

A Content Analysis of the TEFL M.A. Entrance Examinations (Case Study: Majors Courses)

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The MA Entrance Examinations (MAEE) held in Iran since 1990 are frequently criticized as being invalid, unstandardized exams with lots of problem in terms of principles of testing in general and test construction in particular (for instance, Jafarpur, 1996). To make sound judgments about such objections, the present study dealt with a content analysis of the TEFL MAEE held in 2007. Actually, the purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it aimed at analyzing the content of the MAEE's in order to see if any pattern be at work in the process of devising such exams. Naturally, through such an analysis, some problems of these exams were also determined. Thus, the second aim of the present study was to pinpoint and describe the problems with these exams as well as to offer some suggestions to remedy the problems. In so doing, a coding system encompassing a checklist of the possible content categories was developed by the researchers themselves and its validity and reliability were established as well. The finding of such an analysis, especially the unequal distribution of the content categories, supported the idea that the validity of the exam is not strongly established due to the exclusion of or de-emphasis over the content categories given significant credit in the B.A. Program. The problems found during the analysis showed that the exam is not a standard one; still some of the basic principles of language testing are not observed in the process of constructing the exam.

Key Words: MA Exam, University Exam, test, Measurement, Evaluation, Content Analysis, Validity, Relativity, Choice distribution

1 Introduction

Entrance examinations in general and the M.A. Entrance Examinations (MAEE) in particular are evidently of crucial importance since based on the examinees' performance on such exams, vital decisions are made; decisions that do have decisive impacts directly on the examinees' future. Thus, testees

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are undoubtedly entitled to sit for a standard, well-developed exam with as few problems as possible. In fact, in most cases, one may pass or fail only due to his/her answers just to one or two items.

During the past twenty years or so, different studies have been conducted as well as reported with respect to the shortcomings of the University Entrance Exams in Iran. For example, investigating the exams administered from 1983 to 1985, Farhady (1985) found little correspondence between the manner materials are taught to the students and the manner the students are tested on them. In a similar attempt, Yarmohammadi (1986) came to this conclusion that in such exams, the role of communication is, to a great extent, ignored. Moreover, among language skills only one skill (reading, namely) and among language components only grammar and vocabulary are tested. Jafarpur (1996; see also Jarfarpu, 1986), for instance, in a study critically reviewed the TEFL MAEE of 1996 and concluded that "the validity of that exam is under question due to the problems related to the items in terms of testing principles" (p.20). Razmjoo (2006) stated that the University Entrance Examination held in Iran during the past two decades are frequently criticized as being invalid, and non-standardized with lots of problems in terms of principles of testing in general and test construction in particular. Yet some of the basic principles of language testing are not observed in the process of constructing the exam.

Surprisingly enough, despite all these criticisms and although the MAEE's in their present format are at work since 1990, still there seems to be lots of problems with them.

1.1 Statement of the problem

In order to make sound judgments about such objections, the present study dealt with a content analysis of the TEFL MAEE held in 2007. Actually, the purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it aimed at analyzing the content of the MAEE's in order to see if any pattern be at work in the process of devising such exams. Naturally, through such an analysis, some problems of these exams were also determined. Thus, the second aim of the present study was to pinpoint and describe the problems with these exams as well as to offer some suggestions to remedy the problems.

1.2 Research questions

The present study addressed two major questions as follow:

1. Does the MAEE measure what it is supposed to measure? In other words, is there any specific objective behind including the items in the exam?
2. Is there any balance between the emphasis given to each specific course (i.e. the credit assigned to each course in the undergraduate program) and the number of items allocated to them?

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1.3 Significance of the study

The findings of this study can hopefully be useful for the university teachers teaching to English majors at the B.A. level, the TEFL MAEE testees, and most for the anonymous test constructors of this exam. Moreover, the assessment organization will benefit from the results of the study.

1.4 Information about the exam

The exam consists of two main parts: General English and Major English. The general English exam includes the following parts (Table 1).

Table 1. The General English Exam Format

Section	Sub-sections	Number of Items
1. Structure and Written Expressions	1.1 Sentence Completion	10 items
	1.2 Error Recognition	10 items
2. Vocabulary		10 items
3. Cloze Test		15 items
4. Reading Comprehension		25 items

The major English exam consists of the following sub-majors, namely, Teaching Methodology, Testing and Linguistics (Table 2).

Table 2. The Major English Exam Format

Majors	Sub-parts	Number of Items
1. TEFL	1.1. Teaching Methodology	40 Items
	1.2. Testing	20 Items
	1.3. Linguistics	20 Items
2. English Literature	No-subparts	80 Items
	3.1. Theoretical principles of translation	25 Items
3. Translation	3.2. Linguistics	15 Items
	3.3. Contrastive Analysis	10 Items
	3.4. Morphology	15 Items
	3.5. Translation skill	15 Items

2. The Study

Three major subparts (Teaching Methodology, Testing and Linguistics) of the TEFL MAEE administered in 2007 were selected to obtain a representative sample of the test at issue. The booklet included in itself 40 items for Methodology, 20 ones for Linguistics and 20 for Testing to keep the total number of items equal to 80 multiple choice items as usual.

Next, to define content categories that measure the variables in question, a coding system encompassing a checklist of possible content categories was developed by the researchers themselves. To ensure the validity of such a system,

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first content categories were determined based on a classification proposed by Mirzaeian (1997), a classification which has proved to be helpful in classifying test items of the MAEE's of seven successive years. Furthermore, to have the checklist as comprehensive as possible, it was modified according to the following coursebooks which are the dominant major ones taught in the related courses at the B.A. Program in our country:

Methodology

- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (4th ed.). White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
- Chastain, K. (1988). *Developing second language skills: Theory and practice* (3rd ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000) Techniques and principles in language teaching. In R. N. Campbell & W. E. Rutherford (eds.), *Teaching Techniques in English as a Second Language* (pp.1-189). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Testing

- Farhady, H. et al. (1994). *Testing Language skills: From theory to practice*. Tehran: SAMT.
- Harris, D. P. (1969). *Testing English as a second language*. New York: Mc Graw-Hill.
- Heaton, G. B. (1990). *Writing English language tests*. London: Longman.
- Hughes, A. (2003). *Testing for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Linguistics

- Falk, J. (1978). *Linguistics and language*. New York: John Wiley.
- Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., & Hymes, N. (2003). *An Introduction to language* (7th ed.). Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Richards, J. C., Platt, J., & Platt, H. (2002). *Longman dictionary of language teaching & applied linguistics* (3rd ed.). Essex: Longman.
- Yule, G. (2006). *The study of language* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

As a pilot study, the modified version, then, was applied by the researchers themselves to the TEFL MAEE of 2006 to improve it further. Thus, the researchers came up with a checklist consisting of 31 content categories for Methodology, 17 ones for Linguistics and 18 for Testing. Still, to reserve the flexibility of the checklist, for each part a choice titled "others (name, if any)" was added to the list. Moreover, enough room was given for possible comments and notes for each item.

After establishing the validity of the content classification system, it was investigated to determine the reliability of the coding scheme in the sense of intra-coder and inter-coder reliability. For intra-coder reliability, the researchers codified the test items with a two-week time interval and the correlation between the findings was computed. To gain inter-coder reliability, two independent coders who were sufficiently trained, skilled and familiar with the task codified

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the test items. The codification was done by the raters independently at the same time and the correlation of codifying the test items was calculated. The intra-and the inter-coder reliability were shown to be .97.5 and .96 respectively.

3 Results and Discussion

Based on the instruction proposed by Ary *et al.* (1996, p. 486), the materials were analyzed according to the content classification system to determine the content categories of the exam.

To summarize the data and to aid in its interpretation, frequencies as well as percentages are used. Moreover, to present a clearer picture of the data, three bar graphs are presented.

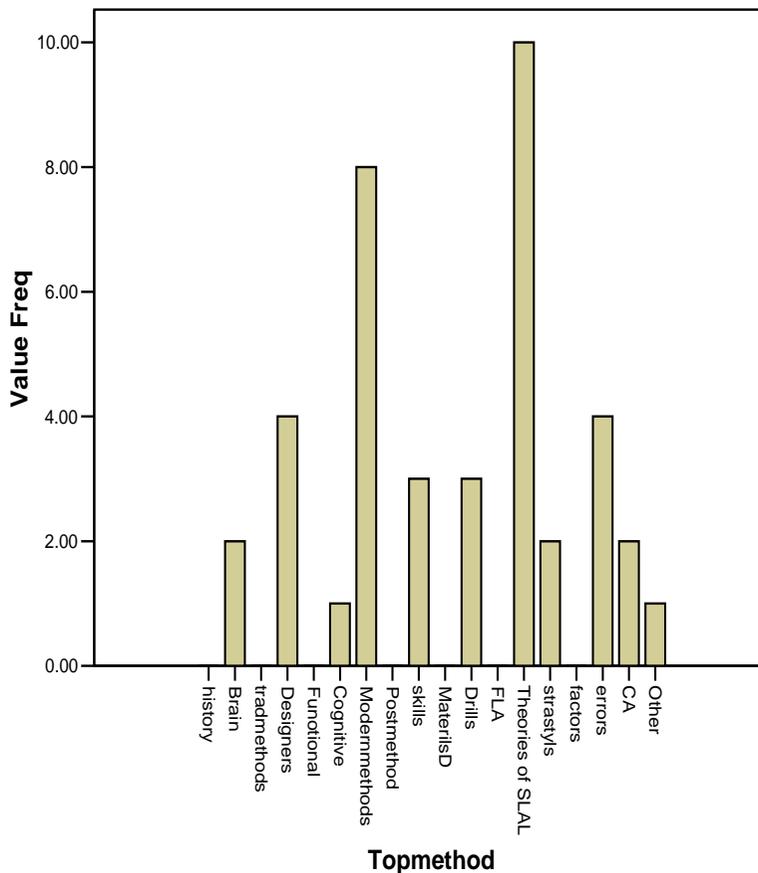
Table 3. Frequency and Percentage of Methodology Items

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1. The history of language Teaching	0	0%
2. The Brain and Learning	2	5%
3. Grammar Translation Method	0	0%
4. Direct Method	0	0%
5. Situational Language Teaching	0	0%
6. Audiolingual Method	0	0%
7. Total Physical Response	0	0%
8. Community Language Learning	0	0%
9. Silent Way	0	0%
10. Suggestopedia	3	7.5%
11. Natural Approach	1	5%
12. Functional-Notional Approach	0	0%
13. Communicative Language Teaching	3	7.5%
14. Cognitive Code Method	1	2.5%
15. Task-Based Language Teaching	1	2.5%
16. Content-based teaching	2	5%
17. Cooperative learning	1	2.5%
18. Multiple Intelligences	1	2.5%
19. Post-method Era	0	0%
20. Listening	0	0%
21. Speaking	0	0%
22. Reading	2	5%
23. Writing	1	2.5%
24. Syllabus Design	0	0%
25. Drills and Class Activities	3	7.5%
26. First Language Acquisition & Language Teaching	0	0%
27. Theories of Second Language Learning & Teaching	10	25%
28. Learning Strategies and Styles	3	7.5%
29. Personality and socio-cultural Factors	0	0%
30. Errors	3	7.5%
31. Contrastive Analysis	2	5%
32. Others (name, if any)	1	2.5%
31. Total	40	100%

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Table 3 indicates that equal weight is not given to the thirty-one parts of methodology section. Modern methods and approaches such as communicative language teaching and suggestopedia and theories of second language learning and teaching have the highest frequencies and percentages. No question has been raised with respect to categories such as the Grammar-Translation and the Direct, the audio-lingual, situational language teaching Methods which are the dominant traditional methods and the instructors spend lots of time on teaching them. Figure 1 displays the data.

Figure 1. Display of methodology items



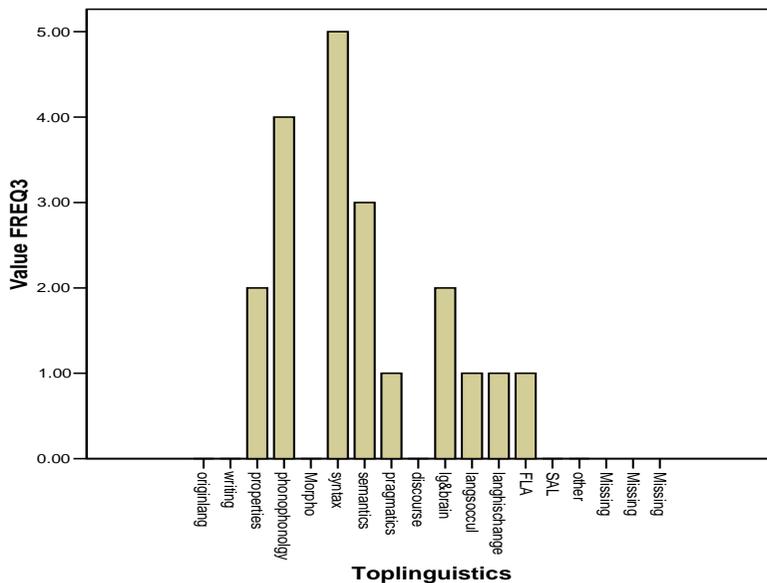
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Table 4. Frequency and Percentage of Linguistics Items

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1. History/Origin of Language	0	0%
2. Writing Systems	0	0%
3. Language Properties	2	10%
4. Phonetics	2	10%
5. Phonology	2	10%
6. Morphology	0	0%
7. Syntax	5	25%
8. Semantics	3	15%
9. Pragmatics	1	5%
10. Discourse Analysis	0	0%
11. Language & the Brain	2	10%
12. Language & Machines	0	0%
13. Language, Society & Culture	1	5%
14. Animals & Human Language	0	0%
15. Language, History & Change	1	5%
16. First Language Acquisition	1	5%
17. Second Language Acquisition/ Learning	0	0%
18. Others (name, if any)	0	0%
19. Total	20	100%

The same as Methodology section, equal value has not been given to different parts of the Linguistics section. The frequency and percentage of 7 parts of this section is zero. Parts such syntax, semantics, phonetics and phonology have the highest frequencies. Figure 2 displays the linguistics items.

Figure 2. Display of the linguistics items



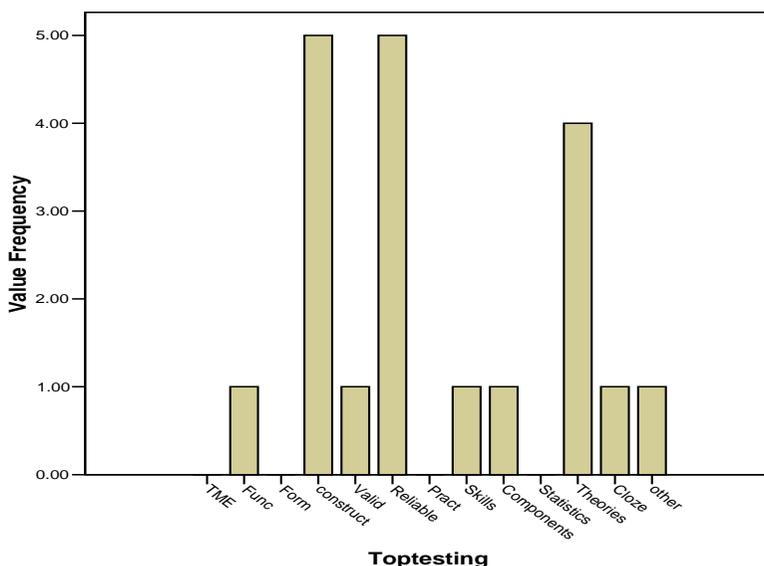
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Table 5. Frequency and Percentage of Testing Items

Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1. Test, Measurement and Evaluation	0	0%
2. Test Functions	1	5%
3. Test Forms	0	0%
4. Test Construction and Administration	5	25%
5. Validity	1	5%
6. Reliability	5	25%
7. Practicality	0	0%
8. Listening	0	0%
9. Speaking	0	0%
10. Reading	1	5%
11. Writing	0	0%
12. Vocabulary	1	5%
13. Structure	0	0%
14. Pronunciation	0	0%
15. Descriptive Statistics	0	0%
16. Inferential Statistics	0	0%
17. Theories of Language Testing	4	20%
18. Cloze & Dictation	1	5%
19. Others (name, if any)	1	5%
20. Total	20	100%

The items in this section are not equally distributed among the content categories. Test construction, reliability and theories of language testing have received the highest frequency and as a result 70% of the items are allocated to these topics. Figure 3 displays the testing items.

Figure 3. Display of the testing items



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As for the choice distribution, the following tables present the choice distribution of each course in particular and the overall major in general (this is done based on the assessment organization key to the items).

Table 6. Teaching Methodology Items Choice Distribution

Choices	1(A)	2(B)	3(C)	D(4)
Times as correct answers	13	10	9	8

It can be claimed the correct responses are distributed well among the four options.

Table 7. Language Testing Items Choice Distribution

Choices	1(A)	2(B)	3(C)	D(4)
Times as correct answers	0	8	4	8

The Table presents the fact that the correct responses are not distributed normally among the four alternatives.

Table 8. Linguistics Items Choice Distribution

Choices	1(A)	2(B)	3(C)	D(4)
Times as correct answers	5	5	6	4

Based on the results of table 6, it can be claimed that there is a normal distribution of the correct responses of the items in linguistics course. Table 9, shows the choice distribution of the correct response of the whole major.

Table 9. Choice Distribution of All Items

Choices	1(A)	2(B)	3(C)	D(4)
Times as correct answers	18	23	19	20

Despite the fact that the distribution of the correct responses of each individual course is not too much equal, the overall choice distribution is close to normal.

According to Farhady (1994), in the case of multiple choice items, “correct responses should be distributed approximately equally but randomly among the alternatives” (p. 97). In this exams, the correct answers (N=80) are approximately distributed equally and of course randomly. However, a close look over the way the correct responses are distributed in each subpart of the exam reveals that the distribution is not equal. Making such distributions equal even for the subparts of the exam is a step towards the improvement of the exam.

As for the second aim of the present study, the researchers pinpointed, through the thorough analysis of the exam, the following problems:

1. It is usually suggested by the experts in the field of language testing that “the stem should be quite clear and state the point

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to be tested unambiguously.” (Farhady *et al.*, 1994, p. 93). However, in 2007 TEFL MAEE, there are lots of items where this criterion is not observed. For instance, in the Methodology Section, the stems of items 82, 84, 86, 90, 93, 96, 105 and 117 are not clear. The same is true about items 121, 122, 127, 129, 133, 135 and 136 of the Testing Section as well as items 143 and 149 of the Linguistics Section.

2. Since the number of items is very limited, especially in the case of the Linguistics and Testing Sections, and since the number of the content categories, which are supposed to be included in the exam, is relatively high, it would be reasonable to test the same theme just once within a single MAEE. In other words, it is not justifiable that in this very exam, 5 items are related to syntax while no item is allocated to word-formation theme.
3. Farhady *et al.* (1994, p. 95) state that "every item should have one correct or clearly best answer". Items 86 and 129 have more than one correct answer.
4. The following items are not familiar to the MA candidates and are not included in the content MA sources: items 83, 91 and 97 of the Methodology section, item 125 of the Testing section and items 156 and 160 of the Linguistics section.
5. Due to the facts that the testees are not supposed to use any kind of calculators during the exam session, items 124, 131 and 136 of the testing section require complicated calculations. This is not fair and justifiable.

4 Conclusions

As far as the first research question is concerned, it seems that the validity of the exam is not strongly established due to the exclusion of or de-emphasis over the content categories given significant credit in the B.A. Program. Moreover, the unequal distribution of the content categories also supported a negative answer to the second research question too. The problems found during the analysis showed that the exam is not a standard one; still some of the basic principles of language testing are not observed in the process of constructing the exam. The only solution to remove such problems and shortcomings is to employ experts in the field as exam developers.

The present study is limited in its scope: only one of the MAEE's was analyzed; no attempt was made to determine the exact sources from which the items were produced. Nothing can be said about the reliability of the exam due to the unavailability of the scores too. One can replicate this research study focusing on any kind of correspondence between the content

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of the MAEE and that of the MA courses. The researchers hope that the findings of this very study and other similar ones help improve the MAEE's since evaluation is not to prove but to improve.

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