КИЇВСЬКИЙ НАЦІОНАЛЬНИЙ УНІВЕРСИТЕТ ІМЕНІ ТАРАСА ШЕВЧЕНКА
КАФЕДРА ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ ЕКОНОМІЧНОГО ФАКУЛЬТЕТУ

II МІЖНАРОДНА КОНФЕРЕНЦІЯ

ДОСЛІДЖЕННЯ І ВИКЛАДАННЯ ІНОЗЕМНИХ МОВ
У ГЛОБАЛІЗОВАНОМУ ЕКОНОМІЧНОМУ ПРОСТОРІ

2ND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

LANGUAGE RESEARCH AND TEACHING
IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

Матеріали II міжнародної конференції
Київ 06 жовтня 2016 року

Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference
Kyiv 06 October 2016

Київ – 2016

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EFL teachers' formal assessment practices based on exam papers

This study reports initial findings from a small-scale qualitative study aimed at gaining insights into English language teachers' assessment practices in Turkey by examining the formal exam papers. Based on the technique of content analysis, formal exam papers were analyzed in terms of assessment items, language skills tested as well as the feedback provided to the students. The findings indicate that traditional ways of assessment such as multiple-choice and gap filling are the most preferred assessment items. The results also indicate that listening and speaking appear to be the ignored skills on the examinations.

Keywords: language assessment, language skills, assessment types, assessment items, washback

Problem analysis and current research. Two forms of assessment appear in the literature considering the functions of assessment: formative and summative. While the former focuses on learner performance in the process and provides feedback for future action based on the results obtained, the latter is more related to learner performance at the end of a unit, chapter, or a class [1]. Formative and summative assessment can be often made by teachers themselves using a variety of sources, while summative assessment lends itself to local or nation-wide one-shot exams in which the stakes are high. Teachers may obtain more feedback from a variety of sources during assessment, and thus their assessment might be more accurate; however, as most high-stakes testing formats are given only once or twice and based on traditional assessment practices such as multiple-choice and gap filling question formats, the assessment made may not yield to accurate and reliable results and may have serious effects on classroom practices [2, 3].

The purpose and methodology of the study. This study reports initial findings from a small-scale qualitative study that aims to gain insights into English language teachers' assessment practices by examining the formal exam papers that they created. The study specifically analyzes the types of instruments that language teachers use to assess their students as well as the skills they focus on. This research is based on content analysis, which can be considered both a technique and methodology that allows studying human behavior as well as written contents of a communication. In this research, the written communication includes the formal assessments conducted by language teachers in the classroom. With this aim in mind, formal exam papers (both formative and summative) were collected from fifty-five language teachers working at secondary schools in different districts of a city in Turkey. The teachers were aged between 24-50 with experiences of teaching English varying from 3 to 22. A total of 165 papers were collected and were subject to content analysis in terms of techniques for testing and test items such as selection and supply items.

Findings. The data collected from the formal exam papers written by the participants in the classroom led to several categories that emerged during the data analysis. These categories were analyzed in three different perspectives: classification of test items used, the skills tested, and the feedback provided on the test performance.

Regarding the test items used, the analysis indicated that the participants benefited from selection and supply items. The selection items included selecting the correct answer within a number of options presented. Multiple choice (53%) and matching items (34%) were the most commonly used test times, while True/False items were the least used selection items (13%).

Multiple choice items were specifically used in assessing grammar and reading comprehension despite the fact that some formal exam papers also benefited this type of items in the assessment of lexical items as well as listening. True/False items, on the other hand, appeared to test reading and listening comprehension.

As to supply items, the analysis indicated that the most common items used on the formal exam papers were gap-fill (fill-in-the-blanks), cloze, short-answer, and completion items. As known, supply items require students to provide or construct the correct answer considering the sentence and/or context provided. Gap-fill (fill-in-the-blanks) items (66%) appeared as the most preferred type of supply item in the assessment of grammar and lexical items -generally included a pool where students can choose the words.

Completion items (14%) required students to provide the rest of a sentence. It is due to note that in this type of supply item, students are not provided any options but are required to complete the sentence meaningfully and grammatically, which is practiced to assess grammar mainly. Short-answer items (15%) appeared on the reading comprehension questions, while cloze items, the least preferred type in the exam papers (5%), were used mainly in while-listening questions.

The analysis also indicated that in addition to the traditional methods of assessment, formal assessment exams included projects, portfolio, and oral

presentations. However, due to the nature of formal assessment conducted in Turkey, which required language teachers to have the written proof that the exam was conducted, these types of alternative assessment appeared as the least preferred assessment methods to be used as the formal assessment. Their frequency of use on the exam papers ranged from 10% for projects, 15% for portfolios, and 8% for oral presentations. Moreover, other types of assessment such self- and peer-assessment and observations forms were not available in the exam papers analyzed.

As for the skills tested, the analysis revealed that the main tested skills/language component were grammar, reading, vocabulary, and writing (partially), while the least tested language skills appeared to be listening and speaking. The number of the items testing grammar and vocabulary outnumbered that of the items testing any other language skill/component.

The frequencies of use were determined to be 85% for grammar, 50% for reading, 65% for vocabulary, and 15% for indirect assessment of writing. However, the frequency of the items aimed at assessing listening were as low as 8%, while it was at the lowest level (3%) for speaking. As the content analysis indicated, speaking assessment were conducted in the form of oral presentations as informal assessment contributing to the overall assessment.

The last category, the feedback provided on the test performance, yielded important results. The analysis showed that a great majority of the exam papers (91%) failed to provide detailed comments or feedback regarding the students' performance. The comments and/or feedback appeared only a number or a score on the papers, with some ticks or crosses showing which answers were accepted as right or wrong. This practice provides no information that will enable students to discern structures, topics, or skills that need improvement. This finding is also alarming mainly due to the following two reasons. The feedback provided is often summative in nature and students must be informed of their strengths as well as weakness in order to achieve beneficial washback. Thus, language teachers, despite the heavy-loaded schedules and limited amount of time, should strive to provide efficient and effective feedback that will enable their students to build upon their past success and failure.

Overall, the content analysis on formal assessment exam papers indicates that the most preferred selection items include multiple choice and matching items, while True/False is used as the least used selection items. Moreover, gap-fill (fill-in-the-blanks) appeared as the most common supply item used. The findings also show that language teachers have a strong preference to use these traditional ways of assessment over alternative assessment such as projects and portfolios. In other words, most Turkish EFL teachers tend to rest on traditional methods of assessment. This might to be contributed to the fact that traditional ways of assessment have several advantages such as easy scoring and relatively easy construction compared to construction of other items and that formal assessment is to be conducted in the classroom in limited time. Another possible reason might be that teachers consider formal examinations the only form of assessment to be conducted.

The findings also reveal that listening and speaking skills seem to be ignored as the test types and items do fail to assess these skills, which receive utmost importance under increasing internationalization and mobility. This might be due to teachers' feeling forced to 'teach and test what is tested' [2, 3] although this might be against their own values or goals since the high-stakes language examinations in Turkey mainly assess grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, leaving no space to the assessment of listening and speaking skills. This finding is clear especially on the exam papers of 8th and 12th grade classes where students are preparing for these language examinations.

This 'teach and test what is tested' raises an important issue for the language assessment: authentic assessment. The content analysis also indicates that most of the items in the traditional assessment types include items that are composed of unrelated language samples, especially in items that aim to test grammar and vocabulary, without being presented in some context.

Regarding the feedback provided to students on their performance, it should be noted that assigning only a number in the form of a score on the exam paper and just indicating the wrong and right answers do not provide detailed information on the level of achievement of a student.

Conclusions and suggestions. Due to increasing internationalization and mobility, to know a language is more important than ever before. Assessment in language classes, as a result, has a pivotal role in not only in assessing the achievement level of language learners but help them for further learning or improvement. Taking this into consideration, this study reported the English language teachers' assessment practices by investigating the formal exam papers. Based on the findings, several suggestions have been made, some of which are expressed as follows. It is essential that teachers be encouraged to consider and adapt alternative assessment such as portfolios and projects in addition to traditional ways of assessment. Equal weight should be allocated in each language skill and component as language means more than learning grammar and vocabulary.

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