Reflection: reading and writing processes in the university environment

Reflexión: los procesos de lectura y escritura en el ámbito universitario

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Abstract

This article aims to understand the structure of the SABER PRO exam in the writing and critical reading components from a psycholinguistic analysis. All this, in order to recognize the importance of cognitive processes developed by Colombian students which are presented in the test, whereby the 75% of them who have culminated their formative process in higher education must take.

Key words: critical reading, writing, SABER PRO, psycholinguistics.

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Resumen

El presente artículo tiene por objeto entender la estructura de la prueba SABER PRO en los componentes escrito y crítico lector desde un análisis psicolingüístico. Lo anterior, con el fin de reconocer la importancia de los procesos cognitivos que desarrollan los estudiantes colombianos y que se evidencian en esta prueba; la cual es presentada por todos aquellos que han culminado el 75% de su proceso formativo en la educación superior.

Palabras clave: lectura crítica, escritura, SABER PRO, psicolingüística.

Developing the ability to adequately produce oral and written texts has been a constant challenge, not only for trainee teachers and lecturers, but for all those who have begun a higher education programme. This article aims to understand the structure of the writing and critical reading components of the SABER PRO exam that are presented by university students with the intention of fishing their undergraduate studies. This analysis will aim to provide reasons for the importance of developing significant processes in the strengthening of reading and writing skills in the university context, supported by a psycholinguistic approach.

Higher education in Colombia is regulated by entities that promote equality in access to quality education; among them it is found the National Ministry of Education (MEN), which prepares the SABER PRO exams, in reading and writing as two essential components that aim to create indices for the improvement of Colombian education. Ramírez (2009) argues for "la necesidad de articular el sistema de educación media y superior con una estrategia global de competitividad para aumentar la productividad de Colombia ante el mundo" [the need to articulate the secondary and higher education system with a global strategy of competitiveness in order to increase productivity in Colombia compared to the rest of the world (own translation)] (p. 3)[1]. Reading

and writing contain social, psychological, linguistic and cultural elements, in which the student is trained to confront a society that is educated towards competitiveness.

The SABER PRO exam, in order to analyse the evaluation process of reading and writing in the university context, presents a set of generic competencies (see table 1), in which reading and writing skills are assessed in two aspects: critical reading and written communication.

Table 1. Structure of the SABER PRO exam

Test	No. of items assessed
Citizenship skills	30
Written communication	1
English	35
Critical reading	30
Quantitative reasoning	30

Source: taken from ICFES (2016d).

The following graph (see figure 1) shows that the generic competencies focused on writing and critical reading are performed well in degree programmes, such as Medicine and Humanities. On the other hand, Education, with one of the lowest averages, has a lower than the fixed average score in Critical Reading and lower than that of Health Sciences. However, in writing, the score for Agro-Livestock Sciences and Health Sciences programmes is right on the threshold of the fixed average. In this regard, it can be seen that many university

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[1]   En adelante, todas las traducciones son nuestras.

Figure 1. Averages Score-University Students
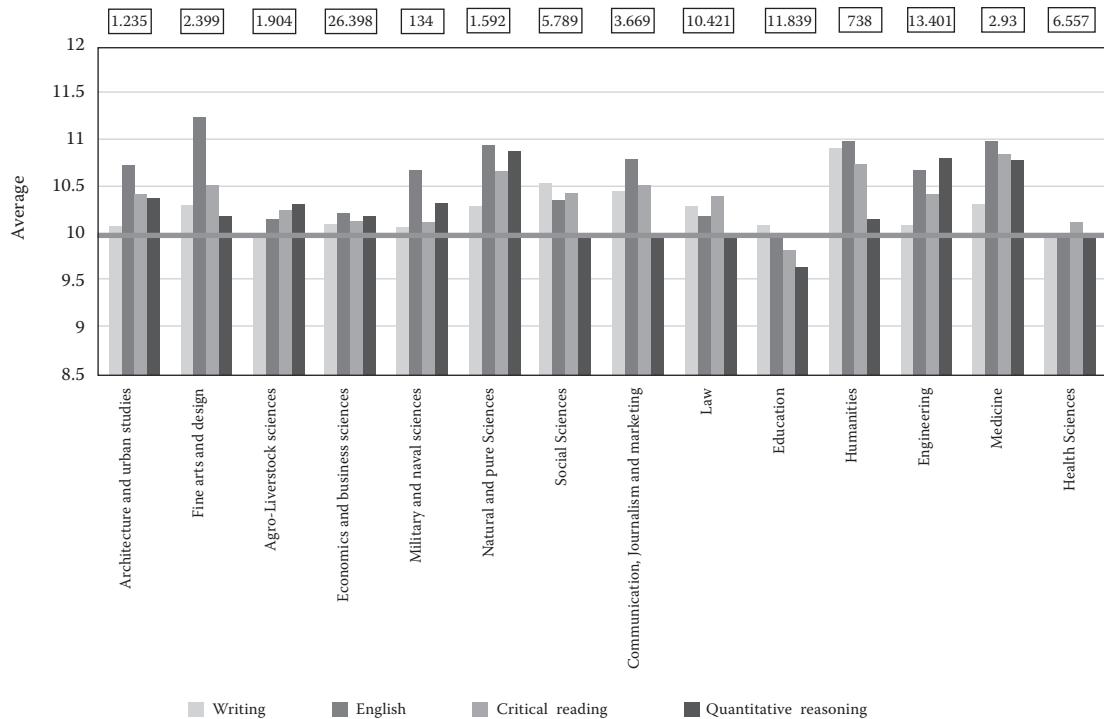
Source: taken from Ministerio de Educación Nacional (2012, p. 2)

programmes have great difficulties in achieving scores at or above the fixed average required by the exam to be considered as having passed the minimum developed competencies.

Torrado considers that the critical and purposeful competencies:

> además de ser un saber hacer, es un saber haciendo, soportado en múltiples conocimientos que vamos adquiriendo en el transcurso de la vida; es la utilización flexible e inteligente de los conocimientos que poseemos los que nos hace competentes frente a tareas específicas. En otras palabras, quien es competente lo es para una actividad determinada. [as well as being know-how, it is knowing how, supported by a wide range of knowledge bases that we acquire throughout the course of a lifetime; it is the flexible and intelligent use of the knowledge that we possess that makes us competent in

specific tasks. In other words, whoever is competent is so for a specific activity (2002, p. 19)]

Therefore, these competencies strengthen the reading and writing processes in the university context as evidenced in the results of the SABER PRO exam, given that these processes of autonomy are developed from a critical standpoint and new approaches are proposed from different perspectives.

The critical component complicates the development of the exam due to the need to generate answers in response to the reading, which in some way are subject to the abilities that the individual has been developing throughout their professional education. In critical reading, the SABER PRO exam provides 30 multiple-choice questions with only one correct answer, that are categorised according to three competencies:

(1) identificar y entender los contenidos locales que conforman un texto; (2) comprender cómo se articulan las partes de un texto para darle un sentido global; y (3) reflexionar a partir de un texto y evaluar su contenido" [(1) Identify and understand the local content that makes up a text; (2) understand how the different parts of a text are articulated in order to give it global sense; and (3) reflect on a text and evaluate its content)] (ICFES, 2016c, p. 4).

In this way, the reading is assessed using a comprehensive and reflective approach, which allows the student to create cognitive processes focused on the processing of the information from its interpretation, argumentation and purposeful critique.

Managing the three levels of reading (literal, inferential and critical) is fundamental to approach the exam with an aim to obtain a satisfactory result. However, many students present the exam with the first two levels of reading well developed, as can be observed in the figure 1, but the last reading level, which is focused on a purposeful competency that has a negative effect on the exam results. "La interpretación de los textos, el punto de vista, (…) el significado social de los géneros a los que pertenece cada texto, y ser consciente de cómo estos contenidos ideológicos se relacionan con los propios" [The interpretation of the texts, the point of view, (...) the social significance of the genres to which each text belongs, and being aware of how this ideological content is related to them (López y Martín, n.d., p. 510) will allow the student to handle with ease the elaboration of essays, scientific articles, their bachelor's thesis, among others.

Similarly, the elements that have to be considered for the assessment of the written component of the SABER PRO exam, according to ICFES (2016c), are subject, firstly, to the approach developed, which means:

> obtendrán calificaciones altas los escritos en los que el tema dado se analice desde perspectivas innovadoras, se complejicen

los planteamientos de manera efectiva y se establezca claramente a qué se hace referencia en la argumentación. Los textos cuyo contenido no sea claro, presenten ambigüedades, repeticiones innecesarias o redundancia en el planteamiento de las ideas, recibirán una calificación inferior. [those written texts that achieve the highest scores are those in which the given subject is analysed from different innovative perspectives, complex concepts are dealt with effectively and it clearly establishes what is being referred to in the argumentation. Texts whose content is not clear, which present ambiguities, unnecessary repetitions or redundancy in the proposal of ideas will receive a lower score (ICFES, 2016b, p. 4)]

Secondly, in terms of organisation, that is related to the form and structure of the text: "cuando en la escritura (…) se note que el autor pensó en cómo expresar sus ideas de manera efectiva y ordenada, siguió esquemas adecuados al tipo de tarea propuesto y definió bien los párrafos que componen el texto" [when in the writing (...) it is noted that the author thought about how to express their ideas in an effective and ordered manner, that they followed appropriate schemes for the type of task proposed and defined well the paragraphs that make up the text] (ICFES, 2016b, p. 4).

It will receive a high score; and thirdly, the expression of ideas, which makes reference to the vocabulary used, the argument and position regarding the tops, in other words, "si el texto cumple su función comunicativa: hacer una solicitud, sustentar un planteamiento, indicar cómo han de ejecutarse unas tareas, etcétera, o sea, si la redacción es socialmente efectiva" [if the text fulfils its communicative function: making a request, expressing an approach, indicating how these tasks should be performed, et cetera, or rather, if the composition is socially effective (own translation)] (ICFES, 2016b, p. 4). Furthermore, the written

communication component is justified by an individual process of elaboration on a topic in the public domain, that which is evaluated from a communicative perspective.

"La lectura y escritura son herramientas fundamentales en el aprendizaje, debido a su carácter transversal, si bien matizado por las diversas áreas de enseñanza" [Reading and writing are fundamental tools for learning, due to their transversal nature, although this is moderated according to the different areas of teaching (Fernández, *et al.*, 2011, p. 112). Therefore, the creation of strengthening processes in reading and writing in the classroom promotes the development of proposals that are centred on continuity, coherence and cohesion in the discourse, substantiation in assertions and vocabulary that allows for the understanding of ideas. This will allow the student to reflect on their learning process by analysing the results of the exam.

An important contribution to reading and writing processes is psycholinguistics, which proposes a series of processes, including: perception, memory, cognition, metacognition, abstraction, conscience, among many others. This discipline is a tool that develops and appropriates language as a single entity that reinforces the necessary oral and written skills. "En la lectoescritura, la conciencia del conocimiento psicolingüístico mediante el análisis fonológico, léxico, sintáctico y semántico, le permite al sujeto operar de manera intencional y reflexionar sobre los principios del lenguaje escrito" [In reading and writing, the awareness of psycholinguistic knowledge by means of the phonological analysis, lexicon, syntax and semantics, allows the individual to function intentionally and reflect on the principles of written language] (Montealegre and Forero, 2006). Psycholinguistic knowledge is based upon the relationship between the use of words and their meaning, the meaning given to sentences and the definition of concepts for integrating knowledge into a set of ideas.

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Metacognition allows the student to be conscious of the processes in the acquisition of knowledge. It is, therefore:

> indispensable desarrollar estrategias cognitivas que permitan a los estudiantes interactuar con distintos tipos de texto, para construir sentido a partir de conocimientos previos, e impulsar estrategias metacognitivas que los lleven a asumir el control y la regulación de sus propios procesos de lectura y escritura [crucial to develop cognitive strategies that allow students to interact with different types of text, in order to build an understanding based on prior knowledge, and promote new metacognitive strategies that allow students to take the control and regulation of their own reading and writing processes] (Camargo, Uribe & Zambrano, 2013, p. 102).

In view of the above, the learning processes of the language that are oriented from the cognitive domain encourage the student to recognise the structures of oral and written discourse in a particular context. The elaboration of written texts that demand certain requirements, such as academic and scientific texts, encourages the student to strengthen processes of memory, abstraction and learning from the design of "metodologías más efectivas para la enseñanza de la lectura o enseñanza para la comprensión" [more effective methodologies
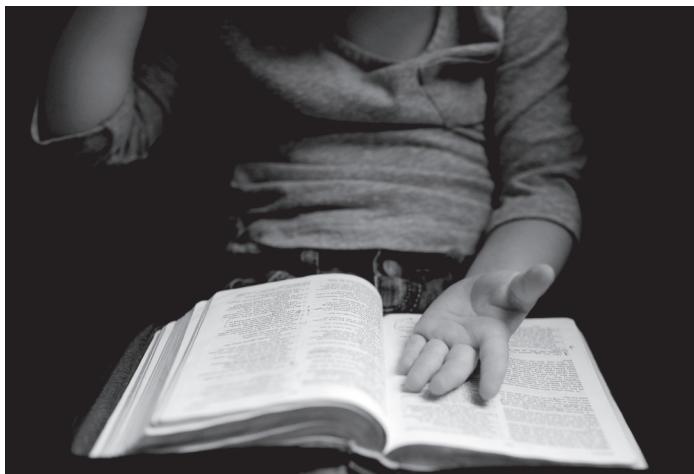
for the teaching of reading and writing for comprehension (Silva, 2005, p. 240)] in both individual and institutional education; processes that are evidenced in the results of the SABER PRO exam through the abilities of comprehension, interpretation and evaluation (ICFES, 2016b, p. 3).

The level of reading and writing that the university environment demands permeates all areas of knowledge. Therefore, the student must have the skills in the final semesters of their degree to handle processes of reflection, proposition and management of appropriate linguistic structures when it comes to reading and writing. Accordingly, "los procesos del lenguaje están directamente relacionados a nuestra capacidad lingüística y cognitiva, los cuales facilitan la producción y comprensión

de enunciados" [the processes of language are directly related to our linguistic and cognitive capacities, those which facilitate the production and comprehension of texts (own translation)] (Montealegre & Forero, 2006, p. 32). All these with the aim of presenting an academic exam, writing letters, reports, projects, analysing data, and everything that professional labour requires.

According to this, it is understood that the structure of the written and critical reading components of the SABER PRO exam, which is presented by everyone that studies an undergraduate programme, is focused on demonstrating the competences that have been developed over time, through the learning given to students by the education institute and through the autonomy of the student. Hence, the importance of re-evaluating the formative actions within educational programmes, given that the results of the exam show that the skills of writing and critical reading hardly meet the minimum average.

Psycholinguistics arises, therefore, as an alternative for mediating and facilitating the development of competences, which from students' know-how allows them to reflect on their performance and the relevancy of their education. Besides, showing quantifiable results, it invites us to recognise our use of the language in real contexts: university, exams and in our professional lives.

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