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ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN ENGLISH IN A SAMPLE OF INCOMING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract. The development of communicative competences in English is fundamental for the labour insertion of future professionals. In this cross-sectional study, the communicative competences in English of a representative sample of 114 incoming Dominican university students were assessed using an *ad hoc* instrument based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Communication skills were compared according to the socio-demographic and academic characteristics of the sample. Overall, intermediate levels were identified in reading comprehension, general competence, written production, and grammar and vocabulary; and low levels in oral production and listening comprehension, respectively. Students over 30 years of age had statistically higher levels of proficiency in grammar and vocabulary, those with more than three years of prior training in grammar and vocabulary, and those who reported having lived with English-speaking family members in general proficiency. Female students had higher levels in all communicative competences, although the differences were not significant. In conclusion, it is necessary to intervene as a priority in the communicative competences of oral production and comprehension in incoming university students, as well as to strengthen the domains of written comprehension, general competence, written production and grammar and vocabulary.

Keywords: linguistic competences, communicative competences, teaching, learning, English.

EVALUACIÓN DE LAS COMPETENCIAS COMUNICATIVAS EN INGLÉS EN UNA MUESTRA DE ESTUDIANTES DE NUEVO INGRESO A LA UNIVERSIDAD

Resumen. El desarrollo de competencias comunicativas en inglés es fundamental para la inserción laboral de los futuros profesionales. Este estudio transversal evaluó las competencias comunicativas en inglés de una muestra representativa de 114 estudiantes universitarios dominicanos de nuevo ingreso, a partir de un instrumento *ad hoc* basado en el Marco Común Europeo de Referencias para las Lenguas (MCER). Las competencias comunicativas se compararon según características sociodemográficas y académicas de la

muestra. En general, se identificaron niveles intermedios en comprensión escrita, competencia general, producción escrita y gramática y vocabulario; y bajos en producción oral y comprensión oral, respectivamente. Los estudiantes de más de 30 años obtuvieron niveles estadísticamente más altos en el dominio de gramática y vocabulario, los que tenían más de tres años de formación previa en gramática y vocabulario y los que indicaron haber convivido con familiares de habla inglesa en competencia general. Los estudiantes de género femenino obtuvieron niveles más altos en todas las competencias comunicativas, aunque sin diferencias significativas. En conclusión, es necesario intervenir de forma prioritaria las competencias comunicativas de producción y comprensión oral en los universitarios de nuevo ingreso, así como fortalecer los dominios de comprensión escrita, competencia general, producción escrita y gramática y vocabulario, respectivamente.

Palabras clave: competencias lingüísticas, competencias comunicativas, enseñanza, aprendizaje, inglés.

Introduction

The assessment of communicative competencies is a fundamental process for the teaching and learning of a new language in university students (Bolaños et al., 2021; Borja-Torresano et al., 2020; Cabrera et al., 2020). Recent research has shown that the acquisition of communicative competencies in English is directly associated with the implementation of participatory programs (Gómez and Larenas, 2020; Toala-Alarcón et al., 2019; Uribe et al., 2020) and with the regulation of different communicative competencies (López, 2020; Luna-Hernández, 2016; Nuñez and Deulofeo, 2020). Since 2001, the European Union created the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a guide for the design of programs for the study of a given language and to facilitate the development of guidelines (curricula, assessments, tests, manuals and guides) for the learning or acquisition of new languages.

The objectives of the CEFR are to standardize foreign language skills for language learners and for educators who provide foreign language teaching and assessment (Council of Europe, 2017). The general parameters established in this framework serve as a foundation for language teaching and the assessment of the quality of language skills (Nold, 2007). Originally, the CEFR established six levels of language proficiency (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2), with A1 being the most basic and C2 the highest, with general and specific communicative competencies and their respective subcategories. In its most recent update, it incorporated a new framework, a new pre-A1 level and expanded the description of C1 and C2, in order to adapt to the multilingual needs of international university students. Currently, MERC is one of the main references for defining competencies in foreign language curricula in much of the world (Council of Europe, 2017), with its focus areas having transcendental implications in educational contexts (House, 2003).

According to Chomsky (1968) communicative competencies are the abilities of human beings to speak and create messages. These competencies focus on the grammatical operations that people internalize and which, in turn, are susceptible to activation in the development of their colloquial skills (Messick, 1984). In general, the communicative competencies are composed of three main categories: (1) *linguistic competencies*, which include lexical, phonological, syntactic and other dimensions of language knowledge; (2) *sociolinguistic competencies*, which refer to the sociocultural conventions of language use (politeness rules and norms between generations, sexes, classes and social groups); and (3) *pragmatic competencies*, which refer to the functional use of linguistic resources (production of language functions and speech acts), based on

scenarios of interactional exchanges, and to the mastery of discourse, cohesion and coherence (Council of Europe, 2001).

In competence research, two models are distinguished: *competence structures* and *competence levels* (Klieme et al., 2008). The first model assumes the existence of several aspects of a particular competency and examines the relationship between these aspects and its overall competency, while the second describes several levels of competency that differ qualitatively in terms of the task and its particular level of competency. In the proficiency level model, examinee levels are usually defined by determining thresholds based on scores. These models are not mutually exclusive, as seen in foreign language comprehension, where different aspects of proficiency may exist, such as mastery of aspects of vocabulary and grammar, and where various levels of proficiency may be achieved within each language proficiency (Klieme et al., 2008).

Foreign language learning poses a number of challenges for incoming university students (Moreno & Villafuerte, 2016; Romero et al., 2020). In this regard, Ahdal et al. (2014) pointed out that second language learning is directly conditioned by linguistic and sociological factors. In addition, psychological factors such as motivation, memory, emotion, and personality can affect the process and progress of second language learners (Romero et al., 2020). There is evidence that motivations, baseline knowledge and competencies, as well as more transitory factors such as fatigue or distraction, affect performance and language learning (Ching and Badilla, 2021; Romero et al., 2020). Tagachi (cited in Brooks and Wilson, 2014) highlighted that teachers often prioritize vocabulary and grammar exercises to the detriment of other communicative competencies, hindering a comprehensive mastery of the language (Brown, 2000; Tagle-Ochoa et al., 2020).

Tinjaca and Contreras (2008) mention four barriers to learning English: lack of effective support, monotonous classes, indifference to the learning process, and social embarrassment. Authors such as Von Worde (2003), Turula (2004) and Jones (2004) indicated that language learning is affected by anxiety, feelings of insecurity, nervousness and lack of confidence among university students. Moreover, according to some studies these external factors are associated with public speaking anxiety (Ching and Badilla, 2021; Romero et al., 2020). On this point, Dhanasobhon (2006) highlighted that lack of teacher training and demotivation and lack of opportunities for students are the main factors hindering English language learning.

In this order of ideas, motivation is a central element that favors the successful learning of a new language, and is defined as a set of factors that help to act and have a sense of proper direction (Blaublitz, 2010). There are two types of motivation in language learning: *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* (Oletić and Ilic 2014). Extrinsic motivation is driven by rewards external to the students, such as obtaining high scores; and intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is associated with a self-determined mindset that is expressed through personal self-discipline to learn and is also independent to external rewards (Oletić and Ilic 2014). Numerous studies have highlighted that both types of motivation are necessary in learning a new language (Ching & Badilla, 2021; Moreno & Villafuerte, 2016; Romero et al., 2020), so they should be used according to the learning environment and the particular needs of the learners (Young-Shin & Uichol, 1999).

Against this background, it is important to recognize the English language proficiency of university students at the beginning of their studies. The main objective of this research was, therefore, to evaluate the communicative competencies in English of a

representative sample of 114 incoming students at the Universidad Tecnológica de Santiago (UTESA), Dominican Republic, using an *ad hoc* instrument based on the CEFR.

Method

Participants

This cross-sectional study included a sample of incoming students at UTESA (Dominican Republic). After performing a simple random sampling, based on the statistical formula for populations of Fischer and Navarro (1994), it was estimated that 86 new students were required to constitute a representative sample of this population. Finally, the sample consisted of 114 incoming students during the quarters 2020-1 to 2021-2. Figure 1 shows the statistical formula used to calculate the sample size for this study.

Figure 1

Fisher and Navarro's (1994) statistical formula for population estimation

<p>N (tamaño de la población) = 172</p> <p>Z (variable estándar) = 1,81</p> <p>P (probabilidad de ocurrencia) = 50%</p> <p>q (probabilidad de no ocurrencia) = 50%</p> <p>e (error) = 7%</p> <p>Z (constante) = 1,81</p> <p>E (estimación) = 5%</p>
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Inclusion criteria were: (1) be enrolled in the 2020-2021 terms, (2) be incoming freshmen to the institution, and (3) earn a 57-point average per quarter. No exclusion criteria were established in this study.

Procedure

Data collection was performed using a Google online form. Participants were recruited by telephone through a list of contacts provided by the institution. Students who agreed to voluntarily participate in the study received by e-mail a general description of the study objectives and a Google online form with the corresponding instructions for filling in all the fields of the questionnaire. The assessment of communicative competencies in English was carried out using a procedure that combined both the responses to the online tests (grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing and listening), administered in the Google form, and in the responses recorded by the researcher during video calls with the participants.

In order to preserve the original responses for the English communication skills assessment, the option to modify the responses of the Google Form after submission was disabled. The response time used to fill out the form varied according to the technology

and language skills of the participants, ranging from two to four hours at a time. This study was approved by the UTESA Research Ethics Committee. The data were treated anonymously and were only used for the purposes of the study, guaranteeing the confidentiality of the participants.

Instrument

The variables of interest were the communicative competencies of grammar and vocabulary, general competence and comprehension and production in English, evaluated in written and oral form. The *ad hoc* instrument used to measure these variables was divided into five sections: (1) collection of descriptive data (gender, age, previous experience with English and living with an English-speaking family); (2) assessment of written comprehension by reading texts and applying multiple choice items; (3) assessment of written production by writing an essay on a topic known to the participants; (4) assessment of oral comprehension by listening to conversations and applying multiple choice items; and (5) assessment of oral production through group dynamics. Thus, since it is an *ad hoc* instrument, neither content validity nor construct validity is shown; these limitations will be solved in subsequent works.

The scores for each communicative competency were scored according to the original levels established by the CEFR. The *Speaking Test and Score Sheet* was used to measure oral production (interview). *Introductory questions, no score value and grading scale* were used in this process. The questions were organized according to different levels of difficulty: *starter, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced*. This score was adjusted according to the rating scale: unacceptable (0), low (1), acceptable (2) and excellent (3). Finally, the ranking systems of the communicative competencies were, from lowest to highest: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2.

Data analysis

Sociodemographic and academic data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages. To compare the domains of English communicative competencies according to gender, age ranges, years of English language training, and living with English-speaking family, χ^2 test analyses were used. Before applying this statistical test, a review of compliance with data normality requirements was performed using the Kolmogorov Smirnov test. The results obtained allowed us to accept the assumption of normality in the distribution of the data. A value of $p < ,05$ was assumed to identify statistically significant differences. Data were analyzed using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS, v26).

Results

Sample characteristics

A total of 114 new students participated, 42 male (36.8%) and 72 female (63.2%), with age ranges between 15 and 50 years old. As shown in Table 1, most of the sample was between 15-20 years old (52.6%), had about one year of previous English language training (34.2%) and had lived with an English-speaking family (59.6%).

Table 1
Descriptive data of the sample

Variables	Sample(n = 114)
	n (%)
<i>Genre</i>	
Male	42 (36,8)
Female	72 (63,2)
<i>Age ranges</i>	
15-20 years	60 (52,6)
21-25 years old	35 (30,7)
26-30 years	8 (7,0)
> 30 years	11 (9,7)
<i>Years of English training</i>	
None	31 (26,2)
From 0 to 1 year old	39 (34,2)
From 1 to 2 years	18 (15,8)
From 2 to 3 years old	13 (11,4)
More than 3 years	13 (11,4)
<i>English-speaking family</i>	
Yes	68 (59,6)
No	46 (40,4)

Communication skills in English

47.4% of students showed English proficiency B in grammar and vocabulary, 50.9% in written production, 57.0% in written comprehension, and 52.6% in general proficiency. 60.5% showed an English A level in oral production and 49.1% in oral comprehension. Table 2 presents the communicative competencies in English of the sample.

Table 2
English communicative competencies of the sample

Variables	Sample(n = 114) n (%)
<i>Grammar vocabulary</i>	
A1	16 (14,04)
A2	27 (23,68)
B1	29 (25,44)
B2	25 (21,93)
C1	11 (9,65)
C2	6 (5,26)
<i>Written production</i>	
A1	20 (17,54)
A2	31 (27,19)
B1	38 (33,33)
B2	20 (17,54)
C1	5 (4,39)
C2	0 (0,00)
<i>Reading comprehension</i>	
A1	7 (6,14)
A2	32 (28,07)
B1	37 (32,46)
B2	28 (24,56)
C1	7 (6,14)
C2	3 (2,63)
<i>Oral production</i>	
A1	27 (23,68)
A2	42 (36,84)
B1	18 (15,79)
B2	12 (10,53)
C1	9 (7,89)
C2	6 (5,26)
<i>Oral comprehension</i>	
A1	23 (20,18)
A2	33 (28,95)
B1	33 (28,95)
B2	20 (17,54)
C1	3 (2,63)
C2	2 (1,75)
<i>General competence</i>	
A1	8 (7,02)

A2	40 (35,09)
B1	50 (43,86)
B2	10 (8,77)
C1	6 (5,26)
C2	0 (0,00)

Table 3
Differences in English communication skills according to gender

	Male (n = 42) n (%)	Female (n = 72) n (%)	χ^2	p
<i>Grammar and vocabulary</i>				
A1	8 (19,0)	8 (11,1)	2,85	,72
A2	11 (26,2)	16 (22,2)		
B1	9 (21,4)	20 (27,8)		
B2	9 (21,4)	16 (22,2)		
C1	4 (9,5)	7 (9,7)		
C2	1 (2,4)	5 (6,9)		
<i>Written production</i>				
A1	11 (26,2)	9 (12,5)	6,76	,15
A2	9 (21,4)	22 (30,6)		
B1	11 (26,2)	27 (37,5)		
B2	10 (23,8)	10 (13,9)		
C1	1 (2,4)	4 (5,6)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Reading comprehension</i>				
A1	3 (7,1)	4 (5,6)	4,50	,48
A2	13 (31,0)	19 (26,4)		
B1	16 (38,1)	21 (29,2)		
B2	7 (16,7)	21 (29,2)		
C1	3 (7,1)	4 (5,6)		
C2	0 (0,0)	3 (4,2)		
<i>Oral production</i>				
A1	12 (28,6)	15 (20,8)	1,77	,88
A2	15 (35,7)	27 (37,5)		
B1	6 (14,3)	12 (16,7)		
B2	5 (11,9)	7 (9,7)		
C1	2 (4,8)	7 (9,7)		
C2	2 (4,8)	4 (5,6)		
<i>Oral comprehension</i>				
A1	9 (21,4)	14 (19,4)	3,18	,67
A2	13 (31,0)	20 (27,8)		
B1	13 (31,0)	20 (27,8)		

B2	7 (16,7)	13 (18,1)		
C1	0 (0,0)	3 (4,2)		
C2	0 (0,0)	2 (2,8)		
<i>General competence</i>				
	Male	Female		
A1	4 (9,5)	4 (5,6)	4,80	,31
A2	19 (45,2)	21 (29,2)		
B1	15 (35,7)	35 (48,6)		
B2	3 (7,1)	7 (9,7)		
C1	1 (2,4)	5 (6,9)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		

Table 4 shows that participants aged 30+ showed higher levels of English C proficiency than those aged 26-30, 21-25 and 15-20 in grammar and vocabulary (27.3% vs. 0.0%, 14.3% and 15.0%), reading comprehension (18.2% vs. 12.5%, 2.9% and 10.0%), written production (9.1% vs. 0.0%, 2.9% and 5.0%) and oral comprehension (9.1% vs. 0.0%, 0.0% and 6.7%), respectively. However, the only statistically significant difference was identified in the grammar and vocabulary domain ($p = ,04$, $\chi^2 = 25.66$). Those aged 15-20 reported higher levels of English C proficiency than those aged 30+, 26-30 and 21-25 in oral production (18.3% vs. 0.0%, 12.5% and 8.6%), while those aged 26-30 years indicated higher levels of this same domain than those over 30, 21-25 and 15-20 years in general competence (12.5% vs. 9,1%, 0,0% y 6,7%). None of these differences were statistically significant ($p > ,05$). In general, the age ranges that obtained lower levels of proficiency in English communicative skills were the participants aged 26-30 years and 21-25 years, respectively.

Table 4

Differences in English communicative competencies by age range

	15-20 years($n = 60$)	21-25 years($n = 35$)	26-30 years($n = 8$)	> 30 years($n = 11$)	χ^2	p
	$n (%)$	$n (%)$	$n (%)$	$n (%)$		
<i>Grammar and vocabulary</i>						
A1	10 (16,7)	4 (11,4)	0 (0,0)	2 (18,2)	25,66	,04
A2	8 (13,3)	13 (37,1)	5 (62,5)	1 (9,1)		
B1	16 (26,7)	9 (25,7)	2 (25,0)	2 (18,2)		
B2	17 (28,3)	4 (11,4)	1 (12,5)	3 (27,3)		
C1	8 (13,3)	1 (2,9)	0.0 (0,0)	2 (18,2)		
C2	1 (1,7)	4 (11,4)	0.0 (0,0)	1 (9,1)		
<i>Written production</i>						
A1	11 (18,3)	6 (17,1)	1 (12,5)	2 (18,2)	9,67	,64
A2	12 (20,0)	12 (34,3)	5 (62,5)	2 (18,2)		
B1	23 (38,3)	11 (31,4)	1 (12,5)	3 (27,3)		
B2	11 (18,3)	5 (14,3)	1 (12,5)	3 (27,3)		

C1	3 (5,0)	1 (2,9)	0 (0,0)	1 (9,1)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Reading comprehension</i>						
A1	2 (3,3)	3 (8,6)	0 (0,0)	2 (18,2)	19,12	,21
A2	14 (23,3)	14 (0,4)	3 (37,5)	1 (9,1)		
B1	17 (28,3)	12 (34,3)	3 (37,5)	5 (45,5)		
B2	21 (35,0)	5 (14,3)	1 (12,5)	1 (9,1)		
C1	4 (6,7)	1 (2,9)	1 (12,5)	1 (9,1)		
C2	2 (3,3)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	1 (9,1)		
<i>Oral production</i>						
A1	14 (23,3)	6 (17,1)	2 (0,25)	5 (45,5)	17,85	,27
A2	17 (28,3)	18 (51,4)	3 (37,5)	4 (36,4)		
B1	8 (13,3)	6 (17,1)	2 (0,25)	2 (18,2)		
B2	10 (16,7)	2 (5,7)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
C1	6 (10,0)	3 (8,6)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
C2	5 (8,3)	0 (0,0)	1 (12,5)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Oral comprehension</i>						
A1	13 (21,7)	7 (0,2)	1 (12,5)	2 (18,2)	15,95	,38
A2	12 (20,0)	15 (42,9)	4 (0,5)	2 (18,2)		
B1	17 (28,3)	10 (28,6)	2 (0,25)	4 (36,4)		
B2	14 (23,3)	3 (8,6)	1 (12,5)	2 (18,2)		
C1	3 (5,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
C2	1 (1,7)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	1 (9,1)		
<i>General competence</i>						
A1	4 (6,7)	2 (5,7)	0 (0,0)	2 (18,2)	17,36	,14
A2	16 (26,7)	16 (45,7)	6 (0,75)	2 (18,2)		
B1	29 (48,3)	14 (0,4)	1 (12,5)	6 (54,5)		
B2	7 (11,7)	3 (8,6)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
C1	4 (6,7)	0 (0,0)	1 (12,5)	1 (9,1)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		

Participants with more than 3 years of prior English language training showed higher levels of C proficiency than those with no prior English language training experience or those with 2 to 3, 1 to 2 and 0 to 1 years in grammar and vocabulary (53.9% vs. 9.7%, 23.1%, 5.6% and 7.7%), this difference being statistically significant ($p = ,04$, $\chi^2 = 32.75$). Those with previous English training of 2 to 3 years obtained higher levels of C proficiency than those with no training experience or those with more than 3, 1 to 2 and 0 to 1 years in written production (15.4% vs. 0.0%, 0.0%, 11.1% and 2.6%), reading comprehension (15.4% vs. 9.7%, 0.0%, 5.6% and 10.3%), oral comprehension (15.4% vs. 0.0%, 0.0%, 5.6% and 5.2%) and general competition (15.4% vs. 6.5%, 0.0%, 5.6% and 2.6%), although none of these differences were statistically significant ($p > ,05$). As can be seen in Table 5, in general, students with less than 2 years of training in English obtained the lowest levels of mastery of communicative competencies in this language.

Those with more than three years of English training showed the lowest English A proficiency in oral production (92.3%).

Table 5

Differences in English communication skills according to years of previous English language training

	None (n = 31) n (%)	0 to 1 years(n = 39) n (%)	1 to 2 years (n = 18) n (%)	2 to 3 years(n = 13) n (%)	> 3 years(n = 13) n (%)	χ^2	p
<i>Grammar and vocabulary</i>							
A1	5 (16,1)	7 (17,9)	2 (11,1)	2 (15,4)	0 (0,0)	32,75	,04
A2	10 (32,3)	12 (30,8)	4 (22,2)	1 (7,7)	0 (0,0)		
B1	9 (0,29)	7 (17,9)	5 (27,8)	5 (38,5)	3 (23,1)		
B2	4 (12,9)	10 (25,6)	6 (33,3)	2 (15,4)	3 (23,1)		
C1	1 (3,2)	3 (7,7)	1 (5,6)	2 (15,4)	4 (30,8)		
C2	2 (6,5)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	1 (7,7)	3 (23,1)		
<i>Written production</i>							
A1	6 (19,4)	8 (20,5)	3 (16,7)	3 (23,1)	0 (0,0)	19,73	,23
A2	9 (0,29)	10 (25,6)	6 (33,3)	4 (30,8)	2 (15,4)		
B1	8 (25,8)	15 (38,5)	6 (33,3)	2 (15,4)	7 (53,8)		
B2	8 (25,8)	5 (12,8)	1 (5,6)	2 (15,4)	4 (30,8)		
C1	0 (0,0)	1 (2,6)	2 (11,1)	2 (15,4)	0 (0,0)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Reading comprehension</i>							
A1	2 (6,5)	4 (10,3)	1 (5,6)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	19,62	,48
A2	8 (25,8)	11 (28,2)	6 (33,3)	4 (30,8)	3 (23,1)		
B1	11 (35,5)	9 (23,1)	7 (38,9)	3 (23,1)	7 (53,8)		
B2	7 (22,6)	11 (28,2)	3 (16,7)	4 (30,8)	3 (23,1)		
C1	3 (9,7)	3 (7,7)	1 (5,6)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
C2	0 (0,0)	1 (2,6)	0 (0,0)	2 (15,4)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Oral production</i>							
A1	5 (16,1)	11 (28,2)	5 (27,8)	3 (23,1)	3 (23,1)	23,29	,27
A2	10 (32,3)	16 (0,41)	5 (27,8)	2 (15,4)	9 (69,2)		
B1	6 (19,4)	4 (10,3)	3 (16,7)	4 (30,8)	1 (7,7)		
B2	3 (9,7)	6 (15,4)	1 (5,6)	2 (15,4)	0 (0,0)		
C1	3 (9,7)	2 (5,1)	3 (16,7)	1 (7,7)	0 (0,0)		
C2	4 (12,9)	0 (0,0)	1 (5,6)	1 (7,7)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Oral comprehension</i>							
A1	7 (22,6)	6 (15,4)	4 (22,2)	4 (30,8)	2 (15,4)	13,97	,83
A2	8 (25,8)	13 (33,3)	6 (33,3)	2 (15,4)	4 (30,8)		
B1	12 (38,7)	11 (28,2)	5 (27,8)	2 (15,4)	3 (23,1)		

B2	4 (12,9)	7 (17,9)	2 (11,1)	3 (23,1)	4 (30,8)		
C1	0 (0,0)	1 (2,6)	1 (5,6)	1 (7,7)	0 (0,0)		
C2	0 (0,0)	1 (2,6)	0 (0,0)	1 (7,7)	0 (0,0)		
<i>General competence</i>							
A1	2 (6,5)	4 (10,3)	1 (5,6)	1 (7,7)	0 (0,0)	12,7	,69
A2	11 (35,5)	17 (43,6)	7 (38,9)	3 (23,1)	2 (0,1)		
B1	12 (38,7)	15 (38,5)	8 (44,4)	6 (46,2)	9 (0,8)		
B2	4 (12,9)	2 (5,1)	1 (5,6)	1 (7,7)	2 (0,1)		
C1	2 (6,5)	1 (2,6)	1 (5,6)	2 (15,4)	0 (0,0)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		

Participants who indicated having lived with English-speaking families demonstrated higher levels of English C proficiency than those who did not in grammar and vocabulary (20.6% vs. 6.5%), reading comprehension (10.3% vs. 7.3%), written production (7.4% vs. 0.0%), listening comprehension (5.9% vs. 2.2%) and general competition (7.4% vs. 2.2%), the latter being the only statistically significant difference ($p = .03$, $\chi^2 = 11.01$). As shown in Table 6, those who indicated that they had not lived with an English-speaking family obtained higher levels of English B and C proficiency than those who did in oral production (30.4% and 14.6% vs. 23.5% and 13.3%), although these differences were not significant ($p > .05$).

Table 6

Differences in English communication skills according to living or not with English-speaking families

	English-speaking family ($n = 68$)	Non-English speaking family ($n = 49$)	χ^2	p
	n (%)	n (%)		
<i>Grammar and vocabulary</i>				
A1	7 (10,3)	9 (19,6)	9,73	,08
A2	12 (17,6)	15 (32,6)		
B1	19 (27,9)	10 (21,7)		
B2	16 (23,5)	9 (19,6)		
C1	8 (11,8)	3 (6,5)		
C2	6 (8,8)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Written production</i>				
A1	11 (16,2)	9 (19,6)	7,35	,12
A2	14 (20,6)	17 (37,0)		
B1	24 (35,3)	14 (30,4)		
B2	14 (20,6)	6 (0,13)		
C1	5 (7,4)	0 (0,0)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		
<i>Reading comprehension</i>				
A1	4 (5,9)	3 (6,5)	3,53	,62

A2	15 (22,1)	17 (0,4)		
B1	23 (33,8)	14 (30,4)		
B2	19 (27,9)	9 (19,6)		
C1	5 (7,4)	2 (4,3)		
C2	2 (2,9)	1 (2,2)		
<i>Oral production</i>				
A1	14 (20,6)	13 (28,3)	3,00	,70
A2	29 (42,6)	13 (28,3)		
B1	10 (14,7)	8 (17,4)		
B2	6 (8,8)	6 (0,13)		
C1	5 (7,4)	4 (8,7)		
C2	4 (5,9)	2 (4,3)		
<i>Oral comprehension</i>				
A1	11 (16,2)	12 (26,1)	4,18	,52
A2	19 (27,9)	14 (30,4)		
B1	22 (32,4)	11 (23,9)		
B2	12 (17,6)	8 (17,4)		
C1	3 (4,4)	0 (0,0)		
C2	1 (1,5)	1 (2,2)		
<i>General competence</i>				
A1	5 (7,4)	3 (6,5)	11,01	,03
A2	16 (23,5)	24 (52,2)		
B1	36 (52,9)	14 (30,4)		
B2	6 (8,8)	4 (8,7)		
C1	5 (7,4)	1 (2,2)		
C2	0 (0,0)	0 (0,0)		

Discussion and conclusions

The objective of this research was to evaluate the communicative competencies in English of a representative sample of 114 incoming Dominican university students, using an *ad hoc* instrument based on the CEFR. The results of this study indicated that most of the sample showed intermediate English proficiency (B1 and B2) in written comprehension, general proficiency, written production, and grammar and vocabulary; and low proficiency (A1 and A2) in oral production and oral comprehension, respectively. In addition, when comparing by analysis groups, it was identified that female students obtained higher levels of proficiency in all English communicative competencies than male students, although the differences were not statistically significant.

Similarly, it was found that students over 30 years of age were the age range with the highest levels of proficiency in most of the communicative competencies in English, obtaining statistically significant differences in the mastery of grammar and vocabulary. Students with more than three years of previous training showed the highest levels in grammar and vocabulary, with a statistically significant difference. Those who indicated having lived with English-speaking family reported higher levels of English proficiency in grammar and vocabulary, written comprehension, written production, oral comprehension and general proficiency, the latter being the only significant difference.

In this vein, these findings highlight the relevance of providing initial formative accompaniment to incoming students at universities, as previously noted in the literature (Castelo et al., 2019; Figueroa, and Álvarez, 2014; Moreira-Aguayo, and Venegas-Loor, 2020; Rodríguez, 2015; Vargas et al., 2008). In general, the programs of classes in English taught to university students should recognize, as a priority, the need to intervene in the communicative competencies of oral production and comprehension in all incoming students (Moreno and Villafuerte, 2016; Romero et al., 2020). They should also focus on strengthening domains such as reading comprehension, general competence, written production, grammar and vocabulary, in that order of priority.

It is relevant that in the improvement plans of English programs in universities, specific leveling strategies are designed for male students between the ages of 21 and 30, with less than two years of previous training in English and who have not lived with an English-speaking family. Although in general not many significant differences were identified between the groups explored in this study, the analyses provide evidence that these are the student groups that may require greater accompaniment in their training plan.

Strategies for the development of communicative competencies based on the promotion of motivation, values and collaborative activities could be considered in university English programs, recognizing the leading role they have demonstrated in foreign language learning (Borja-Torresano et al., 2020; Cabrera et al., 2020; López, 2020; Luna-Hernández, 2016; Nuñez and Deulofeo, 2020). The implementation of complementary technological resources during English language instruction is especially important at the university level (Bolaños et al., 2021; García et al., 2020; Uribe et al., 2020). The results of previous studies have provided evidence of the multiple benefits of integrating virtual strategies within the training plans of university students (Bolaños et al., 2021; García et al., 2020; López, 2020).

The educational role played by university English teachers is fundamental to address the diverse needs reported in this article, as has been demonstrated in previous studies (Ching and Badilla, 2021; Gómez and Larenas, 2020; Tagle-Ochoa et al., 2020). In agreement with what was observed in this research, the classification of the communicative competencies obtained by the incoming students underlines the need for increased teaching strategies on the part of teachers and professionalization in English on the part of universities. In this sense, the contribution of educational policies that prioritize English reinforcement plans is a highly relevant support for the academic and labor insertion of university students.

The following limitations should be considered in the interpretation of these findings. First, due to the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the data for this study had to be collected using a Google online form. Connectivity difficulties and discontinuity of response time for some of the UTESA students may have interfered with their respective evaluations. Second, although simple random sampling was used in this study, no stratification criteria were defined for key comparison variables. The unbalanced distribution of the sample characteristics, therefore, may have hindered the scope of some comparisons between groups, as in the case of gender and age ranges. Third, although 28 more students were assessed than necessary to constitute a representative study sample, a larger sample size could have helped to explore more accurately the comparison between the analysis groups.

In conclusion, communicative competencies in English constitute a highly relevant training resource for the professional development of university students. This study allows us to identify intermediate levels in the English communicative

competencies of written comprehension, general competence, written production, and grammar and vocabulary. It also provides evidence of the need to strengthen the communicative competencies of oral production and comprehension as a priority in this sample. The findings of this research could contribute to the plan to strengthen English programs taught in universities. It is recommended that future studies continue to explore the baseline competencies of incoming university students, with the purpose of expanding the evidence in samples with other characteristics and to provide ongoing professionalization support in English, adjusted according to the updated CEFR criteria.

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