

An Investigation into English Language Proficiency Placement Testing

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ABSTRACT :

The study aims at investigating English language proficiency placement testing as a screening for first year university students in Sudan. The researcher used a descriptive analytical approach. Data were collected through the following tools: (i) English language staff questionnaire and (ii) Experimental test. Both the teachers and students who were the sample of the research were from the three faculties of: Arts (Juba University), Education (Juba University) and Education (Upper Nile University). The findings of the study support the use of English proficiency placement test in Sudanese universities for screening purposes. The findings also revealed that lack of resources such as finances and facilities hinder the practice of placement testing at Sudanese universities. Additionally, Chi-square test results revealed that there were significant differences between individual respondents' levels. Findings also showed that all the research hypotheses have been confirmed valid. In the light of the results obtained through the investigation, the researcher recommended the training of teachers and the reviewing of curricula by national and international experts. He also recommended the reduction of class size for the purpose of creating a conducive environment of teaching in the classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Problem of Promoting Students, Decline of English Standard, Proficiency Placement Test for Screening and Review of curricula.

INTRODUCTION :

Many people who find learning English as a foreign language difficult feel more or less incapable of the task. Krashen (1992) proposed the theory that acquisition of a language happens best when the learner's input contains forms and structures just beyond the learner's competence in the language. Hammad (2002), claimed that, " from a distant

time in history to the nineteenth century, efforts to create an artificial language to play a role of a universal language have been attempted. The primary objective was to find a language that would bind the linguistically diverse people of the world into a cohesive whole. With English on its way to assume such a

position in recent decades, many people have been deeply concerned at the prospect. For them, English is an imperial language which threatens the world's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. Linguistic activists have begun counteracting this universalizing trend with language repair and maintenance programs (Hammad, ibid, 2002: P.1)". In another development, due to the current status of English as a global language of science, technology and international relations, many countries around the world consider the teaching of English as a major educational priority (Mckay, 2000: P.9). On the other hand, Halliday (1978 : 1) believes that language is a product of social process and it arises in the life of an individual through ongoing meanings. While Bernhardt (1993), gives a reason for learning English as a second language or a foreign language and he maintains that, it is concerned with social and political interests raised by non-native learners, speakers and writers. These non-native learners require instructions in English for success at the school. Other adult learners need employment for survival and therefore must attain good skills in English. Furthermore, Others seek advanced degrees at universities and consequently must attain sophisticated skills in English too. Bernhardt added that English is now being offered not only at the post-secondary level, but also in many high schools across the

world. Interest in English learning has increased drastically in recent years. The problem under investigation is that Sudanese universities do promote students from first year to second year English section without using any screening device. The researcher suggests that there should be an English language proficiency placement test which is to be sat by the students to divide them into their appropriate academic levels. In this connection, the researcher designed an experimental test for students of three faculties from the universities of Juba and Upper Nile. He also designed questionnaire for English language staff of the three faculties of: Arts(Juba), Education (Juba) and Education (Upper Nile). The experimental test was administered to 150 students and the staff questionnaire was administered to 29 teaching staff. Of course, the decade of twentieth century witnessed a considerable use of language tests in learning institutions but in Sudanese universities there has been no clear projects pertaining to English proficiency placement testing carried out. However, the fact that English is one of the most difficult foreign languages, all students entering English sections in colleges, institutes and faculties are supposed to be tested because it cannot be assumed that all the students can enter English section or have the same English proficiency. The researcher further emphasizes that English language standards have

declined and thus, he advocates that a placement test would be a good tool for screening students and that will put each student in his/her appropriate level of achievement. Consequently, after testing, the competent ones will be enrolled into English section as they will be the preferable target quality. Although students at universities are exposed to varieties of courses such as English grammar, reading comprehension, writing skills, lexical studies, oral discussions, short stories....etc, still the results of courses taught mentioned above reveal that the standards of English are low. This is evidenced by the examination results of 2007/2008 at Upper Nile University as an example. For more clarification, the statistics of percentages for 2007/2008 first year English results is provided in

| (a) English | N0. Of students who sat the exam. | N0. Of students who passed the exam. | N0. Students who failed | Percentage of those who passed | Percentage of those who failed |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| First sem. | 70 | 35 | 40 | 42.8% | 57% |
| Sec. Sem. | 70 | 35 | 35 | 50% | 50% |
| (b) Geog. first Sem. | 103 | 88 | 15 | 83.5% | 16% |
| 2 nd Sem. | 100 | 90 | 10 | 90% | 10% |

As illustrated on the table above, the pass percentages of Geography were very high compared to those of English in both first and second semesters 2007/2008. It is therefore, proved that students' performance in English was poor as the percentages of pass and fail show. This justifies the researcher to

a table to prove the claim that the standards of English are low. Moreover, these English results were compared with the results of Geography which is taught to the same group in first year. The comparison reveals that students performed badly in English and performed nicely in other subject areas. The table below shows the first and second semester results of English and Geography of first year students of Upper Nile University, Faculty of Education 2007/2008. (See the statistical table below).

Table 1 shows the first and second semester results of English & Geography of first year students of Upper Nile University, Faculty of Education.

investigate the English language proficiency placement testing. If students who wanted to join English section were to be screened through testing, most of them would have been knocked out. However, it is to be reckoned with that English in general is connected with economic, political and

social aspects of development. As argued by Yusuf (1984), development of educational system and communication network are also

2. Brief Review of Relevant Previous Studies

This section will focus on some relevant previous studies carried out by different authors on language testing in general and English proficiency placement testing in particular.

- Hughes, A. (1989), in her book: Testing for language teachers, argued that most of the proficiency tests that are administered on a large scale retain a grammar. She further elucidates that grammar has an important place in any institution's teaching activities. A successful writing of academic assignments, for example, must depend to some extent on command of more than elementary grammatical structures.
- Omran, S. A. (2005), handled English Language Examination System in General Secondary School, Education Certificate in Qatar. He discusses what test measures. According to him examination is used to refer to a set of longer subjective questions. He reiterated that testing is very important. Good tests help students in creating positive attitudes towards their classes. Also, tests can help students in mastering the language, that is to say, can foster learning their capabilities. Conversely, Omran elucidates that tests can sustain and

increasingly recognized as critical elements in national development as a whole.

enhance class morale and learning. Tests are conceived as teaching devices as well as natural steps in the educational process. They act as a guide to students as well as to a teacher. (River, 1968).

- The idea of formal tests of knowledge or ability emerged in traditional China where they were used for the selection of individuals who would go to be trained to be ruling elite. McNamara (1991 p.763), elaborates language testing has undergone a rapid evolution in the past fifty years, mirroring the development of applied linguistics more broadly. Language tests have marked social relevance in contemporary world, they play a role in socially significant institutional and political processes. Language tests thus played a crucial role in constructing the fundamental character of Chinese cultural and political life over many centuries (Fairbank and Goldman, 1998). In the west, language testing while still emerging as a discipline in its own right, established its status as a branch of applied linguistics in 1990s (Bachman, 2000). To conclude this section, it has been made clear through authors' assertions that language tests and language testing do play significant

roles throughout the world. They are used for decision-making upon who is to pass or take the position tested for. Language tests do control the transition between schools and higher education. Authors who wrote on language tests and language testing described them as important elements in language learning. Language tests are used in some countries in the world for

3. Materials and Methods

The method adopted in this study was a descriptive method. The tools that were used in data collection were the English language staff questionnaire and an experimental test. The stratified random sampling method was used in collecting the needed data. The subjects of the research consist of 150 first year students who intend to specialize in English in the two national universities of Upper Nile and Juba. The faculties targeted were Arts (Juba), Education (Juba) and Education (Upper Nile). Also, English language staff questionnaire was administered to 29 teaching staff from the three faculties mentioned above. This will bring the total sample of the study population to 179 subjects. The data were computed and statistically analyzed by using the program of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). For the validity of the research tools, both the test and questionnaire were checked by Dr. Abdalla Yassin Abdalla of Sudan University of Science and Technology,

selection of scholars who would go for training to become elite or bosses as it used to occur in China. For the case of Sudan, Sudanese universities have not established any standardized English proficiency tests which they can use for screening their students for academic purposes, particularly, for those who wish to specialize in English language.

College of Languages, Dr. Michael Baffuka of Juba University, Faculty of Arts and Dr. Mamur Chol Turuk of Upper Nile University, Faculty of Education-English Department. This was to see whether the tools could measure what they were intended to measure. This is what the experts call: “Construct Validity”. The experts made modifications in the two tools by deleting, adding or reforming the questionnaire statements.

(i) Students' Sample

The first sample of the study was represented by the group consisting of 150 first year students from the three faculties of the two national universities mentioned before. They were the students who wished to specialize in English language.

(ii) English Language Staff Sample

The second sample of the study was represented by the group consisting of 29 English language staff of English departments of the three faculties of:

Arts (Juba), Education (Juba) and Education (Upper Nile).

The table below shows the distribution of students according to their faculties, universities and sex

Table 2: Students' Sample

| Faculty | Univ. | Male | Female | Total | Percentage |
|-----------|------------|------|--------|-------|------------|
| Arts | Juba | 42 | 8 | 50 | |
| Education | Juba | 29 | 21 | 50 | |
| Education | Upper Nile | 40 | 10 | 50 | |
| | Total | 111 | 39 | 150 | 100% |

The table above indicates that the number of students who sat the experimental test at the three faculties of the two national universities of Juba and Upper Nile is 150 students. The number of male students is 111 and the number of female students is 39. In

percentage, the number of male students forms 74% and the number of female students forms 26%. The information presented on the table above reveals that the percentage of male students is higher than the percentage of female students.

Table 3: English Language Staff Sample

The table below shows the distribution of English language staff according to

their faculties, universities, qualifications and sex.

| Faculty | Univ. | Ph.D | M.A | Diploma | B.A | Total No. | Grand | Percent. |
|---------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------|----------|
| Arts | Juba | M 1 F - | M 6 F - | M 1 F - | M 1 F - | M 9 F- | 9 | 31.0% |
| Educat | Juba | M 2 F- | M 8 F - | M - F- | M - F- | M 10 F- | 10 | 34.5% |
| Educat | Upper Nile | M 1 F- | M 6 F- | M 3 F- | M- F- | M 10 f- | 10 | 34.5% |
| | Total | 4 | 20 | 4 | 1 | 29 | 29 | 100% |

Key: M= male & F= female

The table above indicates that the number of English staff who hold Ph.Ds in the three faculties is 4. The number of those who hold M.As in the three faculties is 20. The number of those who hold Postgraduate Diplomas in the three faculties is 4. There was only 1

teaching staff member who got B.A in English in the Faculty of Arts (Juba). There were no female staff members in the three faculties when the researcher distributed the questionnaire sheets. However, observation on the table above reveals that the number of

Ph.Ds, Postgraduate diploma and B.A holders is less, compared to master

4. Relevant Hypotheses of the Study

In investigating the study problem, the following hypotheses were formulated and confirmed valid according to the questionnaire respondents' responses:

1. Language tests are considered as good tools used for decision-making and as sources of information collection for development of strategies of public and higher education.
2. Proficiency tests are considered as the best instruments used for assessing, categorizing and classifying students according to their English efficiency levels.
3. Proficiency placement tests are of some educational value but lack of facilities prevents many Sudanese universities from practicing them.
4. Tests inspire students to utilize a regular time for language and teach them to display their knowledge and skills in a focused way, while placement tests monitor education in academic institutions.

*For more information, see the confirmation of the four hypotheses in the completed thesis (p.103-105).

5. Objectives of the Study

The present study intended to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the nature of English language proficiency placement testing.

degree holders of the three faculties.

2. To investigate thoroughly, to what extent universities in Sudan utilize placement tests in screening their students for learning purposes.

3. To recommend effective strategies and procedures addressing issues of language testing process and screening at universities.

6. Rationale for the Study

- The rationale for this study is to utilize placement testing in the allocation of students in their appropriate levels in language learning programs.
- The need of diagnosis of students' academic strengths and weaknesses through testing before they are enrolled into English class
- The study also aims at reducing the English class size after screening test. The smaller the class, the better the environment for teaching and learning English.
- The researcher also suggests that the designed proficiency placement test could be used as a qualifying examination or proficiency entrance test to institutes, colleges and universities in Sudan, with the purpose of screening those candidates seeking admissions to English departments.

7. Data Analysis, results and discussion

Questionnaire
The questionnaire used in this study consisted of 20 items. The items were

grouped into four groups as follows: Group A: language tests and language testing, Group B: Proficiency tests and placement tests, Group C: Placement testing and Group D: Tests in General. All the items in the questionnaire were simply and precisely stated so as to avoid any misunderstanding. To each item there were five responses: “strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree and strongly disagree” in likert’s scale.

Data Analysis and results

The data analysis does not consist of a simple description of data collected but rather it is a process by which the researcher interprets the data. The completed questionnaire was first subjected to descriptive statistics utilizing frequency and percentage. The descriptive statistics was followed by

Group A: Language tests and language testing.

discussion of the results. In the process of data analysis, the researcher adopted an analytic induction by reading through the completed 20 questionnaire items. The responses of the respondents are shown in table 4 below. The results of the questionnaire clearly show that the English language staff have overwhelmingly supported the statements. This implies that they are willing to implement the use of English language proficiency placement testing in their universities. In other words, they think that screening students through test is very important in language learning programs. See the table of twenty questionnaire items below.

Table 4: shows the frequencies and percentages of the English language staff questionnaire.

| NO. | Statement/Question | Strongly agree | Agree | Not sure | Disagree | Strongly disagree | Total |
|-----|---|----------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|------------|
| 1 | Language tests are good tools used for controlling the transition between schools and higher education | 21 72.4% | 6 20.7% | 2 6.9% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 2. | Language tests are sources of information collection regarding students’ proficiency levels | 18 62.1% | 11 37.9% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 3. | Language testing is used in decision-making on who should receive remedial English or English intensive course among students | 15 51.7% | 13 44.8% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 4. | Lack of resources constrains language testing practices in | 16 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 29 |

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| | most of the learning institutions in Sudan | 55.2% | 17.2% | 20.7% | 6.9% | 0.0% | 100% |
| 5. | Universities in Sudan need to lay down strategies and procedures to address issues of language testing. | 15 51.7% | 13 44.8% | 1 3.4 | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| | Group B: Proficiency tests and Placement tests | | | | | | |
| 6. | Proficiency tests assess students' ability in a language. | 15 51.7% | 14 48.3% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 7. | Proficiency placement test is one of the best instruments that could be used in allocating students in their appropriate levels in language learning | 17 38.6% | 11 37.9% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 8. | Placement tests aid the categorization of students of homogeneous language ability | 15 51.7% | 10 34.5% | 1 3.4% | 3 10.3% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 9. | Placement test can contribute significantly to the overall achievement and future progress of the participants | 18 62.1% | 10 34.5% | 0 0.0% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 10. | Designing of placement tests should be a highly comprehensive academic skill | 21 72.4% | 7 24.1% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 11. | When conducting a placement test, the university administration is normally willing to provide the necessary facilities for categorizing students into groups according to their abilities. | 11 37.9% | 13 44.8% | 3 10.3% | 2 6.9% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 12. | Samples of placement test should be incorporated into English courses for yearly testing of students in English Department. | 19 65.5% | 9 31.1% | 0 0.0% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 13. | Students in first year university who would like to specialize in English should sit a placement test as a prerequisite for their admission to English section | 19 65.5% | 8 27.6% | 0 0.0% | 2 6.9% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |

| Group C: Placement Testing | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------|-------------|------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| 14. | To what extent do you agree placement testing has some educational value in language learning? | 13 48.8% | 12 41.4% | 4 13.8% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 15. | To what extent do you agree that the lack of variable facilities such as classrooms and staff offices prevents many Sudanese universities from conducting placement testing? | 14 48.3% | 10 34.5% | 5 17.2% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 16. | English language staff of universities are expected to appreciate the application of placement testing for screening purposes. | 16 55.2% | 12 41.4% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 17. | Placement testing is an area that received comparatively little attention in language research in Sudan | 11 37.9% | 11 37.9% | 6 20.7% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| Group D: Tests in General | | | | | | | |
| 18. | In language learning, tests encourage students to devote time regularly to their language as they reduce nervousness affecting performance | 17 58.6% | 7 24.1% | 4 13.8% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 19. | Tests like examinations invite candidates to display their knowledge and skills in a concentrated manner. | 18 62.1% | 8 27.6% | 3 10.3% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |
| 20. | Tests are used to monitor teaching and learning in academic institutions. | 19 65.5% | 9 31.1% | 1 3.4% | 0 0.0% | 0 0.0% | 29 100% |

Discussion

As can be seen through the reading of the table above, twenty questionnaire items were divided into four (4) groups, thus, Group A: Language tests and language testing, Group B: Proficiency tests and placement tests, Group C:

Placement testing and Group D: Tests in General. The respondents of the questionnaire statements have demonstrated through their responses that they strongly supported the statements. In the discussion on the

table, the percentages of strongly agree and that of agree were combined to make the total percentage of the two percentages. The percentages correspond to the numbers of the respondents in each case, as can be seen in each table. In every group, the series of percentages begin with the highest percentage. Thus, in Group A: the percentages of the respondents appear in this order: {100%, 96.5%, 96.5%, 93.1% 72.4% }. In group B: the percentages occur in this order: { 100%, 96.6%, 96.6%, 96.5%, 96.5%, 93.1%, 86.7% & 86.2% }. In Group C: the percentages appear in this order: { 96.6%, 86.2%, 82.8% & 75.8%}. In Group D: the percentages appear in this order: { 96.6, 89.7% & 82.7%}. However the above high percentages provided by the respondents of the questionnaire statements, have justified that the English language staff of the three faculties of Arts (Juba), Education (Juba) & Education (Upper Nile) have beyond doubt supported the application of English Language Proficiency Placement Testing in Sudanese universities. Their strong support is also an indication that tests are important elements in the process of language learning. On the other hand, findings have also revealed that the four hypotheses of the research have been confirmed valid as follows: the first hypothesis has been confirmed valid by table 4.5 which displays high percentages given by the respondents in

the questionnaire's items: (1, 3, 4, & 5). The second hypothesis is confirmed valid by table 4.6 which displays high percentages of respondents' responses in items: (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8). The third hypothesis has been proved to be valid by the questionnaire respondents' statements : (3 & 4) in table 4.7. The fourth hypothesis has been assured to be valid by the questionnaire's statements in table 4.8. The samples confirming the validity of this hypothesis are verified on the following statements which correspond with percentages as follows: statement 1(82.7%), statement 2(89.7%) & statement 3(96.6%).

8. Chi-Square Test

Results of the Chi-square test Group A, table 4.9.

On table 4.9 of the chi-square test results, observation on the table reveals that there are significant differences between individuals for all the statement except statement two (2) which is not significant. This means that there is a difference between the opinions of the respondents. To know which difference refers to what, we look at the median value (for the statements which are not significant only) and interpretation according to the value. When looking at the table, we find that all the interpretations are strongly agree in this group except statement two (2) which is not

significant. See this table on page 94 of the thesis.

Table 4.10 of the chi-square test results, Group B. P.96 of the Thesis. On the table mentioned above, there are significant differences on an individual for all the statements except the first one which is not significant. Statement 1 which is not significant does not affect the results.

Table 4.11 of the Chi-square test results, Group C. P.97 reveals that there are significant differences on 9. The Results of the Students' Test Here the researcher attempted to find out the students' standards of English by giving them a test of English proficiency placement test.

| Sex | Sample size | Mean | Standard deviations | Standard errors of mean |
|--------|-------------|-------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Male | 111 | 65.13 | 15.327 | 1.455 |
| Female | 39 | 58.51 | 11.832 | 1.895 |

Table 5 above reveals that male students' frequency is three times the number of female students. The average degree of male is 65.13% whereas the average degree of female is 58.51% with standard deviation of 15.327 and 11.832 respectively. On the other hand, the standard errors of mean of the two groups are near to one another, 1.455 for males and 1.895 for females respectively. The elaboration above on the degrees of males' and females' standard deviations and standard errors of means, reveals that there is a significant difference between the

individuals for all the statements. This implies that all the respondents have strongly agreed and have strongly supported all the statements. The results are accepted.

Table 12 of the Chi-square test results, Group D. p.98 of the thesis reveals that there are significant differences on individuals for all the statements, this is an indication that all the respondents have strongly agreed and supported all the statements, the results are accepted.

Table 5: shows students' sex, sample size, standard deviations and standard errors of mean.

marks which the male and female students obtained. He males' degree is approximately 7 whereas the average for females is approximately 6. Thus, there is a significant difference between the males' and females' degrees. The males' degree is higher than the females'.

10. Conclusion

The current status of English as a global language of science and technology has inspired many countries around the world to teach it as a major educational priority (McKay, 2000 : p.9). On the

other hand, language testing has undergone a rapid evolution in the past fifty years, mirroring the development applied linguistics more broadly. It is emerging in the west as a discipline in its own right and has established its status as a branch of applied linguistics in 1990s (Bachman, 2000). Regarding the findings of the study, findings have revealed that lack of resources obstructed the application placement tests in Sudanese universities. Findings have confirmed the validity of the research hypotheses. The data analysis results of the English language staff questionnaire have shown that proficiency placement test has been supported for use at universities by the respondents. Data analysis has shown that there are significant differences between individual respondents' levels. For students' test of English proficiency, findings have revealed that the test was reliable and that 80.7% of the students passed the test while 17.3% failed it. Statistical analysis of this test showed that students of Juba university- Faculty of Arts got the best results, students of Education-Juba got better results and students of Education-Upper Nile got the lowest results.

11. Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the researcher recommended the following:

(a) Universities need to use placement tests for screening their students and the

results should indicate the students' levels.

(b) Universities should have standard curricula and syllabi set by the national and international experts.

(c) Universities should adopt pre-session courses as a remedy for raising students' low standard of English.

(d) Criterion- referenced tests which clearly find out how language skills and materials students have learned should be practiced at universities.

(e) Several large scale standardized proficiency tests such as "the test of English as foreign language (TOEFL), International English language testing system" and others are supposed to be used for testing students for academic purposes.

(f) Based on the views of several authors, the researcher recommends the teaching of English as a foreign language because it is concerned with social and economic interests raised by non-native learners, speakers and writers. These non-native learners require instructions in English for success in the school and an employment for survival.

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