

Reading Comprehension in a Foreign Language at UNICEN: Towards a Comprehensive Test for Distance Education BA Students

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a crucial skill for both attaining knowledge and enhancing learners' academic and personal growth. Yet, the process of reading and understanding academic and disciplinary texts in a Foreign Language comprises an in- depth knowledge of the language and the attainment of many complex skills – to understand main ideas, to make inferences, to develop a critical stance. Usually, students' reading comprehension skills are tested in a two or three- hours exam with source texts unknown to them and instructions which need to be processed and solved during that time limit. Nevertheless, students at the BAs of Distance Education at UNICEN do not have the same prior knowledge of the English language when they start the course of reading comprehension or have not even dealt with academic and/ or scientific texts in their mother tongue in previous levels of education. Moreover, students do not generally develop a solid knowledge of the English language after the eight- month reading instruction course. Thus, a more comprehensive procedure was implemented in the last two examination boards – i.e. source texts provided in advance. To assess the repercussions of such procedure, a questionnaire was designed and completed by 50 out of the 62 students that sat for the exam in the last examination boards. The results were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, though no statistical method was applied this time. Even though the sample is not as representative as expected, the preliminary results ratified that students' had diverse prior experiences with the English language and a few had had exposure to academic and scientific texts in previous levels of education. As regards the exams per se, the results also show an increase in students' confidence, exam performance and students' commitment to the challenging instructions proposed which could lead to the introduction of permanent changes in the exams of distance education if these results sustain in future examination boards.

Keywords

Academic texts, Assessment, Distance Education, English as a Foreign Language, Reading Comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Universidad Nacional del Centro de la Provincia de Buenos Aires – UNICEN henceforth- is one of the most important and widely known regional universities in Argentina. UNICEN has 11 separate colleges distributed in three different cities: The Colleges of Humanities, of Exact Sciences, of Veterinary Sciences, of Economic Sciences and The College of Art – all of them situated in Tandil-; The Colleges of Law and Agronomy in Azul and the Colleges of Engineering, Health Sciences and Social Sciences in Olavarria. There is also a subsidiary, the Unit of University Teaching, in Quequén, Necochea. Within the college of Humanities, the Centre of Distance Education offers e-learning BA courses in History, Environmental Management, Geography, Sustainable Tourism, Preschool Education and Pedagogy. Each year, students with a tertiary degree from the whole Argentinean territory and from other Latin- American countries enroll in these educational programs to deepen their academic training and get a university degree.



Figure 1. UNICEN as a regional university

The syllabuses of all these BA courses include specific contents and goals for their chore subjects but do not specify any explicit content for the instruction of the Foreign Language (FL), neither for French nor for English [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]. Only two, the BA in History and the BA in Environmental Management, explicitly state that 'students' reading abilities in the foreign language should be assessed' [1] [2]. Nonetheless, students who enroll have different experiences with the English language – from none to intermediate. Besides, they have little or no experience with academic/ scientific and/ or disciplinary texts, for the syllabuses of secondary education do not generally aim at the instruction of such complex texts. Considering these

variables and the goals of the National Law of Education N° 24. 206 [7] and the Argentinean Law of Higher Education N° 25. 521 [8], the instruction of reading comprehension has been and still is the only competence to teach in the BA e-learning courses at the College of Humanities since their inception for different reasons.

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AT THE COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES, UNICEN

The Coexistence of Two Approaches of EFL at the College of Humanities, UNICEN

As noted by different experts [9] [10] [11], most university teachers in Argentina devote their planning to a) the teaching of the four macro- skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing- or b) the teaching of reading comprehension skills. At the College of Humanities, the in- person course of Tourism gives priority to the instruction of the former. Yet, the second approach prevails in the rest of the in- person careers and in the BA courses of distance education since students are often asked to read academic sources in English in chore subjects.

Why Reading should Matter at University Level

As soon as students start their course of studies at university, they need to learn and internalize specific concepts and procedures to gain expertise in a subject area; and thus, to be members of a community of practice [12]. It is known that communities of practice sustain themselves thanks to prototypical genres which are used to foster, transmit and share information among their members – i. e. experts and students alike. Reading, then, becomes, a crucial skill at university because the academic information of any subject area is transmitted in written form – in journals and books, for instance [13] [14] [15]. Under these circumstances, being able to read and understand texts of such rigor should be a goal to pursue in higher education.

Why Reading in English should Matter among other Skills at the College of Humanities, UNICEN

Different experts have outlined why reading in English is fundamental in academic contexts. First, this linguistic code is the most widely used language to disseminate scientific and academic knowledge [16] and it is a crucial skill globally because millions of people write and read texts of different kinds even when English is their second language [17]. In this sense, a specialist or learner in higher education institutions should be able to read and understand texts in English to have access to reliable and core texts of a given discipline. Needless to say, that the lack of this skill has become a 'frontier of exclusion,' since those who are not capable of reading and understanding English and/ or are not trained to gain those skills are and will be in a disadvantaged position [18] [19]. Thus, teachers should bear in mind that the teaching of reading comprehension of academic/ scientific and disciplinary texts broadens students' access to knowledge and to other authors' perspectives.

TESTING READING COMPREHENSION IN ESAP CONTEXTS

There are numerous ways to test reading comprehension. Different well-known experts have devoted whole books on this subject area [20] [21] [22] and papers as well [23] [24]. In educational settings where cohorts are numerous, standardized exams are usually administered. Under these circumstances, it is generally assumed that they students gained the same contents and strategies throughout years of exposure and explicit training. Thus, exams usually share certain features –i. e. type and length of texts, number and typology of exercises, a time limit to solve the whole exam, etc. By way of illustration, students usually have to read texts *in situ* and solve dichotomous and multiple- choice questions mainly in two- to- three hours. Besides, students cannot consult any other source to overcome difficulties while sitting for the exam. Nonetheless, teachers sometimes face different realities. Consequently, they need to critically adapt and/ or change their instruments of assessment considering their educational settings, their goals; and most of all, their learners. Such is the case of the tests designed to assess reading comprehension of English texts in final exams at the Digital and Educational Centre at UNICEN.

TEST DESIGN ON READING COMPREHENSION AT THE DIGITAL AND EDUCATIONAL CENTRE

As stated, distance education BA students belong to different age groups and always have differing experiences with the English language. Besides, most have never read academic/ scientific and disciplinary texts before they start the eight- month course of reading comprehension. Since it has always been troublesome for students to read and understand the texts *in situ* and solve the exercises or instructions provided in two hours' time in final exams, some changes were introduced. First, students of distance education do not have to travel to Tandil to sit for their exams anymore as the current norm states [25]. Instead, exams are mediated via the Moodle platform and monitored in a video call the whole-time limit. The final exams keep certain features of standardized exams – i. e. dichotomous and multiple choice questions- but they also introduce some others which may make them unique and tailored- made. As regards the terms of the exam, students are contacted and informed how the exam will be like days before through Moodle messaging. In addition, the same terms are explicitly stated on the Moodle platform as well. 48- 72 hours before the examination date, the main text and the complementary texts by which students will be assessed are available for them to download and read in advance.

This procedure was implemented on 12th July, 2025, for the first time so that students could process the texts – read them many times, highlight the most important ideas, take down notes, consult sources to overcome difficulties, etc. Students were asked to read an extract of an academic text as the main source and two extra sources – cartoon, quotation, etc. as complementary sources which held a different view of

the topic provided. The day of the exam, students had to connect to a video call and had to solve a questionnaire online while they were being monitored. The questionnaire assessed a) genre awareness, b) comprehension awareness, c) grammar awareness and d) intertextual awareness. Once students finished their exams, the teachers checked the identity of the students and corroborated whether the exam had been sent or not. Finally, they were required to answer a questionnaire and to scan and send the texts and any other notes they had made when reading the text/ s on their own. This last requirement was not compulsory at the time.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Instruments

To measure the impact of these changes, a questionnaire with 17 questions in Spanish was designed to collect data related to students' personal details and previous experiences with the English language. This tool also had some questions which intended to find the difficulties students had encountered when reading the texts provided 48- 72 hours in advance, the procedures and/ or tools used to overcome these difficulties, whether they felt more confident having read the text/ s in advance or not, among others. Students were asked to complete a google form and send it back after they had finished their exams. The data collected were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

The Sample

61 students sat for the exams on reading comprehension – on 12th July and on 23rd August, 2025. 51 students answered the questionnaire as required post exam. Since the sample was manageable no statistical tools were consulted this time. As [Figure 1] shows the students who could sit for the new mode of examination belonged to different BA courses, being Environmental Management and History the most representative in this sample:

In which BA course did you enrol?

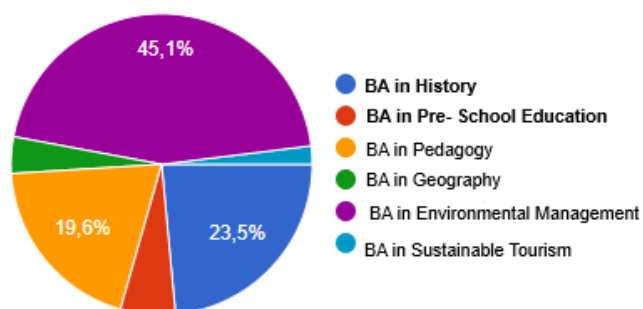


Figure 1. Students by career in the last two examination boards

The data collected also prove that students belonged to different age groups and the percentages collected ratify that they indeed had an unequal prior knowledge of the English language by the time they started the course of reading comprehension at the Centre of Distance Education at UNICEN.

What knowledge of English did you have when you started the course?

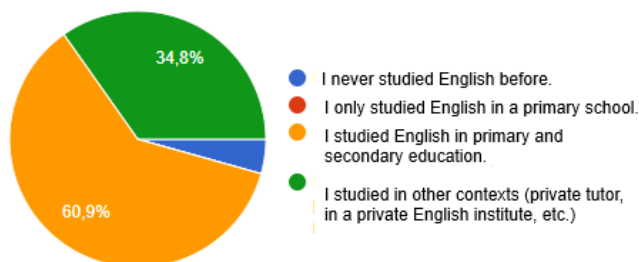


Figure 2. Knowledge of English at the beginning of the course

These percentages confirm that students who enroll in any of the BA courses have different educational backgrounds, belong to different age groups, and 50% at least have not read academic/ scientific and/ or disciplinary texts before in English, neither in Spanish.

Did you read any academic/ scientific texts in the courses of English you attended?

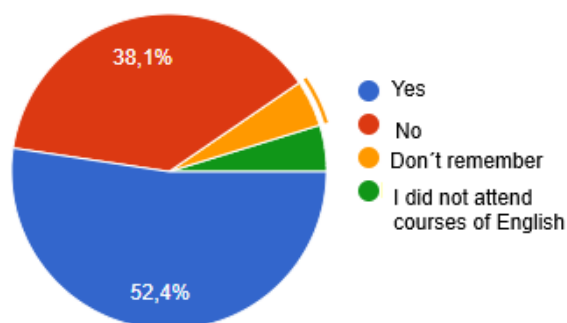


Figure 3. Prior experience with reading academic/ scientific texts

Students' answers to the rest of the questionnaire were even more enlightening in terms of whether students had had any difficulties when reading the texts in advance and the tools they consulted to overcome any difficulties they may have encountered, for instance.

RESULTS

The results show that students do have unequal knowledge of the English language since some state that they have only attended classes of English in public institutions -the 60% of the sample- whereas a few students have had a more personalized and regular instruction in private institutions with more hours of exposure – the 36%. Only 1% acknowledge to have sat for an international exam.

In relation to one of the questions – i. e. whether students had any difficulties with the text provided in advance-, the majority of the students- the 95%- affirmed that they had not had trouble with the text/ s provided. Only 5% stated that they had actually had difficulties with some verbal tenses and some terms. Assuming that students could have encountered some difficulties with the text provided 48- 72 hours in advance, one of the questions intended to find whether

students had consulted any tool or extra source to overcome their difficulties with the text as shown in Figure 4:

Did you consult any source to overcome difficulties? If so, which one/s?

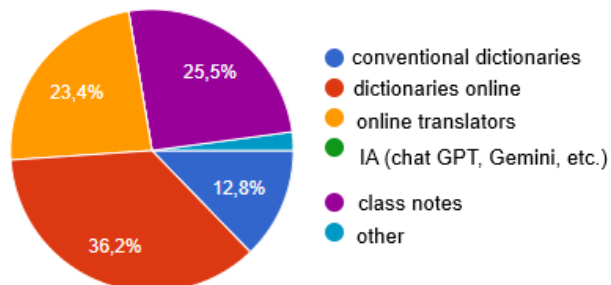


Figure 4. Sources consulted to overcome text difficulties

As [Figure 4] shows, most students state to have consulted dictionaries online – i. e. wordreference.com mainly- and online translation tools; some affirm to have consulted materials designed for the course and 13% to ordinary dictionaries. Question number 13 intended to analyze whether it has been useful for students to have access to the text in advance. Some students highlighted “It has been to have the text in advance since they could read it many times in a relaxed way.” Others mentioned that they ‘could translate the text and look for unknown words up in the dictionary. Some testimonies are also enlightening like: “First, I could translate the text into Spanish and understand its content. Then, I could relate it with the topics seen in the course and the syllabus. Personally, I do not have a solid foundation of English and [to have had the text/ s before] allowed me to organise and manage with time the moment I had to solve the questionnaire” or “Having the text in advance allowed me to identify the main ideas and analyse the images in depth; and thanks to that, I could provide more elaborated and critical answers when required.”

In your view, if you had not had the text in advance, you would have had ...

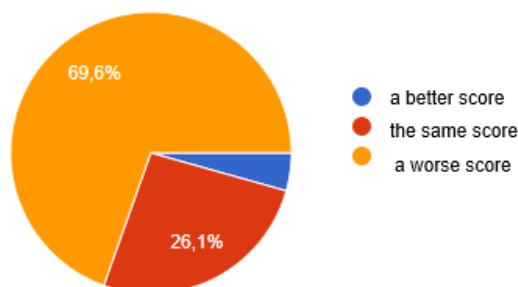


Figure 5. Perceptions of students

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The subjects who answered the questionnaire owed the final exam of 2024. This is the reason why the sample was not significant to make general assumptions or conclusions. Nevertheless, the preliminary results show that students feel

more confident and capable of solving the exam satisfactorily when they are given the source texts in advance. Since the sample was limited, no statistical tools were used to run the data in this circumstance. In the next examination boards – i. e. December, 2025 and February, 2026, we will be able to collect more data since there were 240 students enrolled in 2025 -as it is usually the case. We expect to provide a more thorough and detailed analysis- with statistical tools if possible- so as to be shared with other colleagues in the future.

CONCLUSIONS

As explored, university students need to develop reading comprehension skills in English, for they need to read and understand information from chore disciplinary texts and to access to updated information at any time. Besides, being able to read and understand texts in English helps them to overcome ‘existing or hidden frontiers’ of exclusion. In addition, in contexts like ours where students start their course of studies with different prior knowledge of English it is necessary to design exams beyond standardized or traditional ones; exams that could take into account students’ differences and that could provide similar or equal possibilities of success. This is the reason why our first attempt has been to provide the texts with which students could be evaluated the date of the exam. Although a decision like this is arguable, it has proved to be useful for students and teachers alike. Students were able to solve the instructions provided on the Moodle platform satisfactorily and on time– whether true- false, multiple choice or open questions.

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