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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTING IN *MOODLE*: STEP TOWARDS UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA LANGUAGE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract. Along with globalisation, university internalisation has taken place, leading to the support for the national and foreign language policies in universities. This has resulted in the expansion of English as a *lingua franca* of academia. The aims of this study were to discuss the results of the focused descriptive study aimed at obtaining information on the *status quo* of the students' English language proficiency level at the University of Latvia (UL) and the feasibility of the introduction of an in-house *Moodle*-based testing introduction into the learning process at the UL. The piloted test results demonstrate that generally the students have an appropriate English language proficiency level for academic studies at the UL at all degree levels, although exhibiting limitations in writing and some limitations in listening skills. It has also been concluded that *Moodle*-based online language testing is helpful to meet the language policy goals set out at the University of Latvia.

Key words: English language testing, *Moodle,* University of Latvia, language policy, focused descriptive study

INTRODUCTION

The University of Latvia (UL) has joined the intra-European academic community and has, thus, committed itself to all EU education policy initiatives, for instance, the adoption of a degree system and a system of comparable degrees, the promotion of academic staff, researcher and student mobility, the implementation of quality assurance as well as the promotion of multilingualism (*Latvijas Universitātes Valodu politika*, 2010). The latter is in line with the White Paper on *Teaching and learning: towards the learning society* (1996), which states that each EU citizen should be competent in three official EU languages, that is, one must know two languages in addition to the mother tongue. The UL promotes the use and preservation of Latvian as the national language as well as supports a wider application of foreign languages in academia.

English has become the *lingua franca* of higher education (e.g. Brumfit, 2004), and its dominant role in the linguistic landscape of higher education has affected the language policy at universities, including the UL.

Since technological development is not only enabling new ways of communication, but also transforming the ways of language learning and testing in

higher education, the use of the English language as well as the application of technologies have become crucial in higher education.

Proficiency in English is a factor contributing to the implementation of language policy initiatives, and this calls for a potentially wide range of English language skills which arise out of various academic tasks which students of the UL may have to perform in English.

It is assumed that first year undergraduate students already have a certain English language level to be able to function in the academic context where English language skills are required. The Secondary Education Standards (*MK noteikumi,* 2013) state that level B2 or C1 (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 2001 (henceforth the *CEFR*)) should be reached when leaving the secondary school. In order to implement the UL language policy in practice, it is of utmost importance that all level students have the expected English language proficiency to be able to carry out academic tasks in English as prescribed in their academic programmes and documented in UL order No 1/184 concerning foreign language studies at the UL. According to this order, students have to acquire an English for specific purposes course (three or six ECTS) and are encouraged to take additional English language proficiency development courses (*LU rīkojums 1/184*, 2015). Taking the above mentioned preconditions into account, it is expected that undergraduate students' language proficiency shall normally be B2 in each of the four skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking). The UL is obliged to propose study courses and study modules in English as well as promote them in all study programmes at all levels (*Latvijas Universitātes Valodu politika*, 2010). The key performance indicators in the UL Strategic Plan (2010–2020) determine that not less than 15 per cent of study courses should be delivered in a foreign language by 2016 and not less than 50 per cent – by 2020 respectively (*LU Stratēģiskais plāns* 2010–2020).

Therefore, this study pursues the following goals: the first one is to investigate the students' English language proficiency level at the UL, and the second – to explore the feasibility of the introduction of an in-house *Moodle* (Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment)-based test into the learning process at the UL.

In order to achieve the goals, a focused descriptive study has been conducted in order to obtain information about bachelor's, master's and doctoral students' English language proficiency level and pilot the English language proficiency test placed within the *Moodle* learning management system (LMS) from the *Pearson Test of English (General)* open access practice test paper collection.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Alongside with the increasing role of the English language proficiency in the promotion of academic staff, researcher and student mobility, scholars have brought out the growing significance of learning management systems (LMSs)

in foreign language teaching and testing (e.g. Koyama and Akiyama, 2009; Godwin-Jones, 2012).

LMS application was a novel practice for a range of tertiary institutions at the end of the 20th and even at the beginning of the 21st century when the most influential LMSs were two commercial applications *WebCT* and *Blackboard*. *WebCT* was used at the UL in 2002 within the framework of the E-University Project, the long-term goal of which was e-course creation to initiate blended studies. Meanwhile, open source LMSs (e.g. *Sakai*, *ATutor*) were developed among which *Moodle*, created by Martin Dougiamas in 2002, swiftly gained popularity (see Cole and Foster, 2007: 1–4). The main advantages of this cost-free LMS are summarised by Godwin-Jones (2012: 5) in his overview of LMS use in language teaching. In addition to Moodle technical advantages, Godwin-Jones explains that Moodle is based on modules or blocks that enable users to add any of the available resources and activities (e.g. assignments, forums, wikis) and tailor these arrangements according to particular language teaching needs.

The E-studies project group at the UL (see Voitkāns, 2008) had explored and summarised *Moodle* LMS application advantages and experience gained by other universities. Due to the Moodle advantages, all e-courses of the UL were transferred to this LMS five years after its *WebCT* application and the transition to *Moodle* was completed in 2008.

Topical issues of LMS application in language testing and the benefits of computer adaptive testing (CAT) in comparison with the conventional testing procedures have been discussed, for example by Brown and Dunkel. Brown (1997: 45) has emphasised several advantages of CAT: computers are more accurate at scoring selected response test items, reporting the scores and providing immediate feedback; different tests for each student can be used; students can work at their own pace and may consider that CATs are more friendly because the questions are presented one at a time on the screen, not as multiple test items in a booklet. On the other hand, Brown (ibid.) and Dunkel (1999: 87) have drawn attention to the issues that have to be considered in the case of CAT handling: the unreliability of computer equipment and possible computer and system capacity limitations (especially in the case of graphs and multimedia use that is also revealed by Alimin's (2014) *Moodle's* features assessment for delivering TOEFL based English course) as well as students' familiarity level variations with the testing system and anxiety about its use.

Moodle LMS modules have already been applied by researchers in CAT, for example by Koyama and Akiyama (2009). They have addressed the above-mentioned CAT application issues and reported on the piloting results of in-house English for specific purposes placement test in the *Moodle* LMS. The piloting revealed that the CAT module application could reduce work load required for the placement test.

The growing need for students' English language proficiency and in-house testing at the UL as well as the LMS global and UL institutional application

experience have urged *Moodle*-based English language proficiency test (according to the CEFR levels B2–C2) piloting and the involvement of students in skills-based self-assessment of their English language ability (according to the self-assessment types discussed by Edele et al. (2015)) to elicit the current state of students' language proficiency at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels and the students' attitude to taking the test in the *Moodle* module.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the goals set at the beginning of the research, a focused descriptive study was implemented with the research focus on the English language proficiency level measured by Pearson Test of English (PTE) General, following Larsen-Freeman and Long's (1991: 17) theoretical considerations. The research was based on multiple sources of evidence, including the review of theoretical literature, documentary analysis, language self-assessment, tests and interviews. It used both the direct (naturally occurring) data yielded from the analysis of 24 PTE tests completed in the *Moodle* LMS module and the indirect data obtained from the interviews conducted to come to the data which 'are essentially free-standing or independent of the (discourse of the) interviewer/moderator' (Litosseliti, 2010: 158). Thus, in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the research, the following validation strategies were undertaken:

1. Response validity as the results were obtained during the following response processes: the skills focused English language self-assessment and responses to items in English language tests.
2. Content-related validation, that is the tools were appropriate for the intended use, in particular, the assessment of the students' English language proficiency in accordance with the CEFR as well as the feasibility to introduce an in-house *Moodle*-based assessment.
3. Criterion-related validation,the extent to which the test results were related to the criterion measure.
4. Construct-related validation, that is the conformity of the research tools (tests and interviews) to the aim of the research manifested through (a) the implementation of the research design well established both in qualitative investigation in general and in applied linguistics in particular; (b) the logical flow between the stages of the research; (c) the establishment of the cause and effect relationships; (d) familiarity with the participants; (e) peer scrutiny (adapted from Shenton, 2004: 64–69).

According to the PTE General and PTE Academic Score Guides (2015: 43), well-established test item creation processes enable these test writers to achieve a high reliability coefficient from 0.91 to 0.97 within the score range of 53 to 79 points.

MATERIALS, PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The items for the English language proficiency tests (A1–C2 levels according to the CEFR, 2001) were computerised from the open access practice test collection website *Pearson Test of English* (*General*) by placing the tests in the *Moodle* LMS module. This LMS was chosen because, as described in the theoretical background, *Moodle* has been applied at the UL since 2008 in a number of courses, including those oriented towards language studies,of the bachelor's level, master's level and doctoral level study programmes.

Each test placed in the *Moodle* LMS module is composed of relevant items for each of the four task types (see Table 1): (1) listening (three tasks: one multiple choice and two gap filling tasks); (2) listening and writing (a dictation); (3) reading (two tasks: one multiple choice and one answering questions); (4) writing (two tasks: writing of an email or a letter and the other task – an essay or an article, depending on the level of the test). The total score (100 points) is obtained from weighted raw scores for all the tasks as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 **Tasks and scores**

Task types	Tasks	Weighted raw scores
Listening 1	multiple choice	10
Listening 2	gap filling	10
Listening 3	gap filling	10
Listening and writing	dictation	10
Reading 1	multiple choice	10
Reading 2	answering questions	20
Writing 1	email or letter	15
Writing 2	essay or article	15

A total of 24 participants volunteered for the focused descriptive study – the English language proficiency test in the *Moodle* LMS. The participants were 8 bachelor's level and 7 master's level students in the humanities and 9 doctoral level students in the sciences. None of the participants was a native English language speaker or an English philology programme student.

Before the test, the participants had to self-assess their English language writing, listening and reading proficiency according to A1–C2 levels defined in the *CEFR* (2001). As a result, 6 bachelor's level students reported that they intended to take the B2, 1 student the C1 and one – the C2 level test. The master's level students' English language self-assessment revealed that 4 students intended to take the B2 level, and 3 students – the C1 level test. Three doctoral students reported that according to their self-assessment they intended to take the B2 and 6 students – the C1 level test.

As the participants were supposed to take their selected test level in the *Moodle* LMS, they were asked to report on their *Moodle* use experience

because it might affect the computer-assisted test taking procedure. Even though all the participants reported that they had experience in using the *Moodle* LMS, they were provided with the instructions how to access the *Moodle*-based test site and how to handle each task type. In addition, if required, test handling assistance was provided to the participants throughout the test. The time allotted varied depending on the level of the tests: 2 hours were allotted for the B2 level test, 2 hours and 30 minutes for the C1 test, whereas the C2 level student had 2 hours and 55 minutes to complete the test.

The tests were graded in the *Moodle* LMS. Automatic grading was applied to the multiple-choice tasks following the specifications; namely, 'items for assessing receptive skills are scored dichotomously; in other words, each answer will either be correct or incorrect with no half marks' (*The Revised Pearson Test of English General Brochure*: 9). However, manual verification was necessary in the listening and reading tasks, as various wording options in gap filling of the answering questions tasks were acceptable. Fully manual holistic grading was applied to both writing tasks. The reliability of the assessment of the writing test was ensured by 'means of analytical scales derived from scales within the CEF' and peer scrutiny (ibid.). The oral proficiency test was excluded from the study because of the limitations of the *Moodle* LMS.

RESULTS

The convenience of online testing in the *Moodle* LMS is the digital records of the scores. The B2 level participants obtained scores ranging from 39 to 64, and the mean score is 53. The C1 level participants' scores range from 36 to 66 with the mean score 56, whereas the C2 level participant gained 58 points (see Table 2).

Table 2 **Test takers scores according to levels (max. 100 points)**

B2	39	40	51	52	52	53	54	55	58	59	59	62	64	**53**
C1	36	49	53	55	57	57	61	62	65	66				**56**
C2	58													**58**

The mean indicates that the mark of 50 percent (50 points) was hard to achieve at all university degree and language proficiency levels, in particular at B2, although it is expected that, for example undergraduate students of the UL have at least B2 level upon their enrolment (The Secondary Education Standards (*MK noteikumi*, 2013)).

The CEFR B2 level descriptor for writing skills presupposes that students can communicate their and other's opinions effectively, whereas they are expected to express themselves 'with clarity and precision, relating to the addressee flexibly and effectively at level C1' (*CEFR*, 2001: 83). The writing tasks appeared to be

the most challenging for the students possibly due to the insufficient planning or deficient language proficiency resulting in the failure to complete one of the two tasks fully. The desired score of 50 percent was achieved only at level C2, which can be seen in Table 3 below. These results reveal that all B2 and C1 level participants' self-assessment of their writing proficiency disagrees with the obtained test results. It has to be noted that writing proficiency is of crucial importance for the doctoral programme students, since they are expected to publish their research results not only in Latvian, but also in a foreign language as part of their studies.

Table 3 **Writing mean (max. 30)**

	B2	C1	C2
Bachelor's level	11	5	17
Master's level	11.2	14.6	
Doctoral level	6.5	14.8	

The CEFR B2 level descriptor for listening presupposes that students can understand standard spoken language encountered in personal, social, academic or vocational settings as well as follow the essentials of propositionally and linguistically complex utterances, whereas they are expected to meet the above requirements with relative ease at C1 level (*CEFR*, 2001: 66–67). However, the doctoral students' level of achievement at B2 in this skill was the lowest, with the data at the other university degree and language proficiency levels only slightly exceeding it, as it is presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4 **Listening mean (max. 40)**

	B2	C1	C2
Bachelor's level	22.8	17	23
Master's level	22.7	25.3	
Doctoral level	19.5	24.8	

The results might mean that the sample students may not take full advantage of the international educational opportunities such as applying for international exchange programmes, listening to lectures in English and studying abroad due to their limited listening comprehension skills in social, professional or academic life.

The CEFR B2 level descriptor for reading implies that students' general reading comprehension skills are well developed 'with a broad active reading vocabulary, experiencing only some difficulty with low frequency idioms while reading with a large degree of independence, adapting style and speed of reading to different texts and purposes, and using appropriate reference sources selectively' (*CEFR*, 2001: 69). The same holds true for the CEFR

level C1, which highlights the ability to understand in detail lengthy, complex texts irrespective of the area of speciality. The tasks of reading skill test results demonstrated the highest value in comparison with the tasks devoted to writing and listening skills. The lowest result of a bachelor's level student was marked at C1, constituting 14 and, thus, not reaching the required 50 percent level. A more detailed result breakdown is seen in Table 5 below.

Table 5 **Reading mean (max. 30)**

	B2	**C1**	**C2**
Bachelor's level	22.1	14	22
Master's level	21	20.3	
Doctoral level	19.75	16.8	

These results and relatively high values in comparison with the other skills might be explained by the fact that the students at all degree levels are expected to work with theoretical literature in English and, hence, are exposed to extensive reading. Since the findings of this research are attributed to a relatively small number of participants, it can be considered a limitation related to external generalisability and iterative chain sampling might be suggested for further research activities.

In addition to the participants' test results, their feelings during the test in the *Moodle* LMS were explored in an interview as all of them were interviewed (8 bachelor students, 7 master students and 9 doctoral students). Interview moderation, as Dörnyei (2007: 144–145) explains, can trigger useful insights, which was vital in the study because all the participants had experienced the same technology-based task types, and, therefore, could arrive at useful conclusions about test-taking in the *Moodle* module.

The interview included 3 closed-ended and 3 open-ended questions that, as explained by Oppenheim (2001) and Dörnyei (2007), allow expressing one's own opinion and reflect on their attitude.

The answers to the question (*Did you experience any difficulties during the handling of test tasks in the Moodle LMS?*) revealed that the majority of the participants (18 of 24) had experienced test handling difficulties in the *Moodle* LMS. This question, therefore, was followed by one more question relating to the *Moodle* LMS (*What were the major difficulties during the Moodle-based test?*). The participants' discussion and responses confirmed that, irrespective of the fact that before the test the participants reported that they had used at least one *Moodle* e-course in their studies, they had experienced difficulties in locating the e-university site and also in managing the test formats normally available in *Moodle*. After the discussion of the *Moodle* LMS, the participants concluded that, alongside with the concise pre-test instructions, a special instruction seminar would be of great help to ensure a smooth test procedure.

The question: *'Does the initial self-assessment correspond with the results you had expected to obtain?'* revealed that the participants themselves were aware of the discrepancy with their self-assessment, namely, their expected results and the obtained test results. The discussion of the discrepancy reasons was continued and the question aimed at revealing the possible challenging tasks was asked (*Which of the tasks were more difficult than you had expected?*). It was surprising that they had initially expected more inspiring results in particular test sections, especially in writing tasks (see the results section of the article). The interviews uncovered that the participants had experienced self-assessment difficulties. Obviously, they therefore admitted during the interviews that it would be advisable to join a course and/or do practice tests.

The question: *Which of the tasks were the most/the least challenging?* aimed at finding out the tasks the participants considered to be more difficult to complete than the other tasks. The reflection confirmed that both the writing tasks of all three test levels appeared to be the most challenging ones. This discussion was continued by clarifying whether the participants had felt any time constraints (*Did you experience any time constraints during the test?*), which revealed that a noticeable part of the participants had experienced time constraints (12 of 24 participants) for the completion of both writing tasks. Moreover, 2 participants had not managed to complete one of their writing tasks. The interviews were concluded by asking whether there were any other issues that had not been discussed or would require a more detailed discussion.

CONCLUSIONS

The conducted study allows for drawing several conclusions on the students' English language proficiency level and the introduction of the in-house *Moodle*-based test at the UL.

Considering the external, content-related, criterion-related and construct-related types of test validation, the quality of the test version developed in *Moodle* is sufficient to meet the aims of the present research. The students' self-assessment and the piloted results demonstrate that their written proficiency (that includes writing, listening and reading skills) self-assessment tends to disagree with the test results. Even if the test results reveal that they are able to perform different tasks in English, the exhibited limitations in their language use in writing as well as listening skills might lead to hindering their academic and professional progress. Thus, this study has revealed that students tend to overestimate their written English language proficiency. In spite of the fact that most students passed the test quite successfully, the detailed result breakdown and the relatively low pass mean determine the necessity of further development of students' reading, listening and writing skills in the personal, social, academic and vocational setting. It might be suggested that B2 and higher English language proficiency requirements are set upon graduation from a bachelor's level programme, B2–C1 English language

proficiency requirements upon graduation from a master's level programme and C1 English language proficiency requirements upon completing doctoral studies respectively. It is also important that these English language proficiency levels are stipulated by the UL language policy document. The levels are to be confirmed by an examination in English for special purposes taken at the end of the course prescribed by each study programme.

The present study provides additional evidence with respect to the application of the *Moodle* LMS in the study process at the tertiary level. Test computerisation substantially relieves the manual grading, irrespective of the fact that some of the tasks (e.g. writing tasks) require fully manual grading, but some reading and listening tasks manual verification. Online testing provides digital records of the test results and promotes the students' digital literacy skills by practicing online test handling. Therefore, the piloting of the *Moodle*-based test and the obtained results show that further research should focus on the item bank enrichment and also the creation of items for an in-house test aligned with the CEFR levels and the piloting of the test to meet the language policy goals set out at the University of Latvia.

The current investigation was also limited by a small number of participants in the study. Therefore, caution must be applied to generalizing the findings, as they might not be transferable to all the students of the University of Latvia. It is recommended that further research be undertaken.

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