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Description of the Spanish Proficiency Test DELE and Brief Report on Special Classes for DELE

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Abstract. The present article aims to provide a detailed explanation of the Diplomas of Spanish as a Foreign Language. This work contains three parts. In the first part each of the exams is described in terms of its level, design, structure, assessment, and the examiners. The three main documents relevant to the design of the Spanish tests, namely the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the Manual for Relating Language Examinations to that framework of reference, and the Curriculum of Instituto Cervantes are explained in this section. In the second part, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the Spanish exam in Japan are discussed. In the third part, the classes held at Tohoku University oriented to students interested in taking the Spanish test are discussed.

概要. 本論文の目的は、外国語としてのスペイン語のディプロマについて詳細説明を行うことである。本稿は三部に分かれる。第一部ではレベル、デザイン、構成、評価、試験官といった、試験の主な特徴について述べる。またスペイン語試験のデザインの基礎となる3つの主要文献、すなわち「ヨーロッパ言語共通参照枠 (CEFR)」及び「語学試験をCEFRに関連付けるためのマニュアル」並びに「セルバンテス文化センターのカリキュラム」についても言及している。第二部は「ヨーロッパ言語共通参照枠」と日本でのスペイン語試験に関する情報を掲載。第三部はスペイン語試

験を受けたいと考えている学生を対象に、東北大学で行った授業について述べている。

Introduction

DELE, Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera (Spanish for Diplomas of Spanish as a Foreign Language), are official certificates issued by the Spanish Instituto Cervantes on behalf of the Spanish Ministry of Education and Sciences to participants who have passed a standard test indicating their Spanish language proficiency (Instituto Cervantes, 2010).

The DELE exams were created by the Spanish Ministry of Education in 1988 by the act Real Decreto 826/88. The first exam was held in November 1989 and was called Diploma Básico de Español (DBE). In 1991, the first Diploma Superior de Español (DSE) was introduced. The University of Salamanca, which issued its own certificates of Spanish proficiency until 1991, agreed with the Ministry of Education of Spain to undertake the development, production and grading of the DELE examinations. In 1992, according to the act Real Decreto 1/92, the Instituto Cervantes became responsible for the administration of the DELE exams. In 1994, the exam was referred to as the Certificado Inicial de Español (CIE). In 2002, by the act Real Decreto 1137/02, the Instituto Cervantes was declared responsible for the certificate, and the

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Spanish exam was divided into three distinct levels: the Diploma de Español Nivel Inicial (beginners level), the Diploma de Español Nivel Intermedio (intermediate level), and the Diploma de Español Nivel Superior (advanced level). In 2003, the Instituto Cervantes reached an agreement with the University of Salamanca to elaborate and evaluate the DELE exams. In 2008, by the act Real Decreto 264/08, there was a change in the denomination of the exams and the correspondence between the Spanish exams levels and the levels defined by the CEFR was settled: the Diploma de Español level A1, level A2, level B1 (equivalent to the former beginners level), level B2 (equivalent to the former intermediate level), level C1, and level C2 (equivalent to the former advanced level).

The Instituto Cervantes (2010) established the eligibility criteria for prospective candidates. The DELE exam is for those who do not speak Spanish as their mother tongue. Candidates must be citizens of a country in which Spanish is not an official language or, if they reside in a Spanish speaking country, they should fulfil at least two of the following requirements: a) Spanish is not the mother tongue of one of the parents, b) Spanish was not the first language learned, c) Spanish is not the candidate's usual language of communication, d) The candidate has not been educated in the primary or secondary school system in Spanish for any length of time.

In the first section of this paper, some background about the Spanish examination is provided, including the design concepts, structure, assessment, and training for examiners. The second part focuses on the evolution of the DELE exams and test centers in Japan. In the final part, an extra-curricular course organized at Tohoku University oriented to students interested in taking the DELE examination in the future is briefly described.

In fact, as the number of students interested in taking the DELE examination has increased, it is

necessary to organize special classes, not only for furnishing students with the language skills corresponding to the content at their particular level of the exam but also to acquaint them with the structure of the exam. We have made a revision of the DELE examination (design, structure, relation with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), a search about the evolution of DELE in Japan, and we have organized ten classes with the aim of ensuring that students understand the instructions of the exam, become accustomed to its structure, and providing practice exercises of the four linguistic skills. At the time of submitting this article, only three of the ten scheduled classes had been taught, thus the report we include in the third part describing the purpose of the extra-curricular classes for preparing DELE exams, the profile of the students, and the structure of the classes is very brief.

1. DELE (Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera)

1.1. Design of exams

As described by the Instituto Cervantes Dirección Académica (2014), the design of the Spanish exams is based on three instruments: the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, and, in the case of Spanish language, the Curriculum of Instituto Cervantes (Figure 1). In the following section, each of these will be described in detail.

1.1.1. Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) can be seen "as an example of what is now frequently referred to as the globalization of educational policy" (Byram and

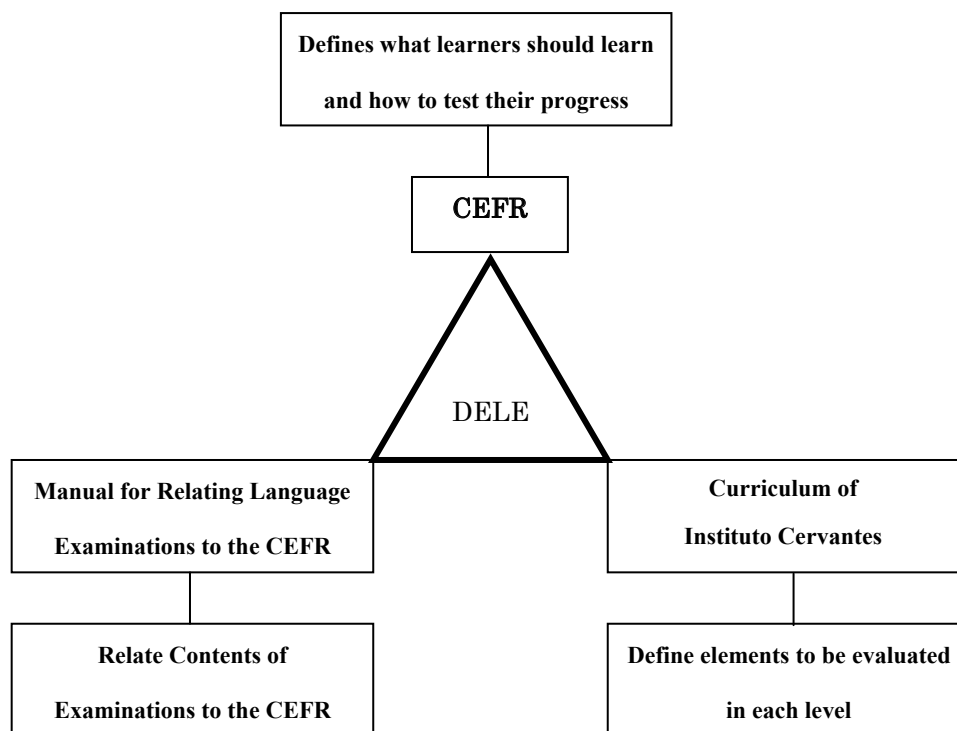


Figure 1 . Instruments considered for designing DELE examinations

Parmenter, 2012). Regarding the use and influence of the CEFR in Member States of the Council of Europe, Martyniuk and Noijons made a summary of a survey carried out in 2006 for the Intergovernmental Policy Forum of February 2007. The following conclusions were made:

In general, the CEFR seems to have a major impact on language education. It is used – often as the exclusive neutral reference – in all educational sectors. Its value as a reference tool to coordinate the objectives of education at all levels is widely appreciated. In some countries the CEFR has helped to develop both strategic language policy documents and practical teaching materials. In others, it is becoming the most reliable reference for curriculum planning. On the other hand, some respondents view the CEFR’s impact as quite modest so far. They point out that it does not yet play an important role for the teaching profession at the school level, although it has undeniable contributed to more transparency and coherence in general. (2007, p.7)

The CEFR was published by the Council of Europe’s Language Policy Division for the European Year of Languages in 2001, in the two official languages of the Council of Europe: English and French. The CEFR was developed with two broad aims: to act as a stimulus for reflection on current practice and to provide a common reference point for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations and textbooks across Europe. The intention of the CEFR was to establish a metalanguage that could be used to talk about objectives and language levels. Although the CEFR maintains neutrality regarding methodology, it presents a clear philosophy that can be summarized in the following points: a) transparency and coherence: define outcomes and create can-do descriptors that relate the content of the programme to real world needs; b) language for a social purpose: this point follows the action-oriented approach that sees the learner as a social agent who needs to perform certain actions for which he/she needs

Table 1 . Levels defined by the CEFR and considered for producing DELE exams

| | |
|----|---|
| A1 | Students can use the basic language in communication situations involving immediate needs or very common everyday matters. |
| A2 | Students can understand commonly used every day phrases and expressions related to areas of experience relevant to them: basic information about themselves and their families, shopping, occupations, places of interests, etc.) . |
| B1 | Students can understand the main ideas of a text in standard language if it contains well-known topics related to work, studies or leisure, handle most of the situations in a trip, produce simple texts about common topics, describe experiences, events, wishes and hope, briefly justify opinions or explain plans. |
| B2 | Students can understand the gist of complex texts (concrete or abstract, even technical texts if they are within the candidates' field of specialization) , interact with native speakers, produce clear and detailed texts about diverse topics, as well as defend a point of view on general topics. |
| C1 | Students can understand a variety of long, demanding texts, express fluently and spontaneously, use the language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes, produce clear, well-structured, detailed texts on topics with a certain level of complexity, with correct use of mechanism for organizing a cohesive and coherent text. |
| C2 | Students can handle any kind of situation, proving a spontaneous capacity of adaptation to any context, with a high degree of semantic and grammatical precision; and to express themselves fluently, with a high degree of specialization and complexity. |

language; c) plurilingualism: promote learning as discovering of other cultures and enrich the perspective about your own culture; d) partial competences: teach learners what they need to do in the language and focus on comprehension of features to help them understand a wider range of languages (North, 2014).

While the CEFR is not a method, it is more than a set of six proficiency levels (Council of Europe, 2001). The CEFR offers a link among planning, teaching and assessment, and also a link between language points and the real world by means of Can-do descriptors in each level, briefly explained in Table 1:

Nevertheless, the CEFR neither refers to any particular language nor does it specify the concrete contents of an exam. For that reason, it is necessary to use another document, the Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, to establish the relationship between the levels of reference and the exams.

1.1.2. Manual for Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

This Manual is a document that provides

procedures and techniques, based mainly on experimentation and expertise, to systematically relate the exams to the levels of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2009; Noijons, Béresová, Breton, and Szabó, 2011). Once the exam has been linked to the CEFR, if it certifies, for example, a B1 level, this is a definite indicator that the B1 level of this exam is equivalent to the B1 level in any other language within the CEFR (Instituto Cervantes Dirección Académica, 2014). The Manual aims to contribute in the area of linking assessments to the CEFR and increase transparency on the part of examination providers (Noijons, Béresová, Breton, and Szabó, 2011).

The Manual (Council of Europe, 2009) presents five inter-related sets of procedures that exam providers are advised to follow so as to design a proper link between a test and the CEFR: familiarization, specification, standardization training and benchmarking, standard setting, and validation. Familiarization, developed in Chapter 3 of the Manual, proposes a selection of training activities to ensure that participants in the linking process have a detailed knowledge of the CEFR, its levels and descriptors. Specification, developed in Chapter 4, has an awareness-raising function for improving the

relationship between the content of exams and the CEFR. Standardization training and benchmarking, developed in Chapter 5, suggest procedures that facilitate the implementation of a shared understanding of the common reference levels, exploiting illustrative CEFR samples for spoken and written performance. Standard setting, developed in Chapter 6, refers to the crucial point of a decision rule to allocate students to one of the CEFR levels on the basis of their performance in the examination and describes procedures to get to the final decision of setting cut scores. Validation, developed in Chapter 7, suggests that validation is not a final stage but a continuous process of monitoring, aiming to give an answer to the question “Did we reach the aims set for this activity?”

The third indispensable tool is a detailed description of the elements that are to be learned and evaluated in each language. For Spanish, Instituto Cervantes produced the Curriculum: Levels of Reference, which defines the Spanish language content appropriate to each level.

1.1.3. Curriculum of Instituto Cervantes

Instituto Cervantes produced a document called Plan Curricular: Niveles de Referencia (2012), which is a detailed description of which aspects of grammar, vocabulary and discourse are to be evaluated at each level. The six levels determined by CEFR apply to all the major EU languages, and the Instituto Cervantes determined the levels of reference for Spanish.

This work, integrated into three volumes, presents a systematic treatment of the necessary materials for preparing the objectives and contents of Instituto Cervantes syllabi and fulfills the following functions: a) it links theory and practice by helping to introduce the results of research and didactic experimentation into practice in the language classroom; b) it provides a professional analysis of

the needs and expectations of students and establishes the specific objectives and the most appropriate teaching approach; c) it coherently articulates the decisions made by different people at several points in the process of planning, development and curriculum evaluation. Each volume presents a description of the general objectives of each level and twelve inventories of grammar, pragmatics, notional component, culture, and learning, all of which provide a guide for the material necessary in order to accomplish the communicative activities specified in scales of descriptors for each of the levels defined by the CEFR.

1.1.4. Structure of DELE examinations

The three basic instruments used in the designing of the exams are the CEFR, the Manual to relate examinations to the CEFR, and the Levels of Reference defined by the Instituto Cervantes Curriculum. The first step in the process of design is to set the specifications of the examination: a description of what is to be evaluated, a structure for the exam, and to decide on the type of tasks to be included (Dirección Académica Instituto Cervantes, 2014). The document with the relevant specifications is checked and revised until the final version of the exam is reflected, and this becomes the reference for all the DELE exams. These specifications also define the contexts in which candidates are to use Spanish as a vehicle of communication. Having set these contexts, it is possible to decide what type of tasks will be more appropriate for measuring the communicative competence of candidates.

To establish those contexts, the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) describes four spheres of social life: a) personal: individual life and practices, family, friends; b) public: interactions as members of a social group; c) professional: activities and relations of people in working places; and d) education: the context of learning and acquisition of knowledge. Within each

sphere of social life, the language users are confronted with situations and expected to use the language in certain ways to speak about certain topics which need to be defined for the exam.

Therefore, considering social spheres, communicative situations, contents described in the Instituto Cervantes Curriculum, competences defined in the CEFR for each level, the three main aspects of the exam are set: the tasks that candidates have to accomplish, the texts that they have to understand and deal with, the items they have to answer, and the texts they have to produce (Dirección Académica Instituto Cervantes, 2014).

The DELE system, as described in Dirección Académica Instituto Cervantes (2014), consists of six exams corresponding to the six levels of the CEFR aiming to measure the communicative competence in Spanish of candidates. In levels A and B, each exam consists of four parts containing several tasks: Reading, Listening, Oral expression and interaction, and Writing expression and interaction. In levels C, each part contains more than one skill. The tasks are communicative and have a high level of authenticity. Oral and written instructions are, in all cases, in Spanish.

1.2. Assessment

Assessment, as detailed in Dirección Académica Instituto Cervantes (2014), is related to two main questions: a) What should language users learn? and b) How can the improvement of such learning be tested? The CEFR answers those two questions in two dimensions: a) the horizontal dimension: description of language learning and usage considering competences, strategies, communicative activities, linguistic processes, social spheres, texts, tasks, and contexts; and b) the vertical dimension: a definition of six levels of reference. The combination of both dimensions produces a system of scales (described in the CEFR, Chapter 9) for assessing the

language competency of candidates.

Scaled assessments are based on a comparison of the candidate's performance to a previously defined pattern called a descriptor. This assessment can be holistic and analytic. The first one is a general evaluation of the candidate's performance. The second one evaluates each component (fluency, accuracy, interaction, coherence, and the repertoire) of each level of the language being evaluated. Most of the assessment systems combine both scales.

The main requirement for assessment is reliability, i.e. consistency of qualification, which means that the results of qualification should be the same, independent of the moment and the examiner. Reliability can be internal or external. Internal reliability means that one examiner gives the same qualifications to the same performances of a candidate at different moments. External reliability means that different examiners give the same qualifications to the same candidates (Dirección Académica Instituto Cervantes 2014).

1.3. The role of examiners

The requirements for becoming an examiner, and the details of the role, are fully detailed in the online course of Dirección Académica Instituto Cervantes (2014). Examiners of oral expression and interaction are required to acquire the specific knowledge, procedures and attitudes to ensure they perform competently in their role. Regarding knowledge, examiners are required to be familiar with the qualification sheets and all the materials, and also understand the tasks and the scales. Besides, examiners must be well aware of the procedures for applying scales in the process of assessment so as to avoid subjective interventions in the interpretation of descriptors. As regards attitudes, examiners must remain impartial, and maintain objectivity and balance throughout the entire process. Examiners are required to have the ability to avoid being

influenced by the performance of the previous candidate, to maintain a balance between all the components of the content-level being evaluated and avoid concentrating on only one or two, and to make an appropriate comparison between the answers provided by the candidates and the patterns of the descriptors in the scales.

The following people may become DELE examiners: teachers employed by Instituto Cervantes and Education Offices of Spain, language assistants employed by the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, other teachers who speak Spanish natively, teachers whose mother tongue is not Spanish but who hold a university degree in Spanish or a DELE C2 certificate.

Instituto Cervantes offers training courses in three formats, on line, face to face and blended, to those interested in becoming examiners, in order to be familiar with DELE exams and their duties. All examiners must avoid all possible conflicts of interest with candidates. In cases where the candidates are their students, family members or friends, this must be communicated to the relevant superiors.

2. CEFR and DELE in Japan

2.1. Influence of CEFR in Japan

In Japan, the impact of the CEFR is more predominant in the university system, where students follow a liberal art curriculum for two years which includes foreign languages (Sugitani and Tomita, 2012). In particular, those authors maintain that “Even though the CEFR was designed to provide a common European framework for language learning, teaching and assessment regardless of language and country, almost all the universities in Japan have focused predominantly on the can-do statements in the CEFR and have applied them to only one language, which in the majority of cases is English” (p.201). The authors also pointed out that the influences of the CEFR in foreign language

education, mainly in the university system, are strong in two areas. On the one hand, regarding the teaching of English as an international language, there is a move towards transparency and efficiency of learning objectives and assessment systems as well as the development of can-do statements. On the other hand, the CEFR also has an influence on the education of the neighbouring languages of Chinese and Korean, with regard to the inclusion of intercultural factors, which is a promising precedent.

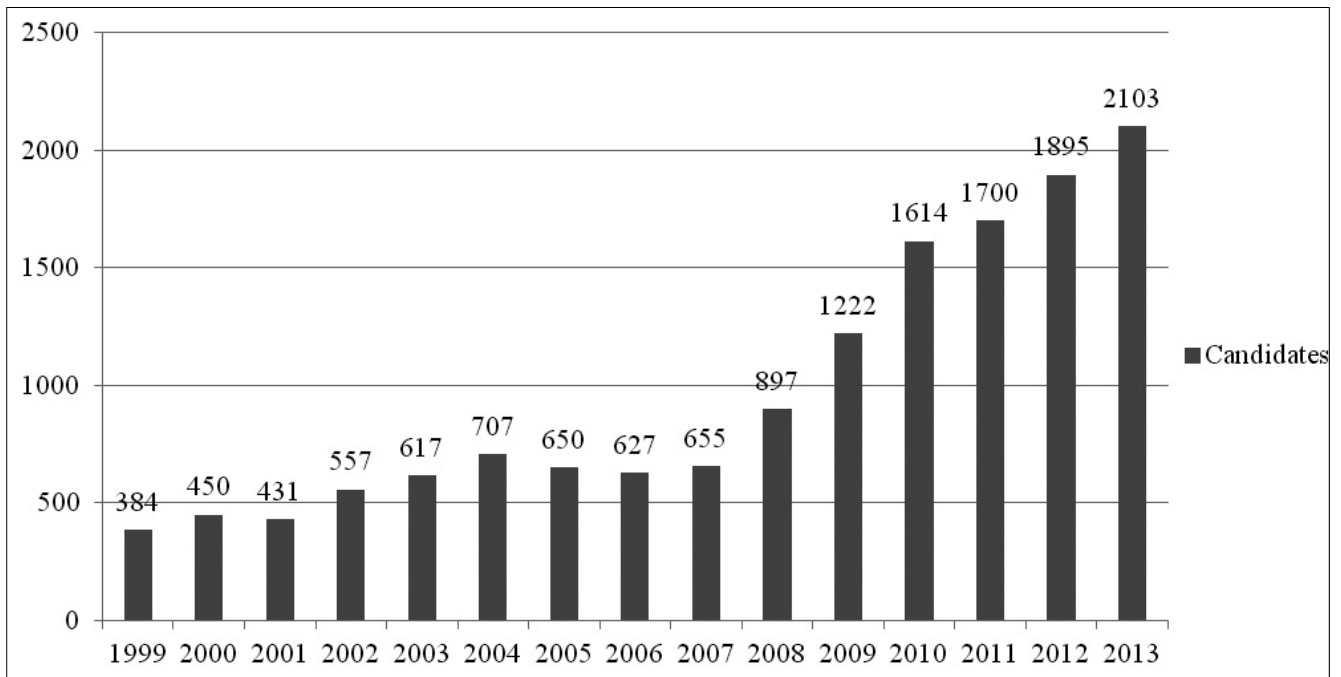
As regards the influence of CEFR on Spanish language education, the focus in this article is on the Instituto Cervantes introduction and development of Spanish proficiency tests in Japan.

2.2. Evolution of DELE in Japan

According to the information of the Department of Diplomas of Instituto Cervantes, the DELE exams, *Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera*, started to be held in Japan in 1990. Until then, Manila was the only place where the Spanish examination could be taken. In 1994, the Spanish exams started in South Korea, in Malaysia in 2001, in Vietnam in 2002, and in Taiwan in 2003. The Spanish examination was held for the first time in China in the spring of 2004 (Extenda, 2009).

According to a report in Extenda (2009), approximately 300 Japanese candidates sit for the DELE examination annually in Spain. In Japan, the number of Japanese candidates has been constantly growing, as can be seen in Graph 1. In Table 2 we can observe the number of candidates in all the test centers in 2014.

From 1999 to 2007, the Embassy of Spain administered the DELE examinations. Since 2008, the Instituto Cervantes has administered the DELE examination and the number of test centers has grown along with the number of candidates (Domínguez Marín, 2013).



Graph 1 . Evolution of the number of candidates in Japan between 1999 and 2013
(Sources: Instituto Cervantes and Embassy of Spain in Tokyo)

Table 2 . Number of Japanese candidates to DELE in all test centers in Japan in 2014 (Source: Instituto Cervantes)

| Candidates in Japan (2014) | | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------|-----|------|----------|------------|
| Place of the examination | April | May | July | November | Total 2014 |
| Tokyo | 9 | 461 | 208 | 727 | 2027 |
| Kyoto | | 32 | | 45 | |
| Nagoya | | 58 | | 218 | |
| Hirakata | | 87 | | 106 | |
| Okinawa | | | | 12 | |
| Sapporo | | | | 4 | |
| Hiroshima | 7 | | | 15 | |
| Fukuoka | | | | 33 | |
| Niigata | | 5 | | 0 | |
| Total | 16 | 643 | 208 | 1160 | |

2.3. Profile of Japanese students

According to research carried out by Extenda (2009), women traditionally have outnumbered men in the study of Spanish. This can be attributed to the following reasons: a) Japanese women are attracted to Spanish culture, b) women have more working mobility and can stop working, accomplish studies of Spanish in Spain and get another job later. Regarding male students of Spanish, approximately 90% of them

are business men who work in companies which have relations with countries in South America.

During the examination in August 2013, Instituto Cervantes carried out a survey of 112 candidates of level B: 62 candidates of level B1 (55%) and 50 candidates of level B2 (45%) (Dominguez Marin, n/d). The results of the survey were as follows:

a) 63% of the candidates were female and 37% were male

Table 3 . Candidates level B classified by age (Source Instituto Cervantes, Domínguez Marín, n/d)

| Age | Number of candidates | Percentage |
|-----------------|----------------------|------------|
| Under 18 | 2 | 2% |
| Between 18 - 25 | 56 | 50% |
| Between 26 - 39 | 34 | 30% |
| Between 40 - 59 | 18 | 16% |
| Over 60 | 2 | 2% |

Table 4 . Occupation of level B 112 candidates in August 2013 (Source: Instituto Cervantes, Domínguez Marín, n/d)

| Occupation | Number of candidates | Percentage |
|---|----------------------|------------|
| Students (high school, institute or university) | 59 | 53% |
| Part-time job | 12 | 12% |
| Regular job | 35 | 35% |
| Unemployed | 4 | 4% |
| Retired | 2 | 2% |

- b) The age range which represented the largest number of the candidates was between 18 and 25 years, followed by 26 and 39 years (Table 3)
- c) Approximately half of the candidates were students and many of the remaining half, were employed in regular or part-time work (Table 4)

To determine the motivation of candidates, several options were provided: personal motives, study, and work. The most common motive was personal, followed by study, and work was third. Within the field personal motives, the main reason chosen was “to motivate myself to study” and “to be aware of my level of Spanish”. In the Study field, the most common reason was “to improve my grade at school” . Within the field of personal motives, many of the candidates indicated their motive was related to their study of Spanish “as a hobby”.

According to Domínguez Marín, the person in charge of DELE in Japan, the motivation that leads students of Spanish to sit for the DELE examination differs from the motivation which leads them to study the language. The DELE examination

represents a challenge for students, who consider it as a way of testing their improvement, their level and their intensive preparation.

3 . Report on Classes for preparing for the DELE examination at Tohoku University

3.1. Purpose of the classes

In order to take the Spanish examination, students are required not only to acquire the abilities tested at the specific level of the exam but also to become familiar with the structure and the instructions of the DELE exam. For that purpose, special extra-curricular classes using material designed for studying for the exam are offered to students at Tohoku University who will eventually sit for the exam. The purposes of the classes are the following: a) to become familiar with the meaning of verbs in the instructions (listen, write, relate, choose, and other imperative verb forms) ; b) to study particular topics and details that may have not been covered in the regular course; c) to become used to completing the required tasks within the limited time allocated to each task.

Table 5 . Profile of the students taking the extra-curricular DELE classes at Tohoku University.

| Number of students | Level | University class | Spanish semester |
|--------------------|---------|------------------|------------------|
| 4 | A1 | Engineering | 2 |
| 1 | A2 | Anthropology | 4 |
| 1 | A2 | Economics | 4 |
| 1 | A2 → B1 | Economics | 4 |

Table 6 . DELE extra-curricular classes at Tohoku University

| Date | Number of classes | Content of each class, students: a) receive explanation and practice the new elements they may encounter in the tasks they will work with; b) revise the meaning of key-words often found in instructions (write, read, relate, etc.); c) accomplish two tasks: one reading, or writing, or listening task (either in pairs or individually), and one oral interaction task (individually). Students have an answer booklet so they can check their answers. After that, they prepare the oral task and perform it with the teacher. |
|----------|-------------------|--|
| Dec 2014 | 3 | |
| Jan 2015 | 2 | |
| Apr 2015 | 2 | |
| May 2015 | 3 | |



A DELE class at Tohoku University (Picture Cecilia Silva, Dec. 16, 2014)

3.2. Profile of the students

Students from six different classes were invited to participate in the courses, and seven decided to attend the ten extra-curricular DELE classes (Table 5). The learners attending these classes intend to take the DELE exam and/or travel and pursue studies of Spanish abroad sometime in the future.

3.3. Structure of the classes

We have organized a short course of ten classes (Table 6). In these classes, students work with the books *Preparación al Diploma de Español Nivel A1*

(Hidalgo, 2010) and *Preparación al Diploma de Español Nivel A2* (García-Viño Sánchez, 2010), which contain models of DELE tests, with all the contents and instructions entirely in Spanish. In this short course, students should cover two test-models. As homework, students are required to work with a book (Bando, Arrieta, Takaki, 2011) which contains test models and instructions in Japanese.

Conclusions

The DELE examination is internationally recognized among public and private educational institutions and

authorities as well as in the business world. The DELE exam certifies consolidated knowledge of Spanish and not just the momentary effort required when taking the exam. This exam values the practical use of the language and the diplomas are valid permanently. Nowadays, there is a great deal of educational material, course books adapted to the CEFR and books for preparing DELE and containing exams-like practice. Preparation for the exam requires not only handling the contents and language usage of the specific level but also plenty of practice in order to become accustomed to the specific structure of the exam. Since there have only been three DELE classes at the time of submitting this article, there are as yet no conclusive results or suggestions for the continuation of the course. From the broad perspective of Spanish as a foreign language, the DELE examination presents both a challenge and a purpose for studying the language.

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