

# **Washback effect of higher education institution exam-foreign language test on university candidates' attitudes**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Higher Education Institution-Foreign Language Test is one of the most important examination in Turkey, taken by the high school students yearly that are seeking admission into bachelor of foreign language programs in universities. Students are awarded ELT, ELL or Interpreting and Translation degrees after graduating from these departments. Thus, this study aims to reveal the attitudes of university candidates' towards Foreign Language test. Forty-two (42) participants volunteered for this study and the required data were gathered by means of open ended questionnaires and analyzed using content analysis technique. During the research, the first questionnaire was designed to have knowledge about the participants' general ideas about Foreign Language Test, while the second questionnaire was conducted to reveal the factors affecting the participants' attitudes towards Foreign Language Test. The results shed light on the fact that participants have negative attitudes towards Foreign Language Test. Besides, the findings revealed that there is need for improvements with respect to content, style and reliability, and validity of the examination for it to be more positive and practical for the candidates.

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**Keywords:** Foreign language test, attitude, washback, reliability and validity.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Testing is a significant and complex issue such that majority of researchers have been trying to determine for a long time the extent to which testing is supposed to be reliable, valid, and effective. Tests are also valuable sources for measuring the effectiveness of learning and teaching. Teachers, for example use tests to have an idea about the students' progress. Additionally, they have an opportunity to figure out to what extent their methods are effective in classroom setting. Apart from the evaluation of the learning in classroom setting, learners have to sit for various tests or examinations held in national or international fields, such as YKS, KPSS, FLE, YÖK-DİL, IELTS and TOEFL. These tests are called high stakes examinations because critical decisions about the candidates' future and careers are shaped with the tests.

Therefore, high-stakes tests have been discussed extensively for a long time by the authorities, since, these tests affect educational strategies and even policies which will determine a nation's developmental process in the long- run.

Petrie (1987: 254) pointed out that "it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that evaluation and testing have become the engine for implementing educational policy." There is a strong evidence that examinations, especially high-stakes tests, have important washback effects on learning and teaching (Ross et al., 2005). Cheng (2005: 98) indicates that examination results are regarded as a criteria by students, teachers and other stakeholders such as administrators, and parents with which considerable

decisions are taken concerning the students' future career plans.

Greaney and Kellaghan (1996: 98) argues that, examinations or tests are connected to the performance of the students or even teachers, and when taking important decisions about the learners' future, those tests or examinations can be said to have high stakes effect, because the winner or the loser is strictly determined by those examinations. Besides this, Bachman (2000: 147) define high-stake examination as critical decisions because they could have a very important effect on the students' future and life. Especially in Turkey, high-stakes examinations have had important roles while giving decisions about individuals' future in the long run. Accordingly, these examinations have been a disputable issue of authorities and those taking one of them, since they were employed.

### Purpose and significance of the study

Researchers have been interested in tests or examinations and their influences for years. Also, they focus on these effects in terms of different teaching and learning implementations (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Hughes, 2002). It is a fact that tests and test results are important in people's lives. Especially in exam-oriented countries, like Turkey, this importance becomes even more evident because individuals might have to make their future decisions according to test results. Hence, this research aims to focus on exploring the washback effect of Higher Education Institution-Foreign Language Test on university candidates' attitudes and motivations.

Considering the aims of the study, attempts were made to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the university candidates' attitudes towards Higher Education Institution Exam-Foreign Language Test?
- 2) What are the factors affecting the university candidates' attitudes towards Higher Education Institution Exam-Foreign Language Test?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Washback effect

We always live with examinations. Accordingly, our educational system has been equipped with various high-stakes examinations which involve national or international ones, such as YDS, YKS, KPSS, YÖK-DİL, IELTS, TOEFL, PTE, and FCE. The fact that high-stakes tests are critical decision makers on both teaching and learning is widely known by the authorities, and this is known as washback of testing (Alderson and Wall, 1993: 431). Testing always has consequences which is either

positive or negative (Stobart, 2003: 140). It could be negative or positive, strong or weak, hence it is possible to mention that learning could be affected by tests and this is called washback or backwash (Biggs, 1995).

Various opinions have been argued on washback effect so far. In her investigation, Cheng (1997: 8) depicts washback as the adjustment of curriculum and adjustment of the high stakes examinations in accordance with teaching and learning, while on the other hand, Spolsky (1994: 8) reports that washback effect of the examinations is not planned or deliberate, so when considering the control of the course program, washback effect could not be the first issue or purpose. Alderson and Wall (1993) argue that, washback can not directly be associated with an exam's validity, because washback is so complex a condition that it should not only be seen as the results or effects of the test on learning and teaching.

For some researchers (Messick, 1996; Sprat, 2005; Hughes, 2002), washback is closely related to teaching since it provides a clear way for teachers to be aware of the effectiveness or not of their teaching process and test preparations. For instance, Messick (1996) and Hughes (2002) state in their researches that teaching and learning process or planning and conducting the examinations in terms of positive and negative relationships are directly and closely related.

Messick (1996: 4) believes that there is a link between teaching and use of test. He mentions in his article that to claim the washback, teaching must be accurately linked to the use of the test. Frederiksen (1984) and Hughes (2002) also have ideas similar to Messick's. They clearly state that if an examination is not prepared clearly and properly, the results could be negative, yet if prepared clearly, properly and well planned, test results are likely to create favourable or positive effects on learning and teaching.

For the purpose of recognizing the effect of tests in terms of teaching, learning and other stakeholders, it could also be beneficial to differentiate between the test impact and test washback. Generally, the term washback is primarily known as the impact of a test on teaching and learning, but Wall (1997: 216) tries to put the washback of the test and its impact into two different categories. She claims that, test impact refers to the effect of examinations on educational policies, educational practices, and society, but test washback is the effect of the examinations on teaching and learning process.

Many researchers (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Pearson, 1988; Ross et al., 2005; Wall, 1997; Hughes, 2002) believe that washback could be related to high-stakes tests, and these are mostly used with a view to accessing an important decisions on the stakeholders of a society such as education and economy administration, policy. Bachman and Palmer (1996: 14) claim that washback of an examination influences within society, which varies from policy of a country, administration, academic researches, and general opportunities to

parents' expectations of their children. Pearson (1988: 431) also has a similar opinion. For him, washback could be a potential instrument for educational reform which affects the developmental process of a society in the long-run.

The term 'washback' might be positive or negative. According to Hughes (2002: 145), washback is the effect of testing on teaching and learning, and also he describes the term washback as positive and negative. Alderson and Wall (1993: 28) believe that tests can influence the classroom activities both positively and negatively.

Messick (1996: 217) suggests some ideas on creating positive washback in terms of teaching and learning. He argues that a positive washback effect can occur when the tasks and activities which are used in teaching process contain examinations. Messick (1996: 28) also claims that to create a positive washback, there must be little differences between activities involved in learning the language and the activities involved in preparing for the test. On the other hand, Pearson (1988: 9) makes a contribution to Messick's ideas by stating that well prepared and planned exams could be usable for the learning and teaching to some extent, despite possible economic and practical confinements of those tests. In addition to the positive washback, there are also negative effects of tests called 'negative washback'. When the tests do not match with the learning or teaching principles, it may lead to negative effects. In his research, Pearson (1998: 101) clarifies that to hamper the negative influence of the test, the programme of the course being taken should directly be related to the examination being conducted. In another research, he stated that, for the purpose of creating positive effects, it should be directly related to the course outcomes and also should be open to flexible changes. Also, Alderson and Wall (1993: 29) reports a similar idea like Pearson on negative washback. According to them, negative effect of the test could be caused by the conditions in which learners and teachers are not willing to participate in teaching and learning process.

One of the researchers suggesting an idea on the negative washback effect is also Vernon (1956). He believes that "teachers mostly have their students pass the exam and become successful individuals, hence they directly prepare their materials that is related to the examination". As a result, course programme and learning outcomes are not fulfilled and affected adversely.

Wiseman (1961: 9) also adds that private teaching courses or tutorings whose main goal is to prepare students for the exams do not have efficiency in learning activities, since they mostly focus on practicing or revising the exam techniques. Davies (1968: 9) supports Wiseman's ideas by stating that only preparing for the exams, studying and revising testing materials taking into account the past examinations, make educational experiences boring, stable and uncreative.

## **The impacts of washback**

### **Curriculum and materials**

Alderson and Wall (1993: 9) argues in their study that content of the courses are affected by the examination. Cheng (1997) notes that examination contents have changed the in-class tasks and activities, methodology of the teacher, student-teacher interaction in form of role plays, discussion etc; but the study by Shohamy (1993) shows that content of the teaching does not have effect on the examination. It is possible to state other situations about the curriculum. These are class time and class size. Lam (1994: 9) believes that, curriculum is mostly focused on examination preparation; nevertheless, Shohamy shows a contrast with Lam and claims that once the examinations are seen as high-stakes ones which have important effect on candidates, course programmes could be arranged in accordance with the examination preparation.

Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996: 9) note that extra time could be spent for the exam classes, but in some cases this may not be fulfilled. The study by Read and Hayes (2003) also note that time spent for the exam preparation could be related to the school's approach towards the exam. They emphasize that the time allocated for teachers by schools affect their course programme both in class and out of class.

Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (2003: 19) also draw attention to class size, arguing that students are so crowded when compared to regular classes. As a result, studies as to how washback affects the curriculum show that course programmes could be changed according to the conditions which may show variance (Spratt, 2005: 10).

### **Teaching and learning**

High-stakes examinations heavily affect teachers' teaching methods and techniques. Instead of conducting general language teaching activities, they mostly focus on the test-based tasks or activities in classroom setting. Shohamy (1993: 100) argues that "teaching toward the high-stakes EFL exam led teachers to teach through the exam tasks or through carrying out other activities directly aiming at developing exam skills or strategies."

Alderson and Wall (1993: 105) suggest a similar idea with Shohamy's. They believe that high stakes exams affect teachers' course methodology and styles in a negative way. In that, they feel it mandatory to create an examination based atmosphere for them to prepare effectively, thus they prepare the materials taking into consideration the exam process.

Jones et al. (2003: 105) point out that, a high-stakes test forces teachers and students particularly to use examination based methods because the schools and teachers mostly aim to pass previous test achievement or

maintain the former achievements. Some studies indicate that usage of the methods changes varies from teacher to teacher. For instance, the studies conducted by both Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996: 14) and Watanabe (1996: 14) show large differences in terms of the method used. Some teachers use much of 'teaching the test, 'textbook slave' approaches, while others use more creative and independent approaches.

### **Attitudes**

Attitude could be stated as a psychological tendency and this tendency could be articulated by measuring a specific entity which claims favor or disfavor" (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993: 41). Besides, Celuch et al. (2009: 41) believe that attitudes are made up of evaluations including aims or things to be done. They are generally expressed by taking into account favorable or unfavorable perceptions. Gardner (1985) also defines that the term attitude consist of four components of motivation, they include target, demanding behaviour, wishing to achieve the goal and attitude. When we look at the literature, it is possible to mention two kinds of attitudes in language learning process: one is the attitudes towards the people who speak the language which is about to be learned and attitudes towards the use of language in practice and this is also being learned (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993: 41).

To determine the learners' success in a foreign language learning process, attitudes of learners have significant roles. Furthermore, it is possible to state that there are noteworthy close factors which determine the relations between learners' attitudes and their learning outcomes (Mahdavi and Zafarghandi, 1991: 42). Serin et al. (2010: 6) support this idea by stating that attitude is a factor in the success of students in learning a second language.

When we search for the literature related to the attitudes and language learning, a great number of studies were conducted on the attitudes and language learning. Karahan (2007) studied the relation between language learning and attitudes towards English Language. She found in her study that students' attitudes are positive but mild towards English Language. Moreoever, she added that especially female students have more positive attitudes than male students. Also Serin et al. (2010: 7) examined students' attitudes towards English course. They investigated students' attitudes by considering different factors including their socio-economic level, high school type, and high school success. They found that high school success affects students' attitudes positively or negatively and in addition, low high school grades have lower effect on attitudes towards English Language. However, students' gender, socio-economic level and high school type do not have significant effect on students' attitudes.

Focusing on the learners' and teachers' attitudes

towards the high-stakes exams is an another important consideration, because these tests are likely to play important roles and influences on learners' test performance and teachers' teaching performance. Cheng (1998: 296) mentions that, learners show mixed feelings towards the exam itself, recognizing on the one hand that the exam made them work hard to achieve good scores, but at the same time thinking that exams were not an accurate reflection of all aspects of their study. She also states that teachers could always be anxious as to how the shy or less outspoken students which means introvert students, will deal with the exam and besides some teachers may feel themselves as unsuccesfull if they are unable to get their students familiar with the test formats. Therefore, high-stakes exam may create an atmosphere of high anxiety and fear of test results for both teachers and students.

According to Pearson (1988: 146), examinations conducted for serious aims nationwide have effect on teachers and learners in terms attitude and motivation. Also, Davies (1985: 28) adds that examinations conducted nationwide affect parents, apart from the teachers and students in terms of attitudes and behaviors, because examinations are conducted at the end of a course or term.

Teachers are affected by the success or failure of their students and they come to feel that they have to use the materials for the exam during teaching and learning process (Shohamy, 1993: 14). Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996: 14) state similar things in the TOEFL study. They revealed that most teachers' attitude towards the examination was so low and they felt themselves underpressure when lecturing for the exam. On the other hand, some teachers were much more positive. Lecturing the examination topics were really enjoyable activities and they believed that they could help students cope with something important. Read and Hayes (2003) conducted similar studies on IELTS. From their findings, both teachers and learners have positive attitude and strong motivation towards the exam.

A number of research studies focused on the attitudes of students towards various types of high- stakes tests (Madsen, 1982; Scott, 1986). Different factors could be taken into considertion that influence learners' attitudes, including test format, length, time limit, testing environment, familiarity with test types, test validity, and anxiety (Scott and Madsen, 1983; Scott, 1986). Therefore, attitude is a strong tool while searching for the language learners' perceptions and other tendencies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research model**

In this the study, qualitative approach was used. Qualitative approach could be described as ethnographic, naturalistic, anthropological, field, or participant observer

research. It focuses on the results and those found in the natural research area. Open-ended questionnaires were used for gathering data, and participants' direct answers were provided as direct quotations in the article. The interviewer directly participated in the research process (Cohen, 1988). This type of study is different from quantitative one because qualitative studies gather data by more objective methods thereby giving notifications on the comparisons, estimations or correlations of the issues (Smith, 1983). The reason why qualitative approach was chosen for this research was that it provides an opportunity for the researcher to understand the participants' feelings, beliefs and perceptions about Higher Education Institution-Foreign Language Test.

In this research, two open-ended questionnaires were conducted. The results obtained were evaluated by using content analysis technique. This technique might be practical because with it, the researcher could collect specific information about the participants' thoughts and evaluate them easily.

### **The universe and sample of the research**

The participants of the study were 43 university candidates aiming at passing the Higher Education Institution-Foreign Language Test. Participants were required to take the Higher Education Institution-Foreign Language Test in order to apply for the undergraduate programs of faculties.

To conduct the study of university candidates' perceptions towards taking Higher Education Institution Examination-Foreign Language Test, necessary permission was taken from the Mersin American Culture Language Schools Management. Then, two open-ended questionnaires were prepared and participants were asked about what they think about the exam, what factors affect them during preparation for the exams. They were asked to respond to nine different questions about the validity, social effects, necessity and effects during the undergraduate program. As a result, various conclusions were found about the factors affecting the participants' perceptions about university entrance examination. Key words which would help the researcher to comment on the findings and discussion part were also coded. After analyzing all the data, there were inferences and implications which were supposed to be helpful both to teachers and researchers.

## **RESULTS**

### **General impressions of the participants on higher education institution exam-foreign language test**

After having decided the content of the study, the first thing that had to be done was to determine the data

collection tools and prepare questions to gather data about participants' general impressions on Foreign Language Test. An open-ended questionnaire was employed to find out the participants' general thoughts on Higher Education Institution Exam-Foreign Language Test. Forty three participants took part in the study.

The results acquired from the open-ended questionnaire showed that forty-one of the participants articulated the same issue about the examination. They believed that FLT is so difficult and detailed in terms of grammar and vocabulary and they do not want to study detailed grammar rules because it will not be practical for them to use those rules apart from the examination. The following excerpt was chosen as representative:

"I think Foreign Language Test is so difficult and filled with lots of unnecessary details and I do not want to learn detailed grammar rules and words because I am not going to use them apart from the examination".

Pt1/1<sup>st</sup> Questionnaire/(10.05.2020).

For most of the participants, Foreign Language Test is far from measuring the individuals' English proficiency because they believe that questions asked in the exam should include four major skills, including reading, listening, speaking and writing. However, FLT conducted in Turkey offers multiple choice questions on syntax, lexis and reading ability, and therefore individuals are deprived of improving their communicative abilities. The following excerpts were chosen as representatives:

"In my opinion, FLT does not measure students' English language abilities. I used to speak English better, but now I have completely forgotten how to do so because FLT compels me to study lots of grammar". Pt7/1<sup>st</sup> Questionnaire (10.05.2020).

"All I am required to do is to memorize some vocabulary list and exam strategies. I can not speak and write but the system accepts me as an individual who has a good English level. This is our reality in education and I believe it is really annoying". Pt11/1<sup>st</sup> Questionnaire/10.05.2020).

The findings have also shown that participants used cognitive strategies which led them to memorize the words. Also, they believe that they do not need to have advanced English level. By being familiar with exam strategies and techniques, it is really easy to solve questions. Similary, Cheng (2004: 223) focused on the influence of a specific test on learning strategies and study skills of students. She found that tests involves simply using test techniques and memorizing the rules and words in order to get good points in the specific examination. Participant 9 stated his ideas about this:

"FLT is not an effective exam. I know many candidates who got high scores in FLT but cannot write a complete sentence. But by memorizing the rules and predominating the exam strategies, they may easily pass it". Pt9/1<sup>st</sup> Questionnaire (10.05.2020).

In conclusion, candidates have negative attitudes towards Foreign Language Test in general. Candidates are so unwilling to learn detailed grammar rules and vocabulary as those will not be used after the examination. On the other hand, FLT is believed to be an unfair implementation for the candidates because they claim, anyone who is in a preintermediate level can provide answers to the questions easily only when he/she knows the exam strategies and question techniques well. Finally, FLT does not test their foreign language proficiencies. For them, a foreign language exam should measure four language skills, however, FLT only measures reading, grammar and vocabulary. In summary, FLT created a negative impression on candidates.

#### **Factors affecting participants' attitudes towards higher education institution exam-foreign language test**

The second open-ended questionnaire was prepared and conducted by taking into consideration the results obtained from the first one. The aim was to get the picture of factors affecting the participants' attitudes related to Foreign Language Test. By asking participants nine questions, various conclusions were reached about the factors affecting their attitudes towards FLE. Data gathered from the participants were analyzed and categorized under these terms: validity, difficulty and length, necessity, social effects of FLT, effects of FLT in academic life, skills to be tested in FLT, studying strategies in FLT.

#### **Validity and reliability of higher education institution exam-foreign language test**

Participants were asked to answer on whether the Higher Education Institution Exam-Foreign Language Test is valid or not. It would not be an exaggeration to say that all the participants attending the study stated that exam is not valid. The following are some reasons for their answer. The first and the most important one is that FLT does not measure all language skills apart from reading, grammar and vocabulary.

According to them, a good foreign language examination should test four major language skills in order to determine the individuals' language competency. Apart from this, participants claim that questions can

easily be solved with an effective test technique and memorization even if individuals have a little English language capacity; after a while, studying for an examination is converted from the normal learning of language into a kind of memory game. Difficulty and time allocated for the questions are other issues related to the validity of FLT. Participants believe that questions, particularly those in paragraph, are so difficult and that learning very detailed rules of grammar and vocabulary are both difficult and time consuming. Therefore, due to the content and style of the test, candidates have a negative attitude towards FLT. The following excerpts were chosen as representatives:

"Foreign Language Test is not an examination that measures four skills. It is only based on reading, grammar and vocabulary. To test the actual English language capacity of individuals, the TOEFL and IEITS exams are logical. As such, FLT is not a valid exam". Pt9/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"I do not think FLT is a valid exam. It does not measure listening, speaking and writing abilities. It only contains reading comprehension questions". Pt10/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"In my opinion, it is not possible to measure the individuals' English language capacity with multiple questions. Also, this exam is only based on the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. As a result, it is not a valid exam". Pt13/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

#### **Effects of higher education institution exam-foreign language test on candidates' social life**

Participants were asked to respond to how FLT affects their social life. They gave such significant answers for this question that it actually sheds light on all the candidates' life in Turkey. Participants believed that studying for a high-stakes exam is a serious obstacle to their social life because they have to allocate much time to study. They stated that, they have to ignore their friends or even their families because of the examination. Unfortunately, the most serious thing was that conflicts between parents and students start to occur since candidates can not focus on studying for hours and want to make time for their friends. Also, candidates begin to isolate themselves from their friends because they always think about the examination and do not want to spend times with their friends. Instead of this, they prefer to solve questions or memorize vocabulary, and over time, isolation from social life causes depression and even serious disorders.

Furthermore, participants mentioned their misery as

they are harshly criticized by some people when they fail the examination. For them, this is the worst thing they experience when they are criticised rigidly because of their inability to pass the exam. Also, they added that the people who criticise them actually do not know the difficulty of the examination, hence this upsets them. The following excerpts were chosen as representatives. Some participants stated that they cannot allocate time for their families and friends. Besides, they sometimes have conflicts with their parents and as a result they feel depressed. Some excerpts were taken as representatives:

"I do not have any social life because of this exam. I am depressed. I don't know what I will tell my parents, if I can not pass the exam". Pt2/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"I do not have social life anymore. After a while, because the exam becomes the centre of your life, I no longer have time for my parents even though we live in the same house. We only see each other for 20 minutes during the meal" Pt4/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

'I can no longer devote time to my family and my friends, even during break times. Whenever I try to do so, I feel guilty because of the exam and start studying immediately. Also sometimes, I feel that I am not capable of passing that exam". Pt26/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

Two participants stated they feel guilty when they do not study for the exam. They called off everything in their lives to pass this exam. As a result, they are isolated from their social lives. Excerpts were chosen as representatives below:

"I feel that staying at home and memorizing vocabulary is better than meeting with friends. If I do not study, I feel a twinge of guilt about the examination". P13/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"I cancel everything that I would like to do in my life. When I do not study, it makes me feel guilty and depressed". Pt 21/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

Some participants complained about the people who criticize them unjustly. They state that some people who are not familiar with the academic life and this examination criticize them harshly. As a result, they are discouraged by negative remarks of people and do not want to study more. The following excerpt was chosen as representative:

"if you can not get enough points from FLT,

people will not evaluate and comment on your professional competence. Instead, they evaluate your success whether or not you have passed the examination. This is a very bad situation". Pt 15/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

### **Test strategies for higher education institution exam-foreign language test**

Participants were asked about how to study for Foreign Language Test and they suggested various ideas. Particularly, most of the participants stated that vocabulary and reading are the determining parts for being successful in the exam, and thus they suggest studying vocabulary and reading regularly. In addition, the other participants claimed that being competent in multiple choice question technique could contribute to candidates' success and therefore they recommended solving so many multiple choice questions and doing practice examinations a lot. Few of the participants stated the importance of studying grammar and memorizing some grammar rules for solving multiple choice questions. However, all the participants were in view of the fact that focusing on the exam questions which were asked in previous years are really important for the candidates' success because they believe, the questions which were asked in the past could be clues to them about the content and format of the exam. Some excerpts were given below as representatives:

"In order to be successful in this examination, vocabulary and reading should be studied regularly" Pt7/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"The questions which were asked in previous years should be studied in detail. Also, being familiar with the multiple choice question technique brings success". Pt 11/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"Practice exams should be done a lot". Pt 15/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"Candidates should have a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Also, paragraph studies are to be included in this studying process". Pt7/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

### **The difficulty of studying for higher education institution exam-foreign language test**

When participants were asked whether studying for Foreign Language Test is a difficult process or not, they presented various opinions. Candidates believe that studying for FLT is quite difficult and tiring process. They

find the exam tiring and difficult because it requires studying regularly and revising the topics they learnt continuously. For some participants, memorizing vocabulary and reading the texts are tiring and difficult because of their English language competency. Therefore, they have to spend much more time than the other ones. Finally, test anxiety associated with FLT makes participants feel that the exam is really difficult and tiring process. The following excerpts were chosen as representatives:

"It is a very difficult and tiring process, because it takes a lot of time and effort to memorize the very difficult words and rules of grammar". Pt5/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"FLE is extremely difficult because you have to prepare on a daily basis. Otherwise, it is possible to forget everything concerning vocabulary and rules of grammar. But, on the other hand, I have a TYT exam, so I am in a dilemma and I do not know what to do". Pt13/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"This education system did not give us anything in terms of language education. But now, this system wants us to pass this complex and ambiguous exam. It is really difficult and tiring because I do not have enough time to study because of my busy academic schedule". Pt16/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

#### **Language skills measured higher education institution exam-foreign language test**

In Higher Education Institution Examination conducted in Turkey, with reading as a major skill, grammar and vocabulary as subskills are tested, so participants were asked to give responses on what skills should be measured. All of them agreed on the testing of four major language skills. Those who support the idea of testing four major skills also believe that memorizing should not be in FLT process. On the other hand, even though a great number of them agree on being tested on four language skills, very few of them stated that Foreign Language Examination is a tool for reviewing literature, reading an article and therefore they do not need to write, speak or listen to something in the exam. All the participants in this study were in view of the fact that there should be questions related to their own majors and that it will contribute more to their achievements. The following excerpts were taken as representatives:

"There should be no memorization of vocabulary and grammar. Four skills must certainly be included in this exam". Pt6/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire

(29.05.2020).

"Not only should multiple choice be measured, but also four major skills must be included in the exam". Pt7/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"The candidates should be asked detailed questions about their own majors. Productive writing and speaking skills should also be included in this exam". Pt11/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"Knowing a language means predominating four major language skills. So, authorities should prepare the questions in parallel with these skills". Pt12/2<sup>nd</sup> Questionnaire (29.05.2020).

"We have been educated with multiple choice system for years. This is also true for language education. We cannot speak, we cannot write or we cannot understand what we listen to. We are only familiar with circling multiple choice questions. We cannot produce anything we receive by reading or by memorizing rules. This is the system being practiced in the second or third world".

#### **DISCUSSION**

In recent years, the number of studies on the attitudes of students towards high-stakes tests has been increasing because critical decisions are taken about individuals' life by means of those tests. One of them is Higher Education Institution Exam-Foreign Language Test conducted in Turkey for the university candidates who aim to apply for the academic programs at universities. Therefore, the present study has shown the attitudes of candidates and factors affecting their attitudes towards the examination. The first research question was related to the general impressions of university candidates' about the exam. It was found that FLT seriously created a negative impact on candidates. For them, studying for the Foreign Language Examination is a time consuming practice because they cannot allocate time for other courses. Nevertheless, they are aware of the fact that they must be successful in this examination to proceed their academic life in undergraduate programs. They think that that exam can inevitably be considered as an obstacle in their academic life or future career plans.

On the other hand, studying detailed grammar rules and memorization of advanced vocabulary items are really discouraging issues for them to pass this exam since they believe that they will not have to use the aforementioned issues in any sort of areas. Besides, candidates thought that a foreign language examination should measure four major skills mainly listening,

speaking, reading and writing, but they also maintain that Foreign Language Test conducted in Turkey is only based on multiple choice questions which contains grammar, vocabulary, and reading skills, which makes the examination far from measuring English competency. These findings are compatible with the study by Özmen (2011) on the washback effect of ILE (Inter-Universities Foreign Language Examination). In his study, he found that candidates have negative attitudes towards ILE and this negative attitude can be attributed to the content and style of the test which is multiple choice.

Similarly, Karabulut (2007) conducted a study on university entrance examination in which she examined how foreign language component of the university entrance examination influences teachers and students, and he found that the students and teachers focus mostly on the grammar, reading, vocabulary and ignore the skills that are not tested. Consequently, Foreign Language Examination is remarkably mechanical which is based on memorization of the rules and it definitely prevent candidates from using the productive skills of language.

The second research question was about the factors affecting the candidate academicians' attitudes towards Foreign Language Examination. When the second open-ended questionnaire was analyzed, various factors were obtained about the attitudes of candidate academicians towards Foreign Language Examinations.

It was found that Foreign Language Examination's validity is debatable. Participants believed that FLT does only focus on reading, grammar and vocabulary and it does not measure language competency. In other words, being competent in multiple question technique, they believe that a person can attempt grammar and reading questions easily. As a result, when writing, speaking and listening is neglected this may result in the invalidity of the examination. In fact, this finding seems to be compatible with the part of literature.

Yıldırım (2010) conducted a study on the washback effects of English section of the University Entrance Exam on future English language teachers. He found that even though students spent most of their times in English classes, they barely or never focused on writing, reading and speaking skills. Instead, they mostly studied grammar, reading and vocabulary because this exam emphasizes these three skills, reading, grammar and vocabulary, and therefore most students think that the preparation process is not a valuable learning experience and they do not think it improves their overall language proficiency.

Candidates gave two different responses to the necessity of the examination. Those who support the necessity of the exam stated that Foreign Language Examination does improve their reading abilities and this is helpful for reading an article. In literature, this kind of positive result on the necessity of FLT was not encountered. The other candidates who believed the unnecessary of the exam claimed that Foreign Language Examination is a barrier to their career plans. Also it is a

serious obstacle to their social life. They complained of not being able to see their families even if they are in the same house because they have to study for the exam for hours. In addition, they can not meet their friends since they feel guilty when spending time with something apart from the studying. Thus this causes them to isolate from social life.

Studying for FLT is a very difficult and tiring process for them because they have to spend a lot of time memorizing the grammar rules and vocabulary. Especially, some of them believed being competent in multiple choice questions take a lot of time and energy. They also complain about going for language courses in the evenings after a very tiring and busy day at work and in the end they finish the day without learning anything. They feel that they pay money in vain.

In the light of the above, the results of this study indicate that Foreign Language Test has negative effects on university candidates. It is a fact that the demand for the undergraduate programs and the demand for having a good job opportunity are the increasing issues. It would not be useful to suggest the elimination of this examination. However, there is a serious need to think about some change in the examination which may be useful in terms of developing their language skills in a better way.

The study has some implications which need to be put into practice. First of all, necessary changes of Foreign Language Test can be made in terms of content and style. In the light of the findings of the study, it is evident that Foreign Language Examination conducted for Turkish students could be changed to measure four language skills. Özmen (2011) stated that FLT must be updated in parallel with IELTS and TOEFL because, apart from the national needs, being a part of Bologna process, which aim at improving learners' communicative competence, requires such change.

Secondly, it is important to note that reliability and validity are another issues which need to be dealt with. Foreign Language Test's validity is questionable for them, because they claim, it does not measure their proficiency of English. Accordingly, reliability and validity of this test must be improved and revised comprehensively.

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