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Evaluating the Effectiveness of Aptis as a Proficiency Test in the Recruitment Process ff University Lecturers by Afghan Ministry of Higher Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

English language proficiency has been considered as an important prerequisite for hiring new faculty members for various disciplines by the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). For this, the Departments of English across the major universities of Afghanistan such as Kabul, Nangarhar, Shaheed Prof. Rabbani Education; Heart and Balkh Universities have the responsibility to conduct English language proficiency test, which is always a subject of a critical discourse. This study compares both the proficiency test developed by the Department of English at Nangarhar University and the Aptis, which is developed by the British Council to test the proficiency level of test taker. The study is also intended to explore the effectiveness of Aptis as a standard proficiency test, conducted at Nangarhar University (NU), Afghanistan, on a total sample of ten (10) permanent English lecturers. It was found that a significant majority (80%) of the lecturers participated in the study recommend Aptis test to be conducted by (MoHE) in the employment process of new faculty members, while (20%) lectures do not recommend Aptis due to the lack of computer skills and the proficiency gap of most test takers; so, they recommend the test developed by Nangarhar University.

Keywords*:* Aptis, English language, Proficiency test, Validity; Reliability

Introduction

Computer based testing is a common prevailing phenomenon today in both academic and professional environments. Each year, many students take online language tests across the world and this trend is increasing every day (Robles & Fátima, 2017). With the arrival of International Community in 2001, the interest of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has dramatically increased (Alimyar, 2017) in Afghanistan. Various international institutions such as the US Embassy in Kabul and British Council have funded various English language programs.

For instance, British Council funds a program called (English for Afghans) through which Afghan school teachers are trained in two phases. First, their English language skills are refined by conducting ten months of intensive and non-intensive English language sessions four days a week for three hours. The second phase is designed in such a way where English teachers at Afghan schools are trained and facilitated by various English language teaching methods from Cambridge Certified CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) teachers (English for Afghans, 2018). In this connection, Aptis as a standard proficiency test is considered as a criterion of progress given to them as pre and posttests.

Besides this, with the growing tendency of Aptis in Afghanistan, various educational and professional entities got membership with the British Council in Kabul for facilitating their candidates with the Aptis test. For instance, Afghan Ministry of Higher Education in 2015 changed its paper based English language testing policy to Aptis for its scholarship applicants. Afghan Ministry of Higher Education found Aptis a more reliable and valid proficiency test as compared to other paper-based tests developed by its universities for a particular criterion. In the meantime, it has decreased the level of criticism in terms of transparency on MoHE's equal opportunity of scholarships to the nation, since corruption is identified as a critical problem especially in the education sector of Afghanistan (SIGAR Reports on Afghanistan Education, 2018). However, locally generated paper-based language testing is still an ongoing process in major Afghan universities, which are responsible for conducting the placement tests of instructors who are going to be newly recruited for various higher education institutions in the country. The same type of English proficiency test (as a proficiency of foreign language in terms of research and data collection) is given to them after every three years by the time their academic ranks promote. Nevertheless, one can also opt for Arabic language test instead of English to meet the requirement.

Literature Review

Test Reliability and Validity

Defining the objectives of test and selecting the most appropriate type must be done before administering a test (Huseyin & Qzturan, 2018). However, this is not enough at all to have an effective test. Hence, educators should first consider some specific principles. From these principles, validity and reliability are far more important. Validity refers to whether a test

truly measures what we claim to measure. In other words, the test measures what they are supposed to measure once the tests are valid (Huseyin & Qzturan, 2018). Reliability of test is the degree to which a test measures a skill and/or knowledge consistently (Huseyin & Qzturan, 2018). Keeping the principles in mind, the Aptis as a proficiency test has been brought into practice by the British Council to serve the client needs for various means of English language assessment. Besides this, the paper-based testing system is still an on-going process and computer-based testing (CBT) is not completely the death of paper-based testing (PBT). Whether the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) must prescribe Aptis test for the recruitment of its new lecturers across the Afghan universities in addition to its other purposes is still the benchmark where there is no formal record of Aptis test's reliability and validity specifically in Afghan context. This research will answer these important questions with the data analyzed from the field.

Aptis as a Standard English Language Proficiency Test

Aptis is a global innovative assessment tool from the British Council. It is a proficiency English language test for adults and young adults that can be used to assess the ability of English language in four integrated skills (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) (Aptis Candidate Guide 1). Aptis does not test a single level while it includes a range of questions that are designed to allow you to show your test ability. Aptis was developed by British Council directly working with organizations to provide them services in terms of tests of English as a Second or Foreign (ESL/EFL) Language proficiency for a range of assessment needs (Zheng & Berry, 2015).

The test results are reported either on a numerical scale from (0-50) or as (CEFR) level. CEFR stands for the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, often referred to as CEFR or CEFRL. It is an internationally accepted standard frame to work out your ability within a particular language. It was first brought into practice by Council of Europe which aims to validate the language ability. There are six CEFR levels, which are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2 (Saieedi, 2019). A1-B2 are the basic users; B1-B2 are independent users and C1-C2 are the proficient users. If a candidate in Aptis takes the General Variant of Aptis test, this general variant within the Aptis test system, currently assesses abilities across the four CEFR levels (A1-B2). In this case if a candidate does not obtain a high enough score to achieve (A1), s/he will

receive a score of (A0). On the other hand, if a candidate gets a near perfect score on the test, s/he is likely to be at the (C) level and so will receive a score of (C). Currently, the Aptis General does not distinguish between (C1) and (C2) (Zheng & Berry, 2015). In addition to this, there are two types of Aptis based on the CEFR level analysis. There is Aptis from (A1-C) on the CEFR level and is suitable for most test-takers. There is also an Aptis Advanced test, which assess the ability of English language from (B1-C2) and is designed for higher level test-takers. Aptis is usually taken on a computer, but the core test either reading or writing test can be taken paper based. Aptis also has the possibility in some countries to be taken via the telephone (Aptis Candidate Guide, 2018).

Aptis Test Structure

Aptis is a professionally constructed test keeping in mind the integration of major and minor skills of language. Aptis has five components in its structure which are the core grammar & vocabulary, reading, listening, writing and speaking. It is the clients who decide which components are required for their situation. As a test taker, one needs to prepare for the core item grammar & vocabulary, which is mandatory for any test taker and the skill components the client has chosen. You may be taking one skill component (for instance, reading) or all the four components (listening, speaking, reading and writing) (Aptis Candidate Guide, 2018). It is also recommended to try Aptis practice test, so that one fully understands what one needs to do. One can find a practice test on the Aptis website at: www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/take

The Core: Grammar and Vocabulary

One is given total of 25 minutes for grammar & vocabulary parts. It starts with the grammar part, which focuses on sentence completion. It has 3-option multiple choice question from which the test taker must choose one right answer. In vocabulary, there are questions for word matching (similar meaning, match words to definition, sentence completion and words pairs or words combination (i.e., words commonly used together). There are sets of five target words with ten options (Aptis Candidate Guide, 2018).

Reading

The time which is allocated to this part is (35) minutes. It has four parts. First is sentence comprehension in which the test taker chooses one right choice from 3-option multiple choice question to complete the sentences. Part two is the text cohesion in which the test taker puts the

sentences in proper order to make a story. In this connection, there are seven sentences jumbled up. Part three focuses on short text comprehension in which the candidate chooses the best word from a list to make a sentence. Here, there are ten options and seven empty spaces. Part four is long text comprehension where the test taker matches the headings to the paragraphs. Hence, there are seven paragraphs and eight headings (Aptis Candidate Guide, 2018).

Listening

The listening section in Aptis has approximately (55) minutes which is divided into three parts. Part one is word and number recognition. Here the test taker listens to a phone message to identify specific information. Part two is specified to identifying specific information in which the test taker listens monologues or conversation to identify specific information. Part three is the inference part where the test taker listens to monologues or conversation to identify the attitude, opinion or intention. In all the mentioned three parts, there are 4-option multiple choice questions (Aptis Candidate Guide, 2018).

Writing

A fifty minute-time slot was allocated for four parts of the writing section. The first part is the word level writing in which the candidate responds to messages using individual words. There are 1-5 words for each question. The second part is short text writing where the test taker writes with personal information. It is to be written in 20-30 words. Part three is three-written responses to questions in which the test taker responds to written questions on a social network-type website. Word limit to write answer for each question is 30-40 words. Part four focuses on formal and informal writing in which the test taker writes an informal email to a friend and a formal email to an unknown person. The word limit for an informal email is 30-40 words, and the word limit for formal email is within the range of 120-150 words (Aptis Candidate Guide, 2018).

Speaking

There are four parts with (12) minutes time to complete. Part one is personal information where the candidate responds to three personal questions. The candidate has (30) seconds for each response. Part two describes and expresses opinion and provides reasons and explanations. Here the test taker has (45) seconds time to describe two contrasting pictures and answer two additional questions of increasing difficulty. Finally, part four focuses on to discuss personal

experience and opinion on an abstract topic. The test taker in this part answers three questions on an abstract topic. Besides this it is imperative to check and make sure that your test is taken in a quiet room.

The British Council based on its policy of equality is committed to promoting diversity and inclusion in English language testing. It is believed that the Aptis test should be accessible to anyone who wants to take it. It is believed that each person should have the opportunity to perform to the best of his or her ability on the Aptis test. It is noted in the Aptis Candidate Guide, (2018), "If you have a disability and believe that Aptis is not accessible to you or believe that the form of the test will not allow you to show your true level of English, please contact your local British Council centre to talk about ways in which the test can be modified for your needs. We can adjust such as pen and paper tests, Braille and large font tests, timing, and many others. Discuss it with us to ensure that we can support you with a test which is both fair to you and maintains the high standards and reliability of Aptis" (p.47).

English Proficiency Test by Department of English at Nangarhar University

Based on its institutional strategic goals and vision of providing various academic services through different academic degree programs in various academic disciplines, Nangarhar University established B.A. program in English Language and literature major in 2002. The Department of English at Nangarhar University is responsible for teaching English as Specific Purposes (ESP) across various disciplines inside the institution in addition to teaching their own professional students. Besides this, the Department is further accountable to develop and conduct English language proficiency test for the new lecturers of this and other universities working under its academic supervision. The department also carries the responsibility of testing the linguistic knowledge of current university lecturers in terms of English for their promotion in academic ranks. If they do not receive the required marks, they are asked to prepare for the next term. There is always a three-member exam committee consisting of its senior lecturers that develops, conducts and evaluates the test. Now, how far is the mentioned proficiency test reliable, valid and can test the actual linguistic knowledge and proficiency of the test takers is always a question for professional discourse within the whole university.

It is also noteworthy that paper-based tests in Afghanistan is always seen bad because of no transparency and reliability. However, people trust computer-based test (CBT) since its

reliability and transparency are better guaranteed. In this connection, nowadays, Aptis along with other English proficiency tests such as Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is getting further popularity in the sense where the education sector of Afghanistan is rapidly moving towards the digitalization, therefore, a survey is conducted among the lecturers of NU Department of English to make a comparative analysis if Aptis test can also be recommended to Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) as a standard English proficiency test in the recruitment process of new lecturers for various disciples within and beyond Nangarhar University.

Methodology

The nature of this study is quantitative and interpretive in nature. Responses from the population of permanent English teachers of English Department of Nangarhar University were collected to evaluate the effectiveness of Aptis as a standard proficiency test for the recruitment process of new faculty members. A self- designed survey was online distributed as a method of data collection (Ayaz Ahmad & Sarfraz Khan, 2011) among the (21) research subjects out of which (10) valid responses were received. The percentage is (47.6%) which is considered a good number as compared to similar other studies. Aldehayyat et al. (2011) & Saunders et al. (2003) suggested when questionnaires were delivered, collected, and received (30-50%) percent responses are considered valid. The survey has two parts. Part one is about their personal information, qualification and teaching experiences. Part two contains eight close ended questions regarding their perspectives on the effectiveness of Aptis test as a standard proficiency test to be accepted and utilized by (MoHE) for the assessment of the linguistic knowledge of new lecturers who are going to be hired across Afghan institutions of higher education in various discipline majors. The study intends to test the following two hypotheses:

1. The English proficiency test that is developed by NU Department of English for the purpose of recruitment of new lecturers is seen as substandard test that lacks the reliability and validity of testing and the integration of language skills.

2. The Aptis test that is developed by British Council is seen as a standard test as compared to NU Department of English test keeping in mind the high level of test reliability, validity and language skills' integration.

Besides this, Excel-Sheet was used for analyzing the data. Some of the primary and most of the secondary data in this study has come from the archival and published papers.

Findings and Discussions

Analysis of the responses of ten (10) lecturers of the Department of English at Nangarhar University revealed that they found Aptis as one of the Standard English language proficiency tests capable for the recruitment process of new lecturers across the Afghan universities. The hypothetical position of the study was confirmed as majority of the lectures do not recommend the English language proficiency test which is generated by the Department of English at Nangarhar University.

Thirty percent (30%) of the lecturers, who participated in this research, pursued Master in English literature as their major, while (20%) of the lecturers held their Master in English Language Teaching (ELT). The other 30% lecturers did their Master's in Teaching of English to the Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Besides this, 10% studied English language and literature at B.A. level. The other (10%) studied educational leadership at Master level. Among them all, only 40% of lecturers underwent other professional courses such as Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults (CELTA), Afghan Junior Faculty Development Program (AJPDP), Fulbright FLTA, and others.

Table 1

Participants' Qualification

Qualification	Frequency	Percent (%)
B.A (English Language & Literature)	1	10
Master (Literature)	3	30
Master (ELT)	2	20
Master (TESOL)	3	30
M.A (Educational Leadership)	1	10
Ph.D.	0	0
Total	10	100

Responses from (10) participants of the study are organized under two major umbrellas, which are (The English Language Proficiency Test developed by NU Department of English and The Aptis Test developed by British Council). There are three questions under the mentioned two umbrellas followed by the last thematic statement if Aptis test can be recommended to be utilized by MoHE in the hiring process of new lecturers.

Twenty percent (20%) of the lecturers, who participated in the survey answered "YES" to claim that the English language proficiency test which is developed by the NU Department of English can be considered an acceptable language proficiency test. They believe that there are minor shortcomings in this test which can be fulfilled after the revision. For instance, it has reading, grammar and translation, but lacks listening and speaking which can be added properly. On the other hand, a significant majority (80%) of lecturers responded "No" even if the mentioned shortcomings are fulfilled. Their common arguments are: first, the test cannot evaluate the actual linguistic knowledge of test-taker since there are problems of test structure and scoring. Second, a standard language proficiency test cannot be developed thirty minutes ahead from its time. Therefore, it is found that the mentioned test requires professional structure having appropriate questions that can accurately test the proficiency level of candidate.

Table 2

Point of View on the Capability of English Proficiency Test Developed by the Department of English, Nangarhar University

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	2	20
No	8	80
Neutral	0	0
Total	10	100

Forty percent (40%) of lecturers participated in this research responded "yes" to the query that the NU Department of English language proficiency test is both reliable and valid in terms of scoring. They believe that scoring and grading process is transparent enough despite pressure from outside. They further state that in case of any problem, the department exam's committee resolves it. While a significant majority (60%) of lecturers responded that the test lacks the reliability and validity. In this connection, their shared concerns are: first, most of the

questions are subjective while objective questions are also important when we talk about the reliability and validity. Second, the test is found because of copying its questions from various websites whose authenticity is yet a big question mark. Third, the department lacks to professionally grade the scoring and all parts of the test do not carry equal marks. Therefore, it can be concluded that English language proficiency test developed by NU Department of English for the recruitment process of new lecturers does not have sufficient reliability and validity of its scoring. Here it is found that reliability and validity do not only refer to cope up the external pressure in the process of grading while it is a professional process to be handled.

Table 3

Point of View on Reliability and Validity of English Proficiency Test Developed by the Department of English, Nangarhar University

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	4	40
No	6	60
Neutral	0	0
Total	10	100

A significant majority (70%) of the lecturers from NU Department of English, who participated in this survey, found that there is no integration of the four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). They believe that it is only a reading and writing test and ignores listening and speaking skills, which are equally important. However, (30%) of the lecturers from the same department found the test having all the four skills, but again the question of integration of these skills are not well-explained in their views. Hence, the idea of skills integration is highly important to evaluate the actual and wholesome language proficiency of the candidate.

Table 4

Point of View on the Integration of four Skills of English Proficiency Test Developed by the Department of English, Nangarhar University

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	3	30
No	7	70
Neutral	0	0
Total	10	100

Ninety percent (90%) of lecturers at the Department of English, Nangarhar University took the Aptis test during the years 2015-2019. Most of them took the test conducted by (MoHE) for meeting the English language proficiency criteria as a pre-requisite for various government sponsored scholarships such as ICCR, SWDP, and many others. Only (10%) reveal that they did not take the Aptis test but studied enough about it.

Table 5

How many Participants have taken the Aptis test?

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	9	90
No	1	10
Neutral	0	0
Total	10	100

Almost ninety percent (90%) of the lecturers found Aptis as a standard proficiency test suitable for the recruitment process of new lecturers across the Afghan universities. They found Aptis as one of the accredited, standard and recognized English language proficiency tests by which one can evaluate the actual communicative knowledge of test-takers. There is high degree of test reliability and validity since it is the product of the University of Cambridge. They further believe that communicative knowledge of English is highly important for lecturers across the various disciplines. This will help the long-term policy of English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) of Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (National Higher Education Strategic Plan,

2015). Only (10%) is found neutral about the suitability of Aptis as a standard proficiency test. Their argument is that it is computerized test having old British vocabularies which need to be replaced. In short, it is found from the discussion that Aptis is a test that has the capability to hire new faculty members for MoHE.

Table 6

Point of View on the Capability of Aptis as a Standard Proficiency Test Developed by British Council

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	9	90
No	0	0
Neutral	1	10
Total	10	100

Remarkable high majority (90%) of lecturers found the high level of validity and reliability in Aptis scoring. They found computerized grading a way to a better transparency and accuracy. In terms of grading the speaking and writing skills of Aptis, they further believe on the existence of native expert examiners who professionally and technically grade the writing and speaking portions of Aptis. Only (10%) is suspicious about its grading. They further made it clear that there are chances whiten the British Council's examiners and invigilators who illegally help the candidates in grading, but the study cannot justify its accuracy since the participant of the study did not provide evidences in this regard. Therefore, reliability and validity as important principles of testing are found in Aptis test.

Table 7

Point of View on Reliability and Validity of Aptis Test Developed by British Council

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	9	90
No	1	10
Neutral	0	0
Total	10	100

The major part (80%) of this study believe that Aptis is an advanced digital language proficiency test where four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in addition to the core skills (grammar and vocabulary) are highly integrated with one another, and this leads to accurate evaluation of language proficiency. In the meantime, keeping the CEFR framework in mind, the four skills are even integrated. On the contrary, (20%) of lecturers have come up with two different ideas. First, Aptis lacks Speaking and Writing sections in most of the cases while the theoretical account of this study has made it clear that it depends on the client who decides which skills in addition to core skills (grammar and vocabulary) are required to be tested. Second, another responded that Aptis does not have four skills integration in basic level while it has the integration on advanced level. In this case, the theoretical background made it also clear that Aptis has the skills' integration on both basic and advanced level, so in this part, the study arrived at the conclusion that Aptis has the digital capacity to provide variations to be chosen by the client.

Table 8

Point of View on the Integration of four Skills of Aptis

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	8	80
No	2	20
Neutral	0	0
Total	10	100

Keeping in mind the current developments in various disciplines of studies, Afghan universities are also striving to provide quality services to their people, and this is done when these institutions meet the norms of higher education globally. One of these norms is to make English as a medium of instruction since English is considered as an international language of research where researchers, linguists and translators believe that the output of research papers and scholarly articles runs into millions and to tens of millions every year and the language used for the dissemination of the enormous volume of research information is English (Swales, 1981). Equally it is important for Afghan Ministry of Higher Education to consider the English language proficiency as the highest priority for hiring new faculty members. This will foster and

bring the MoHE closer to the successful implementation of its policy (EMI) overall. In this regard, significant majority (80%) of lecturers recommend Aptis as a standard proficiency test in the recruitment process of new lecturers across the Afghan universities in a situation where TOFEL and IELTS are more expensive than Aptis. Twenty percent (20%) of lecturers responded "NO" to the recommendation of Aptis to be used as a standard proficiency test by MoHE. They believe that Aptis as a computerized test requires internet and computer facilities as well as knowledge of how to use it. It has limited time where the candidate does not have sufficient time for checking. Besides this, the proficiency level of Aptis is higher than the competence of most new lecturers because they used either Pashtu or Dari as mediums of instruction and only studied English as required subject in the shape of meeting the formality. Therefore, keeping the concerns of (20%) lecturers in mind, it is found that we can provide a sort of Aptis coaching before they appear for the test.

Table 9

Recommendation of Aptis to MoHE as a Standard Proficiency test in the Recruitment Process of new Lecturers Across the Afghan Universities

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Yes	8	80
No	2	20
Neutral	0	0
Total	10	100

Conclusion, Suggestions and Limitations

English Department at Nangarhar University and other major universities of Afghanistan have the responsibilities to conduct English language proficiency test for two important purposes. First, according to current policy of Afghan Ministry of Higher Education, the test is conducted for new lecturers who are in the process of employment as a criterion every individual university lecturer must fulfill to have access to the language of research. Second, the English proficiency test must be conducted during the time when the hired lecturers promote their academic ranks in every three years. Keeping the above two points in account, English Departments at the major Afghan universities (Kabul, Shaheed Prof. Rabbani Education,

Nangarhar, Kandahar, Heart and Balkh Universities) especially NU Department of English locally generate a proficiency test that significant majority of the instructors who participated in this study found the test incapable for the hiring process of new lecturers due to the considerable shortcomings which existed in terms of reliability and validity of scoring, skills integration and test structure.

Besides this, Aptis as a standard proficiency test was developed by British council directly working with organizations to provide them services in terms of tests of English as a Second or Foreign (ESL/EFL) Language proficiency for a range of assessment needs. So, MoHE has started to use this test to select the best candidates for scholarships abroad, so an attempt is made to study the effectiveness of Aptis as a standard proficiency test to be conducted by MoHE as a criterion for hiring new lecturers at various disciplines across the Afghan universities. The study found that a significant majority (80%) of the lecturers who participated in the research recommend the test since there is high level of reliability and validity of scoring, skills integration and transparency if it is computer based (CBT). At the same time, the study also found that (10-20%) of lecturers do not recommend Aptis due to the absence of digital facility everywhere, lack of computer knowledge within the test takers and the imbalance of proficiency between the Aptis and the competence of test takers. Therefore, it is suggested that a study might be conducted to find out ways of solutions for the mentioned technical issues Aptis is facing in Afghan context. The study is also limited to Nangarhar University while it is further suggested that a similar study may be conducted in other mentioned major universities of Afghanistan to find out comparative results.

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