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## Language Teachers' Views and Suggestions on the Central Teacher Selection and Recruitment Exam in Turkey

### Abstract

This study inquires into whether prospective English language teachers consider the central exam, *KPSS* (The Selection Examination for Professional Posts in Public Organizations) valid to select and recruit English language teachers, and what suggestions they have concerning the improvement of the exam. The findings indicate that the majority of the participants have negative attitudes towards the exam and think that it is not valid. Moreover, they point out that the exam must include the subject knowledge. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the policy makers to know what they want teachers to do in classrooms and schools, then test and select teachers accordingly.

**Key words:** *teacher selection, teacher recruitment, language teachers, Turkey.*

### Introduction

Growing enrolment and pending retirement have given rise to an increasing demand for teachers in any country. The supply of teachers, on the other hand, has been declining. According to Dolan (2008), “the relationship between teacher supply and demand is such that supply represents the number of teachers eligible to teach, and demand represents the number of teaching positions available” (4). However, in some countries such as Turkey, this relationship is rather problematic. In some school subjects, trained teachers are available in excess of the requirements of the system, while in others untrained teachers have to be appointed due to

non-availability of trained persons. This can be attributed to the fact that YÖK (the Higher Education Council) is responsible for teacher training, increasing/decreasing the number of faculties and the number of students to be accepted at the faculties of education, resulting in failing to control the demand and supply of teachers. With the number of teachers available in excess of the requirements of the system in certain subjects, an examination is naturally required.

Teachers working in state schools in Turkey are employed as civil or public servants as in other countries, such as Austria, Germany and Italy (Grenfell, Kelly, and Jones, 2003) and unlike such countries as Poland or the UK. A competitive central exam, *KPSS* (The Selection Examination for Professional Posts in Public Organizations) is used as the selection process for teaching positions in state schools, while the private sector has its own approach such as conducting formal, standardized interviews, testing basic and subject matter skills, and observing actual teaching performance during a demonstration teaching lesson.

*KPSS* is implemented by The Student Selection and Placement Centre (ÖSYM) and can be taken only once during a year. Teachers take the exam in two sessions. In the morning session, general knowledge and ability questions are taken, while the afternoon one consists of questions pertaining to educational sciences. The exam is composed of three sections, featuring multiple choice questions on general knowledge and ability such as the Turkish language and mathematics, general culture such as the history of Turkey and geography and educational sciences such as principles of learning and teaching:

- 1) General knowledge and ability: this section aims to measure candidates' knowledge and ability in the Turkish language and mathematics, testing the basics of the language and the basic maths skills.
- 2) General Culture: this section deals with the history of Turkey with a focus on the Principles of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, the geography of Turkey, Turkish Culture and Popular Topics.
- 3) Educational Sciences: This section measures pedagogical background, focusing on the general principles of learning and teaching, curriculum and instruction, guidance and counselling.

The exam does not include any items on subject knowledge and candidates are penalized for guessing, four mistakes take one correct response away. Scoring is done out of 100 and there is no passing grade, i.e., the minimum scores are set by the number of teachers taking the test. There is no content (subject area) assessment, i.e., although there are different subject areas that a candidate can teach, such as mathematics, English and biology, all candidates are required to answer the same questions. That is, there are not any different sections or questions for

the candidates who will be teaching a specific age group, which means that any candidate who will be teaching grades 1–8 or grades 9–12 will respond to the same questions. The exam is used to assign teachers to public schools in need, while it is not used as a way of licensing to teach. Private institutions or schools do not require the KPSS exam. Instead, they have their own way of selecting and recruiting teachers.

**Table 1.** The sections and the number of questions in KPSS

Section	Number of questions	The overall weight in the exam	Time allowed (minutes)
<b>The morning session</b>			120
General knowledge and ability	60	30%	
General Culture	60	30%	
<b>The afternoon session</b>			150
Educational Sciences	120	40%	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>270</b>

## **Importance of the study**

According to the General Directorate of Teacher Training (MEB, 2008) in Turkey, the competences determined for teachers are expected to be used mainly in the personal and professional development of teachers, pre-service and in-service teacher training and selection of newly assigned teachers. Below there are some of the main competences prepared for English language teachers:

- Planning English language teaching.
- Using materials and sources for English language teaching.
- Developing students' language skills such as speaking, listening, reading and writing.
- Monitoring and testing students' language development.

Of these competences, developing students' language skills is of utmost importance as the students in Turkey are mostly exposed to the target language in the classroom, which is the place where they get input (Krashen, 1985) for language learning, which implies that an English teacher should be competent in these skills and s/he has a very important role to play in students' performance and success in English language learning. However, although the competences are aimed to be used in the selection of teachers in general, KPSS still lacks the subject knowledge.

Some studies investigated the *KPSS* exam for prospective teachers' views, anxiety levels and predictive validity. In the study by Çoban, Gündoğdu and Zirek (2009), the physical education and sport teacher candidates stated that *KPSS* is not a valid exam to select and recruit language teachers. Moreover, the participants stressed that the exam excludes subject assessment. In another study, Gündoğdu, Çiğmen and Turan (2008) investigated the perceptions of junior and senior prospective teachers about *KPSS*. According to the results, the exam was considered to be unsatisfactory in selecting quality teachers and it caused anxiety. The anxiety was also stressed by the participants in the study by Tümkaya, Aybek and Çelik (2007). Examining the predictor validity of *KPSS* for science and technology pre-service teachers, Baştürk (2008) found that there is an important relationship between a candidate's Grade Point Average (GPA) and his/her performance in the exam, though the significance is low.

## **Method**

The participants of this study were four hundred undergraduate senior students from the English Language Teaching (ELT) departments of six universities randomly selected in Turkey. All the students were senior students and had knowledge about the exam. Of the participants, 322 were female and 78 male. All of the students took the exam upon graduation; however, approximately half of them had taken practice tests and/or practised some parts of the exam.

To collect data, a survey developed by the researcher was used. The survey included 17 statements (Table 2) and the participants were asked to read each of the statements and indicate their agreement or disagreement on a 4-point Likert scale (1= I totally disagree, 2= I do not agree, 3= I agree, 4= I totally agree). In order to analyze data, descriptive statistics measures were applied. The survey was completed by the participants through online survey tools.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

As can be seen in Table 2, the participants do not agree that *KPSS* is a valid exam for selecting and recruiting English language teachers ( $M= 1.17$ ). The participants gave various responses to the test questions included in the exam. The test questions on mathematics and the geography of Turkey were considered to be unnecessary. However, the questions on the Turkish language and pedagogical knowledge of

teaching and learning were highly appreciated. Moreover, the participants highly recommend that there be questions on subject knowledge (the English language) and GPA and the grades in their school experience course be taken into consideration. Since the exam does not include testing language proficiency, a language proficiency exam is suggested.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics on the responses provided to the statements in the questionnaire.

Statements	N	M	Sd	Agreement/ Disagreement
1. The test questions on the Turkish language are necessary.	400	3.70	.457	Totally agree
2. The test questions on mathematics are necessary.	400	1.24	.521	Totally disagree
3. The test questions on Turkish culture and civilization are necessary.	400	3.60	.548	Totally agree
4. The test questions on Atatürk, his principles and history of the Turkish republic are necessary.	400	3.53	.500	Totally agree
5. The test questions on the geographical knowledge of Turkey are necessary.	400	1.56	.631	Don't agree
6. The test questions on the basic knowledge of citizenship are necessary.	400	1.70	.605	Don't agree
7. The test questions on general knowledge and current issues in Turkey and around the world are necessary.	400	2.90	.736	Agree
8. The test questions on psychology of learning and development are necessary.	400	3.58	.494	Totally agree
9. The test questions on program development, principles of learning and teaching, testing and assessment are necessary.	400	3.64	.480	Totally agree
10. The test questions on guidance and counselling are necessary.	400	2.94	.794	Agree
11. <i>KPSS</i> is a valid exam for selecting English language teachers.	400	1.17	.518	Totally disagree
12. There must be questions on subject knowledge (methods, approaches, testing and evaluation, use of technology).	400	3.66	.476	Totally agree
13. In addition to the exam, there must be a language proficiency exam such as <i>TOEFL</i> and <i>KPDS</i> (The Foreign Language Examination for Civil Servants – Turkey).	400	3.59	.493	Totally agree
14. GPA must be taken into consideration.	400	3.21	.895	Agree

Statements	N	M	Sd	Agreement/ Disagreement
15. Grades in the school experience course must be taken into consideration.	400	3.43	.679	Agree
	Yes	%	No	%
16. I attend a preparatory class for the exam.	300	75	100	25
17. The courses I have taken/ am taking are useful for the exam.	203	50.8	197	49.3

The research findings of this study show that the majority of the participants had negative attitudes towards the exam, and they think that it is not a valid exam, which is also supported by the studies conducted by Çoban, Gündoğdu and Zirek (2009), Gündoğdu, Çiğmen and Turan (2008) and Özoğlu (2010). Moreover, they point out that the exam must include the subject knowledge such as methods, approaches, testing and evaluation and use of technology together with a language proficiency exam. This is an important factor to take into account if we are to make the selection and recruitment process more effective and efficient. If the exam is to measure knowledge that is irrelevant to the subjects as taught in the school system, some qualified candidates can score poorly on the exam and be eliminated. This also raises questions about the validity in teacher selection and in measuring applicants' potential for teaching. Since they are going to teach English in the near future, it is not acceptable to exclude test items checking their level of English, especially when we consider that the exam includes the same questions for all teachers, though their fields are different. The exam cannot test the skills and competences that language teachers are expected to possess. One cannot suppose that a language teacher who has passed the exam but cannot speak the language well and efficiently will contribute to his/her students' development. One key finding emerging from the studies shows that students taught by teachers with a greater verbal ability learn more than those taught by teachers with a lower verbal ability (Wenglinsky 2000; Andrew, Cobb, and Giampietro 2005; Stronge 2007). Verbal ability, knowledge of teaching and learning and content knowledge seem to be the most important qualifications that we can expect from our teachers, though Aloe and Becker (2009) found that teacher verbal ability is not the strongest predictor.

The findings of the study also show that a great majority of the participants attend a preparatory class outside the university to pass the exam, which is in line with the findings of Çoban, Gündoğdu and Zirek (2009). This finding signals that there might be a discrepancy between the program followed at the department and the content of the exam. If the participants are not satisfied and consider extra preparation necessary, they may feel that the curriculum they follow is not useful,



thereby leading those to pay more attention to preparation for the exam than the skills required in their teaching profession, in which language teachers should be equipped with literacy skills.

## **Conclusion**

The responses provided to the questionnaire revealed that *KPSS* is not viewed as a valid exam for selecting and recruiting English language teachers mainly due to the lack of subject knowledge and assessment of the language skills that a language teacher is expected to have. When the competences prepared by The General Directorate of Teacher Training in Turkey are analyzed, English language teachers are expected to develop students' overall English communicative proficiency through communicative activities, focusing on the four skills. However, *KPSS* is a test that focuses on the acquisition of technical and cognitive skills, rather than certain features of alternative, continuous and formative assessment. As stated by the participants in the study, *KPSS* leads the prospective English language teachers morph into teacher candidates attending to cognitive skills required by the test rather than advancing their communicative skills, subject knowledge and methodology. Subject knowledge in the language teaching profession is an indispensable part of the profession. Therefore, policy makers together with teacher educators urgently need to improve the exam in accordance with the competences that they have specified in order to put into practice what they want teachers to do and achieve in the classroom.

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