

An Investigation of the Subsections of Undergraduate Admission Test of English (LYS-5)

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Geliş Tarihi/Received

01.02.2022

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted

28.03.2022

e-Yayım/e-Printed

30.09.2022

ABSTRACT

Language is so generative and continuously evolving that defining what is meant by language and how to assess it are real challenges. In essence, developing an understanding of language ability and the nature of language can enlighten language assessment. The reason is that any test of language proficiency seemingly depends on how test developers define and describe the language construct. In the last two decades, the importance attached to high-stakes exams of English has risen because the results of these exams are used to make decisions regarding a test taker's university or school admission. The aim of this study is to investigate the subsections of undergraduate admission test of English (LYS-5) in Turkey by describing what they are actually measuring (e.g. multiple-choice items of reading comprehension, translation, vocabulary, grammar, and etc.) and examining whether the multiple-choice translation items in the test function as good as open-ended translation items. The results of the exploratory factor analyses and the rotated component matrix indicated that vocabulary and grammar are all shared by three abilities (factors) measured by the test, which could be grammar-related, vocabulary-related, and overall-ability. Besides, the open-ended translation test scores significantly correlated with most of the subsections, but did not correlate with the multiple-choice translation test scores. The paper suggests that high-stakes language exams like LYS-5 should be studied in a more detailed way so that better and high-quality tests can be developed.

Keywords: High-stakes tests, undergraduate admission test, LYS-5, English language testing

1. INTRODUCTION

Language assessment has witnessed considerable changes in the last few decades. A number of language proficiency tests, such as *Test of English as a Foreign Language* (TOEFL) and *International English Language Testing System* (IELTS), have been developed to measure general language ability of English as second or foreign language (ESL or EFL) learners. Similar to such standardized tests of language proficiency, language tests within the university entrance examination are also administered for students who would like to major in a foreign language. Such high-stakes language tests are used to make decisions on students' lives and whether they have acquired the necessary language ability to be admitted to undergraduate programs. Although scholars have already put forward the negative washback effects of such high-stakes tests on students (e.g., Dawadi, 2021; Dong, 2020; Cho & Han, 2018; Li et al., 2018; Sayın & Aslan, 2016; Yıldırım, 2010), countries keep administering them as a part of the university admission process.

Since a serious decision is made according to the scores obtained from those language tests, describing the function of the items in those tests and what they are actually measuring (e.g. multiple-choice items of reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and etc.) are of great importance. As a standard practice in many countries, the questions in university admission tests are presented as multiple choice (mc) items, which only "assess knowledge recall in discrete domains" as stated by Kitchen, et. al, (2019, p. 170). Although these tests are criticized for their major focus on mc items, the procedure does not change due to the high number of test takers.

In Turkey, *Lisans Yerleştirme Sınavı*¹ (abbreviation for LYS- Undergraduate admission examination) consists of five tests for admission to higher education. LYS-1, LYS-2, LYS-3, and LYS-4 are to assess test takers with verbal and quantitative tests in Turkish, whereas

¹ The names of university entrance examination in Turkey have changed a number of times. This paper focuses on the previous version, Undergraduate Admission Examination (Lisans Yerleştirme Sınavı or LYS) which was valid between 2006-2017. Within LYS, foreign languages admission test was named as LYS-5. As of 2018, the university entrance examination is called Higher Education Institutions Examination (Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı or YKS). Although LYS and YKS share certain features, there are some differences with respect to the procedure and their administration. The exams within YKS are named as Core Competency Test (TYT), Field Competency Test (AYT), and Foreign Language Test (YDT) (ÖSYM, 2018).

LYS-5 is high-stakes large-scale standardized assessment tool used to test general foreign language ability of the test takers in one of the following languages: English, German, and French. The overall score of the undergraduate candidate who will be specialized in a language is based on the score of LYS-5 and other related LYSs' according to the major of the test taker. LYS-5 consists of 80 multiple choice items on vocabulary, grammar, cloze test, sentence-dialog-paragraph completion, paragraph comprehension, situational judgments, finding the closest meaning to the sentence, finding the irrelevant sentence in a paragraph (odd-one-out), and translation. Although translation is a different ability that requires using language skills (Campbell, 1998), the language admission test in Turkey use 'translation' as a section of the test to assess language proficiency.

The purpose of LYS-5 is to provide evidence that the test takers have good enough foreign language ability to pursue their studies at university. Like many high-stakes tests, testing specifications of LYS-5 are not public. However, anything regarding the test construct and framework is not made publicized, either. Only the items are made public after the test has been administered, following the permission of *Student Selection and Placement Centre* (ÖSYM). The testing experts in Turkey send test items to the Council of Higher Education (CoHE) to create a different foreign language test each year. Yet, there is little or no information regarding the construct and psychometric qualities of the test. One may wonder why there are so many sections (e.g., reading comprehension, odd-one-out, translation, and so on) in one language test and whether translation mc items would measure the language ability as good as open-ended translation items.

In their study, Sayın & Arslan (2016) wanted to examine whether LYS-5 was all-inclusive in terms of measuring language ability and to suggest some changes if needed. 74 Turkish students completed a questionnaire to indicate their perceptions on this matter. It was found that LYS-5 was "not comprehensive" enough in measuring language competency in that it lacks the balance of all four language skills (speaking, writing, listening and speaking), includes unnecessary item types, and weight of grammar and vocabulary should be lowered. The researchers also highlighted the importance of contributing to the existing but limited literature on this topic and called for research.

Considering that there is not much research on this examination as a national high-stakes English language admission test in Turkey, an investigation of the subsections of LYS-

5 can be of great importance and interest to test developers or designers in terms of defining the language proficiency construct in the undergraduate admission test of English (LYS-5) and creating quality items measuring foreign/second language proficiency.

2. A CLOSER LOOK AT LYS-5

2.1. Possible Definitions of the Construct of Language Proficiency in LYS-5

Since a handbook of LYS-5 is not made public, it is difficult to know how CoHE in Turkey defines the construct of language proficiency and prepares the test items. In essence, it is an important issue because how a standardized language test is designed, operationalized and administered depends mainly on the definition of the language ability construct (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Therefore, it is better to examine what is shared with the community and make inferences regarding the definition of language construct in LYS-5.

To date, language assessment has been influenced by theories and methodologies of language learning and teaching. Mainly philosophical thoughts of positivism and constructivism affected language testing theories (Farhady, 1982). Now communicative language ability described by Bachman (1990) as “consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use” (p.84) is in stage, but Canale and Swain (1980)’s assessment model of second language proficiency seems like a general framework for proficiency test construction. According to Canale and Swain (1980), there are three components of second language proficiency: grammar, discourse and sociolinguistics, which can be assessed by means of oral, multiple-choice items and written responses. As a framework of second language proficiency, it seems to match to a certain extent with the framework of LYS-5 in Turkey. However, LYS-5 only includes multiple-choice items. Qualities of those items from Canale and Swain’s (1980) perspective are shown in Table 1 (adapted from Brown, 2010, p.119).

Table 1: Qualities of Multiple-Choice Items in Canale and Swain (1980)’s model

Trait

	Grammar (Grammatical accuracy within sentences)	Discourse (Textual cohesion and coherence)	Sociolinguistics (Social appropriateness of language use)
Multiple Choice Items	sentence-level “select the correct form” exercise involving verb morphology, prepositions, and other items	paragraph level “select the coherent form” exercise	speech-act level “select the appropriate utterance” exercise

However, it is also possible that LYS-5 measures only one skill, which is reading comprehension, since it does not have sections of speaking, writing, and listening skills. Another possibility is that it measures multiple abilities. These possibilities have made an investigation of the LYS-5 necessary.

2.2. A Description of LYS-5

LYS-5 is a national high-stakes foreign language exam in Turkey that measures general language ability of test takers in English, German, and French to determine if they are proficient enough to study language-related majors at university. The English section of this test is used to make decisions on applicants for the English Language Teaching, Translation and Interpretation, and English Language and Literature departments at universities. In terms of its content, LYS-5 consists of 80 multiple choice items on vocabulary, grammar, cloze test, translation, sentence-dialog-paragraph completion, paragraph comprehension, situational judgments, finding the closest meaning to the sentence, and finding the irrelevant sentence in a paragraph (odd-one-out) (See Table 2).

Table 2: Number of Items in Each Subsection of LYS-5 (2012)

<u>Subsection</u>	<u>Number of Items</u>
Vocabulary	5
Grammar	10
Cloze test	5
Translation (6 English to Turkish & 6 Turkish to English)	12
Sentence completion	8
Reading comprehension with different paragraphs	15
Dialog completion	5
Finding the closest meaning to sentence	5
Situational judgments	5
Paragraph completion	5
Finding irrelevant sentence in paragraph (odd-one-out)	5
Total	80

Considering the subsections in LYS-5, it is clear that it does not measure listening, speaking and writing skills. Rather, it seems to measure reading comprehension ability, vocabulary, grammar knowledge, and translation ability. Actually, most of the subsections in the exam are related to measuring foreign/second language reading ability. Therefore, it can be argued that it does not show the language proficiency of a test taker since it lacks items directly measuring speaking, writing and listening comprehension. However, for a large-scale standardized test as such, it might be challenging and impractical to directly measure all skills. Besides, Carrell (1991) argues that measuring reading comprehension might be sufficient to measure language proficiency as foreign/second language reading also reflects foreign/second language proficiency.

Considering Canale and Swain's (1980) model of language proficiency assessment, there are similarities between their framework of language test design and LYS-5 with respect to the level of the items. As in their model, LYS-5 also involves sentence-level, paragraph-level, and speech-act level items. Only translation mc items in LYS-5 do not have any referent in the model by Canale and Swain (1980). The reason might be that translation is a cognitive ability that requires different processing (Stansfield, Scott, and Kenyon, 1992). On the other hand, translation can be an indicator of language proficiency (Pickett, 1968; Birjandi & Farahzad, 2010). This issue is examined in Section 3.

2.3. Translation Ability and Language Proficiency

There have been studies supporting the use of translation items to assess grammar (Salem, 2012), reading comprehension (Kern, 1994), and general language proficiency (Ying & Liying, 2008). Some language proficiency tests such as *New York University Foreign Language Proficiency* (NYUFLP) exam, comprised of four sections: listening, writing, translation from English, and translation to English, include translation items as separate sections. Moreover, in the article by Pickett (1968), translation items were found to be good predictors of language ability rather than fill-in-the-blank items. All of such findings indicate that translation ability and language proficiency may be related to each other.

In the field of language assessment, using different item types requiring closed-ended and open-ended responses makes a difference on the test scores. For instance, in her study, Shohamy (1984) investigated the influence of multiple choice and open-ended item types on

second language reading tests. She claimed that as different item types, they affect results of the tests because they require different processing. In the similar vein, when translation items are considered, Birjandi & Farahzad (2010) asserted that item type can also make a difference in test scores because open-ended translation items necessitate production as well as knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Their study revealed there is a correlation between foreign language proficiency with the open-ended translation-production test rather than multiple choice translation test. That means students with high translation ability also have high language proficiency.

2.4. Purpose

The present study aims to investigate the subsections within LYS-5 by examining the abilities LYS-5 measures and the possible relationships among the subsections. It also focuses on the possible relationship between each subsection score and that of obtained from the open-ended version of the mc translation items. Accordingly, the following research questions will be addressed in the study:

1. How many abilities (factors) does LYS-5 measure?
2. Is there any relationship among LYS-5 subsection scores?
3. Is there any relationship between LYS-5 subsection scores and the score of the open-ended translation test?

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

60 freshmen students were asked if they want to contribute to a LYS-5 study, and only half of them volunteered. Therefore, 30 university level Turkish EFL students who took the LYS-5 exam in the same year participated in the study. Their average age is 19. The students are freshmen majoring in English Language Teaching in the School of Education at two English-medium universities in Turkey. They graduated from different high schools from different parts of Turkey in May, took the LYS-5 in summer, and were admitted to universities. During the study, the students were enrolled in their universities.

3.2. The Context

In Turkey, high school graduates who want to study language-related majors at university take LYS. The first four LYS (LYS-1,-2,-3, and -4) include multiple-choice items on

Turkish language, Geography, History, Mathematics and Science whereas the fifth one, LYS-5, includes multiple-choice items on a foreign language (English, German, and French in accordance with the students' preference). The average score of those exams determines whether the students are admitted to universities.

3.3. Data Collection

In this exploratory study, in order to investigate the construct definition of the language proficiency in LYS-5, it was necessary to understand the relationship among the subsections scores. To achieve this, LYS-5 items and online answer sheets of 30 test takers were collected. Since another focus of this study was on the possible relationship between LYS-5 subsection scores and the score of the open-ended translation test, the participants were given the open-ended versions of the same mc translation test items.

3.3.1. Online Answer Sheets and Related Test Items

In order to answer the research questions, online LYS-5 answer sheets and test items of 30 test takers were collected. However, it was not an easy task. It was only the test takers who could screen their responses from the system provided by CoHE by using their usernames and passwords. Therefore, with the consent and collaboration of the test-takers, their responses to each item in the test were obtained from their system one by one. Since the order of the questions in each test booklet was different, it was difficult to compare all the items. Thus, after a detailed right and wrong checks of each participant's responses in the test, all the answers for the 80 items were eventually noted down for each test taker.

3.3.2. Open-ended Translation Test

10 participants out of 30 volunteered to answer the open-ended translation test. The test consisted of 12 items. Those items were taken from the multiple-choice translation items in LYS-5 (2012) itself. Thus, this test was the open-ended version of those 12 multiple choice items. The students were asked to translate 6 of the items from Turkish to English and the other 6 from English to Turkish. The scoring rubric for the test was holistic. According to Farahzad (1992, p. 274, cited in Khanmohammad & Osanloo, 2009), both accuracy and appropriateness are important criteria in scoring open-ended translation tests. According to the rubric agreed in the study by Khanmohammad & Osanloo (2009), "accuracy, finding the right and suitable word equivalence in target language, genre, target language culture,

grammar and preservation of style, shifts, addition, omission and inventing equivalents” are focused on when scoring a translation item. Therefore, in the present study, the translation rubric was adapted from the one in Khanmohammad & Osanloo (2009). The total score for the open-ended translation test was 12 (1 point for each item). See Table 3.

Table 3: The Scoring Rubric for the open-ended translation test

Translation Scoring Rubric	
Grammar	0,25
Vocabulary/word equivalence	0,25
Meaning (general impression)	0,25
Discourse (cohesion, genre, register)	0,25
Total	1

The answer key for the translation test was the correct option provided in LYS-5’s answer key.

3.4. Data Analysis

Since there are different forms (e.g., grammar, vocabulary or translation) of multiple-choice items in LYS-5, as identified in Table 2, those forms of mc items were treated as subsections in the test. The number of correct responses for each subsection was regarded as scores for the subsection. Then the scores for each participant obtained both from LYS-5 answer sheets/test booklets and the open-ended translation test were entered into the SPSS program (version 16).

In order to answer the first research question, “How many abilities (factors) does LYS-5 measure?”, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was run in SPSS. EFA is used to explore the factors, which are combinations of different variables in a data set. The factor analysis displays the correlations among subsection scores as well as the correlations between subsection scores and the factors. Before the analysis, so as to see if exploratory factor analysis is suitable for the sample size, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin’s measure of sampling adequacy test was run as well as Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity to further test it. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test result should be between 0-1 (the closer to 1, the better). For this sample, it was ,632. The Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity should yield to significant values, and in our test, it was

significant ($p=.000$). Therefore, it is appropriate to claim that the sample ($N=30$) might be adequate to run EFA.

In order to answer the second and the third questions, “Is there any relationship among LYS-5 subsection scores?” and “Is there any relationship between LYS-5 subsection scores and the score of the open-ended translation test?”, Pearson’s correlation analysis was run using the SPSS program.

4. RESULTS

The results of the first research question asking “How many abilities (factors) does LYS-5 measure?” indicated that it measures three abilities (See Table 4). According to EFA and the rotated component matrix, vocabulary and grammar are all shared by three abilities (factors) measured by the test. The first one, possibly *grammar-related ability*, loads on the subsections of dialog completion, finding the closest meaning, situational judgments, paragraph completion, and slightly on vocabulary section in the test. The second one, *vocabulary-related ability*, loads on the subsections of reading comprehension, sentence completion, cloze test and grammar. The *overall ability* loads on the subsections of vocabulary, grammar, cloze test, translation, and odd-one-out.²

The results of the second research question “Is there any relationship among LYS-5 subsection scores?” showed that most of the subsection scores significantly correlated in the test (See Table 5). For example, **Vocabulary** section highly correlated with reading comprehension ($r=.753$, $p<0.01$) and moderately correlated with grammar ($r=.550$, $p<0.01$), cloze test ($r=.537$, $p<0.01$), sentence completion ($r=.492$, $p<0.01$), finding the closest meaning ($r=.410$, $p<0.05$), odd-one-out ($r=.455$, $p<0.05$) and paragraph completion ($r=.398$, $p<0.05$). Interestingly, there was no significant correlation between mc **translation** and any other subsection score.

Table 4: Rotated Component Matrix

	Component		
	1	2	3
Vocabulary	,410	,720	,374
Grammar	,629	,303	,334

² It should also be noted that the results of the first research question is based on the assumption that LYS-5 has 11 forms of items or subsections. For the other alternatives, see Appendix 1.

Cloze	,135	,347	,754
Translation	,063	,022	,522
sentence_completion	-,011	,844	-,019
reading_comprehension	,191	,871	,172
dialog_completion	,825	,046	-,008
finding_the_closest_meaning	,807	,062	,221
situational_judgements	,711	,246	-,508
paragraph_completion	,598	,101	,322
odd_one_out	,173	,098	,833

The results of the third research question “Is there any relationship between LYS-5 subsection scores and the score of the open-ended translation test?” indicated that the open-ended translation test highly correlated with vocabulary ($r=767$, $p<0.001$), and moderately correlated with grammar ($r=689$, $p<0.05$) and reading comprehension ($r=656$, $p<0.05$) (See Table 5).

Table 5: Correlation Matrix of Subsections in LYS-5

	vocab	grammar	cloze	translation	Sentence completion	Reading comprehension	Dialog completion	Finding the closest meaning	Situational judgments	Paragraph completion	Odd one out	Open-ended translation
vocabulary	1											
grammar	,550**	1										
cloze	,537**	,337	1									
translation	,326	,311	,232	1								
Sentence completion	,492**	,295	,234	,028	1							
Reading comprehension	,753**	,384*	,469**	,055	,563**	1						
Dialog completion	,345	,546**	,146	,035	,167	,110	1					
Finding the closest meaning	,410*	,542**	,357	,027	,053	,264	,514**	1				
Situational judgments	,346	,286	-,190	-,099	,078	,311	,455*	,498**	1			
Paragraph completion	,398*	,309	,353	,174	,106	,306	,475**	,421*	,240	1		
Odd one out	,455*	,385*	,586**	,213	,063	,288	,114	,393*	-,257	,303	1	
Open-ended translation	,767**	,689*	,620	,536	,589	,656*	,485	,531	*	,100	,454	1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2tailed).
a. Cannot be computed because at least one of the variables is constant.

5. Discussion

The purposes of this research study were to investigate how many abilities LYS-5 measures, whether there is a relationship among the subsection scores in LYS-5, and whether there is a relationship between the subsection scores of LYS-5 and of open-ended translation test.

According to the results of the first research question, LYS-5 measures three types of abilities, which are possibly grammar-related, vocabulary-related, and overall-ability. That means the test focuses on grammar and vocabulary since they were shared and loaded in all abilities in the component matrix. On the other hand, the number of the subsections in LYS-5 cannot be reduced because the Exploratory Factor Analysis demonstrated that all subsections were loaded in at least one of the three abilities or components (See Table 4).

According to the second research question, the subsection scores in LYS-5 correlated with each other. Especially, vocabulary and grammar were the subsections that mostly correlated with other subsections. However, the translation test in the LYS-5 did not correlate significantly with any of the subsections, which was an unexpected result even though Birjandi & Farahzad (2010) provided evidence claiming that mc translation test did not reveal the level of language proficiency. Considering this finding, mc translation items can be excluded from the test but EFA results showed that it loaded on the third ability.

According to the third research question, an expected finding was that the open-ended translation test significantly correlated with the subsections of vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension, which were the core components of the test and correlated with most of the subsections. That means the open-ended translation test can be claimed to reflect foreign language proficiency. However, multiple choice translation scores did not correlate with the open-ended translation test. This finding is parallel to what Birjandi & Farahzad (2010) found in their study. Their study revealed that language proficiency correlates with an open-ended translation test rather than mc translation test. This might be right because the open-ended translation test is productive compared to mc translation test.

6. Conclusion and Limitations

This research paper suggested that researchers need to study on high-stakes language proficiency exams like LYS-5 so that better and high-quality tests can be developed. One of the limitations of this study was that the findings of this research were based on 30 participants. Therefore, the sample size can be increased. Also, there was not much variance among the subsection scores because the participants were all successful and admitted to universities. For further studies, the participants can be divided into different proficiency levels.

The results might have been different if CoHE had made the handbook of specifications of LYS-5 public and if multiple exams from different years had been investigated. Besides,

the results of this study depend on the assumed subsections in LYS-5, which were agreed by four ELT instructors. For the other alternatives on LYS-5, see Appendix 1.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank distinguished **Prof. Hossein Farhady** for his guidance in this study.

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Appendix 1

Other Alternatives of Exploratory Factor Analysis on LYS-5

A) Assuming that there are 5 subsections in LYS-5: Vocabulary, Grammar, Cloze, Translation, and Reading. The correlation matrix is shown below.

		vocabulary	grammar	cloze	translation	READING
Correlation	vocabulary	1,000				
	grammar	,550	1,000			
	cloze	,537	,337	1,000		
	translation	,326	,311	,232	1,000	
	READING	,780	,600	,463	,107	1,000

	Component
	1
vocabulary	,896
grammar	,767
cloze	,691
translation	,437
READING	,853

a. 1 component extracted.

B) Assuming that there are 3 subsections: sentence-level, paragraph-level, and speech-act level as Canale and Swain's (1980) second language proficiency test model.

		Sentence-level	Paragraph-level	Speech act-level
Correlation	Sentence-level	1,000		
	Paragraph-level	,705	1,000	
	Speech act-level	,519	,196	1,000

	Component
	1
sentence_level	,475
paragraph_level	,410
speechact_level	,335

Note: Alternatives A and B suggest that there is only one component. That means LYS-5 measures only one ability, which might be called reading comprehension. That can explain the reason why LYS-5 does not clarify its subsections.