DETERMINING EXIT CRITERIA FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN PREPARATORY PROGRAMS AT TURKISH UNIVERSITIES

Ayşe Dilek Keser
School of Foreign Languages, Anadolu University, Eskişehir, Turkey
adkeser@anadolu.edu.tr

Gül Durmuşoğlu Köse
Education Faculty, Anadolu University, Eskişehir, Turkey
gdurmuso@anadolu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT
This study intended to identify the exit criteria in English Preparatory Programs (EPPs) at universities by hearing stakeholders in a three-phase Delphi study. The participants were teachers and students from the EPPs and faculties of 11 universities in Turkey. In the open-ended Delphi, 472 compositions from four universities describing the exit level skills were analysed and 12 participants were interviewed. In the face-to-face Delphi, 23 panellists from 10 universities attended a two-day brainstorming and focus-group meeting. Using the findings of these two phases, a 213-item Likert-type questionnaire was designed to rate the necessity of each skill (online Delphi) with participants from 11 universities. In the first rating, the respondents (n=40) evaluated where each skill should be taught along with their necessity. In the second rating, the respondents (n=36) focused on skills only in EPPs. The results suggest that the stakeholders have a preference towards teaching academic skills rather than general English.
Keywords: English Preparatory Programs, Language Proficiency, English as a Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

The wide acceptance of English as a *lingua franca* in the globalized world has affected the instruction at universities. In order to cope with the demands of professional, scientific and social life in international contexts, many universities in Turkey offer content courses delivered through the medium of English ranging from 30% - 100% of their programs. To be able to provide instruction in English, universities have to establish English Preparatory Programs (EPPs) as a legal requirement. These programs can be obligatory or elective intensive language courses depending on the faculties studied, and they aim to teach the language to students before they start their studies in their departments so that they can cope with the courses delivered in English, follow the developments in their fields and communicate in international environments. However, there are inconsistencies and imbalances among the EPPs of universities in terms of their exit level proficiency requirements. The lack of a previously established common framework or minimum set of standards as well as different approaches towards the targeted levels have resulted in this current state of inequality. Despite the problems resulting from this situation, there was lack of adequate research in this field. Hence, this research study was designed to investigate some common basic exit criteria among universities which EPPs could further build upon.

EPPs can be described as intensive pre-faculty courses that students normally attend for one academic year, or two years if they become unsuccessful in the exit examinations. Even though their aim is stated as preparing students for their studies at faculties and the global world, there was lack of specific guidance from the Council of Higher Education (CHE) for a long time in terms of the target level, which led to various interpretations of exit level proficiency. There was only a single statement in the 'Regulations on Foreign Language Teaching in the Institutions of Higher Education and on the Basis of the Implementation of Education and Training in a Foreign Language' (CHE, 2008) which stated that the purpose of teaching a foreign language is teaching students the fundamental rules of the target language, developing their vocabulary, enabling them to understand what they read and listen to and to express themselves in writing and speaking. This statement was too vague to guide the EPPs in making decisions in terms of their programs and language levels. In 2009, after the declaration of the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Turkey (NQF-HETR) by the Council of Higher Education, the language level needed was stated to minimum B1 Level for BA students according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (CHE, 2009). However, the scope of this statement was still the whole tertiary studies including faculties, and it did not specifically address EPPs. To date, the problem of the lack of a clear description of the role of EPPs still persists. In addition, Turkey still ranks among the most unsuccessful countries in teaching English, and each year the rank is on the decline. According to Education First index (2017), Turkey ranks 62th among 80 countries and 26th among 27 European countries. Overall, there are serious language planning problems which begin in primary

school education (e.g. Haznedar, 2004) and continue in higher education.

Among the very few recent investigations by local authorities, the research study 'The English Education in Higher Education Institutions in Turkey – A Situation Analysis' in 2015 by the British Council with the collaboration of TEPAV (Ministry of National Education and Turkish Economic Policies Research Foundation) maintained that the exit level for EPP students should be B2+ for linguistically challenging departments and B1+ for other departments. However, adopting CEFR in local contexts in Turkey is not without problems. Firstly, besides ignoring national contexts, it was based on mainly social/survival skills for EU citizens rather than academic skills. In addition, some skills are not empirically confirmed and tests are not designed to assess them (Alderson, 2006). Moreover, some skill descriptors are too global to guide program design, teaching and assessment as they are open to different interpretations.

The problems outlined above contributed to a number of different practices in the EPPs across universities in Turkey. For instance, while some universities require demanding target levels and exit exams and they test all four skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking), others may simply administer a single multiple choice exit exam at the end of the EPP. This clearly has consequences ranging from student complaints to lack of comparability among EPPs as some universities do not acknowledge the EPPs of others and require the transferring students to re-study in their own EPPs. The need to identify the exit criteria in a local context was one of the main motivations to undertake this particular research study. It was aimed that the findings could provide a basis towards a framework or a minimum set of common skills required in EPPs which could be later exploited by individual EPPs. With these basic aims, this study sought answers to the research questions "What a) reading, b) writing, c) listening, d) speaking skills and competencies are needed for the exit criteria at English Preparatory Programmes in universities in Turkey?"

METHOD
The study was implemented using a mixed-method research design, which is often used to understand complex subjects by investigating them from multiple perspectives and dimensions (Creswell, 2005; Opoku and Ahmed, 2013). In this research, both qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed. Two series of qualitative research stages were used whose results contributed to construct a pool of items regarding the exit level skills at EPPs. Then, a questionnaire was designed using these items and it was administered two times, which was the quantitative stage of the research.

Specifically, the study was conducted using the Delphi method. It is based on gathering and reporting group opinion and is used in making decisions, especially when there is lack or scarcity of previous research. Originated in the 1950s (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963), today it has gained other varieties after the classical Delphi in which a panel of experts provide responses and the group response is responded to by controlled feedback until consensus on a subject is determined through statistical analyses (Hanafin, 2004). In this paper, hybrid Delphi approach was adopted in order to gather multiple perspectives about the subject under focus.

The Delphi method was applied in three main phases apart from the pilot study. The participants were the immediate stakeholders of EPPs, namely teachers and students from EPPs and faculties at a total of 11 universities in the whole study (Table 1). The first phase was an open-ended Delphi stage which consisted of a composition study with four state universities. A total of 2674 compositions were collected and approximately 17% of these were analysed due to time limitations using random and stratified sampling. 12 participants were interviewed to triangulate the data.

Table 1. Participating universities

Type of University	University	City	Phases Participated
State universities	Anadolu University	Eskişehir	1,2,3
	Eskişehir Osmangazi University	Eskişehir	1,2,3
	İstanbul Teknik University	İstanbul	2,3
	Ortadoğu Teknik University	Ankara	1,2,3
	Hacettepe University	Ankara	1,2,3
	Dokuz Eylül University	İzmir	2,3
	Selçuk University	Konya	2,3
	Süleyman Demirel University	Isparta	2,3
Foundation universities	Maltepe University	İstanbul	2,3
	Yeditepe University	İstanbul	2,3
	Bahçeşehir University	Istanbul	3

In the second phase of the study – the face-to-face Delphi implementation, 23 participants, i.e. panellists from 10 universities, attended a two-day meeting at Anadolu University. The first meeting sections were held in the form of brainstorming sessions for each skill. The panellists suggested the exit level skills anonymously through idea cards as described in Selvi (2003). This was followed by focus group discussions when the panellists sat in groups revising and editing the lists of skills obtained during brainstorming.

The results of these first stages were turned into a pool of items which was used to generate a questionnaire for the third phase, which was a classical Delphi application delivered online. At this stage, a questionnaire consisting of 213 items covering all four skill areas was designed obtaining expert opinion. The questionnaire was administered to a group of 40 respondents from 11 universities in the first round. They rated the items in terms of their necessity and commented on where each skill should be taught (i.e. in the EPP, in the faculty, or left to the students' own responsibility). Although in classical Delphi after the results are analysed and evaluated statistically, the respondents are normally informed about the average score of each item, and the items are re-rated giving the respondents an opportunity to change their responses in the subsequent rounds. However, since the concern was only the EPPs in this study, and the mean scores for each item was already above the acceptable scores in literature, the second rating was realized independent of this first round. In the second rating round, the same 213 were assessed whether they are necessary to be taught only in the EPPs with 36 respondents. Each skill was rated in the form of 5-point Likert-type scales. In order to reach a higher degree of consensus, the mean value was set as X=4 even though in literature X=3.5 and above can be sufficient, and the acceptable limit of standard deviation was chosen as maximum SD=0.84.

The compositions were analysed through content analysis (initial inter-coder reliability was 66% which increased to 70% after negotiation). The semi-structured interviews also underwent content analysis. The face-to-face Delphi findings were evaluated through expert opinion. The questionnaires were analysed statistically using SPSS 11. The Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient for both questionnaires was .993.

FINDINGS
In this section, the findings of the second round questionnaire of Phase Three will be summarized due to the length of the results. In addition, the findings of round two Phase Three Delphi represent the suggested exit criteria for EPPs, and these are achieved through statistical consensus. In the 213-item questionnaire, the dispersion of the skills that are evaluated is presented in Table 2.

Some skills were clearly identifiable as Academic English skills. There were 36 of these among the four skills. The remaining 177 skills of 213 could be evaluated both as academic and general English skills. Therefore, the participants were asked to rate them in terms of both dimensions. The results support this distinction since many skills that were found necessary as academic skills were eliminated when they viewed as general English skills.

Table 2. The number of questionnaire items

	Academic Skills	Academic and General Skills	Total
Reading	5	46	51
Writing	11	55	66
Listening	8	40	48
Speaking	12	36	48
Grand Total	**36**	**177**	**213**

Of the 36 academic skills, 16 were accepted as necessary passing the mean value of 4 and above (max. *SD=0.84*). Among the 177 skills that were rated in two perspectives, 127 of them were regarded as necessary as academic skills, while only 60, that is nearly a half of the same skills were considered to be necessary as general English skills.

When the accepted purely academic 16 skills were added to the passing 127 skills that can also be used in academic environments, the total number of agreed-upon Academic English skills became 143. On the other hand, 60 skills were also acceptable as general English skills. The results indicate a dominant preference towards teaching Academic English in EPPs.

In this paper, some sample skills on which the four participant groups reached consensus are presented. The numbers before skills refer to their order within the 213-item questionnaire. In Table 3, some sample academic skills that passed the criteria are presented. These skills focus mainly on being able to follow courses in faculties such as reading books, articles, doing research, taking notes and being able to write in examinations, listening to lectures, talks and discussions, being able to summarize what is listened to, participating in class discussions, asking questions and being able to cover a subject in classes such as making a presentation or giving a talk about an assignment.

Table 3. Sample academic skills accepted as exit criteria

Skill Areas

Academic Reading	X	SD
1. Being able to read the course books, articles and course materials of the department to be able to follow courses in faculty	4.2778	.7786
2. Having the reading ability enough to do research	4.3056	.70991
3. Being able to read and understand examination questions and assignments	4.7222	.45426
19. Being able to understand summaries	4.3056	.66845
Academic Writing		
53. Being able to take notes of the information presented in the classes	4.4444	.50395
55. Being able to provide written answers to examinations in the faculty	4.6111	.54917
60. Being able to use common academic vocabulary during writing	4.1389	.76168
61. Being able to apply essay structures in writing	4.1667	.60945
Academic Listening		
118. Being able to follow courses (lectures, etc.) in the faculty by listening	4.5000	.69693
119. Being able to follow academic talks and discussions	4.1111	.78478
120. Being able to take notes effectively while listening to lectures in faculty	4.4167	.64918
123. Being able to summarize what is listened to in undergraduate education	4.0556	.79082
Academic Speaking		
166. Being able to ask questions in classes	4.5556	.60684
167. Being able to participate in class discussions	4.3611	.72320
168. Being able to cover a subject in class	4.2222	.63746

Some sample skills that were rated both academically and in terms of general English are presented in Table 4. The skills with an asterisk are the ones that are eliminated due to their mean value or standard deviation.

Table 4. Sample academic and general reading skills

	Academic		General	
	X	SD	X	SD
15. Being able to make use of print and visual resources	4.2778	.56625	4.0000	.75593
17. Being able to read English publications	4.2222	.68080	3.8611*	.79831
27. Being able to make sentence analysis in long sentences	4.3889	.54917	3.9722*	.65405
41. Being able to do critical reading (being able to make analysis, synthesis, evaluation, making interpretations, reacting, using information in other contexts)	4.2222	.63746	3.7222*	.74108
43. Being able to use reading strategies effectively	4.2222	.68080	3.9167*	.73193

To illustrate, in Table 4 for reading skills, questionnaire item 15 (*Being able to make use of print and visual resources*) passed the elimination criteria both as an academic and as a general skill. On the other hand, items 17, 27, 41 and 43 exemplify the skills that were viewed as necessary to be taught in EPPs as academic skills, but not as general English skills. This indicates that skills such as being able read publications, analysing long sentences, doing critical reading and using reading strategies are preferred to be taught within academic contexts rather than general ones.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings strongly support a preference for Academic English skills. If it is possible to introduce and integrate some faculty related content or materials during the EPP studies, students might feel more interested and motivated. This finding is supported by Göktürk (1982) who maintained that foreign language instruction should be provided in coordination with faculties in order to give students more realistic goals in learning the language. The idea that EPPs should shift towards Academic English is also suggested by the British Council and TEPAV report (2015). It can be concluded that the EPPs might need to reconsider their programs.

Even though it was claimed that the CEFR descriptors were at times too broad and vague, some skill items in this paper were also too general and need further refining. For instance, the skill in the item '127. *Being able to follow conversations*' in the questionnaire has such a large scope that it involves a number of subskills ranging from being able to discriminate sound and intonation patterns to understanding ambiguous vocabulary including sarcasm. However, analysing each subskill as in this example requires more in-depth research and is impractical to include in a single questionnaire or study. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the details of what a skill involves.

In order to guide EPPs, CEFR level B2 seems to be a good starting point, but it needs further investigation. Future studies might also compare CEFR B1 and B2 level descriptors to the findings of this study to investigate whether adopting CEFR is efficient or not. It is necessary to explore whether is there might be a need to have a nationally tailored set of standards for Turkey. This paper might be one of the initial studies towards building a set of minimum standards in this field. With further research, it might be possible to compare findings and guide national policies to develop the quality in EPPs in Higher Education in Turkey.

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