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Students' Perceptions of Language Testing and Assessment in Higher Education

REYHAN AGCAM and M. PINAR BABANOGLU

Abstract

Assessment is any of a variety of procedures used to obtain information about student performance (Linn & Gronlund, 2000, p. 32). As reported by Pellegrino, Chudowsky, and Glaser (2001), it provides feedback to students, educators, parents, policy makers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational services. Related research on language testing and assessment in foreign language education, which is one of the most controversial issues in Turkey, have been carried out with a focus on perspectives of teachers rather than the students who obviously play the leading role in the process. Hence, the current study is primarily motivated to explore the perceptions of students on foreign language assessment in higher education in Turkey. A total of 103 undergraduate students attending an English Language Preparatory Program at a state university in Turkey took part in the study. They were assigned a questionnaire consisting of open- and closed-ended items to reveal their perceptions on the applications of language assessment in higher education (e.g. core language skills, assessment types employed in testing foreign language development, and types of questions used in the tests throughout an academic year). The findings have demonstrated that most participants found assessment necessary in their foreign language education, and that speaking and listening are considered the most important skills, while grammar and reading are regarded as the least important. As for question types, Selected Response Items (e.g. Matching, MC, Odd-one-out, and T-F) have revealed the most-favored by students in comparison to the Constructed Response Items (e.g. Sentence Completion, Wh- Questions, and etc.) and Personal Response items (e.g. writing a paragraph), which might be attributed to the less challenging and demanding structure of the selected response items. The study concludes with a few pedagogical implications on language assessment in higher education, and suggestions for further directions.

Keywords: EFL, testing, assessment, higher education.



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Introduction

Simply defined as “the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs undertaken for the purpose of improving learning and development” (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 4), assessment is considered an indispensable part of any program with clear goals and objectives, and foreign language education is no exception in this sense. Wiliam (2013) views it as a bridge between teaching and learning, and suggests that it is the only way to discover whether or not instructional activities result in the students’ intended learning. Likewise, Huba and Freed (2000) identify it as:

A process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning. (p. 19)

Accordingly, Gardiner (1994, p. 109) contends that it is essential not only to guide the development of individual students but also to monitor and continuously improve the quality of programs, inform prospective students and their parents, and provide evidence of accountability to those who pay our way. As reported by Pellegrino et al. (2001), educational assessment aims to determine how well students are learning as an integral part of the quest for improved education, and it provides feedback to students, educators, parents, policy makers, and the public about the effectiveness of educational services. Analyzing assessment in higher education, Llorente and Morant (2011) advocate that it guides the alumni through higher complexity studies permitting the student to identify the weak points in their knowledge building where further theory study and/or practice is required.

In the literature, educational assessment is classified into different groups based on its purpose (e.g. initial, formative, summative and diagnostic assessment), the adopted perspective (e.g. objective and subjective assessment), comparison of assesseees (e.g. criterion-referenced, norm-referenced, and ipsative assessment), grading (informal or formal assessment), and the assessor of the process (e.g. internal or external assessment). Table 1 illustrates the fundamental characteristics of each type.

Table 1. Classification of assessment

Criterion	Type	Characteristics
Purpose (McTighe & O’Connor, 2005)	Initial	Conducted prior to instruction to establish a baseline and identify student’s proficiency level. Not graded.
	Formative	Carried out during a course/ project to check students’ understanding of the instruction Provides feedback on students’ work. Grading unnecessary. (e.g. diagnostic/standardized tests, quizzes, oral questioning)

Criterion	Type	Characteristics
	Summative	Carried out at the end of a course or project to summarize what the students have learned, and to determine how well they understand the subject matter. Evaluative and typically graded. (e.g. tests, exams or projects)
	Diagnostic	Focus on all difficulties that occur during the learning process
Perspective (Llorente & Morant, 2011)	Objective	Well-suited to computerized or online assessment format. Each item has a single correct answer. (e.g. true/false items, multiple-choice items, multiple-response and matching questions)
	Subjective	Items may have more than one correct answer. (e.g. extended-response questions and essays)
Comparison (Huitt, 1996; Wojtczak, 2002)	Criterion-referenced	Testing against an absolute standard such as an individual's performance against a benchmark. Aims to determine whether or not a student has achieved specific skills or concepts, and to find out how much a student knows, both before instruction begins and after it has finished.
	Norm-referenced	Based on the representative group of the candidates' population. The standard is based on the performance of an external large representative sample (norm group), equivalent to the candidates taking the test. Aims to rank each student with respect to the achievement of others in broad areas of knowledge, and to discriminate between high and low achievers.
	Ipsative	Self-comparison either in the same domain over time, or comparative to other domains within the same student.
Grading (Weaver, 2014)	Formal	Data obtained from tests are mathematically computed and summarized. Scores such as percentiles, stanines, or standard scores are most commonly given from this type of assessment.
	Informal	Not data driven, but content and performance driven. (e.g. Scores such as 10 correct out of 15, percentage of words read correctly, and most rubric scores).
Assessor (Paris, Paris, & Carpenter, 2001)	Internal	Designed, selected, and used by teachers according to the students' needs (e.g. weekly quizzes, journal writing, reports, and projects). Used to make decisions about instruction and to report progress to parents.

Criterion	Type	Characteristics
	External	Designed, selected, and controlled by another person or group-commercial publishers, district administrators, or state policymakers. (e.g. standardized or commercial reading tests). Used as indicators of both educational achievement of students and the quality of instruction in schools.

As seen in Table 1, assessment is mostly conducted to see to what extent the educational goals and objectives have been achieved at the end of a certain teaching/ learning process. Even though the way it is implemented varies across countries, provinces and even institutions, it is extensively realized using direct tools (e.g. standardized tests, term papers, oral presentations, projects and portfolios), especially in state educational institutions whereby educational programs are created and implemented in accordance with predefined goals and objectives.

Llorente and Morant (2011) classify the tools typically used in higher education into two groups as written and oral techniques. According to the authors, written techniques attempt to bring the students to their maximum potential after several years of studies; whereas, oral examination procedure is unlikely to be successful in computer-processing as human voice-to machine translation techniques are not sufficiently advanced.

The written techniques could be summarized as: questionnaires (consisting of a number of close- and open-ended questions for students to answer); problem solving (requiring students to explain the way a correct answer was achieved); portfolio (a collection of materials demonstrating a student's abilities and achievements; used as a method for testing and examinations, (Lupton, 2005); rubrics (scoring tools used for linking student criteria to learning objectives); concept maps (students are required to demonstrate subject knowledge by establishing key concepts and their relationships); notebook revision (revision of student's notes taken to develop concepts given in class); academic work (written documents of the student to summarize ideas for a given concept, describe processes, compile information or state-of-the-art between others); essay writing (authoring a short document giving opinion of a concept or developing an idea from a topic); study case (studying a real-life problem; then proposing solutions and developing it); project (assignment of a technical project document used to integrate concepts and apply them to a project case); one-minute paper (developing a proposed subject or specific question to prompt students to summarize the day's lesson).

The oral assessment techniques could be summarized as: oral exams (aspects other than subject knowledge could be evaluated, e.g. speech techniques, body language); presentation (a short demonstration of work prepared and explained by a student to the rest of the class); open discussions and debate (dialogue between class members, guided by the lecturer).

Like in many other countries, written rather than oral assessment techniques are extensively used in higher education institutions in Turkey. This is likely because they can easily be designed to obtain quite accurate feedback on student abilities by reciting facts and solving simple problems (Brissenden & Slater, 2005). In this kind of assessment, students are posed questions of various categories such as open- and close-ended questions. The classification of response assessment types proposed by Brown and Hudson (1998) has been frequently employed in studies conducted on question types in practices of written

assessment. The scholars identify three categories as selected response items, constructed response items, and personal response items. Selected response items require examinees to choose from a number of options (e.g. true-false, matching, multiple-choice), while constructed response items are relatively more challenging (e.g. sentence completion, essay writing, providing short and long answers), and personal response items include self- and/or peer-assessment and portfolio assessment. Table 2 illustrates the question types, with sample items for each.

Table 2. Question types (Brown & Hudson, 1998)

Question Types	Sub-type	Examples
Selected Response	Choose from	Circle the correct form of the verb. He doesn't like / likes ice-cream
	True-False	NY is more crowded than California () T () F
	Grammaticality	She were liking animals. () Grammatical () Ungrammatical
	Multiple-Choice	Jeremy is ___ actor. a) a b) an c) the d) much
	Circle the odd word	dog cat fish cow
	Matching	Match items in Column A with those in Column B. <u>Column A</u> <u>Column B</u> A bar of milk A bottle of jam A jar of chocolate
Constructed Response	Sentence completion	What _____ her name?
	Yes/No	Do you have a car?
	Question word	Where do you live?
	Transformation	Make the sentence negative "I like sour cherry"
	Unscrambling	Put the words into correct order "goes-father-jogging-weekend-my-every"
	Synonym/Antonym	Short X _____ hot X _____
	Labeling	Label the senses
	Correcting Mistakes	Find the mistake and correct it. "I likes travelling"
Personal Response	Essay writing	Describe yourself in a few sentences (age, family, hobbies etc.)
	Make up sentences	Write ten sentences using "there is" and "there are".

The above-mentioned classification of question types was also adopted in this study in investigating perceptions of undergraduate students on language testing and assessment. Research on students' perceptions on assessment is mostly concentrated on their overall attitude towards assessment (Dhindsa, Omar, & Waldrip, 2007; Mussawy, 2009), student perceptions on the development of a certain form of assessment (Fisher, Waldrip, & Dorman, 2005), their attitude toward assessment forms (Birenbaum & Feldman, 1998), their assessment preferences (Gijbels & Dochy, 2006), and their perceptions on e-learning

assessment (Moodle) (Babo, Azevedo, & Suhonen, 2015), online assessment (Şanlı, 2003), and portfolio assessment (Burnaz, 2011).

In respect of assessment in EFL settings, Munoz and Alvares (2007) surveyed EFL students' perceptions on self-assessment, and Vavla and Gokaj (2013) investigated 9th graders' overall perceptions of assessment in EFL classrooms in Albania. Both studies revealed that students believe that assessment is necessary and mandatory, and that it is performed by teachers and they do not have a say in it. In another study, Cheng, Wu, and Liu (2015) probed Chinese university students' perceptions on assessment tasks in EFL context and assessment environment relationship, and reported that congruence with planned learning and student consultation are positive predictors of the learning-oriented classroom assessment environment and negative predictors of performance-oriented classroom assessment environment at the same time. Based on that finding, they concluded that aligning assessment tasks with the goals and objectives of the learning programs and effectively informing students regarding how they will be assessed potentially have twofold benefits. Struyven, Dochy, and Janssen (2005) examined student perceptions on evaluation and assessment in higher education. They found that students' perceptions about assessment significantly influence their approach to learning and studying and students mostly favored multiple-choice rather than essay types. Kelly et al. (2010) investigated the perceptions of twenty-four physicians in a cross-cultural training program on four different examination methods (structured oral case simulations, multiple-choice tests, semi-structured oral examinations, and essay tests), and the techniques they use and barriers they face. They reported that all testing methods were found useful in measuring knowledge and clinical ability, and that the participants believe that they should be used for accreditation and future training programs. They also reported that oral examinations were rated as significantly more useful than written ones in measuring clinical abilities ($p < 0.01$), and that oral case simulations were found to be the most useful examination method for assessing learners' fund of knowledge and clinical ability ($p < 0.01$). Most of the studies on language testing and assessment in Turkey have been carried out from teachers' perspectives rather than students, who obviously play the leading role in the process.

Hence, our study aims to explore the perceptions of students on language testing and assessment in higher education in Turkey. It primarily investigates their perceptions of core language skills, assessment types and question types used in assessing their FL development/ proficiency during an academic year. Accordingly, three research questions were posed.

- What are the perceptions of adult EFL learners on language testing and assessment in higher education in Turkey?
- What are the perceptions of adult EFL learners on assessment types used in language testing and assessment in higher education in Turkey?
- What are the perceptions of adult EFL learners on question types used in language testing and assessment in higher education in Turkey?

The following section is intended to describe and outline research design of the study.

Methodology

A total of 103 undergraduate students attending an English Language Preparatory Program at a state university in Turkey took part in the current study. Six of them were excluded from the study due to inconsistent responses to the questionnaire items. The mean age of the participants was calculated as 19.6 years old. It is significant to note that, at the time of the study, they were attending a 16-week intensive EFL program as a compulsory or elective part of their undergraduate education, and that they were supposed to attend their major degree programs (e.g. business, economics, international relations, public administration, electrical and electronic engineering, mechanical engineering, and textile engineering) in the following academic year. It is also important to note that English is not the medium of instruction in the programs they will attend. Throughout the EFL preparatory program, the students were required to take three different courses identified in the related curriculum at the beginning of the academic year (Main Course: 18 h/ week, Speaking: 4 h/ week, and SAC 'Self-Access Centre': 2 h/ week). The courses aim to enable students to use English for communicative and academic purposes, providing them with core linguistic skills identified in the previous section. Nonetheless, as suggested by its name, Speaking classes are more communication-based, and speaking and listening are emphasized over other linguistic skills. SAC classes, on the other hand, are designed to provide students with the opportunity to reinforce their knowledge acquired in MC and Speaking classes using the Moodle online platform. The content available on Moodle was arranged by the researchers, and took into consideration the course contents, including skill-based activities and games. During the academic year, the students were supposed to take short and long tests comprised of various types of questions, and to prepare portfolios, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Assessment in EFL preparatory program

Name	Characteristics	N
Pop Quiz	Short test without prior announcement Mostly skill-based	6
Quiz	Long test with prior announcement All skills assessed except speaking	4
Portfolios	Presented in oral or written form (3 Spoken, 3 Written)	6
Midterm	Long test with prior announcement All skills assessed	3

For data collection, a questionnaire consisting of several items developed by the researchers was administered to the students in order to reveal their perceptions on the applications of language testing and assessment in higher education (e.g. significance of assessment in foreign language education, assessment of core language skills, assessment types, and types of questions). The students were requested to complete the questionnaire, which consisted of both Likert-type, multiple-choice and open-ended items, during a SAC class hour, and no time limit was set. Data obtained from the questionnaires were both quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed, and the related results are presented in the following section.

Findings

The first question of the survey was intended to obtain students' opinion about the necessity of testing and assessment in foreign language education. Approximately 75% stated that it is necessary, whereas less 20% of students asserted the contrary, with the remaining staying neutral. This particular finding is in line with Struyven et al. (2005), Munoz and Alvares (2007), Kelly et al. (2010, and Vavla and Gokaj (2013). A male student attending a mechanical engineering program notes,

"If our development were not assessed, simply I would not try to learn English or study it outside the classroom." (Extract from S64)

The second question of the survey investigated whether or not time was allocated for studying English outside of the classroom. Of the students who responded, 34% stated that they do not allocate time to study out of class. It is understood that those who positively responded to this item allocate an average of 3.6 hours a week studying English after school. As a follow-up question, they were asked whether or not they revise their working plans should they achieve poor grades on the tests. Slightly over 51% of the students responded positively. Quite naturally, the other students tend to be among those who reported that they do not spend any time on learning English outside the classroom. In order to elicit their opinions about the quality of the abovementioned tests administered throughout the academic year, they were asked whether or not they think their exam results are consistent with their success in foreign language education. Their responses have revealed that approximately 76% of the participants find them consistent, and that most of the rest attribute this to the anxiety they feel during the tests. A female student attending an international relations program stated,

"I feel nervous during exams, especially in writing sections, I don't think I will express myself effectively. That's why, I can't get good grades on them". (Extract from S52)

Subsequently, their perceptions about types and frequency of assessment during the academic year were scrutinized. The great majority reported that they are satisfied with both types and frequency of assessment. Interestingly, most of those who responded negatively stated that the number of exams should be increased, and that they should be speech-based, confirming the finding revealed in the study by Kelly et al. (2010).

The second part of the survey was designed to obtain their perceptions about the significance of core linguistic skills, assessment types, and question types. Accordingly, they were asked to choose among the options from '*strongly dislike*' to '*strongly like*' for each core skill. The related findings are shown in Figure 1.

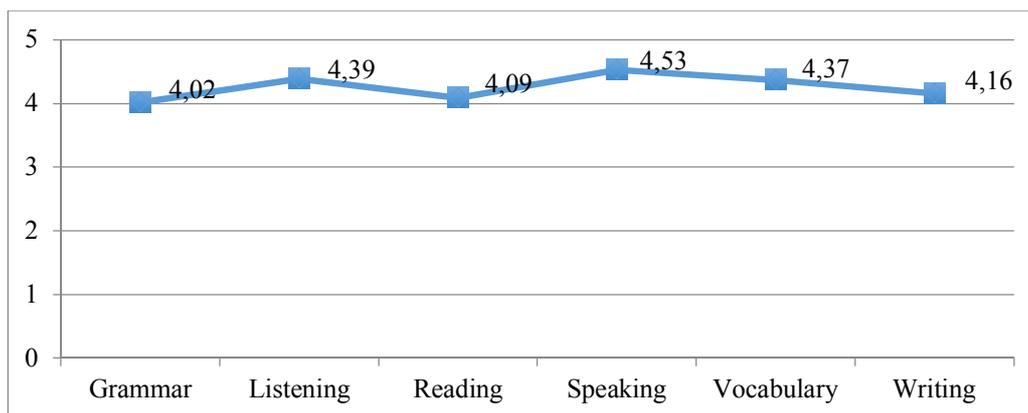


Figure 1. Overall perceptions on skills

As seen in Figure 1, participants believe that all six skills are important/ very important in language education. Among them, speaking and listening are the ones considered the most important, while grammar and reading are the least important in this respect. Subsequently, they were asked to rate types of assessment administered to them at certain intervals, and the findings obtained from their responses are illustrated in Figure 2.

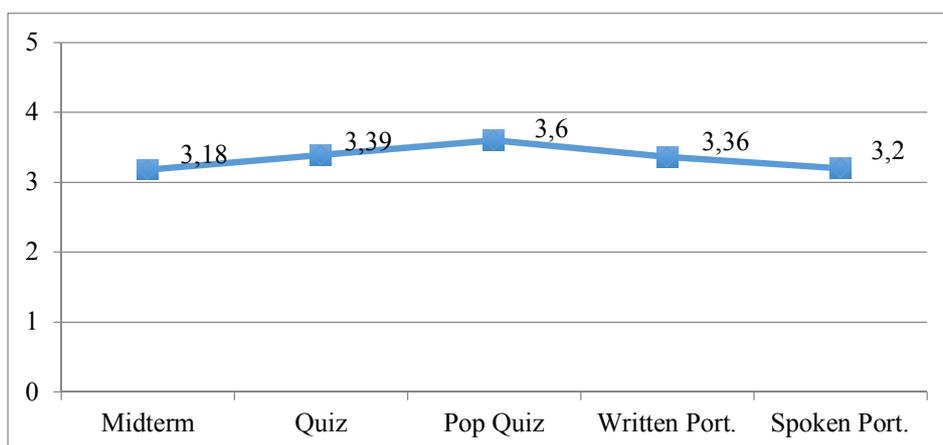


Figure 2. Overall perceptions on assessment types

It was revealed that students tend to favor pop quizzes which are usually applied in frequent intervals (six times during an academic semester), and which are found easier by students probably due to their limited content. Written portfolio and regular quizzes seem to receive equal interest after pop quizzes, whereas midterm and spoken portfolios were reported as the least favored types in the list.

Finally, the participants were required to rate the types of questions posed to them in their written exams. Not surprisingly, findings indicated that Selected Response Items (e.g. Matching, MC, Odd-one-out, and T-F) were the most favored in comparison to the Constructed Response Items (e.g. Sentence Completion, Wh- Questions) and Personal Response items (e.g. writing a paragraph). Findings have also indicated that Personal Response Items which require examinees to write a paragraph/ essay are not well favored by the majority of participants, which might be attributed to their being relatively more challenging and demanding than the other types. This finding seems to be in accordance with those previously reported by Struyven et al. (2005).

As for the individual items, it could be concluded that T-F items is the most popular type, followed by multiple-choice and odd-one-out items, while matching items was the least popular one, entailing that the more the chance of success is involved, the more preferred they are by the students. Namely, they have a fifty-fifty chance to answer T-F items correctly, even if they have no idea about the given items, while this percentage decreases to 25% in MC and odd-one-out items, and decreases even more in Matching items. Among the constructed response items, correcting mistakes appears at the top of the list, followed by fill-in, wh-questions, monologue, unscrambling items, warm-up and dialogue items, respectively. Yes-no questions were rated as the least popular. Being the only personal response item, writing a paragraph was not revealed as that popular among the students. As a matter of fact, students might find writing relatively more challenging since it requires a combination of skills such as grammar and vocabulary, as well as creativity.

Conclusion

The study has indicated that learners consider testing and assessment is necessary for language instruction and they regard listening and speaking more important than the other skills in learning a language, entailing that they want to learn it primarily for communicating with other people with whom they do not share a mother tongue. Furthermore, they label grammar and reading the least important skills. In order to meet their needs, which do not seem to contradict with the general objectives of the implemented curricula, we might put more emphasis on listening and speaking skills and focus on fluency without totally ignoring accuracy while teaching English.

It has also shown that they prefer selected response items, which are cognitively less demanding and difficult, rather than constructed response items and personal response items. However, this finding should not lead us to the conclusion/ implication that our tests should comprise mostly this kind of items as they are unlikely to go beyond encouraging them to memorize certain formula in the target language in order to pass the tests at the end of the semester. Instead, we might increase the number of other types of questions likely to improve their cognitive skills and make their learning more meaningful and permanent. In order to help them perform better while answering these questions, we might employ activities for to improve their extensive reading skills.

This study is confined to the investigation of adult EFL learners' perceptions of language testing and assessment in Turkish higher education. It is also confined to a limited number of participants attending an English Preparatory Program at a state university in Turkey. So, further studies might be conducted with a larger group of students studying various disciplines in other state or private universities or with students attending primary/ high schools. Their perceptions on language testing and assessment might be elicited through questionnaires and/ or structured or semi-structured interviews. The study might also be furthered to scrutinize what could be done in order to decrease/ prevent learners' negative feelings toward constructed response and personal response items, and to improve their success in responding to these kinds of items on the tests.

Notes

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