

Can ESP be tested by EGP?

Ahmadi, M., PhD.

Faculty member of Paramedical Sciences, Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences and Health Services

ABSTRACT

Background: There are two main methods employed for the evaluation of the reading comprehension ability of students of ESP; one using specialized English texts, and the other with general English texts.

Purpose: To determine whether or not there is a correlation between the two methods.

Methods: In the regular 1998 examinations for admission to PhD courses for 18 different medical disciplines, in which 30 subject-specific English test items were given to the applicants of each discipline, all of them were also evaluated using a set of 30 general English test items (n=2010).

Results: There was a positive correlation of 71% between the scores of the examinees in the two tests, the highest and the lowest correlation being respectively in the scores of the applicants of Epidemiology (84%; n=118), and environmental health (56%; n=70).

Conclusion: Our finding seems to warrant the use of EGP test as an adequate measure of English language competency for academic purposes.

Keywords: LANGUAGE TESTING; READING COMPREHENSION ASSESSMENT; EGP; ESP.

Journal of Medical Education Spring 2003 3(1); 7- 10

Introduction

In most screening examinations conducted for admission to PhD courses in Iran, one section is ESP reading ability. This is usually done using 30 ESP reading comprehension items given to the applicants of each discipline. Considering the fact that most often the screening exams are held for up to 20 different disciplines, it involves the preparation of approximately 500 ESP reading comprehension test items, - which are not only highly time-consuming and rather expensive to prepare, but also necessitate the availability of several highly qualified and experienced test designers. However if it is proved that the screening evaluation can be successfully accomplished using general English texts rather than the ESP ones, the preparation of 500 ESP test items could be reduced to the designing of simply 30 EGP items - far easier to prepare and definitely more cost-effective.

In this area several studies have been carried out especially in English speaking countries. British universities have shown special interest in ESP

Cambridge University, the British Council, and the International Development Program of Australia (IDP), is the most widely recognized EGP and semi-ESP test in this country intended to evaluate"

the complete range of English language skills which will commonly be encountered by students when studying or training in the medium of English"(1) in the UK and certain academic centers in Australia, Canada and New Zeland¹. In the US and also Canada, TOEFL, which is just a general English proficiency test, is considered the most appropriate measure proficiency of the examinees to colleges and universities and to governments and other agencies for placement of students in universities"(3). Taking into consideration the considerable differences in these two approaches to ESP assessment and the existence of numerous problems involved in their conduction, this research was carried out to determine how reliable it would be if ESP tests were replaced by EGP ones.

1- speaking modules. There is an option of either academic or general training reading and writing modules. Academic is suitable for candidates planning to undertake higher education study. General training is suitable for candidates planning to undertake non-academic training or work experiences or for immigration purposes.

Materials and Methods

Following prior coordination with the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, the 1998 screening examination (This examination, held once a year, is conducted by the testing department of the Basic Sciences Education Council, located in the offices of the Deputy for Academic Affairs of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education) (4) for admission to PhD courses offered in the various fields of Medical Sciences was chosen as the time for carrying out the main phase of this research. 2010 candidates in 18 disciplines participated in

this examination (Table1). For each discipline, apart from subject-specific questions related to each particular course, 30 R.C. test items, prepared from specific specialized texts had to be designed. To ensure adequate set of 30 General English items, selected from the book: Bruce Rogers:

Princeton. 1998:(pp 58-60; 111-112; 137-138) was also given to all the examinees. Contrary to the ESP test items, which differed according to each discipline, the EGP items were the same for all participants. As it was assumed that answering EGP questions after ESP

TABLE 1. Correlation coefficient between the ESP and EGP scores of applicants for admission to PhD courses of medical sciences.

No.	Discipline	No.	Correlation Coefficient	P.Value
1	Epidemiology	118	84%	0.001
2	Mother and child health	111	82%	0.001
3	Entomology and Vector Control	43	80%	0.001
4	Pharmacology	105	78%	0.001
5	Medical Physics	43	78%	0.001
6	Biological Products	276	77%	0.001
7	Clinical Psychology	149	77%	0.001
8	Nutritional Sciences	169	74%	0.001
9	Health Education	172	74%	0.001
10	Physiology	108	73%	0.001
11	Occupational Health	61	73%	0.001
12	Medical Parasitology	164	68%	0.001
13	Medical Histology	61	68%	0.001
14	Health Services Management	71	68%	0.001
15	Biochemistry	110	67%	0.001
16	Medical Immunology	93	64%	0.001
17	Medical Bacteriology	86	62%	0.001
18	Environmental Hygiene	70	56%	0.001
19	All Disciplines	2010	71%	0.001

ones might have a negative effect on the quality of the applicants' responses to the EGP questions. In order to avoid this, both ESP and EGP testing R.C. passages were arranged alternately in question booklets prior to their being handed out to the examinees. Following correction of the answer sheets, the ESP scores of all candidates were once compared with their EGP scores using

correlation coefficient between the two scores was determined. The same procedure was performed

for the scores of examinees of each discipline separately.

Results

The correlation coefficient between the scores of candidates in the ESP and EGP tests was 71%($P<0.001$) and positive. The degree of correlation coefficient between the scores of the candidates for each discipline in ESP and EGP tests is shown in table 1. It shows that the

examinees of Epidemiology (84%) and mother and child health (82%) ranked first and second while Environmental health (56%) had the lowest degree.

Discussion

There are two primary methods for assessing English language competencies in higher education: ESP tests and EGP tests.

As is true with all assessment methods both methods have some advantages and disadvantages problems in using ESP are:

1. Disparity in the level of difficulty of the ESP reading comprehension texts and the related test items designed, especially when applicants are being screened for several different disciplines. This may mostly be due to the varying styles used by authors in the writing of the scientific textbooks from which the testing texts are selected, or to the individual preferences of the test designers in choosing certain texts, or even to their specific methods of designing test items.
2. Occasionally an inadequate knowledge or misunderstanding of some test designers of the scientific content of the texts chosen.
3. Differences in the background knowledge of each applicant of the scientific content of each text (5).
4. The large number of the test items to be prepared when several applicants are being screened for a number of disciplines. This final problem alone can cause major difficulties for test administrators- for example, in the 1998 PhD screening entrance examination, eighteen different disciplines were offered. For each of these disciplines the committee in charge had to prepare, among other test items, 30 subject-specific reading comprehension questions-approximately 540 test items in all. Considering the numerous steps involved in the preparation of each test item, planning, selecting of suitable texts, designing of each question itself, the repeated checking and rechecking by several experienced English test designers, typing, It can be perceived how time-consuming, and expensive these exams can be, and how many experienced test designers are needed for the preparation of so many ESP -RC test items. As one of the main characteristics of a good test is its specificity (6), these aforementioned problems can drastically lower the exam validity. It is therefore obvious

that if, in this exam, instead of giving 30 ESP test items to the applicants of each separate discipline, the administrators could use only one set of 30 EGP items for all the candidates, most of these problems could be avoided.

In Britain, some kind of semi-ESP tests are popular and have conducted numerous studies in this area. C.M. Clapham(2) acknowledged the existence of many problems associated with ESP tests, such as the difficulty in determining appropriate sources for specialized texts, the level of specificity of the reading texts, selection of passages closely related to the subject area of the examinees and equally familiar for all applicants

advisable not to give academic students subject-specific reading modules, but to give them EGAP (English for General Academic Purposes) reading

clear answer or solution to the problem of discrepancies in the background knowledge of examinees of some of the EGAP reading texts.

One major finding of the Clapham investigation is

specific for their readers, language proficiency will be a better predictor of reading scores than

general non-academic texts would face validity" (2). Alderson does not basically

texts. He questions what was meant by the term

their subject matter was unfamiliar to Lado, the American linguist, has a different idea. He is inclined to use general texts rather than specific ones. He considers language to be a system that is unique and the same in all situations. This system, although it can be used in infinite different situations, its elements are always limited.

communication are potentially almost infinite the elements of language on the other hand are limited and it is more profitable to sample these elements than to sample the great visibility of situations in which language can be used."(8).

In other words, LGP (language for general purposes) has limited and definite elements in all situations whereas ESP can have numerous forms. Hence in many language assessments, instead of evaluating these numerous forms, it is better to

test that form of language, which, in all situations has limited elements and identical systems.

The subject of ESP testing, however, continues to be discussed by the testing specialists of different countries. But what does seem quite obvious is that the academic centers in USA and parts of Canada by relying on EGP tests such as TOEFL, etc have almost discarded ESP tests; whereas the universities and colleges in the UK and Australia continue to use and develop semi-specialised tests (EGAP) such as IELTS .

Our study showed a positive correlation (71%) between the scores of all applicants in the ESP and EGP tests, thereby demonstrating that if all the applicants overall get a good grade in general English tests, they will also be able to obtain good scores (up to 71%) in subject-specific English tests- and vice versa- if they obtain poor scores in EGP tests- they will encounter difficulties in subject-specific English tests too. According to the research findings, there is also a positive correlation between the scores of the applicants of each discipline in both the ESP and EGP tests.

Given the difficulties associated with designing ESP tests with good validity and reliability our finding seems to warrant the use of EGP test as an adequate measure of English language competency for academic purposes. Further studies to investigate predictive validity of English language tests for academic performance seems to be necessary.

In order to determine whether similar results will be obtained or not, it is suggested a similar study be conducted on examinees applying for

admissions to PhD courses of non-medical disciplines.

References

- 1-IELTS, Official site of the International English Language Testing System [Online].1997[cited 1998 Jan 21]; Available from: URL: <http://www.ielts.org/>
- 2-Clapham CM. The development of IELTS. Cambridge University Press; 1996. p. 1-10, 50-63,162-63, 188-205.
- 3-Madsen Harold S. Techniques in Testing. Oxford University Press. 1983. p.189-90.
- 4-The assessment department of Basic Sciences Education Council, Deputy for Academic Affaires of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education.The Bulletin of the examination for admission to PhD courses of medical sciences. Deputy for Academic Affaires of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education; 1998
- 5-Alderson JC, Urquhart AH. The effect of students' academic discipline on their performance on ESP reading test. Lang Test 1985; 2:192-204.
- 6-Harris DP. Testing English as a Second Language.New York:Mc Graw Hill Company; 1969. p.13-24.
- 7-Alderson J. Charles.New procedures for validating proficiency tests of ESP: theory and practice. Lang Test 1988; 5: 220-32
- 8-Lado R. Language testing: the construction and use of foreign language tests. New York: Mc Graw Hill Company; 1961. p. 26.