

The examination impact in the change of English language curriculum in Albania

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Abstract

English proficiency among the Albanian has been proved to be relatively not good when measured by authorized English tests. However, in actuality, facing the 21st century, Albanian society feels the necessity for coping with a more internationalized era.

Formal English language education is, therefore, required to play an important role in teaching adolescents to be more internationally minded. Accordingly, as the Ministry of Education & Science proposed, improving English proficiency has become an important educational aim in our Curriculum.

This research aims to investigate the problems embedded in English language education. Although the ultimate aim is to specify the cause of poor oral English language proficiency, the focus will be narrowed to the selection system. It is well documented that the selection system influences what is happening in our classrooms.

Following this viewpoint, I hypothesized that the high school selection system influences negatively teaching and learning English language in Albania, so that it results in producing poor Albanian speakers of the English language.

It is necessary to stress that this is preliminary research into the relationship between English language education and the selection system, in which the focus is on testing whether or not the examinations influence teaching and learning in the context of English language education. Comparative research is used in order to understand the Albanian education system objectively. The education systems of France, Germany, Italy and Spain are taken into consideration.

A comparison of Albania and these countries in terms of how to assess English language skills in the selection systems show that it is only in Albania that speaking and listening skills are not assessed equally. In actuality, these other countries assess the four English language skills equally and score better than Albania in authorized English tests and/or State Maturity Examination (English as an elective subject).

This finding leads to hypothesize that there might be negative backwash effect on teaching and learning English language because speaking and listening skills are not assessed in high school examinations (considering English as elective subject). This hypothesis is tested based on a questionnaire survey administered to high school students who wish to go to higher education and teachers who prepare these students.

Key words: Assessment, Curriculum, English Language, Proficiency, Albanian high schools

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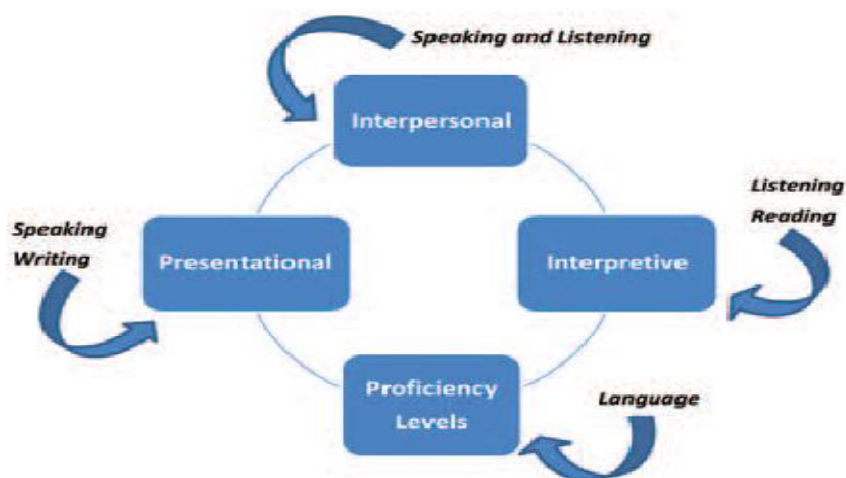
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1. Introduction

English Language Examination as an elective subject in the Albanian high schools has an undeniable influence upon the whole education system. This is because students should have satisfactory knowledge of English as most of the subjects they are going to study at university are English based. High school teachers have welcomed into their classroom the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and the new learning objective of the Ministry of Education and Science is development of listening and speaking in English. However, the grammar-translation method is very common in our schools and thus could be implicated in the failure of Albanian students to attain higher standards of language proficiency. The main focus of the thesis is on the examination impact in the change of English language curriculum and the question of whether, if listening and speaking skills are not required at the evaluation stage, the Ministry of Education's objectives would not be affected. The concept of examination impact may be defined as the direct and indirect effects of examinations on teaching methods (Prodromou, 1995). Some of the hypotheses tested through a questionnaire-based survey in this research were: "A test will influence teaching" and "A test will influence learning". Different questionnaires were administered to teachers and students in their 10th, 11th and 12th year from different cities such as: Tirana, Elbasan, Durrës.

2. Literature review

The standards for teaching and learning language are well-aligned with the Common Core Standards for English Language Literacy. Educators are looking at how best to support the four strands of Common Core for English Language and Literacy (Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, and Language) through the language standards' three modes of communication (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational) and the proficiency levels (novice, intermediate, advanced).



Making the connection conceptually is the easy part; more challenging is identifying exactly what this looks like across levels. The crosswalk examples of how learners improve their literacy skills as they increase their language performance from novice to intermediate to advanced levels. Here is an

example from the writing strand, linking language learning with the Common Core standards on how to conduct research to build and present knowledge:

Novice Students	Intermediate Students	Advanced students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain a local or global practice, product, or issue. • Utilize one or two credible sources, skimming and scanning websites, to create surveys or complete graphic organizers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore local and global issues to preparesummaries, or short reports utilizing digital tools. • Utilize a few sources and occasionally reference these sources accurately. Evaluate credibilityand accuracy of the source. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summarize texts intended for native speakers to support analysis, reflection and research related to global issues while integrating cross cultural perspectives. • Utilize a variety of sources and reference thesesources accurately, including international and domestic sources in the target language (e.g., heritage/immigrant community newspapers, radio and TV broadcasts, or websites).

The conducted Performance Descriptors for Language Learners describe how language learners move from the novice range of performance to the intermediate range and from the intermediate range to the advanced range. They provide details of the parameters for language performance in instructional settings and of how and how well language learners will understand and be understood. They also help educators plan instruction and assessment and help learners identify what they need to know and be able to do to improve their language performance. The language education community must step up to the plate, primed to do its part to prepare productive global citizens. This includes school administrators supporting high-quality language programs. It also includes language educators’ instructional delivery always keeping the target in sight, which is preparing *all* students to succeed linguistically and culturally in our global economy and society. Moving in step with the Common Core Standards is key for all disciplines. Professionals teaching English must be among the leaders of the initiative.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Setting and participants

This study was undertaken in three cities Tirana, Elbasan, Durrës of Albania. There were 600 students and 10 English teachers’ part of this study. The schools use Albanian as the medium of instruction and English as a second language.

3.2 Instruments for data collection

Instruments for data collection include interviews, questionnaires and teachers' reflections. Interviews were one of the major sources of data in this study. "Teachers have always reflected on their teaching before, during and after a particular teaching episode – its part of our professional disposition. Action research is no different... Pausing to analyze and reflect during the action research process is essential." (Mills, 2003).

3.3 Data analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative data collected from questionnaires and students' interviews are presented following this framework.

The first question asked students about their main reason for learning English, i.e. the motivation (Harmer, 1997). The responses showed that most were learning English for academic purposes, i.e. to get good results in the English language examination or even to pass it.

However, it was clear in the questionnaires that one of the reasons for learning English had also communicative purposes and this emphasized that the impact tests have in English language was strongly related to the motivating factor. The second question asked about preferred methods for learning English, e.g. memorizing vocabulary, reading exercises, etc. Here while 10th year students, for whom the examination is three years later, preferred listening and speaking, 11th and 12th year, preferred reading and writing. This seems like good evidence for a tests' impact in English, since it is clear that the effect of the examination system is to change learners' attitudes.

Question 3 asked about which skills were preferred while learning the language. It's natural that were given different answers in the questionnaires from the 10th, 11th, 12th year students: for instance 12th year students preferred reading; indicating that this skill is most particularly assessed in the English Language Examination as an elective subject. In contrast to this result, only 20% thought speaking wasn't as important. This also seems to provide support for the impact English tests have. The problem areas of English were the focus of Question 4 and interestingly, students thought of reading and writing as problem areas rather than listening and speaking. This was despite the fact that, in general, skills in the latter are weak. These responses may relate to the more advanced level of reading and writing skills students are expected to attain and/or their lack of realization of how weak their other skills are. Once again this is read as a nuanced response as far as the impact of tests in English is concerned.

The responses of the teachers to the first question about the important items in teaching, e.g. class size, type of exercise, etc. showed no large difference between items except that small class size and learner motivation were thought more important. The second question was about which skills are prioritized, and reading was easily the most prioritized. A question about the influence of examination system on classroom activities showed that 82% felt this was an influence. Question 4 asked how this influence took place and the result was that reading exercises were favored by 95% compared with listening at 15% and speaking at 5%. Once more this reflects the clear influence of the English language examination (as an elective subject). However, as a balance to this, a further question about emphasis on oral and listening skills revealed that half the teachers still regard these skills as important. The reason given for this by most teachers was that grammar and vocabulary exercises provide a good basis for oral skills to develop later. Overall, therefore, the survey evidence does not support the examination impact unequivocally.

Conclusions of the research

I started this research with an assumption that if speaking and listening skills were assessed more in the English language examination, the oral English ability of the students would be improved. Since the research sample was gathered only in the case of those on an academic track, it did not provide reliable conclusions regarding English backwash effect. Concerning that in our educational system the four skills of learning English are not assessed equally, students do not get preferred results in the examination.

The questions asked to some of the high school students showed that it is barely given any importance to speaking and listening skills, which I believe that it is strongly related to the test factor.

The aptitudes explained above highlight that 11th and 12th year students are more likely to deal with grammatical exercises, reading and model tests. It's completely the opposite with those of the 10th year who prioritize listening and speaking.

The Ministry of Education and Science's proposals for introducing more oral exercises are not fully fulfilled. The implementation of the questionnaires' indications doesn't show any absolute results. In some cases, the influence tests have in English backwash effect is strongly related to the actual educational system. In other words, it's still unclear the backwash effect tests have in English language.

It is clearly shown in this research that too much work is required in including listening and speaking in our curriculum through practices and facilities of teachers themselves and of the Ministry of Education and Science. It is not claimed that this change will occur immediately but I think that if we try continually, we will improve the English level of the four skills. Being a preliminary research, it did not cover specific phenomenon; this is why it is asked that the other analysis be in a practical level (type of: participating in a teaching class and class activities). At the same time the following analysis will ask for a more detailed research concerning the education system of English language. I think that it should also be an evaluative instrument in investigating the backwash effect in the English Language in order to achieve long-term goals in improving English Language in Albanian high schools.

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