UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ORAL VERSUS WRITTEN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS

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Abstract

The main purpose of the present research is to investigate students' attitudes toward oral and written English language tests. The research is based on a sample of one hundred students enrolled in an English phonetics and pronunciation course at Yarmouk university, Jordan. The subjects of this study responded to a questionnaire of three parts. The findings of this study demonstrate that Jordanian students preferred written over oral tests and rated written tests more favorably than oral ones. Written exams were viewed as more interesting, pleasant, reflective of students' knowledge of English, less tricky, less anxiety evoking, and fairer than oral exams.

Introduction

The issue of testing is very central to the educational process. It is extremely important to both test makers and test takers in preparing, planning for, and constructing tests. Recently, researchers have attempted to stress the importance of examinees' feedback procedures in identifying various characteristics of exams (Nevo 1985, Nevo and Jager 1986, Zeidner 1988). The examinees' feedback regarding the different aspects of classroom tests can be very valuable to the examinee, the instructor, and the test specialist alike. Moreover, the test which takes the examinees' attitudes and perceptions into consideration is expected to reveal a superior 'face validity'. However, aside from the studies in Nevo and Jager (1986), very little research has been done on the development and validation of students' feedback
information methods which can be employed in order to gain further insights into the testing situation (for details, see Nevo and Jager 1986).

Students' attitudes, perceptions, and dispositions toward different kinds of exams are indispensable. Despite the importance of studies in this area, very little research has been done. Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988: 102) stated that "At present, very little research has been conducted on students' attitudes toward oral and written modes of assessing EFL." Moreover, Zeidner (1988: 68) claimed "At present, examinee feedback concerning various critical features of educational and psychological tests may be one of the most valuable, but most neglected, sources of information about a test's subjective qualities." Finally, Bradshaw (1990: 14) argued "Research in this area has been limited, and an examination of the literature makes it difficult to draw any general conclusion."

In the relevant literature, there are a few studies that deal with testees' attitudes, dispositions, and perceptions toward various test modes. Savignon (1972) claimed that the reactions of students toward oral tests were extremely positive, in spite of the fact that the test mode was thought to be very difficult. She argued that students reacted positively to the exam because they felt that it was valid.

Shohamy (1982) examined the attitudes of a sample of 106 students at the University of Minnesota toward a cloze test and an oral interview. She found that students rated the oral interview more favorably than the cloze test. She suggested that the difference in the examinees' attitudes toward the two tests was due to the difference in their levels of difficulty.

Scott (1986) (cited in Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988: 102)) compared the students' reactions to various modes of oral tests with those to written tests and specified the factors which seemed to influence their reactions. The students' responses were found to be governed by a cognitive and an affective factor. According to Scott, test anxiety was caused by test content and time constraints. He suggested that these factors must be given adequate consideration in preparing a language test.

Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988) studied the attitudes of a sample of 170 students toward oral versus written English Language tests. They found that students preferred written over oral tests and evaluated the written test mode more favorably
than they did the oral one. Furthermore, they claimed that female students found test taking more traumatic than male students. This was because they felt that written tests were marked by less pressure and tension, better concentration, easier expression of ideas in written form, familiarity with test, and having more time to think and respond.

Zeidner's subjects consisted of Jewish and Arab students. The Jewish speak Hebrew, while the Arabs speak Arabic. The setting is, therefore, different; it is a non-Arabic speaking setting. On the contrary, the subjects of this study are all Arabs studying English language and literature at Yarmouk University. This shows the differences between the present work and Zeidner's.

Finally, Phillips (1992) conducted a study on the effects of anxiety on students' performance on an oral test of French and the attitudes of anxious students towards the test. Phillips reported that anxiety had a negative influence on the oral performance of students; i.e., students who were anxious scored lower than the less anxious ones. Moreover, all students felt that the exam was an unpleasant experience. She also claimed that students "reported going 'blank', feeling frustrated ...., being distracted, and feeling 'panicky'. They used words such as 'nervous', 'intimidated', 'tense', 'confused', 'worried', and 'dumbfounded' to describe their affective reactions to the oral exam" (Phillips 1992: 19). Moreover, some students confessed that their anxiety was due to the fact that they were unable to remember how to say the things they wanted to say in the foreign language.

From the review of literature on students' reactions and dispositions, it is evident that much research is still needed in different settings and cultural backgrounds. Scott and Madsen (1983) suggested that the reactions of students from different cultural groups may vary. Also, Scott (1986) pointed out that there appears to be a variation in the performance and attitudes of students from various cultural backgrounds to various test modes. Similarly, Ziedner (1988: 68) states "it would appear to be of considerable interest to testing specialists to gain further insights into the subjective ecology of the test situation among varying sociocultural groups."

The goal of this paper is to describe an attitudinal study using subjects from a different cultural and educational background in a different setting. The reactions, dispositions, and perceptions of Jordanian university students toward written versus
oral exams of English as a second language will be identified. Furthermore, the claim made by Scott and Zeidner that students of different cultures may react differently to varying test modes will be tested.

This study is significant. It will fill in a gap in the attitudinal literature by providing a full description and analysis of the reactions and perceptions of Jordanian students who come from a different cultural and educational background toward language tests. It will also compare the attitudes of the subjects of this study with those of previous studies.

Sample

The sample of this study consisted of one hundred English major students in the Department of English at Yarmouk University in northern Jordan. The sample comprised sixty-five female students and thirty-five male students who are native speakers of Arabic. Of the entire number of subjects, sixty-seven were second year students, twenty-eight third year students, and five fourth year students. The students included in this research were aged between nineteen and twenty-two.

The subjects were all enrolled in three sections of the same course, a course in English phonetics and pronunciation. As part of the course requirements, students must take an oral examination at the end of the course to demonstrate their pronunciation of English. All the students in this study had taken one or two oral exams, irrespective of their different levels of proficiency in English.

Instrument

The data for this research were elicited by means of an attitudinal questionnaire which was adapted from Zeidner (1987) and Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part was designed to collect background information regarding the participants' age, sex, major, academic level, and number of oral tests taken. The second part was intended to gather data about students' reactions and perceptions toward oral exams, whereas the third part was constructed to gather data about students' attitudes and opinions toward written exams. The second part and the third part each comprised fourteen bipolar attributes each of which described both oral and written modes of tests. In these two parts, students were presented with the following fourteen attributes where they had to rate each exam mode by marking or checking the attribute that best describes that exam as follows: difficult/easy, interesting/boring, fair/unfair, pleasant/unpleasant,
valuable/valueless, nontargeting/threatening, not anxiety evoking/anxiety evoking, no cause to worry/cause to worry, comprehensible/incomprehensible, tricky/less tricky, enough time to complete test/not enough time to complete test, reflects students' mastery of English/does not reflect students' mastery of English, allows for success/does not allow for success, I like this type of exams/I do not like this type of exams. Finally, all these attributes were explained to the subjects.

**Procedure**

The study was conducted by the researcher who explained the purpose of the study and the directions for responding to the questionnaire before it was distributed to the participants. The study was carried out at the end of the semester after the students had already taken the oral exam which was a requirement for the English pronunciation course they were enrolled in. The subjects were assured that their responses would remain confidential. Moreover, the students were given enough time to respond to the questionnaire. The overall numbers of responses of the students to each bipolar attribute for both exams were tallied and tabulated and percentages were obtained. The classification and identification of positive or negative attitude toward an exam was based on the number of positive or negative attributes given to each exam. If respondents gave more positive attributes to an exam, then that was viewed as a positive attitude toward that exam. If, on the other hand, they gave more negative attributes to an exam, then that was considered an indication of a negative attitude toward that exam.

**Results**

The students' attitudes, perceptions, and depositions toward the two test modes are summarized in Table 1 below. The comparison of students' reactions to parts two and three of the questionnaire clearly indicated that our subjects favored written exams to oral exams. The written exam was viewed as being significantly easier, more interesting, fairer, non-threatening, pleasant, less anxiety evoking, more valuable, and eliciting higher success expectancies than the oral exam. The oral exam, on the other hand, was perceived as being difficult, less interesting, unfair, threatening, unpleasant, more anxiety evoking, less valuable, and not allowing for success.

The students in this study perceived written exams as being easy and oral exams as being difficult. In their response to the first item in the questionnaire measuring test difficulty, 74% of the sample considered oral exams difficult, whereas 39%
regarded written exams difficult. Moreover, 26% of the subjects viewed oral exams easy, while 61% perceived written exams as easy.

Our subjects also characterized written exams as interesting and oral exams as boring. Responding to the second item of the questionnaire, 40% of the subjects viewed oral exams as interesting, whereas 61% viewed written exams as interesting. Similarly, 60% of the sample considered oral exams boring, and 39% regarded written exams as boring.

Reacting to the third item measuring test fairness, 32% of the students believed oral exams were fair, whereas 81% of the students believed that written exams were fair. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of the sample perceived written tests as being fair and oral tests as being unfair.

With respect to the fourth item measuring test pleasantness, 41% of the sample reported that oral tests were pleasant, whereas 61% of the sample indicated that written tests were pleasant. Thus, the students in this study tended to view written tests, in comparison to oral test, as relatively more pleasant.

Oral tests are also more negatively rated than written tests with respect to the attribute "threatening." Responses to the item which measures the threat caused by a test indicated that 73% of the sample viewed oral exams as being threatening, and 40% of the sample viewed written tests as threatening.

The majority of the subjects believed that both test modes cause students to worry. Their reactions to this item indicated that 81% of the respondents perceived oral tests as causing them to worry, whereas 55% acknowledged that written tests may cause them to worry.

The reactions of the subjects to the item which measures test comprehensibility suggest that 54% of the subjects regarded oral test as comprehensible, whereas 77% of the subjects perceived written tests as being comprehensible.

With respect to the subjects' responses to the issue of test trickiness, 69% of the sample stated that oral tests are tricky, whereas 36% of the sample believed that written tests are tricky. This attitude clearly indicates that our subjects evaluated written test formats more favorably than oral test formats with regard to test trickiness.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bipolar Attribute</th>
<th>Oral Test %</th>
<th>Written Test %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 difficult</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>easy</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 interesting</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boring</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 fair</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unfair</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 pleasant</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unpleasant</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Valuable</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>valueless</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 non-threatening</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>threatening</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 not anxiety evoking</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anxiety evoking</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 no cause to worry</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cause to worry</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 comprehensible</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in comprehensible</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 tricky</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less tricky</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 enough time to complete test</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not enough time to complete test</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 reflects mastery of English</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not reflect mastery of English</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 allows for success</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not allow for success</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 like</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do not like</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responding to the item which measures test reflection of students' mastery of English, 74% of the respondents viewed written tests as being capable of reflecting
their mastery of the language, in contrast to 34% who felt that oral tests are reliable measures of reflecting their knowledge of English.

Moreover, when asked about test success expectancy, the majority of the subjects pointed out that students have a better chance of succeeding on the written exam than on the oral exam. The overwhelming majority (81%) of the students claimed that a written exam allows a greater possibility for success. In contrast, 31% of the sample felt that oral tests provide a better chance of success.

Finally, the vast majority (85%) of the students in the sample reported that they liked written tests, in contrast to 29% who asserted that they liked oral tests.

**Discussion**

The results stated above clearly indicate that our Jordanian students of English as a second language have very positive attitudes toward written exams, but negative attitudes toward oral exams. These results show that most of the characteristics attributed to oral tests are negative, whereas most of the characteristics attributed to written tests are positive. Our Jordanian students view oral tests as difficult, boring, unfair, unpleasant, valuable, threatening, anxiety evoking, causing worry, comprehensible, tricky, not having enough time to complete them, not reflecting mastery of language, not allowing for success, and not liking these type of tests. On the other hand, they perceive written tests as easy, interesting, fair, pleasant, valuable, non-threatening, anxiety evoking, causing worry, comprehensible, less tricky, having enough time to complete them, reflecting mastery of English, allowing for success, and liking them.

The findings of the present research are consistent with some previous studies administered in different cultural settings (Zeidner 1988, Zeidner and Bensoussan 1988, Phillips 1992). Although our subjects come from a different cultural and educational setting, they perceived written exams as easy and oral exams as difficult in the same way the subjects of Zeidner (1988) and Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988) viewed these tests. However, this view of the difficulty of oral tests contradicts the view expressed in Shohamy (1982) whose students rated the oral interview more favorably than the written test. Shohamy claimed that her students tend to consider oral interviews as being capable of reflecting students' mastery of the language. Moreover, the students perceived oral interviews as a pleasant experience.
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This perception of the difficulty of oral exams can be attributed to the fact that oral language skills are viewed as the most problematic. It may also be due to the fact that students are rarely exposed to this mode of exams in contrast to written tests to which they are accustomed. Therefore, their experience with oral exams is limited. Moreover, students are not generally given enough time for responding to oral exams.

Our subjects also characterized written exams as interesting and oral exams as boring. This characterization may be attributed to the nature of the two exams and the students' experience with them. Written exams are assessment measures familiar to the students where they can express themselves easily and more accurately without any psychological pressure or time constraints (see also Scott, 1986). Oral exams, on the other hand, are less common, and are conducted in an atmosphere where students confront their examiners. These factors, among others, may affect students' perceptions of exams as being interesting or boring. However, our Jordanian subjects' view of oral exams as being boring contradicts the perception of the subjects of Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988) who viewed oral tests as more interesting than written tests.

Most of the sample viewed oral and written test modes as both evoking anxiety and causing students to worry. This perception can be explained in the light of the fact that these are tests, and students always feel that way toward them regardless of their mode. However, oral exams were viewed as arousing more anxiety and causing more worry to the examinees than written tests. To foreign language students, the oral performance is more problematic than the written one and demands a higher level of speech competence, and hence it is more anxiety evoking. This view of our subjects is similar to the view of the subjects of Bailey (1983) who felt nervous about even the simplest oral tasks. It is also in line with the findings of Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988) who maintain that their subjects perceived the oral exam as more anxiety evoking. We also agree with Scott (1986) that test anxiety may be the product of test content and time constraint.

Moreover, the subjects in this study felt that both oral and written test modes are valuable. It is evident that this perception is related to the fact that students consider exams in general as valuable because they encourage them to prepare and study hard in order to obtain high grades.
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The majority of our subjects perceived written exams as non-threatening and oral exams as threatening. Students are very familiar with written exam formats; in fact, for most of the time, written exams are the only measure of evaluation. Therefore, testees are used to taking written tests, and consequently do not feel threatened by such exams. On the other hand, students are not familiar with oral exams; they may take only one or two oral exams during their entire program of study. This unfamiliarity with this mode enhances their fear and feeling of threat. Besides, during oral exams, examinees usually feel under more pressure, stress, and other psychological constraints which ultimately increase their feeling of threat (Scott 1986, Zeidner and Bensoussan 1988).

Furthermore, our Jordanian students characterized written exams as fair, pleasant, and less tricky, whereas they identified oral tests as unfair, unpleasant, and tricky. Our subjects' perception of the unpleasantness of oral exams is identical to the perception of the subjects of Phillips (1992) who also found the oral exam a very unpleasant experience. Moreover, our students' view of the fairness and pleasantness of written test formats confirms the view held by the subjects of Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988). These negative reactions and attitudes toward the oral exam are consistent with our students' perception of oral tests as difficult, boring, anxiety evoking, and threatening.

Although the participants in this study also felt that both test modes are comprehensible, they claimed that oral tests, in contrast to written tests, are tricky, not given enough time, not reflective of mastery of the English language, and not providing higher chances of success. Students' familiarity with written exams and their long experience in taking them may make students feel that such exams are less tricky. However, the subjects' unfamiliarity and lack of experience in taking oral tests may have led them to the perception of these tests as tricky. Furthermore, the subjects' perception of written exams as more reflective of their knowledge of English than oral exams may be attributed, as Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988) suggested, to the low degree of pressure and tension students experience when answering written exams, the easiness of expressing their ideas in writing, and the ample time devoted to thinking and answering. Moreover, our participants' perception of test success expectancy is similar to the perception of the subjects of Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988) who claimed that they have a much better chance of success on written tests than on oral tests because of their familiarity with written tests and the low degree of psychological tension, pressure, and anxiety.
Finally, the vast majority of our Jordanian students of English as a second language clearly admitted that they preferred the written test in general. This is in line with previous studies in the field.

Conclusion

In this research project, we have delineated the perceptions, reactions, and attitudinal dispositions of Jordanian university students toward written and oral exams. The analysis of the data has revealed that our subjects strongly favor written, rather than oral exams. On most of the questionnaire's items, written tests are rated more favorably than oral tests. The general finding of the present study is consistent with a number of previous studies conducted in other cultural settings, especially those of Zeidner (1988), Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988), and Phillips (1992).

The students' perceptions and attitudinal dispositions towards various test modes are of great importance to both test takers and test makers. By encouraging and offering them a chance to express their views and attitudes, testees can be better motivated to prepare for a test and, consequently, their performance on that test may be greatly improved. These perceptions also provide us with a valuable source of information on the test face validity from the testees' viewpoint, and they help examiners modify and improve the different components of the exam.
References


مواقف طلاب الجامعة تجاه امتحانات اللغة الإنجليزية التنموية والتحريرية

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ملخص

أن الهدف الرئيسي لهذا البحث هو دراسة مواقف الطلاب تجاه امتحانات اللغة الإنجليزية التنموية والتحريرية. تكمن عينة الدراسة من طلاب وطالبات مسجلين في مساق اللدغة والتحرير في جامعة اليرموك، وأجاب المشاركون في الدراسة على استجابة من ثلاثة أجزاء. ولقد أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب الأردنيين يفضلون الامتحانات التحريرية على الامتحانات التنموية وإن مواقفهم إجمالاً أكثر إيجابية من مواقفهم إجمالاً الامتحانات التنموية. كما اعتبر هؤلاء الطلاب الامتحانات التحريرية أكثر مصدمة وسروراً وأظهراً لقدراتهم اللغوية وأتصافوا وأقل اثارة للقلق، وأقل خناقاً من الامتحانات التنموية.