

REPORTS:

Dealing with Linguistic Competences at University: the Erasmus Case

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1. Introduction

This study is set within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), where competences play a key role and where, precisely, mastering a foreign language (both written and spoken) has an outstanding value in a globalized and intercultural society as the one we have nowadays.

Superior Teaching Institutions are aware of students' needs and claim for degrees which really fulfill certain studies and facilitate working anywhere in Europe. The challenges of this main change in education have been the object of several studies both in specialized literature and in documents produced by different European Organizations.

The project *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* (Gonzalez et al. 2003) is at the heart of [the Bologna - Prague - Berlin - Bergen process](#). It is one of the few projects in Europe that actually links the political objectives set in the Bologna Declaration of 1999 to the higher education sector. Tuning is a project developed by and meant for higher education institutions.

The *Tuning* project deals with some of the lines of action mentioned in Bologna and, in particular, the adoption of a degree system easily recognizable and comparable, a system based in two cycles and the establishment of ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). The Tuning project, therefore, helps reaching some other goals set in Bologna. In other

words, it aims at **defining certain points of reference for generic and specific competences of each discipline** of first and second cycle in different thematic areas, such as: business studies, educational sciences, geology, history, mathematics, physics and chemistry. Competences describe then the results of learning: what the student knows or can prove to know once the learning process is over. This applies for both specific and generic competences as communication and leadership skills (Schwalm et al 1985, Bonwell et al. 1991, Ana Finol et al. 2005).

The main features of this new educative model require the development of a professional profile (Barbara McDaniel 1994, Dudley-Evans et al. 1998, T. Orr 1999, 2001), some new roles and different activities from the traditional ones (both for students and professors).

Taking as a starting point three of the main goals set from Bologna declaration, as:

- a) **Competitivity**, or the capacity of attracting European and non European students.
- b) **Applicability**, focusing learning in what is relevant for the working world and having a clear system to certify that goals are reached.
- c) **Mobility**, both internal and external and from students, professors and administration and services staff (PAS).

A new educational system in the Higher Education Area will be sought and this system will have to deal with two main issues: on the one hand, the need to cope with a global world and on the other, the society of knowledge. Within this framework, the present paper will be focused on two main competences: oral and written expression in English language. Not to mention that we consider these two competences essential not only for professional mobility but also for the future career of our present Engineering students. Besides, the language planning of the European Union generally seems to support multilingualism while, in particular, the Erasmus programme supports English only in its practice.

2. Methodology

In the first phase of this study about the linguistic evolution of oral and written competences in English of university students nowadays we have analysed the evolution of the subject *English for International Stage*. This subject is a free election one (ALE) with a credit load of 4,5 per year and whose objective is to prepare our students for a future mobility experience abroad since they will have to attend English lessons anywhere in Europe and

once back home they will have to hand in a summary of their project/practicum to “justify” the given Erasmus scholarship. And, of course, English will be the language of such official document.

In its second phase we will examine the results obtained by our students not only in their global mark but also in their partial, taking into account their grades of written and spoken skills in English. After that, we will compare the generated data in our university context with previous courses, such as the ones taking place in the compulsory secondary education in our country both by the official compulsory assessment and PISA annual report.

3. English subjects offer in the UPC

The English Section in the UPC offers a wide range of subjects in English (S. Abad et al. 2006, B. Amante et al. 2007, d. García et al. 2007). These subjects are divided in two main approaches: on the one hand the area of ESP (*English for Specific Purposes*) and on the other, the area of STS (*Science, Technology and Society*). In this sense, ESP subjects are the ones specially designed to meet our technical students’ needs both academically and professionally, whereas STS subjects are meant to provide our students’ syllabus with a more humanistic component and the level of English required to follow the classes is the equivalent to a First Certificate of English (Cambridge) or a B1-B2 from the Common European Framework of Reference. In the next lines we describe the main objectives of the English subjects we offer at our Engineering School in Terrassa:

A. Technical Writing: our objective here is to develop written communication skills in the field of Engineering and to work on some of the documents produced in this area. The content of this subject is divided in three main sections:

- a) technical writing basis,
- b) elements of organization, language and style and
- c) types of documents.

In other words, our topics range from the different types of discourse, qualities of a good technical writing, basic elements and rhetorical approach, to text organization, register typology, punctuation rules, etc. besides from dealing with the key documents of English correspondence and technical reports.

B. Communicating in Technical English: We also enhance communication skills in English in this subject, both for our industrial and our Aeronautical Engineers and hence from a technical and professional point of view. With

this objective in mind, our students practice the four skills of a language (*speaking, writing, reading y listening*) but the emphasis in our lessons is on the oral and audio activities. It is through autonomous learning (guided homework) that our students carry out reading and writing exercises.

C. English for International Stage: This subject was implanted during the academic year 2005/2006 and because of the cooperation of the English teacher with the International Relationships Department in our School (ETSEIAT). This subject aims at reaching First Certificate level of English and is mainly designed for students who want to participate in the Sócrates/Erasmus Program. The contents are structured in five main areas and are focused on: a) revising *upper intermediate* English Grammar and introduce our students in ESP, b) developing our students' *listening* skills, c) enhancing *reading* comprehension of academic business texts d) developing and practising *speaking* and last but not least, working on the *writing* of *Academic and Business English* texts.

D. Technical English for Aeronautics: This subject was also implemented during the academic year 2005/2006 and the contents of the course aim at our students' acquisition of vocabulary and specific expressions in the field, listening and speaking practice within the technical context and reading and writing specific documents from this discipline.

Finally, we would like to point out that there are far more students interested in applying for the subjects we offer in English than the actual vacancies available and that each and every year there is a higher number of students matriculated in these ESP subjects. In other words, an average of 140 students per academic year enrol in the ESP subjects offered in the School and every year there are more students asking for finishing their studies or carrying out their final project in a foreign University. We must say that it is required to prove a First Certificate level of English Language before applying for a Sócrates /Erasmus scholarship in our School. We can confirm our students' increasing interest for a stage abroad nowadays and It is only a matter of verifying whether these students reach the required English level or not. And if not solve the matter!

4. Results

In this study we have focused on the *English for International Stage* subject which, as we have mentioned before, was implemented in our School during the academic year 2005/2006 and because of the detected need of our students to be prepared for a future stage abroad. Not to mention for their professional careers, too. In the first place, we are going to present a

classroom activity specially developed to enhance oral communication in English language

In the first place, in the following lines we are presenting an activity specially developed to enhance oral communication skills in English. In the second place, we will focus on the results obtained by our Engineering students in the subject *English for International Stage* throughout the academic years it has been taught and taking into consideration not only speaking but also writing skills.

Afterwards, we will be dealing with the specific tests students not attending the above mentioned subject have to pass in order to be eligible for a Sócrates /Erasmus scholarship to carry out a stage abroad. We will then compare the results obtained both in those specific tests and the ones in the subject *English for International Stage* to finally discuss the data generated in a study carried out within the compulsory secondary education program in our country. Being secondary school the step prior to University education, we will take the advantage of having such results to focus on the “weaker competences” secondary students seem to have and better plan and develop university activities to enhance those lower level skills detected.

Example of an activity to enhance oral communication in English

In the following section we present the outline of one of the several sessions carried out in the subject *English for International Stage*, in which oral communication is emphasized and students’ level is continuously being assessed.

Each session in the subject lasted for 2 hours and in each case the activity was divided in two parts:

1. In the first part the content of the session was explained by the professor (1h), and it included:

- The explanation of how to conduct an oral presentation in English.
- The different parts of an oral presentation (see Figure 1)
- Key words in English to describe slides and link information.
- Vocabulary used for graphics description
- Relationship between the different parts of the presentation and a written document (either a research paper or a project)

2. In the second part of the session, students developed an oral presentation in English divided in groups of 6 and following the stages explained by the professor. After that, they presented the content in front of their classmates (1h).

In this 2h session students are given the guidelines to perform a coherent presentation from a written document (being a research paper or a project or even their own curriculum vitae for a job interview in English. By making them face this type of situation beforehand, students become more aware of facts and acquire important and essential vocabulary for any international stage and even to use in their future professional careers.

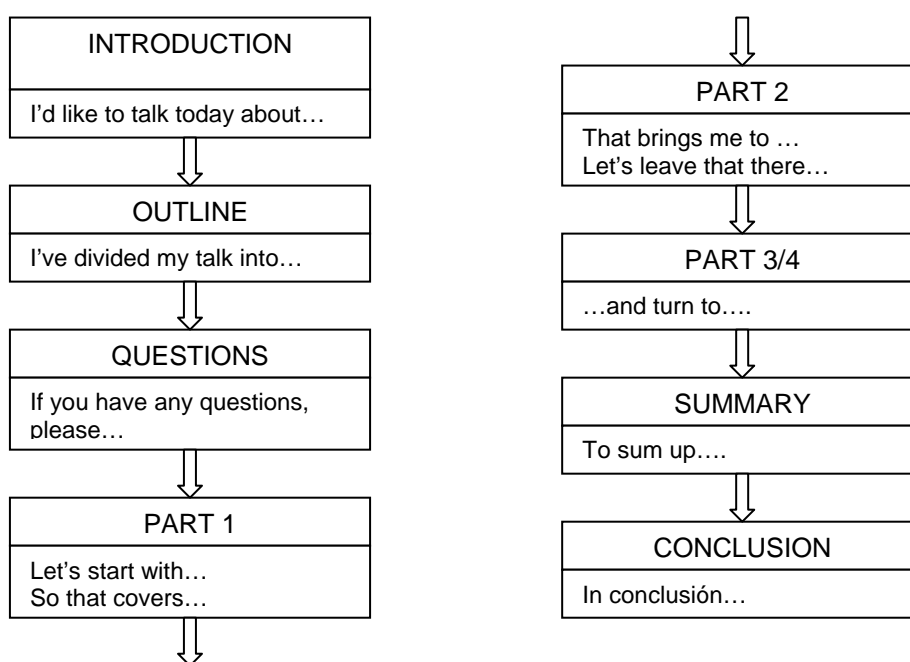


Fig. 1. The different parts of an oral presentation (Comfort 1995)

In the second part of the activity with an already chosen topic an oral presentation will be carried out and the professor will check that everything explained was fully understood. The presentation in question will be in English and in front of the classmates and the teacher. So as to help evaluating the oral presentations and the oral communication competence, in particular, students will be provided with an assessment grid to help them verify if the different parts of the presentation contain the main points explained-not only in terms of content but also in terms of behaviour facing an audience, modulating one's voice, gestures, etc. Examples of these assessment grids are in (D. García et al.2007, Cepeda).

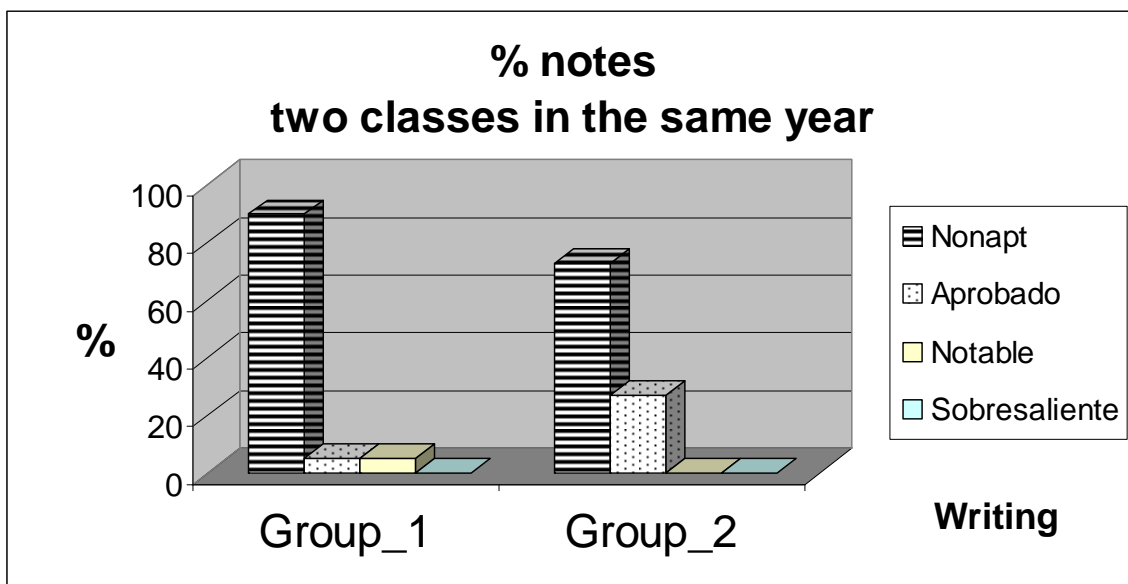
Besides from the peer-to-peer evaluation, the professor will carry out another assessment and all this procedure will provide more data to facilitate when giving feedback to students once the session is over. Not to mention students' evident implication in the evaluation system and greater cooperation among students in the learning process. Apart from this experience a wide range of activities are performed so as to assess oral and written skills throughout this subject.

Results obtained in the “*English for International Stage*” subject

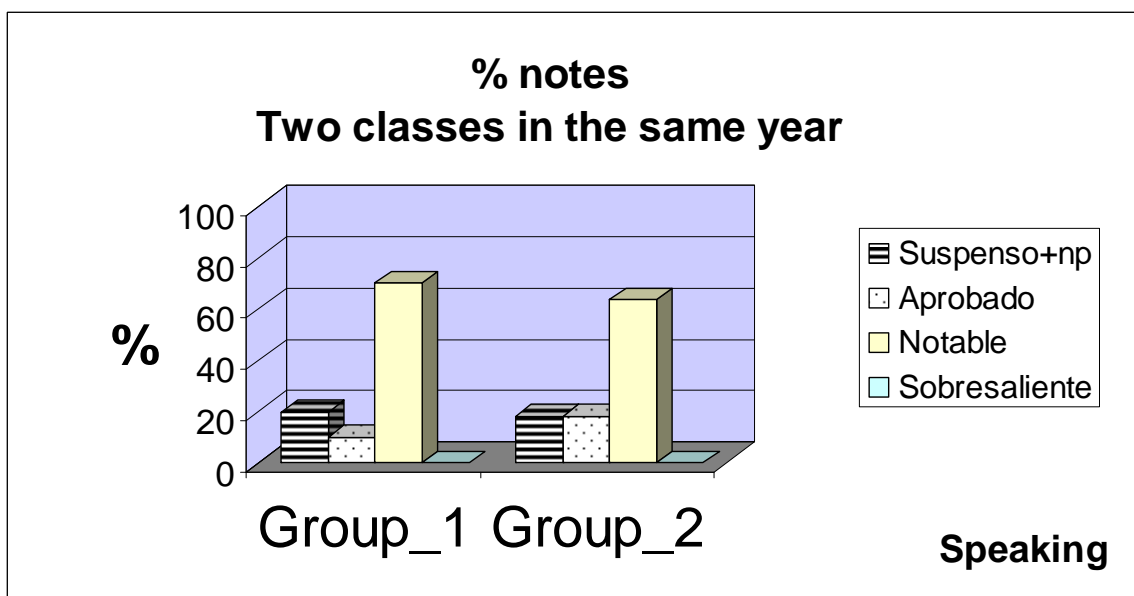
This type of subject has been very well accepted in our School. As a matter of fact, right from its first academic year 29 students matriculated in it and many of them were granted with a Sócrates /Erasmus scholarship and carried out a stage abroad. In its second year, the number of enrolments increased to 34 students and after that every year more and more students attend this subject. This causes a nowadays “overbooking”.

In this subject, as we mentioned before, we try to develop students' oral and written communication competences as much as possible as well as providing a grammar content and a general English culture framework. In order to check our student's competence level in such skills we have considered the global marks obtained. These marks are the total scores from the evaluation tests carried out in the different classroom sessions besides from the assessment the teacher carried out through several activities and individual interviews.

If we have a look at the results obtained in the subject and focus on the academic year 2005-06, in which the subject was taught to two groups simultaneously, we can observe in Figure 3a that the number of failures in *writing* is really high compared to the ones appearing in *speaking* Figure 3b. Marks that year by year (as we will see later on in this paper) will improve. It is remarkable that the results of two different groups reflect the same competence patterns. This fact makes us think that a good work on oral skills is being carried out in this subject but that more emphasis on written skills it is needed to improve students' present level.



a. Writing



b. Speaking

Fig. 3. Marks of English for International Stage (two different groups in Academic year 2005/06)

After these results, we questioned ourselves whether those patterns would be kept throughout the different courses and so we compared the average marks students obtained in the subject the following years (see Figure 4).

We must say that the evolution of students' marks in the successive years shows a decrease in higher marks (*notable*) and an increase in passing (*aprobado*) and *excellent* marks whereas the percentage of students failing the subject slightly decreases. Having a closer look at the marks taking into account the different competences studied, we can say that trends do not

vary, in other words, *speaking* marks keep on improving while *writing* results stay below the passing mark required in *English for International Stage* subject.

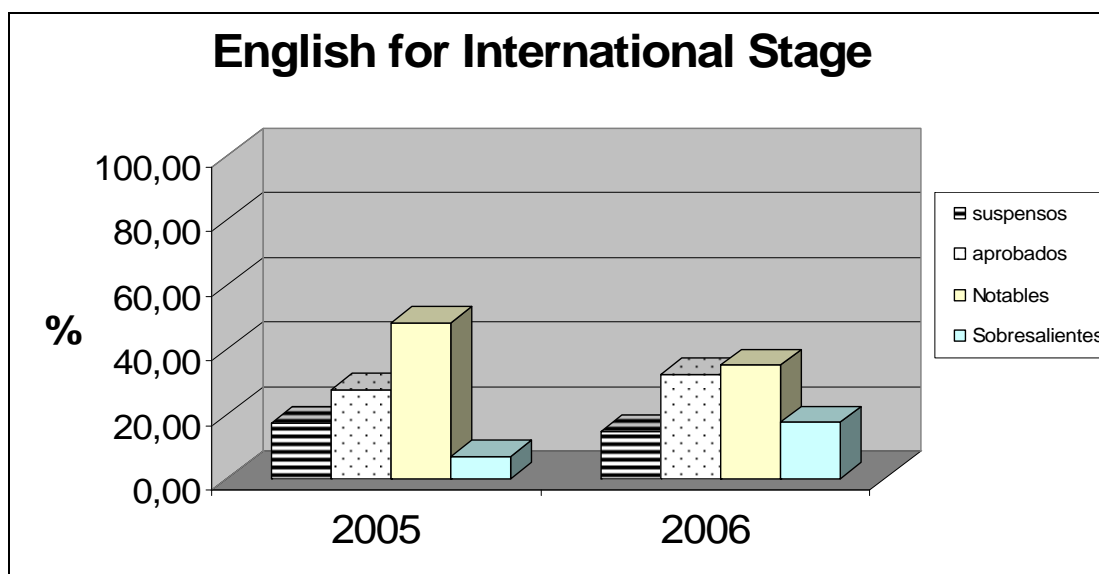


Fig. 4. Evolution of the average marks obtained in two academic years of the subject English for International Stage.

As we have previously stated, the results obtained imply a deep re-thinking from teachers' side in terms of enhancing writing and reading skills in the subject by designing and implementing new activities and exercises (inside and outside the classroom).

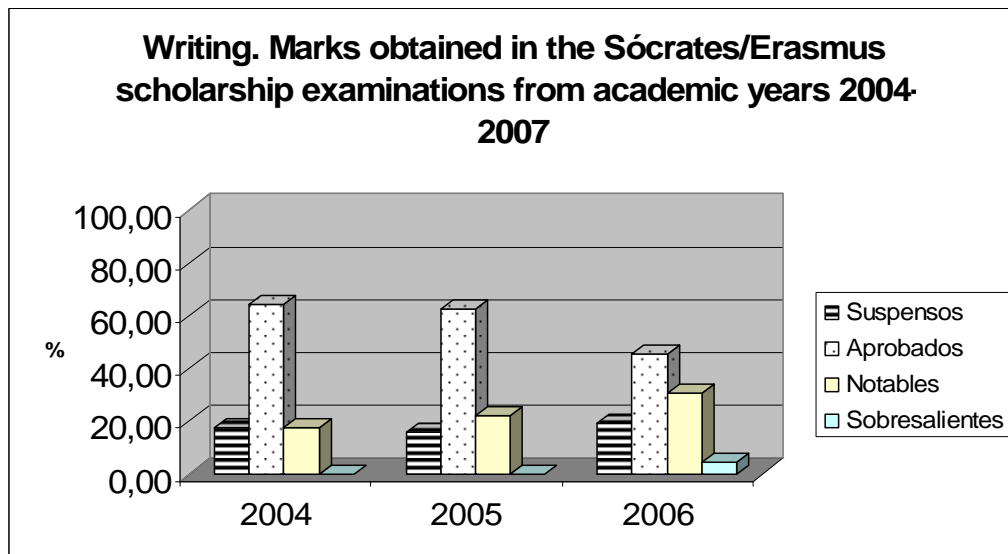
Sócrates/ Erasmus scholarship exams

For all those who have not attended *English for International Stage* subject and want to spend a term or an academic year abroad our School offers the possibility of sitting for a specific exam in English. The tests are designed so that students can show their approximate level of English grammar and written and spoken competences.

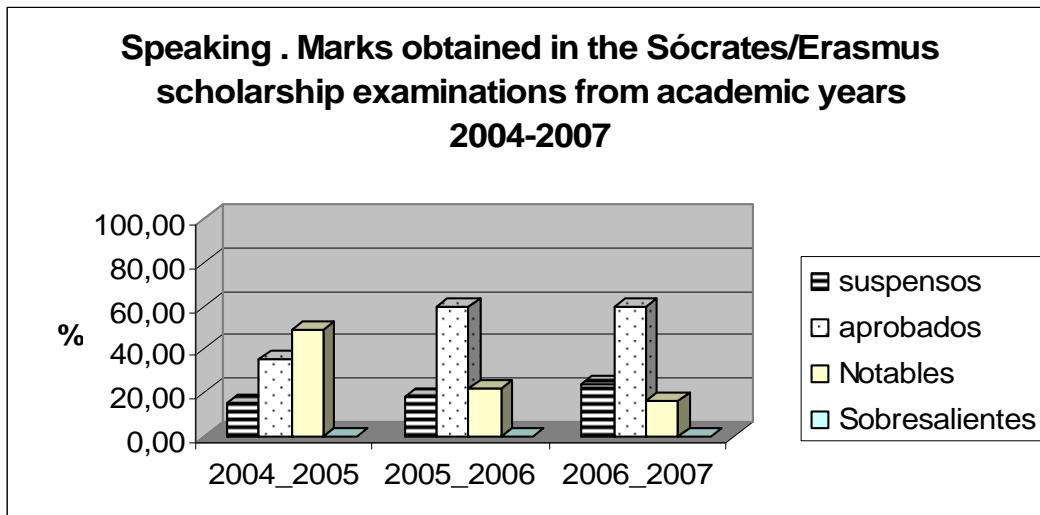
These examinations are being carried out in our school, ETSEIAT, since the academic year 2003-04 and, of course, by implementing *English for International Stage* subject we pretended to make the Sócrates /Erasmus exams disappear little by little. One of the inconveniences we found was the “overbooking” of students' enrolments in the subject and the increase of SOCRATES /ERASMUS applications in the last years. Therefore, nowadays there still exist both possibilities to accede a Sócrates /Erasmus scholarship for student's mobility: a) pass the *English for International Stage* subject or b) pass the specific oral and written examinations for Sócrates /Erasmus scholarship.

Focusing on the latter, we can distinguish three different parts:

- A.** In the first part, a student’s personal interview is carried out and the professor will assess the English oral performance level of each candidate.
- B.** In the second part, each student will write a composition in English (choosing from several topics suggested by the professor) and his/her written competence will be also assessed by the professor.
- C.** Students will have to sit for a content exam, mainly focused on specific vocabulary and grammar.



a.- Writing



b.- Speaking

Fig. 5. Marks obtained by Engineering students in the Sócrates/Erasmus scholarship examinations from academic years 2004-2007 (Parts A and B)

In figures 5 and 6 we can observe the evolution of the marks obtained by our Engineering students in the three parts of the specific oral and written

examinations for Sócrates /Erasmus scholarship from the academic year 2004 to the academic year 2007. By observing these Figures, and opposed to what had been shown in the *English for International Stage* subject, our students would seem to have improved their oral and written levels in English language although the percentage of failures is slightly higher. This pattern seems to be repeated in the content exam, where grammar and vocabulary is assessed, although in this part global results are higher and failures are less. Afterwards, we compared the number of existing applications for the Sócrates /Erasmus scholarships in the last years and the percentage of students passing the specific examinations.

As we can see in Figure 7, there is a clear trend to apply for the specific examinations to obtain a scholarship and carry out a term or an academic year abroad. Moreover, each year there are more students obtaining such scholarship although 20% of the applicants do not get it.

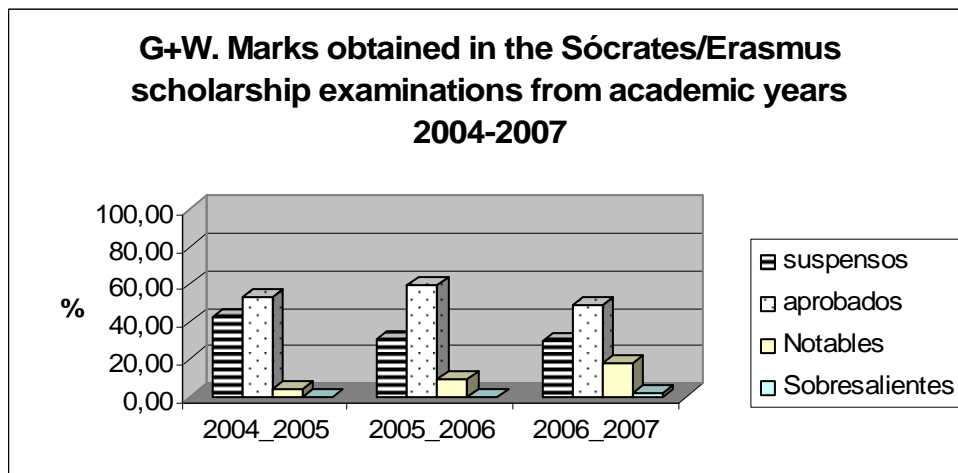


Fig. 6. Marks obtained by Engineering students in the Sócrates/Erasmus scholarship examinations from academic years 2004-2007 (Part C)

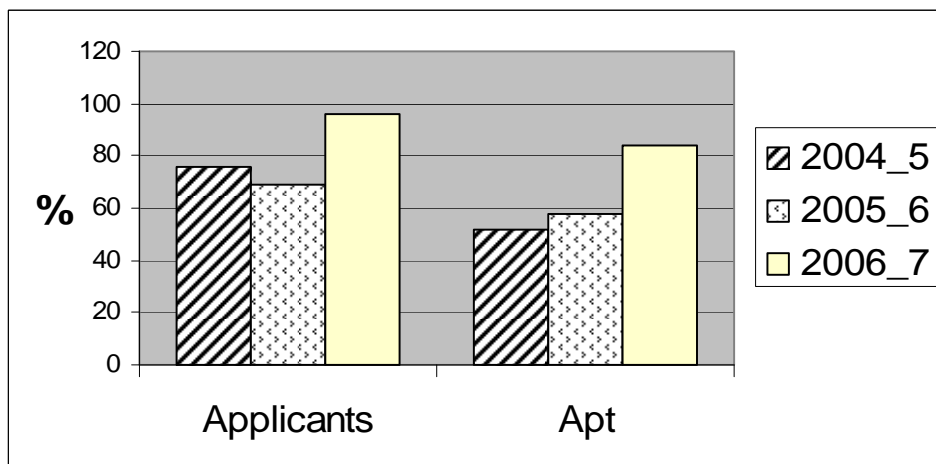


Fig. 7. Comparison of specific examinations applications (2004-2007)

These results make us realize the importance of academic mobility and the increasing interest from our Engineering students. On the other hand, we are willing to train our students the best so that they can take part in an International Stage without any problem. It is such our concern that we are already thinking about new planning strategies to improve these results and, hence, increase oral and written communication levels in English.

At this point, we have asked ourselves what the level of our students was before entering the University and, in particular, in written and oral competences in English language. Our aim is to detect “weak areas” to enhance certain skills and, thus, increase university students’ competence development in English (S. Oliver et al.2003).

Study of competence development in different languages and at pre-university level

In order to find out the competences level among primary and secondary school students a research has been carried out by the Generalitat de Catalunya (Education and Universities Department) (Generalitat 2006). This study focuses on the three languages that are taught in Catalonia throughout primary and secondary compulsory education. That is so say, Catalan, Castilian or Spanish and English as a foreign language. The period of analysis ranges from academic year 2000 until academic year 2006 and, therefore, it is a good reference for trends within this educational context. So as to develop the study students have been examined by sitting for a series of tests especially designed to provide data on written and oral competences. Later on, the results obtained by students in Catalonia have been compared to the ones obtained by students in the rest of the country (Spain) and to other European educational institutions.

The results of this study in particular show the great difficulty students face when developing written communication skills in the different languages studied and in the different educational levels (primary and secondary). This implies that although teaching quality seems to improve steadily there is always even a slightly lower level in reading and listening compared to speaking and writing abilities. As shown in the above mentioned study, this problem seems to exist in the three languages studied (Catalan, Spanish and English) not only in the foreign one as the trend is the same for all but with English having the lowest global scores (almost 50%).

If we focus on the English language and we observe the comparison between the results obtain in Catalonia and the results obtained in Spain as a whole, we can see that in both cases the written competence percentage of primary and secondary students is really low and so it is a trend that stands for all the

different state schools analysed in the study and all the languages being taught in our country.

Therefore, by comparing these results with the ones we obtained at University level we must say that there is a trend shared by the whole educational cycle nowadays and which means that all our students show a rather high difficulty acquiring grammar and developing writing skills. In this sense, the empirical studies behind the conclusions have shown that the oral usage of English is at a higher level than the written one and that means a challenge to master the language. Not to mention, the difficulties these Engineering students will face when dealing with technological documents as their interaction with their colleagues will not only imply attending conferences, visits abroad, multicultural meetings or working in a multilingual team but also being able to write research papers in their field, feasibility reports, deal with business correspondence, such as briefings or memorandums, etc. From our view, to overcome such lack of proficiency in English written competence of our present Engineers, experts in education should devote time to carefully plan and design a suitable curriculum to meet the requirements of nowadays globalized and multilingual society.

5. Conclusions

As we have already mentioned, the results we present in this paper show a mistake in our present educational system in terms of written competence in any of the languages taught in the different levels. This fact should make us rethink how competences are being developed nowadays and how to modify the way they are being dealt from early educational cycles.

As a matter of fact, at University level we face these difficulties as we have the same students coming from a poor competence level background in their previous studies and we (university professors) are the ones who have to analyse this complex issue and help them develop these communicative skills, essential for their future professional careers and the possible mobility stages abroad.

A further research would include finding out more about European trends in Education in terms of competences level and whether the new educational methodologies aiming at enhancing those competences are being applied in the different European centres and if European educational convergence will lead us to an improvement in the Spanish educational system and ,hence, modify the present trend and become real multilingual citizens.

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