



## Student Experience of a Supervised Online English Proficiency Test

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### Abstract

*This case report recounts the experiences of first year higher education engineering, business information technology, business administration, nursing and activity tourism students (N=412) who participated in a pilot online English proficiency test delivered via the Moodle learning platform at a University of Applied Sciences. This computer-assisted language test consisted of five sections: vocabulary and grammar, written and spoken production, and listening comprehension.*

*The data contains the feedback provided by the participants and the teacher researchers' observations during supervised test sessions. The students' written feedback was given immediately after the test on the same learning platform as the test was held.*

*The results indicate that the students had a positive attitude to modern means of assessing language proficiency and they considered the test versatile and challenging enough. Moreover, they appreciated the information the test provided on their language skills in different competences which offers them the opportunity to concentrate on their less advanced language competence.*

*This research is particularly timely in Finland since the high school matriculation exams are gradually being digitalized. Higher education is experiencing the same change.*

*Keywords: language testing, attitude, language proficiency*

### 1. Introduction

Our research investigates the experiences of the first year higher education students (N=412) of completing the supervised pilot online English proficiency test. The same test was held to the students of all offered fields: engineering, business information technology, business administration, nursing and activity tourism students. The pressure to produce an extensive language proficiency test for large number of students has led to the solution of an on-line digital test. The three main reasons for using technology in language testing are efficiency, equivalence and innovation. (Chapelle & Douglas, 2006). Efficiency refers to the automated computer adaptive testing, equivalency is achieved through making digitalised testing equivalent to paper and pen test. Innovation means the real transformation of testing utilising technology. [1]

The online proficiency test is timely because of the ongoing digitalisation strategy in Finland, and especially the strategy of this university of applied sciences. Moreover, the online test provides the new students a first glimpse of the language learning in the contemporary higher education: the learner is required to be the agent of her own learning using her individual learning space where the digital learning material is authentic, and her production is also in a digital form. Accordingly, the test promotes 21st century skills needed in working life.

On entering universities of applied sciences, undergraduates are expected to possess level B1-B2 listening and speaking proficiency in English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This level states that the students are able to use all four English language competences; reading, speaking, writing and listening, independently in their professional fields and the interdisciplinary context. The participants, who gain less than 50% correct in it, are advised to attend an optional multimodal online English refresher course. Based on the results of this pilot online test, 20% of the test takers were offered the opportunity to refresh their English skills on the course prior to their proper English courses. These results were similar to pen and paper test results held previous years, suggesting that the implementation of the pilot succeeded. On this pilot test, oral proficiency was assessed for the first time.

### 2. Method

The pilot proficiency test was created on the Moodle learning platform, which offers advanced possibilities for testing and assessment. With Moodle question bank teacher can generate either selected response items, for example true/false and multiple choice questions and constructed response items such as short answers and essays. The test included five sections: vocabulary,

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grammar, listening, reading and speaking. The vocabulary, grammar and listening sections involved multiple choice questions which Moodle corrected automatically. In listening assignment, an authentic video was used even though multimedia in assessing language skills might distract the test takers, but it can also facilitate their performance [2].

In the written section, the students wrote an essay answering the question “What is professionalism in your field?” and in the spoken part, the students recorded their perceptions of student life inspired by an amusing meme utilising sound recorder. The oral and the written parts were included in the test in order to evaluate students’ ability to apply their language skills in practice since mastering grammar and vocabulary does not necessary correlate with the ability to use the language in real life situations. The teacher researchers assessed these latter sections, written and oral productions, manually focusing on the following factors: achieving the set goals, fluency, cohesion, versatility and richness of the vocabulary, grammatical correctness and pronunciation (in the oral part). After completing the test, the participants were also required to provide online feedback on Moodle.

This qualitative research employs an ethnographic approach where the teacher researchers are both test designers, supervisors, and observers. The data of this research consists of the teacher researchers’ observations during the piloted online test and the students’ (N=412) feedback given on Moodle immediately after the test. The feedback was analysed by inductive content analysis method and those results were supported by the researchers’ observations.

### 3. Results

This case study reveals students’ positive attitude to evolving pedagogical practices and acquiring 21st century skills needed in working life. The results indicate that the students had a positive attitude to modern means of assessing language proficiency. According to the data, the students appreciated the clear instructions given for all test sections and they considered the test versatile. Moreover, according to their feedback, the test assessed the students’ all language competences reliably as shown in example 1. The test also provided the test takers valuable information on their individual language skills in different competences, hence they can concentrate more on the peculiar competence they experienced challenging. This notion is also on the line with the strategy of the University of Applied Sciences, since it emphasises students’ individual and flexible needs based learning paths.

#### Example 1

The test was good and I noticed in which language competences I am good at and where I need more practice.

The grammar and vocabulary section was regarded challenging enough. Students appreciated the clear division of the different sections, which concentrated on one grammatical topic at a time. On the other hand, the students were confused about the grammatical terminology which was in English in the test. This confusion might be due to the fact that English grammar is commonly taught in Finnish at schools in Finland.

Despite the anxiousness, the students experienced about speaking English, they recognised the work based need to assess their oral language competence. Moreover, they noticed that after a while, speaking English becomes more natural and less discouraging, see example 2.

#### Example 2

At first I was shy to records my oral production but as I warmed up I did not feel so terribly nervous any more.

According to the data, the listening comprehension section was considered easy. The less challenging video for the listening assignment was selected deliberately in order to offer the test takers an empowering experience. After realising that they master at least one language competence the students continued the test feeling more confident.

The students found the writing task challenging, particularly those who had not produced written texts in English for a long time. Cohesion, verbs in general and especially tenses caused difficulties, furthermore to differentiate between simple and continuous verb forms was considered hard.

In general, the test takers regarded the computer assisted language test suitable for assessing their language skills at the beginning of their studies at the University of Applied Sciences. Nevertheless, some, especially technically incapable students, would have preferred a pen and paper test. These students assume have succeeded better in a traditional test, even though they recognize the demand for digital literacy in contemporary education and work life.



## 4. Conclusion

In this study we investigated students' perceptions on a pilot computer assisted English proficiency test which was conducted with Moodle at the beginning of their studies at the University of Applied Sciences. The overall feedback on the test was positive; the students recognize the digital literacy competence the present society requires, and they had a positive attitude to modern means of assessing language proficiency. Moreover, the test was considered suitable and versatile in order to provide sufficient means to assess the new students' all language competences. This research presents valuable information also for the English teachers of the University of Applied Sciences not only how to develop the test further, but also how they can improve their teaching and which topics the students need more in depth training and practice.

## References

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