

An Evaluation of the Postgraduate Proficiency Tests
of English in the University of Kerbala

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Abstract

This paper aims at evaluating the Postgraduate Proficiency tests of English in the University of Kerbala which were as an exrequirement for joining higher studies in Iraqi universities.

First, it defines the concept of proficiency, states other public tests which measure the students' proficiency in English, connecting on the TOFEL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). In addition, it points out similarities and the differences between the two tests, presenting some suggestions to improve these tests and questioning whether the substitute course is quite sufficient for those tests.

1.Introduction

Testing plays a vital role in the teaching/learning process. Learners have to know what they have achieved in a second or foreign language. Teachers need information about this achievement to be able to assess and make meaningful educational decisions.

The field of language testing has been influenced by vast radical changes in many fields. In linguistics, many theories gave rise to studies about the nature of language use; being enriched by work in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and the ethnography of communication.

As a result, new insights and broader views of language, language use, language teaching and language acquisition have winded the scope of language testing. In addition, advances in psychometrics and statistics have affected the field of language testing as well.

Since, *testing* means the use of tests, so it is appropriate to define the term *test*. Richards *et al* (1992: 377) define a test as *any procedure for measuring ability, knowledge, or performance*. Obviously, *ability* implies what people can do in, or with a language. Having information about this ability is of great benefit for both the teacher as well as the learner.

Another definition is presented by Carroll (1968: 46), stating that a psychological or educational test is *a procedure designed to elicit certain behavior from which one can make inferences about certain characteristics of an individual*. Thus, a test is considered as a measurement instrument to obtain a specific sample of the testees' behavior. Many other definitions by linguists assert this fact; pointing out that those dependable measures of language ability are needed for various situations and different purposes.

2. Purposes of Testing

Language tests are usually used for types of educational decisions such as selection, placement, diagnosis, and evaluation. They are also used to manifest wider social implications i.e. awarding certifications or high school diplomas for people, who want to be employed in special organizations, such as interpreters, translators, secretaries, etc...

Hughes (1996: 7) presents the following purposes:

- a. To measure language proficiency of any language courses that candidates may have followed.
- b. To discover how far students have achieved the objectives of a course study.
- c. To diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses, to identify what they know what they do not know.
- d. To assist placement of students by identifying the stage or part of a teaching program most appropriate to their ability.

The four purposes show clearly that tests are used to obtain information, which definitely will vary from one situation to another. Therefore, tests can be categorized according to the types of information being got. Thus, there are four types of tests: proficiency tests, achievement tests, diagnosis tests, and placement tests. This paper is concerned with the first type only.

3.Proficiency Tests

First, it is worthy to know some definitions of the term *proficiency*. Richards *et al* (1992: 4) point out that *proficiency* refers to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language. Consequently, *language proficiency* implies a person's skill in using language for a specific purpose.

Bachman (1995: 16) states that *language proficiency* is a term used to refer in general to knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language, irrespective of how, where, or under what conditions it has been acquired.

It is noted that the term *proficiency* has been used as a synonym with *language ability*. In order to get a complete picture of a learner's language proficiency, you would need to use a test set consisting of several tests of different kinds – structure, extended writing, and listening test as well as an oral test. (Underhill, 1987: 12). In this statement, the concept of *proficiency* is general.

It is exemplified in the Cambridge examinations (First Certificate and Proficiency Examinations) and the Oxford EFL examinations (Preliminary and Higher). Such tests are not based on any course, a specific syllabus or particular purpose in mind for the language. Yet, they must contain detailed specifications of what testees are able to do in the language to be regarded as proficient. In some other proficiency tests, the testees must have sufficient command of the language for a particular purpose; taken into consideration the level and kind of English needed for courses in particular subjects such as arts, sciences, and so on. Thus, the concept of proficiency is not general in such cases. Brown (1996: 2) considers proficiency and placement tests as norm – referenced tests which help administrators and teachers to make program – level decision, contrary to diagnostic and achievement tests, being criterion – referenced ones, helping teachers to make classroom – level decisions.

Harmer (2002: 321) states that proficiency tests give a general picture of a student's knowledge and ability. It is noted that most linguists have considered proficiency tests as tests designed to measure global language abilities or proficiencies i.e. including listening ability, reading ability, writing ability, and so on. The test structure contains a few relatively long subtests with a variety of question contents. Yet, students have no idea about the specific content or the skills to be tested by such questions.

4. Some International Proficiency Tests

Harmer (ibid: 333) presents the following list of some international tests in some universities which students can take:

1. Cambridge tests offered by the University of Cambridge local Examinations Syndicate (ULES), Cambridge. UK. These tests are in general English. They consist of five main levels:

- a) Key English Test (KET) for elementary testees.
- b) Preliminary English Test (PET) for lower intermediate testees.
- c) First Certificate in English (FCE) for upper intermediate testees.
- d) Certificate of Advanced English (CAE) for upper intermediate/ advanced testees.

e) Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE) for very advanced testees.

2. City and Guilds Pitman qualifications offered by City and Guilds, London in the following areas:

- a) Communication in Teaching English.
- b) English for Business Communication.
- c) English for Office Skills.
- d) ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages).
- e) ESOL for Young Learners.
- f) Spoken ESOL.
- g) Spoken ESOL for Young Learners.

3. IELTS (International English Language Testing System), administered by UCLES, the British Council, and IDP Education, Australia.

British and Australian universities use these tests to measure the level of would – be students or trainers/ teachers.

4. Diploma in English for International Communication offered by the institute of Linguistics, London.

5. SESOL (Spoken English for Speakers of Other Languages) offered by Trinity College, London.

6. TOFEL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) offered by Educational Testing Services, New Jersey, USA.

7. TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) offered by TOEIC Service International, Princeton, New Jersey, USA. TOEIC scores are used by some companies to judge the level of English of potential employees.

It is noted that the most widely known standardized test among those is the TOFEL. Therefore, it will be tackled in detail to be compared with proficiency tests in the Iraqi Universities, exclusively, in the University of Kerbala.

5. The TOEFL Test

The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a test used to measure the level of the English language proficiency of non – native speakers of English. It evaluates the potential success of testees use and understand Standard English at a college level.

Since 1963 the TOEFL has been used by universities, scholarship selection committees of governments in addition to agencies such as Fulbright, the Agency for International Development, AMIDEAST, Latin American Scholarship Program and others. Approximately, one million students from 180 countries register to make the TOEFL every year at the centres established throughout the world. The admission committees of more than 2400 colleges and universities in USA and Canada require the foreign students to submit TOEFL scores with their application papers to be allowed for admission, in addition, many universities use these scores as a requirement for doctoral foreign applicants. The TOEFL is also used by many institutions in other countries where English is the language of instruction. Almost, more than 4,300 colleges, universities, professional schools, and sponsoring institutions require TOEFL scores each year.

5.1. Types of TOEFL Programs

Three TOEFL testing programs are presented:

- a) the Supplemental Paper – Based TOEFL.
- b) the Computer – Based TOEFL.
- c) the Institutional TOEFL.

The first and the second programs are administered officially, whereas the third one is not. Few comments are to be stated about the last two types, whereas the first type is to be tackled in detail.

The Computer – Based TOEFL was introduced in 1998 in the United States, Canada, Latin America, Europe, Australia, Africa, the Middle East, some Asian countries and in 2002–2003, it was introduced to China. The Institutional TOEFL is administered by more than 1,200 schools, colleges, universities and private agencies. This type is similar to the official Paper – Based TOEFL in length, format and difficulty; yet the dates and purposes are different. It corresponds with the beginning of an academic session in a college or university. Also it is used for admission, placement, eligibility or employment but only where it is offered.

5.2. The Content of the Supplementary Paper – Based TOEFL

The Paper – Based TOEFL has the following sections:

1. Listening Comprehension

This test is used to measure the testees ability to understand spoken English. They must listen to various types of questions such as short conversations, class discussions or passages on a tape recording then respond to multiple – choice questions about them. Pictures or visual aids are not used in this test.

2. Structure and Written Expression

This test is used to demonstrate testees ability to recognize grammatically correct English. Two types of questions are used in this test. The first is incomplete sentences with four words or phrases. The testees have to choose the word or phrase that best completes the sentence. The second is incomplete sentences or sentences with underlined words or phrases. The testees have to find the errors in these sentences.

3. Reading Comprehension

This test is used to measure the testees ability to understand written English by answering multiple – choice the questions about the ideas and the meanings of words in reading passages.

4. The Essay / Written English

This test is used to measure the testees ability to produce correct, organized, and meaningful English by writing an essay on a given topic. Three types of topics are commonly used in this test: argument, persuasion, and extension. The testees do not need any previous knowledge of the topic to answer since the topics are very general.

It is worthy to note that the Essay/Written English test is not given with every paper TOEFL test. It is offered five times each year so if the testee needs an essay/written English score, he has to choose a TOEFL test date when this test is scheduled (Philips, 2003: xvi).

Sharpe (2004: ix) presents the following timetable for the Supplemental Paper – Based TOEFL Test.
Total Time: 3 hours

Section 1 (40 Minutes)	Listening Comprehension	50 Questions
Section 2 (25 Minutes)	Structure and Written Expression	40 Questions
Section 3 (55 Minutes)	Reading Comprehension	50 Questions
Test of Written English	Essay	1 Question

6. TOEFL Testing Rules

Special rules are to be followed by the testees having Paper – Based TOEFL Test:

1. At the end of each test section, the testees must stop writing at once after the administrator stops.
2. The testees are not allowed to work in any section of the test other than the section that is worked in officially by the testees.

If any of these testing rules are violated, the testee is warned. Perhaps his test will not be scored or he may be dismissed since violating the rules is considered cheating.

Before having the test, the testees are asked to pay the fee for the test, which is \$35, and bring their passports with the complete admission form. Moreover, they are not allowed to eat, drink, and use mobiles or any testing aide during the test.

7. Proficiency Tests in Iraq/ University of Kerbala

The English Language Proficiency Test Centre was established in the University of Kerbala in 2004 according to the Ministerial order in 18/1/2004 (the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research). The aim of establishing this Centre was to evaluate the postgraduate proficiency in English as a requirement for joining higher studies in Iraqi Universities. In addition, this Centre facilitates performing this test in the city centre i.e. Kerbala instead of having it in the Capital, Baghdad, or in other provinces. A special committee was formed to compose questions, correct test papers as well as forming a special administrative team. The Centre established a schedule for dates of the test: starting in March and ending in September. The test was achieved jointly or separately for both sections: scientific and humanities; depending on the number of the testees. As for the total number of scores, the test is offered 300 scores. The skills tested in this test are: reading comprehension, structure and vocabulary, and essay or composition writing. Also, the testees are asked to pay the fee of the test, which is 5000 I.D.

8. Similarities and Differences Undoubtedly; there are points of similarities or differences between the Paper – Based TOEFL T and the Proficiency Test in Iraq /University of Kerbala.

Preparing an adequate, quiet and well –ventilated room with enough time and clear scheduling for the testees is similar in both tests. As for pre-administrative arrangements. The testees are given precise information about the test such as the place and time of the test, and bringing their identification cards. Preparation for the test is achieved by having ready adequate materials and equipment such as test – papers, answer sheets, pencils, boards, etc... Well qualified and trusty monitors are chosen before the test. They are supplied with necessary information such as test directions and schedules of time and position. As for the scoring process, the scores of the test and the subtests are distributed clearly on the test paper. Besides, a sufficient qualified staff is needed for all scoring procedures. Concerning the last logistical issue i.e. the test construction, many remarkable TOEFL references are depended upon to construct proficiency test items trying as much as possible to make it similar, to some extent, to the TOEFL test in its content and linguistic level. It is worthy to note that a comparative description of different language tests has been made as part of the Cambridge TOEFL Comparability Study to the examine comparability of the EFL proficiency test batteries. The results show that TOEFL reading passage contained 60% of complex sentences, stems of vocabulary items contained 43% complex

sentences, and structure items contained high proportions of abstract and negative information. Raters state that 58% of the TOEFL items are *academic*, 30% *technical*, and 23% *American culture* in topic. (Bachman, 1995: 152–53). However, bearing these findings in mind, reading comprehension passages are chosen from topics related to our culture, as well as items mentioned in all of the activities being tested. The techniques used in testing grammar section in Proficiency Test/University of Kerbala / are multiple – choice items, paraphrase, completion or correction. As for vocabulary, testing is done by a number of different operations such as synonyms, definitions, antonyms, or gap –filling. More or less, these techniques are similar in both tests.

Yet; there is a remarkable difference between the two tests according to the skills being tested. In the local Proficiency tests an important skill is missing i.e. listening comprehension. It is known that *listening* is used to refer to a complex activity that permits us to understand spoken language. Moreover, *listening is not only a skill area in language performance, but also a critical means of acquiring a second language*, as Rost states in his article "Listening" in Carter and Nunan (2002: 7). Excluding this skill in such tests may be due to the difficulties encountered in its application. Listening multiple – choice items are auditory in nature so their validity is based on not only the context of the message but on other external factors such as the physical environment, the quality of the tape, the speaker's voice quality, the gender of the speaker, the length of the speech and other variables to be controlled during the test. To ensure the test validity, it measures what is supposed to measure. At least, the test must have face validity. As for the reliability of the Proficiency Test, it is difficult to give it on two occasions. So, partially, reliability here is enhanced by making test instructions very clear, allowing no chance for variety in the answers as well as ensuring constancy in test conditions.

9. Conclusions

After discussing the points related to both types of tests, it is appropriate to mention some comments about the Proficiency Tests in the University of Kerbala. It is noted that these tests are not taken seriously by some testees, thinking that they must not fail in such a type of tests, since it is just a license for joining higher studies.

In addition, most of the testees' linguistic abilities are of a low level; resulting in a high percentage of failure in this test.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has suspended these tests and substituted them by courses taken throughout the first year of higher studies.

Yet; these courses are not sufficient enough to acquire proficiency in English. Many previous courses showed that only one language skill is taught and the other skills are excluded. Thus, "language proficiency" cannot be acquired by students since this term implies having a global competence in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

10. Recommendations

To develop this type of tests, some suggestions are presented:

- 1 – Offering the testees a training condensed course for two months or more before performing the test to be familiar with the test program.
- 2 – Such tests can be enriched by cooperation with some international Proficiency Centres to be acquainted with the latest innovations and techniques concerning this field.
- 3 – Having qualified committees of many experts in English to design teaching materials for various specializations in higher studies to have almost one unified linguistic level in English.
- 4 – Having refreshment courses abroad for instructors who teach English in these training courses for higher students.

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