

ONLINE ASSESSMENT OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

The study is about the questions of online assessment of English for Specific Purposes. The focus is on online assessment as a possible future form of language testing which truly has a huge importance hence today's situation around the globe. It can unquestionably be used as a perspective in a vast array of contents. The study is innovative and its main aim is to uncover the intriguing questions and issues of online testing and to enlighten the candidates and professional assessors about the advantages and disadvantages of online testing. A thorough experimental process is currently being implemented involving a process that includes an online questionnaire completed by English and Hungarian students at the Medical School of the University of Pécs. Material and methods include already completed surveys, which will be followed by needs analysis and trial versions of online tests. These surveys do not only question future candidates but also assessors in order to find both perspectives of needs and wants. These include the aspects of tasks, content, skills, technology and others.

KEYWORDS

Assessment, ESP, Language testing, Online, Validity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language testing is among the most interesting topics in the field of applied linguistics and it is also popular with foreign language teachers. Assessing language learners not only gives teachers feedback and information about the learners' knowledge but also gives a picture to the learners themselves regarding how well they have acquired the language and how well their learning skills work. Test results can also help as a motivating factor for sustaining and increasing students' willingness to learn (Turek, 1998). A considerable number of tests and examinations exist already regarding language acquisition, yet all fall victim to little variation. It has long been questioned whether it is of considerable use to vary *online* assessment when compared with traditional testing methods. Another intriguing question is whether it can be said that the evaluation of languages for specific purposes reflect today's current progressive attitudes, reflecting online behaviour. The number of questions arising is merely uncountable.

The present paper aims to provide an overview of the most up-to-date questions of online testing. The questions include the students' attitude towards online tests, their experience regarding the online world and their online habits. First, the paper will discuss the theoretical background providing relevant literature review of ESP and English in its general use, indicating the similarities and differences between them. Then, it will focus on assessment, more precisely online assessment. The literature of online testing has grown enormously in the past few months

hence the global pandemic situation. In this section it will also state the advantages and disadvantages of online assessment versus the traditional way of testing. Finally, it will draw conclusion of the survey that was carried out among the Hungarian and international students at the Medical School, University of Pécs.

1.1. Validity in the Online World

Validity is one of the key questions of online testing beside implementation. There have been numerous studies to investigate the intriguing field of validity. Czéreová and Mazurová (2017) claim that a test is considered valid if it can be used to measure what is supposed to measure. In the case of ESP, a test is considered valid if it measures not only the general language ability of the candidate, but it also measures the candidate's skills in certain field-specified context. Bachmann (2013) explains the term valid as a major requirement in order to be able to conduct a language assessment with a reliable result of the test taker's language ability.

Further investigations and experiments need to be conducted for an online test to be considered valid. Finding a way to prove validity of online testing is the next level of this study. In order to gain relevant information and solution about validity is our following concern.

1.2. Theoretical Background

The aim of the present paper is to uncover some of the most intriguing questions of online assessment of ESP. The topic has been on its peak since the pandemic situation made teachers and candidates stay at home behind their screens. Today's situation has forced people to look forward hence today's situation's urge to be able to fulfil everything online due to factors like time, progression and safety. There are so many ways of keeping up with the pace of technology as well as information technology itself, that somehow, we might as well miss the point and tend to think that everything is available online already. However, it remains a question whether we are ready for this challenge in terms of ESP.

At first, the term *Languages for Specific Purposes* should be clarified. It is still argued today whether Languages for Specific Purposes means merely having a certain set of vocabulary or simply having good communication skills result in being able to use a language well for any kind of purposes. According to Kurtán (2003), LSP includes elements of everyday language, common set of a specified vocabulary and defined specific vocabulary of a given field. Taking general and specified vocabulary into consideration, questions of assessment arise. It is questionable whether a language should be assessed in terms of vocabulary and if so, how we can differentiate between using a language, and more precisely a set of vocabulary for *general* purposes and using it for *specific* purposes. These are only the first questions that come to our mind when thinking about assessing ESP.

Numerous researchers have defined LSP so far. Kurtán (2003) provides a collection of the various descriptions of languages for specific purposes in linguistics. She describes it as a way of communication with the aid of verbal and non-verbal features, and she also claims that it can be used to communicate different messages from one to another participant and lastly, she states that we can consider it in a very narrow but also a very broad content.

Starfield (2013) states that in the beginning of teaching ESP, the motivation behind it was the need to communicate across the languages in areas such as commerce and technology. It can clearly be said that the initial motivation has not changed but numerous other and new topics have been added to the above mentioned areas, such as the areas of English for academic, social and business purposes.

If we take the functions of ESP into consideration, it is not difficult to agree with Basturkmen's (2006) claim about ESP, when she states that ESP has the following typical functions: help language learners to cope with the features of language or to develop the competences which are necessary to function in a discipline, profession or workplace. These functions are limited to a certain area, unlike when using a language in its general form. However, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) share their view of ESP as an *approach* rather than a *product*, by which they mean that ESP implicate a specific kind of language, teaching material or methodology. This view brings us back to the previous views regarding the close relation between ESP, profession and commerce.

As Master indicates about English and its role, it has a "subtle aspect of linguistic dominance" (1998:720) in ESP. It is unquestionable as English is still one of the most dominant languages around the globe, not only in spoken communication but in terms of written media and languages of specific purposes as well.

One of the main questions of the differentiation is whether or not we should make a distinction between Languages for Specific Purposes and languages in their 'general' use. Where is the line between the two above mentioned uses? If there is a line, is the line distinct or only a faint one. It is arguable, whether it is only the *function* as purpose that derives them from each other or they are separate due to the use of a special set of vocabulary. Warta (2005:28) explains this as follows: "The specialized language is different from the so-called general language regarding lexical, semantic, grammatical, stylistic, textual, sociolinguistic and pragmatic attitudes. Special vocabulary is only part of the language and linguistic repertoire needed for achieving special communication purposes". In this view, there are numerous features that draw a distinct line between language in its general and specific use. These features do not only appear in their everyday meaning, but also in this special, multi-purpose meaning.

As it is important in general EFL contexts, assessment is an integral part of LSP, too, which may be achieved through traditional as well as alternative ways (Bánhegyi-Fajt, 2020; Bánhegyi-Fajt-Dósa, 2020). Douglas (2000) claims that a distinction between EFL and LSP tests should be made. The fundamental features include authenticity, interaction and the knowledge of specific purpose content. In his view, for a task to be authentic, it is essential for the task to share critical features in the target language when measuring social skills in a situation exercise. The situation is in a specific context involving the criteria of the certain field. In this case, the language user is more likely to use the target language in a test situation as he would use it in a real-life situation. To be able to perform well in such exercise, good background knowledge is essential in the concept of specific purpose language use. In a case of a given field's situation, a specific set of vocabulary is needed to be able to complete such task on an expected level.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

As a first step, a query was conducted with the aid of a questionnaire on an online platform. There were two reasons behind choosing an online platform. Firstly, the topic itself is about an online issue, secondly, it is easier, quicker and more current to use an online platform with today's university students. The number of students answering the questionnaire made it clear that it is the best way of reaching out to students in such cases and topics.

The questionnaire listed twenty-one questions including questions about personal biodata, past online habits, present online habits, preferences regarding paper-based and online tests and attitude towards online tests and the attitude towards unethical behaviour.

This questionnaire is a first step in order to gain a relevant picture of online testing with the aim of a preliminary investigation to have a background picture from the students' point of view.

Their aspect is essential regarding further investigations, such as wants analysis. Eliciting students' attitude, needs and wants, experience and feelings about online assessment proves to be fruitful for this research.

In order to answer the research questions the quantitative research paradigm was used. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms, the answers were recorded and data was saved and personal data was kept confidential. Charts and MS Excel tables were used for data analysis, extraction and visualisation.

The second step is to investigate the assessors' attitude and expectations. To explore this side of the topic, a questionnaire will shortly be completed by me, which will be asked to complete by the ESP tutors at the Medical School, University of Pécs and by the Profex assessors. The aim of this is to get insight to the assessors' point of view, to receive a needs analysis in connection with assessing online. This will give another perspective on which path the research will gain valuable information to develop the experimental side. Online trial tests will give us the real, first-hand experience of the topic. It can only follow the thorough processing of the data received in the theoretical part. Volunteer participants will again come from the same basis, volunteering students of the University of Pécs Medical School.

A great deal of organization needs to be done in advance, which include finding a suitable room with reliably working computers, an applicable software, camera system, personnel, eligible tests, given personality rights for video recording and the list goes on. Once the online trial test is prepared thoroughly and commenced successfully, it will give a huge set of information urging to be processed to find out about the advantages and disadvantages of online testing.

2.1. Participants

Participants included Hungarian and international students at the Medical School, University of Pécs. In this particular questionnaire, the participation was limited to students of higher education and to the students of the University of Pécs. The reason behind this is to acquire answers and data from one particular educational age group. To find out about different age groups' attitude and answers further investigations are necessary with the possibility of comparing the given data.

3. DISCUSSION

Data, regarding both students in higher education and ESP can be seen on the following charts. (Figure 1.) In our case, Medical English is behind the meaning of specific purpose. At the Medical School of the University of Pécs, candidates have the possibility to take Profex language exam, which is an exam for languages in Medical Purposes. "*PROFEX (PROficiency EXamination) in an English for Medical Purposes (EMP) bilingual testing system offering language tests for medical and paramedical professionals.*"(<http://profex.aok.pte.hu/en/what-profex>) There are three levels B1, B2 and C1, which were defined in accordance with the recommendations of the Council of Europe described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The PROFEX Exam Center is at the Faculty of General Medicine, University of Pécs. PROFEX exams are administered in more than 20 exam sites in Hungary and abroad too, for example in Targu Mures University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Romania. Exams can be taken in four languages and successful exams are certified by official language certificates.



Figure 1. Number of successful and unsuccessful Profex candidates 2016-2018. English (lighter bar) and German (darker bar) for Specific Purposes (<http://profex.aok.pte.hu/en/what-profex>)

The above charts show the number of candidates taking language exams for Medical Purposes. It is clearly visible that there is an increasing demand for these exams year by year. The total number of candidates of Profex language exams show a steadily rising tendency in the last three years' statistics. It is also noticeable that the number of unsuccessful candidates is significantly fewer compared to the successful ones. From 2016 to 2018 the total number of candidates who applied increased from 435 to 586. The number of successful candidates also shows a positive dynamic with the rise from 281 to 410. As for the unsuccessful candidates, we can see a merely steady number of 87 and 86 students. This exam has worked offline so far, thus it is an interesting question how these numbers would change if there was an opportunity to take it online. One of the most important questions and obstacle of this at the same time is validity.

4. RESULTS

Having identified students' experience, attitude and view on online assessment has given us insightful findings, however it also showed that further examination is required to handle today's increasing online realm.

The questionnaire's twenty-one questions were answered by 430 (n=430) students of the Medical School at the University of Pécs. The students included Hungarian and international students. According to the nationality figure, 31 nationalities participated in the investigation. Figures 2 and 3 give us insight to the students' answers to the 2 basic questions of the survey. A large pool of participants has been involved in an online test before, as 74.4% (n=320) of the students chose yes as an answer to that question. The answer to the follow-up question also received yes from the vast majority of the students as 84.9% (n=365) clicked on that option and only 25.1% (n=65) clicked on no. These results indicate that students already have experience with online tests to some extent and it also indicates students' willingness to try to gain more of it.

Interestingly, after these two high percentage figures of online tests, another follow-up question only received 55.8% (n=240) yes answers for the following question: Do you believe online tests should be available on a broader scale in consideration of the 21st century?

The last figure of answers shows us that even though the present generation is open and has experience with the online world yet fall victim to the unknown world of online assessment. They clearly have more practice in the traditional, paper-based tests which gives them confidence in that type of assessing method. To our knowledge, this is the first report on the online and the traditional ways of testing which gives us ground for a future research. In that research the potential effects of having much more online exams due to today's situation should be taken into consideration more carefully.

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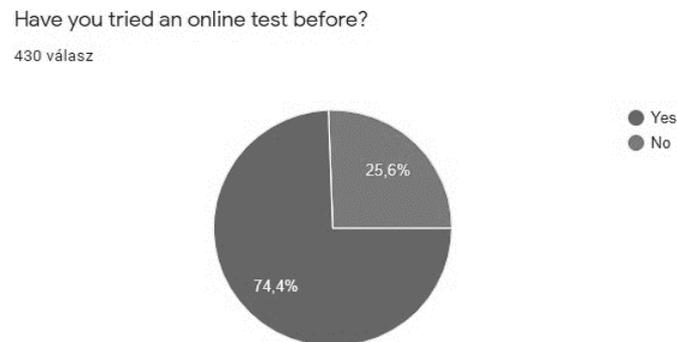


Figure 2. Percent of students who has tried an online test before

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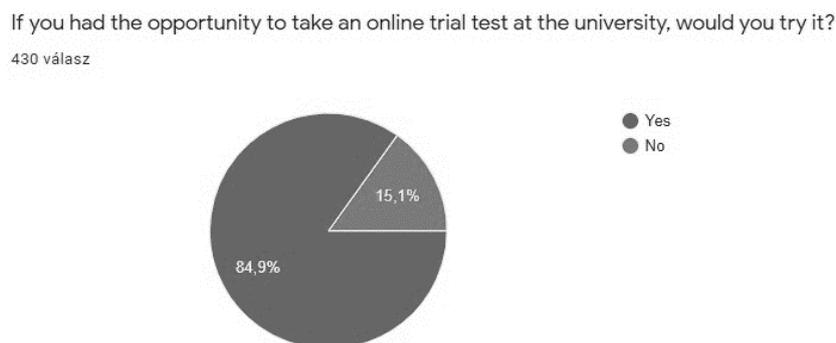


Figure 3. Percent of students who would try an online trial test at the university if there was an opportunity

In the research, one of the questions investigated the fields of life in which students would prefer online tests to traditional tests if they had the opportunity for the online version. The following diagram (Figure 4) shows us the first four items receiving the top votes. They are the following: the theoretical part of the driving course with 64.9% (n=279), computer skills with 52.1% (=224), academic staff with 50.5% (=217) and language certificate with 49.8% (=214). These findings

indicate that the students prioritise those four fields and that they would prefer to have these tests available online. The broad implication of the present result to this question is that in the previously mentioned fields are of high importance for this generation, thus their online test versions are worth researching in the future.

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If you had the opportunity, in what fields of life would you prefer online tests? Please choose your top three.

430 válasz

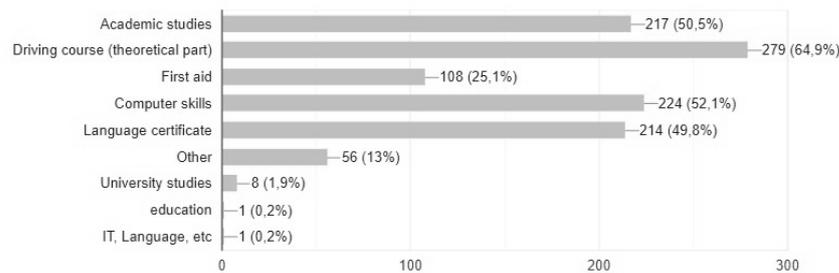


Figure 4: Fields in which students would prefer online tests to traditional tests

The last graph of this paper (Figure 5) shows us the students' top three chosen characteristics regarding online tests. The most popular feature of online tests among the students was "it can be done anywhere" which received a significant 84.2% (n=362). This suggests that being able to take a test at any place is among the most important feature. This was followed by the answer "it can be done anytime" which received 75.8% (n=326). This implicates that the time factor is almost as important for possible candidates as the place factor. Another time-related answer received the third most significant percentage, namely "I would get the results sooner" 74.2% (n=319). These interesting research questions indicate that time and place are of high importance in for today's generation and it also gives us opportunity for future research that can be derived from the findings of the present study.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1CoyxMyYXjnD2r8vwOc_Oli6RpQVO46GKsmoXiYODVIA/edit?no_redirect&gxids=7628#responses

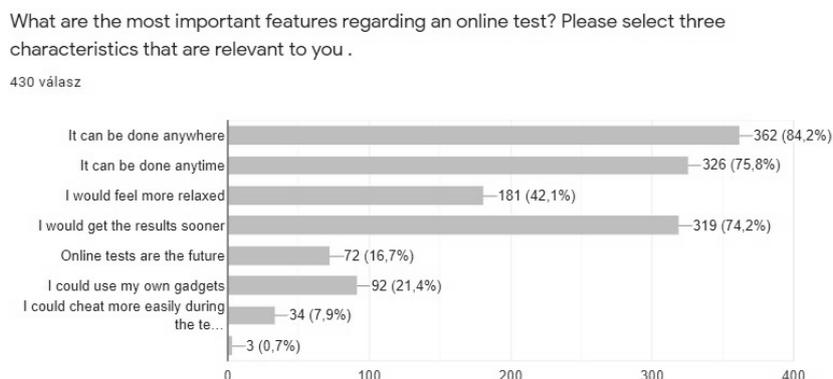


Figure 5: Most important features of online tests for students

5. CONCLUSION

One of the characteristic goals in support of this study is to outline a comprehensive vision of ESP assessment from varying perspectives, including context, time, place, tasks, test developing and technology. However, we acknowledge that there are considerable researches should still be conducted to gain a relevant picture in this field after facing several months of online experience.

I intend to do this not only from the aspect of theory but also from first-hand experience. Throughout the entirety of this research, my primary goal is to identify such perspectives of online testing. I intend to achieve results which can be an aid for actively assessing teachers and also for students desiring to improve their ESP skills aiming at an improving level to conduct a reliable and valid online assessment. The present findings confirm the need and value of online assessment, however the concern of validity and technical issues provide a good starting point for discussion and further research for us to be able to move on to the next level.

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