TITLE

Student Perceptions of the CEFR Levels and the Impact of Guided Practice on Aptis Oral Test Performance

This is a summary of a report by by Jésus García Laborda, Marián Amengual Pizarro, Mary Frances Litzler, Soraya García Esteban, Nuria Otero de Juan as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see
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WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

Following European Union directives for European citizens to master two foreign languages by the year 2020, Spain has placed increased importance on the teaching of English. For example, university students are now normally required to certify their level of English in order to graduate. An efficient, fast measurement process is needed to meet these demands each year. The Aptis testing system is a possible way to meet this need. However, in recent years, a number of Aptis candidates at the University of Alcalá have obtained Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels B2 or C1 in all the skills except for Speaking, which has been rated at as low as A2 or B1. In addition, in 2013-2014 some professors at the university became concerned about discrepancies between Aptis Test scores and their own observations of student levels in class. For this reason, the research team decided to investigate the following questions:

- Do university professors who rate students assign the same level of oral proficiency as Aptis raters?

- Does knowledge of the different tasks on the Aptis Speaking Test and the opportunity to have time to prepare for the Speaking Test affect student results?

- What do the students perceive their speaking level to be? How do their perceived levels compare to their actual Aptis Speaking Test scores?

- Do the students obtain mixed level scores for the different sections of the Aptis Test as has been observed in recent years at University of Alcalá? If so, do any skills stand out as being consistently lower or higher among the participants?

HOW WE DID IT:

Eighty-six students from the Faculty of Education and from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities were interviewed by the researchers to determine their levels of spoken English according to the CEFR. They were then separated into a control and experimental group. The latter received

information about the Aptis Speaking Test and some practice materials. After approximately three weeks, both groups did a mock speaking test similar in format to the Aptis Speaking Test and they took the actual test itself. Afterwards a selection of the students from the experimental group was asked to study for a second official test, which they took three weeks later. Over the course of the project between November 2015 and April 2016 the students filled out three questionnaires.

WHAT WE FOUND:

The CEFR levels assigned by the professors based on the initial interviews were compared to the students' first Aptis Speaking Test levels. There was a difference between the two results in 63 of the 71 cases of people who completed both parts and, in fact, the Aptis level was higher than the face-to-face one more often than it was lower.

In terms of knowledge of the Aptis Test and prior preparation, eleven of the 31 students who took the test a second time - more than 33% of the group - improved their speaking score but the increase was small. The levels for the mock test and first Aptis Speaking Test were also compared for the 80 students who completed both activities. It was found that generally higher results were obtained on the Aptis Test and that the students with relatively lower levels showed the most variation.

In order to answer the third research question, the speaking self-assessments of the eleven students who obtained higher scores on the second Aptis Test were compared to their official levels. These students tended to rate themselves at the B1-B2 level with only one of them identifying his performance at the A2 level and two of them at C1. The data reveal that the students saw themselves as having pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar that were adequate for the level, but that they often gave themselves a comparatively lower mark for fluency.

As for the final research question, the Speaking Test scores were consistently within the range of the other test scores for both the experimental and the control groups. In other words, the students' levels of speaking were similar to their levels in the other areas tested, unlike the discrepancies observed at University of Alcalá in recent years. At the same time, it was observed that the scores for the Listening Test were generally lower than the other areas. This result echoes the findings of the First European Survey on Language Competence (European Commission, 2012), which showed that Spanish students obtain relatively lower scores in listening than those in other countries