

A Strategic Plan for Academic Improvement (PEMA). Case Study to Determine the Improvement of Linguistic Competence of Students in the English Major

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ABSTRACT

A Strategic Plan for Academic Improvement (PEMA) was implemented for students to develop their linguistic and academic competence in the English Teaching Major for I and II Cycles at Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED). The 24-week personalized online course provided students with extra linguistic practice, focusing on their specific needs. Tutors designed lessons based on the students' weaknesses, worked on their skills weekly, and gave them feedback after each session. Students created a portfolio with self-assigned exercises and also shared their challenges, feelings and expectations with their teachers. Even when the students' language development in the 4 macro skills was not linear because of the complexity of language learning, both students and teachers reported that PEMA helped them perform better in different academic tasks.

Key words: Second Language acquisition, English as a Foreign Language, distance education, online tutoring, linguistic competence, academic improvement.

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Due to globalization, English has become the language that has opened borders for cultural, social, and economical exchange between countries. Therefore, governments have established educational policies that aim to promote learning this lingua franca. In the case of Costa Rica, the implementation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in schools dates back to 1901 because of the economic dependence of this country in terms of coffee export to the United Kingdom and the United States of America¹. Throughout the years, different methodologies for English Language Learning have been used based on the needs of the country at each specific period; for example, the grammar-translation method was used at the beginning of the 20th century, with an emphasis in reading foreign texts and translating information from different fields. As times have changed, so have the needs of the country. Nowadays, EFL teaching must focus on the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) in order to develop communicative competence. This implies not only the command of the language, which is defined by lexical competence, but also other general competences such as knowledge of the world, sociocultural knowledge, intercultural awareness, among others². Teaching modes have also changed dramatically. Nowadays, the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) are used not only to make classes more interesting, but also to democratize education and make it accessible. Virtualization has become key in education because it allows students to participate in both asynchronous and synchronous courses. Students who are in remote locations, or have disabilities such as mobility problems can easily access high quality content, have tasks especially tailored for their needs, and be given immediate and delayed feedback on learning, among other aspects. Back in 1994, the government started implementing policies regarding English teaching in elementary school to prepare students for the context of the 21st century. Later, in 1997, Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED) took a leading role in preparing educators for this task. They signed an agreement with the Ministry of Education to train them and ensure that they had the required minimum professional training³. With these changes, schools were expected to prepare students to be proficient in English. However, even after completing the elementary and high school programs in the target language, the number of bilinguals in the country has remained low. These students have not met the expected proficiency levels and do not comply with the international standards. Even when some public schools reach the adequate proficiency levels, for example, Experimental Bilingual High Schools and Vocational High Schools, this is not the norm. Costa Rica is in the 36th place in the English First (EF) English Proficiency Index for Schools (EF EPI-s), which evaluates 88 countries in reading and listening⁴. This ranking is published every year and, in the case of Costa Rica, the average citizen is positioned in the lower proficiency band. UNIMER, in their *Gentico* study, also states that 450 out of 1802 Costa Rican interviewees, from 12 to 80 years old, speak English at least at basic level (from 0-16 years old, 27%; from 17-34,

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1. «Cronología de la enseñanza del inglés en Costa Rica durante el siglo XX», access: april 23th, 2019, <http://hdl.handle.net/2238/4880>
 2. Council of Europe, *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 2001), 101.
 3. Programa Estado de la Nación, *Sexto Informe Estado de la Educación* (San José, 2017), access: april 23th, 2019, <https://www.estadonacion.or.cr/educacion2017/assets/parte-1-capitulo-3.pdf>
 4. Education First (2018), English Proficiency Index, access: april 23th, 2019, <https://www.ef.edu/epi/regions/latin-america/costa-rica/>

36%; 35-55 years old, 20%; 56-76, 14%, 77-92, 8%⁵. In addition, the National Household Survey in 2015 [Encuesta Nacional de Hogares (ENAH)] the percentage of the population who state that they speak English was just 10,8% and that has not changed much in the recent years⁶ (see Figure 1).

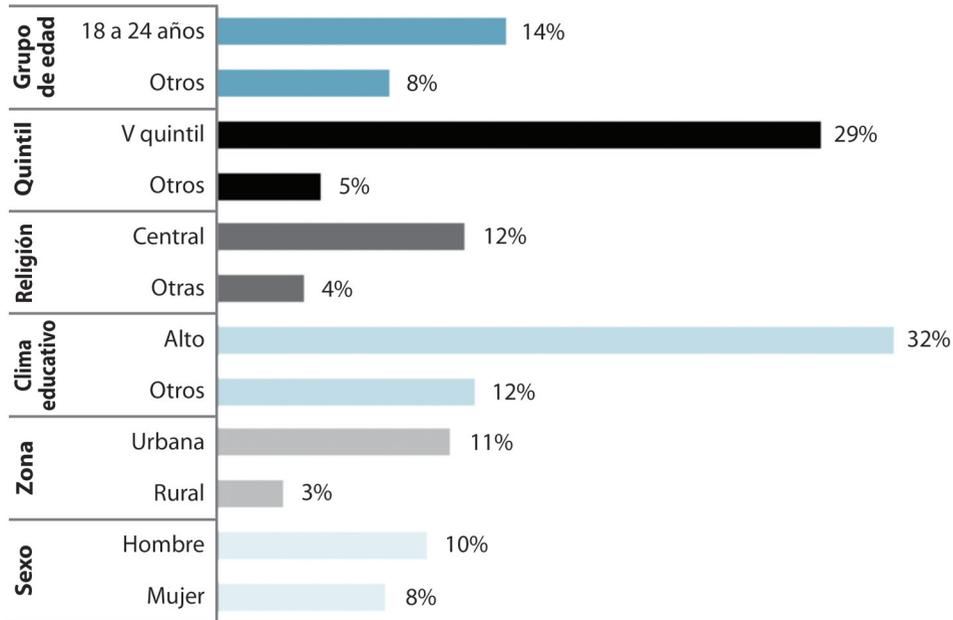


Figure 1. ESL proficiency percentages of Costa Rican population. Source: Sexto Informe Estado de la Educación (2017). San José: Programa Estado de la Nación. Graph 3.22. Retrieved from <http://www.estadonacion.or.cr/educacion2017/informe-para-descarga.html>

Three characteristics of Costa Rican fluent English speakers that are salient are that they are mainly males between 25 and 44 years old, live in urban areas in the central Valley, and have a higher income. This shows the gaps between privileged and unprivileged individuals. In general, inequality in education is an issue that the Costa Rican government must address, specifically in learning English as a Foreign Language to provide citizens with the training and tools to succeed.

The Ministry of Education has highlighted that one of the major factors that affect students' ability to speak English at an adequate level is teachers' mastery of the language. Therefore, the standardized test, TOEIC, was used in 2008 to diagnose educators' performance in English. It showed that 7% had a proficiency level corresponding to Band

5. Cerdas, Daniela, «Costa Rica será un país bilingüe»: Presidente anuncia seis acciones para universalizar el Inglés», *nacion.com*, august 13, 2018, access: april 23th, 2019, <https://www.nacion.com/el-pais/educacion/ingles-sera-prioridad-nacional-gobierno-anuncia/4373WMN26FACXFIFGYPEPHGRA4/story/>
6. Programa, *Sexto...*, 166.

A1, 32% had a proficiency level corresponding to Band A2 and 28% had a proficiency level corresponding to Band B1, according to the Common European Framework. Currently, the Costa Rican Ministry of Education is still training 800 teachers who scored below the standards⁷.

Katherine Barquero, researcher from the State of the Nation Report, highlights that a teacher is required to be in the B1 Band, which represents a challenge for teachers, universities and the Ministry of Education because around 20% of in-service teachers fall below standard⁸. To improve the situation, universities must make sure that future teachers become competent in the target language, so students receive the same quality education in English.

UNED's Role in the Higher Education System and the Teaching of English

UNESCO highlighted that «Within the new context of decentralized education systems, the objectives of quality and impartiality will require the State to strengthen its own role, thereby taking responsibility for ensuring that the basic needs of everyone are met, that equal opportunities exist for enrolling and remaining in the education system and that it has the ability to propose and manage these changes»⁹.

UNED, being a public institution, has always been committed to reducing the inequality gap, making sure that its students succeed in their education, and in this way, contributing to the goals of the country. UNED has had a very active role in the transformation from a monolingual to a bilingual society and has continued with this task until today. In 1994, UNED was the pioneer in training ELF teachers in Costa Rica in foreign language pedagogy and still trains teachers with the highest standards.

UNED's Standards for English Teachers

The English Teaching Major at UNED is the only one in the higher education system in Costa Rica that has an English proficiency test to be admitted specifically to the English Teaching program¹⁰. UNED students are required to rank in the B1+ band based on the standards of the Common European framework (CEFR). This framework establishes a system of bands that are language proficiency levels. Students between A1-A2 are referred to as basic users; from B1-B2 are called independent users; and from C1-C2, they are referred to as proficient users. The bands are part of a continuum; for example, A2 band is subdivided into criterion levels. The lower level is A1, and the plus level A1+.

7. Cerdas, 'Costa Rica será...

8. Castro, Katherine, «MEP capacitó 800 docentes por bajo dominio del inglés», *CRhoy*, August 22nd, 2017, access: April 23th, 2019, <https://www.crhoy.com/nacionales/desigualdad-en-formacion-docente-afecta-ensenanza-del-ingles/>

9. Unesco Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, *The major project of education in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Santiago, 1996), access: April 23th, 2019, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001047/104761e.pdf>

10. Programa, *Sexto...*, 147.

In addition, each band has a set of detailed descriptors called *can do statements*, which describe specific competences. To ascend from a lower band to a higher band, students need to be exposed to a specific number of guided instruction hours depending on the target band (see Figure 2).

CEFR Level	Cambridge English Exam	Number of hours (approximate)
C2	Cambridge English: Proficiency (CPE)	1 000 - 1 200
C1	Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE)	700 - 800
B2	Cambridge English: First (FCE)	500 - 600
B1	Cambridge English: Preliminary (PET)	350 - 400
A2	Cambridge English: Key (KET)	180 200

Figure 2. CEFR Guided Learning Hours (from A2 basic user to C2 Proficient user). Source: Cambridge English support site. Preparing for a Cambridge English exam. Retrieved from <https://support.cambridgeenglish.org/hc/en-gb/articles/202838506-Guided-learning-hours>

UNED applicants take a test that is administered once a year to assess their proficiency level and apply to the program. The test consists of 3 parts: a) multiple choice exercises, b) a short composition task, and c) an interview designed by the coordination of the program. It is intended to ensure that students have the required language command to carry out their academic tasks. If students lack the appropriate language proficiency (B1 level) they will have difficulties to pass their courses, jeopardizing their chances of graduating.

As any other test, there may be some students whose scores are at the lower level of the bell curve. UNED teachers reported around eighteen cases of current students who did not have the correct linguistic competence (B1+) and therefore were struggling to complete tasks in different courses. Having identified and analyzed the problem, two measures were taken: a) the revision of the proficiency test, and b) the creation of a remedial language support online course.

The proficiency exam was examined and redesigned with the participation of all the teachers of the program. The level was set higher to the plus B1 level (B1+), the procedures for exam administration and grading were perfected to increase validity and inter-rater reliability in order to reduce subjectivity.

After these steps, the English Teaching department addressed the issue of the current students who did not have the B1+ level. The coordination designed an online course called *Plan Estratégico de Mejoramiento Académico (PEMA)*, Strategic Plan for Academic Improvement.

The purpose of this project was to provide assistance to students of the English Teaching Major for I and II Cycles who were falling behind their cohort due to their limited language proficiency. This would assure that all the students had the necessary linguistic

competence by the end of the Major and meet the EFL educational standards for EFL teachers. Also, with this course, the university complies with its mission which is to cater for all students, more importantly, for those who require more opportunities due to their economic situation, geographical location, social status, age, cultural background, special needs¹¹.

Regularly, in the Major, students invest an average of 135 hour per course. Only 10 of all the courses require face to face teacher-student interaction¹² which makes it difficult for students with a lower proficiency level to develop their linguistic competence. Therefore, *PEMA* was created as a tailored online course that provided students with extra linguistic practice, focusing on their specific needs.

General Objective

The aim of this case study is to determine how the assistance provided by *PEMA* helped students develop their language proficiency and overcome linguistic obstacles that did not allow them to perform well academically in the English Teaching Major for I and II Cycles.

Objectives

- Determine language proficiency improvement of *PEMA* students.
- Enquire into student perceptions about their own performance and what they require as language learners to develop language proficiency.
- Enquire into teacher perceptions and its relationship with task-design to help students reach the expected language proficiency.
- Identify the best practices of distance language teachers at different points of a language course.

A questionnaire was sent to teachers of the English Teaching Major for I and II Cycles in 2015 and they came up with a list of 18 prospective students with lower proficiency. Therefore, the students were chosen based on teachers' nomination. During faculty meetings, the project team examined samples of the students' production such as videos and written projects. The coordinator of the Major also carried out a detailed study of their academic records. Subsequently, an invitation was sent by the coordinator to the 18 students chosen. Some declined to participate and only 10 volunteered to be part of the project. Throughout the process, there was a change in the number of participants. One student dropped out because of other commitments. However, the total number of students remained the same throughout the Remedial Plan (*PEMA*).

11. Rectoría, Misión de la UNED, <https://www.uned.ac.cr/rectoria/myv/19-rectoria/118-mision-de-la-uned>

12. Tobías Brizuela (coordinator of the English Teaching Department, UNED), Personal Communication, on October 12th, 2017.

Pedagogical Mediation

PEMA's purpose was to provide students with more personalized sessions in which they could work on their weaknesses in a one-to-one basis with the facilitators. Each facilitator used different methodologies and activities, but what they had in common was the emphasis in real communication and authenticity of tasks since the ultimate goal of PEMA was to help students do well academically at a B1+ level.

A two-hour virtual meeting was set up weekly for a total of 24 weeks. In some weeks, the facilitator paired two students so that they could work on activities where collaboration and negotiation of meaning were necessary for the outcome expected. After each session, students wrote an entry in an online portfolio that was shared with the facilitators. They specified the activities they carried out independently, the challenges they encountered, as well as their feelings and expectations about the process. In this way, the teacher was informed about the student's investment in the course. Facilitators also wrote a feedback document to inform students about their accomplishments and areas of improvement. The facilitators remained the same over two terms with the exception of one who was unable to continue and was, as a result, substituted by a new facilitator.

Methodology

Participants

It consisted of 9 students; 6 women and 3 men, between the ages of 23 and 47. Seven students were taking the bachelor's degree and one student was from the graduate degree professional practice («Licenciatura» in Costa Rica).

Table 1 describes students' relevant background information, their self-assigned nicknames to maintain their anonymity and the facilitator that tutored them.

TABLE 1
Detailed Description of participant backgrounds and their corresponding facilitators.

Facilitator	Student nickname	Age	Location	Workplace and schedule flexibility	Special conditions	English classes taken
Teacher P	Amisa 	40	San Carlos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bakery Full time Secretary Part Time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public school at night Single mother of a 11 and 20 years old 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> INA for a year
	Xedorapa 	32	Puriscal Rural area near downtown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-employed Mechanic at home (occasional work) Study time and free time available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public high school graduate Single Guillain-Barré syndrome former patient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institute SiPRA-OCEANO Idiomas-UNED
	Gummy Eater 	23	Escazú Urban area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unemployed A lot of study time and free time available 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private high school graduate Single Only-child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elementary and private high school, FUNDATEC and UNED

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Teacher A	EZAJ 	24 Cartago Urban area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homemaker • Busy daily schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public high school graduate • Divorced • A 5 years kid • Currently doing the professional practice from 7:40 to 3:30 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Centro Cultural, then I took courses at the TEC and now in the University
	NVMS79 	37 San José	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homemaker • Busy daily schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High School Diploma in an adult program • Married • Two kids (9 years-old and a teenager) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School, high school, college
Teacher M	Arasol 	30 Alajuela	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homemaker • Recently got a 7-1 job in a private school • Tutor in the afternoon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public high school • Single • A 4 years old child • Hearing impairment on left ear (hearing capability 20%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • INA, UNED
	MGD 	29 Guápiles, rural, agricultural area-away from downtown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployed since the last 4 years because of an injury therapy every morning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public high school graduate • Wheelchair user 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-taught • CCCN, basic level and • CONARE (both in the last 5 years)
Teacher S	Quesero 	38 Guápiles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pipasa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical school • Volleyball player (UNED Scholarship) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I did it by myself (Youtube, movies, musical videos, etc.) • Sotoya Institute just recently
	Charms 	47 Desamparados	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housewife • Tutoring school children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sporadically in several institutions since 6th grade during vacation time

Instruments

Seven instruments were used at different times over the course to triangulate the information.

First week

Diagnostic Test. First, students took a diagnostic test to identify their areas for improvement. The test was divided into 5 linguistic areas and applied in different dates: *Listening* (May 30th), *Reading, Language Use* (May 3rd), *Writing* (June 1st) and *Speaking* (June 2nd).

The original Listening section was designed by one facilitator. She used book audios and their corresponding exercises; however, the level of difficulty of the listening tasks was not B1+, so this section had to be redesigned by another teacher who was

not a PEMA facilitator. It was administered using Moodle's quiz option and it included three authentic audios. They included a conversation from ELLLO.com between 2 native speakers at normal speed, a United Airlines safety announcement and a mini lecture. The tasks consisted of getting main ideas, and details.

The Language Use section consisted of fill in the blank exercises with appropriate complex grammar. The oral and writing had tasks at the B1+ level, the level required for enrolling in the Major. They were carefully designed by the teachers to allow students to show their actual proficiency level in tasks that involved production. For the writing and oral production rubric, standard and detailed rubrics were created to evaluate these tasks at a B1+.

Diagnostic Test Perception Questionnaire

A self-administered questionnaire was created with Google Forms. It was divided into three main themes a) time devoted to practicing English, b) impressions about the level of the diagnostic test tasks, and c) students' experience when taking the test. They answered a total of 21 questions.

PEMA Phase 1

Week's 1-4: Virtual Encountered Questionnaire

The purpose of this questionnaire was to collect information about the students' perceptions of the first 4 virtual encounters. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections: a) language development, b) teacher mediation process, and c) soft skills. It was made using Goggle forms and sent to the student's email. However, some students reported having problems with the questionnaire, so it was also sent using WhatsApp.

Facilitators Personal Interview

A semi-structured interview was designed to learn about the facilitators' perception about their students' performance, improvement, motivation and performance. Also, they were asked about the methodology and activity used in the sessions. Each interview took around 30 minutes. The interview was recorded using WizIQ in Moodle and the researcher took notes of salient information.

PEMA Transition to Phase 2

Achievement Test First Phase

An achievement test was designed to check if the students improved in the four skills. The test was administered from August 14th to August 20th in Moodle.

Focus Group Interview

The focus group was organized by the coordinator of the Major. It took place via skype on July 10th with the purpose of socializing the experience and discussing general comments from students' interviews from July 10th to July 14th. The topics covered were: a) attendance to virtual sessions and new schedules, b) students' performance, c) students' weekly portfolio, d) useful practices, e) technical issues, and drawbacks.

PEMA Final Week

Final Test Phase 2

The achievement text of the second phase consisted in a standardized test. It evaluates student's general language ability. It was divided into two sections: Use of English and Listening. The test was applied at the end of PEMA. It also included a writing and an oral task that were designed separate from the standardized test. The test was applied at the end of PEMA.

Results and discussion

1. Listening

Initial Assessment, Re-designed Tasks and Final Exam for Listening

The diagnostic test was applied to identify the students' starting points in regards to language needs. These tasks were carefully scripted and not authentic, which make listening easier for non-native speakers. In addition, because of a mistake in the programming of the online test, students could listen to the recording more than twice, which was not the strategy to be used. Most students did well in this section of the test (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Scores in First Diagnostic Listening Task, 2017.

Participants	Points scored in the first diagnostic task	Grade
Arasol • MGD • NVM579	15 out of 15	100 %
EZAG • Gummy Eater Xedorapa	14 out of 15	93,33 %
Quesero	13 out of 15	86,7 %
Charms	12 out of 15	80 %
Amisa	8 out of 15	53,33 %

Source: PEMA.

The students' scores showed that they did not have problems in this section, but they still reported having some difficulties mainly with the speaker's speed (6 students) and the vocabulary (7 students). Others aspects such as accent, length and topic did not cause serious problems. It can be assumed from these results that most students are capable of understanding listening texts that are carefully scripted and have been designed for language learners.

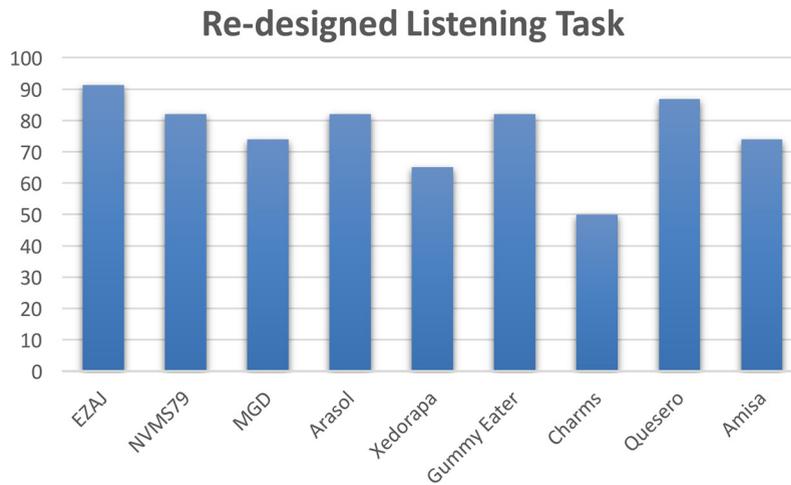


Figure 3. Scores of redesigned listening test. The grade scale is 1-100. Source: PEMA.

In order to confirm the students' ability to understand natural speech, a decision was made to refine and redesign the listening section following the standards of the Common European Framework with clear standard speech and familiar topics, and strictly respecting the competences that students should have at a B1+ level. In this second listening tasks, the students' performance varied (see Figure 3).

It is important to highlight that the main difference between the diagnostic test listening tasks and the redesigned version was the use of native speaker speech and that the number of times the recording could be played was adjusted to two. The articulation was clear and there was an average cognitive load (from 1-2 speakers, minimum background noise).

Having analyzed the test results of the two tasks and the points of view of the students, it can be said that these differences in performance can be attributed to the lack of independent authentic listening practice. In the Diagnostic test perceptions questionnaire, specifically in the background information section, most students said that they practiced this skill from 0 to 2 hours a week and the ones who practiced it more just invested from 3 to 5 hours a week, basically in their mandatory tutorial classes that take place 4 times per trimester. Based on these new results, a decision was made to include authentic listening tasks in PEMA sessions.

Comparing the students' overall performance in the diagnostic test task and the achievement test task, students improved to some extent (see Figure 4).

In the personal interview, students stated that the teacher's recommendations about authentic listening exercises such as www.ellllo.org helped them develop their listening skills in class and in real life. Students who got lower scores (NVM579, Arasol, Charms and Quesero) listed a series of problems that interfered in the results of this section in the achievement test, such as technical problems. The tasks included two multiple choice

Comparison between the listening diagnostic and achievement tasks

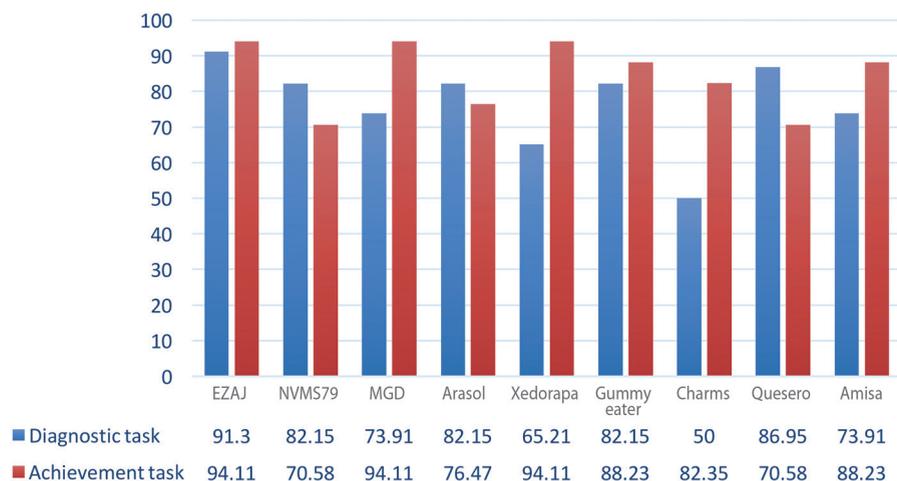


Figure 4. Comparative results of diagnostic and achievement listening tasks. The grade scale is 1-100 based on the Costa Rican scoring system. Source: PEMA.

exercises and one note-taking exercise that required jotting down short phrases (two or three words). Students could listen to each recording twice and had limited time to respond. Comments about this section of the test are summarized in the following table (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Perceived Difficulties in the Achievement Test Listening Section.

Students	Level of difficulty		Comments
	Easy	Difficult	
Amisa		x	I could not listen to the audio the second time. It did not play.
Xedorapa	x		
Gummy eater	x		
Quesero		x	The website froze constantly so I had to skip questions.
Charms		x	I had problems with the audio. They spoke too fast and with European accent.
Arasol		x	I did well, even when I was a bit distracted because my 5 years old baby was around.
MGD	x		
EZAJ	x		Listening has improved after PEMA.
NVMS79		x	I am slow when taking exams, so I got stressed out.

Source: PEMA.

Some of their challenges were related to external factors such as technical issues, cognitive/emotional circumstances and family issues. These undoubtedly affect the students' performance in the listening tasks, preventing the teacher from determining the students' advancement clearly.

The results of the Oxford Online Placement Test showed that students reached Common European Framework level required for entering the Major in the areas of Use of English, which is centered in grammar use and in listening. Table 4 shows the advancement students had in these two areas.

TABLE 4
Scores of Oxford Online Placement Test at the end of PEMA.

Students	Use of English		Listening	
	Score	Level	Score	Level
Amisa	59	B1	–	–
Xedorapa	93	C1	–	–
Gummy eater	74	B2	71	B2
Quesero	82	C1	60	B2
Charms	73	B2	70	B2
Arasol	94	C1	93	C1
MGD	85	C1	45	B1
EZAJ	62	B2	59	B1
NVMS79	61	B2	43	B1

Almost all of them received a B2 and over in language use, showing a great improvement in their performance in this area which was one of their weaknesses at the beginning of PEMA. In the case of listening, 2 students did not do this section, but the rest comply with the requirement of B1+.

2. Reading

Initial assessment, achievement test and final results for reading

The reading sections in both the diagnostic and achievement test were appropriate for B1+ learners. The topics were familiar and multiple-choice items were used for students to get the main idea, find specific details and infer information from the text. However, the achievement text included more questions in which students had to make inferences based on the information provided. Interestingly, the results of this section in the achievement test were significantly lower than the diagnostic test sections (see Figure 5).

Students claim that they had different problems that affected their performance in this task. NVMS79, Xedorapa and Amisa expressed that time, length of the reading and the fact that they are slow readers prevented them from doing well. The case of Gummy eater, MGD and EZAJ was different. They reported that some questions seemed to be ambiguous since there was not a straight forward answer in the text. They said that

Comparison between the reading diagnostic and achievement tasks

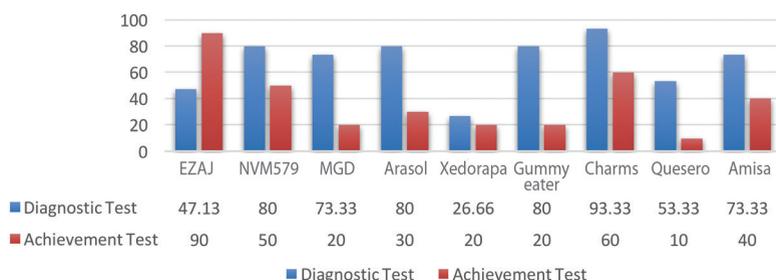


Figure 5. Comparative results of diagnostic and achievement reading tasks. The grade scale is 1-100 based on the Cota Rican scoring system. Source: PEMA.

they realized that just reading a text does not ensure understanding it completely and being capable of answering the questions. EZAJ considers that PEMA has helped her not to answer questions hurriedly and pay close attention to what is actually written in the text instead of coming up with answers based on her opinion and her background knowledge. This training caused a positive impact on her performance since she was the only participant who did considerably better. Other factors mentioned by Quesero, Arasol and NVMS79 respectively to explain their low performance were technical issues, and family distractions.

The reasons that students expressed to explain problems in their performance were: a) time constrains, b) ability to read and comprehend, c) external issues such as technical problems at the time of taking the test, d) low-level reading skills. Therefore, there is a need to ensure reliability. Students should be familiar with the type of exercises and questions that will be used in the evaluations. For example, the reading exercises require getting the gist, skimming and scanning. In addition, students need to understand well what they are being asked to do, so they do not waste time. Proper training to develop reading competence is necessary to help them do better in their academic tasks and assignments.

There are two special cases that require special attention to determine if they are entitled to receive additional assistance and timing accommodations. NVMS79 expressed in the interview that she has always been slow in doing tasks and had to finish high school in an adult program. Xedorapa stated that after suffering from Guillain-Barre syndrome, his cognitive abilities diminished. It is a must for the teachers and administrative staff to know who the students are in order to help them succeed.

3. Writing

Initial Assessment, Achievement Test and Final Writing Exam

Writing is a very complex process that is not linear since it implies the construction of sentences from a great array of options. In their native language (L1), students have the pragmatic knowledge and decide which structures to use to convey meaning. In the case of second language (L2) acquisition, this process is not linear, but dynamic. Good

	Amisa		Charms		EZAJ		Gummy		MGD		NVN579		Xedorapa		Arasol		Quesero		
	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	
Introduction (Organization)	4	↓ 3	↑ 4			↑ 3	↑ 3	↓ 3	↑ 4	↑ 3	↑ 3	↑ 3		↑ 4		↑ 3	↑ 4	↑ 3	↑ 3
	3																		
	2			↓ 2	↑ 3								↓ 2						
	1																		
Focus on Topic (Content)	4		↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4		↑ 4		↑ 4	↑ 4			↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4
	3	↓ 3					↓ 3	↓ 3											
	2								↓ 2			↓ 2	↓ 2						
	1																		
Support for Topic (Content)	4		↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4	↑ 4			↑ 4		↑ 4		↑ 4	↑ 4
	3	↓ 3																	
	2						↓ 3			↓ 2						↓ 3		↓ 3	↑ 4
	1												↓ 1						
Conclusion (Organization)	4		↑ 4		↑ 4				↑ 4					↑ 4		↑ 4			↑ 4
	3	↓ 3				↑ 3		↓ 3			↑ 3					↓ 3			
	2				↓ 2							↓ 2						↓ 2	
	1												↓ 1						
Grammar & Spelling (Conventions)	4																		
	3			↑ 3	↑ 3	↑ 3					↑ 3		↑ 3	↑ 3					
	2	→ 2	→ 2				↓ 2	→ 2	→ 2			↓ 2							↑ 2
	1																		
0									↓ 0										

Amisa		Charms		EZAJ		Gummy		MGD		NVN579		Xedorapa		Arasol		Quesero	
D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A	D	A
↓ 14	↑ 18	↓ 15	↑ 18	↑ 17	↓ 13	↓ 15	↑ 18	↓ 7	↑ 16	↑ 17	↓ 11	↓ 9	↑ 19	↓ 14	↑ 17	↓ 13	↑ 17

Figure 6. Comparative results of diagnostic and achievement writing tasks. The grade scale is 1-100 based on the Cota Rican scoring system. Source: PEMA.

writing is accomplished when students have tested and mastered the structures that are aligned with the intended meaning. Figure 6 shows how students performed in two different times during the course.

Most students showed improvement in the introduction, topic focus and support for the topic. The parts they had most trouble with were when writing the conclusions and using the English conventions (grammar and spelling).

The following sample composition excerpts were written by Amisa (see Table 5). It is a clear example of the advancement the student has had in language use, even when the teacher’s perception of her improvement is not reflected in the rubrics used for the writing tasks. The errors and teacher corrections are highlighted.

The achievement test composition excerpt shows that the students made fewer mistakes in grammar and word choice. In addition, she was able to write a more coherent text.

In the final writing task, students carried out a similar task to the diagnostic and achievement tasks. Compared to those, the performance varied significantly in certain cases (see Table 6).

TABLE 5
Excerpt from Amisa's diagnostic and achievement composition test.

Diagnostic Test	Achievement Test
<p>Practical strategies to teach English to young learners</p> <p>Second, it is mandatory that the teacher has all the necessary material to be used in the classroom and a well organized daily plan because, with these strategies, students will feel security confident about what they are learning but also about the teacher's knowledge. Additionally, the atmosphere environment in which the class will be developed can have a positive or negative result because a good atmosphere class environment will influence in the student's learning capacity. capability of learning. For example, the classroom infrastructure, the color, the environment, and the furniture. All these aspects play an important part in the acquisition of a second language. That is why the teacher must have his or her own classroom and try to be careful with these little but important aspects. issue.</p> <p>To sum up, young students are easy going but if the teacher does not have anything nothing interesting to teach, then the students would be bored borried about the way they are learning English. The practical strategies the teacher chooses or selects must involve them in a new and enjoyable way to learn English.</p>	<p>Since UNED is one of the most prestigious universities university in Costa Rica, many people want to be part of this institution. Now, the catedra is offering a new opportunity to the students to improve their profiles in the four areas of the second language as well. For instance, the catedra opened the PEMA program to allow the students to have extra classes through virtual encounters. However, this program has some advantages and disadvantages as well.</p> <p>The most important advantages of PEMA program are: 1. The opportunity to practice the area of the second language where the student needs to improve such as speaking, listening, reading and writing. 2. The individualize attention the professor offers to the student in the class. 3. The flexibility of the schedule which allows the student to choose the day and the hour to have the virtual encounter. 4. The opportunity for the student to attach the topics he or she wants to practice more or clarify some aspects of the second language to better understanding and 5. The professor's positive attitude to motivate the student to take all the advantages of this program.</p> <p>The disadvantages of this program are: 1. Few time for each lesson. For example, there are some topics that need more time to be cover during the lesson and sometimes there is few little time to do it. 2. The internet connection sometimes does not work very well, and as consequence there are interruptions during the lesson because of that, and 3. there are not scores to force the students to recognize their weakness and strengths during the whole program.</p> <p>To sum up, the students that need to improve their profiles should will be part of this interesting and educational program the catedra is offering to support the students who want to succeed in the acquisition of the second language.</p>

Source: PEMA.

TABLE 6
Scores of final writing task.

Introduction	Amisa	Xedorapa	Gummy eater	Quesero	Charms	Arasol	MGD	EZAG	NVMS79
	2	3	3	2	2	4	2	3	4
Focus on Topic	3	3	4	2	4	4	3	3	3
Support for Topic	2	3	3	2	4	4	3	3	3
Conclusion	1	3	3	2	3	4	3	2	3
Grammar & Spelling	1	2	1	1	3	4	1	2	3
Total	9 ▼	14 ▼	14 ▼	9 ▼	18 ►	20 ▲	12 ▼	13 ►	16 ▲

Source: PEMA.

As shown in the table, two students performed better, five students had lower scores than in the previous tasks and two remained the same. One reason that explains these results is the time invested for developing the skill. In the online portfolio, and in the recorded sessions more emphasis was given to the development of other skills. The implication for this is that writing should be taught separately since it requires a greater effort in terms of time.

Student's Perceptions about their own Performance

In the Week 1-4 Virtual Encounter Questionnaire, students explain in their own words why they have seen improvement in their performance (see Table 7). The answers were directly copied from the students' responses; therefore, they contain students' mistakes.

TABLE 7
Students' Self-perceptions of their improvement.

The students' own performance	The topics/language forms studied	The activities carried out
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel more confident in myself, I have practiced a lot and I am motivated to • Because I need to put more efforts into it continue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are very accord with the topic, they are very clear, completed and useful too • They provide me a significant learning • Yes, they were because these have been useful for skills development • I am working on my weaknesses • Because every task helps me to be better and improve my language skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I am accord with the feedback from my professor, he is very smart but just a little detail... I think it would be useful too, take in count my opinion about what I need to improve, and take it into the planning • They do not need any improvement. They satisfy my needs • Work using the language, topics and tips that can be used in a classroom based on the tutor experience, more practice

Source: PEMA.

In general terms, all the students were satisfied with PEMA. They stated this in the Week 1-4 Questionnaire and in the personal interview. Having the opportunity to participate in this program help them identify their weaknesses and take an active role to overcome the obstacles that hindered their progress in the Major.

4. Speaking

Initial Assessment, Achievement Test and Final Exam for Oral Production

In order to determine the level of oral production, a task was designed to collect information about the speaking skills of participants.

The task was almost the same in the three moments where it took place: to make a video, or an audio by using Poddle® or WhatsApp® or any other video/audio maker to answer from three to five specific questions provided by the researcher and coordination.

The performance of students was assessed by means of a rubric that included 5 linguistic features: content, structure, fluency, vocabulary and pronunciation (Annex 1).

TABLE 8
Oral performance of PEMA participants (June to December, 2017).

Student	Diagnosis Test June 2 nd	Achievement Test –phase 1 August 22 nd	Final Test – Phase 2 December 12 th
Amisa	14/25 = 56	16/23 = 69	15/23 = 65
Xedorapa	15/25 = 60	17/23 = 73	13/23 = 56
Gummy eater	15/25 = 60	18/23 = 78	14/23 = 60
Qesero	16/25 = 64	10/23 = 43	13/23 = 56
Charms	22/25 = 88	18/23 = 78	17/23 = 73
EZAJ	22/25 = 88	17/23 = 73	18/23 = 78
NVMS	16/25 = 64	15/23 = 65	17/23 = 73
Arasol	18/25 = 72	16/23 = 69	20/23 = 86
MGD	16/25 = 64	18/23 = 78	23/23 = 100

Source: PEMA.

Results showed a lot of variants in the participants' oral performance. Arasol and MGD showed improvement along the process whereas Charms, EZAJ and Xedorapa showed lower performance. On the other hand, Qesero's grades showed inconsistency due to his absenteeism.

Facilitators pointed out some of the aspects to reinforce oral performance (see Table 9).

TABLE 9
Areas of improvement identified by facilitators in oral performance.

Student	Comments from facilitators
Amisa	She needs to work on subject verb agreement, gerunds and infinitives. She needs to improve accuracy.
Xedorapa	He needs to work on subject-verb agreement and accuracy.
Gummy eater	She can still work on accuracy.
Quesero	He lacked of vocabulary to express accurate ideas.
Charms	She is very good at expressing ideas. She only needs to work on fluency.
EZAJ	She needs to work on language use, structures and vocabulary.
NVMS	She needs to focus on the content, using more vocabulary to communicate and avoid repetition.
Arasol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluency • Pronunciation • Vocabulary
MGD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fluency • Pronunciation

Source: Taken from comments made by facilitators in the achievement and final test.

5. Developing Soft Skills

As part of the project, the researcher and the coordination decided to include not only opportunities for the students to develop their linguistic competences, but also chances to reflect on some other areas adjacent to developing a good student profile in a distance learning environment.

Students reported improvement in three major areas: autonomy, self-assessment and self-awareness and confidence. Now, they are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, and are able to work on them independently. Other personal skills mentioned in the interview were that students learned how to take constructive criticism.

6. Teacher Perceptions and its Relationship with Task-design to Help Students Reach the Expected Language Proficiency

The bases for the teachers' lesson plans were the diagnostic test information about the student's weaknesses. As the course progressed, teachers used ongoing assessment techniques such as observation and note taking. They also directly asked the students which areas they felt they needed to work on. T1 expressed that many times, the student's expressed wants and the teacher's perceived areas of improvement overlapped.

Recommendations

Test design

To objectively measure students' proficiency, language programs usually use standardized tests. However, the cost of the most popular exams such as TOEIC and TOEFL are high. To solve this problem, previously UNED's program coordinator was in charge of creating an exam. A lesson learned from this experience is that in order to ensure that the appropriate candidates are accepted in the Major, the most experienced and certified teachers have to work collaboratively to guide the exam construction process and train others to assess students objectively. The same applies to PEMA. Also, The Global Scale of English can be used to provides a detailed picture of language performance at different levels of proficiency and for individual skills¹³.

In the test design, the tasks were piloted to determine the time required to complete them; however, it is important to pilot the listening section keeping in mind not the average time, but the maximum time required to solve the tasks. For example, multiple choice exercises may require less time to be completed than note-taking tasks. Note taking requires understanding, identifying pieces of information and writing the responses.

In addition, reliability is an issue. The conditions in which a test is taken vary from student to student; therefore, it is imperative to be flexible with the students in the days they take the exam. They have to find the best conditions to take it, which will ensure that the results reflect the students' proficiency in the specific skill.

Technology

After analyzing these results, it is important for online course designers to take some aspects into account. First, it is important to make sure students have technological conditions to participate in course. Problems arose from poor internet signal or the condition of the equipment being used. There has to be a pre-testing session with each student. If they do not comply with the requirements, the university should find a solution for them. Then, students should be trained in the use of specific technological resources. It cannot be assumed that they are experts in the use of technology, applications or technological devices.

During PEMA, some students did not know how to record and upload a video, take a screenshot and do other activities that teachers assume students can do. In this technological era not only teachers need training in technology use, but students do, too. For example, in the sessions, technology was used mainly «to deliver information to students»¹⁴. Teachers should use the Technology Integration Matrix framework for targeting the use of technology to enhance learning.

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13. GSE Learning Objectives, Pearson (n.d.), access: april 23th, 2019, <https://www.pearson.com/english/tools/digital/placement/scores/gse.html>
 14. Technology Integration Matrix (TIM), Table of Teacher Descriptors, access: april 23th, 2019, <https://fcit.usf.edu/matrix/teacher-descriptors-table/>

If training is not carried out, students will be indirectly put at a disadvantage, which contradicts the University's mission. Technology should be taught across the curriculum with the creation of multimodal projects.

Mediation

UNED is clear about its educational perspective on distance learning. Students need to be autonomous, independent and able to self-regulate their learning process. Nevertheless, when talking about second language learning, it is evident that some students need guidance, support and individualized help to accomplish their academic responsibilities. PEMA proved to be an excellent opportunity for those students and they benefited from it. All facilitators declared that this plan contributed to helping students improve not only their linguistic performance but some other soft skills that are also necessary to succeed in their university studies.

Moreover, students tend to feel more confident when they work consistently with the same facilitator, which encourages them to perform better. However, having a different facilitator gives them a different view of their performance since facilitators have different methodologies, accents, ways of evaluating, concerns and perspectives on assessment.

RESUMEN

Plan Estratégico de Mejora Académica (PEMA). Estudio de caso para determinar la mejora de la competencia lingüística de los estudiantes en la especialidad de inglés

El Plan Estratégico para el Mejoramiento Académico (PEMA), se implementó para que los estudiantes de la carrera de Enseñanza de Inglés para los Ciclos I y II de la Universidad Estatal a Distancia (UNED), desarrollaran su competencia lingüística y académica. Participaron en un curso en línea personalizado de 24 semanas, el cual proporcionó a los estudiantes una práctica lingüística adicional, centrada en sus necesidades específicas. Los tutores diseñaron lecciones basadas en las debilidades de los estudiantes, trabajaron en sus habilidades semanalmente y les dieron realimentación después de cada sesión. Los estudiantes crearon un portafolio con ejercicios auto asignados y también compartieron sus desafíos, sentimientos y expectativas con sus tutores. Aun cuando el desarrollo del lenguaje de los estudiantes en las cuatro habilidades macro no fue lineal, debido a la complejidad del aprendizaje de idiomas, tanto los estudiantes como los maestros informaron que el PEMA los ayudó a desempeñarse mejor en diferentes tareas académicas.

Palabras clave: Adquisición de un segundo idioma, inglés como idioma extranjero, educación a distancia, tutoría en línea, competencia lingüística, mejora académica.

RÉSUMÉ

Plan Stratégique pour l'Amélioration Académique (PEMA). Étude de cas pour déterminer l'amélioration de la compétence linguistique des étudiants dans la spécialité

Le Plan Stratégique pour l'Amélioration Académique (Plan Estratégico de Mejoramiento Académico, PEMA) a été mis en place afin que les étudiants de la filière d'Enseignement de l'Anglais pour l'école primaire de l'Université de l'État à Distance (UNED) développent leur compétence linguistique et académique. Les étudiants ont participé pendant 24 semaines dans un cours en

ligne personnalisée le quel leur a donné un espace additionnel de pratique linguistique centré sur leurs besoins spécifiques. Les tuteurs ont conçu de leçons basées sur les faiblesses des étudiants et chaque semaine ils ont travaillé les habilités en leur donnant une rétroaction après la séance. Pour sa part, les étudiants ont créé un portfolio avec les exercices qu'ils ont choisi et ils ont aussi partagé leurs défis, leurs sentiments ainsi que leurs attentes. Bien que le développement des quatre habilités n'ait pas suivi une progression linéaire dû à la complexité de l'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère, les professeurs et les étudiants ont exprimé que le PEMA leur a permis de mieux se débrouiller dans les différentes tâches académiques.

Mots-clés: Acquisition d'une langue seconde, anglais langue étrangère, enseignement à distance, compétence linguistique, amélioration académique.

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