

The perceptions of the students about the English Language Test implemented as a component of university entrance exam

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Abstract

This study aims to reveal students' perceptions about the Foreign (English) Language Test implemented as a component of University Entrance Exam. There were two groups as the participants of the study: the first group included pre-service English teachers studying in the English language teaching (ELT) Department and the second group consisted of cram school students preparing for the English Language Test. A questionnaire was implemented to both groups in order to reveal their perceptions about the English Language Test. The data derived from the questionnaires were analysed in a descriptive way through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences and the results were presented in a comparative manner. The results revealed that the rate of pre-service English teachers who think that English Language Test should include all of the language skills is higher than the rate of cram school students. In addition to that most of the pre-service English teachers are not pleased with the content of the test as they have faced with the problems related to the language skills after the onset of studying in ELT Department.

Keywords: Students' perceptions, education policy, English language test.

1. Introduction

It is a known fact that English is a global language that is mostly learnt and spoken all around the world. Tsui and Tollefson (2007) state that the considerable effects of globalisation have been seen in many dimensions of the societies, especially in foreign language policy (cited in Kirkgoz, 2009). In addition to globalisation, the European Union is among the most important factors that have a role in determining Foreign Language Education Policy in many countries (Cangil, 2004). Turkey is an associate member of the European Union and a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, thus the importance of English language increases every passing day in Turkey, as well (Incecay, 2012). Different regulations and changes are done for a more effective Foreign Language Education in Turkey. In the 1997–1998 academic year, the Ministry of National Education regulated the curriculum of primary schools. English began to be taught in the fourth year of the primary schools instead of the sixth year (i.e., at the age of 10, rather than at the age of 12). This decision was based on a belief in the necessity of beginning English at early ages (Gunes, 2011). In 2012, another regulation named 4+4+4 was done in the education system. English was taught during the second year of the Primary School instead of the fourth year to reach the advantages of early ages.

On the other hand, it is a widely known fact that there are still some problems with English Language education despite so many efforts. The continuous problems in English education keep the eyes on the English University Entrance Exam implemented in Turkey. As known, the students are placed in ELT Departments through an English test in addition to a general proficiency test which includes Turkish, social studies, mathematics and science. The English University Entrance Exam has been named in different ways such as Foreign Language Examination (YDS), Undergraduate Placement Examination (LYS) and Foreign Language Test (YDT). All these tests are mostly based on reading comprehension. As a result, the students start to study in ELT Departments after a long process of reading practice. As other skills (listening, writing and speaking) are not included in English test, the students generally do not focus on these skills during the preparation process, so the pre-service English Language teachers may have some problems with these skills even when they start to teach.

English Language Test is an obligatory step to study in ELT Departments. The components of the ELT program are related to field knowledge (linguistic competence), teacher education (pedagogic competence), general knowledge and teaching practice (Altunya, 2006). In the first year, the program focuses on the improvement of specific language competences. In the following years, the students start to learn the pedagogic knowledge in addition to linguistic competence. In the last year of the ELT Department, they start to be a part of actual teaching environments in primary or secondary schools under the supervision of a teacher trainer and a mentor (Karakas, 2012).

As seen, the students do not expose to speaking, listening and writing skills in English Language Test, but they do in ELT programs and they start to teach all of the skills after graduation.

This study aims to reveal the perceptions of the students about English Language Test which is implemented as a component of the University Entrance Exam. Pre-service English teachers who study in an ELT Department of a state university in Turkey and cram school students who prepare for English Language Test will be the focal groups of the current study.

2. The background of the study

2.1. English tests implemented around the world and in Turkey

Different English tests are implemented to reveal learners' proficiency levels around the world. The mostly accepted English tests, which are implemented for non-native English language speakers, are The Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS). MELAB is accepted as an alternative to TOEFL by many educational institutions in the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom

(MELAB). It requires composition writing, listening comprehension test and multiple-choice test, but speaking is optional. TOEFL and IELTS include tests related to four main skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) (Karpinski, 2018).

In Turkey, the students who want to study in a higher education institution have to obtain required scores in terms of the tests implemented by Assessment, Selection and Placement Centre. Currently, three examinations are implemented under the name of the Examination of Higher Education Institutions: General Proficiency Test, Field Proficiency Test and Foreign Language Test. General Proficiency Test consists of Turkish, social studies, basic mathematics and science; Field Proficiency Test includes Turkish philology, social studies I and II, mathematics and science; and Foreign Language Test is implemented in German, Arabic, French, English and Russian. All of the students have to take General Proficiency Test as the first step, and the students who obtain 150 or higher in the first test become eligible to attend the next test which is either Field Proficiency Test or Foreign Language Test. In the current study, the focus is on English Language Test implemented for the students who want to study in ELT or related departments. In total, 80 questions are asked in the English Language Test; the numbers of the questions related to the content are given Table 1.

Table 1. The content of English Language Test

Content	Number of Questions
Vocabulary	5
Grammar	10
Cloze Test	5
Sentence Completion	8
English–Turkish Translation	6
Turkish–English Translation	6
Paragraph Questions	15
The Closest Meaning	5
Finding the most appropriate sentence for meaningful coherence in the paragraph	5
Situation Questions	5
Dialogue Completion	5
Finding the sentence which is not appropriate for the coherence of the paragraph	5

As stated earlier, different English tests are implemented all around the world and in Turkey in order to clarify test-takers' proficiency levels. A language is not made up of a single skill; so, what is important for a test is to assess the language as a whole (with all of the main skills). The ongoing problems related to teaching English as a foreign language in Turkey draw attention to the education given in ELT departments. On the other hand, there is another issue which should not be ignored: the English language test that is implemented as a component of University Entrance Exam provides the students with the opportunity of studying in ELT and English-related faculties. This study aims to clarify what the students, who took and will take the English test, think about it.

3. Methodology

The current study aims to present the perceptions of pre-service English teachers and cram school students about Foreign Language Test. As the English Language Test is mostly based on reading comprehension, this study also aims to clarify whether the other language skills (speaking, listening and writing) are problematic for the participants or not. In addition, it is aimed to see whether the participants practise or have additional activities in order to improve speaking, writing and listening skills. Following research questions are addressed in this study.

3.1. Research questions

1. What are perceptions of pre-service English teachers and cram school students about English Language Test?
2. What is the most problematic skill for pre-service English teachers and cram school students?
3. Which language skill is mostly practised by pre-service English teachers and cram school students?

3.2. Setting and participants

This research was conducted at a state university and a private English Language Learning Centre in Turkey. The participants of this study were 30 pre-service English teachers studying at the ELT Department and 30 students who attended a private English Learning Centre for English Language Test (see the profile of the participants in Table 2).

Table 2. The profile of the participants

		Percentage
Gender	Male:	30.8%
	Female:	69.2%
Type of school which the students graduated/will graduate from Educational State	Regular High School:	48.1%
	Anatolian (Teacher) High School:	51.9%
	Studying at University:	44.2%
	Preparing for University:	55.8%

3.3. Procedure

In order to collect data, a Likert-type scale was used. There were two sections in the scale. The first section was about the personal information to indicate participants' profile. The second section included the items about Foreign (English) Language Test; there were five options for each item such as 'totally agree, agree, no idea, disagree and totally disagree'.

The questionnaires were administered to 60 students: 30 of them had passed the English Language Test and were sophomore ELT students, and the other 30 of them were the students who had not entered the English University Entrance Exam yet and they were in the preparation process in a private English Learning Centre. Fifty-two questionnaires were used for data analysis as eight of them were not seriously answered.

4. Data analysis

In this part, an item-based comparison of the students who had passed English Language Test (pre-service English language teachers) and those who were in the preparation process (cram school students) will be presented in terms of the research questions. The data collected from the scales were quantitatively analysed by means of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, using descriptive statistics (frequencies).

The results will be presented by means of the items placed in the questionnaire using the graphs in which similar choices are combined; the total percentages of 'totally agree and agree' will be presented in one bar and those for 'totally disagree and disagree' will be in one.

4.1. Research question 1

What are perceptions of pre-service English teachers and cram school students about English Language Test?

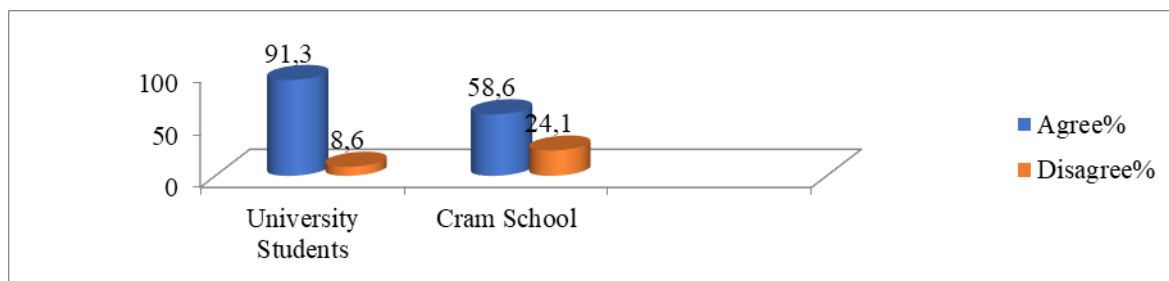


Figure 1. It would be better if English Language Test included speaking skill

As seen in the graph in Figure 1, 91% of pre-service English teachers think that it would be better if English Language Test included speaking skill. On the other hand, this ratio is lower for cram school students who prepare for English Language Test (58.6%).

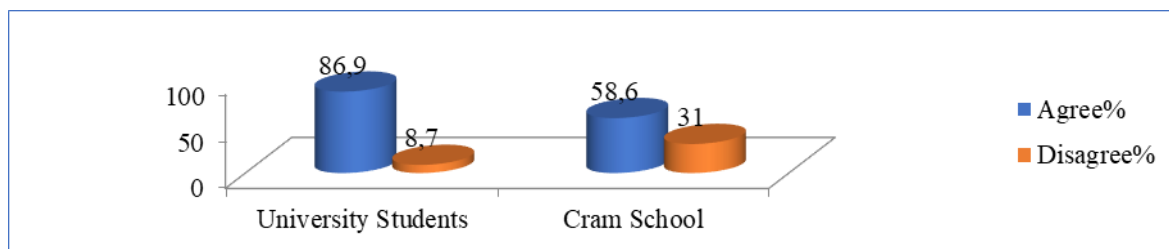


Figure 2. It would be better if English Language Test included listening skill

According to the results, it is seen that the ratio of the pre-service English teachers who think that it would be better if English Language Test included listening skill is higher (86.9%) than the ratio of cram school students (58.6%).

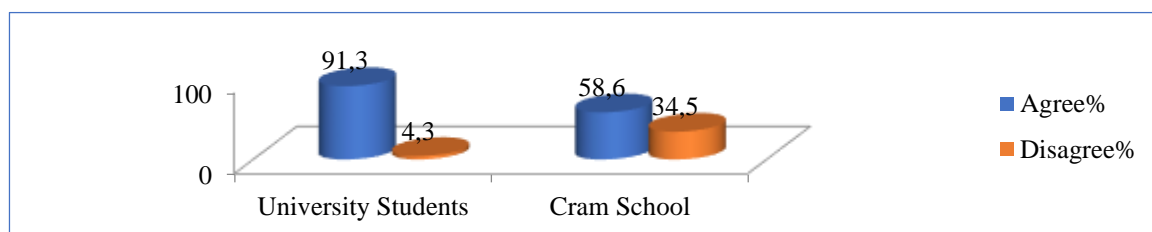


Figure 3. It would be better if English Language Test included writing skill

As seen, most of the pre-service English teachers (91.3%) think that it would be better if English Language Test included writing skill and this ratio is 58.6% for the cram school students.

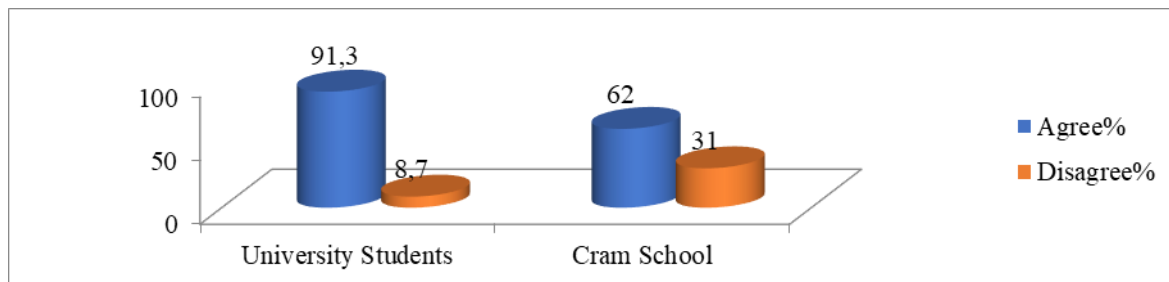


Figure 4. It would be better if English Language Test included all of the language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening)

About 91.3% of pre-service English language teachers and 62% of the cram school students think that the English Language Test implemented as a component of University Entrance Exam should include all of the language skills.

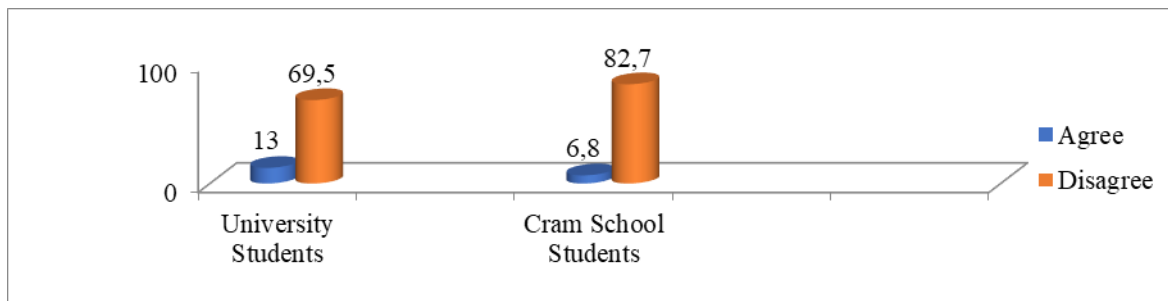


Figure 5. The results of English Language Test show the exact proficiency level of the students

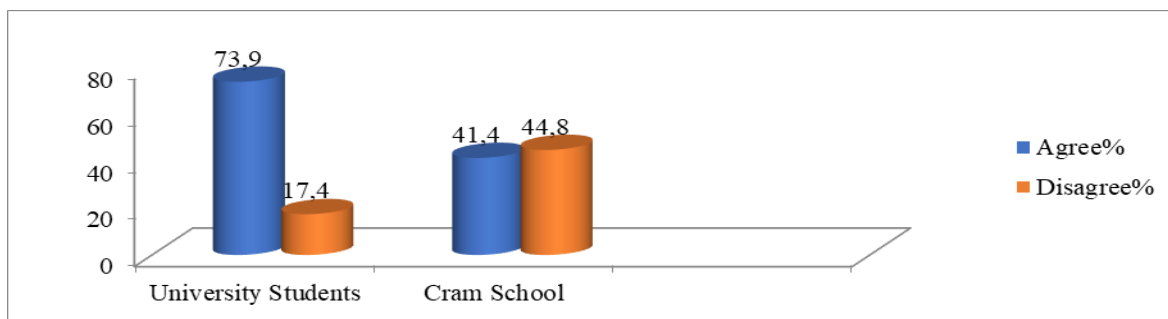


Figure 6. There should be more than one English exam to place the students in ELT or related departments

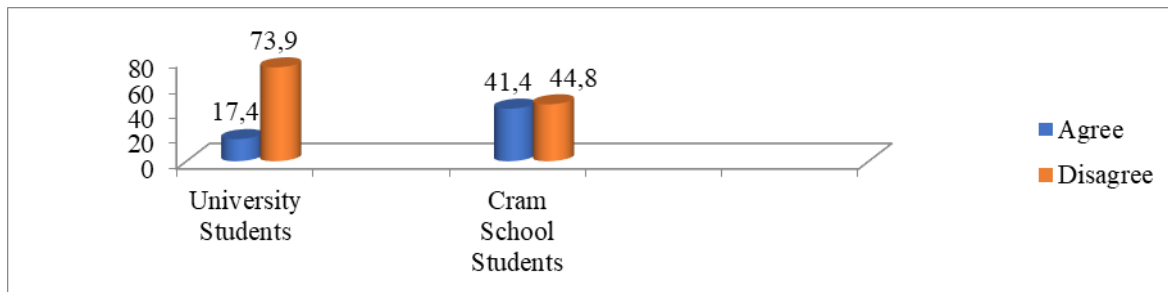


Figure 7. I am pleased with the content of English Language Test

As stated earlier, the English Language Test implemented to place the students in ELT or related departments is mostly based on reading comprehension; the other language skills (listening, speaking and writing) are not tested. Therefore, the pre-service English teachers and cram school students are aware of this fact and most of them think that the Foreign Language Test does not show the exact proficiency level of the students. Most of pre-service English teachers (73.9%) and 41.4% of the cram school students think that there should be more than one English exam to place students in ELT or related departments. This ratio is the same in terms of the participants' pleasure of English Language Test; 73.9% of pre-service English teachers and 41.4% of the cram school students are not pleased with the content of English Language Test. As stated earlier, the participants of both groups think that it should include all of the language skills.

4.2. Research question 2

What is the most problematic skill for pre-service English teachers and cram school students?

4.3. Research question 3

Which language skill is mostly practised by pre-service English teachers and cram school students?

First, it should be indicated that reading is not considered in terms of the most problematic and mostly practised skills since it is known that the focal point of both groups was *reading* because of the preparation process of the English Language Test.

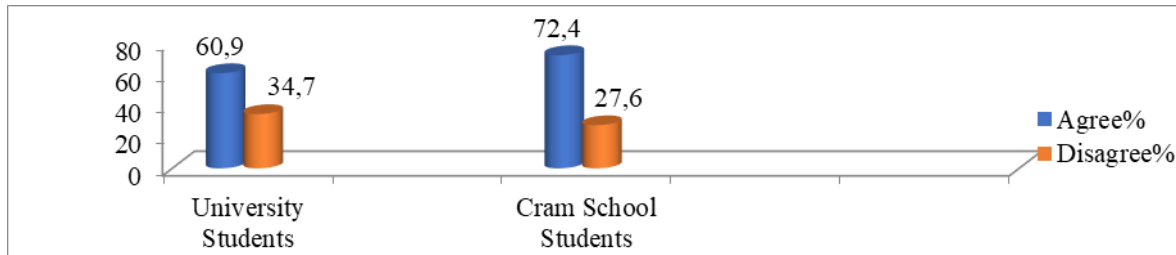


Figure 8. I have some problems with oral communication in English

As seen, 60.9% of the pre-service English teachers and 72.4% of the cram school students think that they have problems with oral communication skills. When the participants are asked whether they have additional activities in order to improve their speaking skill, it is seen that 86.9% of the university students have some additional activities to improve their speaking skill; on the other hand, this ratio is 48.3% for the cram school students.

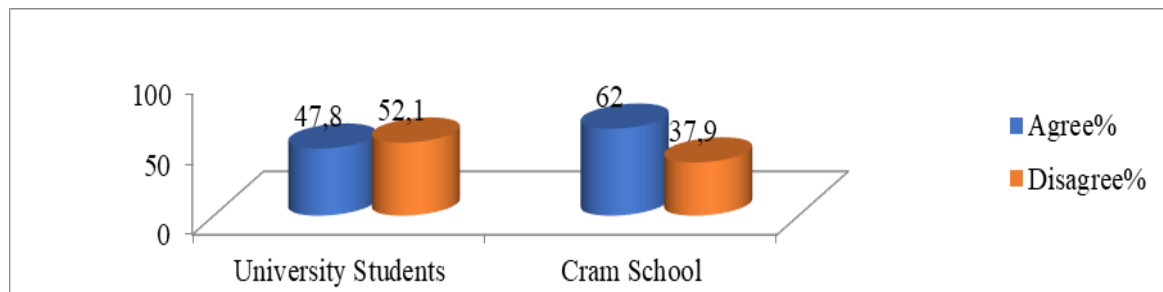


Figure 9. I have some problems with writing in English

As seen in the graph in Figure 9, 47.8% of the pre-service English teachers and 62% of the cram school students have problems with writing in English. However, only 39.1% of the pre-service English teachers and 31% of the cram school students have additional activities to improve their writing skill.

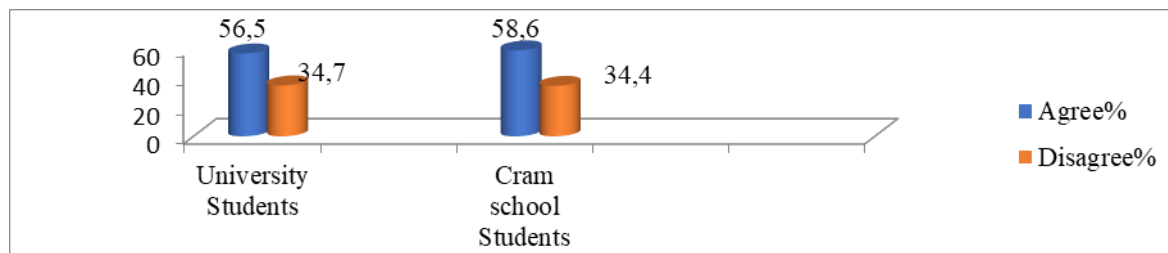


Figure 10. I have some problems with listening comprehension in English

The results reveal that 56.5% of the pre-service English teachers and 58.6% of the cram school students think that they have problems with listening comprehension in English. In terms of practising *listening*, it is seen that 82.6 % of the pre-service English teachers have additional activities to improve their listening skill, but this ratio is 44.8% for the cram school students. The results for the most problematic and mostly practised skills are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. The rates of the problematic and mostly practised skills

	Speaking		Listening		Writing	
	The rate of being problematic (%)	The rate of being practised (%)	The rate of being problematic (%)	The rate of being practised (%)	The rate of being problematic (%)	The rate of being practised (%)
Pre-service English Teachers	60.9	86.9	56.5	82.6	47.8	39.1
Cram School Students	72.4	48.3	58.6	44.8	62.2	31

The results show that speaking is the most problematic skill for both pre-service English teachers and cram school students and it is also the mostly practised skill for both groups. It is also seen that writing is the least-practised skill for both groups.

As seen in Table 3, the rate of pre-service English teachers who have problems with speaking (60.9%) is lower than the rate of those who have additional activities to improve their speaking skill (86.9%). This is also valid for listening skill. There are more students who have additional activities in order to improve their listening skill (56.5%) than the students who have problems with listening (82.5%).

On the other hand, more than half of the cram school students do not have additional activities for speaking, listening and writing even though they have problems with these skills. This may stem from their focus on reading comprehension as they are in the preparation process of the Foreign Language Test to be able to study in ELT or related departments.

5. Conclusion and discussion

As indicated earlier, this study aims to clarify the perceptions of pre-service English teachers and cram school students about English Language Test. The results revealed that the rate of pre-service English teachers who think that English Language Test should include all of the language skills is higher (91.3%) than the rate of cram school students (62%). About 31% of the cram school students do not want to be tested in terms of speaking, writing and listening in English Language Test because the focal point of the cram school students is mostly to pass the University Entrance Exam; they may also believe that the exam will be more difficult in case of including all of the language skills. On the other hand, pre-service English teachers are aware of the fact that language is a whole as they are in a learning process which will be substituted with the teaching process after graduating from university.

As English Language Test is mostly based on reading, both in high schools and cram schools, the focal point is mostly reading comprehension; therefore, the students who prepare for English Language Test mostly practise reading. This may result in some problems after starting to study in an ELT or related department, as in these departments, the foreign language is considered as a whole and all of the language skills are included in the process. After the onset of university process, pre-service English teachers become aware of the importance of being able to use a foreign language with all of its skills; therefore, nearly all of the pre-service English teachers (91%) think that the English Language Test should test the proficiency of the students in terms of all the language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) to not to have problems during their education at university and after they start to teach. Similarly, most of the participants of both groups think that the English Language Test does not show the exact proficiency level of the students. As stated previously, most of the participants are in favour of including all of the language skills into Foreign Language Test.

In addition, the participants of both groups have problems in terms of speaking, listening and writing. When the rate of pre-service English teachers for problematic skills and mostly practised skills

is investigated, it is seen that most of them have additional activities and practises to improve especially their speaking and listening skills. For pre-service English teachers, the number of those who have additional activities and practises to have a better level of speaking and listening is higher than the number of those who have problems with listening and speaking. This means that the pre-service English teachers try to give importance to the foreign language with all its aspects even if they do not have problems. On the other hand, the results revealed that most of the cram school students do not give adequate importance to speaking, listening and writing even though they have problems with those skills; because they are aware of the fact that they will not be assessed in terms of listening, speaking or writing in English Language Test as the content of the test is mostly based on reading comprehension.

6. Recommendations

As a result, it can be said that language is a whole; knowing only one skill of a foreign language does not mean to know that language. Therefore, the learners of a foreign language should be encouraged in order to give adequate importance to all of the skills. In fact, the curricula of primary, elementary and high schools in Turkey consist of all four skills, but as the important examinations implemented by Assessment, Selection and Placement Centre for all level of the learners are mostly based on reading comprehension, the learners give much more importance to reading practises. When the English Language Test implemented as a component of University Entrance Exam consists of four main skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), the students will give much more importance to all of those skills during the language learning and preparation processes. As a result, ELT departments will have had more qualified students in terms of using language with all of the main skills. Having more qualified English teachers will be an important step in terms of teaching English. In addition, other English exams implemented for primary school students and for academic purposes should also involve the tests related to four main skills. Assessment, Selection and Placement Centres including all of the language skills into those examinations may be helpful for directing English language learners to the awareness of learning a foreign language as a whole.

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