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What do Teachers Think about Testing Procedure at Schools?

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Abstract

Testing is one of the important factors in foreign language teaching and learning process. Teachers use tests for different purposes such as evaluating their students' progress, diagnosing their weaknesses and strengths and helping them improve in foreign language, checking the efficiency of their teaching and determining their achievement level. In the educational system in Turkey, national exams including questions for foreign language take place and according to the school grades and the results of these exams students are guided to different schools. Therefore, the main purpose of the students and their parents is to get higher grades in the foreign language exams. This is a qualitative research that aims at learning the reflections of the teachers for the testing system at schools. 20 teachers from different state secondary schools joined the survey and they were given a structured open-ended questionnaire containing 8 questions about testing at state schools. With their answers the situation was analyzed from the perspective of the teachers. They generally agree that they pay attention to reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary in the exams they prepare although they believe that this type of exams fail to measure the real performance of the students. They also complain that the expectations of parents for higher grades in the exams have a negative effect on the foreign language learning and teaching process. As a result of the study, some suggestions were made to improve the foreign language teaching and testing system.

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1. Introduction

Testing is one of the most important components of teaching process (Madsen, 1983, p.3). In the same way, it has a great importance in foreign language teaching. Tests are systematic procedures administered to get information about students' performance (Coombe, Folse & Hubley, 2010). The results of the tests not only reflect students' level

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of success but it also gives information to stakeholders about the other components of teaching process. The information provided can be used to make decisions in a variety of educational situations (Miller, Linn & Gronlund, 2009, p.44). As Özçelik (1998, p.6) says, tests fulfill different duties: They show students' readiness for a course; they determine if the students have already acquired the objectives before the instruction; they reflect if students have learned what is taught in class after each unit and they inform how much the objectives of the instruction have been reached at the end of the unit. Tests support learning and show what learners achieved in terms of objectives of the instruction and where they need help (Madsen, 1983, p.4). Brown (2004, p.4) says: "A well- constructed test is an instrument that provides an accurate measure of the test- taker's ability within a particular domain." Tests are beneficial for students, teachers and even administrators by reflecting the progress of students in the educational domain and helping them to plan the future (Madsen, 1983, p.5).

Language tests are the basis for language teaching as they determine the objectives and check teaching and support teachers and students in their attempts to reach the objectives (Davies, 1990, p. 1). Exams administered in foreign language teaching are divided into groups in terms of their purposes (Harmer, 2007, p.166): They are placement tests if they are used to place students in the appropriate level; progress tests if they reflect the improvement during the learning process; achievement tests if they show whether or not students have acquired what is taught in class and proficiency tests if they determine how much students have reached the objectives. The results of language tests can also be effective in making decisions about programmes (Bachman, 1995, p.62). As tests have so many functions, language teachers are expected to be competent and equipped for testing procedure.

Foreign language course is different from other courses. Students need to show that they are using the language. In language courses 4 skills- listening, reading, writing- are tried to be gained and vocabulary, pronunciation and structures are taught and in the exams students are tested on how much they have acquired them (Bachman, Palmer, 2009, p.4). Test constructors should prepare tests to check accurately students' performance in developing the skills by taking the relative importance of these skills into consideration (Heaton, 1990, p.8).

That fact that exams used in foreign language teaching fail to show students' performance leads to performance-based assessment. Performance tests are not tests composed of multiple choice questions, they have various alternative types (Shohamy, 1995, p.191). Performance- based assessment enables students to use real- world tasks and implies an integration of language skills and therefore it is motivating for both teachers and students (Brown, 2004, p.255). Recently there is a tendency to use tests that resemble real language use and for which students perform language in authentic, direct and communicative contexts (Shohamy, 1995, p.188).

In the preparation of tests, the first step is to decide what should be tested, then how and by means of what type. (Davies, 1990, p.28). Bachman (1991, p. 688) claims that teachers know that the way how they test language ability affects students' performance on language tests and the information they get from the tests. Language testers should be more careful at adjusting tests to educational context where tests are used as part of teaching and learning process (Shohamy, 2000, p.552). As every topic, every skill and every item need different test types, choice of the items should be related to the topic to be tested. Furthermore, the tests should include the things taught in class and students should be familiar with techniques and formats before the exam (Coombe et al, 2010). A test item should be given in the same way as in the class exercise so that students can perform in the same way with the help of practice done in class (Alderson, Clapham & Wall, 2005, p.41). Aydın (2000, p. 182) believes that it is necessary for a teacher to have knowledge and experience related to testing to reach the ideal teaching atmosphere. According to Brown (2005) teachers should criticize their own tests as well as the commercial ones. On the other hand, Alderson (2004, p.8) claims that teacher- made exams are not good enough and they give little meaningful information about students. İşman (2005, p.91) mentions that both experienced and prospective teachers are not good at testing and evaluation.

Language tests are different from tests for other content areas because language teachers have more choices to use in the exam and all test items have distinct strengths and weaknesses (Brown & Hudson, 1998). In the history of teaching English as a foreign language, until the communicative teaching, it was easy to test what students know about the language but later tests are thought to be communicative as well (Çakır, 2000). Although many aspects of the language can be tested by using multiple choice exams, constructed- response assessments are more appropriate for productive skills (Brown & Hudson, 1998, p.660). Brown and Hudson (1998) also add that it is difficult for teachers to produce performance assessments and time consuming to administer them in class. Therefore, testing in foreign language teaching is a great problem for teachers. With the aim of sending students to different schools according to their abilities, Ministry of National Education administers exams including questions on different fields

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