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Organization and Conducting of the Russian Unified State Examination in English: the Experience of Tomsk Region

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Abstract

The article deals with some topical issues in the current pedagogical practice-organization and conducting of the Russian Unified State Examination (USE) in English in Tomsk region. The USE in foreign languages constitutes one of the elements of the regional system of education quality assessment which includes the training of experts, formation of the Subject Commission and a variety of arrangements. The monitoring procedures are discussed. The author has provided the results of the USE in Tomsk region over a period of 2010-2014, a detailed analysis of the attainment level of students and an estimation of the efficiency of educational arrangements.

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1. Introduction

The Unified State Exam (USE) in Tomsk Region has been administered on a regular basis for 5 years already after several years of trial administration. The experience accumulated in the Region over the past years enables us to state that the introduction of the USE made it possible to consider both the system of education quality and the system of education quality assessment from a new angle. In this article we understand education quality (A complex project of the education modernization: the regional system of the quality assessment, 2013) as being an integral characteristic of the system of basic education. This characteristic reflects the degree of conformity of educational programs, the conditions of educational processes and the actually achieved educational results to state

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normative requirements and social services commissioning which was formed by the educational industry consumers. The introduction of the USE allowed the ascertaining of new target groups of the above consumers - students and their parents; school teachers and university lecturers; educational services and the system of educators' career development; public education authorities; employers; mass media and other social institutions. Such a great variety of consumers of the information about the USE allows us to specify the understanding of education quality monitoring (A complex project of the education modernization: the regional system of the quality assessment, 2013) as the ascertainment of the degree (level) of conformity of students' educational results, educational programs, conditions of exercising of the educational process to the widely recognized reference standards and requirements enshrined in normative documents.

The USE is a part of the regional education quality monitoring system. The objective of the present article is to consider the USE in the context of the regional education quality monitoring system. This need has been stipulated by the current changes aimed at the development and normative consolidation of new views on modern conditions and final results of educational activities. These new changes lead to constant enlargement of the range of new criteria and indicators for the education quality assessment on the regional and municipal levels, and in educational establishments.

The purpose of the experimental activity in the sphere of organization and conducting of the USE on the territory of Tomsk Region is the development of methodological support for the adequate evaluation of students' knowledge of English. The above activity involves the training of experts, formation of the Subject Commission, working out of new methodological recommendations for the training of students for the USE and evaluation of the examination results.

2. Monitoring procedure

2.1. Experts' training

The organization of the experts' training reflects the specific peculiarities of the region, its workforce capacity, economic perspectives and the experience in conducting the USE in different subjects. The Education Quality Assessment Centre formed on the platform of the Tomsk Regional Institute for Educators' Training and Retraining, and the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Tomsk regional USE in English Commission are involved in the process of experts' training.

The training of experts of the USE in English in Tomsk Region is aimed at the formation and development of professional competence of specialists in the field of monitoring and evaluation of the USE tasks. To achieve the goal, the following tasks are to be realized within the framework of experts' training:

- .to promote understanding by the experts of the role of the USE during the current period of creating an all-Russian system of education quality assessment;
- to promote the educators' formation of a system of basic theoretical and methodological knowledge about the modern technologies for the evaluation of current educational achievements, about the content of normative documents regulating the procedure of checking and evaluation of pupils' answers at the USE;
- to encourage the formation of the notion about the structure and content of monitoring and assessing materials in the English language; the purpose of various tasks ("Listening", "Reading", "Writing" etc.), the principles and methods of their creation;
- to promote the formation of the following skills: to work with the corresponding instructions; to check and evaluate Part C ("Writing") in which a school leaver must use his/her creativity; to fill in the checking protocol according to all the technical requirements.

The work being done in the sphere of experts' training in Tomsk Region falls in line with the all-Russian conception of the regional training of experts (Verbitskaya & Makhmuryan, 2014 a) , building a network of skilled professionals.

The form of the organization of the USE experts' training includes lectures and tutorials as well as self-directed learning and tests. The lectures, tutorials and self-directed learning are organized according to the teaching and learning materials for the chairmen and members of the Regional Subject Commissions which are annually published by the Federal Service of Supervision in the sphere of Education and Science and the Federal Institute of Pedagogical Measurements (Verbitskaya & Makhmuryan, 2014 a, 2014 b). The lecture course provides information about the normative legal basis of the USE - a standardized test, the content of monitoring and measuring materials, checking technology and assessment; the classification of typical assessment problems and the recommendations on their identification and elimination. This input from lectures and reading encourages experts to consider the most urgent problems at the tutorials where we use a team based work or work in small groups and everyone has opportunities for discussion.

The aims of the tutorials are: 1) to practice various skills in evaluating the C Part of the USE and 2) to analyze the works which cause some difficulties and cause arguments among the experts. Such a training of experts seems to be the most productive because it gives an opportunity to discuss the maximum number of debatable works. Moreover, this helps to develop some uniform approaches to the assessment that promote the qualitative work of the Subject Commission during the examination. The organization of tutorials adheres to the following pattern: 1) quality control and item analysis, 2) analysis of the assessment criteria and specifications, 3) development of assessing skills, purposes, principles and technique, 4) opportunities for discussion of all possible options, arguments, examples, etc., 5) analysis of authentic students' works.

The above sequence of a tutorial is very productive as it allows modelling of the checking procedure in real exam conditions. The effective organization of tutorials increases the uniformity of checking during the USE examination. The Part C "Writing" consists of two items: C1- a personal letter and C2 - a composition and is checked by two experts of the Regional Subject Commission. In the case of assessment disparity the pupil's work is checked by the third expert. The greater the number of works for the third checking, the less effective the work of the Commission.

The realization of the practice-oriented component in the course of experts' training is achieved in the conditions when every expert is provided with a set of printed materials and handbooks. Information and Communication Technology, which helps to optimize the exam checking procedure and the technology of filling in the protocols, is also used in Tomsk Region. These technologies are applied not only in the tutorial course and self-directed learning, but in final tests for the USE experts. Members of the Tomsk Regional Subject Commission in English (of whom there are currently 35) are selected according to the results of federal computer-based testing.

2.2. Data collection

The total number of the participants of the USE in English throughout the last 5 years when this exam became compulsory indicates the increasing tendency in 2012-2014 after the fall in 2011: in 2010 -283, 2011 – 242, 2012 – 265, 2013 - 269 and in 2014 - 278. It is necessary to stress the effectiveness of the existing regional system of preparing students for the exam (Table 1).

Awarding USE grades involves two stages. In this system, a "primary grade" is the sum of points for completed tasks, with each of the tasks having a maximum number of points allocated to it. The maximum total primary grade varies by subject. The primary grades are then converted into final or "test grades" by means of a sophisticated statistical calculation, which takes into account the distribution of primary grades among the examinees.

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Table 1. The level of qualifications of the USE (English) participants in Tomsk region in 2010-2014 years (Petrashova, Savitskaya & Agafonova, 2010, Statistical results of the Unified State Exam in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014)

Groups of examinees	Primary grades	Test grades	Results (in %)				
			2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Below the minimum level	0 - 15	0 – 19	3,84	1,24	1,48	0, 75	2, 85
Basic level (A2+)	16 – 40	20 – 50	25,50	45,23	26,76	12, 73	24, 91
Higher level (B1)	41 – 64	51 – 80	56,40	36,10	51,67	45, 76	28, 47
Proficiency in English (B2)	65 - 80	81 - 100	13,80	17,43	20,81	40, 73	43, 77

According to the criteria of the achievements' evaluation adopted in the USE in English the group "Below the minimum level" includes those examinees who did not attain the required level in any types of the speech activity. The students from the "Basic level" group can understand simple authentic texts and can write a personal letter, but they cannot use complicated lexico-grammatical constructions and have difficulties with the understanding of large texts. Those in the "Higher level" group show their skills in understanding texts of different genres and types mainly based on language material with a high degree of frequency. They can write coherent texts where they express their personal impressions and feelings. But they come across difficulties when they have to argue and express some compensatory skills and use a contextual guess. The students from the "Proficiency in English" group can be characterized by the ability to read and listen to complicated texts with a detailed argumentation and an emotional author's position. They have a good vocabulary and use various grammar structures. Thus, according to the table above we see the increase in the number of the "Basic level" and "Proficiency in English" in Tomsk Region in 2014. This can be explained by the fact that school teachers are more involved in the process of acquiring knowledge about the organization, conducting and assessment of the USE in English. Besides evaluating the achievements of schools, carrying out analytical work and developing school rankings the Education Quality Assessment Centre of Tomsk Region is involved in disseminating language assessment and testing expertise among teachers. The Tomsk Regional Institute for Educators' Training and Retraining organizes seminars for teachers where the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Tomsk Regional USE in English Commission help teachers understand modern approaches to testing and assessment. They share their knowledge, acquired experience and collected materials, provide teachers with reliable information about testing and assessment and with guidelines on how to help students prepare for the high-stake examination.

3. Conclusion

The Unified State Exam is used for student selection and certification purposes, but a variety of other uses have been attached to it, including informing pedagogy, ensuring accountability, and monitoring the quality of education. The USE in English is appropriate to get a general assessment of school leavers' achievements provided the process is conducted in a transparent way that involves unified, reliable and valid standards for the assessment of attained language skills. Using these clear criteria qualified experts assess applicants' knowledge, creativity, independent thinking and ability to analyze and draw conclusions. It is also necessary to provide teachers with training in language testing and assessment because tests give valuable feedback on pupils' language skills, which will ultimately lead to more effective language teaching and learning in the classroom.

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