



AN EXPLORATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TEST FOR STUDENT MOBILITY

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Abstract:

University education is characterized by the atmosphere and opportunities offered to students to help master new skills, develop existing ones, realize and accept cultural diversity, hence broaden their horizons. Compared to past, students now have numerous alternatives either in the university in their home country or abroad. According to the statistics, 10% of the students graduated from university in the mid-1990s had studied abroad for different time periods (Jahr, Schomburg & Teichler, 2002). Undoubtedly, this number has probably increased given the fact that developments in technology have resulted in obvious easiness in communication and transportation. More importantly, there are now student exchange programs like Erasmus+ that help support student mobility.

Keywords: effectiveness, language proficiency test, student mobility

1. Introduction

Launched in 1987, Erasmus+ is an EU's program which aims to 'contribute to the Europe 2020 Strategy for growth, jobs, social equity and inclusion, and to the aims of ET2020, the EU's strategic framework for education and training' (http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/node_en). The statistics show that in 2015, 678,000 people studied, trained or volunteered abroad and there were 69,000 organizations involved in Erasmus+. Through Erasmus+, students have the opportunity

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to pursue their studies in another country in Europe for at least a period of six months, which might be extended to one year, and even do their internship for three months before they graduate from university. Students taking this opportunity are also given a certain amount of grant for their expenses. Research shows that many students like to go abroad through Erasmus+ because of the opportunities to learn about a different culture, benefit from cheap and easy travel overseas and make a change in their CV for their future career (Tekin & Gencer, 2013).

Turkey is among the countries where universities and university students benefit from Erasmus+. There are 184 universities in Turkey and as of 2011, 131 of them benefit from Erasmus+ student exchange program. The demand for the program is high, yet it is unlikely to send all the applicants to Europe taking the amount of grant spared for student mobility and the possible quotas agreed by the host universities. This makes the application and admission process a competitive and challenging one with certain requirements, and only the ones meeting them are eligible for the program. These requirements include a minimum GPA of 2,20 and a proof of good language proficiency level.

This competitive process brings language assessment as one of the issues to be considered. As language proficiency is essential to survive and pursue their studies abroad, students take language proficiency tests measuring their overall mastery of English language abilities. Taken the diversity of students in terms of their majors and language background, developing and deploying language tests is a challenge itself because studying abroad requires mastery in both productive, i.e. speaking and writing and receptive, i.e. reading and listening, language skills now that students merge into a new community where the medium of communication is English, if not only. This suggests that students should be competent in oral and written skills with correct register in both social and academic contexts.

A quick research on the Internet reveals that universities having Erasmus+ student exchange program in Turkey deploy language proficiency tests differing in content and construct. Given the fact that these tests play an important role in making decisions by universities, how language proficiency is tested is of crucial importance. As McNamara (2000) stated, proficiency tests do not aim to assess students' success considering the language instruction they have received previously, but look to the future situation of language use. Some universities have candidate students sit a multiple-choice test, in which grammar, vocabulary, reading and translation skill of students are tested, with the inclusion of listening in some other universities. There are some examples of proficiency tests with a writing component, in which candidate students are required to write an essay. There are few incidents of a speaking test given

to the students. Also, the number of questions in the multiple-choice test varies as well as the item types used. As Erasmus+ is a Europe-based program, the language proficiency of students is expressed according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), from A1 (the lowest) to C2 (the highest). The language proficiency tests in Turkey also range from A2 to C1 in the language level they are developed.

All assessment tools are meant to be valid, reliable and practical (Madsen, 1983; McNamara, 1996). As for the language proficiency tests for student mobility, namely Erasmus+ student exchange program, they seem to heavily rely on multiple-choice discrete item tests, which might stem from the practicality issues due to high number of applicants and low number of raters to test productive skills. In other words, there seems to be that practicality issue plays a major role in decision making when it comes to testing language proficiency, contrary to the fact that students need to be competent in all language skills to survive in both academic and social contexts abroad as mentioned earlier.

2. Aim of the Study

This present study aims to determine whether it is possible to substitute scores from different dimensions of English language skills. This study particularly seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant correlation between student scores from receptive skills (i.e. Booklet – multiple choice) and productive skills (i.e. written and oral tests – open response)?
2. Does the correlation between receptive and productive skills tests make it possible to substitute one another?
3. What are the perceptions of test takers about what should constitute a language proficiency test for student mobility?

3. Setting

Anadolu University, founded in 1982 having its roots back in 1958, is a state university in Turkey. Anadolu University is among the largest universities in Turkey with its modern, dynamic and innovative nature, housing 17 faculties, 3 applied schools, 4 vocational schools and 9 graduate schools located on two different campuses. As of 2016, the total number of students is 1,140,288, of which 4,089 are foreign students.

AUSFL hosts undergraduate students in their first year at university and provides them a one-year intensive language course because the medium of instruction in some faculties is English, French, German or Russian, thus they need to be proficient in the required language to pursue their courses in their undergraduate studies. For all the languages mentioned before, a language proficiency test is deployed for exemption from this one-year education.

4. The English Language Proficiency Test

The ELPT for Erasmus+ student exchange program is administrated by AUSFL. The test consists of three components, namely Booklet, Written and Oral Tests. In the Test, the items in all components are aligned with the learning outcomes in the Global Scale of English (GSE). The GSE is a granular academic scale enriching the CEFR and showing student level and progress in fine progression (<http://www.english.com/gse>). Table 1 gives a quick overview of the test.

Table 1: ELPT at a Glance

Test Component	# Items	Item Type(s)	Language Skills / Systems	Duration	Weight (%)
Booklet	80	Discrete item Multiple Choice (Fill-in blanks, cloze tests, sentence completion, etc)	Listening Grammar Vocabulary Reading	75 mins after the listening section	60%
Written Test	2	Open response Two alternatives (one to be written)	Writing	60 mins	20%
Oral Test	3	Open response (2 items done individually, 1 item in pairs)	Speaking	15 mins for each pair	20%

As seen in Table 2, Booklet is the multiple-choice component of the Test, aiming to measure students' language abilities in two receptive skills and two language systems. It is administrated in one session with the invigilation of English language teachers working at AUSFL. The Written test aims at measuring students' abilities in expressing themselves in written English and student papers are separately graded by two different raters using criteria for task achievement, organization, grammatical and lexical competence. In the Oral Test, two different raters grade student performances just after the students leave the test room, where all the test process is video recorded. As for the weight of the components in the Test, Written and Oral components have

20% weight each, and the Booklet has % 60, which makes the overall test score showing the proficiency level of test takers. In this study, the Test deployed in 2016-2017 Academic Year was analyzed.

5. Participants

The number of participants across their majors taking the 2016-2017 Test participants is given in Table 2 .

Table 2: The Participants

School / Faculty / Institution	# of test takers
Faculty of Pharmacy	12
Faculty of Humanities	15
Faculty of Education *	25
Faculty of Science *	8
Faculty of Aeronautics and Astronautics	11
School of Music and Drama	14
Faculty of Law	222
Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences *	11
Faculty of Communication Sciences *	43
Faculty of Architecture and Design	55
Faculty of Engineering *	53
Faculty of Health Sciences	4
Faculty of Sport Sciences	6
Graduate School of Fine Arts	4
Graduate School or Sciences	26
Graduate School of Social Sciences	19
Graduate School of Earth and Space Sciences	1
Total	421

* The medium of instruction is fully or partially English.

As seen in Table 2, a total of 421 participants took the Test in the Fall Term of 2016-2017 Academic Year. The participants vary in their major, ranging from School of Music and Drama where the medium of instruction is Turkish to Faculty of Engineering where the instruction is done in English. The majority of the participants are undergraduate students (88,2%) and the minority is graduate students (11,8%).

6. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, the scores of students taking the ELTP, administered by AUSFL in three different sessions, for Erasmus+ Student Exchange Program to study abroad are used. In the first part of the study, the relationship between the scores of 421 students from the Booklet, Written and Oral tests was analyzed. In the second part, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the students' overall scores from the Written and Oral tests and the scores from the Booklet was calculated. The Pearson correlation coefficient gives a value ranging in value from -1 to +1. This value indicates whether a linear relationship between two continuous variables exists. In other words, the larger the absolute value of the Pearson coefficient, the stronger the relationship between the variables. If this value is negative, it is deduced that the relationship between the variables is reversed and if it is positive, it is in the same direction. Values close to 0 or 0 mean that there is no relationship between variables. As absolute value, values between 0 and .30 are low; values between .31 and .70 are moderate, and values between .71 and 1.00 mean a high correlation between variables (Büyüköztürk, 2009). Finally, considering the values of the Pearson correlation coefficient, the possibility of substituting the tests administered in different sessions to determine English proficiency has been discussed.

In the last part of the study, students' Written Test outputs are used to explore their opinions about what should constitute a language proficiency test for student mobility in their response to the following question: *"What language skill(s) should be tested in Erasmus Exams?"*

Nearly half of the students responded this question and 80 of the students who scored 80 and above out of 100 were analyzed to identify the recurring themes.

7. Results

In this study, the correlation between the participants' scores on the Booklet, Written and Oral Tests (Research Question 1); and the Pearson correlation coefficient between the students' overall scores from the Written and Oral tests and the scores from the Booklet (Research Question 2) were calculated.

As for research question 1, the results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: The correlation between scores from the Booklet and the Written & Oral Tests

Component	Pearson Correlation Coefficient		
	Booklet	Written	Oral
Booklet	-	.45*	.41*
Written	.45*	-	.32*
Oral	.41*	.32*	-

* p < .01

As seen in Table 3, the correlation between the three components of the ELPT was positive and statistically significant. It is seen that the values change between .32 and .45. The highest correlation score, .45, is between the scores taken from the Written Test and the Booklet, the multiple-choice component of ELPT. The correlation value between students' scores on the Booklet and Oral Test was calculated as .41. In addition, the correlation between the Written and Oral Tests, measuring productive skills, was calculated .32. The values indicate a moderate correlation between the variables.

As for research question 2, the findings are shown Table 4.

Table 4: The correlation coefficient between students' scores from the Booklet and their overall scores from the Written and Oral Tests

Component	Pearson Correlation Coefficient
	Written & Oral
Booklet	.51*

* p < .01

As seen in Table 4, there is a statistically significant correlation between the students' scores from the Booklet, the multiple-choice components of the ELPT, and their overall scores from the Written and Oral Tests measuring productive skills. The correlation value of .51 indicates a moderate relation between the variables.

As for research question 3, almost half of the students stated listening and speaking should definitely be tested to communicate effectively with others; to survive in a foreign country; to follow courses at university by stating the fact that listening and speaking work collaboratively, hence inseparable and indispensable. The following extracts are taken from students' outputs:

"... An exchange student should be able to comprehend what others are saying, especially since their education will continue abroad. ... "

".. I can't imagine that a student wants to go abroad and cannot speak the language.."

" ... When we talk about daily tasks, the first thing comes up to our minds is speaking because human beings cannot survive without speaking. ... "

" ... When you arrive in the city, you must contact someone to solve your problem. Also, you need to understand what they are saying. If you are asking something, you need to understand the answer. ..."

Nearly half of the students emphasized the importance of reading and writing skills for Erasmus+ students in order to follow the courses at university because they are required to read to study the content and write assignments. It would also help them discover new things regarding life in general and their majors, which would be achieved by applying effective reading strategies to whatever they read.

"... We'll go to a foreign country for education. We'll read, write and have exams at school, so we have to be good in them. ..."

" ... Erasmus students will take many exams in their schools. If they don't have enough writing skills, they will probably get low grades and a bad Erasmus experience. ..."

"... Reading and writing are incredibly important for academic life. Most of [the] time you have to read essays and write essays. Reading helps you to write brilliant essays. While you are reading, you see how to use grammar and learn more words. ... "

"... Students' reading skills must be at the top of the range because all lesson materials are in the language used in that country, so if your reading skill is not at [a] good level, education will be harder for you. ... "

Whatever skills are prioritized in students' outputs, nearly all of them emphasized the importance of having a good command of grammar and vocabulary knowledge because they would provide a basis for all language skills preventing distortions in meaning; increasing comprehension as well as accuracy and fluency. The following extracts are taken from students' outputs:

".. The mastery of all the skills means a higher chance of achieving the goals of an exchange program like Erasmus+ ..."

"... These skills are really dependent on each other. ... "

" ... it's fair to say that all language skills are required to achieve the program's goals. ... "

"... If we want to write correct sentences, we have to learn grammar rules very well. ... Vocabulary.. knowing a lot of words helps us to be better in other skills. If we don't learn a lot of words, we don't understand people, we don't write and read. ... "

8. Discussion

Tests designed to measure foreign language proficiency are intended to reveal test takers' abilities in different language skills. Tests with multiple choice items are usually developed to measure language abilities in receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading, and language systems or in other words sub-skills, i.e. grammar and vocabulary. On the other hand, written and oral tests are designed to evaluate test takers' abilities in productive skills.

In this study, the correlation between the scores of test takers from three different components of the ELPT administrated by AUSFL, a language proficiency test to determine the candidates for Erasmus+ Student Exchange Program to study abroad was calculated. The aim was to determine whether it was possible to deploy one or two components of the test, rather than the whole, and use their overall score to measure language proficiency, rather than having students take multiple tests for different skills in different sessions. In the literature, there are studies stating that if found a positive and statistically significant relationship between tests measuring different dimension of the same psychological structure, then the most practical one(s) may be deployed only. Practicality is likely to affect decisions because resources required to deploy tests may be limited (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). For example, item writers or test developers as human resources; space, equipment and materials as material resources; and time for designing, writing, administrating, scoring and the like as time resources. This might be the reason why productive skills are ignored on language proficiency tests given the fact that there is always a high demand for Erasmus+ student exchange program.

The preliminary aim of this study was to find out the correlation value between the Booklet, the Written and the Oral Tests. The results revealed that there was a positive and statistically significant correlation. It is important to note that the correlation value, .30, is close to the lower limit for the moderate level correlation value. This finding suggests that student scores from any of these components may not fully or accurately represent their language abilities in the other language skills. In other

words, deploying only one of these tests may not prove effective in measuring students' abilities in other skills which are not tested.

Another aim of the study was to find out the correlation between student scores from the Booklet and their overall scores from the Written and Oral Test scores. The correlation value was found .51, which was relatively higher than the previously mentioned correlation values between the components of the ELPT. This correlation value indicates a positive and moderate relationship between the two. Considering this, it might be concluded that scores from the Booklet and the overall scores of the Written and Oral Tests may not substitute each other. In other words, a score from the Booklet may not be a representative of their abilities in the Written and Oral tests aiming to measure test takers' language abilities in different skills.

Consequently, considering the results of the study, it might be concluded that there was a moderately statistically significant correlation between the Booklet, the Written and the Oral tests. However, the fact that these relations are not at a very high level does not make it possible to substitute these three tests for each other, thus reducing the number of sessions, hence the tests, administered. Correlation between different dimensions of the same skill is theoretically expected. However, in this study the correlation values are not very high. This might be linked to the fact that English language is a whole and all language skills are integrated, hence inseparable from and highly indispensable for each other, operating in harmony. In other words, each component and psychological sub-dimension constitutes the whole, namely language proficiency. By taking these findings into consideration, it might be concluded that administering multiple-choice tests only and ignoring productive skills due to practicality concerns may not prove effective. Written and oral abilities of students should also be tested to determine the language proficiency of students, especially the ones aiming to pursue their career abroad. This conclusion is also supported by students' perceptions of what should constitute a language test for language proficiency. It is important to test productive skills as acknowledged by students because language skills and systems are integrated and they all serve the same purpose: effective communication.

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