

INCLUSIÓN, EQUIDAD Y CALIDAD EN LA ENSEÑANZA DE LENGUAS



UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DEL
ESTADO DE QUINTANA ROO



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Humanidades
y Lenguas**



Inclusión, equidad y calidad en la enseñanza de lenguas

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TESTING SECOND LANGUAGE READING COMPREHENSION FOR POSTGRADUATE STUDIES IN A MEXICAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In many public universities in Mexico, candidates are required to pass a reading comprehension examination in a second language, frequently English, before admittance to postgraduate studies. These examinations are frequently developed by in-house design teams within the University itself. However, due to its importance as a gatekeeping measure, these exams are open to criticism from test users who see the test requirement as unfair, as the level expected exceeds that attained in the standard curriculum for public schooling in Mexico. A further criticism is that the test requirement is irrelevant, as test users believe they will not need to read in languages other than Spanish to achieve success in their postgraduate studies. To address these questions of fairness in test design and to inquire more deeply into L2 reading requirements, we designed and applied an online questionnaire to 244 students enrolled in postgraduate programs at *Especialización*, master's, and doctoral levels. Our results show that students, once they are enrolled in study programs, perceive the L2 reading requirement to be fair and that they, in fact, read widely in English and other languages to fulfill course demands. However, we also identify that, despite attaining passing grades on the entrance exam, students are not confident about their understanding of texts in English and are substantially less confident about their ability to read texts in French. Our results point to a need to work with the academic community to develop greater assessment literacy and improve understanding of the purpose of these



tests and their usefulness. Further understanding of different program requirements should enable a differentiated approach to test design which would hold higher standards for some programs, with higher proficiency requirements and lower the level expected for programs with less need for L2 reading. We also see a need to work on more communicative tasks for the examination to reduce the perceived mismatch between test design and real-life requirements.

Key words: Language assessment, Fairness, Reading comprehension, Postgraduate studies, English for academic purposes.

INTRODUCTION

English language competence plays an increasingly important role in postgraduate studies in Mexico, since students are expected to participate in an international research community, a set of practices often referred to as academic literacy (Carlino, 2005). Wingate (2018) defines academic literacy as “the range of abilities that students have to acquire when starting out in a new academic discipline” (p. 349). The participation expected in the international research community for a given population of students may require different levels of competence and demand varying levels of proficiency in different language skills. For example, students may be expected to take classes or attend conferences in English, where the skills of speaking and listening will be heavily relied upon, or students may be expected to write term papers, produce, or comprehend research articles in English which require attention to reading and writing (Murray & Muller, 2018). In Mexico, students are rarely expected to take classes in English, but are expected to read articles and other academic papers in English and may, to a lesser extent, be expected to produce academic texts like conference proposals or articles in that language. Therefore, the emphasis is largely on written skills like reading and writing. Hence, many postgraduate courses require students to prove that they are able to read in English as part of the selection process.

However, there appears to be a mismatch between the testing requirement and language policy in Mexico. There are currently no clear language policies with regard to foreign language competence and/or reading comprehension for higher level education in Mexico, leading to each university taking decisions which vary widely depending on context and perceived requirements (Mendoza, 2020). The lack of a clear language policy makes it difficult to design appropriate curricular responses, since neither expected standards nor classroom demands for language competence are clear. In response to this ambiguity, many Mexican universities have addressed the perceived language requirement through a reading comprehension test requirement for candidates to study at the postgraduate level, rather



than providing much needed instruction to develop student competence in this area. In the case of the Public University under study in this article, to be admitted to higher studies programs, candidates must obtain a reading comprehension certificate. This requirement is established in University legislation through article 26 of the Guidelines for Postgraduate Studies (*Reglamento de los Estudios Avanzados de la UAEM*) (Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, 2008). It requires that successful applicants to postgraduate studies should prove their ability to comprehend at least one foreign language, to be determined by the program of study, following the certification process designated by the University.

Since 1999, the Faculty of Languages has administered the test for this requirement. Students who can present evidence of certification by a suitable external examining body, like Cambridge ESOL, Trinity, or ETS, can apply for revalidation. The test is designed in-house, and consists of a two-text, multiple-choice task, assessing the skill of academic reading comprehension in second languages. The texts are differentiated by the candidate's area of study. That is, there are separate versions of the test for students from biological sciences, health sciences, humanities, law, computer science, business studies, and political science, amongst others. The multiple-choice questions cover a variety of reading subskills relevant to student requirements in academic reading, such as identification of text purpose, reading for gist at both textual and paragraph levels, identification of primary and secondary information, identifying word and phrase meaning in context, and identifying textual referents. New versions of each test are produced periodically using texts plus items from an item bank designed following the test specifications. All item designers receive training in following the test specifications for text selection and item design before new versions are commissioned.

Despite the care taken in the design process, several issues accompany the certification process, such as negative user responses towards the test. This negative response has been identified from all sectors of test users, principally program coordinators, and candidates. Many of the negative comments reflect the belief that certification is “merely” a requirement, with the implication that postgraduate students do not need to read in a second language in the courses they take at the postgraduate level. Others believe that the certification of reading skills in a second language is at an unnecessarily high level. The language proficiency level expected to obtain the certificate is between B1 and B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), the latter being a proficiency level that would certainly allow the candidate to engage in independent reading. However, the failure rate of the test can be as high as 35%, with some variability according to the area of study. This reflects the lower level of reading achievement provided by the standard curriculum in Mexican education and leads to discontent amongst candidates who assume that the level obtained from general schooling should be sufficient. This last problem can only be addressed through curricular change, providing higher levels



of language studies to help students acquire the required foreign language reading skills (Mendoza, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading English as a foreign language has become an essential skill for students all over the world who wish to keep up with developments in almost all academic disciplines (Hamel, 2007). While it is essential to recognize that this English language hegemony can lead to a lack of diversity in evidence as well as restrictive access to knowledge as pointed out by Amano et al. (2021), the status of academic publishing is such that the most recent research is published in English, hence making reading in that language a prerequisite for being up-to-date in most fields.

Reading is a highly complex social and cognitive process. In part due to the complexity of the variables entering the process of reading, the reader, the text, the context, and the writer, there is no clear definition of it (Sadeghi, 2021). Koda (2005) defines reading in terms of the success achieved through the process. Therefore, the successful reader is one that generates interaction between the text information and individual background knowledge, and comprehension is a product that gradually evolves from such interaction (Koda, 2021). From this view, a successful interaction process would consist of factors like word meaning retrieval, word meaning integration, and personalization of information. Grabe and Yamashita (2022) state that several features define reading. In this view, reading is seen as a rapid, efficient, comprehending, interactive, strategic, flexible, purposeful, evaluative, learning, and linguistic process.

In order to understand what reading entails, several models have been developed. The bottom-up model is an approach that starts with the printed word and continues through decoding processes to assign meaning. The top-down model (Alderson, 2000; Smith, 1971) considers the activation of the reader's schemata as a central process of text understanding. Neither model alone provides an adequate explanation of how reading proceeds, so limitations in both models gave rise to the interactive compensatory models (Stanovich, 1980). This approach understands reading as a process using both bottom-up (information from the text) and top-down strategies (schemata) to understand the text. The reading comprehension certification in the above-mentioned University takes this approach.

These definitions and constructions of the concept and process of reading refer to reading in a first language (L1), which is remarkably similar to the process carried out by second language readers at advanced proficiency levels when reading skills in L1 are transferred to L2 reading. However, at beginner or intermediate levels, differences are significant. Koda



(2021) explains that the most significant differences are L1 reading ability, the linguistic distance between both languages, and L2 linguistic knowledge.

As well as the added challenges of reading in an L2, students at the postgraduate level face the additional difficulty posed by the specific features of academic English making processing more demanding. These additional challenges come in the form of bottom-up features like heavily pre- and post-modified noun phrases, for example, *a very marked and expanding cumulative effect* or *a study of intraspecific variability focused on developmental physiology* and embedded sentences, like *Here the photograph functions verbally, as if to punctuate the book's conclusion with the phrase* (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999; Hyland, 2004). Readers also face difficulties that are more top-down in nature, for example, the level of abstraction in academic prose, the complexity of the genres they are expected to read successfully coupled with their lack of experience with reading those genres, the intensity of the reading expected and the lack of time to process the information gleaned from assignments.

On the other hand, there are some specific features of academic English that make it easier to process. Again, these can be categorized as bottom-up or top-down. In terms of top-down advantages, the scientific terminology used in academic prose often comes from Greek or Latin roots, making these words easier to recognize for readers from a Romance language like Spanish. In fact, scientific terminology is typically remarkably similar in form between English and Spanish, facilitating students' access to meaning (Jiménez, Rosas & Saez, 2017). From a more top-down perspective, background knowledge of the topic and discipline can compensate for lower levels of language ability. Having access to knowledge schemata facilitates the prediction of textual content and the construction of viable expectations, enabling students to read texts which are linguistically beyond their level (Andrade, 2010; Ibáñez, 2008; Stanovich, 1980). However, some evidence suggests that this effect may be dependent on the capacity of working memory (Shin, Dronjic & Park, 2018).

The assessment of reading comprehension in a second language is usually relevant for the test-taker and some stakeholders. Several high-stake language certifications such as TOEFL, TOEIC, Cambridge First, IELTS, amongst others, include reading comprehension modules because of the kind of decisions often based on results obtained by candidates (Grabe, 2009; Grabe & Yamashita, 2022). However, these exams are costly and cover other language abilities not considered necessary in the context of postgraduate studies at Mexican universities, where classes are taught in Spanish, and most written evaluation is carried out in that language. This has led to the need for an in-house test designed to cater to the needs of higher studies at the University.

Testing reading comprehension involves several complex decisions in the design of suitable test specifications about construct definition, item type, and text selection. Accordingly,



exceptional care must be taken when defining the construct, and simultaneously, a substantial number of actions must be undertaken to ensure reliability. It is the quality of those actions which gives the standardized certifications offered by institutions like Cambridge Assessment and Educational Testing Services their reputation. Many of these decisions are underpinned by as thorough theoretical knowledge of the reading process as is possible. Alderson (2000) claims that, as testers, we are fully aware that our knowledge of the reading comprehension process “is faulty, partial, and possibly never perfectible” (p. 1).

We have discussed the problems of validity, reliability, practicality, backwash, authenticity, and interactivity of these exams in previous work (Moore, Andrade & Matamoros, 2009) under the umbrella term of usefulness. Nonetheless, other aspects of test design require a more profound understanding of the test population and the task types they will be expected to undertake. The concept of tester responsibility is key to this discussion. According to McNamara, Knoch and Fan (2019), tester’s responsibility can be seen from two perspectives, described as fairness and justice. Fairness is the issue of tester’s responsibility with reference to decisions on issues which are about internal test considerations, like design or administration, whereas justice is about considerations which are external to the test, such as the purposes and contexts for which the test is used. Improvements in justice can be achieved through the development of assessment literacy since they are under the direct control of the test designer, however issues of fairness must be addressed within the testing community through attention to the technical quality of the test and its suitability for a specific population.

Fairness is the focus of this paper, where through a deeper understanding of the demands of reading comprehension in Spanish, English, and other languages in the postgraduate student population, we wish to consider how well tester responsibility for internal characteristics is achieved in the reading comprehension entrance test. As McNamara, Knoch and Fan (2019) point out, tests used as gatekeeping measures for access to higher education, jobs, or immigration are particularly vulnerable to misuse by authorities and other end users and, hence, open to the perception and accusation of unfairness. This point is especially true in those circumstances where the quality of life of candidates is deeply affected by the decision taken based on test results.

Crucially, the language certification offered through the L2 reading comprehension entrance exam has been the object of criticism, on the basis that these tests are used for purposes for which they were not originally designed. This misuse of tests can lead to decisions of importance being taken on the insufficient basis of the information provided by such certifications, which afford measurements of a construct different from the intended one. Several authors have called attention to the issue of fairness in language testing and made proposals calling for greater validity and fairer testing practices that go from test validation



(Weir, 2005), social responsibility (McNamara & Roever, 2006), target language use (Bachman & Palmer, 2010) or use of statistical analysis (McNamara, Knoch & Fan, 2019). However, because of the considerable number of factors and uses related to standardized language tests, little consensus has been reached on the matter.

When it comes to reading comprehension, the issue is not different, as it is a key component of academic literacy needed to perform successfully in higher education. Therefore, information related to this skill is of foremost importance for university decision-makers. For that reason, an accurate measure of the construct of reading comprehension must be achieved to increase the fairness of the selection process for postgraduate studies.

METHODOLOGY

The main objective of the study was to detect current needs in second language reading comprehension in postgraduate studies at university. In order to achieve this, we designed and applied instruments that identify such needs amongst postgraduate students. For the research, we adopted a quantitative methodology (Uribe, 2017), and a transversal, non-experimental, exploratory research design (Hernández y Mendoza, 2018).

The research questions for this study were:

RQ1 How well does the current reading comprehension entrance exam serve the needs of postgraduate programs in the *UAEMéx*?

RQ2 What current practices in reading in postgraduate studies in the *UAEMéx* are in place?

To respond to these research questions, we designed a questionnaire in Spanish, based on the questionnaire included in Mendoza (2020). The questionnaire in Mendoza (2020) was designed for a population of candidates being screened for admission to postgraduate studies and was applied at the time of the entrance exam. To answer our research questions, our questionnaire needed to target students who were already taking classes in postgraduate departments in the *UAEMéx* since they would have information about actual expectations and requirements. The questionnaire was drafted in Microsoft Forms and revised by the researchers for omissions and adjustments. The definitive version of the questionnaire is included as an appendix.

This questionnaire was sent via institutional email to the current coordinators of postgraduate programs in the *UAEMéx*. Contact details for the coordinators were obtained from the official University websites, and emails were sent to 140 program administrators,



including program deans and assistants. The email included a request to share the questionnaire link with active students in the program.

Following this request, the online questionnaire was answered by 244 postgraduate students out of 3,541 at the University (Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, 2020). This total included students from master's, doctorate, and *Especialización* students. The distribution of responses was as shown in table 1.

Level	n	Sample
<i>Especialización</i>	3,198	55
Master's	797	98
Doctorate	546	91
Total students enrolled	3,541	244

Table 1. Population and sample.

Table 1 shows that the highest number of responses came from students enrolled in master's programs, followed by doctoral students and finally students in *Especialización*. Given the population size, the margin of error was calculated as 5.93%, which is acceptable for generating inferences.

The University has 103 postgraduate programs, of which 35 (34%) responded to the survey. Table 2 shows this total by type of program:

Level	Total of programs	Responding programs	Percentage
Doctorate	21	12	57%
Masters	40	15	38%
<i>Especialización</i>	42	8	19%
Total	103	35	34%

Table 2. Number of programs vs sample.

Here we can see that the highest percentage of responses were from students in doctoral programs. We received responses from a wide variety of programs, including humanities, social sciences, business, and public administration, computing sciences, health sciences, computing, sustainability, and agriculture. The next highest level of response was received



from students in master's programs. Again, these students were enrolled in programs from diverse areas of knowledge, including the humanities, psychology, the agricultural industry, odontology, engineering, computing, and materials sciences, amongst others. The lowest number of responses came from students in specialties, with only a 19% response rate. Most of the responses from these programs were from the area of health sciences, for example, orthodontics, pediatric medicine, and studies in resonance and imaging for medical purposes. The low percentage of responses from specialties might be a consequence of students' activities related to medical practice. However, responding programs include some of the most prestigious academic programs in the University and so, despite the low response from specialties we believe we can treat the sample as representative of postgraduate students.

RESULTS

The first research question we planned to respond to with this study was how well the current entrance exam serves the needs of postgraduate programs in the *UAEMéx*. We asked two main questions in this respect; firstly, how well the language level evaluated in the exam corresponds to the level of reading competence expected in their postgraduate program. Secondly, we asked how well the type of text encountered in the exam relates to the type of text students are expected to read during their studies. The responses to the first question, regarding the language level, are shown in figure 1. Students selected their response from 5 options, ranging from very high correspondence to very low correspondence.

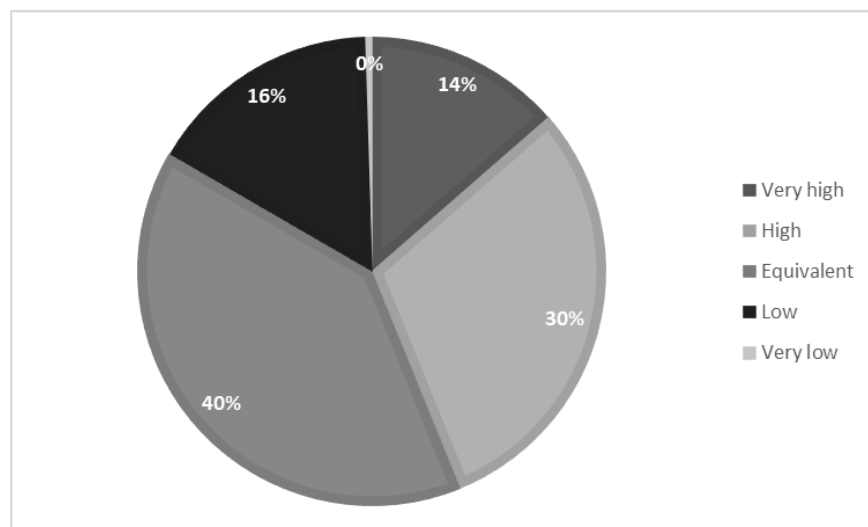


Figure 1. Equivalence of level evaluated in entrance exam with the level of English expected in the program.



The most frequent response, from 90 students (40%), was to identify the language level of the test and the one required by postgraduate studies as equivalent. This is an encouraging result since most students feel the language level is suitable. However, 69 students (30%) felt that the test level was high compared to course requirements. An additional 31 students (14%) stated that the language level was very high in relation to their course requirements. Here, 37 students (16%) considered that the entrance test level should be higher to account for the expectations with regard to reading in English for their postgraduate courses. Taken together, all students who indicated a mismatch between the language level of the test and that expected during their studies account for 60% of test-takers. However, we need to consider that there is no clear consensus amongst the respondents whether the level is too high or too low, and responses to questions later in the study call into question the belief that the language requirement is too high.

In relation to the first research question, we also asked how well the type of text students are expected to read during their postgraduate studies corresponds to the type of text in the entrance exam. The answers are recorded in figure 2, where the students selected responses from four options ranging from very high to very low. Only 228 students responded to this question.

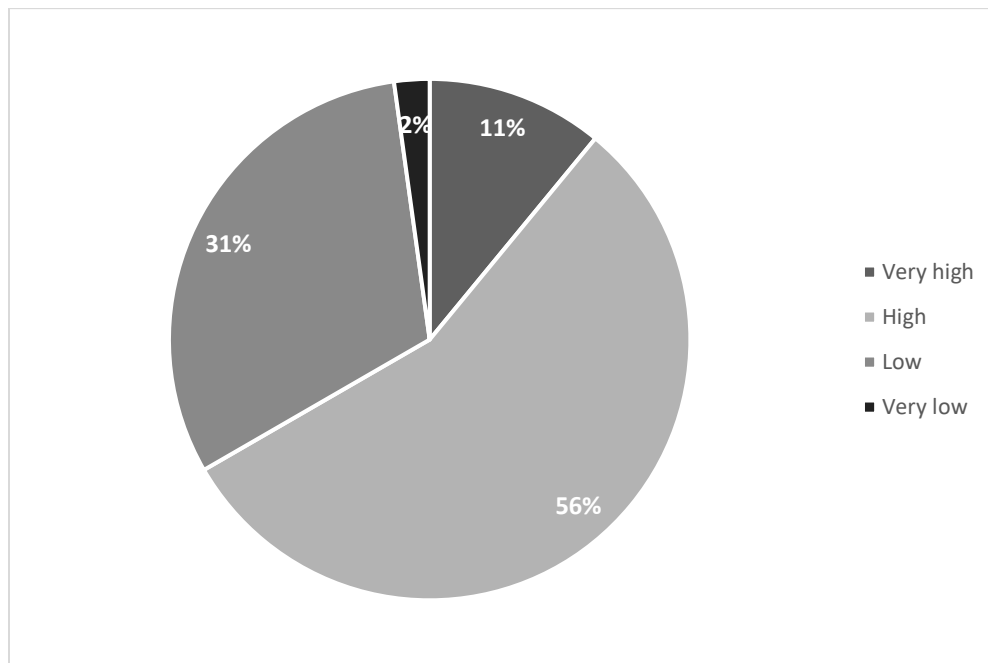


Figure 2. Equivalence between the type of reading in the entrance exam and that expected during postgraduate studies.



We should note that the type of text included in the exam is fragments from research articles from journals in the general field of studies. This seems to be a good fit for most programs, since 67% of respondents (152 students) identified the text type as highly or very highly equivalent to the type of texts they are expected to read. However, there are 33% (76) who consider that textual equivalence is low or very low.

The second research question was about the form of current practices in reading in postgraduate studies in the *UAEMéx*. Based on the problem which inspired this research, we asked about five areas of interest:

- How much students read in general;
- What languages do students read in;
- What types of text do students read;
- How much do students feel they understand from a text when reading in different languages;
- What are students expected to do with the information they glean from their reading.

The responses to these questions provide valuable input to the design of the instrument of evaluation for entry to postgraduate studies, enabling us to design a more relevant exam with greater validity for its testing purpose (McNamara, Knoch & Fan, 2019).

Figure 3 shows participant responses about the number of pages read during a typical week of postgraduate studies, regardless of the language in which the students read.

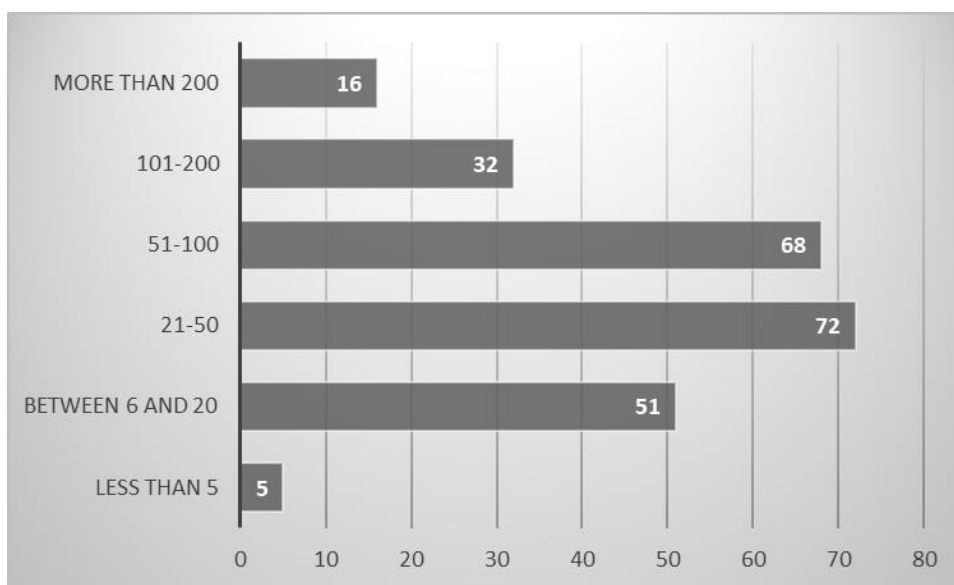


Figure 3. Number of pages read per week by postgraduate students.



The most frequent response was that students were reading between 21 and 50 pages per week. Many students were reading between 51 and 100 pages a week. These results show that 57% of the students surveyed were reading more than 20 but less than 100 pages a week for their studies. There was quite a wide range of responses to this question, as 16 students (6.5%) were reading more than 200 pages, but there were 5 students (2%) who were reading less than 5 pages per week. On checking the programs students at each extreme of the range were enrolled in, the amount of reading seems to be a personal issue, since students from the doctoral program in Humanities were present amongst those who claim to read more than 200 pages as well as those who read fewer than 5.

To find out how central access to texts in other languages is in postgraduate studies in the *UAEMéx*, we also asked what languages students were required to read their academic sources in, whether that is Spanish, English, French, or others. The reader will recall that one of the problems this study was designed to address is the accusation from several program coordinators and potential candidates for postgraduate studies in the *UAEMéx* that students are not required to read in any language other than Spanish. In contrast to this claim, 89% (217) of the students stated that they had to complete readings in English as part of their coursework. In fact, 7% (16) say they never have to read texts in Spanish, which shows how pervasive the requirement to read in other languages has become. Only 4% (10) of students say they never have to read in English, and almost 40% (96) are expected to read in languages other than Spanish or English. These other languages vary with the discipline and program but include Indo-European languages like Portuguese, Italian, French, and German. However, English is still the most common language of science, as more than 50% of the participants (104) read more in English than in Spanish.

Another question to help determine the relevancy of the current design of the entrance exam was regarding the types of text students are expected to read. The results for both Spanish and English can be seen in figure 4 below.

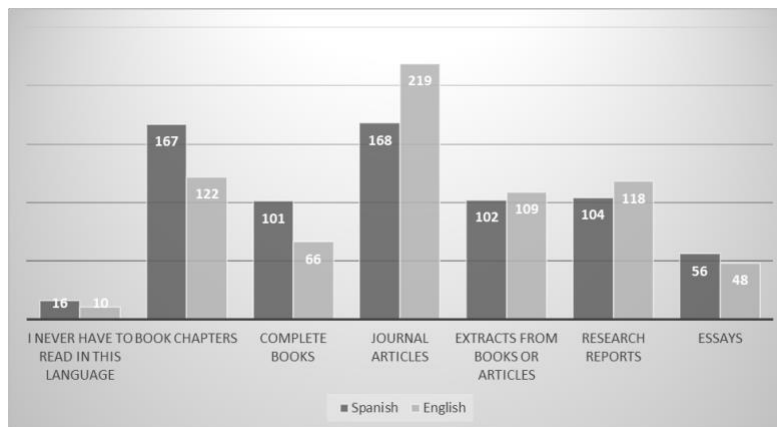


Figure 4. Text types read by participants in Spanish and English.



It should be pointed out that these responses were not exclusive, since students could select as many responses as were relevant to their current situation. Hence, the same students who read one text type in one language are probably also reading that type in the other language. The most frequent response by far was the requirement to read academic articles in either language. However, English was clearly the more frequent answer here, with almost 90% of the participants being required to read this kind of text in English. Slightly fewer are expected to read journal articles in Spanish, but those 168 students still represent over 68% of the total sample. The subsequent most popular response was the reading of book chapters. In this category, students were more likely to be reading in Spanish, 68% (167 students) responded to this option. Fewer read book chapters in English, but the frequency was still relatively high, since 50% of participants chose this option. After this, research reports constitute a common text type, the response frequencies were similar between Spanish and English, with a slight advantage for the latter. 48% of participants indicated that they read research reports in English, compared to 43% reading this type of text in Spanish.

The next most common text type was extracts from books or articles. We were particularly interested in this response, because the text type currently used on the entrance exam is extracted from chapters or articles for reasons of practicality. Given time constraints on the exam design, it is impossible to include full-length texts with the appropriate academic style. 42% of the participants are expected to read extracts in Spanish, whereas 45% have been required to read extracts in English. Students are also requested to read entire books in fulfillment of course requirements; in this study, this practice is more common in Spanish than in English. Over 41% are expected to read complete books in Spanish, whereas only 27% are required to read entire books in English. This result reflects the likelihood that students could not be expected to fully comprehend longer texts in a second language. The least frequent response about text type was essays. Nevertheless, they are still a common type of reading, with 19% of students reading them in English and 23% reading in Spanish.

While the kind of texts that students are expected to read in other languages is significant, it could be considered even more meaningful to know how much students understand from their reading. For this reason, we asked students to estimate the percentage of texts they understand for two modern languages, English and French. While these responses represent perceptions rather than reliable, validated measures of language competence, we consider them a suitable reflection of what it means to have passed the entrance exam. Since all the participants in the survey were students enrolled in postgraduate programs in the *UAEMéx*, they had to have passed the exam or shown an international certification of their language competence. Participant responses for 243 postgraduates are shown in figure 5 below. One student did not respond since, in his program, he was not asked to read in English.

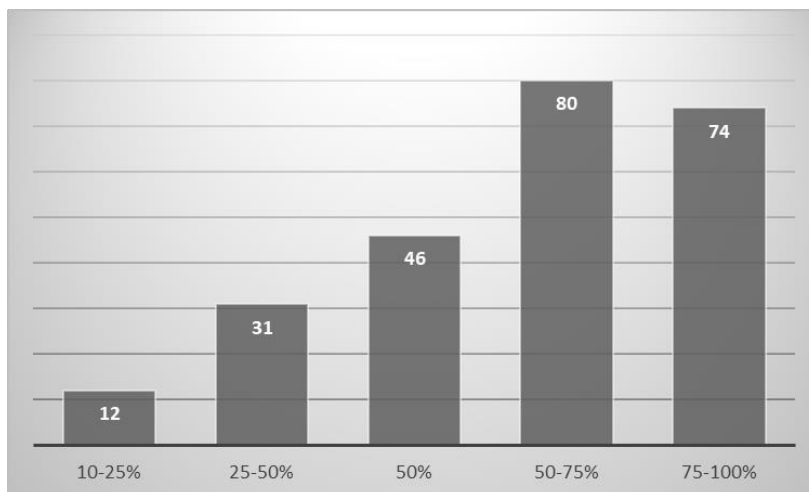


Figure 5. Percentage of text in English participants perceive they understand.

While there may be some debate about what percentage of understanding is acceptable, we might agree that only the 74 (30%) who claim to understand between 75% and 100% of what they read in English understand the text at a level appropriate to postgraduate studies. Most students (33%) responded that they understood over half the text. Nonetheless, that would probably not be considered acceptable by most standards. If we take 75% understanding to be the minimum acceptable, 70% of the students (169) would not be currently reading at an acceptable level.

We asked the same question about the level of understanding in French to gauge how well known this language is amongst students of postgraduate studies. Only 98 students responded to this question, since the rest were not expected to ever read in French. These results can be observed in figure 6.

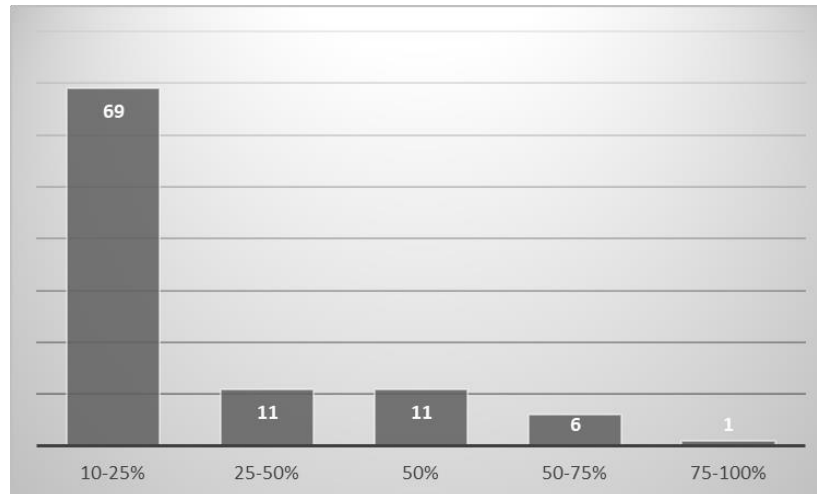


Figure 6. Percentage of text in French that students perceive they understand.

Again, if we consider the acceptable cut-off point for understanding to encompass at least 75% of what is read, then only one student can adequately comprehend texts in French. A further 6% (6 students) say they understand more than half the text. However, the majority of participants (97 postgraduates, 93%) understand 50% or less of the material they are expected to read in French.

The degree of understanding achieved by the participants is of great relevance in postgraduate studies. However, an additional concern is the tasks students are expected to complete using the information gleaned from the reading material. Figure 7 shows what tasks students are expected to complete based on their reading. These findings are not differentiated by language; that is, the task types are based on reading in any language. It is also worthwhile noting that these are student perceptions of task type and may not correspond to actual pedagogical practices in the University.

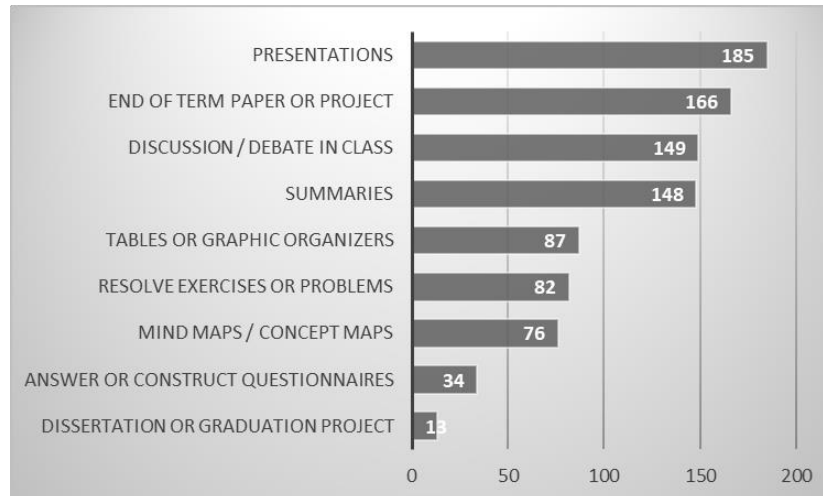


Figure 7. Types of tasks carried out from reading materials.

The most frequent type of activity expected after reading is classroom presentations. 185 participants (76%) were engaged in this activity. Reading is also a major input for end of term papers or projects, with 166 students (68%) marking this option. The following most frequent options were discussion or debate in class and summaries, obtaining a similar number of responses with around 60% of participants. 36% were required to create tables or graphic organizers, an activity that requires a considerable level of text processing and adaptation of the reading material. 82 of the participants (34%) were required to resolve exercises or problems based on the reading; again, this activity requires a practical understanding of the text. Those activities designed to promote greater processing of the text may help to compensate partially for the limited percentage of understanding achieved by the students if students receive sufficient, personalized feedback. Mind maps or concept maps were mentioned by 76 participants (31%). Few students were expected to respond to or design questionnaires, with only 34 (14%) mentioning this activity. Finally, the least frequent response was the use of reading material for the dissertation or graduation paper. This low result can be partially explained by the phrasing of the question, focused on using reading assigned by a teacher. It would be expected that most reading for dissertations would be assigned by the thesis tutor or self-directed.

From these results, it is worth highlighting that most of the postgraduate students see the relevance of the reading comprehension component in the L2 entrance test they are required to take. Referring to figure 1, none of the students who responded to the questionnaire felt that the language level was too low, and only 14% felt it was too high. The exam was also perceived to include very similar texts to those that students were required to read in the context of their studies. These two results indicate that the test contents are



not very distant from current reading expectations in postgraduate studies in the *UAEMéx*. This data is an encouraging result in terms of the fairness of the test. However, it is imperative not to disregard that part of the community perceives a mismatch between the demands of the exam against the demands within actual courses. So, it was essential to improve our understanding of the role of reading in other languages in postgraduate studies at the University.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to respond to two research questions about how well the current reading comprehension exam responds to the requirements for reading in different languages in the postgraduate programs of the *UAEMéx*. We applied an online questionnaire to further our understanding of these processes in the student population. The results we present in this paper clearly indicate the importance of reading in English and, to a lesser degree, in other modern languages to participate successfully in postgraduate studies in the *UAEMéx*. Our findings show that students in most postgraduate programs in the *UAEMéx* are expected to read complex texts in Spanish, English, and other languages at elevated levels of understanding and fulfill complex tasks. This is at odds with a common perspective we identified amongst program administrators and candidates for postgraduate studies that reading in other languages was not an expected skill and represented an empty requirement for admission.

The decisions taken on the test result have a high impact on the lives of the test candidates, and so, it is a responsible action to develop fair, useful, and valid instruments. In terms of fairness, most postgraduate programs in the *UAEMéx* are well served by the current exam. However, some programs require slightly higher or lower levels of reading competence, which would indicate the need to redesign different versions of the exam for specific areas in terms of the level of difficulty. It is also worrying, however, that despite passing the examination, many students feel their understanding of texts in English is below 75%. Most English language teachers would consider this level insufficient for putting textual content to any practical purpose. This level of language ability could be enhanced by teaching students top-down strategies to activate their previous knowledge to compensate for their lower language ability.

While the sample of students who responded to our questionnaire was considered significant for the entire population, some areas were not well covered. It would be preferable to include a larger proportion of students from specialties to further our understanding of this level of studies and their requirements for the entrance examination. Another area requiring future attention is greater detail in the correlations between data from different programs,



which would allow the test design to be more responsive to the specific needs of each program and hence fairer. Amongst the student population, we feel that following up on the questionnaire with focus groups and in-depth interviews would improve our general understanding of the results we have presented in this paper. Finally, as well as an inquiry into student needs and perceptions, we recognize the need to obtain further information from other stakeholders in the testing process, such as professors, program deans, and test designers.

Finally, we wish to share several pedagogical recommendations arising from this study. Firstly, there is an immediate need to develop assessment literacy amongst the stakeholders and end-users of the entrance examination to promote greater justice in its use. Secondly, in attention to the policy-testing mismatch, it is essential to encourage students to focus on using reading skills to enhance their learning rather than aiming to pass the exam. Redesigning and marketing exam preparation courses to achieve greater academic success and develop an awareness of the importance of reading to learn in other languages is an essential step towards greater acceptance in the community of test users. Finally, much of this evidence points to the need to design test specifications that promote the inclusion of more communicative tasks while maintaining an acceptable level of practicality.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Estudio exploratorio de las necesidades de comprensión lectora en lengua extranjera en la UAEMEX. Análisis de necesidades de comprensión lectora en lengua extranjera.

ESTIMADO ESTUDIANTE:

El siguiente cuestionario tiene como finalidad ver cuáles son tus necesidades de comprensión de lectura en lengua extranjera en la UAEMEX, así como determinar la importancia de los distintos niveles de comprensión que requieres en tus estudios. El cuestionario es anónimo y la información aquí recabada es confidencial y con fines informativos para la UAEMEX.

1. ¿Cuál es su edad?
2. ¿Cuál es su género?
3. ¿En qué programa de posgrado estudia?
4. ¿Cómo obtuvo sus conocimientos de idioma para certificar la comprensión de textos en una segunda lengua?
 - A) clases de lengua extranjera en sus estudios curriculares
 - B) clases extracurriculares de una segunda lengua
 - C) Aprendizaje autónomo/ estudios independientes
 - D) Experiencia en un entorno de habla extranjera
5. ¿Presentó el examen de certificación de comprensión de textos en una lengua extranjera en la Facultad de Lenguas de la UAEM?
6. ¿Qué tan equivalente considera el nivel de lengua del examen de certificación de comprensión lectora en una lengua extranjera de la Facultad de lenguas en relación con lo que se le pide leer en el posgrado?
7. ¿En qué grado se asemeja el tipo de lectura del examen de certificación de comprensión lectora en una lengua extranjera de la Facultad de Lenguas a lo que se le pide leer en el posgrado?
8. En caso de NO haber presentado el examen en la Facultad de lenguas, ¿con qué certificación revalidó su competencia lectora en una L2?
9. ¿Cuántas materias curso actualmente en su posgrado?
10. Del material de lectura obligatoria que le asignan sus profesores, ¿qué cantidad de cartillas tiene que leer a la semana?
11. ¿Actualmente en sus cursos tiene que leer en otro idioma además del español?



12. ¿Qué porcentaje del total de lecturas asignadas por sus profesores en el posgrado representan las lecturas en español?
13. ¿Qué porcentaje del total de lecturas asignadas por sus profesores en el posgrado representan las lecturas en inglés?
14. ¿Qué porcentaje del total de lecturas asignadas por sus profesores en el posgrado representan las lecturas en una lengua distinta al inglés o español? ¿Por ejemplo, francés, portugués u otras?
15. ¿Qué tipo de textos en español le asignan sus profesores para leer en sus cursos?
16. ¿Qué tipo de textos en inglés le asignan sus profesores para leer en sus cursos?
17. ¿Qué tipo de textos en otra lengua, que no sea español o inglés, le asignan sus profesores para leer en sus cursos?
18. Indique en qué porcentaje aproximado se encuentran en **papel o en línea los textos en español** que le asignan sus profesores para lectura.

Por ejemplo: *en línea 75% en papel 25%*

19. Adicionalmente a las lecturas obligatorias que le asignan en sus cursos, ¿cuántas cuartillas lee por su cuenta a la semana para apoyar en su trabajo de investigación?
 20. En general, ¿en qué idioma o idiomas lee el material de lectura adicional?
- Por ejemplo: español 75% e inglés 25%
21. Aproximadamente, ¿qué porcentaje del texto en inglés comprende?
 22. Aproximadamente, ¿qué porcentaje del texto en francés comprende?
 23. Indique la frecuencia con la que utiliza las siguientes herramientas de apoyo cuando lee en lengua extranjera:

Diccionario bilingüe en papel

Diccionario monolingüe en papel

Diccionario bilingüe en línea

Diccionario monolingüe en línea

Tesauros (diccionario de sinónimos)

Traductores electrónicos

24. Indique cuáles actividades derivadas de las lecturas realizadas se llevan a cabo en el curso

Discusión/debate en clase



Presentaciones/exposiciones

Resolución de ejercicios o problemas

Resúmenes

Tablas o cuadros

Mapas mentales

Resolución o elaboración de cuestionarios

Elaboración de trabajo o proyecto final

Redacción de trabajo de obtención de grado

¡Muchas gracias por tu participación! Si tienes algún comentario, por favor háznoslo saber.