

# English Requirement for College Graduation : A Minimal Exit Level Competency ?

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## Abstract

Students should be required to meet minimum competencies before they graduate from college. The impetus for this recommendation comes from business people and educators who are concerned that too many college students are graduating without adequate competency in the basic English skills of reading, writing, and speaking. Making the decision to require minimums is a good beginning. However, what the “minimum competency” should be, how to develop and implement exit level competencies (ELC), and how to measure them are major problems.

This paper addresses the above concerns and introduces ten basic guidelines which should be adhered to in the development and implementation of the ELC. The article concludes with issues that should be resolved and gives new directions to explore.

## Introduction

In recent years two trends have been widely recognized in society. First, the business world has been dramatically internationalized, which makes it almost imperative for business people to know English as the language of world business. Second, communicative approaches have become the predominant trend in the field of EFL, and oral proficiency and communication are the principal desired outcomes of today’s English instruction.

These trends merit attention as we look to the development of large numbers of competent learners and the improvement of English teaching. Despite some struggling to improve the performance of average students in basic-skill courses and to develop more effective English teaching, the

academic study of English admittedly does not lead most students to proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking English.

Looking at some of the current realities of the English teaching scene in our university, such as the number of students who complete a junior or higher academic year English course, and the average level of competence attained in speaking, writing, or even reading, these are hardly the pride of the university. The level of competence is far inferior to that of average high school graduates.

The students must take English for four semesters in order to fill a graduation requirement, ordinarily by simply accumulating a certain number of passing credits in English, not by demonstrating proficiency in using English. Few academic English programs require their students to demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding English at a useful level even after 2 and 3 years of study. The average student is still unable to understand and speak spontaneously and fluently beyond the trivial exchanges between a teacher and the students. In general, the proficiency of the average student in the junior and senior year is far more limited. Given the time and cost for all the students, the results are notoriously low in their achieving English skills at a competent level. This is a disgrace for the university in providing the means to learn English in the conventional college setting.

Too often the public, business people, and even educators have long believed that English courses would lead to the ability to read, write, speak, and understand English, and that this outcome was achieved by most students. Some claim, however, that in fact our English courses seem to have consistently failed to produce the desired outcome for most students, and that there would probably be a decline in college English education. Some may feel that this view is excessively pessimistic.

The author believes that the average student in an English course is capable of learning in a more effective way than has been normally assumed in the conventional classroom courses, provided a student is motivated to learn and are guided by correct principles and standards. Significant acceleration of English learning for the average student can be done through development and implementation of some form of ELC which is now generally absent in the academic learning environment.

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It is considered particularly important to develop ELC for graduation which enable students to attain more academic basic skills in order to pursue further study. To reach this goal is the subject of this article.

### What is Minimal Exit Level Competency ?

Basically, ELC is defined as a list of skills that students should master by the time they leave school. Mastery of these skills is a prerequisite for graduation in the academic situation. The idea toward requiring skill mastery for graduation is a change from the past when completion of a certain number of courses has been the simple requirement in the conventional college education. Essentially, now the college must be held responsible not only for what is taught but also for what is learned. This will encourage the public, as well as educators, to believe that college English courses can lead to the ability to speak, read, write, and understand English. Among educators who advocate developing ELC for graduation, there is a growing awareness in the English teaching profession that change is inevitable for the more innovative, effective practices of English teaching and learning than the current ones.

In the United States there is considerable variation in the forms that ELC take. According to a survey developed by Educational Testing Service, over half the states have required or have been in the process of developing some form of ELC. For instance, ELC is defined simply as a list of functional basic literacy skills. They are also defined in the terms of a grade level designation. Students who have achieved certain grade level competencies on standardized tests, have thus achieved competence. Teachers have mandates to the effect, therefore, that every student will be reading, writing, and speaking at the level equal to his/her grade by graduation.

Very few schools at present have the materials to evaluate these functional competencies, although a number of instruments are available to measure ELC. A comprehensive description and an evaluation of many of these are developed and published by reading associations, educational laboratories, and university research institutes.

### Why the Emphasis on Exit Level Competency ?

Many trends and events seem to have contributed to the emphasis on ELC. There has long been a great deal of publicity generated about the supposed deficiencies on English education of the student population.

In an analysis of the results of the entrance examination made by the author, it was found that approximately 27% of the 601 freshmen currently enrolled in his university could be labeled functionally deficient in reading, writing, and understanding English. It was ascertained that more than 33% sophomores of this year were supposed to be labeled 'underachievers'. They cannot cope with the demands of the course since they felt forced into choosing an English course. They do not see the relevance of English to their everyday lives in a current society. They show a lack of interest in whichever course they are placed into. English is no longer a priority. Although the validity of these is not satisfactory, they have nevertheless received a great deal of publicity in the public as well as educational communities.

Negative publicity about universities and learning, however, is not the only cause of the demand for ELC. Recent rapid change in Japanese society has served to emphasize the overwhelming need for an adequate level of English education in order for people to function effectively. Increases in global exchanges of economy, technology, and culture have demanded that workers at their jobs possess skills in reading, writing, speaking, and understanding English. The general expectation is that students should graduate with the English competency necessary for adult success in an international society. 'Success' should mean more than 'survival'. It should not mean so minimal a degree of competence that a student's need for college education could be questioned.

On the educational scene, emphasis on career education has recently served to point out that universities are responsible not only for providing the prerequisite for further education but also for providing some students with a marketable career.

The author concludes here that a practical and realistic criterion would be requiring graduating students to have English comprehension

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adequate for successful employment at the entry level of certain jobs. It should also allow for future success for some personal purpose where a certain amount of English comprehension is required.

### How the Test is Developed

The way in which ELC is implemented and mandated varies from school to school. In any case, most universities are vitally concerned. Doubt over the validity and reliability of the tests can lead to the teaching of the tests, a lack of concern for individual's differences, an overemphasis on those students who have trouble attaining a minimal level of competence, statistical results to be analyzed to determine the 'passing' score a student had to learn to show he/she had met the criterion for graduation. Although the value of ELC is questioned, it is clear that it represents an educational phenomenon that can not be ignored. It must be a reality, and universities and educators must concentrate their energies on developing and carrying ELC out in the best possible manner.

As Morrow (1979) stresses, the use of the language to read, write, speak or listen in ways and contexts should correspond to real life. A language test should aim to measure what students can actually do with a language rather than what they know about the language. Therefore, the language test should be criterion-referenced against actual language performance.

Criterion-referenced tests of competency-based instruction which compare student's performance to a standard of performance, rather than to the performance of other students, requires students to demonstrate mastery of certain knowledge, skills, and abilities deemed important to their educational experience. It emphasizes student's individual mastery of each competency in terms of specifically stated criteria. Thus criterion-based tests indicate whether students meet the competencies at a uniform level. The author believes that criterion-based testing is effective and essential to assessment of ELC for graduation.

Specific evaluation criteria will vary with the English program and setting. The following list of statements suggests factors that should be considered in achieving ELC.

1. Students should be guided to a concept of English as being alive, interesting, and functional.
2. The importance of oral skills development should be recognized as the basis for human relationship.
3. A continuum of learning should be provided so that students can progress at their own rates.
4. Opportunities for developing competency in both receptive and expressive skills should be provided.
5. Students' strengths and weaknesses should be continually evaluated.
6. There should be many opportunities to practice use of English in practical situations.
7. Students' thinking should be stimulated and creative uses of English should be fostered.
8. Enjoyment and appreciation of English should be fostered.
9. The needs of student at various levels of development should be adequate to meet.

Evaluation of the English program is essential for effective teaching and learning. Such assessment depends on clearly identified criteria. Aspects of the program that ought to be considered include the achievement of major goals and objectives; teaching effectiveness; and the adequacy and use of resources, both material and human.

#### Basic Guidelines in Developing and Implementing Exit Level Competency

The following guidelines do provide some basic standards in the development and implementation of ELC.

1. Adoption of Multilevel Competencies. Competencies should be developed at more than just minimum competencies. Some form of competency should be developed at the primary and intermediate, or junior, sophomore and senior year levels. The author considers it unfair for students to complete most of their schooling and then be judged incomplete.

2. Consideration of Retention Process. If students fail to achieve competency, they should be given further instruction for promotion.

3. Adequate Remediation. Any student should not fail in any attempt to make the educational system accountable. Benjamin Bloom (1976) acknowledges that in order for mastery to take place, some form of extra-class instruction is usually needed for further success.

4. Flexibility of Time. Students should be given further opportunities even though they do not achieve competence on the first trial. Time, instruction, and reinforcement are all variable which influence mastery.

5. Focus on Basic Level Skills. Competencies should be focused on basic level skills necessary for every student to achieve.

6. Certificates of Competence. Students should receive a certificate of competence delineating the specific skills they have mastered. Students who have mastered all the specific skills should be awarded a general certificate of competence.

7. Adequate Assessment Instruments. Attempts should be made to develop and utilize valid and reliable assessment instruments.

8. Uniformity of Standards. Competencies should have some degree of uniformity from course to course, department to department, or college to college.

9. Dissemination of Standards. Competencies and means to teach these competencies should be disseminated to all teachers. Students should be aware of exactly what the basic competencies are.

10. Relevance and Validity. Competencies that are developed should be relevant to functioning under the conditions of our current society. Understanding and communicating in English are more relevant than knowing the grammar rules.

### Conclusion

A well-developed ELC gives direction to teaching and learning. Such a statement suggests the need for long-range planning to identify goals that students should be expected to achieve. It involves identifying the basic component skills, abilities, and attitudes that make achievement of the goals possible. Once ELC has been established, English educators have a clear view of what students need to do to learn and can set about

planning developmental learning activities. How well students learn is governed by natural principles of learning. Among these are: (1) students learn in different ways and at different rates; (2) learning is developmental; (3) learning is more efficient when it is meaningful; (4) motivation affects how well students learn; and (5) to be retained, learning must be reinforced. ELC which is purposeful and challenging can be an effective practice for implementing these principles and maximizing language development of our students. The author believes that emphasis on ELC development is essential to any reformed curriculum of our university English program.

#### References

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