TESTING MADE STUDENT-FRIENDLY: *READY FOR SUCCESS AT THE ENTRANCE EXAM IN ENGLISH* - A NEW EDUCATIONAL TOOL FOR CANDIDATES AT "MIRCEACELBATRAN" NAVAL ACADEMY

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Abstract: The present paper will report on the outcome of the authors' initiative to provide prospective candidates at "Mircea cel Batran" Naval Academy with an efficient learning tool, aimed at facilitating and sustaining their preparations for the eliminatory language exam. Herein there will be discussed both the theoretical framework on which Ready for Success at the Entrance Exam in English is articulated and the design process behind producing it. The current approach will be reflected on, in which there is a strong and clear echoing between the tested content and its synthetic presentation. What makes this particular educational resource stand out is its commitment to fostering autonomous learning by setting out to equip learners with those learning and test-taking strategies that ensure their academic success.

Keywords: testing, autonomous learning, connecting theory to practice

Introduction. Theoretical framework.

The Entrance Examination in English for admission to military academies in Romania is regulated by instructions and specifications issued by the national testing agency within the Ministry of National Defense, namely the National Military Testing Center for Foreign Languages. The candidates' English knowledge is tested in an eliminatory exam which constitutes an essential component of the admission examinations organized in all military academies. While each academy is allowed to produce its own test, there are clear, unique test specifications and instructions which ensure that all tests produced across the country are equally valid and reliable by essentially testing the same things.

According to Arthur Hughes "the first thing that testers have to be clear about is the purpose of testing in any particular situation" (Hughes, 7). The reason for the importance of the purpose of testing is that it will determine the format of your test. There are several types of tests in the field of language testing. Understanding the purpose of each will ensure the accuracy and overall quality of the test.

1. Placement test. It is used to place new students in the right class in a school. It identifies which level or stage of a teaching program is more appropriate for the students'

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abilities. In other words, their task is to assign students of languages to different classes at different levels and thus save time and effort of teachers.

2. Diagnostic test. It is used to discover student problems, difficulties or deficiencies in a course. This type of tests is employed to know the students' strengths and weaknesses so as to be able to take appropriate corrective action.

3. Progress/ Final progress Achievement test. It is designed to measure students' language and their skill progress in relation to the syllabus they have been following. This type is directly related to language courses and done during the course and then at the end of the course to measure students' achievement of the course objectives or goals.

4. Aptitude test. It is designed to discover whether a student has a talent or basic ability for learning a new language or not.

5. Proficiency test. It is not necessarily based on certain courses that students may have previously taken. Most students take this type of tests to admit to a foreign university, get a job or obtain some kind of certificate. It is designed to measure students' knowledge and ability in a language.

The Entrance Examination in English for admission to military academies is a proficiency test which ensures that candidates possess the necessary English knowledge to function efficiently in the English courses held at each academy throughout all four years of undergraduate studies.

It is generally agreed upon that the three main criteria of a well prepared test are validity, reliability, and practicality:

1. Validity. In Heaton's opinion "the validity of a test is the extent to which it measures what it is supposed tomeasure and nothing else" (Heaton, 159). According to Hughes,the test has content validity if its content consists of a representative sample of the language items which it is meant to test (Hughes, 22). To display such validity, Heaton deems it essential to propose a chart of specifications of the test, which would precisely describe the particular language skills and areas to appear in the test (Heaton, 160-161).

2. Reliability. According to Madsen, a reliable test is "the one that produces essentially the same results consistently on different occasions when the conditions of the test remain the same" (Madsen, 179). Weir discusses yet another two important aspects of reliability. Firstly, the learner's score should remain the same even if there are different evaluators of the particular test. Similarly, the score should stay the same abstractedly from which version of the test the learner takes (Weir, 31).

3. Practicality. Hughes warns that even "the best test may give unreliable and invalid results if it is not well administrated" (Hughes, 152). There areseveral factors which can invalidate a test and these are related to its inefficiency in terms of administration, scoring and interpretations of results (Weir, 34). Hughes also mentions factors such as the lack of clear instructions for the test-takers as well as for the invigilators (Hughes, 152-154).

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1. Test Overview.

The eliminatory language test in English for admission to "MirceacelBatran" Naval Academy is entirely based on the national specifications and general test instructions produced by the National Military Testing Center for Foreign Languages and consists of 3 parts, with a total of 45 questions in all. The test lasts 1 hour and 30 minutes and each correct answer is allotted 0.2 points adding to a total of 9 to which 1 point is automatically added to round up to 10. The test components are Reading, Grammar and Vocabulary and Writing.

Testing reading.

Arthur Hughes insists on the importance of specifying the abilities to be tested "as accurately and completely as possible" (Hughes, 116). Test specifications are described as "blueprints" by Glenn Fulcher and Fred Davidson who explain that specs are "generative explanatory documentsfor the creation of test tasks. Specs tell us the nuts and bolts of how to phrase thetest items, how to structure the test layout, how to locate the passages, (…) the rationale behind the various choices that we make." (Fulcher and Davidson, 52)

When testing reading, test specifications will include information about what Hughes calls "operations", types of text, addressees, and topics. "Operations" refer to the test-takers ability to scan a text in order to locate specific information, skim a text in order to obtain the gist, identify stages of an argument, identify examples presented in support of an argument , understand relations between parts of text by recognizing indicators in discourse, etc. (Hughes, 116)

The Entrance Exam in English at the Naval Academy tests the candidates' ability to understand the overall meaning of a simple text, identify the details in a given text by selective reading and identify main ideas at paragraph level by careful reading. According to specifications, the reading texts have the following characteristics:

a) They are sourced from simple and concrete authentic materialssuch as: newspaper and magazine articles, brochures, advertisements, leaflets, fiction, textbooks, etc.

b) They are usually of about 80-150 words each.

c) Their topic range covers areas such as *family, school, free time activities, food, entertainment, mass-media, travelling, sport, music, and shopping*.

The unique testing item type is the 4-option multiple choice question with only one correct answer. There is a total of 15 multiple-choice questions in the reading part with 10 items for selective reading and5 items for reading for gist/main idea.

Testing Grammar and Vocabulary.

This part tests knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. According to specifications, the candidate can use the following *morphological* structures: frequently used regular and irregular nouns, comparative degree of adjectives/adverbs, basic tenses in the indicative,

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simple and continuous aspects (present, past, simple future, going to future, present perfect, and past perfect), modal verbs (can, may, must followed by present infinitive etc.), common linking words (and, but, because, not, after, next, before etc.), articles (except for the *Zero* article). The candidate can also use *syntactical* elements such as: word order, types of sentences (interrogative, affirmative, negative), sequence of tenses, if clause, time clause, relative clause. The vocabulary addresses the intermediate level, with concrete *lexical* structures that belong to the same topics as mentioned above in the Reading section. The focus is also on collocations, polysemy, synonymy and antonymy. There are two components to this part, each containing 10 multiple-choice items, with a total of 20 items in all.

Testing writing

Given the large number of prospective test-takers, practicality and reliability have lead the test specifications writers to choose a multiple-choice format for the writing section. Therefore, in the writing section, the candidate can identify specific elements in order to fulfill elementary requirements for producing written messages of about 10 - 50 words on the above-mentioned topics. Knowledge of writing techniques,spelling, punctuation, style, accuracy, text structure and cohesion, and language functions – are also tested. There are 10 items altogether.

2. Bridging the gap between the test and the test-taker population: *Ready for Success at the Entrance Exam in English*

*Ready for Success at the Entrance Exam in English*is the outcome of the authors' initiative to provide prospective candidates at "MirceacelBatran" Naval Academy with an efficient learning tool, aimed at facilitating and sustaining their preparations for the eliminatory language exam.

Need Analysis."MirceacelBatran" Naval Academycandidates are recent high school graduates who have just faced a test in English as part of their baccalaureate exam for which there is a wealth of learning and practice materials readily available on the market. Nevertheless, there is less available information about the specific format of the English language examination for admission to military academies. While high school graduates are generally likely to possess good lexical and structural language knowledge and communicative skills, it is important to ensure their familiarity with the test format and to equip them with those test-taking skills and strategies which will ensure their successful performance on the entrance test.

Design process. The format of *Ready for Success at the Entrance Exam in English*is derived from its overall aims and objectives:

a) To appease the candidates' test anxiety and lower its impact on the overall test performance by familiarizing test-takers with the test format. Consequently, the book opens

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with a comprehensive exam format overview which offers test-takers all necessary format, content and practical information pertaining to the test.

b) To reflect fully and accurately the national test specifications so as to provide test-takers with as realistic a learning experience as possible. This learning instrument is specifically geared towards achieving the best results in a particular test. It does not provide general language training but rather orientates test-takers towards their immediate goal. Not only do candidates have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the test format but they can reliably predict their prospective score in the real exam with the help of the original practice tests provided in the second part of the book, tests which completely replicate the entrance examination. In addition to the answer key, the book offers test-takers a grading scale so that they learn how to calculate their own scores, as well as a useful form to record their progress when moving from one test to another.

c) To develop the test-takers strategies. What makes this particular educational resource stand out is its commitment to facilitating autonomous learning by setting out to equip learners with those learning and test-taking strategies that ensure their academic success. In fact, this book far exceeds the limits of a simple exercise collection and constitutes a complex educational product in both its content and format. Thus, each test component (reading, grammar and vocabulary and writing) benefits from a dedicated "tips and strategies" section in which test-takers are presented the *how-tos,* they are warned against test *pits and traps* and are advised about the *best routes* to take when approaching the test. To begin with, the reading section includes a brief description of each reading skill tested in the book and dedicated *how-to* approaches to it. Moreover, a second list of tips is provided which will help students deal with multiple-choice questions in general. In addition, the first practice test comes complete with a fully justified answer-key which constitutes a learning tool in itself. Not only is each option in each reading question justified for or against it with direct references to the text but general reading tips and traps are provided at each step to give a targeted and concrete illustration of what to do and what to avoid when approaching different reading tasks.

d)To foster autonomous learning in the test-taker population. The current approach is based on a strong and clear echoing between the tested content and its synthetic presentation.An essential tool provided by the book is the comprehensive and synthetic presentation of the tested content. Thus, all grammar structures prescribed by the test specifications are given a snapshot presentation in the first part of the book, in the Grammar Tips section. They are meant to correspond to the items tested in the grammar section in each test. The rationale behind it is that such a mirroring between theory and practice will not only allow test-takers to identify their own mistakes while taking the practice tests but also take swift remedial actions. Thus, in the process of correcting their own tests, test-takers will identify their weak points and then zero in the concise theoretical information they originally lacked or misused so that they can learn and correct it immediately. The same principle applies to the Vocabulary section of the test as the book has included a Vocabulary Tips component with a topical arrangement which takes each thematic area tested and provides a

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general overview of essential lexical items with colocations and examples. The Writing portion of the test is mirrored by an extensive and comprehensive theoretical presentation, meant to quip students with all necessary knowledge tested in the entrance exam, complete with writing samples, spelling and punctuations rules, etc.

Conclusions

The book includes five original practice tests which, when combined with the theoretical knowledge and test-taking skills, are expected to offer a powerful learning and practice tool for all candidates at the Naval Academy. The justification for reporting on the authors' editorial initiative is to illustrate what we call a tri-dimensional approach to test practice (Learn the What, Learn the How to, Learn to Learn) and,in the process, possibly inspire other such endeavors in our fellow language practitioners.

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