

25 The implications of business English mock exams on language progress at higher education

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Abstract

Language learning has been increasingly influenced by technology over the last decades thanks to its positive effects on language acquisition. It is thanks to the technology's supportive role towards language learning that an increasing number of online foreign language courses have appeared. Besides, foreign language courses are more and more specialised covering a wide range of topics, from nursing to agricultural studies. However, this study is exclusively concerned with a well-known Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) subject: Business English. The objective of this research is twofold: on the one hand, to describe the implications of mock exams on foreign language learning; on the other hand, it aims at contributing to the field of computerised language testing by properly analysing the effects of these kinds of exams on learners' foreign language progress. Previous studies have focused on the development of specific language skills (Dunkel, 1991; Larson, 2000), or have reported the improvement of computer adaptive testing on official language exams (Alderson, 2000), or have simply described the advantages and disadvantages of computer-based tests (Alderson, 2000; Brown, 1997; Dunkel, 1999). However, few studies have considered the role of mock exams as scaffolding activities for language learning. The present study involves adult participants at the higher education context undertaking online Business English as a compulsory subject of their degree on Economics. The paper discusses the importance of scaffolding activities such as mock exams and self-

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assessment activities in order to ensure learners' language progress and makes reference to supporting articles in the field at the same time that it presents some materials illustrating these developments.

Keywords: information and communication technologies, ICT, language for specific purposes, LSP, online learning, assessment, higher education.

1. Introduction

Integrating the use of technology into education requires the adaptation of good teaching materials into digital format in the simplest and most cost-effective way. This is the case with assessment since it is an essential part of any course because it checks students' understanding of the course's content. Tests and examinations are widely used as assessment tools for being objective indicators of a student's performance.

In the current teaching context, the increasing use of e-learning platforms has triggered the need of automatic tests to check students' progress. Given the growing variety of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools involved in education, it is becoming a challenge to monitor students' progress. That is why this article attempts to justify the positive effects of mock exams on language learning and gives evidence of this practice as scaffolding activities.

2. The relationship between online learning and LSP

Online learning has become an established way of teaching and learning over the last decade. The particularity of this type of education is the use of technology by both the tutor and the learners with the objective of designing digital learning content, offering interaction among participants, and fostering the process of learning. Until recently, online learning was just an excellent way of enlarging the target audience of a course; however, it now requires

getting closer to each student by offering different interactive possibilities, such as counselling or individual feedback.

Turning to the issue of LSP, the same circumstances have arisen regarding the new virtual challenges that tutors face. Not only do the tutors need to master the course's content, but they also have to be computer literate. According to [Arnó-Macià \(2011\)](#), “in the context of [...] LSP, technology also becomes a gateway to specialised discipline knowledge and to students' relevant discourse communities” (p. 24). Hence, the tutor must collect the latest language resources within a specialised field.

2.1. The potential benefits of online learning

Online learning contributes to LSP teaching and learning by providing a great variety of resources to improve grammar and the four main language skills: reading, listening, writing and speaking. In addition to these skills, there are several ways in which online learning is beneficial: it caters for students' specific needs; it provides access to the digital resources at any time; it fosters students' autonomy; it develops awareness and learning strategies; and it is based on students' own responsibility.

All in all, online education requires the use of technology to personalise a course's content so that students get the most out of it, given their particular characteristics.

2.2. Online learning and assessment

When designing an online course, one needs to consider whether the course would mainly be exam-based or assignment-based. This means asking yourself which are the most important elements within the course. If it is the exam, the course will likely prioritise the acquisition of knowledge. However, if the course is assignment-based, students will be probably expected to put knowledge into practice over the length of the course. This is the view of [James and Fleming \(2005\)](#), who think that students tend to perform in a better way at coursework

assignments rather than at examinations. What lies beneath is the importance of providing enough tools and opportunities for students to check their knowledge through the course. In fact, most of the courses currently created tend to include both types of assessment.

2.3. The importance of feedback

On numerous occasions, students within an online learning course require feedback in order to properly obtain the course's objectives. This feedback could come from different areas, like answering doubts about grammar, providing the accurate answers for exercises, correcting a written composition, or specifying the course's assessment criteria for beginners, among others. Some authors, like [Hattie \(1987\)](#), argue that feedback is the main interactive component in many forms of online learning. For example, [Gibbs and Simpson \(2004\)](#) claim that "[students] can cope without much, or even any, face-to-face teaching, but they cannot cope without regular feedback on assignments. [...] Regular assignments and comprehensive feedback is understood to be central to distance education" (p. 9). In this case, online tutors should provide comprehensive feedback on regular assignments as frequently as possible.

2.4. Automatic assessment tools

Marking may become a tedious task if tutors find they have a large amount of work to correct. Within online education, automatic assessment tools are increasing in order to save the tutors' precious time and give students immediate feedback. Among these automatic assessment tools, this article will briefly describe the mock exams and the self-assessment tests.

Regarding mock exams, one can consider them as a kind of examination under similar conditions as the final exam, but usually shorter. The objective of mock exams is to provide feedback to the student without having to wait until very late in the course, or even after the final exam. That is the reason why they can be used as scaffolding activities supporting students' learning. Mock exams have indeed many advantages, they:

- support learning by checking what students have learnt;
- give learners the opportunity to practice and consolidate what they think they know;
- provide instant knowledge of results and feedback;
- help students to monitor their own progress;
- develop learners' self-evaluation skills;
- guide the choice of further learning resources to increase mastery;
- give learners a sense of accomplishment;
- provide tutors with the necessary materials to monitor and evaluate students' progress.

Concerning the self-assessment tests, it is highly recommended to use them when the tutor wants to know students' perceptions and beliefs. The need for self-assessment fosters the reflection on one's own learning, which not only helps to know the areas one needs to study more, but also facilitates the development of critical thinking.

It is a common belief among tutors that a percentage of the final mark has to be devoted to assessment activities, such as mock exams and self-assessment tests, in order to encourage students to do them. Evidence on the field, like the research performed by [Forbes and Spence \(1991\)](#), show that without the input of motivation given by marks students did not solve practically any activity, and as a consequence, their final grade was noticeably low compared to students who were used to assessing their peers' work. [Gibbs and Simpson \(2004\)](#) state that "coursework does not have to be marked to generate the necessary learning. [...] The trick when designing assessment regimes is to generate engagement with learning tasks without generating piles of marking" (p. 8). Thus, the use of

automatic mock exams and self-assessment tests helps students improve their learning while the teacher saves marking time.

3. Methodology and results

3.1. Setting and participants

The present research was carried out to study the relationship between mock exams and the students' final exam achievement. To do so, the work reported here has been carried out at the Universidad Católica Santa Teresa de Jesús de Ávila, Spain, where participants were adult learners enrolled in an online official degree on Economics. As part of their compulsory curriculum, students took Business English. This subject's level is pre-intermediate to intermediate and it is worth six credits, which is equivalent to a hundred and fifty hours. Participants who were involved in the research were twenty in total and were all Spanish. They had a basic knowledge of English but had never studied any LSP class before. This is why all of them were considered novel learners in this respect.

3.2. Procedure

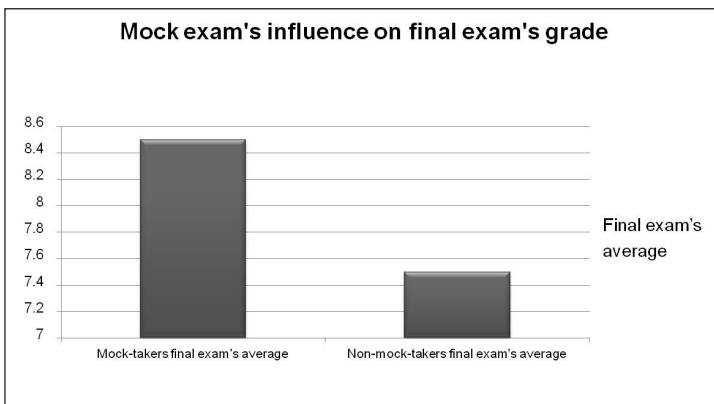
Before beginning the study, the mock exams were designed according to the course's content. Each mock exam included five multiple-choice questions learnt in the lesson: two of the items requested specific business vocabulary, another one checked a linguistic expression, and the last two items were about grammatical features. There were a total of twenty-four mock exams, which corresponded to the total number of lessons. After having created the mock exams, they were uploaded into the course's virtual platform. Students did not have a fixed deadline to take the mock exams, nor did they have a time limit to complete them. On the very first day of the course, students were highly recommended to take each mock exam after studying the lesson, but they were not obliged to do so. Hence, two groups were accordingly created: the experimental and the control ones. Once data was collected, it was analysed by calculating the average marks of the students who took the mock exams

and the ones who did not, and later on, they were compared to the final exam's grade of all students. The last step consisted in creating a graph to show the results.

3.3. Results and discussion

Comparing participants' answers of both students who took the mock exams and the ones who did not, it was realised that the fact of taking the mock exams had significant correlation with students' academic achievement. Those who took the mock exams had higher final grades than those who decided not to take them, as can be seen in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1. Influence of mock exams on final exam's grade



The preceding graph shows an interesting finding too. Considering the final exam to be worth from one to ten points, where five is the passing grade, the difference between students who did not take the mock exams and the ones who did so is almost one point. Since this difference is notably large, it seems that taking mock exams as scaffolding activities improves learning.

An appealing insight into the findings of this research is the fact that many participants took all the mock exams, even though they were not marked (as

mentioned above). The number of these participants is quite high, especially with respect to the low number of participants that either did not take any mock exam or did not complete all the mock exams. There are several possible reasons that could explain this situation. One could be that students may have been highly motivated to acquire as much knowledge as they could in this subject, given that they were all novel LSP learners; hence, they took all the mock exams because they might want to check their understanding before the final exam. Another feasible explanation could be that those students who completed all the mock exams considered it important (1) to check their progress, so that they knew in advance those aspects that they needed to study harder for the final exam, or (2) to build up the content they thought they knew. Yet, there might be students who did not entirely understand (or were not fully confident) that they would not receive any mark for taking the mock exams; and, for this reason, they completed all the mock exams.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to know the reason(s) that moved students to complete all the mock exams since no survey was conducted to check students' inner motivations. This issue could become an interesting starting point for a future research. All in all, whether it is for one reason or another, what matters is that those participants who completed all the mock exams greatly surpassed the ones who did not take them, proving that this assessment tool can support students' learning and progress.

Another consideration that can be done in light of the previously stated results is that mock exams were the only learning resource tested in this research. This means that the present study is limited by the number of different learning strategies applied. However, mock exams can be combined with many other resources, such as self-assessment tests, individual or collaborative projects, or even educational activities or games like quizzes, mazes, crosswords, guessing the object, and so on.

To sum up, the information presented before provides some support for the view that not only do students who take mock exams achieve a brilliant final grade in a given subject, but they also outperform those students who decided

not to take the mock exams. Moreover, these results might endorse Gibbs and Simpson's (2004) opinion about not assessing coursework, but rather engaging students in doing the course tasks since it reports large benefits for their learning process even though the reasons for their motivation could be imprecise.

Indeed, a promising line of study regarding the field of online LSP learning and language progress could be taking into consideration sociolinguistic variables like age, gender, language level, and so on, affecting the performance of mock exams. Another attainable research could focus on the importance of motivation for language learning, but this seems to be a well-established area of research (Dörnyei, 1998; Fernández Orío, 2013; Pourhosein Gilakjani, Leong, & Banou Sabouri, 2012; Ushida, 2005). In addition, further investigations could feasibly tackle the issue on other LSP disciplines.

4. Conclusions

Online learning is now an extended everyday practice in which many disciplines are taught, including the one this article is about: Business English. In online higher education, feedback is what makes a difference on students' achievement; however, it is difficult to provide detailed feedback when the tutor has countless students. It is thanks to technology that automatic assessment tools, such as mock exams, can be used to give immediate and helpful feedback to students. This article has outlined and verified the benefits of mock exams as scaffolding activities to foster language learning. Results indicate that these types of activities promote outstanding final grades as well as prove to be an effective way of engaging students in learning tasks.

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