

Research Article

In Quest for Reliable English Language Testing Practices in Secondary Education

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Abstract: This paper reports on the current English language teaching context and reformed foreign language policies in the Republic of Serbia. Although the objectives, contents and outcomes formulated in national curricula for all educational levels have been designed in compliance with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, there is not much evidence on the learning outcomes achieved by students at the end of secondary education. In other words, there are no standardized testing practices present in the secondary education system that would, on the one hand, objectively show to which extent the prescribed outcomes have been achieved, and, on the other, serve as a diagnostic tool that pinpoints which aspects in teaching, learning and assessment practices should be improved. This paper focuses on the issue of assessment and draws attention to the need to introduce reliable testing practices of foreign languages that would serve as the objective indicators of the outcomes achieved, which would, in turn, provide feedback on teaching and learning practices. Through the analysis of the results obtained from grammar, vocabulary and reading tests taken by a group of secondary school graduates, the most common errors have been detected and explained. The results show that the commonest errors result from the lack of understanding of the use of English in a context that demands more than just a straightforward application of rules as used in isolated sentences, and the most demanding reading tasks comprised inference and implication questions. This study aims to research the errors and, subsequently, to investigate the implications relevant in English language teaching and testing and point at the segments that need to be worked on more in English language classes.

Keywords: foreign language testing, secondary education, CEFR, learning outcomes

1. Introduction

In the Republic of Serbia, foreign language teaching has a rather long tradition characterized by a thoroughly developed policy of designing, planning, and incorporating foreign language courses in the national curriculum. As a result of the key language policymakers' and stakeholders' endeavors, learning one foreign language-dominantly English-is mandatory from the age of 7, when children start primary school national programme. It is expected that students achieve A2, i.e. the second level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) after 8 years (two 45-minute classes per week). It is also worth to note that the formal education system promotes plurilingualism through the introduction of a second foreign language in the fifth grade of primary school. As relates to the second foreign language, it is envisioned that, within the time frame of 4 years, students reach the A1+/A2

level mapped to the CEFR.

Upon completing their secondary education, all students in Serbia will have already been exposed to 12-13 years of the main foreign language (the expected level achieved being B2/C1 and even higher in specialized schools, i.e. those with advanced study of a foreign language of choice), and 4-8 years of a second foreign language learning. Despite the comprehensive reforms encompassing various aspects of foreign language teaching in Serbia, the issue of objective assessment of foreign language learning outcomes at the national level is still waiting to be systematically dealt with.

Having taken into consideration the aforementioned foreign language learning situation in the country, the authors of this paper organized an online English language competition among secondary school graduates from 27 schools at the end of the academic year 2020/2021. The aim of the competition was to draw attention to the topic of standardized testing and the uniform, objective criteria based on the CEFR that would provide a more structured and reliable foreign language assessment framework. What we focused on was the outcome achieved by the students who took part in this competition; this paper reports on the results obtained from the competition with the aim of providing insight into second language learning through the analysis of the common errors made by the participants. The research aims to investigate to what extent the outcomes related to linguistic and reading comprehension competencies prescribed by the national curriculum were achieved by a group of students who voluntarily applied to take part in this competition. Namely, it addresses the question of whether it is realistic to expect students to achieve the prescribed learning outcomes that are defined according to the C1 level within the CEFR. With regards to the type of these errors, a further discussion is developed to bring forth implications relevant in a wider foreign language teaching context.

2. English language learning policy

The position of English worldwide has been remarkably strengthened over the previous decades, not only in compulsory education but also in various institutions for adult education and lifelong learning. Today, English undoubtedly holds the first place among foreign languages offered in school curricula. Foreign language teaching takes a significant role in education and its importance is even more emphasized due to its aims-attaining not only a rather high level of linguistic competence but also cultural and pragmatic proficiency (Brown, 2020).

A significant turning point in foreign language teaching and learning policies and practices relates to the creation of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages in 2001. According to the European Commission Report (2017), this document, first revised in 2018, and then in 2020 (Council of Europe, 2020), is used in most European countries and serves as a benchmark and guidance for various aspects of foreign language teaching learning, and assessment, the last being the most challenging segment. According to the report, at the end of secondary education, students receive a certificate with a record of their exam results, but these are not often expressed in “the internationally comparable CEFR scale” (European Commission, 2017, p.15). On the other hand, relating examination practices to the CEFR principles is not an easy task because this relationship is not a “simple observable fact but is an assertion for which the examination provider needs to provide both theoretical and empirical evidence” (Noijons et al., 2011, p.17). The importance of foreign language testing has been recognized by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Additionally, for the first time, in 2025, PISA tests will include an assessment of foreign languages, providing “policymakers and educators with comparable results of their students’ foreign language competences”, and allowing “them to gain insights into the best practices and policies for teaching and learning a foreign language” (OECD, 2021, p.5).

The national curriculum, incorporating teaching English at all levels of primary and secondary education in the Republic of Serbia, conforms to the CEFR document to a great extent. Language standards and learning outcomes prescribed in the national curriculum, as well as recommended teaching methods and techniques, rely on the principles and can-do descriptors as defined in this widely acknowledged framework for teaching, learning, and assessing foreign language competencies. The language coursebooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, recognized for use in schools, whether written and published by domestic or foreign publishing houses and authors, are also compliant with the CEFR levels. All these endeavours have been made to create a foreign language policy that allows for the framework wherein a student can reach the independent (B levels) or even a proficient level (C levels) at the end of secondary education.

Nonetheless, although the formal English teaching and learning framework in schools in the Republic of Serbia

complies with the CEFR, the issue of objective assessment has arisen as a challenging aspect that calls for further action. Namely, there is no standardized form of testing in the Republic of Serbia, leaving rather big freedom to teachers to assess whatever they think is important, in any form they think is appropriate. This freedom raises concerns that there are no standardized tests used at the national level in all schools which could indicate a more realistic estimation of language learning outcomes. Namely, there is no standardized examination system at the end of secondary education in the Republic of Serbia and the assessment process is subjective; hence, a new final examination system, State Matura, has been initiated by the European Union and accepted by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, as a solution to resolve the existing problems and provide a more objective system linking education standards, goals and different forms of assessment. Despite the reforms in testing and assessment that resulted in the creation of the Bylaw on Student Assessment in 2019 that introduced formative assessment as obligatory in schools, foreign language teachers in Serbia conduct testing relying on their own resources (Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja, 2023). There are still no standardized tests that teachers are obliged to use in their classes because there is no standardized examination system at the end of secondary education. This inconsistency and subjectivity that exist in the field of assessment can result in a huge gap between the exam results and objective learning outcomes (Gavranovic, 2023). Therefore, the introduction of standardized testing as school leaving examination could help language teachers address the stated outcomes more effectively leaving less room for various interpretations.

3. The research context and methodology

The COVID-19 pandemic has stirred the education systems worldwide and affected many aspects which otherwise could have been undisturbed (Pu, 2020; Prodanović, 2020). In Serbia, both students and teachers were forced to switch to an online education environment overnight in the spring of 2020 and after a year of online teaching and learning, we have all acquired many skills, digital ones being the most obvious. The digital education environment provided new possibilities for conducting various forms of teaching and learning, as well as testing practices that were new in education in the Republic of Serbia.

In such a newly-created context, an English language competition was organized by a private university and its language department and students from the whole country were invited to apply. The competition was held online in April 2021 via the MTutor platform and 80 secondary school students in the final year took part in it. They came from 27 different schools from all parts of the country (including, but not limited to: Negotin, Čačak, Čuprija, Bečej, Šabac, Lazarevac, Niš, Novi Sad, Belgrade). These schools were selected on the criteria on regional coverage (all parts of Serbia), the city size (several thousand citizens to over two million), and the type of schools (vocational and grammar schools). A public call, with clear guidelines and aims of the competition, was sent to English language teachers and their students inviting them to participate in this competition. The call comprised the description of written and oral sections, with a comment that tests have been created at the C1 level according to the CEFR so that they could expect tasks at this language competence level. The participants sat a test comprising two sections aimed at testing students' linguistic competence and reading comprehension. The first section, comprising The Language in use tasks, was aimed at assessing students' grammatical and lexical competence through a set of 30 multiple-choice questions, each of which contained three to four missing items used beyond a single sentence, in a wider discourse. The items, which were designed to respond to the language content at the advanced level, belonged to a wide range of grammatical and lexical repertoire that was a part of the prescribed national curriculum. The second section of the test comprised a reading text at the C1 level with eight accompanying multiple-choice questions.

The main aim of the competition was to encourage students to take part in a language event organized at the national level, and, thus, enable them to measure their achievement in comparison to other students' results. Furthermore, it was the first online foreign language competition held in Serbia, so it opened new perspectives related to testing, and the teachers were familiarized with some possibilities the new educational context offered. The authors of this paper utilized the results obtained from the competition to draw attention to foreign language assessment in the Republic of Serbia, bringing together students from across the country and giving them the same tasks to do, regardless of teaching methods and testing practices they had been exposed to by their teachers.

This study focuses on the analysis of the test results and the method applied is primarily of qualitative nature; the quantitative data serves as a general representation of the achieved outcomes. The test results were first categorized

as correct or wrong answers and further compared and analyzed with the aim of pointing to the achieved outcomes showing the average score attained at the aimed C1 level and explaining the nature of the commonest errors made by the participants.

4. Results, illustrations and discussion

The statistical representation of the grammar and vocabulary test results is shown in Table 1: the first column represents the number of students who took the grammar and vocabulary test; the second column represents the number of students who scored the percentage of correct answers given in the third column.

Table 1. Statistical representation of Grammar and Vocabulary Test results

Number of students	G&V test	Percentage of correct answers
80	0	0-30%
80	3	30%
80	8	40%
80	6	50-60%
80	50	61-70%
80	13	81-90%
80	0	91-100%

Table 1 shows that no one scored below 30% in Grammar and Vocabulary Test. There were 11 students who scored below 50% (3 of them (3.75%) had 30% correct answers and 8 (10%) had 40%. A slightly better result was scored by 6 students (7.5%), who had between 50 and 60% correct answers. A big percentage of students (62.5%, or 50 students) had between 61 and 70% correct answers, while there were 13 students (16.25) who scored between 81 and 90% correct answers. Additionally, there was no one who had over 91% correct answers in Grammar and Vocabulary Test.

The analysis of the most common errors reflecting students' linguistic competence revealed that the most challenging aspects for the respondents belong to the following categories: prepositional phrases and dependent prepositions, sequence of tenses, the use of stative verbs, and collocations. Through a comparative analysis, we noticed a pattern that was repetitive throughout many tests-it relates to those aspects of language which differ in Serbian and English and can result in mistakes due to language transfer, particularly if not intentionally focused on and explained in language classes (according to Larsen-Freeman (2013, p.122), learners "transform their knowledge [...], and this happens at all levels of language proficiency").

One such example can be illustrated using prepositions *to* and *with* after the verb *agree*-in Serbian the same preposition is used regardless of the complement but more than 80% of the students could not spot this difference and used the preposition *with* in both *agree with a person* and *agree to the terms and conditions*.

Even though the students showed an excellent command of the verb forms in a variety of contexts, the most challenging tasks were those implying the use of progressive and perfective aspects in broader contexts in which the time reference and duration of the verbs are closely connected. Another verbal-system-related issue arising from the analysis of the results points to the distinction between the use of stative and active verbs. The rationale for a higher percentage of mistakes made in questions containing the aforementioned categories can be found in a different way of expressing aspect in language-in Serbian the use of different lexical items bears the aspectual meaning, not the use of

different tenses (e.g. *Majka piše pismo već satima/The mother has been writing the letter for hours* VS *Majka mi svake nedelje piše po jedno pismo/The mother writes a letter for me on a weekly basis*, where the very same verb form, that being *piše* is used in Serbian for both an activity characterized by duration and the one characterized by repetitiveness). The result is in compliance with the statement put forth by Gundel & Tarone (1983 in Faerch & Kasper, 1987, p.121) that “transfer will take place in those areas of the L1 which are in accordance with the typological characteristics of the learner’s interlanguage and natural language-acquisition processes”.

The most challenging tasks relate to the use of more complex verb forms including modal verbs and non-finite forms and those aspects referring to the sequence of tenses, particularly in a wider context. The following example from the test illustrates one of the most demanding tasks for the students which yielded the lowest percentage of correct answers: *Tom called his friends at the last moment, apologising (apologise) for being late. Despite his apology, his friends were very annoyed and said that he should have let (let) them know earlier because they had been waiting (wait) for him for over an hour. They told him he should stop behaving (behave) in such an irresponsible way and left.*

On the other hand, some other aspects which are also rather differently represented in Serbian and English, such as the causative *have*, modal verbs and non-finite verb forms, yielded a better percentage of correct answers. The analysis of these categories in two languages showed that there is no language transfer interfering with the proper use of these in the foreign language, which conforms with some of pioneer language transfer postulates stating that transfer is mostly (not exclusively, as we could see earlier) expected and prominent during the early learning stages (Ringbom, 1987). The notion of language transfer is an inevitable one when second language acquisition is concerned. As of the Michigan conference on language transfer (held in 1981), the opposing views on language transfer relevance have become more obvious. While some researchers advocate the stand that language learners tend to rely on their L1 knowledge in order to complete their messages in the target language or interpret those they are exposed to (Faerch & Kasper, 1987), there are also those who claim that L1 no longer influences the acquisition of L2 grammar (among those are Dulay et al., 1982) or, at least, that transfer will not be visible at higher levels of language proficiency (as previously mentioned). These results follow the research conducted with a group of students at the B2 level attending the same course at a private university, whose results show “a rather consistent pattern of correct answers and recurrent errors” (Gavranović & Prodanović, 2020).

The analysis also showed the presence of another source of errors-those of intralingual nature, which result from partial, inadequate or faulty learning of the target language. These errors are of various kinds, belonging to different aspects of the English language, but what came as the most conspicuous test result relates to the use of articles. Serbian students entirely rely on the target language when learning the use of articles, because this class does not exist in the Serbian language. The results showed that the more explicit the rule is, the fewer mistakes are made, and vice versa. This means that the respondents provided correct answers with a high degree of percentage to those questions that demanded understanding and the application of rules in sentences that contained clear indicators of what form should be used. The example which illustrates a high percentage of correct answers is *My friend has been living in ___ (the) north of ___ (the) UK for a little over two years and he still can't understand ___ (the) way some people speak there.* The options the students were given are as follows: a) the, the, the; b) /, /, /; c) the, the, a; d) /, /, the. Conversely, the sentence *This is the first day of ___ (the) International Belgrade Book Fair and everywhere you look you can see ___ (/) people talking enthusiastically about the new app which helps ___ (the) visitors navigate this overwhelming world of fiction* posed a problem for more than half of the students who found the use or omission of the definitive article in front of the nouns in plural and the name of the fair rather challenging. The answers the students could choose from were as follows: a) the, /, the; b) /, /, /; c) the, the, the; d) /, the, the.

The results obtained from questions containing grammar show that the students could apply the rules of the above-mentioned grammar items and categories to a high degree of precision provided a sufficient and clear context had been provided. Namely, the National Curriculum prescribes that all these grammar sections should be done in classes, and the results show that the respondents understand the rules and apply them in situations that are familiar to them, in other words, in sentences containing indicators that are explicit and trigger the use of the intended forms. The results showed that the students who participated in this competition were well prepared and that their teachers were well acquainted with the national curriculum, followed and applied the curriculum in their classes helping their students achieve the prescribed outcomes. On the other hand, the results also showed that the respondents could not fully apply the acquired rules in a wider context that demands a thorough, critical, and analytic approach.

As regards the lexical part of the test, the analysis of the results revealed that the students showed a good command of lexical knowledge, particularly that of inferring the meaning of lexical items in context, word-formation and the use of idiomatic expressions and collocations that are fixed. However, students made more mistakes in examples containing collocations slightly different in two languages or containing easily confused words. For example, the challenging lexical items could be illustrated with the collocation *spare parts*. While English *reserve* and Serbian *rezervni* might exhibit significant resemblance in terms of meaning, spelling and specifically pronunciation, they do not collocate with the same nouns in the two languages and over 75% of the students opted for the combination *reserve parts* as a similar rendering from Serbian into English.

The second part of the test comprised a reading text at the C1 level with eight accompanying multiple-choice questions devised to examine various aspects of reading comprehension. The statistical analysis of the reading section test showed a higher score of the correct answers compared to those obtained from the grammar and vocabulary test. No one had below 40% of correct answers, and no respondent provided all correct answers. Only 12 students (15%) scored 40 or 50% correct answers; 19 students (23.75%) had five correct answers, while over half of the students had 6 or 7 correct answers.

Table 2 represents reading comprehension question types and the number of correct answers provided for them by the respondents, whereby the first column represents the total number of students who took the reading comprehension test, the second column represents the reading comprehension question type, and the number in brackets illustrates how the number of such type questions in the test, and the last column represents the percentage of correct answers obtained for the given question type (if there was more than one question of the same type, the average score percentage has been calculated).

Table 2. Statistical representation of Reading Comprehension Test results

Number of students	Reading comprehension question type (no)	(Average) percentage of correct answers
80	lexical inference (1)	67.5%
80	reading for specific information (3)	62.5%
80	inference and implication (3)	3.75%
80	true/false/not mentioned (1)	30%

The analysis of the answers the respondents provided showed that a high percentage of students, 67.5% of them, had no problem providing the answer to the type of comprehension question that related to inferring the meaning of a word in context. This result showed that students could read fluently and understand the meaning of new lexical items provided that sufficient context had been given (the target word was “bursary”). Additionally, those questions that aimed at finding specific information in the text, or demanded connecting two or more pieces of information to come to the conclusion and provide an answer to questions referring to understanding text coherence, stating reasons and purposes were also done well by the majority of students. On the other hand, the most demanding questions comprised inference and implication, asking students to think laterally and use different pieces of information, connect them, analyze, and evaluate. The most difficult questions for students implied understanding attitudes expressed by the author, and only 8 students provided at least one correct answer to these three questions of the same type. The average score of correct answers to inference questions amounted to 3.75. Furthermore, what came as a disputable question contained ‘true/false/not mentioned’ answer options whereby the last two were hardly discriminated by many students-only 24 students (30%) provided the correct answer (which was “False”), and as many as 44 of students who did not answer correctly opted for “Not given” option, which illustrates that students cannot make a distinction between information that is not given in the text or is false.

The reading comprehension section analysis also revealed the findings that the respondents had no problems

understanding a longer text tailored at the C1 level, particularly general understanding. Nevertheless, when a more subtle, implicit reading was demanded, the respondents lacked the skill to recognize the implicit messages the text provided.

The results from both tests point to the need to reexamine existing testing practices and introduce a more consistent and uniform framework to guide English language teachers in devising their testing practices. Professional development courses should be offered to help teachers learn how to align their teaching and testing practices with national standards of language teaching. Although there is a clear and straightforward foreign language teaching framework in the Republic of Serbia designed at the national level, and in compliance with European language policies, the results obtained from this research showed that there is a discrepancy between the desired and prescribed policies and the application of these in reality. Furthermore, the results of this research illustrate an example of the trend of introducing more reliable testing practices in schools. Namely, the relevance of establishing more objective assessment practices at national levels in European Union countries can also be seen in the efforts of The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that results in the PISA 2025 cycle that will include optional assessment of foreign languages, the aim of the introduction of foreign language assessment is “to provide policymakers and educators with comparable results of their students’ foreign language competence and allow them to gain insights into the best practices and policies for teaching and learning a foreign language” (OECD, 2021).

5. Implications and conclusions

The results obtained from the corpus of tests done by a group of 80 students from 27 schools from different parts of Serbia have some implications for English language teaching. In the first place, the CEFR tenets and principles provide a common framework with guidelines for language teaching and learning that ensures objective and standardized outcomes. This case study showed that the outcomes were achievable if the students were exposed to the content as prescribed by the National Curriculum and in compliance with the CEFR.

Through the analysis of the results obtained from grammar and vocabulary and reading tests taken by a group of secondary school graduates, the most common errors have been detected and explained. The results show that the commonest errors result from the lack of understanding of the use of English in a context that demands more than just a straightforward application of grammar rules as used in isolated sentences. On the other hand, the analysis of vocabulary tasks shows that students have a good command of inferring the meaning of words in context, while they to a high degree lack the knowledge of idiomatic expressions and collocations. The most demanding reading tasks comprised inference and implication questions, whereas the questions related to text coherence, stating reasons and purposes, and explicit questions were done correctly by the majority of the respondents. This study aims to research the nature and causes of these errors and, subsequently, to investigate the implications relevant to English language teaching and testing. The conclusion drawn from the results points to the segments that need to be worked on more in English language classes, and they also imply that in two languages should be taken into consideration while planning and devising tasks for language learning.

On the other hand, the most common errors detected in the students’ answers point to the need to take into consideration the nature of students’ first language which causes various language transfers. The analysis of these errors points to the areas which belong to the proficient level, but also to those categories which are under a greater influence of language transfer. It implies that these differences in the two languages should be taken into consideration while planning and devising tasks for language learning and, thus, with the support of the teacher, students could overcome the obstacles imposed by language transfer. The research also shows that the teacher needs to be well acquainted with the prescribed national curriculum because it provides an objective framework that helps students achieve the outcomes aimed at the national level. All these aspects need to be taken into consideration while planning lessons and activities that would enhance students’ linguistic competence.

The main purpose of the conducted study emanated from the need to draw attention to the aspect of English language teaching in Serbia, which is much discussed and debated, but still not resolved in terms of introducing standard, objective testing at the national level. The results of the competition not only point to the outcomes achieved by the group of students who participated in it, but the analysis of the results and errors cast a light on the complex nature of testing and the implications it has on teaching. It means that learning outcomes, teaching and assessment

methods need to be aligned and interdependent (Rodríguez-Gómez & Ibarra-Saiz, 2015).

Reflecting on the results illustrated, it can be deduced that the outcomes prescribed by the national curriculum for the advanced level are realistic and achievable-78.8% of students scored 60% and more. However, what needs to be researched in the future is what percentage of all students can achieve the prescribed outcomes. It is worth mentioning that the National Curriculum discerns three levels of achievement and that the advanced one is the most challenging and is attained by some students. Unfortunately, due to the absence of national, standardized testing, there is no evidence of what the average level of language proficiency is after 12-13 years of learning a foreign language. This study, although restricted in scope and aspects it encompasses, casts a light on the issue of testing and calls for a systematic approach that could yield a more objective picture of the nature and quality of foreign language teaching in one country.

This finding points to a very important aspect of reading comprehension because it shows that students do not have problems distinguishing true from false in the reading task, but have difficulties understanding whether something is not given in a text or is false, which leads to a conclusion that more attention should be paid to developing students' reading strategies aiming at a deeper and more thorough way of reading. Although restricted to reading comprehension, PISA 2025 will provide a more comprehensive picture of students' learning outcomes. This paper draws attention to the need to organize professional development courses for language teachers that focus on aligning teaching and testing practices following the CEFR rationale and principles.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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