

The Role of Grammar and Vocabulary-based Placement Tests in Identifying EFL Learners' Entry-level at the Centre of Foreign Language Intensive Teaching (CEIL) of Chlef

دور اختبارات المفردات والنحو في تحديد مستوى الدخول لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في مركز التعليم المكثف للغات (CEIL) بالشلف

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Abstract:

At the Centre of Foreign Language Intensive Teaching (CEIL) of Hassiba Benbouali University (UHBC), a placement test had always been delivered to newly registered candidates for an English course for the first time. This test had mainly been based on a four-skill package designed to place students in classes appropriate to their proficiency levels. However, this type of testing proved to be time-consuming, costly, and debatable in terms of pertinence as most test takers estimated their knowledge of English as basic when completing the online pre-registering form. With this in mind, the team of test developers has designed an online grammar-vocabulary placement test instead of a complete four-skill package test. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to determine how accurate the online language knowledge placement test was at placing learners at their appropriate levels according to the CEFR descriptors.

Keywords: Four-skills test, Grammar, Language knowledge test, Placement test, Vocabulary.

ملخص:

يجب أن يتمتع أي مطور اختبار يرغب في إنشاء خدمة تفي بالمعايير والاحتياجات المحددة في سياق معين بفهم شامل لأهداف الاختبار. في مركز التعليم المكثف للغات (CEIL) بجامعة حسيبة بن بوعلي-الشلف، يتم إجراء اختبار تحديد المستوى للمتدربين المسجلين في دورة اللغة الإنجليزية. لطالما اعتمد هذا الاختبار على حزمة من أربع مهارات مصممة لوضع الطلاب في فصول تناسب مستويات مهاراتهم. غير انه تبين أن هذا الاختبار مكلف ويستغرق وقتاً طويلاً، كما انه عند ملء نموذج التسجيل المسبق عبر الإنترنت، قدر معظم المتقدمين للاختبار معرفتهم باللغة الإنجليزية. بناء على هذه المعطيات، صمم

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فريق مطوري الاختبارات اختبار تحديد المستوى عبر الخط يعتمد على قواعد اللغة والمفردات بدلاً من إنشاء اختبار الحزمة أربع مهارات. الهدف من هذه الورقة البحثية تقييم مدى فاعلية هذا الاختبار في تحديد المستويات المناسبة التي تم فيها وضع المتعلمين وفقاً لوصف *CEFR*.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اختبار المهارات الأربعة، القواعد، اختبار معرفة اللغة، اختبار تحديد المستوى، المفردات

1. Introduction

The A placement test is assigned to candidates to determine their language level in order to place them in the most appropriate class that matches their language abilities. At the Centre of Foreign Language Teaching (CEIL) of Chlef University, and in the pre-online registration phase, candidates have to fill out an information form where they have to mention their level of English. Those who have already studied English and have a level certificate do not need to take part in the placement test, whereas those subscribing to an English course for the first time have to complete a survey profile and inform a multiple-choice question indicating an estimation of their average level of English and then take the online placement test newly introduced in October 2021.

In the past years, UHBC CEIL was heavily relying on a four-skill placement test package to test the reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills of newly registered candidates. However, these types of tests proved to be time-consuming, and costly, in terms of human resources and budget. Besides, they did not make sense in terms of pertinence, since candidates were expected to be true beginners and beginners starting mostly from scratch. Consequently, the question of potential returns against associated costs invested in these types of placement tests was raised. With this in mind, the team of test developers at the CEIL stressed that placement tests were not achievement tests and that they aimed at just placing candidates in the most appropriate class that corresponds to their level. Accordingly, they designed an online grammar-vocabulary placement test instead of the traditional complete four-skill test. They developed a large pool of question items corresponding to the two levels of the CEFR and their sub-levels A1, A1+, A2, A2+ and an authoring system that accessed the pool of questions and proceeded to a random generation of a limited number of questions at each test administration, and an automated correction and grade assignment. That authoring system also converted the grades of each test attempt into one of the levels mentioned above.

The purpose of this online grammar-vocabulary placement test was to measure candidates' knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary, and phrasing. Each question included three possible responses, and test-takers could select one of them when answering the question. They had to carefully read each question and select the answer they believed was accurate. This online placement test was supposed to be free from human errors and to give accurate at-a-glance data, ready to be used, allowing the center to gain efficiency in time and expense. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to determine how accurate the CEIL's online language knowledge placement test is at placing learners at their appropriate levels according to the CEFR descriptors.

2. Literature Review

According to Harrison (1983), a placement test is a test designed to place incoming students into teaching groups so that they can begin a course at roughly the same level as the rest of the class. It is more concerned with the test-current taker's level of general language competence than with particular learning points (p. 4). Hughes (1989) offers a definition that is similar to Harrison's but is broader. According to him, placement tests give information that will assist in placing students in a section of the educational program that is most relevant to

their ability. As it is necessary to place students into homogeneous language proficiency groups. Brown (1989, p. 65) explains that a placement test is the first contact students have when enrolling in most ESL/EFL programs.

Coombe et al.'s (2007)] stresses the importance of determining the purpose of the test teachers intend to design. The basic purpose of testing is "to establish ways of making decisions about students' competence according to scores, in a fair way" (Nasem, 2019, p. 43). Oxford Placement test, for instance, is designed to measure the language knowledge of the test takers and to place them into levels that align with the CEFR. The Oxford Placement Test, which is divided into two parts, aims to measure test takers' grammatical and pragmatic knowledge of the second or foreign language. Other placement tests offer different versions depending on the purpose of the test. Cambridge placement test assesses reading, listening, and language knowledge skills. A single examination covers vocabulary and grammar knowledge in addition to reading and listening comprehension skills (Placing students in the right exam, s. d.). It seeks to ascertain the precise level of students and the Cambridge level they can pursue (ibid.)

In contrast, other placement tests are grammar and vocabulary based because they are enabling skills, and their knowledge enables students to perform well in language skills. Knowing grammar and vocabulary is at the heart of learning a language; they are predictors of language ability (ibid). The purpose of the Macmillan Language Placement test, for instance, has been to place students into groups corresponding to the four levels of the teaching methods 'optimise series' and 'Language Hub'. The placement test items become progressively more difficult from questions 1 to 60. The four levels align with the programme progression of the teaching methods.

Along the same line, Laura Edwards, an English Lecturer, Language test expert & Digital materials designer from St Andrew University states that a placement test should not include all four skills (2018). She bases her argument on the predominance of the input over the output in second language learning. Edwards says that most language acquisition theories stress the importance of the input in language learning while the output is seen as important but not essential. She argues that becoming good at listening and reading are sine qua non-conditions prior to being good at speaking and writing. Accordingly, the placement test which is administered at the start of a course, and whose purpose is to place the test takers in the appropriate group to get the instruction and the input they need to progress in their learning, should not include the four skills .

Accordingly, grammar and vocabulary should be included in a placement test because they are taught in some form or another. Grammar tests are designed to assess grammatical ability, or rather the lack thereof because it limits what may be accomplished in terms of skill performance (Hughes, 1989, p. 142). At least some placement tests seem to have the potential to include a grammar component (ibid). The construct of grammar itself has diverse meanings but is nonetheless considered by many to be a significant part of the measurement of an individual's overall competence in a language (Rea-Dickins, 1997). Vocabulary tests are used to evaluate students' understanding and use of words in speaking and writing. (Madsen, 1983). One would only be looking for a broad indicator of a student's vocabulary competence (Hughes, 1989). Multiple-choice completion is a suitable vocabulary test type for students who can read in a foreign language. The students are forced to rely on context hints and sentence meaning. The item is made by removing a single word from a sentence (Madsen, 1983).

It stands to reason that the purpose of the placement test is context-bound and that being said, UHBC CEIL's EFL placement test was used as a basis for making inferences about candidates' language knowledge and placing them in the right group and hence, planning effective lessons. In this research, a grammar and vocabulary-based placement test has been employed to determine the test takers' level before placing them in their classes.

3. Research Methodology

The target population of the research consisted of EFL learners who joined the CEIL to learn and develop their language skills. Most of them studied English as a foreign language while being students' in middle and/ or secondary schools. The research was conducted in two stages:

A. The Testing Phase: A test developers team was formed in this phase to identify test-takers characteristics, to set the placement test's objectives, to select the type and content of the test to be used, to create rubrics, or scales, then to pilot and deliver the test.

B. The Evaluation Phase: The test results served as a needs analysis resource upon which a syllabus was designed according to the learners' strengths and weaknesses. The syllabus included the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. After the implementation of the suggested syllabus, an evaluation grid was given to the instructors to compare the learners' entry-level to the CEFR descriptors. The grid was prepared using EAQUALS bank of descriptors - as levels. Teachers were requested to answer yes-no questions to the A1+descriptors (Bank of Supplementary Descriptors).

4. Results of the Evaluation Phase

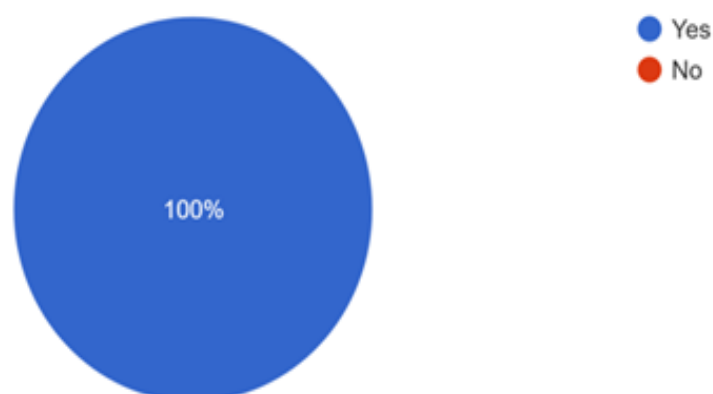
As explained previously, a syllabus was designed and delivered to learners whose level was supposed to be A1+ according to the placement test results. To answer the research question, an evaluation grid was submitted to teachers to test the reliability of the placement test results.

4.1. Listening

Q1: Following Slow and Careful Speech

All teachers agreed that their students could follow slow, clearly articulated speech with significant pauses to absorb information.

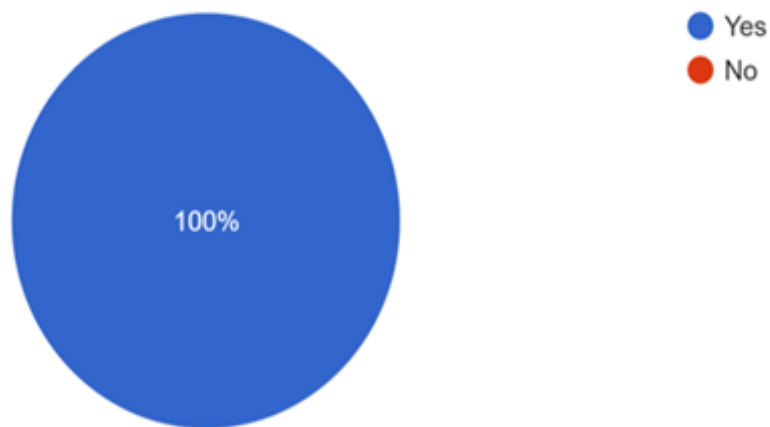
Fig 1. Following Slow and Careful Speech



Q2. Understanding Slow Questions and Simple Instructions

All teachers believed that their students could grasp and follow brief, straightforward commands if they were asked questions and instructions properly and slowly.

Fig 2. Understanding Slow Questions and Simple Instructions

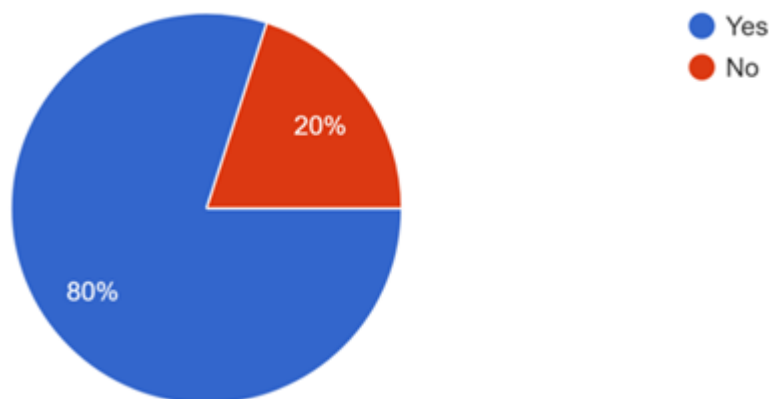


4.2. Reading

Q1. Understanding Simple Short Texts

80% of teachers thought that their students could comprehend very short, simple texts one phrase at a time, picking up known names, words, and basic phrases and reading as needed.

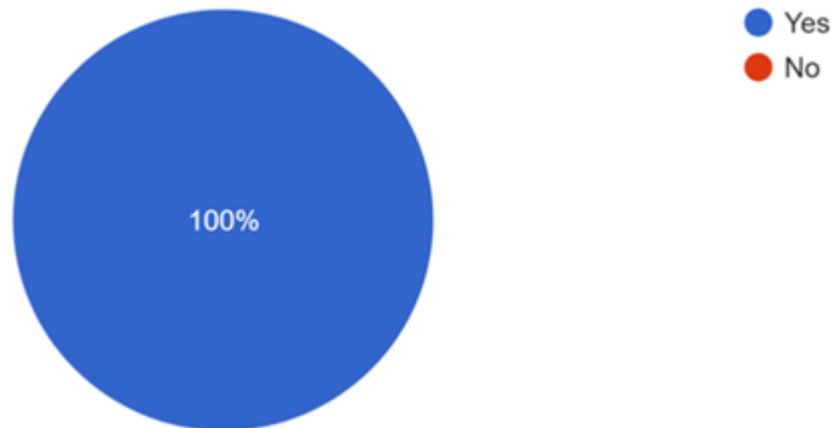
Fig 3. Understanding Simple Short Texts



Q2. Getting the Idea of the Content of Simple Descriptions with Visual Aids

All teachers responded that their students could gain a sense of the substance of basic factual material and brief straightforward descriptions, especially if visual support is provided.

Fig 4. Getting the Idea of the Content of Simple Descriptions with Visual Aids

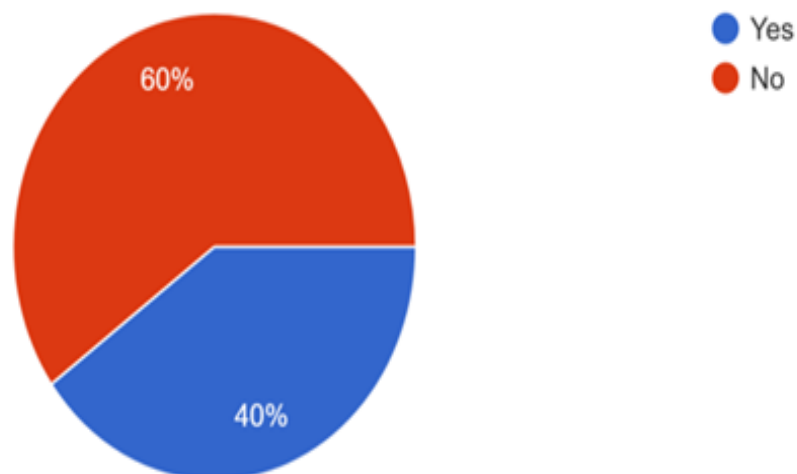


4.3. Speaking

Q1. Asking how people are and reacting to news

Only 40% of respondents agreed said that their students might inquire about how people are doing and how they react to new situations.

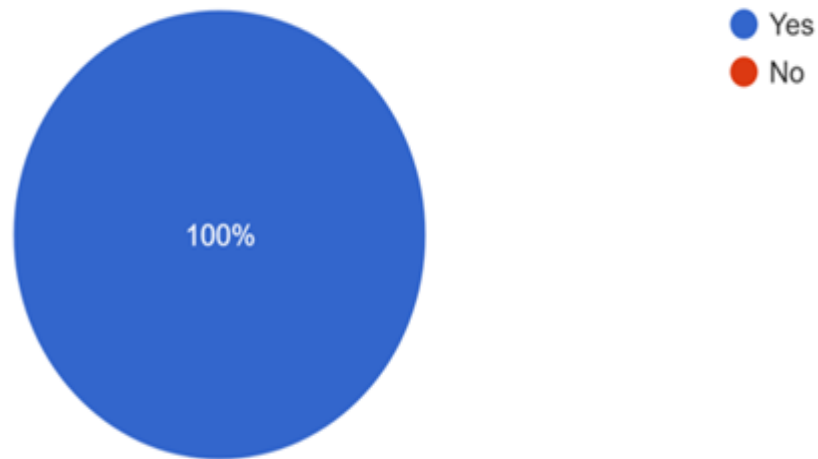
Fig 5. Asking how People are Reacting to News



Q2. Asking/ Answering Simple Questions

All participants stated that their students could ask and answer simple inquiries as well as respond to simple assertions about topics that they were familiar with (e.g., family, student life)

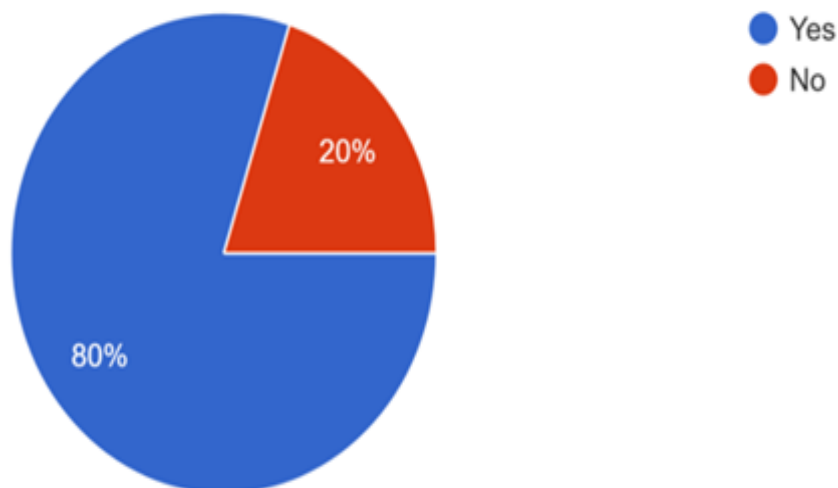
Fig 6. Asking/ Answering Simple Questions



Q3. Describing themselves

All teachers indicated that their students were able to describe themselves, their jobs, and their homes.

Fig 7. Describing themselves

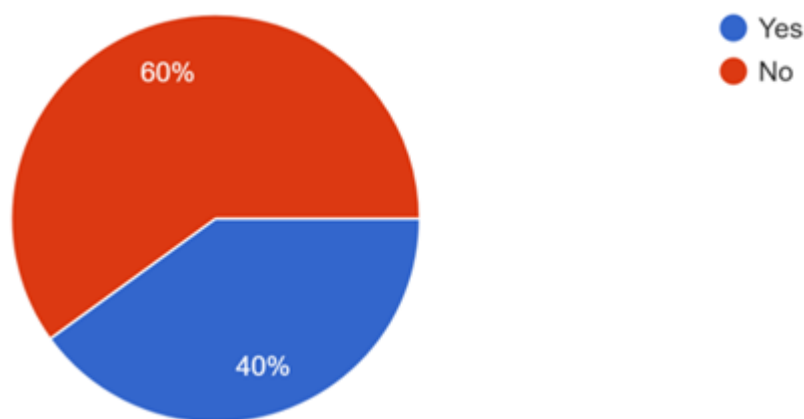


4.4. Writing

Q1. Writing Simple Sentences about themselves and Imaginary People

40% of the respondents claimed that their students could write short phrases and sentences about themselves and imaginary individuals, including where they live and what they do.

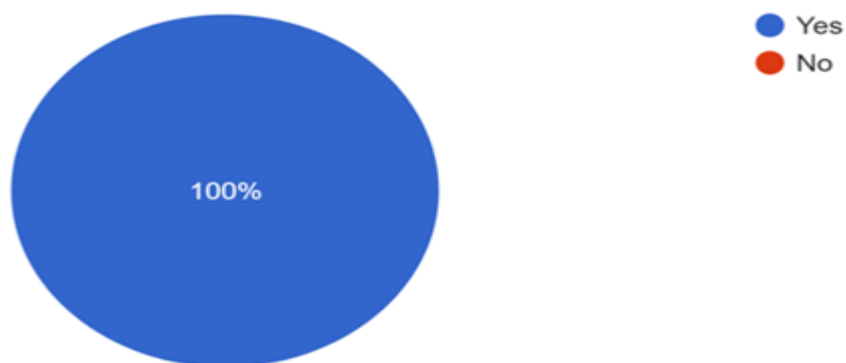
Fig 8. Writing Simple Sentences about themselves and Imaginary People



Q2. Writing Number and Dates, as well as their Name, Nationality, Address, Age, Date of Birth

All teachers said that their students could write numbers and dates, as well as their name, nationality, address, age, date of birth, or date of entry in the country, on a hotel registration form, for example.

Fig 9. Writing Number and Dates, their Name, Nationality, Address, Age, Date of Birth

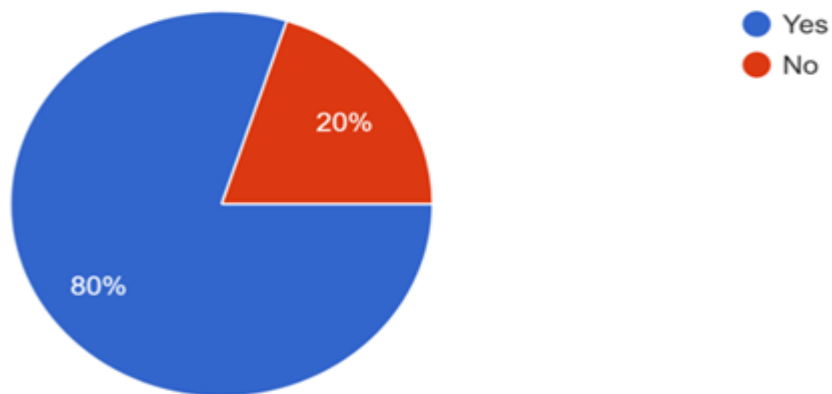


4.5. Vocabulary: Having a basic Repertoire

Q. Having a Basic Repertoire

80% of the teachers agreed that their students might have a basic vocabulary of terms and phrases connected to personal information and specific situations.

Fig 10. Having a Basic Repertoire

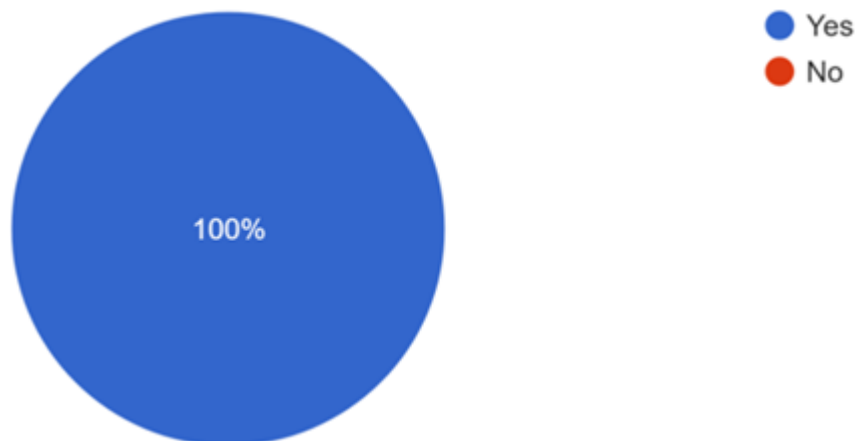


4.6. Grammar

Q. Control of Simple Grammatical Structures

All instructors confirmed that their students could exhibit limited control of a few elementary grammatical structures and sentence patterns in a memorized repertoire.

Fig 11. Control of Simple Grammatical Structures

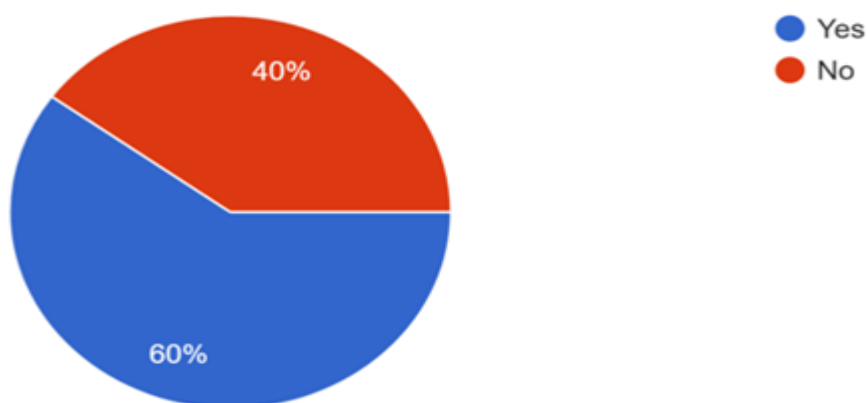


4.7. Fluency

Q. Managing Pre-packaged Utterances

60% of teachers said their students could accomplish short, isolated, mostly pre-packaged statements with a lot of pauses to look for expressions, pronounce less familiar terms, and restore communication.

Fig 12. Managing Pre-packaged Utterances

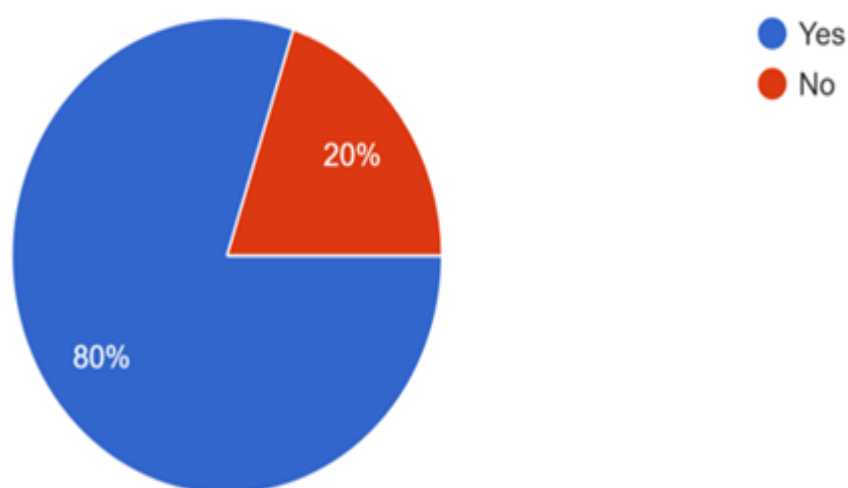


4.8. Interaction

Q. Asking/ Answering Questions about Personal Details

80% of teachers reported that their students were able to ask and answer personal inquiries, and could communicate straightforwardly, but communication is entirely based on repeating, rephrasing, and mending.

Fig 13. Asking/ Answering Questions about Personal Details

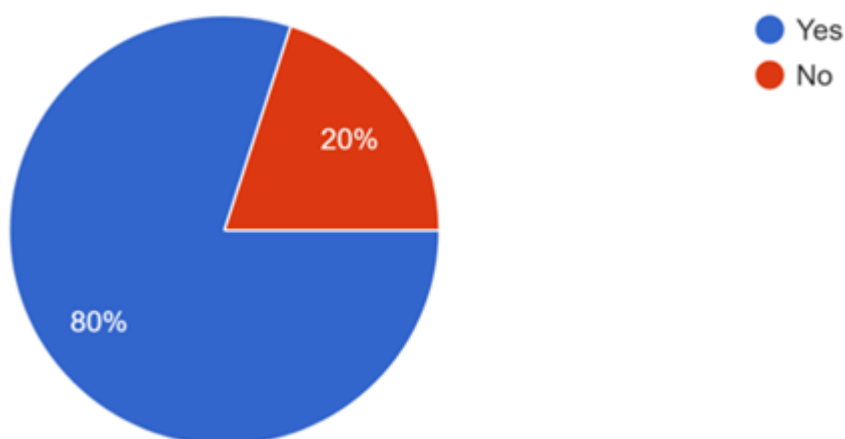


4.9. Linking

Q. Linking Words with Basic Connectors

80% of participants indicated that their students could connect words or groups of words using simple linear connectors such as "and" or "then."

Fig 14. Linking Words with Basic Connectors



5. Discussion

The overall accuracy of the placement test score was 81.48 percent, proving that the MC questions used in the grammar-vocabulary placement test were highly effective. Grammar and listening placement ratings were both 100% accurate. In reading, the placement test had a 90 percent success rate. However, according to the CEIL teachers, 20% of learners found it difficult to understand short, clear texts one phrase at a time, picking up necessary basic names, words, and phrases. The speaking placement rate as a whole was 73.33 percent. Some students found it difficult to express emotions, ask how others were doing, or react to the news. The accuracy percentage of writing placement was 70%. Some students struggled to write simple statements and phrases regarding real individuals as well as fictional characters, including where they live and what they do. Students were successfully placed at an 80 percent proficiency level in vocabulary, interaction, and the use of linking words. Some students lacked a basic vocabulary of words and simple phrases related to personal particulars and concrete situations, they were unable to ask and answer questions about personal particulars, interact in a straightforward manner, and link words or groups of words with very basic linear connectors. The placement test score for fluency was 60%.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to evaluate how accurately learners were placed in their appropriate skill levels using an online grammar-vocabulary placement test in accordance with the CEFR criteria. The ability to place learners at the appropriate level using grammar and vocabulary-based placement has been found to be fairly successful. The grammar-vocabulary placement test demonstrated its effectiveness. Using the findings, the test

developers and syllabus designers at the CEIL were able to determine the needs of the candidates and create lesson plans with goals that matched their present skill levels. The intended syllabus was easily followed by the learners, who improved their language skills and completed their course requirements according to the CEFR. .

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