THE ROLE OF ABA IN THE BULATS CANDIDATES´TRAINING AT THE MONTERREY INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

FINAL REPORT

By

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Introduction

Monterrey Institute of Technology is the leading private university in Mexico (according to QS Ranking) and has 31 campuses in various parts of the country. It is one of Latin America's universities with the highest academic recognition and one of the top 100 worldwide. It is very active as a business school as well as in the areas of engineering, technology and innovation. In total it offers 54 degrees, 32 of which can be studied internationally.

In fact, technology and innovation are areas in which Monterrey Institute of Technology stands out thanks to its relentless effort to introduce the most innovative teaching methods, to develop human capital through education and technology and to promote scientific research and entrepreneurial initiatives among its students, all aiming to contribute to Mexico's development.

In order to strengthen the institutional student profile, the Institute has set a B2 English level, according to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) as graduation requirement which students must achieve by taking an international exam.

The online BULATS (Business English Testing Service) is one of the authorized options for students to meet that requirement. This test is administrated and applied in 26 Campuses of the Institution according to Cambridge service and security standards and , in fact, Campus Cuernavaca was awarded Cambridge Recognition as Highly Commended Centre in June 2016 for its test application conditions and high quality training.

In order to provide a thorough education to undergraduates, there is also institutional interest in developing students´ "independent learning" skills as this has been highlighted as one of the most demanded by modern national and international employers and ABA was selected to start the promotion of these skills among our students as this could provide extra exposure time for language practice.

Study conditions

BULATS, the test mentioned before,   consists of three modules: Reading & Listening, Writing and Speaking, the first one is marked automatically while files of the writing and speaking tests are sent to certified examiners who mark them according to Cambridge international mark schemes.

The present study was carried out in five campuses of the Institution: Cuernavaca, Querétaro, Irapuato, Saltillo and Culiacan, 130 students participated in the study 58 female and 72 male, they were business, engineering, communication and marketing undergraduates from 19 to 22 years old.

The students who participated in this study were taking the "Business Communication" course, which is part of their academic programmes and they were expected to achieve B2 at least in two of the three modules at the end of the 4-month term.

All students had an academic workload of at least 6 courses which is actually a considered very heavy one as the Institution is one of the most demanding ones in Latin America and due to this, they were offered and extra credit of 5 marks in the final note of their course if they covered at least 50 study-hours in ABA.

Although the course requirement is to have a B1 level or at least a 520 TOEFL score, most students have had very little practice on productive skills, which usually makes the course extremely challenging to them.

In addition, there is a very strong "affective filter" among students who have not studied in bilingual high schools and they are usually concerned about "not being good at English" or about "being too late to learn". This sets a new challenge for Faculty: how to deal with this fixed mindset, mostly identified in their speaking skills.

On the other side, there are important time constraints to achieve this academic goal: According to the Cambridge English Support Site, about 200 hours of study are necessary to move from B1 to B2 (University, 2013), the course, however, lasts 80 hours, in which Faculty must ensure that students achieve the graduation requirement and an acceptable level of English for job seeking purposes.

Study Procedures

A survey was run In order to know the student sample features. The questionnaire and results were the following:

1. Do you think you had good English learning experiences in your high school? 58.5% answered yes and 41.5% answered no.


YES ■ NO ■ ■
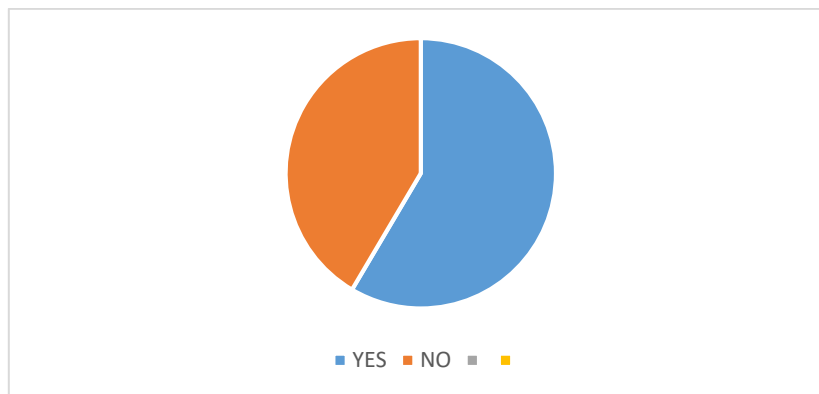
2. Have you studied English in English speaking countries? Only 22.3 % have studied English in English speaking countries.

up to 3 months   up to 6 months   up 1 year
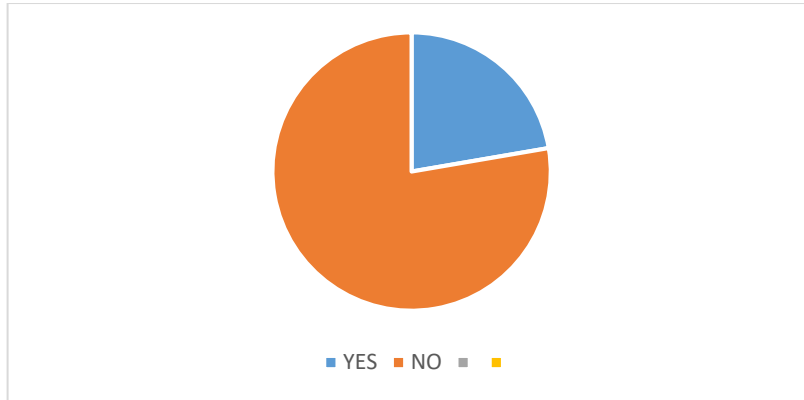
3. If so, how long did you study there? 51.7% up to three months, 27.6% up to six months and finally 20.7% up to one year.

up to 3 months   up to 6 months   up 1 year
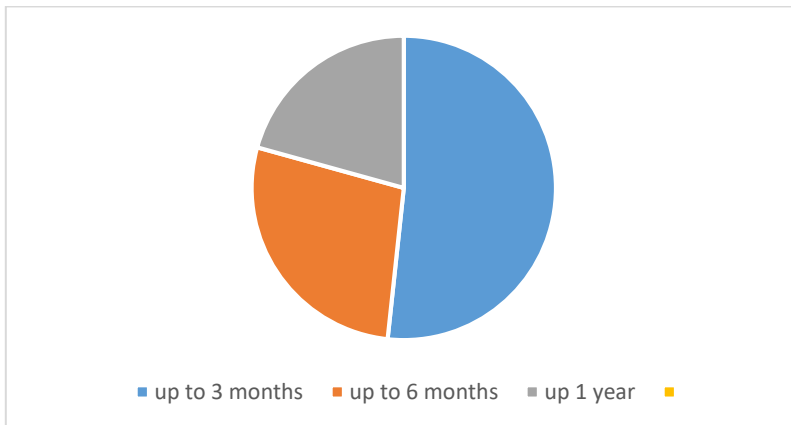
4. Have you taken /are you taking additional English courses during your studies in the Institute? 64.6% reported not having taken any extra course to learn English.

yes ■ no
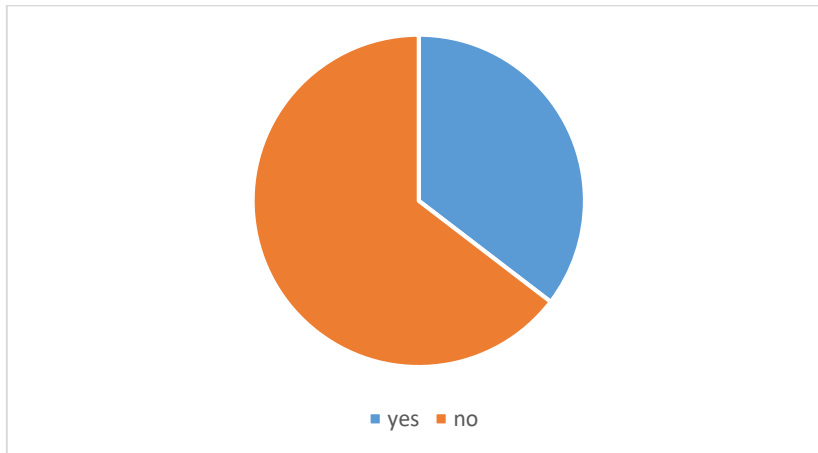
5. How important is learning English for you? Finally 90.8% of the students answered that it is very important for them.

Yes ■ No ■ ■

Head professors in every campus provided a list of their classes including their initial language score. ABA sent an access code for every student and a complimentary one for every professor so they could recommend specific items to work on.

Students were advised to select the Upper intermediate level course at ABA Platform whose staff sent periodical progress reports and technical support if necessary.

Along this study, a series of reminders was necessary to promote students 'participation and complete the study time suggested as there is a strong trend among students to take on several projects and extracurricular activities at the beginning of the school term which become an overwhelming workload and this causes high levels of stress and procrastination among out student body.

ABA staff finally collected the students' performance records at the end of the course.

Results

At the end of the school term it was found that 103 students out of 130 accessed the software but only 46 used it. These 46 students studied about 5.06 units in13.94 hours while 26 of them moved from B1 to B2 and studied 7.17 units in average in about 8.21 hours.

There was an important trend to watch ABA videos but not to complete the units. This has been observed in most students not only in this study but whenever they are assigned similar tasks, it seems to be an anxiety symptom when they feel

overwhelmed by academic work: apparently they tend to focus on visual material rather than on text in order to try to understand what they are required to do or to learn in the least possible time, this could have led to poor results in the language module of the test..

Interestingly, there were three undergraduate students in Campus Cuernavaca who had found graduating extremely difficult in the last two years due to their poor previous experience with English language. The three of them were not part of this study but they were provided with a complimentary license and were offered the same 5-mark extra credit while taking the Business Communication course in an attempt to achieve graduation.

They were two female Business students and one male Communication student. All of them had a B1 level and limited productive language skills as well as poor self- confidence.

The three of them studied 50 hours with ABA and two of them managed to graduate with B2.

It seems that the extra practice of the language items studied in the classroom reinforced their abilities while the software facility to practice speaking skills increased their self-confidence for in-class activities and the BULATS test.

One of the graduates said*: "I would like to say that my experience related to ABA was wonderful because it is a friendly platform where I could learn a lot of business English, besides I practiced listening, writing, reading, speaking, vocabulary and exercises in order to improve all these areas. This platform was very useful because it helped me to get a better performance in English and develop all the English skills. I recommend ABA because it is a fun and easy way to learn English and you can practice anytime and anywhere because it is a online course.*

Finally I would like to mention that ABA is a natural way to learn English. I am very grateful for having the opportunity to work with ABA."

An increasing use of linking words could be noticed in her discourse that makes the comment flow naturally which was not present at the beginning of the course. This graduate achieved B2 in the three modules of the BULATS test with a remarkable improvement in the Speaking exam.

Another graduate mentioned: *"ABA is a good tools to practice your speaking, grammar and spelling. Furthermore, it is useful to increase your vocabulary because you can review the new words in each chapter. In addition, it's interesting that the user can choose the level of the course. However, I don't like the part in which the user need to repeat each sentences because it is too long. To conclude, I found useful and interesting this tool because you can practice English in your free time."*

This graduate achieved B2 in the speaking and writing module but did not manage to achieve it in reading and listening which matches his text features and difficulty to sustain study efforts.

The student who did not manage to graduate, however, mentioned: *"This platform is very useful because I can watch videos, listen to correct forms of pronunciation, record my voice, and compare my pronunciation with that of native speakers while learning about an interesting topic. The voice recordings allow me to compare my pronunciation with that of a native speaker until my fluency is similar. Through more practice I become more fluent over time, I can pronounce in a more effective manner as well. In addition, I take an exam in order to measure my understanding with respect to the topic.*

I like all platform because it is very complete and I really recommend this resource to improve listening, writing, and speaking skills."

Although this last student worked extremely hard along the course and used the software for extra practice, she did not manage to achieve B2 due to the low self-confidence displayed along the course which made her hesitate during tests. However, she achieved B2 in the speaking module, which can be related to the extra practice she had with ABA program in a non-threatening environment as she rarely participated during sessions. Apparently this led to a more confident performance in the test.

Limitations of the study and intended follow up actions.

Despite having a meaningful sample, this was seriously reduced due to the students' limited participation. As in most similar tasks, most students find it very difficult to commit to independent study or extra practice in spite of the advantages of online study regarding time management.

Due to the hectic semester academic agenda, there was not enough time to plan in-class activities aimed to promote the "Autonomy approach" among the student body. This could have raised awareness about their "language learning and the consequences of their choices, through guiding them to a clearer understanding of what the learning process entails." (Morrison Brian, 2014, pág. 12)

In order to replicate a similar effectiveness study in the future, the following items should be considered:

a. Conscious adoption of the Autonomy Approach in Language Teaching by all faculty involved, as their guidance is fundamental to students: to reflect on their actions and consequences, to realign their language learning with their goals and to help them make informed choices. (Morrison Brian, 2014)

b. The work in ABA will be part of the evaluation criteria of the course in order to ensure student participation.

c. Implementation of class activities to promote the selection of learning alternatives, close monitoring and providing reminders of what is happening in the course and what they should be doing next. (Morrison Brian, 2014, pág. 27)

d. Although it is a fact that people who use online resources have a good degree of independence and it is self-motivated, including an "Independent learning" diagnostic test in the ABA introduction to all levels available could raise awareness on this concept and its importance for student and professional life.

e. Creation of opportunities for students to reflect on the choices made and the results obtained by designing an "independent study log" where students can record their choices, time study and reflection on their strengths and weaknesses and ABA program will definitely be part of the series of alternatives that will be available to students.

Conclusion

In spite of the time and participation constraints ABA has proved to be a very useful tool in the Faculty repertoire. All professors involved provided positive feedback as follows:

"*I consider that the program was very useful for my students. I think the practice helped them because I had fewer students who didn't get B2 last semester.*

My students said it helped a lot in their Speaking, especially with pronunciation and intonation. They also mentioned the program helped them with vocabulary and grammar, too. Most of them enjoyed using the program. Those who didn't were the ones who were not really dedicated and didn't work hard in other class activities."

ABA technical features were also praised:

"I believe that the program meets any student´s needs at any level of English. One of the best features is that <u>most students could do the exercises easily in their phones."</u>

ABA usually sends encouraging messages and friendly reminders to users which encourage them to keep the pace and progress along the level selected. In addition there is a regular offer of online classes for deeper study of some language and vocabulary items.

Finally, the facilities offered to acquire or build on speaking skills in a non-threatening environment not only complements class-time but also strengthens users 'self-confidence.

Reference

Morrison Brian, N. D. (2014). *The Autonomy Aprpoach.* Surrey: Delta Publishing.

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