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Students' perceptions of the general english proficiency test: A study on Tishk International University students in Erbil, Iraq

Öğrencilerin Genel İngilizce Yeterlik Sınavına İlişkin Algıları: Erbil, Irak'taki Tishk Uluslararası Üniversitesi öğrencileri üzerine bir çalışma

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Abstract

Language Proficiency exams are run globally in different formats to assess students' performance at all stages. Accordingly, standardized or institution-based proficiency exams are common at higher education institutions to determine students' level and overall ability. This study was conducted in 2022-2023 Academic Year over a span of 4 weeks to examine the perceptions of prospective students who want to study in different faculties and departments of Tishk International University in Iraq. One thousand students were chosen as the sample by adopting convenience sampling method. The purpose of this study was to figure out prospective students' genuine opinions on revised Tishk International University General English Proficiency Exam. The students took the exam run by Tishk International University, Language Preparatory School and expressed their opinions about the exam through the interview. The findings revealed that watching movies, reading books, joining some training programs, following the news and TV programs in English affected their performance positively, whereas setting other priorities, focusing on other subjects rather than English, not studying well in advance, unable to manage the time and stress affected their results adversely. Additionally, the students stated once more that incorporating some of the questions from their grade 12 English textbook with those from the Cambridge Proficiency Exam 1 boosted their motivation to achieve high marks on the test. The findings of this study may have some implications for future studies related to English language proficiency tests.

Özet

Dil Yeterlik sınavları, öğrencilerin tüm aşamalarda performanslarını değerlendirmek için dünya çapında farklı formatlarda yürütülmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, yükseköğretim kurumlarında öğrencilerin düzeyini ve genel yeteneklerini belirlemek için standartlaştırılmış veya kurum bazlı yeterlik sınavları yaygındır. Bu çalışma, 2022-2023 Eğitim-Öğretim Yılında Irak'taki Tishk Uluslararası Üniversitesi'nin farklı fakülte ve bölümlerinde okumak isteyen aday öğrencilerin algılarını incelemek amacıyla, 4 hafta boyunca gerçekleştirilmiştir. Kolaylık örnekleme yöntemi benimsenerek bin öğrenci örneklem olarak seçilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, aday öğrencilerin gözden geçirilmiş Tishk Uluslararası Üniversitesi Genel İngilizce Yeterlik Sınavı hakkındaki gerçek görüşlerini ortaya koymaktır. Tishk Uluslararası Üniversitesi, Dil Hazırlık Okulu tarafından yürütülen sınava giren öğrenciler, mülakat yoluyla sınavla ilgili görüşlerini dile getirdiler. Bulgular, film izlemenin, kitap okumanın, bazı eğitim programlarına katılmanın, İngilizce haber ve televizyon programlarını takip etmenin performanslarını olumlu yönde etkilediğini, diğer öncelikleri belirlemenin, İngilizce yerine başka konulara odaklanmanın, önceden iyi çalışmama, zamanı yönetememenin ve stresin öğrencilerin başarı durumunu olumsuz etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur. Ek olarak, öğrenciler bir kez daha 12. sınıf İngilizce ders kitaplarındaki bazı soruların Cambridge Yeterlilik Sınavı 1'dekilerle birleştirilmesinin sınavda yüksek notlar alma motivasyonlarını artırdığını belirttiler. Bu çalışmanın bulguları, İngilizce dil yeterlilik

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sınavları ile ilgili gelecekteki çalışmalar için bazı olumlu etkilere sahip olabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce testi, yeterlik testi, yabancı dil.

Introduction

The importance of a common language made itself felt in many areas in the rapidly globalizing world right after the Second World War and educators have been playing an essential part in the teaching process since then. Some educated people's curiosity and interest in the world around them may have even led to the development of the act of teaching itself (Celik & Yildiz, 2017), so the language learning and teaching process has also received a lot of attention globally, thanks to advances in technology and the increased possibility of living in another country. The advances in technology that have taken place in this century have had a profound impact on people all across the world (Kara & Yildiz, 2022). Due to the post-war political balance of power and the scientific language that came to life in English in the world, the English language has become the most well-known candidate for a common language on the stage of history. In this regard, learning English is more common than any other languages because it has been considered as lingua franca which means that two foreigners can communicate with English at ease worldwide (Celik, 2018). Accordingly, English ranks first in the most spoken languages in 2022 (Statista, 2022). Likewise, English is an official language in 75 countries which shows that around 40 % of the countries adopt English as one of the official languages (Zeng et al., 2022). Additionally, more than 1 billion people have been learning English worldwide. The average age to start learning English is 7 years old on a global scale (Köylü & Tracy, 2022). These figures illustrate that English has dominated the world recently.

English has affected the people's lives tremendously. Therefore, in today's modern world, which is constantly growing and developing, a person with an excellent command of any language can be considered a candidate for many promising positions in different fields (Abbas et al., 2021). It is compulsory to learn English at educational institutions in many countries, so citizens of the countries may have countless opportunities to grab during their career in their home countries or abroad. Additionally, speaking English is a pre-requisite to be invited for the interview in many job adverts. Moreover, knowing English increases

the chance to be promoted in any fields. Also, students who are able to speak English can be granted a scholarship to earn a degree abroad. Likewise, students can receive education in English remotely (Celik et al., 2022). Furthermore, people who can speak English can expand their social circles via means of communication such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or some online game websites. To illustrate, a student may graduate later if he cannot command English precisely on time; an academic may not read and analyze published articles in English if the English level is not satisfactory; a tourist may not communicate with local people if both parties do not speak English; a CEO may not increase the network to increase the sales in other countries if s/he cannot speak English well; workers may not increase their salaries if they cannot speak English fluently; and drivers may not work overseas if they were unable to communicate with people in English. It seems that English has an essential role in many aspects for billions of people.

Acquisition of a foreign language is not simple and continues within a particular program and procedure. Furthermore, the one who wishes to acquire a foreign language encounters challenges regardless of the language in question (Dayan & Yildiz, 2022). Additionally, assessing students' language proficiency plays a fundamental role at educational institutions. Still, teachers of English as a foreign language are confronted with issues assessing their students' learning processes that require immediate answers (Ulker & Yildiz, 2021). In this regard, Proficiency exams have been designed to measure learners' skills in English. Although proficiency exams (PEs hereafter) are common at all stages, it is compulsory to take it at many universities. PEs are held to figure out whether students need additional English courses or not. Educational institutions set a benchmark to be successful. When students reach the benchmark, they can be eligible to be exempt from additional English courses. On the other hand, some students need to take intensive English courses if they earn lower marks than the benchmark. A growing number of companies such as Oxford, ETS, Pearson and Cambridge have offered

professional services to conduct PEs (Peña et al., 2021). However, some institutions would rather create their own PEs because they state that standardized commercial PEs cannot accommodate their specific requests. Additionally, it is postulated that standardized PEs can be costly and overwhelming (Sims, 2015). Furthermore, Kachru (1985) proposed three circles which were inner, outer, and expanding to distinguish speakers of English. Inner circle refers to people who are native speakers of English, whereas outer circle refers to ESL learners who use English widely in daily life, media, or education. On the other hand, expanding circle is used to identify EFL learner who learn and speak English as a foreign language. The conflict between commercial standardized PEs and local PEs can arise from this fact. A standardized PE created in the USA may not be feasible to conduct in Nepal as the degree of difficulty cannot be balanced well. One of the most important roles of educational institutions is accountability, so testing and evaluation committee in each institution assume responsibility to create relevant Proficiency Exams according to the needs of the institutions and competence of average students in the area.

Creating a PE is a sophisticated process which requires the contributors and administrators to collaborate with a checklist, so the final product can be valid and reliable. McNamara (2000) states that several components should be integrated equally in PEs to measure the general language ability of the candidates as opposed to an achievement test which measures only specific points after completing a course in a period. Considering this point, Brown suggests six procedures for developing PEs successfully which are determining the purpose of the test, specifying each component with precise number of questions, assigning the duties, and setting the deadline, forming an independent committee to revise the questions thoroughly, finalizing the grading rubric and running validity and reliability tests. Sarac and Loken (2022) postulate that multiple choice-based PEs are the most common instruments to measure learners' skills as they are practical, easy to grade and receive statistical analysis and universal. Hulstijn (2012) also attests that a well-developed PE should measure four primary skills as well as grammar and vocabulary. If one primary skill or sub-skills are neglected, the results may be deceptive. Realizing these points, the validity, reliability scores and accountability of PEs can be examined thoroughly before issuing them.

PEs have been held in multiple formats after Covid 19. The isolation of the students exposed the notion of transitioning to online schooling. It should be mentioned, however, that online education presents a number of challenges (Bilgin et al., 2022). PEs used to be taken traditionally before Covid-19 period, however, online PEs have increased since the advent of Covid-19 (Georgescu & Berechet, 2022). Additionally, hybrid PEs are available to urge students to take 50 % of the exam online and 50 % face to face. Although hybrid and online PEs are convenient to a large extent, some hesitations arise related to conducting the exams fairly and successfully. When online exams are held, students' cheating rates can increase (Janke et al., 2021). Moreover, technical problems can occur due to internet or power outages. Additionally, some online PEs require the students to upload a photo, some speaking videos, so students who are not equipped with basic computer literacy skills can encounter many issues. It seems that online PEs should be reconsidered to remove the barriers in terms of security, computer-literacy and technical issues.

Literature Review

PEs have a paramount impact on assessing freshman students' English levels at universities. These exams have been designed to set the lines between failed and passed students. Most universities require the students to study at a language preparatory school for a year or reject them if their English level is not satisfactory to pass. Considering the importance of PEs, it is essential to prepare, conduct and grade them professionally. In this respect, Aydin et al. (2016) contend that CEFR (Common European Framework Reference of Languages) guideline is applied in many commercial or localized PEs because this guideline classifies the levels and specifies the items for each skill in general. Additionally, varied opinions have been stated about the content of the proficiency exams. To illustrate, Isbell and Kremmel (2020) postulate that grammar questions can be an essential predictor to measure learners' proficiency in English, so the items related to grammar should be integrated into these exams. Additionally, reading is one of the skills that are attempted to be taught at every stage of education and it is the process of deriving meaning from written symbols (Ulker et al., 2021). Lee (2018) states that well-balanced reading questions can assess learners' proficiency accurately because they need to read, comprehend, analyze and answer on time. Moreover, Buck (2001) asserts that measuring listening skills is fundamental in PEs

for several reasons. He argues that listening questions not only necessitates being concentrated but also making accurate interpretations on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation knowledge. Furthermore, speaking section should be a pre-requisite in PEs to figure out whether the learners can express their ideas fluently (Bakri, 2022; Celik, 2019). Subsequently, Karakoç and Köse (2017) attest that lexical competence plays an integral role in assessing learners' skills, so vocabulary questions can be of greatest importance in proficiency exams. Upon creating the PE, the versions of it vary which can be conducted face to face, online or blended (Blake, 2015). Paper-based proficiency exams are the most common forms as they are easy to carry out, while online PEs have some drawbacks in terms of computer literacy skills and security. Additionally, blended PEs offer some advantages for learners who have difficulty in taking speaking exams in a face-to-face format (Green & Lung, 2021). Some institutions also offer all skills in the class except speaking exams which can be taken later by a video conference or in offices designed to take speaking exams individually.

A growing number of research has been conducted on PEs globally. To name a few, Karakoc and Kose (2017) carried out a study in Turkey on 175 high school graduates which revealed that lexical competence affects students' overall grades substantially in PEs. They postulate that size of vocabulary affects students' understanding positively in listening, reading, writing and speaking sections. Subsequently, Gary (2021) overviewed some PEs at different universities in the USA which revealed that the trend to offer online exams was noticed more clearly thanks to the advancements in technology. In addition, Abdalhussein (2022) carried out a study in Iraq on EFL students which uncovered that the students who could infer the meaning from the context outperformed. He states that the training to develop semantic knowledge of the learners can increase students' success tremendously. Also, Asif et al. (2022) carried out a study to measure the effects of online training period on proficiency in Pakistan with university students. The study indicated that online learning materials increased students' proficiency levels as they learned how to manage their time, learn from their mistakes, get precious feedback and experience the atmosphere of the exam. A study on blended learning was conducted in Saudi Arabia by Dahmash (2020) which showed that assessing students' performance in a hybrid version eased the tension of the candidate students particularly in Covid-

19 period. He states that speaking sections in PEs can be a source of anxiety for some students, so students can manage their anxiety well if they take the speaking section at home. Considering the essential points in given studies, it can be argued that the strategies to get a satisfactory mark in PEs differ according to the pre-requisite of the exams set by the institutions.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study investigated the perceptions of prospective students who have been considering applying to TISHK University (TIU hereafter) on Revised English Proficiency Exam. Based on this framework, the following research questions were formulated as follows:

- Is TIU Proficiency Exam comprehensive enough to measure their overall ability in English accurately?
- Do prospective students feel competent enough to pass it?
- What are students' overall comments on the conduct of the exam?

Methodology

A qualitative research design was implemented in this study which required the researchers to prepare, conduct and analyze the interview. In this regard, the students who took the English PE were interviewed in lecturers' offices. Castell et al. (2021) contend that qualitative research design has been widely used in the social sciences to collect data and interpret the findings in a verbalized form rather than statistical analysis. Additionally, Turner et al. (2022) state that interviews are one of the most commonly used instruments to get in-depth perspectives and offer constructive amendments for the stakeholders.

Setting, Participants and Sampling Procedure

This study was conducted at TIU in Erbil, Iraq where 5000 students in 29 departments have received their education. This private university has been renowned for offering the medium of instruction in English with its qualified academics. In addition, the university welcomes students from different nationalities in a peaceful atmosphere. The participant of this study comprised 1000 students who took TIU Proficiency Exam in the first round for 2022-2023 Academic Year. Although around 3000 students were expected to take the exam during the period, only 1000 students were included in the study by employing convenience sampling

method. Convenience sampling method has been used to conduct the study with readily available and accessible participants (Zhao, 2021).

Participants` ages and genders were given in Table 1.

Table 1.
Participants` Frequency in Terms of Gender and Age

Variable(s)	Option	F	%
Gender	Female	520	52
	Male	480	48
Age	18-21	960	96
	22+	40	4
Total		1000	100

Once Table 1 was examined, it was seen that female students (52 %) were higher than male ones (48 %). In addition to the gender, the participants ages were illustrated in detail which displayed that 96 % of the students were between 18 and 21 years old, whereas 4 % of the students were 22 years old or older. These figures show that the number of females exceeded the males, while the percentage of 22-year-old and older ones was very limited.

Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected in 4 weeks when the students took TIU Proficiency Exam in October 2022. All participants took the written examination in classes and speaking exam in lecturer`s rooms. Cambridge Proficiency Exam 1 and Sunrise 12 books were chosen as reference books, so international and local English books were merged equally to create the exam. The students were asked some questions about their perceptions towards the revised proficiency exam after receiving the results. The interviews were transcribed and categorized by content analysis. The content analysis was applied to make interpretations based on common themes.

The Stages of Revising TIU Proficiency Exam in 2022

Table 2.
Sections, Items and Points of Proficiency Exam

Skill	Questions	Points	Version
Listening	10	20	Multiple Choice
Reading	10	10	Multiple Choice
Grammar	20	20	Multiple Choice
Vocabulary	20	20	Multiple Choice
Writing	5	15	Open Ended
Speaking	5	15	Open Ended
Total	70	100	

Certain steps were followed to revise the previous year`s TIU Proficiency Exam which can be examined below.

- Analyzing the feedback of students who took TIU PE previously
- Forming an exam committee to decide the degree of difficulty, scope of the exam and reference books
- Having two workshops to clarify all points about the content of the exam
- Assigning the instructors who would create the questions in the exam
- Forming one more committee to proofread the whole exam
- Testing the questions on some students randomly
- Converting the multiple-choice questions into a Zip Grade format
- Uploading the tutorials and sample exams on TIU Website and publishing them on official social media accounts

Content of the Exam

Table 2 illustrates the sections with precise number of items and points.

Listening questions were created based on the audio tracks in Sunrise 12. The rationale to choose this book was that students studied it in grade 12, so they were familiar with the conversations. Although the audio tracks were taken from the Sunrise 12, all questions were formed by instructors creatively. Therefore, the students needed to figure out the topic and answer questions which were not available on the internet.

Reading questions were taken either from Sunrise 12 or Cambridge Proficiency 1. The questions were redesigned by the instructors, so the reading passages were the same, however, all questions were different.

Grammar questions were placed based on the topic checklist. The instructors created some questions about any grammar topics ranging from tenses to passive voice considering the level of the students.

Vocabulary questions were formed based on the essential words in Sunrise or Cambridge Proficiency Exam 1, so students were familiar with the words in advance.

Writing topics were converted into writing a few sentences for each task rather than writing long essays. For instance, introducing someone in their families, describing their dream departments, summarizing the best book they have read, mentioning their hobbies, identifying the qualities of a good student were some topics to be written in the exam.

Speaking questions were also arranged in 3 sets based on the degree of difficulty. For instance, they started by introducing their best friends, continued by expressing tourist attractions in their region and finalized by speaking about the best movie in their lives.

As can be inferred, the degree of difficulty was either easy or moderate because A2 level was determined for this exam based on CEFR guidelines.

Grading Procedure

The exam included 3 primary categories. The first category was related to multiple choice questions created and graded by Zip Grade which is an automated grading system used worldwide. This category included questions about reading, listening, vocabulary and grammar.

Second category was about writing which included 5 familiar writing topics to be answered with a few sentences. This category was graded by two raters to ensure fair grading. Each rater graded the paper and forwarded the marks to the authorized vice director. The vice director compared each mark and decided accordingly.

Final category was about speaking which was taken in instructors' offices. Each instructor asked the question and waited for a 1-minute reply for each question. Later, the instructor graded the student's performance based on the given rubric.

Once all marks were compiled, the results were saved on the system to be announced to the students after 3 days.

Grading Criteria

The student's English score in national university exam and TIU PE results were calculated to decide the status of each student. Based on this rubric, a student who earned 50 and more in TIU PE passed directly. Other students were placed to be a student at TIU Language Preparatory School, or they were required to take Foundation English course during the year based on the other grading criteria.

Findings

The interview was the single instrument to collect data in this qualitative study, so the findings were compressed in one heading. 15 students' opinions in different departments were given below.

I applied to civil engineering department at TIU. The pre-requisite was to take the proficiency exam or submit the scores of an internationally accepted exams such as TOEFL IBT, IELTS or PTE. I chose taking the exam prepared and run by TIU Language Preparatory School. I studied with the reference books for a month. I also enrolled in some online courses specifically designed for PEs. The training period increased my motivation, self-confidence and overall linguistic ability. I took the exam and passed successfully. Now I look forward to having my first day at university. (Student 57)

I applied to computer engineering department at TIU. I studied for the exam with my cousins who took the PE in previous years. We practiced a lot. My weakness was listening in general, however, I understood the conversation clearly in the exam. I figured out that I could answer listening questions when asked from familiar topics. My

problem was about time management in the exam. Although I was sure about my answers, I felt hesitant. As a result, I answered 5 questions randomly without reading. Eventually, my marks were enough to pass. I learned a valuable lesson in the exam which was about managing my time wisely considering the timer displayed on the smartboard from beginning till the end. (Student 40)

I applied to petroleum and mining engineering department at TIU. I studied at a high school where I took my lessons mostly in English, so I was not stressful in the exam. My problem was in the speaking section. I felt nervous in the exam although the questions were not difficult. Additionally, the instructor was very friendly and helpful to reduce my stress. I understood that I needed more practice about speaking in advance, so I could experience the pressure on me and learn how to manage my speaking anxiety. (Student 35)

I applied to dentistry department at TIU. I joined a language course for a month before taking the PE. My teacher was an expert to train students for PEs. We studied for all skills based on the given schedule. Our teacher prepared some practice exams. We took the exams and analyzed each question to learn from our mistakes. In terms of speaking, we had a box to pick a question and speak randomly. These questions helped me a lot to master speaking. My result in PE was more than 90, so I passed successfully. I have realized my dream to study in dentistry. (Student 97)

I applied to medical analysis department at TIU. I studied for the exam with my aunt who has been working as an English teacher at a high school. We divided the sections into weeks at first. Later, we took some online PEs. Finally, we downloaded the sample exams available on TIU website. We took some notes about the common mistakes and watched some additional videos on YouTube. As a result, I passed the exam with a good mark. (Student 160)

I applied to nursing department at TIU. I studied at a public high school. My priorities were Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Biology in high school, so I could not improve my English as much as I expected. Additionally, I studied hard to be successful in National University Entrance Exam. After receiving the scores in this exam, I took TIU PE. Unfortunately, my score was not so satisfactory. I am planning to be a student at TIU Language Preparatory School. I have heard that they provide a high-quality education with qualified academics and proven language

learning and teaching methodologies. This year will be a fruitful year for me to adapt to all courses successfully in the following years. (Student 290)

I applied to pharmacy department at TIU. I registered for TIU PE. Before taking the exam, I visited TIU Language Preparatory School to have further information about the exam. The instructors and administrators showed me some sample questions and clarified all points in my mind. Later, I grabbed Sunrise 12 and Cambridge Proficiency Exam 1 books to study regularly. I also took some online exams prepared based on these reference books. Finally, I took the exam and earned a very good mark. Now I am waiting impatiently to start the university, so I can meet my new friends and teachers. (Student 314)

I applied to architectural engineering department at TIU. I studied at a public high school. My English teacher was passionate to improve My English professionally. Additionally, I am keen on reading books and watching movies in English. When I took TIU PE, I noticed positive influence of my habits and efforts of my English teacher. I earned 95 in the exam. I have realized once more that having habits to read and watch can have incredible effects on my English level. (Student 50)

I applied to information and technology department at TIU. I am interested in following the latest news related to technology by English newspapers. I expanded my vocabulary knowledge tremendously thanks to reading them. I only took 5 online tests about PE and watched some videos about time-saving tips. When I took the exam, I was familiar with nearly all types of questions. Therefore, I passed the exam successfully. Now I look forward to having my first lesson at university. (Student 543)

I applied to interior design engineering at TIU. I am into watching some documentaries in English about designing buildings. Additionally, I subscribed to some online magazines about decoration and design. Moreover, I like listening to the podcasts in English. When I took TIU PE, I did not have any problems to understand and answer the questions. Also, I did not have any problems in speaking section because the instructors asked me questions from easy to difficult. Therefore, I learned how to manage my stress and enrich my conversation. (Student 643)

I applied to business and management department at TIU. I worked and studied to get experience in my high school. However, I think

my English is not satisfactory enough to adapt to lessons in my department. I downloaded the sample exams and watched the tutorials on TIU website. When I took the exam, my result was not high enough to pass. My status shows that I will take Foundation English courses. Additionally, I will take all my lessons in my department. I hope it will be a fruitful year for me to expand my knowledge in English and other departmental courses. (Student 632)

I applied to banking and finance department at TIU. My mum who is my role model in my life works at a bank, so I want to pursue a career in banking and finance sector. I took the TIU PE seriously because I knew that I would study at TIU LPS for a year once I failed. Therefore, my mum requested a tutor to train me for TIU PE. We studied around 45 days considering all skills. In the last 5 days, I took some practice exams to be graded by my tutor. After earning a high mark, I took the real PE which proved that my English was satisfactory. I am glad that I studied with my tutor. (Student 732)

I applied to international relations and diplomacy department at TIU. I am so interested in current issues around the world, so I follow the news and TV programs in English. This habit helped me a lot in PE. I passed the exam successfully. Additionally, I realized that the responsible instructors were very professional at TIU. They guided me perfectly before during and after the exam. Subsequently, they announced the results within 3 days. I am glad to have my degree at TIU where I am sure that my overall ability will improve considerably. (Student 847)

I applied to accounting at TIU. I think I can find a job easily if I graduate from accounting department. I studied for TIU PE for a month by Sunrise 12 and Cambridge Proficiency Exam 1 books. I also joined some groups to solve some online PEs. Additionally, I downloaded some chat applications to improve my English with foreigners. Therefore, earning a high mark was very easy for me in TIU PE. I suggest other students to take advantage of technology, so they can improve their English substantially. (Student 629)

I applied to physiotherapy department at TIU. I did not study a lot for TIU PE because learning English has been my passion since I started learning English. I only took some online PEs available on the internet. I also trained myself for time management. Once the results were announced, my mark was enough to pass. I suggest my friends to develop good habits

towards learning English rather than only studying for the exams. (Student 994)

Discussion

This study investigated the perceptions of students towards TIU PE run by Language Preparatory School. Based on the findings in the interview, some points were emphasized.

The first point was related to the number of each gender which was nearly equal. It can be stated that male and female students have been given equal opportunities to earn a degree at university. This finding was in line with Vilardo and Bittar's (2018) statement which revealed that the number of female students at all stages increased in Iraq thanks to the collaborative initiatives of the government institutions and international foundations. Subsequently, taking a training course before the exam was so common. It shows that students valued the preparation period to get a satisfactory mark (Lowe, 2015). Another point to be considered was that including some questions from students' high school curriculum in English reduced their anxiety and increased their self-confidence. They attest that familiar topics increased their motivation to pass. Standardized PEs do not appeal to all institutions, so a growing number of institutions have created their own PEs (Sims, 2015). Furthermore, students were satisfied with the announcements and tutorial videos to be more knowledgeable about the exam. Saichaie and Morphew (2014) propose that official university websites are essential tools to inform and guide the students on upcoming events or exams with written and visual materials.

In addition, some students stressed that time management, exam anxiety and speaking apprehension in a public place were their weaknesses. Grassi et al. (2011) state that time management problems trigger other issues such as exam anxiety and stress level. After that, increasing the degree of difficulty in each section of the exam was appreciated by students. Gulek et al. (2003) argue that certain steps should be followed while preparing high stake exams which will affect students' university period directly. The last point to be considered was that reading books which is an essential tool for lifelong learning, a springboard to success, and a path to personal fulfilment., watching movies, following news in English affected students' marks positively (Ismaili, 2013; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Yildiz, 2020).

Considering all points, it can be argued that institution and country-based PEs are helpful in many aspects. Although the students are free to take universally accepted exams such as TOEFL, IELTS and PTE, only few students opted in this alternative for predictable reasons. Combining national English book with Cambridge materials eased the tension of the students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout the study, the researchers examined the genuine opinions of prospective students who took TIU PE. The study shed light on some points about PEs. The students who succeeded the exam reiterated that watching movies, reading books, following the instructions, visiting relevant units to be informed about the exam, taking online or paper-based PEs, enrolling in a preparation course, learning some tips about time management and lowering the exam anxiety affected their performance positively. On the other hand, the students who failed completely or partially emphasized that they did not practice a lot to improve their English because they set other priorities. This study shows that multimedia enriched language learning materials can enhance students' learning considerably.

Some recommendations can be made for stakeholders of education who are in charge of conducting the PEs for their institutions. This study investigated the opinions of 1000 students who took TIU PE in October 2022. Further studies can be conducted to add more students who would take the exam in November and December 2022. Additionally, this study only explored students' opinion. Further studies can be conducted to make a comparison between their opinions and overall marks in TIU PE. Furthermore, this study was conducted at TIU. Other PEs run by other universities in the region can be explored, and the results can be cross-checked whether the students' opinions are similar or totally different.

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