An educational intervention as preparation for an english language certification exam: impact and students' perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on an educational intervention to support a group of Mexican High School students in taking an English language proficiency test in order to obtain a nationally recognized English as a foreign language certification. Obtaining an English language certification is not mandatory at the High School level in Mexico; however, it is of great benefit for students' academic and professional advancement in the context the international trends in education they are experiencing in a globalized world.

Action Research was the methodology implemented for the intervention. The objectives of the study were: (1) to learn about the students' perceptions on the usefulness of the implementation of a preparation workshop for a certification exam, specifically on the oral component; and (2) to learn whether the communicative activities implemented in the workshop had an impact on the students´ oral performance in the test.

Results indicate that the intervention had a positive impact in the students' performance during the exam. In addition, the students considered the workshop as a useful pedagogical strategy for practicing, increasing their confidence on their linguistic skills, and for having a positive performance, specifically on the oral component of the certification exam.

Keywords: *educational intervention; english language certification exam; english teaching and learning.*

Una intervención educativa como preparación para un examen de certificación del idioma inglés: impacto y percepciones de los estudiantes

RESUMEN

Este artículo reporta los resultados de una intervención educativa para apoyar a un grupo de estudiantes mexicanos de bachillerato para presentar un examen estandarizado de inglés, y así obtener una certificación de idioma extranjero reconocida nacionalmente. La intervención se centró en el aspecto lingüístico de la producción oral en inglés.

En México no es obligatorio obtener una certificación del idioma inglés a nivel Bachillerato; sin embargo, es de gran importancia para el desarrollo académico y profesional de los estudiantes siguiendo las tendencias internacionales en educación en un mundo globalizado.

La metodología utilizada para esta intervención fue Investigación-Acción. Los objetivos del estudio fueron: (1) conocer las opiniones de los estudiantes sobre la implementación de un taller de preparación para examen de certificación de inglés, específicamente para la producción oral; y (2) averiguar si las actividades comunicativas realizadas tuvieron un impacto en el desempeño de los estudiantes durante el examen.

Los resultados indican que la intervención tuvo un impacto positivo en el desempeño de los estudiantes durante el examen, y que estos la percibieron como una estrategia pedagógica útil para practicar, generar confianza en sus habilidades lingüísticas y tener un buen desempeño en su producción oral en inglés durante el examen.

Palabras clave: *intervención educativa; certificación del idioma inglés; enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés.*

INTRODUCTION

Learning English in Mexico is considered of utmost importance as reflected in the country´s federal educational policy. In the year 2017, the Mexican government released the national strategy for the teaching of English (Estrategia Nacional para el Fortalecimiento de la Enseñanza del Inglés). The document acknowledges the prevalent position of English as a "lingua franca" in a globalized society, as it recognizes the role of English as the language used in worldwide communications, science and technology, economic trade, etc. Further, the strategy justifies the teaching of English at the different mandatory public education levels as part of the federal government's responsibility to generate the necessary conditions for Mexican youth for personal growth and development, social mobility, access information and technological advances, interact with interact with people from other countries and cultures, social, professional, and economic opportunities. In terms of goals, the National Strategy for the Teaching of English seeks that within the next twenty years, one hundred percent of students who graduate from the federal public education system achieve a language proficiency level and linguistic competence certified by international standards, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and standardized language certifications. The levels of language proficiency and competence sought in this policy are B1 level for elementary education and B2 level for secondary education (middle and high school).

Previous educational policies also refer to the importance of the English language in the Mexican educational system. For example, the Comprehensive Reform of Higher Secondary Education, better known as RIEMS (Reforma Integral de la Educación Media Superior), was implemented in Mexico in 2008 (González & Carreto, 2018). This reform states that by the end of Secondary education (High School) students will be able to reach a B1 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Within this context, this educational policy seeks to develop students' ability for effective communication by strategically using not only Spanish, but also by using another language, in this case English as a foreign language.

As of the year 2021, the Mexican Federal Government continued to support the teaching of English systematically in the public education system. At the elementary levels of education, the National Program of English (Programa Nacional de Inglés - PRONI) is in

place with the focus of teaching English as students progress in their educational process to enhance their personal and social development. The PRONI also acknowledges that the English language is the medium of communication and access to information for technological development and research (PRONI, 2021 https://dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5639493&fecha=28/12/2021#gsc.tab=0). Unfortunately, the outcomes of educational policies such as the National Strategy for the Teaching of English, the RIEMS, and the PRONI have not been the ones projected in the official documents. According to the English Proficiency Index (EPI), which is a world ranking of countries based on their English as a foreign language proficiency, data indicates that Mexico has experienced a negative trend in this matter in the last ten years. As indicated in figure 1 and 2, Mexico is labeled as a country as "very low" in terms of English language proficiency. In addition, Mexico has had a steady decline in the world ranking from being 18th out of 44 countries in 2011 to being ranked 92nd out of 112 in 2021. Similarly, Mexico ranks 19th out of 20 in Latin America (EPI, 2021. https://www.ef.com.mx/epi/).

Figure 1. *Ranking of countries and regions according to EPI 2021.*
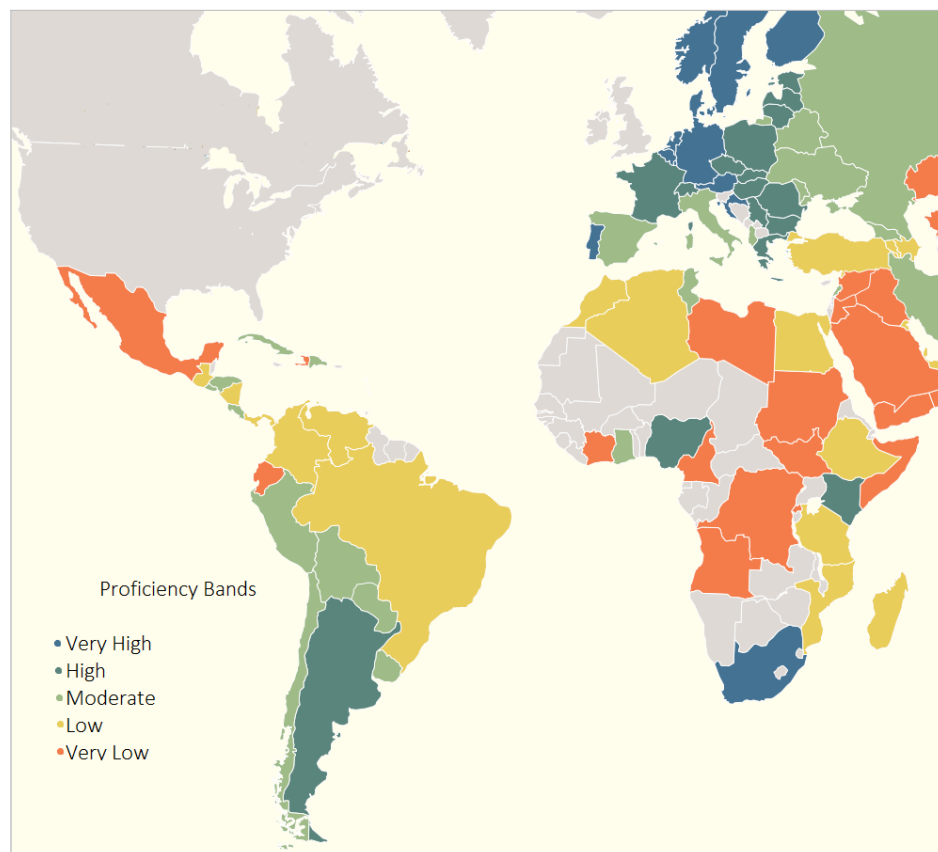
Source: EPI 2021

Figure 2. *Mexico´s proficiency trends from 2011 to 2021 according to EPI 2021.*
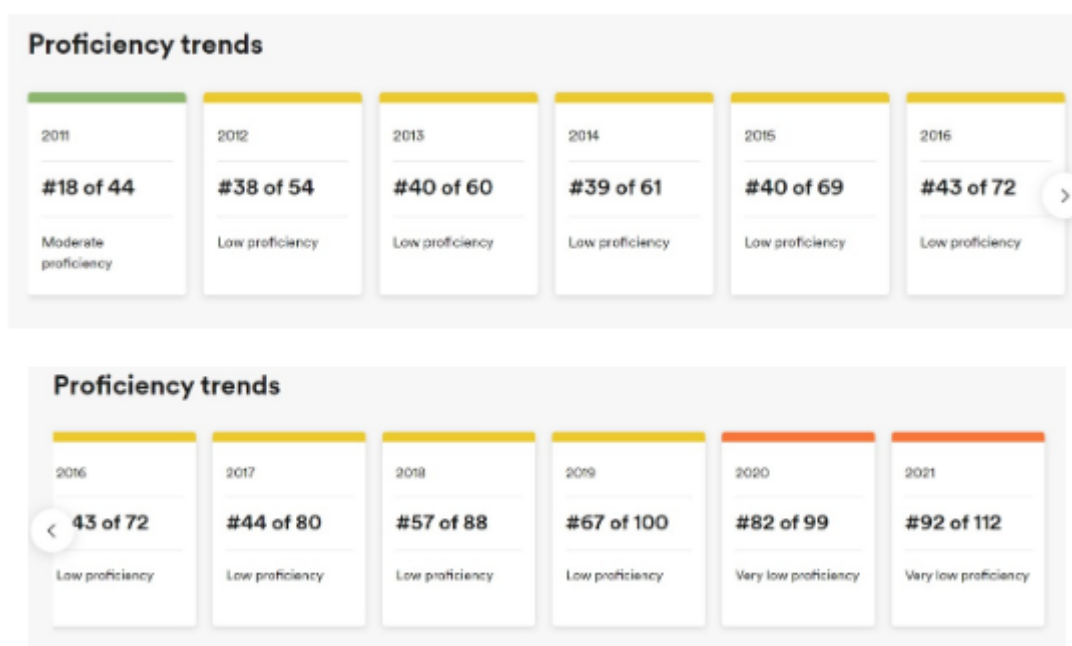
Source: EPI 2021.

In this context, High School students in Mexico need to develop diverse types of competencies and high proficiency levels in English, as part of a comprehensive educational model and a globalized world they are living in. Yet, there is a lack of systematic support for students to reach the desired results and language proficiency levels. One alternative to structure and provide such supports is the design and implementation of educational interventions (i.e. Action Research) to ensure the learning of English for the student population.

In the present study, an educational intervention (a preparation workshop) was proposed, designed and implemented to support a group of fourteen third year High School students who showed English proficiency at grade-level according to the English class curricula. Therefore, it was determined that they were viable candidates to certify their English proficiency levels by taking a nationally recognized standardized English test - EXAVER (www.uv.mx/exaver).

The objectives of the study were (1) to learn about the impact of a preparation workshop in the students´ performance in taking a language certification exam (focusing on the oral component of the test); and (2) to know the students' perceptions about the usefulness of the workshop.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Communicative competence.

Conceptually, the study is grounded in the concept of Communicative Competence, which "refers to both knowledge and skill and using this knowledge when interacting in actual communication" (Canale, 1983, P. 5). Based on the theoretical framework proposed by Canale and Swain (1981), Canale (1983) poses that communicative competence is formed by four areas of knowledge and skills (competence): grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

TASK - BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING (TBLT)

According to Richards and Rodgers (2001) TBLT is "an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching" (p.223). According to Richards and Rodgers (2001)

"Learning a language through tasks implies that the learner not only acquires input by chunks, but experiences the language through real-life activities that will allow him / her to interact with the language. These kinds of activities seek that learners focus more on the process rather than on the product, make emphasis on communication and meaning, interact purposefully while engaged in the task, and fulfill tasks that may involve real-life situations or pedagogical purposes" (p. 224).

TESTING

A language test system is, according to Ryan (2014) "the collective entity of all the elements that are exterior to the test per se, but are still indirectly related to the test" (p.8). The author claims that students go through different processes before taking the exam that may impact their perception about the test. Such processes are the test registration process, the test orientation and preparation process, and the test "reception" process. Focusing on the test orientation and preparation process, the author suggests that if activities and tasks presented during this stage are conducive to quality practice, "then it [the process] will be helpful for them to increase their level of confidence and motivation, hence it would help them to perform better on a live test" (Ryan, 2014, p.9).

METHODOLOGY

Action Research (AR) methodology frame the study since it is a methodology designed to address classroom problems through interventions so that solutions can be established (Burns, 2005; Mackay, 2006). Tripp (1995) proposes a scheme that represents an Action Research that is divided into five stages: reconnaissance, action plan, thoughtful action, action research and action evaluation (see figure 3).

Figure 3. *Action Research Model.*
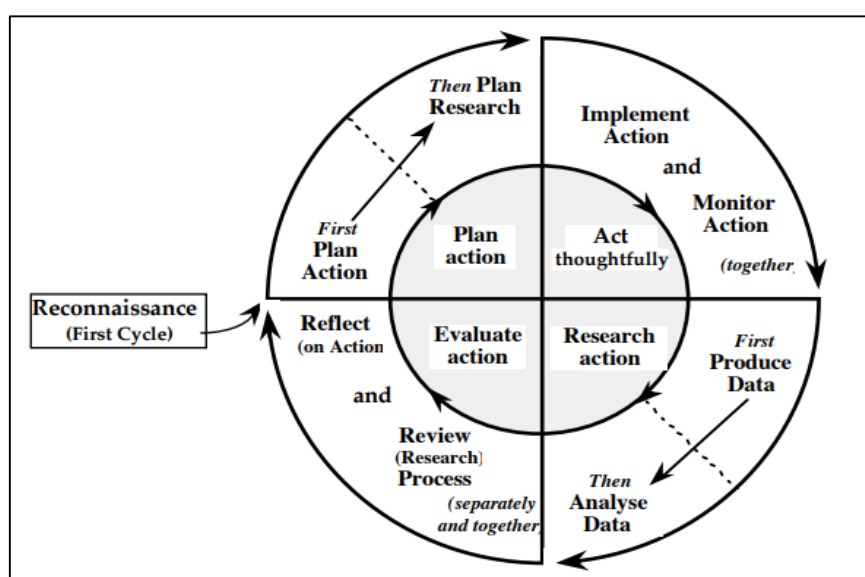
Source: Tripp (1995).

The objectives of the intervention were to structure:

- Opportunities for practicing the English language, especially the oral component outside the students' regular classes.
- Opportunities for the certification exam´s format recognition.
- Opportunities to engage in communicative tasks that involved specific interaction patterns.

The study was driven by two research questions:

a) To what extent do specific communicative activities impact the students' performance in the oral component of an English certification exam?

b) What are the students' perceptions on the usefulness of a preparation workshop to take an English certification exam?

PLAN AND ACTION RESEARCH

In this phase the identification of the problem was realized and an action plan and preliminary research proposal was presented to authorities and students for the

preparation workshop. In addition, the logistics (classroom availability, workshop meeting times and days, materials, etc) and development of a questionnaires (needs analysis) to learn more about the participants' needs were established and implemented. The selection of the test was done: EXAVER is "the name given to a battery of tests aimed at measuring proficiency in the English Language" (Dunne, 2007, p.23). EXAVER belongs to the Universidad Veracruzana, and it was created around 20 years ago with the support of The British Council, Cambridge University and Roehampton University. The exam is a set of three certification exams, each of them assessing the extent of communicative competence developed after receiving formal or informal instruction on the English language.

EXAVER is valid in Mexico and recognized by the Secretary of Public Education (SEP), i.e. passing any of the three tests, the users can apply for the CENNI and get the corresponding score which is valid for a number of educational or labor market matters. The test selected for the participants in this study according to their grade and English level was EXAVER 1, which assesses the linguistic competences at the basic level (A2) according to the CEFR.

▪ Participants were selected: This study was carried out in a public high school located in the north zone of the city of Veracruz, an urban area surrounded by family clusters. The participants were three instructors and fourteen students selected through purposeful sampling (see table 1). Purposeful sampling refers to the selection of "information-rich cases from which significant material could be obtained in relation to the topic under study" (Patton, 1990. P.169).

Table 1. *Participants' information.*

	Gender	Age range	Grade/English level
Students	3 females 11 males	16-18	Intermediate
Teachers	2 females 1 male	30 - 45	Credentials • English as a Foreign Language BA • 5-10 years experience.

Source: own elaboration.

IMPLEMENTATION AND ACTION: THE PREPARATION WORKSHOP

The workshop took place once a week (on Thursdays) from 3 to 6 p.m. for three months (October, November, and December) for a total of 36 hours. The weeks were divided to cover all the sections in the exam. Participants practiced through communicative activities and test format recognition. In every session, tasks were observed and adapted for the students with the purpose of encouraging practice and development of the functions to be assessed in the certification exam with an emphasis in the oral component. The oral component of the certification exam is divided in three main sections: individual development, information exchange and role-play. Therefore, every month the target speaking function focus was different based on those three main sections and types of oral interactions. In addition, terms of content, the communicative activities/tasks implemented in the workshop included the four oral competences assessed: pronunciation, vocabulary range, grammar accuracy, and effectiveness in communication.

Table 2 illustrates the structure of the workshop, as well as the communicative functions addressed for preparation.

Table 2. *Structure of the preparation workshop.*

Month	Stage (according to the test)	Speaking function.			
		Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Sept.	- - - -	Arrangement of spaces, students and schedule.	Arrangement of spaces, students and schedule.	Gathering data.	Gathering data.
Oct.	* Individual development.	- Talking about myself. - Basic description of objects. * Personal information and relationships.	- Sharing information about likes, dislikes and hobbies. - Describing actions. - Description of places and situations. * Travelling	• **Practice oral exam.** - Describing and question answering. - Description of third person, actions. * Clothing and shopping	- Narrative intervention in Present tense. - Oral interviewing to different people. * Daily activities * SURVEY
Nov.	* Exchanging information with others.	- Making questions focusing on present and past tenses. * Home, house and hometown.	- Making questions to get specific pieces of information. - Mutual interviewing. * Own and other countries.	• **Practice oral exam.** - Role playing: pretending to be someone else and talking about his / her achievements. - Describing a picture and making questions about the situation was going on. * Places of interest.	- Debating and giving opinions on a topic given. - Take a role within a discussion and defend his/her point of view. * Food and Drink. * INTERVIEW
January	* Role – playing.	- - - - (Holidays)	- Persuading somebody on a given situation by stating arguments. - Asking for and giving information about location, activities, and times. * Family relationships.	-Talking about predictions. - Talking about long-term and short-term plans. - Giving suggestions. * ¨Pets and other animals.	• **Practice oral exam.** - Sample Complete test in reading, writing, listening and speaking. * SURVEY

Source: own elaboration.

DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS

The instruments used during the implementation in order to gather data during the research implementation were observations, field notes, questionnaires, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and the results obtained by the students in the EXAVER examination. Data gathered from these sources was triangulated according to the trustworthiness criteria (Krefting, 1990). Data collection stages included pre-intervention, during intervention, and post-intervention.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis guided the data analysis process. Therefore, data-guided codification was implemented, and then four main general categories were identified: students' perceptions, being acquainted with the exam's format, peer interaction, and practice and improvement (see table 3). Based on those categories, assertions were generated to structure findings.

Table 3. *Data-driven codification and categorization.*

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	CODES
STUDENT'S PERCEPTIONS	POSITIVE PERCEPTION PP	Useful activities PP-UACT
	NEGATIVE PERCEPTION NP	Did not like the activity NP – NLA
GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THE INSTRUMENT	EXAM PROTOCOL EP	Know the stages EP – KS
	FAMILIARIZATION FAM	Similar activities FAM – SA
INTERACTION	MONOLOGUE MON	Individual work preference MON – IWP
	PAIR WORK PW	Pair and group work preference PW – PGW
PRACTICE AND IMPROVEMENT	PRACTICE PR	Previous knowledge usage PR - PKU
	IMPROVEMENT IM	Progress on oral competences IM – PC
	PERFORMANCE PF	Development of oral performance PF - DOP
	REINFORCEMENT RI	Upgrade their level RI - UL

Source: own elaboration.

FINDINGS

This study sought to investigate two aspects of the intervention: (1) the impact of a preparation workshop in the students´ performance in taking a language certification exam (focusing on the oral component of the test); and (2) the students' perceptions about the usefulness of such a workshop.

Regarding the impact of the intervention, findings indicate that

1. The activities carried out during the preparation workshop provided students with opportunities to be acquainted with the exam format, content, structure, and dynamics, especially in the oral component, which resulted in a positive impact in the students´ performance in the test.

One positive aspect of the preparation workshop relates to the increase of the level of confidence of the participants, as they had opportunities for language practice and to become familiar with the types of activities they were expected to perform in the exam. Data from interviews suggest that the types of activities implemented in the preparation workshop promoted interaction among the students and encouraged them to use not only their knowledge of the language but also other strategies to maintain communication, fulfil required communicative functions in different scenarios, and control psychological pressure (i.e. stress and anxiety).

Excerpts from interviews presented next support this assertion:

GA: "estar ya familiarizado con el protocolo, digamos, pues me fue muy útil"

"getting acquaintance with the protocol, let's say, it was so useful"

GA: "…el hecho de estar familiarizado con el protocolo que las escuelas manejan para certificar, pues creo que fue decisivo para el hecho de concluir satisfactoriamente.

"the fact of being familiarized with the protocol that some school have to certify, I think it was decisive to satisfactorily conclude [the testing process]"

EM: "… uno va avanzando y va este… practicando, pues eso hace que pus te de experiencia… ya tener esa

"…one advances and practices, which is what gives you experience… having that experience and just to put it in practice".

experiencia y sólo es ponerla en práctica".

FC: "En el tipo de secciones que había en la parte escrita, en el tipo de examen que era y en la parte oral tenía el mismo tipo de preguntas"

"In the type of sections that there were in the written part, in the type of exam it was and the oral part had the same kind of questions."

EM: "Fue muy importante saber lo que nos iban a evaluar, cómo le van a hacer, el tiempo, las reglas. … si muestras fluidez, demuestras rapidez…, demuestra que tienes cierto dominio del idioma."

"It was very important to know what they were going to assess, how they would do it, the time, the rules. … if you show fluency, quickness…, it shows you are proficient in the language".

SR: "sí porque lo que vimos en el taller fue casi casi lo que nos pasó en el examen y entonces ya iba preparado y seguro, ya sabía que… que tenía que hacer en el examen, este con base a lo que ya había visto en el taller"

"yes, because it was what we saw in the workshop and it was almost what happened to us in the exam, and then, I was prepared and confident, I knew that… what I had to do in the exam, uh based on what I had seen in the workshop"

SR: "me di una noción de lo que iba a ser el examen de certificación…eso me hizo sentir confiado".

"I got an idea of what the certification exam was going to be…it made me feel confident".

SB: "siento que me ayudó mucho a controlar más que todo mis nervios y saber qué venía en el examen y estar preparado."

"I feel it was helpful to control mostly my anxiety and to know what was in the exam to be prepared."

SR: "Pues me quitó un poco los nervios… me desenvolvió un poco más y… me costó menos hablar con las facilitadoras…"

"Well, it made me feel less nervous… I got a better performance and… it was easier to talk to the facilitators…"

A second positive aspect of the intervention relates to the fact that the implementation of communicative tasks during the workshop raised students' awareness of linguistic

features of oral communication. That is, as the students engaged in pair and group oral activities and tasks that prompted interaction, they became aware of linguistic features of their oral production such as pronunciation, vocabulary range, grammar accuracy, and effectiveness in communication. These features were purposefully included in the activities and tasks of the workshop since they are the aspects of oral production that are evaluated in the EXAVER 1 certification exam.

It is important to point out that twelve out of the fourteen participants of this study obtained their English certification by attaining passing grades (A.B or C) in all components of the EXAVER 1 certification exam. Regarding the oral component, which comprised 20% of the total grade of the certification exam, column 4 in table 5 shows that the students who obtained the EXAVER 1 certification obtained scores above the mean in the total percentage in the oral section (above 10), which included the assessment of four oral competences.

Table 4.

Students´ passing results in the EXAVER 1 certification exam.

General Results					Assessed Language Competences			
Participant	Achieved	Grade	Speaking score (20%)	Global Mark	*Pronunciation*	*Vocabulary range*	*Grammar Accuracy*	*Effectiveness in Communication*
1	YES	B	20	4	4	4	4	4
2	YES	C	18	4	4	4	3	3
3	YES	A	19	4	4	4	3	4
4	YES	A	20	4	4	4	4	4
5	YES	B	17	3	4	4	3	3
6	YES	C	14	3	3	2	3	3
7	YES	C	14	3	3	3	2	3
8	YES	B	20	4	4	4	4	4
9	YES	A	20	4	4	4	4	4
10	YES	C	17	3	3	3	4	4
11	YES	C	13	3	3	2	2	3
12	YES	C	15	3	3	3	3	3
	Total score average: 17.25							

Source: own elaboration.

Data from the exams' results (see table 4) shows that students managed to get the highest scores in Effectiveness in communication. Such competence makes reference to the use of the language in an appropriate and accurate form as a consequence of the

accomplishment of some language functions (describing, inviting, etc.) within an appropriate context. In the oral component, effectiveness in communication is the use of language as a whole, which includes pronunciation, vocabulary usage and grammar accuracy. The proper development of each of these competences reveal the range of proficiency of the language since they are the base structure of actual communication. Excerpts from interviews relate to this finding:

GA: "Practicar ayuda entonces pues a reconocer un poco más el vocabulario, como que palabra es mejor escoger para hablar de algo… también fue gracias al taller"

"Practicing helps to recognize vocabulary a little bit more, like choosing the best word to talk about something… which was also thanks to the workshop"

GA: "un cambio que tuve ya que no practicaba mucho eh… fue la manera en la que yo hablaba, como la pronunciación y todo eso, o sea la parte oral del inglés"

EG: "El cambio mas notable pues fue el hablar, no lo había practicado antes así [como en el taller]".

"a change that I experienced since I did not use to practice much a lot uhhh… was the way in which I spoke, I mean, pronunciation and all that stuff, which is the oral part of English"

"… well, speaking was the most noticeable change for me because I had not practiced it that way [as I did in the workshop]".

GA: "el tener un lugar en donde yo pudiera practicar eso, el tener una interacción más completamente en el idioma…y que te corrijan si no pronuncias bien cuando hablas en inglés"

"having a place where I could practice that, to have a full interaction within the language…and that you get corrected if you do not pronounce correctly when you speak in English".

A third positive aspect of the impact of the workshop relates to the type of activities themselves. Excerpts from interviews reveal that the students considered the topics and the types of tasks that comprised the workshop as having a positive impact in their performance during de EXAVER examination.

GA: "[Algo que me ayudó en el examen fue] poder describir una situación de una escena de película o de cualquier cosa, este, de manera rápida o el poder describir un objeto en menos de tanto tiempo … el poder interpretar escenas por ejemplo de películas que fue una práctica que hicimos".

"Something that helped me in the exam was being able to describe a situation of a scene of a movie or anything, uhh, in a quick way or being able to describe an object in less than certain period of time… being able to interpret scenes for example of movies, which was a practice we carried out [in the workshop]".

SB: "las actividades era muy parecidas a los que habíamos visto en taller y la parte oral también la que habíamos visto con los ejercicios que nos trajo la maestro…eso me ayudó [en el examen]".

"the activities were very similar to what we had seen in the workshop and also the oral part that we worked on with the teachers…that helped me [in the exam]".

EM:"… haciendo esas actividades ya tenías como que la destreza a la hora de tener el examen… ya sabías a lo que uno se enfrentaba."

"… by doing those activities you were already skillful enough by the time you had the exam… you knew what you would face".

As previously mentioned, the activities that comprised the preparation workshop were designed based on the exam´s guide (https://www.exaver.com/examenes/EXAVER1). However, the selection of the topics and the implementation of the activities were framed as tasks following Richards and Rodgers (2001) concepts. As shown in table 5, the design and implementation of the workshop ensured the inclusion of different communicative tasks/activities (monologue, pair work, group work, role-play). At the same time, the topics and activities selected focused more on the process rather than on the product, and made emphasis on communication and meaning. Similarly, the topics and tasks to be completed by the students were selected and designed based on situations that students may face in real life.

Table 5. *Types of interactions and tasks implemented in the workshop.*

Date / Session	Kind of activity	Objective *The candidate will…*	Tasks' description. *The candidate will…*
October 4th *Session 1*	Monologue	talk about him / herself.	Example of task: Introduce him/herself talking about family, preferences and hobbies.
	Pair work	Describe an object.	Example of task: Look at a picture and give a brief and quick description of the object shown for the other to guess.
October 11th *Session 2*	Pair work	Ask for and give personal information.	Example of task: Look at the base questions given on the board and ask his/her partner about them and vice versa, exchange information.
		Describe a situation in progress.	Example of task: Watch a video and simultaneously describe what is happening in the video for his partner who is not watching at it so that s/he knows what is happening.
October 18th *Session 3*	Monologue	Describe a place.	Example of task: Select a picture about a place in a city and describe it, as well as the activities they can carry out in there.
	Pairwork	Discuss and make decisions in pairs.	Example of task: Observe some pictures about different options and discuss on the best gift for a friend according to his needs.
October 25th *Session 4*	Monologue	talk about a topic in a given length of time, by giving reasons and opinions.	Example of task: Sit in a circle along with his/her classmates and will play 'multiple game', the loser will take a paper with a random topic on it and will talk about it for a minute at least.
November 8th *Session 5*	Group work	Argument a story with base vocabulary.	Example of task: work in a small group and with the visuals given (beforehand) will create a story with a beginning, a development and an end. After the story is presented in front of the class, Ss will answer some questions about their story.
	Pair work	structure questions based on given information.	Example of task: be given a series of information by chunks and will make the possible questions for each. Work in pairs with a paper slip on which there are some pieces of information on one hand, and on the other there are cues for possible questions.
November 15th *Session 6*	Monologue	Talk about cities and the activities that can be done.	Example of task: choose a pamphlet about a city and will talk about the relevant sightseeing, activities and interesting facts about a city, given at random beforehand.
November 22nd *Session 7*	Role play	Describe a situation and answer questions about it.	Example of task: Pretend is a famous personality and will talk about a situation to which their partners will make questions and the famous person will answer about it.
November 29th *Session 8*	Pair work	debate on advantages and disadvantages and convince somebody.	Example of task: try to convince the other St that his/her city is much better to visit and argument the reasons by using the information given.
January 15th *Session 9*	Role play	Describe an imaginary situation in the past.	Example of task: Take a flashcard and relate an imaginary story about himself in the place in the picture and answer questions about it.
January 22nd *Session 10*	Role Play	Talk about different places to be visited and the facilities in it.	Example of task: Pretend they will go on a trip and ask a tour guide about different topics like weather conditions, places to go sightseeing and suggestions on what to do there when carrying a pet.
January 29th *Session 11*	Mock exam (Written and Oral sections) Mock exam (Written and Oral sections)		

Source: own elaboration.

2. The students' perceptions of the students about the workshop: regarding the second major finding in this study, the students perceived the workshop as a useful instructional tool to address their need to be prepared to take an English certification exam.

The data obtained from the questionnaires administered to the participants in the workshop indicated that 79% of the students found the activities very useful while 21% perceived they were useful. Conversely, no student found these activities to be partially useful or not useful at all (see figure 4).

Figure 4. *Students' perceptions on the degree of usefulness of the workshop.*
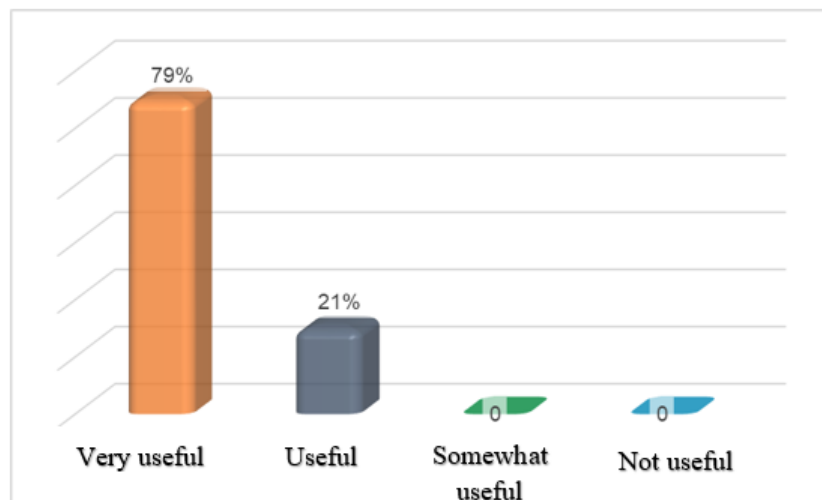
Source: own elaboration.

When asked to describe the reasons why the participants found the workshop useful, the students´ responses suggest that the workshop usefulness centered in helping the students practice their English, feel more confident, and know about the format of the EXAVER certification exam. In a lower degree, the students found the workshop useful to improve/increase their previous knowledge, and to learn new things (see figure 5).

Figure 5. *Students' perceptions on the usefulness of the workshop.*
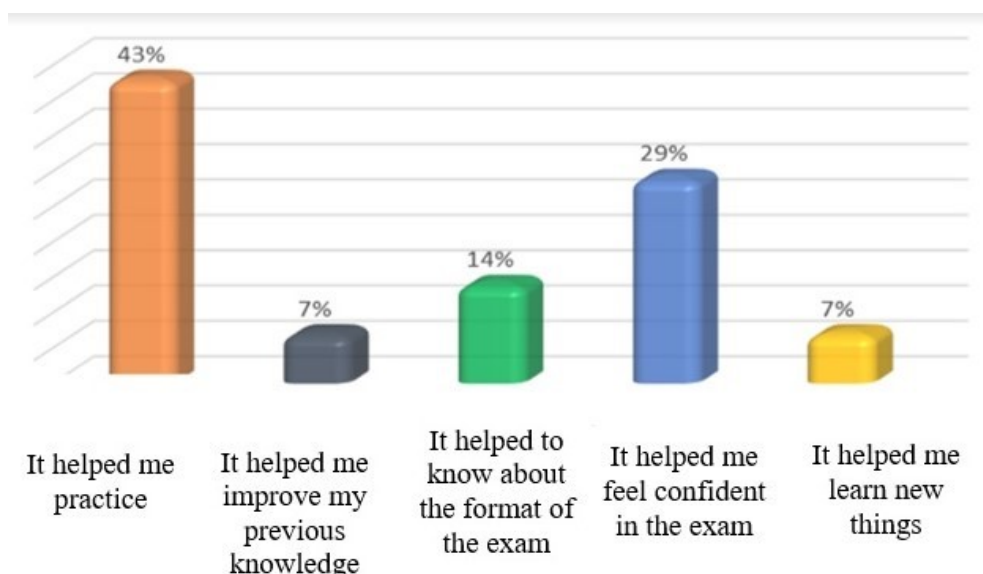
Source: own elaboration.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to the perspectives and data generated by the students who attained passing grades and obtained their English language certification. The two students who did not reach passing grades in the examination were no available for post-intervention interviews nor were their results available to be analyzed as part of this research. Learning about those two cases may had been extremely informative in order to improve the nature of the intervention herein presented, and to learn about factors that may have played a role in the negative results those students obtained.

DISCUSSION

The intervention described in this study was perceived by the participants as a useful instructional tool to address their needs in preparation for taking an English language certification exam. The findings in this study are similar to those by Ryan (2014) who indicates that if students feel the preparation process is useful enough to practice, it would help them deal with a test with a higher degree of confidence and encouragement, leading them to a more competent performance in the exam. The participants in the study also expressed that having practiced during the workshop with a similar instrument helped them to regulate their emotions and feel more confident with what they knew and what they could do. This relates to that stated by Hosková (2014) who describes how practice impacts the students' confidence: "They practice, expand and improve vocabulary and gradually gain more self-confidence and self-esteem. Most of them lose the initial inhibitions and shyness and gradually it becomes quite obvious that a student at the blackboard gives comments…" (pg. 646).

The intervention implemented in this study provided the participants with opportunities for learning about their communicative competence by addressing different aspects of oral communication (i.e. pronunciation and fluency) as they engaged in tasks with the focus on experiencing the language more meaningfully. As suggested by Dunlosky (2013), when being re-exposed to information previously presented, students may not only get enriched with feedback but also they tend to become aware of their own strengths, progress and opportunity areas. In this vein, Nunan (2004) points out that language skills are better developed when the students have the opportunity to go through language experiences that allow them to work on their own progress focusing on interaction and communication.

Based on the research findings it can be argued that the intervention described in this study was pertinent as a pedagogical approach that provides high school students with opportunities and support for their educational development, in this case through the attainment of an English as a foreign language certification. The relevance and potential implications of this study may lay on the realization by those involved in language teaching of the need to generate projects concerning educational interventions, which must address specific needs of their students and their contexts, with the goal of helping them overcome complex circumstances and succeed in their educational and later professional trajectories.

CONCLUSIONS

Successful English learning in Mexican public schools may depend not only on the design and implementation of national education and language policies but also on a series of factors, including those at the local levels. Therefore, there is the need for active participation by schools administrators, teachers, and the community to get involved in the students´ learning processes. One alternative to accomplish such an endeavor is the design and implementation of educational interventions (i.e. Action Research) to impact in a positive way the learning of English for the student population.

In the complex English language-learning context in Mexican public High Schools, administrators and faculty members need to structure opportunities for their students to learn English reaching the desired levels of proficiency by organizing the English curriculum to meet their needs and interests. Further, there is the need to promote and provide English teachers with opportunities for professional development, so that they are better prepared to teach the subject matter effectively, and at the same time being able to identify problems and find solutions in their classrooms.

Further research in the form of educational interventions is needed to inform the field of teaching-learning English as a foreign language in Mexico. This approach to research is pertinent and necessary due to the diversity and complexity of educational contexts in the country, which in many instances requires specific solutions for particular educational problems.

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