

Is The Michigan Test An Adequate Tool For Placement At The University of Qatar

Dr. Noor Sultan Aleasa

Introduction:

The English Department at Qatar University is one of the most popular departments in the university in which students like to enroll. To enable students to cope with the requirements of the department, and to be able to learn and use the English language, the department requires that students must pass an entrance exam. This entrance exam must perform as a monitor for the criterion of accepting students in the English Department. Therefore, the English department accepts students to be majors of English on the basis of passing an entrance exam. The entrance exam used is the Michigan Placement Test Battery.

When using a test for any purpose, it is important to find out whether the test is reliable and valid. The Michigan Placement Test (MT) has been considered both reliable and valid. Many applied linguists tried to evaluate Michigan Tests. Some say that they lack scientific validity and reliability. Others warn that they are outdated and misused. Some linguists say that Michigan Tests have positive points such as the length of the time it has been used which gives language institutions enough data worth studying.

In a study by Egbert and Jessup (1991), implications were drawn about (MT). All of these implications are negative such as the test not being correctly used; it is not an accurate indicator of performance in the level of placement; language theory changes concerning teaching are not considered in the test; and that the test does not measure students progress in language accurately.

Other linguists suggest further research is necessary to evaluate (MT). Madsen (1990:31-32) reports that (MT) is a standardized ESL test which is used in the USA, he states:

"... we strongly recommend against using these for placement purposes. In fact, the University of Michigan bulletin recently indicated that these retired subsets (the MTLEP and MTAC) are not considered adequate for initial admissions screening purposes, as they do not constitute the entire battery; moreover, they may not be secure. They can be useful to institutions for measuring students progress through ESL instructional programs".

Statement of the Problem:

Qatar University (QU) uses the above mentioned (MT) exam as an entrance basis for the English department. Although there are problems with this test, still it has been used for more than 30 years in the USA.

The Michigan Placement Test Battery for English, (M1), tests the areas of Listening Comprehension, Grammar, Vocabulary, and Reading Comprehension. In the first two semesters, the Department of English at (QU) offers four courses in English dealing with the areas of Listening Comprehension and Spoken English in one course (BE 122 in the first semester and BE 123 in the second semester), Grammar and Vocabulary in another course (BE 124 in the first semester and BE 125 in the second semester), Reading Comprehension and Writing in a third course (BE 120 in the first semester and BE121 in the second semester), and Study Skills in the fourth course (BE 126 in the first semester and BE 127 in the second semester).

It is presupposed that the Michigan Placement Test (MT) has a strong relationship with the English language courses offered by the Department of English at Qatar University. Therefore, the (MT) is used as an entrance exam since it measures the skills and areas taught in the English Department at (QU) especially in the first year. (MT) measures the skills of listening and reading as well as the areas of grammar and vocabulary. While the English language courses offered by the English Department at (QU) in the first year deal with listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary, and study skills (not measured by MT). Therefore, it is expected that students

with higher placement scores to be more successful in the English courses, and that those who obtain lower test scores to be less successful in the English courses at (QU). The correlation between the test scores and the course grades should be high and positive.

Questions of the Study:

This study attempts to investigate the following questions:

- (1) Is Michigan Placement Test (MPT) an adequate basis for accepting students as English majors?
- (2) Is there any relationship between the different areas that are tested in the (MPT) and the courses which are offered in the first two semesters by the English Department at (QU)?
- (3) Is it time to use another (ESL) or (EFL) test as an entrance exam for the English Department at (QU)?

Importance of this Study:

This study is important for the following reasons:

- (1) It can present the points of weakness and strength in the test as used at the University of Qatar.
- (2) It can show the relationship between what is being measured in the test and what is being taught in the English Department with respect to language skills.
- (3) The results of the study can help in deciding whether to keep using this test as an entrance exam for the Department or to look for a more appropriate one.

Definitions of Terms:

Several terms are used frequently to report the study, and it is appropriate to define them:

- (1) **Listening Comprehension:** This is a language skill concerned with understanding and comprehending what is being uttered or spoken in the language on one hand, and how to respond to it on the other hand (whether in writing or speaking).

- (2) **Grammar and Vocabulary:** This component deals with the skill that concerns the knowledge and usage of the grammar and vocabulary of a language .
- (3) **Reading Comprehension:** This language skill deals with understanding and comprehending what is being written on one hand, and how to respond to it on the other hand (whether it is writing or speaking).
- (4) **(MT):** The Michigan Test.

Method of the Study:

This study is analytically descriptive. It depends on a case present in the level of students enrolled in the English Department. It is an attempt to diagnose in order to reach a way of improving or solving the shortcomings of the test.

Subjects:

The sample data used for this purpose were (62) women students of the 1992 class who took the (C) form of the (MT). The population of the data varies in the different comparisons due to the fact that some of the students missed taking a final exam at the end of the first semester, or because some students failed some of the first semester courses which are pre-requisites for the some of the second semester courses.

Data:

The data for this analysis were divided into two main categories:

- (1) The scores of (MT) for each skill or area were taken separately as follows:
 - a- listening comprehension scores,
 - b- grammar and vocabulary scores, and
 - c- reading comprehension scores.Each of these divisions test scores were compared against the matching course grades for the first and second semester. Consequently, the (MT) listening comprehension scores were

correlated with grades of courses BE 122¹ in the first semester and BE 123 in the second semester; the (MT) grammar and vocabulary test scores were correlated with the grades of courses BE 124 in the first semester and BE 125 in the second semester; and the (MT) reading comprehension test scores were correlated with the grades of courses BE 120 in the first semester, and BE 121 in the second semester. The study skills course grade results were excluded from this study because there is no existing match to be correlated with in (MT).

- (2) The (MT) scores were interpreted against the guidelines set by the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan. The guidelines indicate the levels of students based on the test's score.

These guideline areas follows:

Level	Test Score
Advanced	85 - 100
Advanced (low)	75 - 84
Intermediate	61 - 74
Intermediate (low)	48 - 60
Beginner (high)	47 - 30
Beginner	29 - 00

The population of the data consists of (62) women students who took the (C) form of the (MT) and were accepted in the English Departments as majors.

The frequency for their levels is as follows:

¹ See Appendix (1) for course descriptions.

Level	Number of Students	%
Advanced	2	3.34
Advanced (low)	4	6.45
Intermediate	16	25.80
Intermediate (low)	36	58.06
Beginner (high)	4 ²	6.45

Total	62	99.99

Statistical Analysis:

Pearson correlations were calculated for the data in an attempt to answer the 1st and 2nd questions of the study. The correlations were calculated in the following order:

- (1) (MT) test scores and grades of the first semester courses for all students. (Table 1)
- (2) (MT) test scores and grades of the second semester courses for all students. (Table 2)
- (3) (MT) test scores at each level designed by the Language Institute at the University of Michigan and the grades of the first semester Listening Comprehension course (Table 3), Grammar and Vocabulary course (Table 4) and Reading Comprehension course. (Table 5)
- (4) (MT) test scores at each level designed by the Language Institute at the University of Michigan and the grades of the second semester Listening Comprehension course (Table 6), Grammar and Vocabulary course (Table 7) and Reading Comprehension course. (Table 8)

² The level at which the English Department at (QU) accepts students as majors is Intermediate (low) or higher. Yet in the class of 1992 (4) students who scored 47 at (MT) were accepted at the Beginner (high) level as classified by the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan. The justification for their acceptance was based on the fact that they have a high-school of 80% or higher, which entails that they have the potentials to survive as English majors.

Results and Discussion:

Correlations between the overall (MT) scores and course grades were high and positive for two areas which are listening comprehension and grammar & vocabulary for both the first and second semesters. However, the correlation between (MT) reading comprehension scores and the matching course grades were low but positive which means that there is a relation but not of great significance. (See Tables 1 & 2)

Table (1)

(MT) Scores and 1st Semester Course Grades Correlations

Skills	Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance
Listening Compre.	61	0.845 ³	0.01
Gram. & Vocab.	62	0.722 ⁴	0.01
Reading Compre.	62	0.131	Non-Significant

Table (2)

(MT) Scores and 2nd Semester Course Grades Correlations

Skills	Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance
Listening Compre.	55	0.845 ⁵	0.01
Gram. & Vocab.	52	0.726 ⁶	0.01
Reading Compre.	47	0.085	Non-Significant

³ r is significant when > 0.354 .

⁴ r is significant when > 0.325 .

⁵ r is significant when > 0.354 .

⁶ r is significant when > 0.354 .

Nevertheless, when the (MT) scores were correlated with the different courses, but according to each of the student levels, which were assigned by the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan, the correlations proved the above results. See (Tables 3, 4 & 5) for the first semester and (Tables 6, 7 & 8) for the second semester.

Table (3)

MT Listening Comprehension Scores Against BE 122 Grades

Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance	% of Stud.	Level of Students
2	0.997	-	3.27	Advanced
4	0.993	0.01 ⁷	6.55	" (Low)
16	0.912	0.01 ⁸	26.29	Intermediate
35	0.711	0.01 ⁹	57.37	" (Low)
4	0.934	0.05 ¹⁰	6.55	Begin.(High)

⁷ r is significant when > 0.990.

⁸ r is significant when > 0.623.

⁹ r is significant when > 0.449.

¹⁰ r is significant when > 0.950

Table (4)

MT Grammar & Vocabulary Scores Against BE 124 Grades

Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance	% of Stud.	Level of Students
2	0.995	-	3.22	Advanced
4	0.940	0.05 ¹¹	6.45	" (Low)
16	0.797	0.01 ¹²	25.80	Intermediate
36	0.484	0.01 ¹³	58.06	" (Low)
4	-0.695	Non-Signif.	6.45	Begin.(High)

Table (5)

MT Reading Comprehension Scores Against BE 120 Grades

Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance	% of Stud.	Level of Students
2	0.998	-	3.22	Advanced
4	0.626	Non-Signif.	6.45	" (Low)
16	-0.078	Non-Signif.	25.80	Intermediate
36	-0.233	Non-Signif.	58.06	" (Low)
4	-0.684	Non-Signif.	6.45	Begin.(High)

¹¹ r is significant when > 0.950 .

¹² r is significant when > 0.623 .

¹³ r is significant when > 0.418 .

Table (6)

MT Listening Comprehension Scores Against BE 123 Grades

Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance	% of Stud.	Level of Students
2	0.999	-	3.63	Advanced
3	0.995	-	5.45	" (Low)
14	0.894	0.01 ¹⁴	25.45	Intermediate
32	0.758	0.01 ¹⁵	58.18	" (Low)
4	0.829	Non-Signif.	7.27	Begin.(High)

Table (7)

MT Grammar & Vocabulary Scores Against BE 125 Grades

Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance	% of Stud.	Level of Students
2	0.986	-	3.84	Advanced
3	0.986	-	5.76	" (Low)
14	0.855	0.01 ¹⁶	26.92	Intermediate
29	0.542	0.01 ¹⁷	55.76	" (Low)
4	-0.551	Non-Signif.	7.69	Begin.(High)

¹⁴ r is significant when > 0.661 .

¹⁵ r is significant when > 0.419 .

¹⁶ r is significant when > 0.661 .

¹⁷ r is significant when > 0.470 .

Table (8)

MT Reading Comprehension Scores Against BE 121 Grades

Number of Students (n)	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Degree of Significance	% of Stud.	Level of Students
2	0.995	-	4.25	Advanced
3	0.722	-	6.38	" (Low)
13	0.055	Non-Signif.	27.65	Intermediate
25	-0.821	Non-Signif.	53.19	" (Low)
4	-0.864	Non-Signif.	8.51	Begin.(High)

It is worth mentioning here that when the data population is three or less, no significance can be drawn from this particular sample due to the small size of the data.

The correlations between (MT) listening comprehension scores and the matching courses from the English Department at (QU) for all student levels were high and positive for the first semester (Table 3) for about 96.76% of the population of the data. This means that there is a relation between the course offered by the English department and the skill measured. This means that what is being measured in (MT) is related to what is being taught in the same area at (QU) in the first semester. On the other hand, when (MT) scores were correlated to the listening comprehension course grades for the second semester for all student levels only the Intermediate and Intermediate (Low) levels showed significant correlations (Table 6). This means that there is significance for only 73.63% of data population. Still the correlation is high and positive. The interpretation of this result can be explained by the fact that teaching English in the pre-university levels is heavily dependant on the listening and speaking component of the language.

In the second area measured by (MT), grammar & vocabulary, the correlations for the different levels of students show different results. For the first semester (Table 4), correlations are significant for the Advanced (low), and Intermediate and the Intermediate (low) levels. The percentage of students in the sample at these

levels is 90% of the total. The last level, Beginner (high), the correlations are very low and negative which means that it is insignificant. As for the second semester the correlations between (MT) grammar & vocabulary scores and the course taught at (QU) the following can be inferred from (Table 7). The Advanced and Advanced (low) levels show no significance because of the small size of their data populations. Only the Intermediate and Intermediate levels of the data about 82.68% of students indicate a significant correlation of positive and fairly high. For both semesters the correlations show notable relationship between what (MT) measures and what is taught at (QU).

The last area measured by (MT), reading comprehension, shows a third result when correlated to the matching course at (QU) for the different levels. For the first semester (Table 5) the Advanced level does not count since it has low data population. The rest of the data population show no significant correlation at any level. The same result applies for the second semester correlation in the same area (Table 8). This indicates that there is no relation between what is measured in (MT) and what is at (QU) in this area. The data shows that (MT) does not measure the students current standards in the skills that students will study later on.

Is time to use another ESL or EFL test as an entrance exam for the English Department at (QU)? From this study, which provides sufficient data about (MT) usage at (QU), it is obvious that (MT) is an accurate indicator for student performance in the listening comprehension area only and it is a significant indicator for the area of grammar & vocabulary. As for the last area, reading comprehension, the correlations show no significance (very low) for this component which is inadequate to indicate student performance. It can be asserted here that this test, (MT), is an inadequate test to be used as an entrance exam for the English Department. The assertion is based on the fact that (MT) is an accurate indicator for only one component of the language, that is the listening comprehension, for all students; and that (MT) can indicate indicatively the performance of students for the second component. Although (MT) is an accurate indicator of performance with all of its parts only to those students who are classified as Advanced and Advanced (low), and who constitute

about 10% of the population of the data, these levels could not be accounted for because they are composed from a small data populations which could not give statistically accurate results. The correlations for the Beginner level of students were almost always low and many cases negative, this is an indicator that students of this level should not be admitted to the English Department because of irrelevant performance. In addition (MT) failed profoundly in the area of Reading Comprehension because no correlations of significance could be drawn in relation to what is taught at (QU) in this area; and hence it is not a performance indicator. This makes it an inadequate entrance exam to be used at (QU).

Recommendations:

From the above mentioned study it is implied that it is time to think about a more appropriate entrance exam which will give satisfactory indications of student performance in relation to the courses taught at (QU). The English Department should try to find a test which is more suitable for this purpose such as MELAB the relatively new Michigan English Language Assessment Battery or CELT the Comprehensive English Language Test. Further studies should be carried out to find out whether to adjust course contents in the department so that (MT) would measure what is taught in the department; or to keep using (MT) as is with the addition of another reading comprehension filter.

A department self-devised test would not be appropriate for entrance purposes because the entrance exam must be internationally recognized and approved.

Appendix (1)

English Department Course Description

BE 120:

This course is a holistic language course focusing on reading and writing skills. The reading approach is not separated from writing, but can be divided into 3 main areas: detailed intensive reading of model texts for reconstruction in writing (this does not mean literal reproduction); extensive reading of simplified classics leading to summary writing and sentence coordination work as well as question formation; extensive reading from the department library of simplified readers leading to book reviews and class presentations. In addition to the writing tasks that are based on the reading, students do exercises from an intermediate level language course involving sentence construction and do regular home-based written assignments planning, writing and redrafting 150 word compositions. These are normally narrative or descriptive in nature.

BE 121:

This course is a continuation of BE 120, but focuses more on the reading based writing tasks and has a more demanding reading component as there is a specialized writing course in the second semester. The language work now focuses on post-intermediate grammar, including a thorough review of reported speech and more complex tense coordination.

BE 122:

This course, which normally takes place in the language lab, can be sub-divided into four main areas: pronunciation work in basic segmental and suprasegmental phonology done from tapes in the lab; listening work from audio and video texts used in BE 120; discussion topics in round-table group sessions; individual and group spoken presentation in front of the whole class.

BE 123:

This course is a continuation of BE 122, at a progressively higher level. It is divided into the same four major areas, but the phonology section now focuses on supra-segmental exercises.

BE 124:

This course gives intensive practical work in intermediate level grammar and most common fields of vocabulary. It

counterbalances the holistic nature of BE 120 by isolating areas of grammar and vocabulary then teaching them intensively in order to provide explicit knowledge of grammatical terminology and a frame of reference for other teachers to refer to the other courses.

BE 125:

It is a continuation of BE 124. It progressively extends to post-intermediate grammar, focusing on more complex sentences and more abstract vocabulary fields.

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