

**”BABEŞ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
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Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences**

**TESTING STUDENTS IN ENGLISH FOR BUSINESS
AND MEDICAL COMMUNICATION**

**EXTENDED SUMMARY
OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION**

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Key-words: testing; assessment; Languages for Specific Purposes; English for Specific Purposes (ESP); English for Business; English for Medicine; authenticity; motivation; anxiety; test framing; contextualization of testing; professional communication; academic performance; communicative competence; dynamic evaluation; static evaluation; intrinsic goal; extrinsic goal; supportive environment; directive environment; test as a learning opportunity; individual differences.

I. TOPIC AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This paper investigates the topic of the assessment of students through tests of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The paper is the result of action-research efforts in response to the challenges posed by academic subjects that have a history of only two decades in our country: English for Business and English for Medicine.

The main aim of the research was to investigate the implications of using tests that simulate specific communication situations, authentic in English on individual factors such as motivation and anxiety, less taken into consideration at the level of educational policies, but very important at the level of the group and of the individual.

II. RATIONALE

The decision to initiate and conduct this research was determined by the following main considerations:

- Teaching foreign languages for specific purposes has emerged as a distinct academic domain and, consequently, generated the need for a more coherent approach of assessment;
- Academic assessment may exercise its role of an innovation catalyst in education through an awareness of the positive impact, as well as of the potential negative effects, it can have on both teaching and learning and the social-professional integration of individuals;
- Through the content and methodology of assessment, students are encouraged to acquire both language skills and specific professional skills.

- A test developed and administered as an instrument measuring knowledge and *relevant* skills can, and should, turn into a learning opportunity;
- A suitable test can have beneficial washback effects on many aspects that precede and that follow it, as well as on the affective-emotional factors;
- The interdependence among motivation, anxiety and academic performance is a complex one, so that the investigation cannot be restricted to its pedagogical dimension. We find it necessary to incorporate the perspectives provided by related fields such as psycho-pedagogy or educational psychology.

The focus on testing and evaluation in English for Specific Purposes is a natural result of our preoccupation with action research in connection with teaching in the Department of Applied Modern Languages in Economics and Business (1993-2004) and the Department of Modern Languages Applied to Medicine (2004-present) within a constantly changing teaching field, but whose basic principles are common to both subjects.

The research was conducted in a specific teaching context, combining exploratory phases with interdisciplinary pedagogical interventions on less investigated aspects of English language courses for future economists, doctors or pharmacists. The usefulness of the research was enhanced by the inclusion of personal contributions, in the form of two practical activities – a procedure for selecting materials for Business English tests and a procedure for the development of an English language test for students in Economics by involving students and designing two dynamic evaluation models.

III. STRUCTURE

The paper is divided into six chapters, Bibliography and Appendices. Chapters I and II are dedicated to fundamental aspects of the topic, a review of the literature and the terminology of General English and English for Specific Purposes. Following a presentation of the general characteristics of tests, test types and methods in modern

languages, we highlight the specific aspects of ESP testing methodology in general, and those of Business and Medical English, in particular. We also highlight several controversial issues and difficulties of testing and assessment.

The concept of authenticity of testing and assessment is discussed in Section II.2. Authentic tests mirror and simulate the reality of communication in a foreign language outside the classroom, through realistic topics, tasks and methods. Authentic assessment focuses on the need to perform according to pragmatic requirements, through the use of tests involving communication that characterises realistic situations that the test taker will be confronted with during their academic or professional life.

Chapter III provides the theoretical foundations of the psycho-pedagogical aspects under investigation, focusing on the individual differences in approaching tests or examinations: motivational drives, anxiety response and attitude of the student. The manifestation of these variables in different degrees depending on the individual determines differences at the level of foreign language acquisition and communicative performance through something that psycholinguists designate as the “affective filter” (Krashen). A remarkable contribution was introduced by Gardner, who considers motivation not only in terms of the intensity of the student’s effort, but also in terms of their inner desire to master a foreign language, together with a positive attitude towards learning.

Chapters IV and V are dedicated to a baseline study and the practical research studies carried out during practical courses of English for business and medical communication.

Chapter VI summarizes several conclusions and practical perspectives resulting from the research, as well as its main difficulties and limitations.

The Appendices include the instruments used in the practical studies – questionnaires and tests designed to collect relevant data for our research topics – along with some documents related to specific aspects of teaching, learning and testing languages for specific purposes.

The Bibliography consists of 176 titles of books, articles and web resources focusing on the specific research topics and related fields. The paper has a total of 270 pages, containing 61 tables, 17 charts and 3 figures.

IV. RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1. The baseline study

The purpose of this stage was to analyze the English for Specific Purposes testing methodology in order to outline the status quo of the context in which the testing process takes place, from the perspective of a sample of teachers and their students from specialized departments of four universities in the country. It also includes an analysis of several curriculum documents.

The main research objective was to investigate the opinions of ESP teachers and students on the types and usefulness of tests that assess knowledge and communication skills in English for Specific Purposes.

The research was conducted primarily through the survey method and the curriculum documents analysis method. In some cases, we used informal observation and unstructured interviews as secondary methods. The research tool for initial data collection was the self-report questionnaire. Data processing was performed using SPSS for Windows.

Among the findings of this research phase, we can mention the following:

- There appears to be a link between testing authenticity and its perception by students not only as a compulsory part of the course, but also as a valuable learning opportunity;
- There is a need for a stronger concern of those involved to eliminate or reduce the effects of a certain kind of standard test preference inertia present among many students in order to enable their orientation towards the development and (self)evaluation of their professional communication skills in English;
- Frequent or exclusive use of tests containing tasks that focus mainly on accuracy rather than fluency can encourage the teaching of English in artificially

constructed situations, thus reducing the effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment in general;

- Students and teachers possess both the willingness and the resources to adapt to the requirements of authentic assessment in terms of materials, tasks, interaction and manner of administration.

2. The practical investigations stage

During the various stages of the research we employed the survey method. As research tools, we adapted and used self-report questionnaires. Hypothesis testing was performed within a type of research that combined correlational explanatory-descriptive phases with ameliorative pedagogical quasi-experiments.

The research involved two exploratory studies focused on the potential interconnections between the manner in which the teacher presents the various aspects of the test, how the testing experience thus framed (Deci et al., 2004) or *contextualised* is perceived by students and the influence of these factors on motivation, anxiety and test performance.

Underlying assumptions

- The objectives, content and tasks used in tests administered to students who are preparing for careers in the medical fields must be characterised by a high degree of authenticity;
- It is important to take into account the motivational function of assessment;
- An increased awareness of the washback effect of testing activities on the syllabus and the non-cognitive individual factors is necessary;
- The importance of an increased awareness of the distinctions between different types of testing: e.g. “standardized”, “traditional”, “authentic”, “dynamic”, or “static”, in order to give students greater opportunities to perform as close to the actual level their skills as possible.

The overall objective was to identify the various drives underlying student motivation to prepare for a test, in order to argue in favour of the idea that along with

individual preparation done by the student, suitable training in assessment areas provided by the teacher, e.g. through information on the content, methods, criteria and scoring systems can contribute to an improved motivation to learn, a more adequate attitude towards learning and assessment and a reduced level of test anxiety.

A. Practical investigation I

Objective

Investigating the interconnection among test motivation, test anxiety and test performance through the elicitation of the students' individual response when faced with testing situations that the teacher framed in different manners and integrated into the Medical English course.

Research Questions

- Can the traditional students' perception of tests and examinations be changed in a positive way?
- Is it possible that test results depend not only on the degree of subject knowledge and skills development, but also on the manner in which the teacher *frames* or *contextualizes* assessment activities?

General hypothesis

H1. The manner of framing testing activities affects the motivation with which students undertake test tasks, their level of test anxiety and their test performance.

Working (specific) hypotheses

SH1. Framing testing in terms of an activity designed and perceived as a learning opportunity will strengthen intrinsic motivation.

SH2. Students' perception of the test as a learning opportunity will result in a lower level of test anxiety.

SH3. Students' confrontation with the test task through engaging their intrinsic motivation drives will result in improved test performance.

Variables

- independent: manner of *framing* the assessment combined with how it is perceived by students;
- dependent: motivation for learning, test anxiety and test performance.

Sampling: second year students of the Faculty of Medicine at the "Iuliu Hațieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Cluj-Napoca.

Analysis and interpretation of results

The analysis of the data obtained in the two stages of the investigation (progress and at end-of-year) yielded results that appear to confirm the general hypothesis. The specific hypotheses were partially confirmed. Thus:

- The prior framing of the test task in terms of an ongoing evaluation or of a normal activity did not cause significant differences in anxiety levels before the activity.
- An unexpected test task *relevant* for the profession did not trigger or increase anxiety.
- Most students who transparently received all the relevant information regarding the test task they were about to engage in perceived it as a learning opportunity and not as a test.
- Most students who did not feel anxiety during the ongoing evaluation experienced very reduced or reduced degrees of anxiety at the final examination, which confirms the specific hypothesis SH2.
- Regardless of test task framing, most respondents stated that they were generally motivated to solve it.
- Most students confirmed that they approached the test task by engaging their own resources towards achieving an intrinsic goal. This prevalence of intrinsic motivation could partially confirm the specific hypothesis SH1.

- The degree of extrinsic motivation did not significantly differentiate test performance.
- By framing a test task as authentic and relevant for the profession seemed to have influenced students' extrinsic motivational drives.
- On the final evaluation, most students highlighted the fact that they were intrinsically motivated by the test task, which required them to write the abstract of a medical research article.

B. Practical investigation II

Objective: To research how test framing within the medical English language course in terms of (1) an activity with an intrinsic goal or (2) an activity with an extrinsic goal could influence test performance, motivation and anxiety, according to the following types of context: - A) dynamic or B) static, C) supportive or D) direct (authoritarian) – created by the teacher through test preparation and administration.

General hypothesis

The general hypothesis essentially integrates the idea of the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of speech acts (Searle; Austin) as well as the idea of adapting testing to the motivational drives engaged by the student in order to solve the test tasks required by this activity.

H1. Framing the medical English language test in terms of an activity oriented towards intrinsic or extrinsic goals influences test performance according to the dynamic or static, supportive or directive environment created by the teacher through test preparation and administration.

Working (specific) hypotheses

SH1. Intrinsic motivation correlates with test performance differently in authentic vs. non-authentic testing.

SH2. Extrinsic motivation does not correlate with test performance.

SH3. Test anxiety negatively correlates with test performance regardless of test task framing.

Variables

- independent: test task framing (for intrinsic / extrinsic goals) and the type of test environment (supportive/directive or authoritarian; dynamic/static);
- dependent: test performance.

Sampling - Non-equivalent groups of students.

Content sampling - The experimental group was administered an authentic test, with appropriate materials and methodology, experimental manipulation consisting of dynamic-supportive framing of the test task for an intrinsic goal. The control group was administered a non-authentic test of English with static-directive framing for an extrinsic goal.

Analysis and interpretation of results

According to the initial hypotheses, the main findings resulting from the analysis of the data of the practical investigation can be summarized as follows:

1. Intrinsic motivation had a positive influence on test performance only in the case of the non-authentic test and only in the control group. The results confirm the specific hypothesis SH1 in the case of the authentic test administered to both groups and for the non-authentic test given to the experimental group.

2. Extrinsic motivation did not correlate with test performance in the case of the authentic test in none of the groups. The specific hypothesis SH2 was confirmed for the authentic test in both groups and for the non-authentic test in the experimental group.

3. Test anxiety had a negative influence on test performance in the case of the authentic test in both groups and for the non-authentic test in the control group, therefore, when anxiety increased, test results decreased. This apparently easy to anticipate finding partially confirms the specific hypothesis SH3, but it also raises an interesting issue: the fact that test performance in the authentic test was not negatively

influenced by test anxiety in the control group might be explained by framing the test in terms of a class exercise and not as “traditional” testing resulting in the award of marks and announced as such, using traditional test-specific language.

3. Study limitations

- difficulties caused by the interdisciplinary approach of the research methodology;
- the action research protocol did not include a teaching experiment per se, the research consisting of descriptive-exploratory correlational investigations combined with a quasi-experiment applied to non-equivalent samples;
- data processing and analysis generated some confusing or unpredictable results that could not be anticipated by the hypotheses or the literature review, as well as other easily justifiable results given the premises of this research. We do not exclude the possibility that some results were generated by flaws in design methodology, especially as far as the use of some ad-hoc questionnaires were concerned, or of questionnaires adapted to the objectives of the current study;
- the impossibility of identifying stable rules and definite causes.

Besides these inherent limitations and practical difficulties, we believe that the constant pursuit of the main aim of this research, that of improving the third element of the teaching-learning-evaluating cycle in a very well established context – the English language course for economics and medical students – generated results which encourage us to continue our research in the area of didactics and educational psychology.

4. Final conclusions

- Transparent communication of the test characteristics by the teacher, together with the stimulation of a positive attitude towards testing can positively influence the entire evaluation process, which will thus be perceived accordingly, as a learning opportunity, without completely eliminating the anxiety response of the test taker.

- The unexpected confrontation with an authentic test task does not increase the feeling of anxiety. Based on the analysis of relevant data collected, we cannot determine whether the “authenticity” of the test or the elimination of examination or testing-specific terminology account for this type of emotional response; therefore, further research is needed in order to clarify possible underlying causes.

- Approaching a test task by employing resources for an intrinsic goal may cause statistically significant differences in test performance values, at least in intrinsically motivated individuals.

- Highlighting the authentic and relevant character of a test task can influence the students’ extrinsic motivational drives.

- Intrinsic motivation influences test performance differently in the case of authentic vs. non-authentic testing.

- The mainly extrinsic motivation manifested by some students does not seem to influence test performance when authentic tests are administered.

- Better test performance is obtained when authentic tests are administered to students with a lower anxiety level compared with those with a high anxiety level, regardless of test task framing. Anxiety does not negatively influence performance when the test task is presented as a routine activity for the development of profession-specific communicative competences which are going to be evaluated through informal *feedback* from the teacher and not through a mark.

As a general conclusion, it can be stated that, when characterized by the attributes of authenticity (of materials, test tasks, interaction, etc.), testing profession-specific competences can positively influence the degree of student involvement in routine practical course activities that would thus include, more naturally, assessment activities.

5. Possible applications and further research

- The advantages offered by dynamic as opposed to static testing must be taken into consideration alongside with the need for adequate framing in a supportive instead of a directive environment, through a more frequent use of authentic test tasks that require more than the simple recognition and correct use of standard structures and terminology.

- A more active preoccupation of teaching staff involved in undergraduate and graduate education is required to identify and apply efficient means for activating students' intrinsic motivation so that their teaching and learning efforts be less dependent solely on the possibility of obtaining good marks. Without compromising the accuracy of the assessment, by highlighting its benefits, among which the fact that testing may be a valuable additional learning opportunity, we could transform the traditional view on tests and examinations.

We believe that in order to encourage and facilitate learning, but also the accuracy of assessment, teachers should offer students, possibly through study skills seminars, if not within specialized departments which already exist in European universities, a set of efficient strategies for approaching tests and examinations, starting with the preparation stage, followed by testing per se and ending with the follow-up *feedback*.

Following the study of individual factors in the context of testing, but also in view of our experience in a supportive approach of the affective-emotional areas of teaching activities involving assessment, we believe that an in-depth, interdisciplinary approach of the impact of academic examination-specific language on student test performance is highly relevant. The available studies on the illocutionary and perlocutionary force of speech acts could constitute the basis of this further research.

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