B1 Plus Exam: A Key to Higher Education in Russia

A.V. Dolzhikova[1], N.V. Pomortseva[2], M.N. Kunovski[3], M.A. Bragina[4]

Abstract:

The use of open electronic courses is a relatively new tendency in education and it is not yet fully discovered by researchers. This article examines the specifics of the introduction of online courses, including the requirements to them, as well as factors that slow down their active development.

The following methods of investigation were used: analysis, synthesis, deduction and induction. As an example the Kozma Minin Nizhny Novgorod State Pedagogical University - Minin University was used. On the basis of the study of the "Regulations on the use of open courses in the educational activities of Minin University", it was noted, in addition to the functions of the coordination group on open education, that for the trainee at the end of the course, in the case of unsatisfactory result, the possibility of the recalculation is established.

This possibility is used not by every university. In the article we make a conclusion that open courses are a new qualitative step in the development of world education, but online courses would be much more effective as narrow-minded, adult-oriented, and deeply motivated for learning. Taken as the basis of research, Minin University showed that the university is ready for the implementation of online courses. It is one of the few universities that actively use open courses in Russia.

Keywords: Open Electronic Courses, Recalculation, System of Estimation, Educational Activities, Coordination Group on Open Education.

[1]Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Russian Federation
dolzhikovado@gmail.com
[2]Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Russian Federation,
pomortsevanv@mail.ru
[3]Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Russian Federation,
kunovski_mn@rudn.university
[4]Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Russian Federation,
bragina_ma@rudn.university

1. Introduction

The majority of international programs are in English. TOEFL (Test of English as a foreign language) internet based test and IELTS Academic (International English Language Test System) are probably the most popular exams. There are also international tests for the other European languages: the results of Test DAF and DSH are compulsory for studying in Germany, TCF and DELF/DALF results are necessary to study in France, DELE exam is a mandatory requirement for those who apply to Spanish universities or colleges.

Russia as well as other countries accepts many international students every year. To be enrolled in a university in Russia any foreign applicant has to prove the knowledge of the Russian language. TORFL-1 certificate (Test of Russian as a Foreign Language, 1st Certification level) is a common requirement both for the international students finishing their pre-university course and for the foreign applicants who studied Russian on their own. TORFL-1 corresponds to B1 level of the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR, 2001). Many universities provide a pre-university course with Russian as a foreign language classes and the general educational subjects (history as a compulsory subject for all the specialities; maths, chemistry, biology, physics, etc. depending on the chosen faculty). The students completing this program pass a course-leaving language exam and get TORFL-1 certificate. TORFL-1 is the most popular exam in the testing system for Russian as a foreign language. Despite its popularity, TORFL-1 as a pre-university course-leaving exam does not already meet the real needs of a foreign.

RUDN University authors' team put forward the idea to review and redesign the existing TORFL-1 as a pre-university course-leaving exam. The proposed new exam got the working title of 'B1 Plus Exam', or 'B1 Plus Test'; it is based on the structure and language requirements of the 1st Certification level of Russian as a Foreign Language, but the vocabulary scope is enlarged from 2300 to 3000 words by adding the academic and general scientific vocabulary units. B1 Plus Test checks not only the language proficiency; it is designed to assess problem solving and critical thinking that are necessary to succeed in one's studies. Proposed as a unified pre-university course-leaving exam, B1 Plus Test could become compulsory for the foreign applicants to be enrolled in a university in Russia. Now B1 Plus Exam is an innovative initiative, it is under pretesting and has not been implemented yet.

2. Literature Review

2.1 State of the literature

The problem of linguistic and cultural adaptation of foreign students of different fields of study through the language is relatively new in the Russian science. The problem of the necessity of the new academic-oriented language exam for

international students studying in Russia has not been yet discussed in the scientific literature.

2.2 Contribution of this paper to the literature

The current findings contribute to the area of making language education at the pre-university level efficient. The given paper is the only research of such a type in Russia that analyses the educational advantages of a new academic-oriented language course-leaving B1 Plus Exam.

2.3 Analysis of the Russian scientific and pedagogical literature

Special adaptation model has been efficiently used at RUDN University for more than 50 years: international students from many countries get their professional education in the Russian language after 1 year of language and general education disciplines studying (Pomortseva, 2009). Special attention is paid to the peculiarities of the language barrier overcoming, adaptation aspects of the language learning environment and its role in adaptation facilitating (Kulikova *et al.,* 2017; Akhmetshin *et al.,* 2017). The standardization of the language assessment and the language courses content starts with the development of the six-level Russian as a foreign language test system (TRFL). This test system has been successfully used in the practice of teaching Russian since 1998. It was officially recognized by the Association of Language Testers of Europe (ALTE) as being equivalent to the European system of levels of foreign language proficiency. The system developers relied on the vast theoretical, academic and methodical bases established through the theory and practice of teaching Russian as a foreign language over the last 60 years (Balykhina, 2009).

The original linguo-didactic interview test, introduced for foreign citizens applying for Russian citizenship, became a logical continuation of the development of State testing systems in Russia (Dolzhikova *et al.,* 2015). The interview test developers took into account the existing testing methods developed abroad and analyzed them to verify their effect and usability for testing Russian as a foreign language. The linguo-didactic interview test model served as a basis for the B1 Plus Test speaking tasks. The content of the traditional TORFL-1 exam and its language requirements are described and formalized in the official documents Language Requirements (Andriushina *et al.,* 2015) and Sample tests (Averyanova, 2000). The problem of the impact of the language exam scores upon the academic success and the adaptation to the Russian academic context has just come to investigation, bringing with it the discussion about the pre-university language course content and the final test format (Dolzhikova *et al.,* 2017).

2.4 Analysis of foreign researches

International scholars mention that there are not many studies examining the relationship between adaptation and academic self-efficacy. Studying the language problems of international students in technical colleges, Larter (1962) concludes that the main language difficulties can seriously jeopardise the success of the overseas student in further education. The students who do not have the necessary level of language proficiency are not able to fully participate in the training (Larter, 1962). The research made by Hill *et al.* (1999) shows that the exam scores (IELTS and TOEFL scores) cannot be considered as absolute predictors of academic failure or success. The latter research of another author shows a positive relationship of the exam scores with the academic performance (Feast, 2002). Language proficiency and academic self-efficacy greatly influence the psychological adjustment of graduate international students. "Psychological adaptation is a complex process, which includes multiple dimensions with different levels of predictors…" (Bulgan and Çiftçi, 2017).

Difference in educational systems and expectations, listening skills, professors' use of humor and examples, quantity of reading, direct writing styles, critical analyses, class participation, oral communication and vocabulary present difficulties. Weak language skills can influence social and academic success (Andrade, 2009). "Host language proficiency is generally considered an important variable in determining successful cross-cultural adjustment" (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005). Andrade (2009) analyses the influence of the language proficiency on social interaction of international students. The study focuses on the influence of English skills on academic, social life and overall adjustment. At the same time, research in the 1980s and 90s lead to the recognition that vocabulary knowledge is a precondition for most other language abilities (Roche and Harrington, 2013). Merki (2011) investigated the impact of state-wide exit exams on students' achievements. However, the target audience in her research was rather regular high-school leavers than the international students.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Theoretical base

The theoretical base for this research is the principles of language proficiency assessment and its quality (CEFR, 2001; Balykhina, 2009; Andriushina *et al.,* 2015), pedagogical test construction (Chelyshkova, 2002) and the testing strategy (Dolzhikova *et al.,* 2015). Analyzing and comparing the exam results, the exam developers' team relied on the works of Feast (2002), Palacio *et al.* (2016), Yang and Badger (2015), Hill *et al.* (1999). B1 Plus Exam is one-stage exam based on the TORFL-1 model. It is a complex non-computerized test consisting of 5 parts; the test structure correlates with the structure of a TORFL exam. The traditional exam content and its language requirements rely on the Language Requirements and Sample tests (Andriushina *et al.,* 2015; Averyanova, 2000). In comparison with the

traditional test, the content of the B1 Plus Test is more academic-oriented. Table 1 presents the comparison of the two exams, their similarities and differences.

Table 1: *The traditional TORFL exam and B1 Plus Exam compared.*

	Traditional TORFL-1	B 1 Plus Exam
Sub-tests (sections)	1. Reading 2. Writing 3. Vocabulary and Grammar 4. Listening 5. Speaking	1. Reading 2. Writing 3. Vocabulary and Grammar 4. Listening 5. Speaking
Answer type	Multiple choice, recorded oral responses (speaking), written responses	Multiple choice, recorded oral responses (speaking), written responses
format	Paper-based	Paper-based
assessment	Criterion-referenced	Criterion-referenced
scores	Standard score, percentile rank	Standard score, percentile rank
vocabulary	2300 words	3000 words (2300 +700 academic vocabulary words)
Duration (total)	3 hours 50 minutes	5 hours

3.2 Research methods

The authors used the pedagogical observation method, the survey among the students, the new test pretesting results analysis, the comparison of the test pretesting results with the results of a traditional course-leaving exam. The methods chosen for this study are a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005).

3.3 Experimental research base

B1 Plus Exam pretesting was arranged at RUDN University in December 2016 (the end of Semester 1) among the 1st year students who began studying at the university after finishing their pre-university Russian language course. The task they had to complete was a traditional TORFL-1 test in the reduced form with fewer tasks and no time limit. Cross-discipline items were added and state universities in Saint Petersburg, Tula, Ufa, and Belgorod. The pretest test-takers were pre-university course students from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe (n=480). These were the students of different fields of study. 350 students of RUDN University participated in the monitoring conducted before the pretesting. The monitoring task was successfully completed if the result was above 66 points. The successful completion rate by the faculties looks like this: Physics and Mathematics Faculty 90%; Agro-Technological Institute 92%; Institute of Medicine 93%; Institute of Economy 93%; Philological Faculty 93,5%; Law Institute 94%; Engineering Academy 94,4%; Ecology Faculty 100%. The authors conducted interviews (the respondents participated in the interviews voluntarily) among those who demonstrated low monitoring test results. 92 % of the respondents say they had trouble in adaptation to the academic process in Russia mostly because of the lack of

general academic vocabulary. The pretesting was conducted once to one group of students at one university. The students did not have a chance to exchange the opinions about the test, which made results more reliable. The test completion was not anonymous (the students put their names in the test papers), though the test results is confidential information available only for the test developers' group.

4. Results

The best results overall were demonstrated at Reading and Speaking Sub-Tests: positive results constitute 80% and 85%, respectively (the percentage is in relation to the total number of the candidates; the pass rate is 65% for each sub-test). As a whole, 50 % of the test takers successfully coped with the Writing Sub-Test. Vocabulary and Grammar Sub-Test was difficult for the students in the part where it was necessary to make sentence transformation; 60% of the test-takers did not experience difficulties coping with this task. Table 2 below summarizes the comparison results. The sample analyzed included 30 randomly selected students' papers (7 students from Guinea Bissau, 5 from China, 4 from Vietnam, 1 student from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkmenistan, Jordan, Lebanon, Kenya, Rwanda, Yemen, Sudan, South Korea and 2 students from Zambia).

Table 2: *Comparison results of the Sub-Test implementation rates*

Student's paper #	Listening B1 +	Listening TORFL-1	Voc.& Gr. B1 +	Voc.& Gr. TORFL-1	student's paper #	Listening B1 +	Listening TORFL-1	Voc.& Gr. B1 +	Voc.& Gr. TORFL-1
1	40	80	60	72	16	80	80	0	86
2	50	70	67	75	17	85	66	0	72
3	25	60	0	75	18	40	67	0	70
4	10	75	76	52	19	15	45	93	45
5	70	65	76	86	20	75	70	89	94
6	45	75	0	86	21	0	60	77	81
7	65	70	0	44	22	10	65	87	98
8	60	45	71	95	23	35	45	89	67
9	80	70	87	82	24	35	70	48	93
10	85	90	94	98	25	55	80	60	82
11	65	85	71	89	26	56	70	60	69
12	25	70	54	51	27	36	45	60	50
13	50	75	77	86	28	45	66	50	66
14	50	70	63	89	29	55	85	70	93
15	80	69	0	89	30	70	75	75	95
					average	49.7	68.6	55	79

The failures at the final exam (sub-test results being below 60%) were in many cases predictable in case of the low (below 45%) result at the pretest. The correlation between the pretesting and the traditional test results is direct. The Pearson

correlation coefficient (r) is 0.396 for Listening Sub-Test B1 Plus exam/ Listening Sub-Test TORFL-1 (moderate relationship) and 0.220 for Vocabulary and Grammar Sub-test B1 Plus Exam/Vocabulary and Grammar Sub-test TORFL-1 (weak relationship). The part with short news presentation and the extracts from a lecture (explanatory type monologue with scientific vocabulary) was the most difficult – only 10% of the test takers coped with these tasks with positive results. Surprisingly there were no science or engineering students among these 10%, though the vocabulary and the topic of the lecture were expected to be familiar for them.

Figure 1 demonstrates the summary result (representative sample of 200 randomly selected students' works) of the task that reflects the specifics of the academic and general scientific vocabulary in the pretest paper of the Listening part (lecture presentation with its specific delivery patterns: the pauses and hesitations of the natural speech, its tempo and intonation changes).

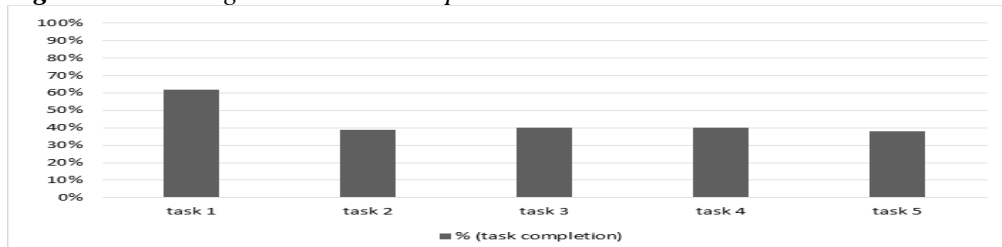**Figure 1:** *Listening Sub-test: lecture presentation*

Figure 2 presents the results of the transformation tasks completion (Vocabulary and Grammar Sub-test). The representative sample included 100 randomly selected students' works. Overall proportion of the students who did not cope with the transformation part of the vocabulary and Grammar Sub-test is 46% (36% were science and engineering students).

Figure 2: *Vocabulary and Grammar Sub-test: transformation tasks (items 101-120)*
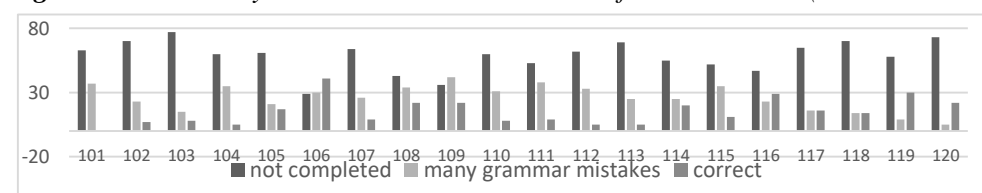

Figure 3 shows the Reading Sub-test completion. The representative sample includes 100 randomly selected students' works (first approbation variant of the test). Items 2-3 relate to the tasks for general understanding of small texts, items 4-8 are related to the tasks for general understanding of the text (yes/no statements). Items 10-15 relate to the tasks that check the ability of a student to combine several reading strategies while dealing with a big text (600 words).

Figure 3: *Reading Sub-test completion.*
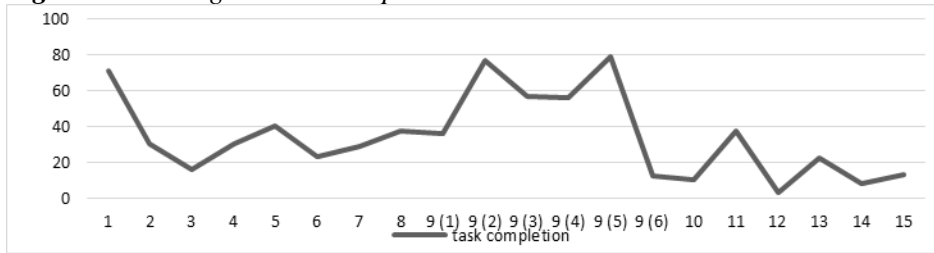
5. Discussion

The vast majority of participants expressed their satisfaction toward the new exam. Two groups (50 candidates each) stayed late to complete the tasks, exceeding the proposed time limit. At two universities that participated in the pretest the students (80 candidates, 100% engineering students) were not able to do the Listening and Writing Sub-tests in the parts requiring the ability to put down the information from the lectures and then to transform it into the coherent and integrated text. They also did not show good results in Speaking Sub-tests in the part concerning the ability to evaluate an argument. Designing curriculum-related items could have an impact on some instructional and assessment practices: contextualized, criterion-based assignments and assessments elicit grammatical responses appropriate to a given context (Palacio *et al.,* 2016). The content and quality of the exam directly influences the quality of pre-university language course thus making the adaptation to the educational environment more successful.

6. Conclusion

The authors are sure that B1 Plus Exam has a big academic potential; the ambitious objective is to make it a unified pre-university course-leaving language exam all over Russia. It will allow the most 'language-vulnerable' categories of students (non-linguistic fields of study, such as engineering and science students) get the most of their pre-university course. Nevertheless, the given study is not without any limitations. The findings present only a small part of a much larger picture of the new B1 Plus Exam perspectives. The authors are planning to continue their research.

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