

TEST RESULTS FOR INCOMING STUDENTS — WHAT DON'T THEY KNOW?

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The University of Aveiro introduced an Ano Comum, that is, a foundation course year in which all the Science and Technology students of the university study a nucleus of subjects. As you can imagine, the numbers involved are huge. In the first academic year, that is, *1993-1994*, there were approximately *1350* students studying English in the Ano Comum. and in *1994-1995* there were approximately *1200* new students entering the Ano Comum and about *180* repeating this discipline.

We were aware that the students entering this discipline could have studied English for either three, five or seven years in their secondary schools. In other words, some of the students entering the science and technology courses could have the same level of English as students taking up a degree course in English.

The point I would like to make here is that the findings I am about to reveal could just as easily apply to any of our students, be they following the humanities or sciences. What the students have learned, have learned incompletely or have not learned in their secondary schools will be the same.

What we decided to do was to test all the incoming new students to see if we could offer some of them the chance of not taking this discipline at all because their English was considered to be of a level that would correspond to studying in large mixed ability groups for two hours per week during one academic year. In other words a proficiency test was needed to evaluate the students' knowledge. We decided that an adequate standard of English would equate with a mark of fifteen or above out of twenty. (Incidentally, we considered that the students would be disinclined to accept our offer if their mean mark was lower than this.)

The test that was used in the first academic year, 1993-1994, consisted of fifty multiple choice questions and a short, 100 word, paragraph on a given topic. The reason for this format was, first and foremost, that it would be very time consuming to administer any other sort of test to such a large body of students *and* be able to publish the results early enough to produce an effect. Although discrete item tests are not considered very valid, they do have the advantage of being reliable. As Weir points out, the test can also be made more valid by taking into account the needs of the students on their individual courses. The different departments took the optimum view that students would need all four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening in order to pursue an academic career but we felt that the constraints imposed by the length of the course meant that our goals would have to be somewhat more short-term and reflect the more receptive skills of reading and listening. The latter could only represent a small percentage of

the whole course even so. Therefore, the course that the students' would subsequently pursue could not be considered communicative in any modern use of that term. Reading and some listening would form the bulk of the syllabus and even these would be approached in a way that could give the students «enabling skills» in the hope that given time they might build on what we could teach in such a small space of time. The test then has no reason to be communicative.

The questions on this first test started with the simple present tenses, negatives and question forms and went on gradually to modal constructions, conditionals, phrasal verbs and passive constructions. In other words the accepted «easy structures» to the more complex. Some specific vocabulary questions were also included.

The results showed that approximately ten per cent of the students enrolled had achieved a mark of fifteen or more and could then be «dispensado». However, evaluation of the test results also showed that *ten per cent* of the students could not competently handle what are considered basic structures.

Questions of the type:

3. _____ coffee?

A Do she like B Likes she C Does she like D Like she

caused *nine per cent* of those tested to make an error and *eleven point five per cent* were caught out by:

4. I _____ English.

A am study B studying C studies D am studying

Most of the students tested, that is *96%*, could not answer the following correctly:

34. This is the first time I _____ Aveiro.

A am visiting B visited C visit D have visited

The items that caused more than *75%* of the students trouble were:

13. You _____ take an aspirin for your headache.

A had better B would better C will better D have better

30. It's time we _____.

A go B went C going D goes

41. I will have to phone later his number was _____.

A occupied B engaged C talking D speaking

38. They congratulated their cousin _____ passing his driving test.

A at B by C on D with

50. The car tried to _____ the lorry while it was waiting at the pedestrian crossing.
A overtake B overlook C overpass D overcome
44. After the mission the space shuttle lands on a _____ in the same way as an aircraft.
A path B highway C motorway D runway
37. Her cupboards are full of clothes, most of _____ she never wears.
A them B which C those D that
21. They _____ in love at first sight.
A fell B felt C feel D fall
25. He took _____ Keith at once and they became firm friends.
A after B up C to D on
36. _____ the high price of meat, the family bought lamb or beef every week.
A Because B Besides C Despite D In spite

More than 50% of the students could not manage questions on the second conditional (67%), indirect question forms (60%), the future perfect (62%), «*suggest*» with a direct and indirect object (70%), the phrasal verbs «*get over*» and «*put in for*» (54% and 61%) and a further five vocabulary questions including such items as «*traffic jam*» and «*experiment*» (50% and 62%).

The number of years of academic study of English that these students admitted to were as follows:

none	4.7%
2 years	2.7%
2.5	0.7% («o outro meio ano ficamos sem professora»)
3	18%
4	3.3%
5	38%
6	1.3%
7	28%
8	2.7%
10	0.7%
11	0.7%

The test that was used in the second academic year, 1994-1995, also consisted of fifty multiple choice questions and a short, 100 word, paragraph on a given topic. The reasons for this being exactly the same as those in the first year; that is, the numbers involved prohibited almost any other practical possibility. However, this time the test items were altered to incorporate some of the items we had decided were fundamental to our course and to eliminate some of the items that were considered to be inadequate discriminators. Thus further validation of the test was incorporated without sacrificing any of the reliability of the test nor its objectivity and

above all speed. Overall results were now also available about pass rates and grades of the first year on this foundation course and these results also validated our test in that our percentage for allowing students to choose not to take the course at all equated well with that of all the students of the year reaching a high grade. The fundamental items included covered both the specific vocabulary that had been taught during 1993-1994 and included an attempt to assess the student's awareness of pronunciation.

The results this time showed that approximately **13%** of the students had reached a level which we considered adequate and could be «dispensados». The increase in the number of students «dispensed with» proportionately was most likely to be due to the fact that, when the answers to the query about the numbers of years they had studied English were collated, it was found that **57%** of the students had studied six years or more (**43%** had studied five years or fewer) whereas in 1993-94 **33.4%** of the students had studied six years or more and **66.7%** had studied five years or fewer (and not, unfortunately, it appeared, because more students had really learnt English more effectively).

The answers to the question on years of academic study were as follows:

2 years	2.8%
3	13% («I'm 3 years» and «3 e péssimos»)
4	0.6%
5	26.5%
6	4%
7	47.5%
8	4%
10	0.6%
11	0.6%

Nevertheless when the answers to the multiple choice questions were once again analysed it was found that **75%** or more of the students continued to have difficulties with modals (**97%**), direct and indirect objects after «suggest» (**63%**), phrasal verbs (**71%** and **83%**), reciprocal pairs (**63%**) and the subjunctive (**89%**).

It was perhaps less surprising to find more than **75%** of the students having problems with those more specific vocabulary items that we had introduced. Questions like:

When light enters another medium it _____ .

A reflects B absorbs C bends D glows

caused **89.5%** of the students to choose an incorrect answer. This could have been caused by either a problem with English or a problem with the basic scientific concept included in this question. However, preliminary results on my research into science and technology texts suggest that this item is very frequent in just such a context.

However, **84%** could not identify the pronunciation of regular past tense verbs in a question like:

32. The sound in the final syllable in «showed» is *different* from the one in

A studied B remembered C caused D asked

More than half of the students (52%) could not identify the sounds of the alphabet in the following:

The letter «A» does *not* contain the same sound as _____ .

A «J» B «K» C «H» D «Q»

This item was considered fundamental because of the various formulae and descriptions of scientific objects which include reference to the shape of letters such as a «T-shaped lamina». Added to this, if we consider the European «Threshold Level» for English in schools we find that this is one of the items that has been singled out as essential learning for secondary school students.

The items which caused the students the least number of difficulties (25% and less) were pronouns (23%), questions using an auxiliary (23%), telling the time (24%), present perfect (22% and 25%), the superlative (20%), the past continuous (21%), future perfect (17% the lowest number of errors on this test) and the phrasal verb «get over» (21.5%).

There would appear to be some strange discrepancies here. If students find phrasal verbs as easy as (or easier than) telling the time or the present perfect, and if the future perfect is easier than questions using an auxiliary, something is going wrong somewhere. Although it is difficult to say what is the exact cause of these phenomena, we could speculate that more emphasis may have been placed on what is considered «difficult» and so the students have fixed these items better. Nevertheless, in terms of course design it does indicate that we cannot ignore certain «basic» items if 25% of our students cannot cope with them adequately, nor should we assume that we have to spend our time teaching lists of phrasal verbs when the students are, in the majority, able to cope with the more common ones adequately. Indeed, work done on corpus studies for the Cobuild project suggests that six common verbs account for nearly 30% of the «most important» phrasal verbs (the verbs are bring, come, get, go, put and take).

In conclusion, we must not take for granted that our students do not know some items included in «advanced» grammar books nor can we assume that the basic structures are that soundly learned and we may need to include in our courses a list of irregular verbs for our students to take away and learn rather than phrasal verbs! In other words, we must test our students' proficiency if we are to make any rational choices about what language should be taught and before we prepare our syllabus for the first year.

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