

Research Notes

A Survey of Semester-End English Examinations in Northern Cyprus Secondary Schools

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The goal of the survey of semester-end exams was to compare the methodological approach and difficulty level of English language tests which were developed and administered at north Cyprus public secondary schools at the end of the first semester of the 2001-2002 academic year. The survey was made at the request of the “Department of General Secondary Education” and was partially supported by the Oregon State University Cyprus English Language Teaching Enhancement Project.

Survey Materials

The department provided 119 individual examinations, from a total of 29 schools. This constituted a very large percentage of all tests given within the system in the relevant school types at the end of the first semester of the 2001/02 school year. End of semester tests are required at all schools in all classes. English is a required subject at all secondary grade levels.

The secondary system in north Cyprus comprises six forms, age levels 11 to 17, which can be divided into two categories: the *ortaokulu* or middle school level and the *lise* or high school level. There are commonly three *orta* levels, which were coded O1, O2 and O3, and three *lise* levels, which were coded as L1, L2, and L3. The school system also includes three distinct school types: English medium schools (coded EM), Turkish medium schools (TM) and vocational/technical schools. Of the total tests analyzed, seven English medium schools provided 36 exam papers, while 23 Turkish medium schools

provided the remaining 83 exam papers. No papers were provided from vocational/technical schools. At the time of the survey, the practice in all of these schools was that the semester tests were made by teachers, either in working groups at larger schools or individually at the smaller schools. Each teacher or teacher workgroup was responsible for producing a final exam for one level of the English program in that school. Since schools vary in size, each exam so produced might have been administered to as few as 30 or as many as 330+ students.

Procedure

The team of assessors consisted of three senior Turkish Cypriot secondary EFL teachers and two visiting resource specialists. The test papers were first grouped by school type, English medium or Turkish medium, and by grade level, from O1 to L3. Working in pairs or triads, team members then examined each group. We first analyzed each individual exam by section to note the testing approach of each section and to determine which language skills were being tested in each section. We then compared tests in each group and noted the general level of difficulty of similar test sections. Finally we made judgments about individual test sections and rated them as average, easier than expected, or more difficult than expected in terms of the system-wide syllabus and norms.

Since the team did not have access to exam results or scoring rubrics, these judgments are of “face” difficulty only. All sections rated as other than

average were read and discussed by all members of the survey team before a final judgment was made.

General Conclusions

Among the English medium schools, there was fairly broad agreement from school to school about what tests ought to be like. Approximately 20% of the marks on each test come from a reading comprehension passage and accompanying questions. Another 20% came from vocabulary questions. Approximately 50% of the marks come from grammar questions, and 10% from composition tasks. Most schools followed this pattern closely. The one exception was the school coded EMZ, as will be discussed below.

Among the Turkish medium schools there was somewhat greater variety from school to school. The bulk of the test items were vocabulary and grammar: 71% on average, ranging from 50% to 90%. The average percentage of marks given to reading comprehension was 17%, with a range of 0% to 50%. The average percentage devoted to writing was 5.5%, with a range of 0% to 35%. There were no listening or speaking items on any of the TM tests.

In terms of face difficulty level of final exams, there was a great deal of consistency from school to school. With a few exceptions, the topics, structures and vocabulary found on tests were very similar from school to school, as one would expect given that the test makers were all using the same textbooks and working from the same general syllabus.

A few tests had linguistic or typing errors, a few tests suffered from poor production quality, and a few contained items or sections of dubious value. Overall, however, the tests were well made and provided evidence of a high level of competence and language ability in the corps of secondary English school teachers.

Comparative Difficulty Levels in English Medium Schools

In the *orta* levels EM01 to EM03, tests in one school, EMD, tended to have a somewhat higher than expected difficulty level in two sections: reading and grammar. This makes their overall

difficulty level quite high, higher in some cases than that of EMZ, which although not part of the public school system, was included in the survey for comparison. However, the EMD difficulty level is only slightly greater than that of EMF, which is also above average in some areas.

In the *lise* levels EML1 to EML3, EMD tests were also somewhat high in face difficulty, but in this case not any higher than EMA. The main grouping here is that EMD and EMA form a high group in terms of face difficulty, while EMB, EMC and EME form a lower group. EMZ tests in the *lise* levels tended to have higher face difficulty than any of the public EM schools.

Approach and Skills Measured in English Medium Schools

The EM schools as a group depend heavily on grammar and vocabulary items. Thus there is a relative neglect of reading, writing, and especially listening skills. At the *orta* level, the tests at EMD gave more than average attention to these three skills; and at the *lise* level, EMA gave somewhat more attention to them. The most balanced tests, however, and the only ones which routinely addressed listening skills on a par with other skills, are those of EMZ. There were large differences between EMZ and the averages of the other six EM schools. Table 1 shows the percentage of the total score contributed by each item type and a comparison between EMZ and the other schools at the *orta* and the *lise* levels.

There was wide variation in the degree to which various skills were addressed in this group. The range for reading comprehension, for example, was from 0% to 50%. For grammar it was from 21% to 89% and for vocabulary 0% to 61%. None of the 83 tests addressed listening skills. In the area of writing, the survey team decided, for reporting

Table 1. Approach and Skills Measured in Turkish-Medium Schools

	Reading	Vocab	Grammar	Writing	Listening
EMO A-F	18	16	55	10	1
EMO, Z	30	16	12	21	17
EML, A-F	23	20	43	12	2
EML, Z	33	0	3	36	28

purposes regarding this group, to distinguish between sentence level writing tasks and paragraph (or higher) level tasks. Although this makes direct comparison problematic, it was broadly clear that writing was given less emphasis in the TM schools than in the EM schools, the difference being relatively small at the *orta* level and more pronounced at the *lise* level.

Reading Comprehension Question Types

Although the survey did not formally address specific item types within skill areas, the team did notice three distinct types of reading comprehension items: open-ended questions, multiple choice questions, and true/false questions. Of these three types, the open-ended question was by far the most common, followed by true-false in second place, and then by multiple choice as a far distant third.

Open-ended questions are easiest for teachers to construct, and this may account for their popularity. Their effectiveness as comprehension measures, however, is not as clear. Since the survey team did not interview teachers to discuss how answers were marked and credit given, no firm conclusions are possible. In general, however, it appeared that many open-ended questions could have been answered correctly merely by guessing which sentence in the original was relevant and then copying that sentence onto the test paper.

The team observed a number of instances where the instructions for answering open-ended questions stated explicitly that answers must be well-formed. This requirement is likely implicit in most test situations. Few teachers would disagree that well-formed answers ought to get higher marks, but the important point for our survey is that this focus on

grammatical accuracy, within what is nominally the reading comprehension section, means that the overall grammatical emphasis of some tests is, in practice, even greater than the survey percentages indicate.

Results of the Survey

The survey team made several points in its final report. First among these was to note the lack of attention to listening comprehension. A listening component had been mandated by the educational authorities for all final exams, but this requirement was very rarely met in the sample we surveyed. Of the 119 exams, only eight had listening components, and six of these were from one school, EMZ, a semi-private institution affiliated with a major university. We recommended that teachers needed to be trained in how to create and administer listening tests and that administrators had to ensure that needed equipment and facilities were available.

We also made note of the relatively high proportion of discrete point grammar and vocabulary items found in this test sample. The survey shows a great reliance on discrete point grammar and vocabulary items: 69% of all items surveyed. Many test makers now prefer more contextualized tasks that require students to understand and process information in reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Teachers would benefit from training in these alternate methods of assessment.

Editor's note: Detailed survey results can be found on the *ORTESOL Journal* website.

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