Journal of King Saud University

Volume 17

Languages and Translation

A.H. 1425

(2005)

Components of the First Certificate Test (FCE)
and Their Prediction of Academic Success for English Majors
at the University of Bahrain

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to examine the multivariate relationships of students' proficiency scores on the First Certificate of English (FCE), together with their performance at the university as measured by the overall gradepoint average (GPA). The subjects for the study were 106 students enrolled at the University of Bahrain. The bivariate analysis of the data showed that the students' scores on the test correlated very significantly with all the variables tested. Regression analysis revealed that the cloze and word formation contributed more significantly to the total test score for the whole sample. As for the overall GPA, word formation proved to be the best predictor. However, analysis for the high achievers revealed different results. Here mainly sentence transformation and to some extent the cloze contributed enough to be maintained in the linear prediction model. Contrary to expectations, both the composition and the oral test contributed to the prediction of the high achievers' GPA. As for the low achievers, mainly their score on the multiple-choice and the cloze contributed more significantly to the total FCE score. Their score on the word formation and sentence transformation appeared to contribute to their overall GPA. We first discuss the background and purpose of the present study and then present an analysis and discussion of the statistical findings. We conclude by considering the pedagogical implications of the findings for different categories of learners.

Introduction

The FCE, as compared to the TOEFL, has received little attention from the specialists in the field of English language testing. This is evident from the relatively small number of studies which have examined aspects of the FCE as an EFL test as compared with the TOEFL [1-5].

Results of Al-Musawi and Al-Ansari [6] on undergraduate students at the University of Bahrain have revealed that the FCE cloze and sentence transformation sub-scores are the only test scores that tend to contribute to the prediction of both

students' GPA and their GPA in English courses. Their results have also indicated that the FCE is a better test instrument than the TOEFL, particularly when English is being taught as a foreign language. However, their later study on students near graduation [7] revealed that the FCE cloze, and sentence transformation sub-scores and also the listening component of the TOEFL are the only test scores that contributed to the prediction of the students' GPA.

The First Certificate of English Test (FCE): The purpose of the FCE is to assess the English language skills of people whose native language is not English. This test consists of seven papers: Reading Comprehension involving multiple-choice items plus reading passages, Cloze test, Sentence Transformation tests, Word Formation test, Listening Comprehension test, and an Interview. Paper 1 includes forty 4-option multiple-choice items in parts: vocabulary (25 items) and reading comprehension (15 items). Paper 2 includes a cloze test in the form of a passage with blanks, each of which the examinee has to fill in with one word only. Paper 3 is a reading passage followed by five 4-option multiple-choice questions. Paper 4 of the FCE is a set of ten sentences, which the examinee has to rewrite without changing the original meaning of each sentence. The examinee has got to use the words given at the beginning of the sentence without changing the meaning. Paper 5, which also includes ten sentences, assesses students' linguistic ability in word building. Paper 6 consists of a series of audio-recorded texts, and the examinee has to answer the different questions based on his or her understanding of the texts. This paper has been excluded from the present study because the subjects who participated in the study were given different listening tests by different language instructors. Therefore, the reliability of the students' score on this paper would have been questioned. Finally, Paper 7 being an oral test assesses the students' ability to give short talks on prepared topics, and to discuss how to solve specific problem situations.

Subjects

The sample consisted of 106 students taking first- and second-major English language courses as part of their language course requirement at the University of Bahrain. They were following a degree program in English Language and Literature at the University of Bahrain. Their degree is based on a credit system of university education. Students need to complete 131 credits in order to graduate, 93 of which are studied within the students' major and minor subject specialization. They are required to pass these courses with a minimum score of 70% in order to be accepted as confirmed English majors and eventually obtain a degree in English language and literature. These are normally identified as successful students who may proceed on to their upper-level without academic problems. However, those who score less or much less than 70% are normally identified as low achievers and would be required to repeat their courses and improve their attainment in the subject. Most of these students end up dropping out from the program altogether or opting for a different subject major specialization. All the subjects selected for the study were highly homogeneous in terms of age, nationality, mother tongue and cultural and educational background. In this respect, it contrasts with the samples used in many other second language acquisition studies. Much of the research reported in the

language acquisition literature has been carried out with linguistically and culturally heterogeneous groups whose members may be assumed to have been open to a much wider range of background influences than the sample used in the present study.

Purpose of the study

The first purpose of the study is to examine to what extent components of the FCE correlate significantly with their overall proficiency score in the test, together with their GPA (grade point average) in the major. Therefore, it is interesting to determine which of the sub-categories of the test are better predictors of the students' success in English than others. Although studies of Al-Musawi & Al-Ansari [6] and Al-Ansari & Al-Musawi [7] have already measured the sub-categories of the test on undergraduate and advanced students, the current study is intended to take a different dimension. Its second purpose is to examine whether the same components correlate differently when the sample is divided into two different categories, i.e. high and low achievers. As mentioned earlier, the mean score of the FCE test was used as the basis for dividing the sample into two groups: high achievers and low achievers, those scoring above 70 being considered high achievers and those scoring below 70 being considered low achievers. Of the 106 students, 53 came out as high achievers and 53 as low achievers.

Analysis

A general linear multivariate regression was made using the SPSS for the overall score of the FCE total score, together with their scores on each of the test components. These analyses were supplemented by a stepwise regression to explore the contribution of certain sub-scores to the multivariate model. The same general linear multivariate regression was computed, using the overall FCE as dependent variables. The general linear multivariate regression was also applied for the students' composite grade point average (GPA). The general linear model differs from a stepwise regression in its considerations of the contributions of all test scores simultaneously. In effect, the final product of a stepwise regression in which both independent variables were entered into the model is equivalent to the general linear regression.

Based on the multivariate regression equations predicted grade point averages (GPAs) were computed. For examinees, who achieved each rounded predicted GPAs, the mean observed GPA was computed and these were plotted against the predicted GPAs. These plots were examined to determine if the fits of the predicted GPAs were equally accurate throughout the range of observed GPAs, that is, in relation to the level of the examinees' achievement.

IV Results

1) Comparability of examinees' scores

Table 1 shows the means and the standard deviations of the component variables pertaining to the examination taken by the different samples.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations achieved on all test components

Test component	Mean	S. D.	Mean	S. D.	Mean	S. D.
	Whole	Sample	High	Achievers	Low	Achievers
Oral	7.24	1.43	7.88	.94	6.81	1.56
Passage	5.75	2.75	7.16	2.48	4.28	2.22
Multiple choice	14.58	2.64	16.08	2.68	13.52	2.04
Cloze	9.44	5.50	13.87	3.63	4.84	2.50
Sentence trans.	10.43	5.26	14.58	3.88	6.12	2.04
Word formation	6.29	2.21	7.74	1.66	4.76	1.63
Composition	14.95	1.82	15.69	1.37	14.17	1.93
FCE	61.69	15.91	76.07	9.21	47.55	6.30
GPA	2.51	.52	2.74	.48	2.27	.45

It is interesting to note that all the mean scores in Table 1 tend to reliably correspond to their mean scores. The standard deviations tend to deviate very marginally away from their mean scores. The same appears to be true for the mean scores and the standard deviations obtained for both the high achievers and the low achievers. As expected the mean scores of the high achievers in all the components tested are clearly and reliably higher than the whole sample and than the low achievers.

2) Bivariate (zero order) correlations

It is clear in Table 2 that the FCE section scores are highly intercorrelated. All correlation coefficients of FCE scores with the total variable are of high magnitude (p < .01), particularly those of the cloze (r= .91) and the sentence transformation and the word formation (r= .89 and r= .81 respectively). As for the GPA all the correlation coefficients are also of high magnitude (p < .01) except for an insignificant correlation obtained for the reading passage.

Table 2. Bivariate correlation coefficients among all scores (whole sample)

Variable	Oral	Passage	M.C.	Cloze	S.T.	W.F.	Comp.	Total	GPA
Oral	—								
Passage	.14	—							
M.C.	.40**	.33**	—						
Cloze	.31**	.55**	.39**	—					
S.T.	.25**	.47**	.36**	.85**	—				
W.F.	.30**	.41**	.47**	.69**	.66**	—			
Composition	.18	.20*	.52**	.32**	.32**	.47**	—		
Total	.37**	.65**	.57**	.91**	.89**	.81**	.51**	—	
GPA	.42**	.10	.44**	.32**	.40**	.58**	.54**	.49**	—

** P <. 01   * P <. 05

Table 3 above gives the bivariate correlation coefficients obtained for the high achievers. Some interesting results have been revealed here. Students' scores only on the multiple choice, the composition and their overall GPA score are found to be highly significantly correlating with their score on the oral test. Their scores on the cloze, sentence transformation, word formation and the reading passage sections constituted a high magnitude correlation with the students' total score on the test (r= .75, r= .71, r= .64 and r= .56 respectively). However, this was not true as for the students' GPA for it tended to correlate with almost different components of the test. Here the correlation coefficients obtained for the students' score on the composition, the oral and the multiple choice sections of the test have proved to be of a high significance level (p< .01) except for the correlation obtained for the word formation section which tended to be significant at the .05 level.

Table 3. Bivariate correlation coefficients among all scores (high achievers)

Variable	Oral	Passage	M.C.	Cloze	S.T.	W.F.	Comp.	Total	GPA
Oral									
Passage	.02								
M.C.	.47**	-.05							
Cloze	.01	.18	-.21						
S.T.	.01	.22	-.13	.64**					
W.F.	.20	.29*	.11	.42**	.26				
Composition	.50**	.07	.63**	-.15	-.15	.26			
Total	.18	.56**	.14	.71**	.75**	.64*	.22		
GPA	.45**	-.13	.40**	-.18	-.05	.39*	.55**	.13	

** P < .01   * P < .05

Some interesting results have emerged for the low achievers as shown in Table 4. First of all, the students' score on the oral did not correlate significantly with any of the components or the total score and neither with the GPA. However, all the sub-scores have correlated significantly with the total FCE score except the oral test score.

Table 4. Bivariate correlation coefficients among all scores (low achievers)

Variable	Oral	Passage	M.C.	Cloze	S.T.	W.F.	Comp.	Total	gpa
Oral									
Passage	-.06								
M.C.	.26	.15							
Cloze	.08	.36**	.45**						
S.T.	-.13	-.17	.17	.32*					
W.F	.02	-.14	.33*	.20	.37**				
Composition	-.10	-.09	.27	.11	.19	.30*			
	.06	.35**	.71**	.65**	.47**	.60**	.52**		
GPA	.23.	-.22	.17	.05	.38**	.46**	.36***	.37**	

** P < .01   * P < .05

3) Multivariate correlations

Tables 5 and 6 show the results of the stepwise regression predicting students' using the component scores of the FCE as independent variables. Note that the cloze score contributed more to the prediction of students' scores in the FCE to be maintained in the linear model (0.5 probability criterion was utilized).

Table 5. Stepwise regression of the FCE sub-sections

	Onto the total score (whole sample)	
Entry order	Independent variables	Partial r-square
1	Cloze	.75
2	W. F	.11
3	M.C.	.04
4	S.T.	.04
5	Passage	.01
6	Composition	.01
Total r-square		.96

Table 6. Stepwise regression of

	On to the overall GPA (whole sample)	
Entry order	Independent variables	Partial r-square
1	WF	.32
2	Composition	.09
3	Oral	.07
4	Cloze	.02
Total r-square		.50

Table 7. Stepwise regression of the FCE sub-sections

	Onto the total score (high achievers)	
Entry Order	Independent Variables	Partial r-square
1	S.T.	.78
2	Cloze	.10
3	MC	.04
4	Composition	.02
5	Passage	.02
6	WF	.01
Total r – square		.97

Table 8. Stepwise regression

	Onto the overall GPA (high achievers)		
Entry order	Independent variables	Partial r-square
1	Composition	.44
2	Oral	.10
Total r-square		.54

Table 9. Stepwise regression of the FCE sub-sections

	Onto the total score (low achievers)	
Entry order	Independent variables	Partial r-square
1	M.C.	.51
2	Cloze	.13
3	W.F.	.13
4	Composition	.07
5	Passage	.07
6	S.T.	.05
Total r-square		.96

Table 10. Stepwise regression

	Onto the overall GPA (low achievers)	
Entry order	Independent variables	Partial r-square
1	WF	.20
2	S. T.	.10
3	Oral	.06
Total r-square		.36

Discussion of the results

Results of the present study and particularly those of the stepwise regression analysis for the whole sample (Table 5) show that attainment of an FCE standard for the students following a BA degree in English is highly predicted by their ability in scoring high on the cloze section of the test. This is not surprising when cloze tests have always been confirmed to be standardized forms of testing instruments [8]. Students' proficiency in the language is measured in terms of their excellent performance in cloze tests. In other words, the more proficient the students are in comprehending and manipulating the lexical and structural content of a cloze test, the better their score in an FCE test. The students' ability in using correct word derivates and with correct spelling is also found to exert some noticeable degree of influence.

The rest of the FCE components, apart from their score on the oral, have had some marginal degrees of prediction. As for their prediction of the students' overall GPA, the FCE word formation component is found to exert a reasonable degree of prediction as shown in Table 6. The other test components, e.g. the composition, the oral and the cloze, have had less degrees of prediction. However, the students' correct usage of word derivates is all reflected in their ability of constructing correct sentences both orally and in writing. The result for the whole sample has certainly signified the importance of word acquisition and development while learning a second language. Students' word acquisition or vocabulary development can accurately be measured over a large period of time and not necessarily by a single test studied over a short period of time. Such kind of acquisition is found to be predicted by students' overall GPA in the BA program. The result found here indicates that the students who have correctly accumulated a large amount of lexical items and are capable of manipulating them accurately tend to have a better GPA than those who have accumulated less.

As for the stepwise regression analysis obtained for the high achievers, the results are evidently different from those obtained for the whole sample. Some striking results have emerged here. The students' linguistic capability in transforming sentences correctly is found to be the best predictor for their success in the FCE test. The cloze is also found to exert some marginal prediction but not as high as the sentence transformation component. These results here are consistent with those of Al-Musawi and Al-Ansari [6] and those of Al-Ansari and Al-Musawi [7]. The rest of the test components, apart from the oral, have also demonstrated some degree of prediction as shown in Table 7. As for their prediction of the students' overall GPA, the students' acquisition of the FCE lexical items and structural patterns does not appear to act as a predictor for their success in the test. Contrary to expectations, the students' writing ability as demonstrated in the composition section of the test has shown to be the best predictor here as it highly significantly correlated with their success in the degree program. Their performance in the oral test has also acted as a good predictor here. This means that the students' academic proficiency in the subject matter is measured in terms of their ability in using the language well both in speech and in writing. Basically, the more they are linguistically professional in these two essential skills of the language, the more they can be identified to be high achievers and bilingual learners in their major subject specialization.

As far as the results of the low achievers are concerned, their score on the test tends to correlate significantly with the total FCE score except for their score on the oral test. The stepwise regression analysis showed that the students' score on the multiple-choice items of the test has shown to be the best predictor with this group. One reason for this is that students normally find the multiple-choice not as difficult as the other test components. Those who are proficient in the language will score much higher on multiple-choice to the extent that other language components of the test such as sentence transformation or the cloze tend to act as better predictors as shown in Table 7, whereas low achievers would normally experience enormous language difficulties with most of

the other test components. Therefore, their score on the multiple-choice section of the test would constitute a more significant correlation. Both the cloze and the word formation have also found to correlate significantly with the FCE total score. The remaining test components have demonstrated some marginal prediction. As for their overall GPA, low achievers' academic proficiency in the degree programme has found to be significantly predicted by their overall acquisition of word forms, transforming sentences correctly and also to a lesser degree by their oral command of the language.

What is interesting about the entire stepwise analyses for the three groups is that the oral competency score has proved to have a role in predicting their overall GPA in the major program. This certainly means that all the students need to attain a reasonable degree of an oral competency in English regardless of their level of attainment. The more proficient communicators they become in oral use of the language, the higher is their GPA.

Pedagogical Implications

Although most of the bivariate correlations obtained here lend support to those revealed in earlier studies of Al-Musawi and Al-Ansari [6] and Al-Ansari and Al-Musawi [7] with some degree of variation, the stepwise analyses results for the students' overall GPA, particularly those of the higher achievers, have certainly added a new dimension to foreign language acquisition. This very interesting result signifies certain language teaching implications which will have to be taken seriously into consideration by teaching practitioners and EFL textbook designers. The fact that more significant positive correlations were obtained with regard to the composition component of the test might encourage educational planners and decision makers in English medium contexts to entertain the possibility that more hours spent equipping the students with essential writing skills and correspondingly fewer hours on formal English language instruction might be more beneficial in the long run, both with regard to concept development in the subject area and the development of academic proficiency in English [9].

As for to the low achievers, the findings confirmed the absence of any correlation with the composition component. These findings are consistent with two possible inferences: either their level of proficiency is too low for them to derive any benefit from the kind of instruction they get during writing lessons or that much of the input they receive is largely incomprehensible, or they do not have the necessary cognitive and verbal characteristics to derive the kind of benefit that would be reflected in an academically biased proficiency test. What the evidence does not tell us, of course, is whether they would derive any benefit from more guided and more sheltered extracurricular exposure. Experimental work in a variety of different contact situations might eventually provide some partial answers to this question. Some of the partial answers we may think of here clearly indicate that this particular group of learners first need to maintain a full understanding on how to use the basic components of foreign language attainment namely those of word formation and sentence transformation. When

the students' language knowledge on such linguistic categories has improved, they will gradually gain better language insights into the other more sophisticated FCE test items. The best way of achieving this is through exposure to plenty of supplementary reading materials and extra-curricular immersion in the language. Their acquisition rate of vocabulary is bound to improve and they begin to comprehend how sentences are transformed. The more this is accomplished in earlier stages, the higher the chance for the rate of vocabulary and sentence structures to develop constructively. Here, inner motivation or desire to learn the language as much as possible plays a fundamental role in language acquisition, especially in the earlier stages. Methodological debate in the field of foreign and second language teaching needs to focus much more on ways of promoting and managing concrete communicative activities and correspondingly less on instructional techniques and classroom management (for further ideas on group dynamics for the purpose of increasing extracurricular activities see [9-10]).

As for the stepwise analysis regarding the score of the oral test and its prediction of the students' academic success at the University, acquiring a reasonable degree of oral competency in the language has proved to correlate more significantly with the high achievers' GPA in the degree program. This means that the level of communicative competency in a foreign language is directly influenced by the amount of exposure the learner has to the target language in its natural settings. In many respects, Bahrain approximates more to an ESL than to an EFL environment. Certainly, the classroom is far from being the only source of comprehensible input for Bahraini learners of English. Most middle-class Bahrainis do achieve a high level of academic or professional proficiency. It is also a reasonable assumption that learners' engagement in various curricular and extracurricular listening, speaking and reading activities will compensate, at least to some extent, for their lack of natural interaction with the target language community and that the more informal contact learners have with the language outside the English classroom in whatever form, the higher will be their level of proficiency. This environmental factor derives some support from Al-Ansari's study [8] on the influence of extracurricular exposure with the level of attainment of EFL learners in Bahrain, which showed a correlation coefficient of .43 (p < .001) between such type of exposure and the level of attainment of low achievers. A lesser correlation coefficient was obtained for the high achievers. The pedagogical implication is that besides inculcating in EFL learners a full comprehension of basic grammatical rules and lexical items, together with the improvement of writing development, communicative competency in terms of becoming fluent in oral expression should become a prime requirement and a comprehensive target at the end. This, in our opinion, needs to be focused on more at upper learning levels. Teachers should come up with communicative activities in the classroom and perhaps through useful communication workshops which will gradually arouse a desire and a motive in the learners to speak the language in various natural settings. At this stage we may conclude that beyond the intermediate stage the level of academic proficiency attained is strongly influenced by a general ability factor that determines how much input is efficiently processed and assimilated, and not merely 'comprehended'. This is perhaps what distinguishes high achievers from

low achievers. This is why within their general ability factor there may well be a critical component that is traditionally though of as 'language aptitude' or 'verbal intelligence' but which might be better conceptualized as some kind of mechanism that functions with varying degrees of efficiency, and perhaps more critically at higher levels, by the efficiency of the learner's language acquisition device. The important thing is that the pedagogical needs of the low achievers be dealt with in an informed and systematic way, otherwise essential educational aims and objectives may be threatened and, in certain cases, the entire educational process undermined.

As for the TOEFL specialists, they need to have a wider spectrum of measurement and evaluation of their programs by adding FCE components into their language learning materials. The various parts of the FCE which enhance certain activities, i.e. transformational drills and cloze exercises will be used as teaching and measurement tools by the EFL instructors to improve student performance. Language material developers, moreover, have a wider scope in terms of concentration on certain language areas. This paper, within the realm of understanding second language acquisition, attempts to understand the factors that influence success or failure in second language learning. The results of the research will promote certain methods and learning strategies in English. It will also help language learning practioners to understand what testing students' level of proficiency involves. Thus they will be able to provide instruction in the most needed areas of language acquisition and special instructional support in the basic skills areas while monitoring their students' progress.

Second language acquisition is a field of inquiry that abounds in theories, while at the same time no single approach has adequately explained how language acquisition takes place. This paper shows that in this sense the different approaches in formal instruction will support the natural acquisition expected from a non-native speaker, and efforts in this respect are never worthless. The present paper looks at how one way of using certain areas of language teaching will be an effective measurement tool to the success of the program compared with overall achievement in the core program of English. Many methods have been adapted and modified throughout the years to find what style best accommodates the need of the learner. It goes without saying that when language teaching becomes an imperative process, the teacher has various tools to enhance language acquisition in an environment suitable to the needs of the learner and matches the measurement of the native speaker's level of proficiency. Hopefully, the continuing and combined efforts made in teaching FCE materials will lead to the ultimate success of establishing a trend in second language acquisition.

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إمكانية تنبؤ مكونات امتحان الشهادة الأولى في اللغة الإنجليزية (FCE) بنجاح طلبة تخصص اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة البحرين

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ملخص البحث. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تحديد مدى صدق درجات الطالب في اختبار الشهادة الأولى في اللغة الإنجليزية (FCE) والقدرة على التنبؤ بنجاحه في جامعة البحرين بناءا على معدله التراكمي الإجمالي (GPA). وقد بلغ أفراد العينة البحثية ١٠٦ طالبا وطالبة في بكالوريوس اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعة. وقد أبرزت نتائج الدراسة إمكانية التنبؤ الدقيق بالنجاح في اللغة الإنجليزية من واقع درجاتهم الفرعية في اختبار الإتمام (cloze) وتشكيل المفردات (word formation) للعينة ككل. أما بالنسبة لمعدلهم التراكمي الإجمالي فإن تشكيل المفردات (word formation) أثبتت أنه العنصر الرئيسي في التنبؤ بنجاحهم في الجامعة. هذا وقد كانت النتائج مختلفة بالنسبة للحاصلين على درجات عالية في اللغة من حيث تحويل الجمل (sentence transformation) واختبار الإتمام (cloze) فقد كان تأثيرهم أكثر من بقية العناصر. وبعكس توقعات الباحثين فإن كتابة الإنشاء (composition) والاختبار الشفوي (oral test) كان لهما دور كبير في التنبؤ بالمعدل التراكمي الإجمالي (GPA) للطلبة الحاصلين على الدرجات العالية للغة.