

THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE SUCCESS IN ENGLISH PROFICIENCY EXAMS AND POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE INTERNET

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1. INTRODUCTION

All developing nations are aware of the fact that learning a foreign language is of vital importance in order to adopt the latest scientific and technological innovations in the word; and are determined to establish a system in which while evaluating the human resources available in their countries, those who have a good command a foreign language have great advantage over the ones who do not.

Undoubtedly, English has become a world language rather than the language of only the English speaking countries such as the UK and the USA because the number of the people who use English as a means of communication exceeds much more than the number of the people who speak it as their mother tongue. Hence, in Turkey generally, English is used as a common foreign language to contact the people in other countries, and thousands of people belonging to various professional groups are going abroad (either with the support of some institutions or not) or learning English in some language courses in Turkey. Moreover, most academicians prefer small private groups aiming at preparing for such specific proficiency exams as KPDS and UDS. When the number of the people who need to learn English to take these exams are considered, it is safe to infer that it is quite wise to develop certain strategies in designing some specific proficiency exam-based English courses.

In all foreign language teaching methods and techniques, in the language teaching process, it is aimed to have a special focus on the language skills that the learners especially need in the use of that particular language. For instance, if the objective of the programme is to develop the speaking skill of the learner, in the language teaching process, listening and speaking activities are highlighted and there is a special emphasis on the pronunciation and the vocabulary rather than the grammatical structures of the target language. Similarly, the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe (2001) has introduced certain language indicators for certain language skills and each language user is expected to be both autonomous in the language learning process and to have the facilities for self assessment. In this case, it is believed that the needs of each learner can be satisfied, and thus learning the target language can be facilitated (Benson, 2001:51; Camilleri, 1998:94).

In the commercial proficiency exams such as FCE, CAE, IELTS and TOEFL language skills are assessed, there are such parts as sentence completion, paragraph development and reading texts. Likewise, in the standard proficieny exams for academic and military promotion in Turkey such as KPDS and UDS there are different parts and their objectives can be illustrated as in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Different Parts of the UDS and KPDS Tests*

PARTS OF THE TESTS	OBJECTIVES (The objective of this part is to assess the language users'....)
Filling in the blanks in a sentence	vocabulary and grammar knowledge.
Sentence completion	writing skill (at the sentence level) .
Translation	transferring skill from and to the target language.
Paragraph completion	writing skill (at the paragraph level) .
Finding the irrelevant statement in a paragraph	writing skill (at the paragraph level) .
Finding the correct statement according to a given situation	speaking skill.
Dialogue completion	speaking skill.
Finding the paraphrasing statement	transferring skill (within the target language) .
Finding the correct answers based on a reading text	reading skill.

***Adapted from Mirici (2002)**

It is a general handicap that language users do not know how to prepare for proficiency exams, and they may be misguided by some inexperienced teachers or other exam takers concerning the method they have to follow to be successful in the tests. For example, while some are aware of the fact that they have to have at least an intermediate-level base before taking the exams; others assume that just developing grammar and vocabulary knowledge is enough to succeed the tests. Furthermore, there are some others who claim that learning some basic test techniques might be enough to make the enough score in the exams. Hence, it can be inferred that the languages users who intend to take proficiency exams are in need of true consultancy in the preparation process. Such a consultancy can possibly be provided via internet, which is the most common and economic means of communication for educational purposes (Kaya, 2002: 224). Almost every academician has a computer and an e-mail address either in their house or in their office (or both) so using internet can be considered as a functional preparation method for language proficiency exams just like its other use for other distant educational purposes. In such a distant educational system the academicians or military staff can be informed about the parts of the language proficiency tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, KPDS and UDS, and about their objectives in terms of the assessment of the language proficiency. In addition, these people can be provided with some self-assessment grids in order to awaken self-awareness, which leads to establish certain personal strategies in the process similar to those in the European Language Portfolio (CoE, 2001).

These objectives of the test items can be given either under the title of "Different Parts of the Exam" such as sentence completion, paragraph development, dialogue completion and reading texts or as "Different Language Skills Tested in the Exams". In this way the language users find the opportunity to observe their language level, to be aware of their needs and to prepare for the proficiency exams with authentic materials, as well.

2. PROBLEM

All academicians, state employees and military officers in Turkey who would like to obtain the chance for promotion have to overcome the initial obstacle, which is the language test. Hence, thousands of language users take one of the standard language tests every year. These include UDS, KPDS, TOEFL and IELTS. Most of these people, especially those who serve in the rural parts of the country, complain that although they have been studying the foreign language for a long time, they cannot get the adequate score in the proficiency exams. It is a fact that in the rural parts of the country there is a serious problem

concerning the recruitment of qualitative English instructors but it is also a fact that those people need an expert consultancy for such a specific study.

The problem of this study is whether a system can be established to improve the success of the language users who work in the rural parts of Turkey in language proficiency exams and what contribution can internet provide to such a system.

In addition, in this study it is aimed to find out the answers to the following questions:

1. What language level is assessed in the English proficiency exams such as FCE, CAE, IELTS, KPDS, UDS and TOEFL?
2. What language skills are assessed in different parts of these exams?
3. Are the language users aware of the purpose of each part in these exams?
4. Is it an effective factor in increasing the success of the exam takers to enable them grasp the purpose of different parts in those exams?
5. Is it possible to increase the success of the exam takers in the rural parts of Turkey through internet?

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to enable the academicians, state employees and military staff in Turkey to get the desired score in English Proficiency Exams such as FCE, CAE, IELTS, KPDS, UDS and TOEFL. Besides, in this study it is aimed to put forward a practical solution to the problems of the exam takers in the rural parts of Turkey through internet.

4. ASSUMPTIONS

In this study it is assumed that

- a) the data collecting tools are valid and reliable,
- b) all the responses of the samples are their sincere feelings and reflecting the truth,
- c) the samples selected are qualified enough to represent the actual groups.

5. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study covers the problems of the English Proficiency Exam takers in Turkey. For this purpose, 44 academicians from different universities in different regions of Turkey were randomly selected; in that 10 academicians from Malatya İnönü University, 2 academicians from Sivas Cumhuriyet University, 18 academicians from Izmir Ege University, 1 academician from Bolu İzzet Baysal University, 1 academician from Izmir Ondokuz Mayıs University, 5 academicians from Ankara University, and 7 academicians from Ankara Hacettepe University took part in the study as samples.

6. METHOD OF THE STUDY

In this experimental study, which is also based on the 'survey' method, a questionnaire, a sample English Proficiency Test and some statistical analyses such as percentage and t-test were used. And the steps of the study can be stated as in the following:

- a. the phases of the study were planned in the 2000-2001 academic year,
- b. the academicians in different universities in Turkey were informed of the purpose of the study, and were invited to take part in it,
- c. the samples, who were selected randomly among these who took KPDS exam were in November 1998 about their attitudes toward the English Proficiency exams (see Appendix 1),
- d. the proposed English Proficiency Exam instruction model was implemented within a 50-class-hour period,

e. The observation questionnaire was administered again as the post-observation questionnaire,

f. The KPDS exam in November 1998 was used as the post test of the study since the samples had already taken it (their first score was considered the result of the pre-test),

g. The data were gathered and the final report of the study was written.

7. FINDINGS

7.1. The Findings Through Questionnaire

The replies of the academicians to the questionnaire before the proposed model is implemented is illustrated in the following table (see Table 2).

Table 2. Results of the Pre-observation Questionnaire

QUESTIONS	YES		NO	
	N	%	N	%
1	07	15.91	37	84.09
2	06	13.64	38	86.36
3	23	52.27	21	47.73
4	39	88.64	05	11.36
5	14	31.82	30	68.18
6	02	04.54	42	95.46
7	12	27.27	32	72.73

The replies of the academicians to the questionnaire after the proposed model is implemented is illustrated in the following table (see Table 3).

Table 3. Results of the Post-observation Questionnaire

QUESTIONS	YES		NO	
	N	%	N	%
1	34	72.27	10	22.73
2	18	40.91	26	59.09
3	34	72.27	10	22.73
4	11	25.00	33	75.00
5	05	11.36	39	88.64
6	05	11.36	39	88.64
7	34	72.27	10	22.73

As can be understood from both tables above it is safe to claim that there occurred some considerable changes in the viewpoints of the academicians concerning English Proficiency Exams. These changes can be stated as follows:

a. Before the proposed model was implemented only 7 % of the academicians were of the opinion that they were able to comprehend different parts of the proficiency exams, however this rate increased up to 72.27 % after the implementation.

b. Before the proposed model was implemented 86.36 % of the academicians claimed that the time allocated for the test was not enough, however this rate decreased to 59.09 % after the implementation.

c. Before the proposed model was implemented 52.27 % of the academicians assumed that different parts of the proficiency exams assess different language skills , however this rate increased up to 72.27 % after the implementation.

d. Before the proposed model was implemented 88.64 % of the academicians reported that they were used to translating every question into Turkish to find the correct answer, however this rate fell to 25 % after the implementation.

e. Before the proposed model was implemented 31.82 % of the academicians were of the opinion that English proficiency exams were based on only vocabulary knowledge, however this rate decreased to 11.36 % after the implementation.

f. Before the proposed model was implemented only 4 % of the academicians believed that knowledge of English grammar was important in the exams, however this rate increased up to 11.36 % after the implementation.

g. Before the proposed model was implemented 27.27 % of the academicians were of the opinion that reading skill was important in the exams, however this rate increased up to 72.27 % after the implementation.

In addition to these statistical figures there are also some interesting replies of the academicians to the last question in the questionnaire. Some of them are as follows:

a. KPDS and UDS must be an internationally validated language proficiency exams.

b. The number of the questions in the proficiency exams should be decreased and thus the time allocated be increased.

c. There must be a curve system for the academicians. Thus the risk for failure with minor marks will be avoided.

d. Language proficiency exams should be given not only in big cities such as Ankara and Istanbul but in some certain cities in different regions in Turkey.

7.2. The Findings Through Pre and Post Tests

The result of the t-test administered to the pre and post tests is as in the Table 3.

Table 4. T-test Results of the Pre and Post Tests

Variables	N	Mean	St.Dev.	Mean for St.Error	t-value
Pre-test	44	55.22	4.70	1.11	-7.98**
Post-test	44	64.94	4.27	1.00	

As can be seen in the table above, at the alpha level of 0.01, there is a significant change between the success of the exam takers on behalf of the post-test.

8. THE PROPOSED INSTRUCTION MODEL

This model was implemented within a 50-class-hour period in 10 weeks' time (5 hours a week). The exam takers attended the course twice a week. Each week they studied different parts of the language proficiency exams with sample questions at the upper-intermediate level. It was known that in the exams such as FCE, CAE, IELTS, KPDS, UDS and TOEFL the sentence types were generally complex and compound, in which adjective, adverbial and noun clauses were used. Hence, it was decided that the level of the exam takers were supposed to be upper-intermediate.

In the present model, the language proficiency exam KPDS was taken as an example and it was divided into ten parts as; vocabulary, grammar, sentence completion, translation from Turkish to English, translation from English to Turkish, dialogue completion, finding the irrelevant statement in a paragraph, paragraph completion, paraphrasing and reading. Every week each part was studied with sample materials and through suggested test techniques as exemplified in the following grammar question.

QUESTION:

Find the correct alternative to complete the following sentence

-The little boy who --- from a serious heart disease since last year --- to the USA for treatment.

- a. suffers/was taken b. suffered/is going to take c. suffered/took
d. has been suffering/will be taken e. is suffering/is taken

- a. suffers/was taken b. suffered/is going to take c. suffered/took
d. has been suffering/will be taken e. is suffering/is taken**

THE TEST TECHNIQUE TO IMPLEMENT:

1. When the alternatives are examined, it is understood that it is a "tense" question,
2. In the sentence such elements as time expression, time adverbials and clause markers are sought,
3. It is seen that one of the tenses belongs to the adjective clause and has the time adverbial "since last year". So it must be the Present Perfect Tense,
4. The alternative "c" is suitable for that and when the second part of the alternative is used in the sentence, it can be understood that it is the correct answer, indeed.

Different test techniques were developed for all parts of the test according to the objectives of the parts similar to the ones introduced by Mirici (2002).

9. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

As a result of this study, the findings illustrate that after the proposed model had been implemented, there was a considerable change in the success of the exam takers. The academicians, who took part as the samples of the study, pointed out that although they had almost the same level of language knowledge and skills, before they were equipped with the information related to the logic of different parts of the test, they were not able to answer the questions in the examination such consciously. Moreover, the result of the pre and post tests supports their ideas. Hence, in conclusion it is safe to claim that the success of the academicians who work in rural parts of the country, and for whom expert

help is not available whenever they feel in need of some can be increased through an intensive course in test strategies. And such a course can be organised by the Council of Higher Education and disseminated through internet.

It is also possible to put forward to suggestions as in the following:

- a. In the English proficiency exams only a fraction of the test focuses on grammar knowledge; the major parts of the test aims at assessing the language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. Therefore the method to follow should be to teach English at the intermediate level with four language skills and then to study test techniques. The ultimate purpose should not be to teach only the test techniques which are not transferable to actual use of the target language outside the examination context.
- b. The academicians should be introduced with the question types in proficiency exams through some model tests which are prepared at the intermediate level just like the original ones.
- c. The model tests should be e-mailed to the exam takers and be practiced at regular intervals so as to increase their speed in the exam.
- d. Just like in the Hungary model (Györgyi at al., 2001:81), homework assignments should be prepared in the web page of the system accordingly and the language users should be guided to do self-study by means of accurate materials.
- e. A standard self-assessment grid should be developed so that the exam takers can be aware of their own learning strategies and can establish their learning strategies as autonomous learners. Such a grid should be accessible in the web site.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear colleague,

The purpose of this questionnaire is to determine the effects of developing test strategies on the success in English proficiency exams. Please, read each question carefully and mark the choice which reflects your opinion best.

Thank you very much for your sincere answers and contribution to the study.

Researcher

1. Do you think you are able to comprehend different parts of the proficiency exams clearly?

YES NO

2. Do you think the time allocated for English proficiency exams is enough to answer all the questions?

YES NO

3. Do you think different parts of the proficiency exams assess different language skills?

YES NO

4. Are you used to translating every question into Turkish to find the correct answer in the English proficiency exams?

YES NO

5. Do you think English proficiency exams are based on only vocabulary knowledge?

YES NO

6. Do you think the knowledge of English grammar is important in English proficiency exams?

YES NO

7. Do you think reading skill is important in English proficiency exams?

YES NO

8. Please, write three most important points concerning English Proficiency Exams.

1.

2.

3.

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