

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEST TAKING IN ALBANIAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Test taking is often very stressful and frustrating for students. Experts tend to focus more on the kinds of tests that work best for students and overlook the emotional aspect of the matter. One of the most important things in successful test taking is exactly the ability of students to cope with the situation. We will provide an overview of test types mostly used by teachers and see how successful and efficient they are. We will first attempt to draw a definition of test taking in order to have a starting point for our discussion. The regular assessment of students progress is an inseparable part of the teaching and learning process. It is a type of information necessary for students grading and for providing evidence of teaching and learning effectiveness. This assessment takes various forms as there are many procedures and techniques followed by teachers to evaluate them. In this process test taking is an essential part.

Keywords: Test taking, assessment, foreign languages, Albania

Test taking and how it works

But what is generally understood with test taking? Test taking is often conceived as a procedure of assessment, or a systematic method of assessment in which tests (usually paper-based, nowadays even computer-based, written or oral) are used. It is a means (instructional and administrative) to measure knowledge, skills, the general educational level of students basic formation. During testing students brain focuses automatically on the information given to him/her and after having grouped it, it finds out the way for expressing or presenting what he or she knows or pretends to know about it. What are some of the functions that tests fulfill? Let us mention briefly some of them:

- They make clear the student’s teaching objectives.
- They provide teachers with plenty of useful information they need regarding their students knowledge and progress.

-They help students to know at what level they are, what things they have to improve, where (at which parts) they need to work harder and above all, to make them reflect on their achievements.

-They motivate students to try harder and to demand more from themselves.

-They facilitate students' preparation and long-term memorization of the information obtained.

Hence, we can say that testing is more than a technique, device or tool. It is than a means of assessment or measurement, more than an indicator or method. It is a mixture of all of these into one single entity - the test. To put it all in a nutshell, testing is knowing what students know or what they are supposed to know and not forgetting this in order to be of service to the students' interests and the teachers' alike.

Test taking in Albanian schools

The main aim of this paper is to consider aspects of test taking in the context of Albanian classes where English is taught as a foreign language. In order to proceed with the arguments this study raises, we will try to give an overview of how test taking has worked in the Albanian educational system in the decades before and after communism. Foreign languages have always been part of the Albanian curricula. Before the fall of the communist regime, students began learning a foreign language which, in most cases, was Russian at the age of ten or eleven, that is to say, as soon as they entered the secondary level of education. The learning of the foreign language then proceeded onto the other levels of education, high and higher levels of education. Texts were prepared by specialized Albanian teachers and were filled with all sorts of information that suited the ideology of the time. Emphasis was given to vocabulary work and grammar exercises. Communication activities were either scarce or totally lacking. Students testing was either oral or written. The written form of testing usually followed a periodical frequency. The oral form of testing did not differ much from the written one. The main types of activities were of the following kinds:

-Translate the following from English into Albanian or vice versa.

-Retell the text using your own words.

-Write about this/that (usually about an event or person related to the Communist/Labour Party).

-What are the days of the week / the months of the year?

-Have a look at this picture and write down the objects (usually a picture of the kitchen, living room, bedroom etc)

-What is the past simple of or the opposite of etc .

The list is long. Such types of activities required that the student produced mechanically what he/she had learned. They tested more the students memory and less their comprehension or understanding. This was the case not only in foreign language classes. The student was not or very rarely asked to give his/her own ideas or opinions, judgment freely as he/she perceived and thought them. The result: when exposed to the native environment, students could not utter a word in the foreign language. They were unable to produce conversations, even of the simplest kind, such as greeting or introducing oneself, because they hadn't been encouraged to do so. But if you asked them about the party or any other such thing, they were fluent in producing it. Real life situation was inexistent in these classes. Unfortunately, activities of this kind persist in many classes even nowadays.

After the nineties Albania underwent great changes even in the educational system. New and more practical teaching methods were introduced. Seminars and other activities were organized to help teachers introduce them in class. New course books suitable for particular age groups were adapted. The introduction of a new methodology of teaching and assessing students have considerably affected the teaching and learning process as well as the acquisition of new knowledge, by giving this process more variety and effectiveness. All these changes were as a response not only to the development of our country, but also to the possibility to be as near as never before to the more developed countries (European and others).

In this changed context, test taking is, of course, a crucial part. Many aspects of test taking have been reconsidered and re-defined. In the past there was more mechanical reproduction of information and less reasoning or discussion. Now the focus of testing activities is the development of communicative abilities and not only. Students are greatly encouraged to talk in the foreign language by being interviewed, by being asked to introduce themselves or to talk about a particular topic, which are part of oral testing. The students should be able to express opinions, to give ideas, to write correctly in a foreign language. Students are tested not only individually but also in pairs or in groups. Pair work and group discussion are given great emphasis, because they increase the sense of shared work, of coping with the others, of doing the best to succeed. These activities have increased the sense of community on the whole.

One frequent activity we used to do in class was the kind of activity we called "composition". Students had to try hard to do their best to contrive language in all its possible forms so as to create variations that went beyond the language of conversation. The more literary this language was, the better it sounded.. These were very frequent, especially as final exam activities. Some common themes students were often asked to develop were: "The love for your country", "The love for your mother, teacher etc", "Spring day" and

so on. Now these have been replaced by essays which are more concrete and well structured, related to real problems that concern our society or controversial issues which are open to debate and discussion.

Test taking in Albania has improved considerably over the years. This, of course, has been possible through experience, collaboration, exchange of ideas, and adaptation of the best of them. One thing that has greatly contributed to these changes is the wide variety and the choice of selection at the disposal of students and teachers. Learning a foreign language is not part of the school's curricula only. Students can choose to learn it elsewhere if they wish to do so. There are many language centers which operate in Albania. Students often choose to go there and learn a language. The books they use and the methods of teaching they practise are often better than the ones offered in class. Their existence increases not only the competition, but also the teachers awareness of their own teaching. It makes them more reflective about their own work.

Types of test practiced nowadays

Generally speaking, three are the basic elements identified to judge a test as good or bad: 1) validity, 2) reliability and 3) practicality/standardization. We will draw upon Adkins for a very brief definition of each. She defines each as follows:

“The primary requisite of a test is that it measure what it is desired to measure. A common definition of test validity is the extent to which the test serves its purpose.(1974:31)”

“A degree of test reliability is requisite to validity; yet it is useful to distinguish the two concepts. Test reliability refers to the measurement accuracy of scores on the test as reflecting the underlying or “true” abilities of the subjects. Some may receive scores that are too high, others scores that are too low. The test should come as close as possible to measuring the true score of each individual.(1974: 34)”

“To be useful, a test must be practical in three features—construction, administration, and scoring.(1974: 40)”

Some other authors identify standardization as the third element, which is the measuring of test scores against the average of typical scores. When discussing types of tests we can notice that they fall into different classifications. They can be: a) oral or written, b) subjective or objective, c) norm-referenced or criterion-referenced, d) formal or informal, e) summative or formative. Let us explain each of them.

a) The first type of classification relies on the form of the test. Oral tests are the most widespread type of tests in our classrooms. Teachers often resort to oral testing to evaluate students' skills. These usually take place in front of the class and the student is asked to answer a list of questions. The

aim of these tests is to evaluate both the knowledge and the communication skills of the student. The pre-reading activities and the discussion sections are good examples of this type of activity. In some other cases oral tests may take place before a limited audience, that is, before the examiner or the examiners. This is usually the case of formal tests, e.g. FCE, CAE and so on, which have an integrated section for communication in the test.

Written tests are actually the most general category of tests. Anything that is tested in the written form falls under this category. Unlike the first, written tests have some advantages. They give students time to think, to concentrate and to organize their thoughts. They also give students control over their emotional state. But oral tests have other advantages. They give students the possibility to improve and progress, the assessment is transparent and direct. Oral tests lead to productive debates between individuals or groups. This classification of tests involves the giving or not of opinions by the students to provide for the answers to the test.

b) Subjective tests are tests evaluated by giving an opinion. Subjective tests are more challenging and expensive to prepare, administer and evaluate correctly, but they can be more valid. Most writing activities fall under this category. Subjective tests belong to the “essay” type of tests. These are based more on the creative and communicative abilities of the student by using the free word. The answers may be a) limited, or b) extended. In the first case the answer should be one page or up to a limited number of words, while in the second case it can be more argumentative and without restrictions of words used and the creative space.

This type of test has got both, advantages and disadvantages. To begin with, among the advantages is the increase in the communicative, expressive and creative abilities. They tell us much about the students formation in one particular area. Among the disadvantages is the fact that the student may get distracted and not focus on the theme or it may happen that he/she does not grasp it properly. On the other hand, there exist considerable difficulties in their correction and evaluation. The difficulties presented are not only practical, but also emotional and involve the teacher as well. The teacher has to follow a work plan and find the necessary time to correct the essays since they need a lot of time and tranquility. But the emotional state is more important for the student and is reflected on his/her moments of creation. The lack of the right inspiration is for example an instance of the emotional state that is not helpful. Below I will list some real examples of essays taken from my own experience as a teacher of university students.

1.“Are there any cultural characteristics of your country or natural features of your land or climate that are so unique as to be “untranslatable” into other languages?”

2. “Is the Albanian language headed towards extinction? What are the symptoms of an extinct language? How can we distinguish between a live and extinct language?”

3. “The position of Albania in the context of European Union”

These tests belong also to another type of test that is, take-home tests. The students were allowed to work these tests at home, to find out materials and to express themselves following the directions given by the teacher. Some of these directions include: 1) Create a scheme for your essay, 2) Write it in well-constructed paragraphs (three to five), with a good introduction, with body paragraphs in which to bring your arguments pro and cons the matter under discussion, to give evidences, and with a conclusion.

Objective tests measure the students ability to remember things as well as their understanding of the course materials. These tests are often designed to make them think independently, to reason critically as well as make subtle discriminations to determine the best answer. In such types of tests the students evaluation is not dependent on who the examiner is. Another characteristic is that they are based on a key for the responses. Objective tests are easier to correct and require less time than the subjective tests. They are totally structured and do not let the student be distracted. They have clear boundaries between the right and the wrong answer and this is one crucial factor in the fair assessment of the student. The student knowledge and abilities are measured at different levels and areas, not restricted to the creative one. The most common objective test questions are multiple choice, true-false, and matching items:

Multiple-choice tests is a type of test in which the student has to choose the right answer among three or more alternatives (usually four). The student can answer them by circling one of the alternatives offered. The student is given a text with some gaps to which one of the alternatives corresponds. In other cases they may be given a text with some questions to answer. Multiple cloze test is another test which falls under this category in which the student is given a text with gaps to fill in by choosing from a set of words for each gap. Multiply-choice tests cover many levels of teaching objectives. The student answers them directly and relatively quickly but he has to consider all the alternatives carefully and one by one by eliminating first the one about which he/she is most sure and then proceeding with the others.

True-false tests are more frequently nowadays, especially in the high school and university. A number of statements are presented to the student and he/she has to judge the truth they bring. Like multiple choice tests, true-false tests can be read quickly and can be corrected accurately and quickly.

Several levels of learning are tested with true-false items. In some cases it happens that the student has the right information about the

statement, but he/she is not clear about the way it is presented to him. This mostly because the statement is not specific, carries ambiguity, implies more than one single idea or because some words that qualify the idea make it absolute. Such words may be adverbs of frequency, adverbs of quantity or quality (usually, never, sometimes, all, many, much etc) or specific determiners. Therefore, it is the duty of those who prepare these tests to avoid statements which carry ambiguity, complexity, and vagueness and be as close as possible to clarity and specificity. Clarity is the key to these types of tests.

As we saw, tests fall under many categories depending on their form, structure, aim and so on. Despite the diverse classification of the tests they should be given the chance to be improved with the passing of time in order to reach the highest and most contemporary standards to achieve a better teaching and learning system.

Collaborative test taking

Test taking is the process during which the student experiences many emotions, especially negative ones due to stress and the high level of anxiety. Collaborative test taking is one type of test aimed at reducing such effects. Collaborative test taking allows student to work together by building peer cooperation and by developing teamwork skills. Collaborative testing has a significant positive association with test performance. It has been widely used mostly at the primary and secondary levels of education. It would be a good idea to use collaborative testing where appropriate.. We consider, it would be a good idea if Albanian teachers resort to it. Collaborative testing facilitates the development of higher order thinking skills and consequently affects students' performance. This testing focuses on cooperation rather than competition. Students work together as equals by creating a brainstorming of their ideas. By working with each other they gain similar insight into their classmates. But this does not mean that they would not assume total responsibility for their answers. The students do the work necessary to consider the material being covered but the teacher maintains control of the process at each stage.

Collaborative test taking is more than a usual kind of test or technique. It is an individual philosophy, where people come together in groups, deal with people, and respect one another, where individual group members abilities and contributions are highlighted. There is a sharing of authority and acceptance of responsibility among group members for the group actions. The collaborative work is based upon consensus and cooperation by group members. So, it is a philosophy of interaction where students are responsible for their actions while working together in groups.

Conclusion

Article In summary, the identification of test-taking strategies and methods to teach them continue to be areas needing further development. Good test takers possess a variety of strategies, at least some of which require a certain level of cognitive development. Although the idea of teaching improved test-taking strategies is intuitively acceptable, few researchers have reported success. Perhaps the techniques take a long time to learn or require more intensive instruction or learning. It is also possible that individual differences such as personality, anxiety level, and intelligence affect the application of test-wiseness skills in actual testing situations.

In this study we also tried to introduce certain aspects or techniques of test taking which are now practiced in Albania but collaborative test taking and is still missing in the Albanian culture.

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