TO ACCEPT, OR NOT TO ACCEPT: PREREQUISITES TO ENSURE QUALITY TEACHER TRAINING

EKATERINA SHCHAVELEVA[1]

Abstract

The research focuses on the problem of acceptability of applicants with the minimal level of the Unified State Exam (the USE) to teacher training programs, and coinage of language teachers with under-developed language competency, the latter being fated to turn insufficient for preparing school students for the USE. In the article the author answers the following two research questions: what level of language competency should be demonstrated by a teacher who works in a Russian regular secondary school; what the initial level of language mastery of applicants of teacher training programmes, measured with the USE and demonstrated with its results, would be adequate for them to be academically and linguistically agile for passing the exam which is known as the Certificate in Advanced English (CAE). The methods of the research included the content analysis of official documents regulating the requirements towards teacher competency and examination procedures and assessment; longitudinal observations on language competency development (330 students were observed throughout six years); comparative analysis of examination results. The outcomes of this research may be of high value to teacher training institutions in terms of the determination of categories of programme applicants who have stronger or weaker chances to graduate as competent (job market relevant) teachers.

Key Words: teacher training programme, language competency, English language teacher, Unified State Examination, CAE, quality of teaching

According to the current educational policy, the government implements new projects to enhance the quality of teaching, which presumes a certain quality level of teachers. Though Professional Standards (The portal of Federal State Educational Standards of Higher Education, 2018a, 2018b), describe a whole list of competencies a qualified teacher should possess, subject knowledge plays a minor part in it; the government emphasizes that any teacher whose subject competency is low-levelled cannot be considered to be good. The National System of Teachers' Growth, the latest project commissioned by the government (Muzaev, 2018), also defines the subject competency as one of the four competencies that compose the professional competency of a teacher.

Furthermore, *Rosobrnadzor* (Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science) conducted a test to check the level of subject competency of 20 000 teachers of certain subjects in 67 regions of the Russian Federation (The Federal Portal *Russian Education*, 2018). It was held on a voluntary basis – i.e. teachers could opt out of participation – but nevertheless the results showed insufficiency of teachers' knowledge of the subject they teach. Although the Ministry of Education questioned (The official site of *RIA Novosti,* 2018) the relevance of the test and it did not encompass all subjects, it is evident that subject competency is a key issue that concerns all stakeholders of the educational process.

If the subject competency of language teachers is scrutinized, language competency can easily be assessed if the CEFR-based test is offered.

According to Cambridge English Teaching Framework (2014), there are four levels, or categories, of professional competency of a language teacher, which correlates with CEFR in terms of language ability. This document provides experts with a full list of descriptors within various aspects of the teaching profession in relation to the given categories, including language ability (Table 1).

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[1] National University of Science and Technology 'MISIS', (Russia), *e.shchaveleva@gmail.com*

*Table 1. Categories of Teachers and Relevant Language Ability*

Categories of Teachers	Language ability (CEFR level)
Foundation	At least A2
Developing	At least B1
Proficiency	At least B2
Expert	At least C1

It is obvious that language teachers in the Foundation category demonstrate at least A2 level. This contradicts the fact that most teacher refresher programmes including Cambridge Professional Development Qualifications (Cambridge Assessment International Education, 2018), require applicants to achieve B2 as the minimum level of language competency, while at the same time the expectation for the CELTA course is C1-C2. Noteworthy, there are no clear explanations or reasons why such high levels of language competency are established as a threshold, assumptions seem relevant that written assignments, compulsory to complete the course, require English proficiency.

International language schools normally require CELTA as an admission, consequently language teachers applying for a job with them need to prove C1 as a minimal level of language ability. This raises the first research question: what level of language competency should be required of teachers who work in Russian regular secondary schools?

Looking into the issue of final outcomes of language education programmes for schools, B2 is to be attained: according to the documents (Specification of Assessment Materials for Unified State Examination in Foreign Languages, 2013), this is established as the highest result in the Unified State Examination (the USE). Subsequently, B2 is insufficient for teachers who prepare their students for the USE, and it is presumably C1 that most likely will guarantee the expected student performance on the national school exit exam. There is strong logical background to believe that low-level teachers breed low-level students and thus it becomes a perpetual loop if the latter opt for teaching as their future job (Fig.1.)

Fig.1. The Loop of Poor Teacher Breeding
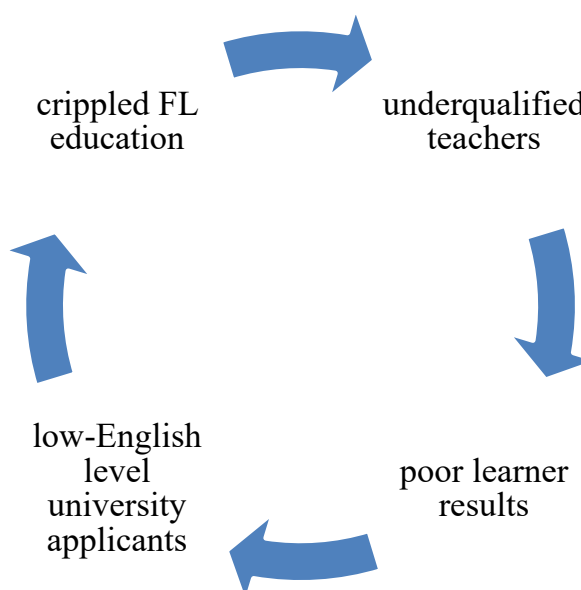
Consequently, the teacher language competency herein should read as Expert level in terms of the language ability characterized in the Cambridge English Teaching Framework [6].

MISIS programme administrators hypothesised that teachers should possess a higher level than he/she prepares his/her students for. Thus, the developers of the teacher training programs should take into consideration that graduates' language competency needs to be at least at the C1 level if the Ministry intends to secure the university graduate's proficiency in the linguistic component of secondary education. Otherwise the insufficient linguistic capability of language teachers may cause some deficiencies during their in-service period. Moreover, if graduates' employability is an issue, this level will be sufficient for securing jobs for young teachers with international language schools.

The Linguistic Bachelor Programme which is offered by the National University of Science and Technology 'MISIS' (NUST 'MISIS) aims to train future teachers, translators and interpreters. Since launching the programme in 2011, administrators have been promoting the ideal that all graduates should be advanced users of the language in relation to CEFR and demonstrate high-level language competency at the pre-service stage of their professional development. The curriculum is designed so that all students can sit the mock CAE exam by the end of their second year. As English is a medium of instruction throughout junior and undergraduate courses, C1 level is expected.

Experience shows that not all linguistic programme students are capable of passing CAE, although all of them are to demonstrate a sound linguistic background as they have successfully passed the USE. Therefore, the second research question that the author poses in the article relates to the initial level of language mastery of MISIS linguistic programme applicants, measured with the USE and demonstrated with its results, which would be adequate for them to be academically and linguistically capable of passing CAE.

Though the USE is declared to be CEFR-based and B2-targeted, the Project documents on the USE development do not stipulate on the scale for converting the final results of the USE into CEFR levels (Specification of Assessment Materials for Unified State Examination in Foreign Languages, 2013). Hence, it is highly challenging to identify the initial level of applicants against the CEFR-scale. It hinders the perception of the baseline of the students' linguistic background in relation to CEFR.

Conversely, CAE as a Cambridge examination is CEFR-based with clear indicators of passing, i.e. 60% on average of its four parts (Reading and Use of English, Listening, Writing, Speaking). Candidates whose percentage ranges from 60 to 74 are awarded grade C; if their performance is between 75 and 84 they are given grade B; 85% or more provides the student with grade A and entitles them to a C2-level certificate.

The longitudinal research in question was conducted at NUST 'MISIS' between 2011 and 2018, and included six groups with a total of 330 students. The research method employed was a comparative analysis of the students' English language mastery level when entering the Programme (the USE performance) and their CAE results they demonstrated after two years of training. Notably, only 236 students managed to cope with the pace of the Programme and passed through the complete research (training) procedure.

Fig.2. depicts the average data of the initial the USE level of the students and their CAE results. The figure shows that in different years the average result in the USE ranged from 75.5 to 83.7 (upper line). Hypothetically, it affected the final result of the average CAE of the same group (the lower line). The group who demonstrated the highest outcomes in the USE (in 2013) also performed best in CAE. Before 2015, a better consistency of the USE and CAE can be observed. In 2015 when Cambridge amended the format of the examination and it became more challenging, we registered the discrepancy between the USE and the CAE outcomes, which suggests the feasible hypothesis that this associates with the faults of the USE scaling.

Fig.2. Correlation between the USE and the CAE results.
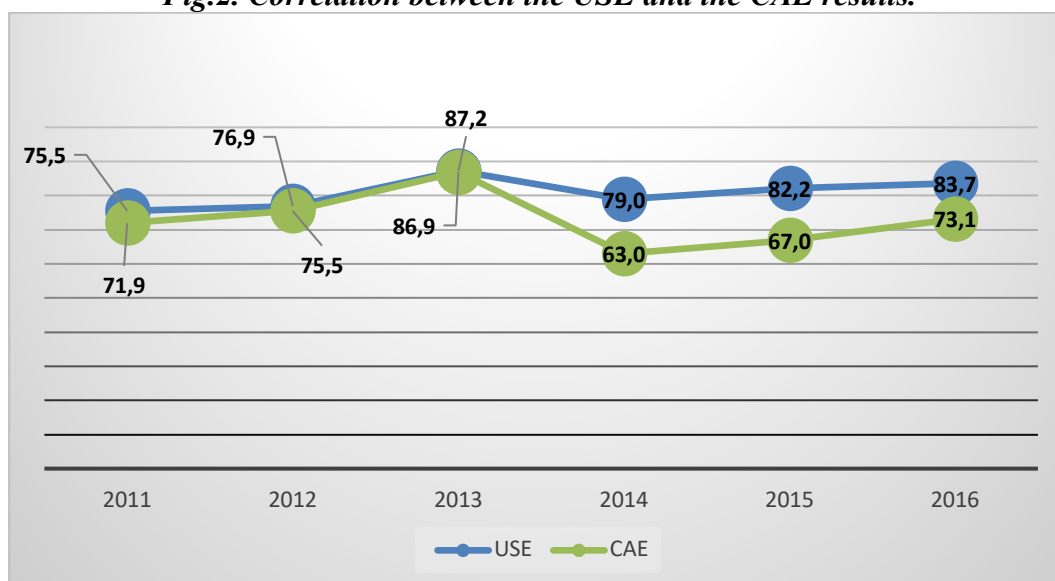
We also examined the range of the initial the USE-levels (in ranges of tens) and the performance of relevant students in CAE across the whole period of the research. Figure 3 visualizes the positive correlation between the two variables.

Fig.3. Correlation between the USE ranges and the CAE results.
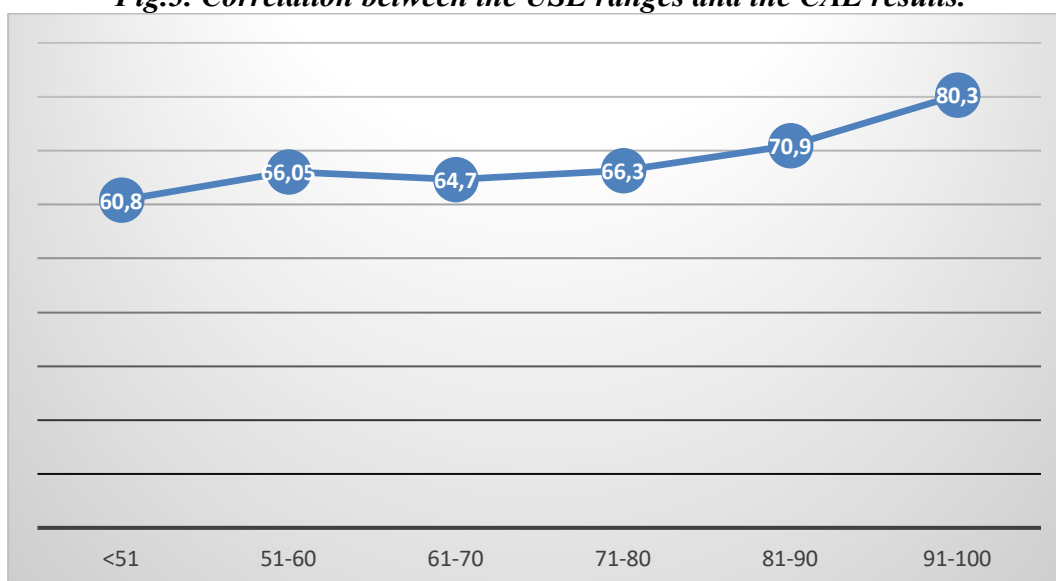
Students who passed the USE with lower than 50 points barely passed CAE and showed low results, while those, whose the USE was high (i.e. 91-100 points) in terms of potential C2 achievement, would, on the average, underscore in CAE to attain the C2-transfer level.

Fig.4. The correlation between the percentile of the CAE-passers and their USE-levels.
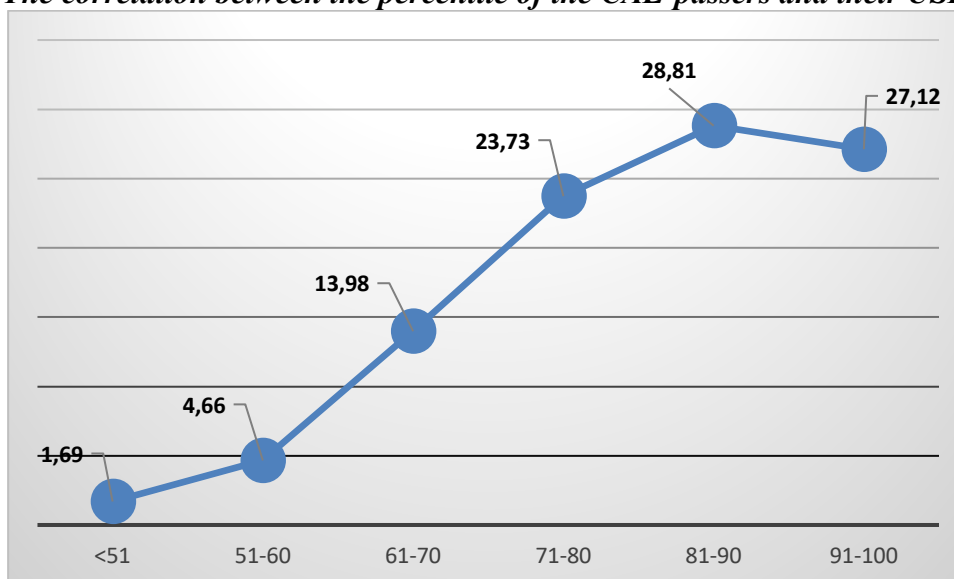

Figure 4 shows that only 1.69% of all the CAE-passers featured less than 50 points in the USE, which is probably associated with their success throughout their schooling. Thus, there is a trend of progression observed here (with some statistical deviation at the point of the USE range of 91-100).

Fig.5. Correlation between the CAE grades and background the USE points
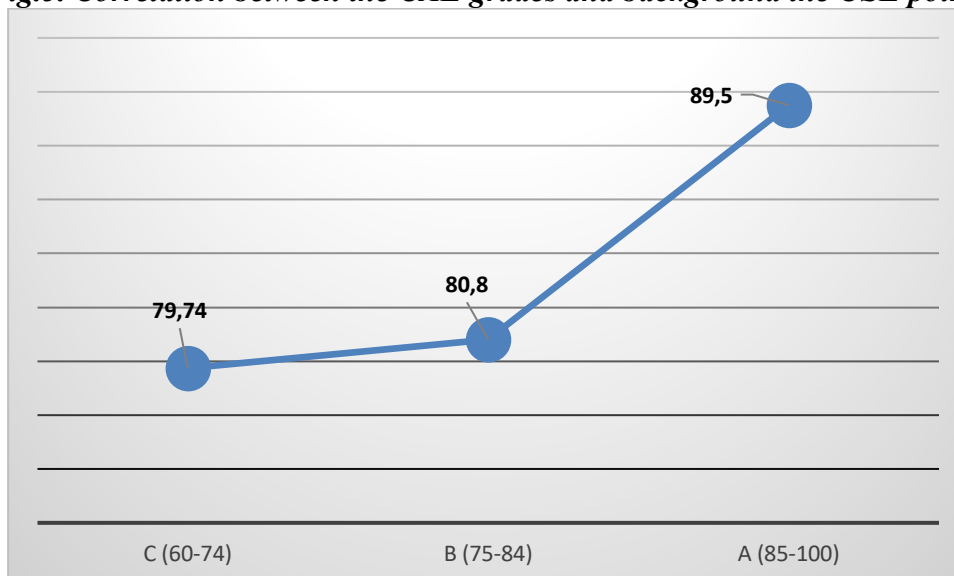

Figure 5 illustrates the correlation between grades that were awarded to candidates in CAE and those candidates' background the USE achievements. Figure 5 also implicitly demonstrates that those Programme applicants whose level neared 80 points in the USE have stronger chances to pass CAE. Thus, those who scored less than 80 appear to be weaker Programme candidates and feature less chances to become professional English teachers with the expected level of language mastery.

Within the first two years of the Programme a certain drop-off rate was observed (shown in Fig 6).

Fig.6. Drop-off rate from the Programme
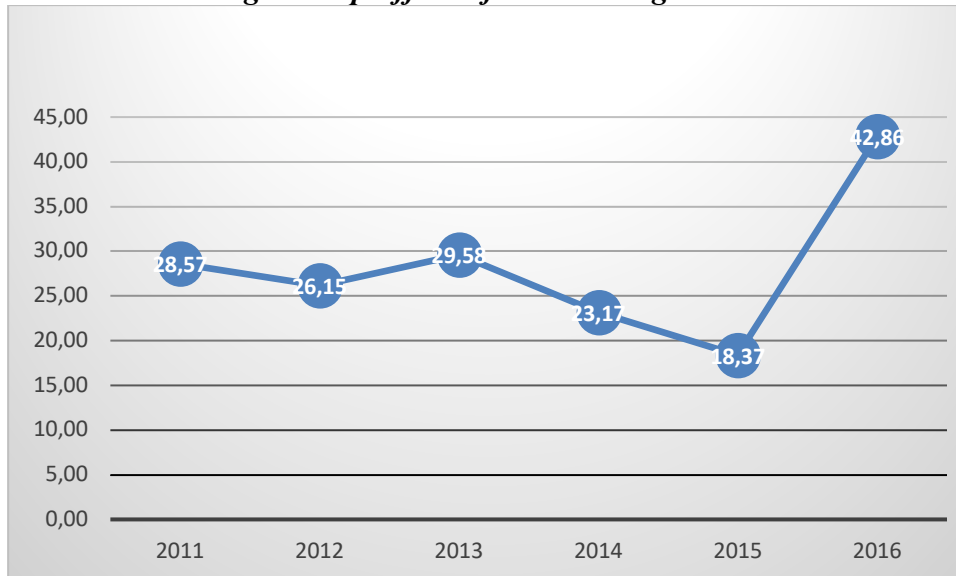
The average drop-off rate throughout the considered period amounted to 28.12%. This may have been triggered by a number of reasons:

- insufficient level of pre-entry language competency;
- advanced pace of the Programme;
- opting out of linguistics as a subject field and career path;
- personal reasons (e.g. financial problems of tuition-paying students or leaving the city).

Our university experience indicates that the first two reasons appear to be the primary ones.

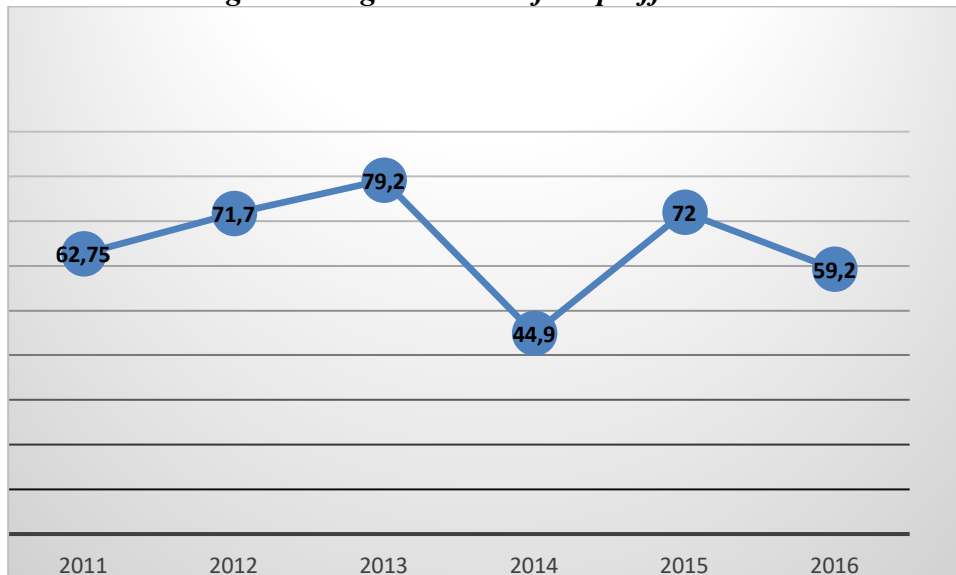*Fig.7. Average the USE of drop-off students*

Figure 7 illustrates that the year-average the USE of those who did not cope with the Programme ranges between 44.9 and 79.2, though there is a clear tendency that those are the USE low-graders who would normally drop-off.

The average the USE results of the drop-off students for the whole research period is estimated to be 64.96. This can be nailed down to several reasons:

- this result is not sufficient for taking CAE, which is pinpointed by the previous findings that showed that on average around 80 points gained in the USE lead to successful results of CAE;

- the USE does not always give an accurate picture of the language competency of a Programme applicant;
- some situational reasons should also be taken into consideration.

Summarizing the research outcomes, it is reasonable to conclude that those who are admitted with low the USE levels do not achieve the required English language mastery to cope with the Programme, attain the profession-expected C1 level (tested with CAE as diagnostic procedure). Thus, those the USE low-graders have poor background and are highly unlikely to complete the course and subsequently be able to prepare their potential secondary school learners for passing the USE successfully.

The results of the research have soundly proved that tangible teacher-training results can be attained by those who enter the Programme with the optimal minimum the USE score of 80. So school administrators should prioritize those applicants who demonstrate 80-plus points. Others have to persevere to endure the Programme.

To meet the requirements, curriculum design may encounter some challenges: (1) teacher-training programme is to be based on C1-relevant materials to guarantee job-relevant student' outcomes; (2) mock CAE should be introduced as a language competency measuring instrument; (3) assessment procedures and rating systems should be designed in concordance with CAE. As a subsequent recommendation, universities need to be empowered to fail and expel the students who underperform in CAE.

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