

EVALUATION OF NATIONAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEST IN TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

Various language proficiency tests are administered throughout the world for the selection of people for academic and professional purposes. In Turkey, Student Selection and Placement Centre (OSYM) coordinates all of the national tests. Foreign Language Test (YDS) is one of the national tests which measure the foreign language proficiency level of candidates. The test is conducted for state employees who want to be appointed to a post abroad permanently or who want to raise their pay status, for master degree and PhD candidates, would-be associate professors and general practitioners who want to be specialists. Having an adult target group of candidates and academic texts from various different fields are two significant characteristic features of YDS. This study aims to evaluate YDS in terms of a number of common characteristics of adult education and language for specific purposes. Analysis were conducted under the title of originality and authenticity of questions, candidates' information about the test and its process, fair distribution of questions between academic science fields. The findings of the study indicate that originality of questions and candidates' acknowledgement of test are bright sides of YDS whereas fair distribution of questions and inability of measuring four basic skills of a language are concluded as the adverse sides of the test.

Keywords: Foreign Languages Test (YDS), Adult Education, Language for Specific Purposes.

INTRODUCTION

A lot of foreign language tests are administered for a great number of languages all around the world. For instance, for English as a foreign language or international language the most popular tests are TOEFL ((Test of English as a Foreign Language) and IELTS (International English Language Testing System). For French, it is TEF (Test d'évaluation du Français) or TCF (Test de connaissance du Français). For Spanish Celu (Certificado de Espanol: lengua y Uso) or DELE (Diplomas de Espanol como lengua extranjera) are administered. All these international tests are eligible and accepted in Turkey, too. However, we have also national foreign language tests which are held by governmental institutions. These language tests are only eligible within Turkey. If Turkish citizen plans to get a master's degree or PhD degree or a civil servant plans to get a chance to work abroad as a representative of Turkish government or a practitioner plans to be a specialist, they all have to take government's national foreign languages test.

Student Selection and Placement Centre (OSYM) executes these tests and they are called Foreign Language Placement Tests (YDS). Until 2013, test was held in there different types; test for social sciences, for sciences & maths and medical sciences. Besides, to present an alternative option and not to limit the candidates only three academic fields, OSYM were administering one more test twice a year. Nevertheless, in January 2013, it was announced in a press release that from then on all the foreign language tests would be gathered in one hand and it would be called as YDS. After the new regulation was published in Official Gazette in Turkey, a new era began for the young, middle and elderly adults. Thus the target groups of

YDS candidates are adults. While preparing or assessing a test for adults, it is a significant criterion to act according to the characteristics of adult learning (Knowles, 1984). In this context; language for specific purposes, which emerged as particularly for adult learners, has an important place both in the preparation and assessment of language training programs for adults. Rather than general English phrases and sentences, YDS embodies academic texts belonging to various disciplines. Therefore with this feature, YDS could be regarded as a test of language for specific purposes. In this study, YDS test is analyzed according to the common characteristic features of adult education and language for specific purposes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is YDS?

Since 2013, YDS has been applied in Turkey with the "Regulations on Procedures and Principles about Foreign Language Placement in Turkey" which was published in Official Gazette. The test is implemented twice a year in autumn (September) and in spring (April) as a paper based type exam in 42 different cities in Turkey. Since September 2014, once in each month, that is 12 times a year, a computer-based language test is applied just for English language in a private university campus in Ankara. 150-minute exam is administered in 23 different languages (German, Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Danish, Armenian, Persian, French, Georgian, Dutch, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Polish, Hungarian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Ukrainian, Greek). 10 (German, Arabic, Bulgarian, Persian, French, English, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Greek) of these languages are prepared in a multiple choice exam format and measure the foreign language skills of candidates accordingly. Multiple choice format tests consist of 80 questions and each question is 1.25 points. The rest 13 foreign languages are evaluated with a text translation in between 150-200 words. The languages (German, Arabic, French, English and Russian) with over 1000 and above candidates are applied twice a year. The test is administered only once a year for languages which have less than a thousand candidates (OSYM, 2015).

Table 1: Foreign language tests in multiple choice format in YDS

Language	Num.of Candidates	Num.of Questions	Arithmetic Mean
English	247.063	80	34,071
Arabic	5.376	80	34,350
German	2.590	80	37,071
French	1.662	80	46,333
Russian	1.202	80	41,809
Persian	847	80	38,268
Spanish	525	80	34,703
Bulgarian	287	80	59,298
Italian	260	80	41,757
Greek	138	80	35,373

Resource: OSYM, 2015

The test is scored out of 100 points. The score between 90-100 points is A level, 80-89 is B level, 70-79 is C level, 60-69 is D level and 50-59 is E level (OSYM, 2015). The employee-candidates who get C and above levels earn higher salaries than their other colleagues. Besides, general practitioner candidates who get C and above are eligible to attend the specialist test in medicine and assistant professors get a chance to become associate

professors. However, as the arithmetic means are seen in Table 1, it is really hard for candidates to get high marks from the tests. Reading, grammar and vocabulary are the target skills that are measured in YDS. In other words; listening, speaking and writing skills are not tested. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the different types of question in the test.

Table 2: Question Types and Their Distribution in YDS

Type of Question	Number of Questions
Vocabulary	6
Grammar	10
Cloze test	10
Sentence Completion	10
Translation	6
Paragraph Reading	20
Conservation	5
Restatement	4
Suitable Expression	4
Irrelevant Sentence in a Paragr	5
Total	80

Related Works

Since the target audience is quite large and it has a national texture, there have been quite a few studies about YDS in Turkey. For instance, in their study, Akpınar and Cakildere (2013) analyzed the effects of YDS on four basic skills of academics in Turkey. They find out that while YDS positively affects reading and grammar skills, it has negative effects on writing, listening and speaking skills of academics. In another study, Gur (2012) argues that YDS does not test the candidates' four basic skills and it is of harmful effect on them. Moreover, he states that all the questions in upper-intermediate and advanced level and they are quite difficult for candidates. Similar results were found by Yavuzer and Gover (2012). The two researchers emphasize that when they cannot achieve their goals in YDS, academics try hard to cope with stress and anxiety because they think the test questions are so much above their language skills. Gokduz (2005), in his unpublished master thesis, discusses the vocabulary questions in YDS. He found out that the test is lack of measuring the vocabulary skills of candidates since the variety of the words are limited to specific topics and they are really at high level and sophisticated.

Other than Turkey, there are a lot of countries in the world that test foreign language skills of their citizens. For instance, Cheng (2008) studied the national English test in China. She states that English tests in China are so important for learners that it is a kind of key for the success of their lifetimes. Erickson et al. (2015) also conducted a survey on students' achievements in terms of English as a foreign language test on the level of students and their schools. They found out some differences in students' performance at both student level and school setting level.

Purpose

As it is stated in the related studies part, there are a lot of studies on YDS in Turkey. However, no studies have been identified about YDS in terms of common characteristics of adult learning and language for specific purposes. Besides, it is also one of the first studies

that introduces Turkish national foreign language test at the international level. The present study aims to identify following issues:

1. What is the test like and how the application process takes place?
 - a) Do the questions range from easy to difficult?
 - b) Does the test meet the needs, demands and interests of candidates?
- c) Does the test measure all of the language skills of candidates when compared to major international foreign language tests?
- d) What kinds of test techniques are applied to measure the foreign language skills of candidates?
 - e) Are candidates aware of all the application process of the test?
2. Is there a fair distribution of questions between the study fields? (E.g. equal dispersion among science, social sciences and medical sciences)
3. How authentic and original are the questions in the test?

Limits of the Study

This paper is limited to analyze English language tests in YDS. Besides, English language questions between 2013 spring and 2015 fall are analyzed. However; it is limited to 10 percent of the questions since OSYM does not share rest of the questions with publicity.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This is a descriptive study which is conducted to examine YDS test administered nationally in Turkey in terms of common features of adult learning and language for specific purposes. In this study, "document review" process was used. Qualitative research method is conducted with the information about facts and analysis of written materials (Yildirim and Simsek, 2008). Related studies both in Turkey and in the world are scanned and sorted out according to the objectives of this present study. Turkish documents were translated into English. Data in documents were analyzed comparatively according to the common characteristics of adult learning and language for specific purposes for the goal of the study. Then, the obtained data were reported and paper was terminated with the inferences, comment and recommendations in findings and discussion part.

Process and Data Analysis

1. National foreign language test was changed in 2013, it created great confusion among candidates in Turkey and the idea of making a scientific assessment of the issue came up when it became a trending topic on social media. In this context, a proceeding was presented in 2014 at Eskisehir Osmangazi University.

2. The proceeding was decided to be converted to a paper by expanding the study. Therefore, the study of literature in order to determine the characteristics that should be considered in adult education was made. At first, studies of Malcolm Knowles (1980; 1984; 1996; 1998) and some other important adult researchers' studies (Davenport, 1987; Brookfield, 1990; Galbraith, 1990) were analyzed.

3. Owing to the fact that texts from various academic disciplines take place in YDS rather than general English topics and contexts, YDS can be evaluated in context of language for specific purposes. A literature review was conducted about the topic, primarily the studies of Douglas (2002) and Mc Namara (1997).

4. The sources were carefully examined and common characteristics of adult learning and language for specific purposes were identified.

5. The content of test, its application process, fair distribution of questions and authenticity of questions were determined as the items to be searched.

6. After literature review and evaluation of the test questions, obtained data were shared in findings part and discussed comparatively. Drawbacks and alternative suggestions on them were listed in recommendation part.

RESULTS

YDS Test and Its application Process

Multiple choice question format is preferred in tests like YDS, TOEFL and IELTS. Even though short-answer questions are applied in both TOEFL and IELTS, the most suitable question technique in Turkey is multiple choice in which answer sheets are evaluated by optical readers. Semerci (2004) supports the same idea in his paper. He conducted a survey to elicit the ideas of adults who attend language courses in Elazig, the staff of Firat University Faculty of Education and employees of Educational Research and Development Department in Ministry of Education, employees of OSYM and members of Private Courses Association about learning based on multiple choice test. Overall, it is found out that the learning based on multiple choice tests are embodied and seen as a supplementary method to traditional teaching. In the US, another study conducted on 400 adult educators, it is identified that %47 of educators use multiple choice, %26 choose short answer type and %19 prefer final projects (Beaman, 1996). Moreover, YDS tests only the reading, grammar and vocabulary skills of candidates whereas TOEFL and IELTS tests four language skills of candidates from different aspects. Since YDS measures only one skill, which is reading, TOEFL and IELTS test scores are required from the candidates who go abroad for training purposes. Besides, some other alternative ways are also tried to measure the other skills when it is needed.

For instance, Armed Forces in Turkey prepare a listening test to select officers for permanent mission abroad. They calculate the arithmetic mean of both YDS and listening test. As similar, two top universities in Turkey, Bosphorus University and Middle East Technical University, do not see the scores of YDS enough and conduct their own language tests. One of the main highlights in studies related to adult education is to include in the learners into the process of education with their ideas, experience, and backgrounds. (Knowles, 1980; Brookfield, 1990; Galbraith, 1990). Knowles (1998) states that adult learners need to feel themselves as part of the process at the levels of planning, application and evaluation of a training program. Even though institutions arrange the training programs, adult trainees are willing to express their ideas and opinions about the content of the programs. Taking the views of adults is often held to create and implement a needs analysis form. Applications for small groups can be in the form of face to face meetings whereas for more crowded groups people could be asked to read and fill the form, which is a kind of survey. In this context, there has been no attempt to involve YDS candidates to the process via needs analysis or with other different kinds of implementations.

When preparing a language for specific purposes test, it is important to sort the questions out from easy to difficult (Dimkovic- Telebakovic, 2009; Jacoby, 1998; McNamara, 1997). In fact, it is a common characteristic for any tests. Candidates should develop a positive attitude toward the test and increase their self-confidence at the beginning of the test application. But unfortunately, one of the most difficult parts of the test is vocabulary and it appears in the first 6 questions of YDS. According to research conducted with 121 academics at Nevsehir

University, %40 of academics state that the most difficulty they have during the test is "vocabulary" (Yavuzer and Gover, 2012). In another study, Gur (2012) argues that all of the questions in national foreign language test in Turkey at the level of B2-C2 according to the Council of Europe's Common Language Criteria. Therefore, table of equivalence is not acceptable on the official website of OSYM since values between A1 and B1 questions have never been asked. Candidates should be aware of the facts about types of the questions, the number of questions, duration and evaluation type before the application of a test (Douglas, 2002; McNamara, 1997; Brown & Yule, 1983; Widdowson, 1983). Candidates know that duration of the test is 150 minutes, there are 80 questions in 10 different types and each question is 1.25 points. OSYM also serves as a press release to the candidates regarding the rules to be followed in the test. Thus, this feature is positive in terms of YDS candidates' success.

Fair Distribution of Questions among the Academic Fields

Douglas (2002) emphasizes that it is easier for intermediate or lower level candidates to answer the questions relevant to their academic field. However, upper-intermediate and above levels can eliminate the lack of information by commenting on the context. Therefore, it is important to identify to what extent candidates face with questions about their scientific fields. In order to determine which scientific group is more advantageous, questions of YDS are analyzed. Statistical information as follows in Table 3:

Table 3: Distribution of questions according to academic fields

Field	Number of Questions	Percentage
Social Sciences	75	%62.5
Science&Maths	21	%17.5
Medical Sciences	24	%20
Total	120	%100

As it is illustrated in Table 3, it has been found out that more questions are asked in social sciences than others in YDS. The percentage is more than half of all test questions. Especially in 20-question section is based on the paragraph and in cloze test parts, 4 or 5 questions are asked only from a reading passage and this fact considerably affects the distribution of questions. Candidates from social science fields are advantageous position with respect to the candidates from other fields of science in terms of the criteria developed for adult learners of specific language learning.

Originality and Authenticity of Questions

If the questions of a test are authentic, especially "rubric" part is taken from an original text, it will increase the reliability and validity of the questions. Therefore, it is advisable to use original materials as possible in tests. (Douglas, 2002; Kohonen, 1997; Teasdale, 1996). For instance; ETS, the institution that regulates TOEFL exam, states that all the readings are taken from the original section of textbooks in universities (ETS,2015). Originality and authenticity is also a characteristic feature of YDS questions. Below are a few relevant examples available.

Example 1. In 2013 Spring YDS, the first vocabulary question was taken from UNICEF official website. The title of the text is "Basic Education and Gender Equality- Equal Access to Education". The fifth paragraph of the article originally taken and remained as the same

(UNICEF,2011). Question preparation committee converted the some other parts of the original text into 4 different distracters.

Example 2. In Fall 2013 YDS test, number 74 question was finding suitable expression question. The original text of this question is from official web page of Business Week magazine. Title of the article is "Unemployment-The Plight of the Long-Term Unemployed" is (Business Week, 2012). Different parts of the text were used as distractor sentences of the question.

It is possible to increase the number of the examples above. In addition, question preparation committee of OSYM prepares some questions from the books with only printed copies. However, it is not clear whether all sentences are original or adapted from their original forms or whether question preparation committee creates the questions from the scratch since they do not share any statistics or any information about it.

DISCUSSION

This present study aims to analyze YDS, which is the only national foreign language test coordinated by OSYM, in terms of common characteristics features of adult learning and language for specific purposes. The target group of candidates in YDS is adults. This target group usually represents Turkey abroad, aims to be assigned to one of the public institutions and/ or has an ambition as having an academic career. Therefore, it is important to analyze YDS in scope of adult learning. Because YDS is created from academic texts other than general English, it could be perceived as in ESP concept. Multiple-choice tests are preferred as a way to measure the language level of candidates. When the target group of the tests is really a large majority of people, multiple choice questions are used for reading, grammar and vocabulary sections. The research shows that, adult educators prefer using multiple choice exams rather than the other techniques even at the end of the structured training process (Beaman, 1996). In this context, TOEFL and IELTS are two well-known test all around the world. Short-answer questions and filling in the blanks are also used in these two tests. Nevertheless, it is analyzed that such alternatives are not suitable for YDS. Findings in Semerci's study (2004) also seem to support this inference. He argues that both learners and authorities are willing to use multiple choice tests even assume them as a supplementary method to traditional teaching.

Rather than application technique of YDS, it is the content that has some shortcomings in terms of adult learning and adult education. Brookfield (1990), Galbraith (1990) and Knowles (1980) state that adults should be included to the training process at the stages of preparation, application and evaluation. The most common way to achieve this principle is to apply needs analysis. No needs analysis have been put into action by OSYM so far. In this context, OSYM could prepare a form and ask candidates about the duration, content, implementation of YDS test before starting the test or during the online application. Thus, while candidates have been involved to the process, OSYM will become aware of the similarities and differences between the demands and the needs of candidates and their own objectives. The purpose of a test also affects the structure of language for specific purposes exams (Douglas, 2002). Establishing a link between the purpose of implementing YDS by OSYM and needs of candidates about YDS may be an important step for the future foreign languages tests. There are only reading, vocabulary and grammar parts in YDS. In other words, listening, speaking and writing skills of candidates are not tested. Yavuzer and Gover (2012) emphasize that YDS test should be reviewed over again in order to measure four basic language skills.

Akpınar and Cakildere (2013) infer that while developing reading and grammar skills of candidates, YDS has a negative impact on candidates' writing, listening and speaking skills. They also insist on testing the other three skills in YDS. However, adding writing and speaking parts to YDS does not seem as a practical recommendation at least for short and medium terms. Building a suitable infrastructure and the necessary human resources for evaluating of writing and speaking skills can take a long time. Listening skill of candidates can be tested with multiple-choice question type since similar to reading and grammar skills, listening is easier to be evaluated with the help of optical readers. At the first stage, rather than being the compulsory part of YDS, volunteer candidates can apply to take the listening test. In later stages, the average results of reading, vocabulary, grammar and listening could be calculated to get the ultimate score.

OSYM is in no effort to distribute the questions according to academic fields as evenly as possible. Douglas (2002) argues that candidates whose English levels are upper-intermediate and advanced, are advantageous since they can infer the correct option from the context with their high level of English. However, it is not the case for lower levels of English. It is always better for them to deal with the questions from their academic fields. More than half of the questions in YDS are about social sciences. Therefore it could be estimated that candidates from social science fields are more propitious than other groups. OSYM needs to distribute the questions as equal as possible according to the academic disciplines in order to eliminate any advantage or/and disadvantage situation among the candidates. During the distribution process, it would be appropriate to pay attention to the types of questions since there is a gap between the vocabulary question and conversation questions in terms of difficulty. In order to avoid injustice, the questions in spring and fall tests could be balanced. Dimkovic-Telebakovic (2009), Jacoby (1998) and McNamara (1997) emphasize that questions in a test had better be sorted out from easy to difficult. However, such a practice does not exist in YDS questions. Even though questions are sorted out there will be no change since the level of the questions is very close to each other. Instead of ranking the questions from easy to difficult, it is better to arrange them according to their types (Gur, 2012 ;Yavuzer and Gover; 2012).

Douglas (2002), Kohonen (1997) and Teasdale (1996) put forward that using original passages in a test will increase its validity and reliability. It is generally the original and authentic passages in YDS. Nevertheless, it is not clear that how many of the rubrics are authentic and how many are not since no statistical information is shared about facts and figures of YDS questions. Also, another problem encountered in this step is about converting the original text into question. While modifying the texts into rubric, it is sometimes difficult to reflect exactly the same meaning of the original format. Thus candidates occasionally experience such kind of difficulties during the exam and share their opinions on that in social media (akademikpersonel, 2013; Guclu, 2013). Candidates should be informed about the application of test during the process. (Douglas, 2002; McNamara, 1997; Brown& Yule, 1983; Widdowson, 1983). Because YDS candidates are aware of the duration, requirements for application, number of questions, evaluation process, it could be concluded that OSYM manages this part of the process successfully.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper aims to evaluate the national foreign language test held in Turkey. The test is administered twice as paper-based format and twelve times as computer-based format in a year. The test is coordinated and held by one of the institutions of government, which is

OSYM (Student Selection and Placement Centre). The findings reveal that there is no moderate and decent distribution of test questions among the academic fields of candidates. Moreover, the test only measures the reading, vocabulary and grammar skills of candidates while listening, speaking and writing proficiency of test takers are not assessed. On the other hand, candidates are aware of the process of YDS and even though the exact number is not informed, the questions are considered as original and authentic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though there is a question preparation committee, we do not know exactly who prepares YDS questions. Therefore, candidates do not have any idea about the committee members' professions or language skills. Government had better pay attention to professional fields of the members when hiring them. The first 40 questions could be common in all areas of academic fields in YDS. The second part of the test can be provided from the different academic fields. A detailed exam result document can be designed for each candidate showing the success or mistakes according to the types of questions. OSYM and universities whose language of education is English should make an agreement on validity of YDS. Thus, these universities may not apply English reading tests for their future students instead YDS may be accepted as eligible. It will be appropriate if OSYM shares more statistical information with publicity in subsequent tests. This information can answer following questions:

How many candidates applied the tests according to their academic fields? What is the average success of these candidates?

What is the number of questions from each academic field?

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