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The English Proficiency Test of the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology: A Review

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ABSTRACT

One of the serious decisions which every administrator may need to make during his/her professional career is to select or reject applicants based on their general language skills or competence. These significant decisions, which may be of serious consequences not only for the individuals but also for the society in general, are occasionally made based on norm-referenced proficiency tests. Out of internationally available proficiency tests such as the TOEFL test, those which fit the specific local cultural and academic contexts seem of greater prominence. One such test, which has been specifically designed for the Iranian EFL context by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, is the MSRT proficiency test. While a few studies have been conducted on the analysis of the reliability and validity of the mentioned test, no study has yet reviewed the test and its component parts. Therefore, the current study aimed at considering the strengths and weaknesses of the test in general and its component items in particular. The results implicated that the MSRT benefits from more efficient general reliability and validity, well planned language items, practicality, ease of administration, objective scoring, ease of accessibility, as well as reasonable fees, while it needs to be more substantiated in terms of the inclusion of the speaking skill assessment, the computerized adaptive assessment procedures, and the correction factor for guessing. In addition, the use of the individual-based listening apparatus for testing listening comprehension as well as the consideration of the integrative communicative tests for its concurrent validity purposes can contribute to more appropriate distinction of proficient and non-proficient applicants.

Keywords: *Iranian Context; Language Proficiency Test; Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT); Test Review*

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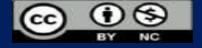
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1. Introduction

One of the decisions administrators needs to make is based on the students' general levels of language proficiency. These decisions assess the general knowledge or skills prerequisite to entry or exit from the institutions or universities. These proficiency decisions, which are made based on the proficiency tests, are necessary for establishing entrance and exit standards for a curriculum, adjustment of the program level and objectives to students' levels, or program comparative purposes. Hence, proficiency tests attempt to assess the general commonly required knowledge or skills for entry into or exemption from the academic or non-academic institutions (Brown, 2008). Accordingly, the examinees' acquired knowledge until the exam time will be

assessed and no consideration is paid to the way in which the examinees have acquired such knowledge or skills (Jafar pour, 1996, cited in Sahrai & Mamagani, 2013).

More specifically, these proficiency tests assess the overall competence of the test takers in comparison with their respective peers. Put simply, they are called norm-referenced proficiency tests (Brown, 2008). Another significant feature of the norm-referenced tests is that they can demonstrate the test takers' ability level along the ability continuum from the least able to the most able ($-\infty$ to $+\infty$). This assumption is well observed in the bell-shaped normality distribution, in which the number of the cases around the average arithmetic mean is much more popular than those distributed along the extreme distribution points (Sulisty, 2009).



One example of such proficiency tests is the MSRT exam which is locally conducted by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology ten times a year annually (i.e., approximately once a month) in metropolitan and some other cities in the Iranian context. This exam is required for the PhD candidates who opt to continue their studies in Iran. This exam is a new version of the previously conducted administered MCHE exam by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, which has been renamed to the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) recently. The exam registration is conducted online via the MSRT website available at <http://msrt-exam.saorg.ir> using the examinees' personal information as well as the national identification number, which is one of the necessities for the registration. The MSRT exam is scored objectively through the computerized objective scoring systems. The examinees are able to observe their result sheets online after seven to ten days from the examination time. They can even send their result sheets online to their academic institutions of concern. There is no restriction for the exam registration and the examinees can register for the upcoming examinations in the case that they fail to get the required minimum cut-off score ("The MSRT question and answers," 2016).

The required cut-off score for the MSRT exam, which is credited by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology in Iran within a two-year period from the examination day, is different based on the academic requirements of each academic context and major (e.g., ranging from 45% to 75% cut-off score). However, the 50% cut-off score is the minimum acceptance requirement for the non-English majors in Iran (Sahrai & Mamagani, 2013).

More specifically, the MSRT proficiency test comprises different parts, each representing a language skill, namely listening comprehension, grammar, and reading comprehension. While the former part, which is distributed first in a separate test booklet includes 30 questions with a 30-35 minute allotted time, the next test booklet contains the remaining sections including the grammar section (30 questions, 20 minutes for answering) and the reading comprehension part (40 questions, 45 minutes for answering). The reason for the separation of the above-mentioned two test booklets, which were integrated previously, was to preclude the examinees from devoting their allotted

listening time to answering other sections namely grammar and reading which they may find easier to answer (Afshar, n. d.).

2. Strengths and Weaknesses

2.1. Strengths

In this subsection, the merits of the items of listening comprehension, grammar, reading comprehension as well as the general advantages of the MSRT test are elaborated.

2.1.1. Advantages of the Listening Comprehension Items

Regarding the MSRT listening comprehension part, it can be mentioned that it includes the dialogue-format questions in which the examinees hear a conversation between two speakers and subsequently a third voice asks a question about what has been implied in the dialogue. This type of questions fits the suggestion by Farhadi, Jafarpour, and Birjandi (2009) in supplying a context closer to the real-life language use than other types of listening questions (e.g., dictation, statements, questions, etc.). In addition, they well conform to the recommendation in the relevant literature (Buck, 2001; Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009) as they adequately assess the examinee's ability to interpret or make inferences about the dialogue.

Another important criterion for the listening skill assessment, which has been well observed through some other types of the MSRT listening test items, is the understanding of the informal and formal lectures and talks. This ability is necessary for EFL students who wish to study in a context in which English is the main medium of instruction (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009). According to Farhadi, Jafarpour, and Birjandi (2009), these types of questions include a short-talk or an academic lecture which are followed by multiple-choice questions, the stimuli for which should represent typical speech situations that the examinees are most likely to encounter in the academic context. This criterion has been well demonstrated in the MSRT test as well.

In addition, Farhadi, Jafarpour and Birjandi (2009) recommend that listening comprehension tests should comprise three to five mini lectures or brief talks which represent several contents and styles rather than including one long lecture. This suggestion is well administered in the MSRT exam through the careful sampling of the spoken stimuli which represents the appropriate real-life speech activities such

as brief conversations, lectures, phone calls, and radio programs. More specifically, it included some short conversations on student housing and ice age, a radio news story on coffee merchandise, a lecture on the ancient art of thatching a roof, and an art history class lecture on photography.

Besides, Farhadi, Jafarpour and Birjandi (2009) recommend that listening comprehension items should ask not for the detailed information but the overall comprehension or interpretation of the stimulus materials. They also claimed that the stem should be as informative and clear as possible to direct the test takers' attention to the test point. Further, they stated that any use of the outside knowledge in the oral stimulus or the use of the grammatically incorrect or implausible choices should be avoided. These criteria seem to be observed in the construction of the MSRT listening comprehension items.

Another merit of the MSRT listening items, which conform to the guidelines set by the literature (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009; Fulcher, 2013), relates to their stem which should be as informative and clear as possible. Furthermore, the choices should be written in a way that the examinees could not answer them unless listening to the oral stimulus carefully. A glance at the listening comprehension items reveals that they have consistently met such characteristics.

Still another merit of such listening items, which fits the criterion put forward by Buck (2003), is that the stems of the listening items are not printed in the test book and hence the test takers will not be given any opportunities to scan the questions before they listen. Hence, they are required to listen for the whole integrative information rather than listening for the specific information in the oral stimulus.

2.1.2. Advantages of the Grammar Items

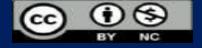
Concerning the grammar items of the MSRT proficiency test, it should be noted that they mostly include an incomplete sentence followed by four choices, one of which completes the sentence correctly. Although these types of structure questions are not the favored and recommended pattern of very brief conversational exchanges of about two sentences with a blank to be selected among the four choices, the above-mentioned type of shorter format structural questions may be selected specifically for the sake of space limitations (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009).

A glance at the English language test criteria suggested in the literature (Farhadi, Jafarpour & Birjandi, 2009; Fulcher, 2013) reveals another four merits of the MSRT listening items, pertaining to the facts that they include only one acceptable answer at a time, none of the options seem to be biased or regionally acceptable in one but not another variety of English, as well as the fact that most of the grammar items are of equal sizes. In the case of unequal sizes, the options are paired by their length. Still another merit refers to the items which examine only one grammatical point at a time.

2.1.3. Advantages of the Reading Comprehension Items

One of the criterion for the reading comprehension texts according to the literature (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009; Hughes, 2007) is that they should be selected from the real-life passages, which include suitable and culturally appropriate content. The MSRT comprehension texts, which well represent such conditions, require the examinees to guess the meaning of the words from the provided context, to infer and get the implicit meaning of the text, and to get the main idea of the passage. Still another value of the reading comprehension texts according to the same literature (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009; Hughes, 2007) refers to their appropriate length which provides enough context at the appropriate level of difficulty as well as their sufficient number of questions (i.e., at least five comprehension questions from each passage). According to Hughes (2007), the reading comprehension texts should not include information that may comprise the general real-world information of the test takers. This criterion is well observed in the MSRT comprehension texts as well.

A further glance at the features of the appropriate reading comprehension items as recommended by the literature (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009; Fulcher, 2013) reveals other advantages of the MSRT reading items since all choices are grammatically correct, semantically plausible, and of the equal lengths. Furthermore, their stem clearly introduces the problem and prevents the examinees to match it with a selected line in the passage. In addition, these reading comprehension questions, which require the test takers to read the materials before they can correctly infer the required information, provide no hint as to the right answer of any other items in the test. Still another satisfactory aspect



of these items refers to the point that they do not include whole items such as 'all of the above', 'none of the above', 'both A and B' or 'neither C nor D' since the items using the words such as 'not' and 'except' increase the cognitive processing and difficulty load of the text while they do not add any useful information to the test items (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009; Fulcher, 2013).

2.1.4. Other Advantages

The MSRT test bears some other precious benefits in comparison with the other nationally conducted proficiency tests. Hence, it is one of the proficiency tests with the highest participatory levels in the Iranian context due to its general efficient reliability ($p > 0.7$) and validity (Sahrai & Mamagani, 2013), objective computerized-based scoring, and its nation-wide credit even in the Iranian medical and non-state academic contexts. In addition, the greater number of the exam administrations and the cheaper registration fees rather than the other nationally conducted proficiency tests such as TOLIMO (Test of Language by the Iranian Measurement Organization) and EPT (English Proficiency Test) should not be ignored ("Frequently asked questions about the MSRT exam," 2015). Furthermore, the accessibility of the exam locations to the most Iranian citizens ("The MSRT and MCHE exams' sources and study points," 2015) has led larger number of participants to take the MSRT test rather than the other proficiency tests on offer.

Finally, other advantages of the MSRT test as a standardized test are its practicality, the ease of administration, quantifiable scores, comparable results across different contexts, and the computerized, objective, and free-of-bias scoring ("advantages and disadvantages of standardized tests", 2016).

2.2 Weaknesses

In this subsection, the disadvantages of the MSRT test in terms of the listening and reading comprehension items, grammar items, and the general assessment aspects are elaborated. Since the MSRT proficiency test seems to be one of the first options to choose for participation for doctoral candidates in Iran ("Frequently asked questions about the MSRT exam", 2015), it appears that it needs to be more substantiated in some respects as follows:

2.2.1 Disadvantages of the Listening and Reading Comprehension Items

Some of the listening comprehension items of the MSRT seem

lengthy. These items can be more substantiated by satisfying the criterion set in the literature (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009; Fulcher, 2013) as the brevity of choices and their equality of length should be observed systematically throughout the test. Moreover, there is a need for the consistent observation of the absence of any grammatical or lexical difficulties in the choices.

As for the reading comprehension section, the results of the study conducted by Sichani and Tabatabaei (2015) revealed that the MSRT reading part need to be more substantiated in terms of validity in order to better measure the reading ability of the EFL learners. Accordingly, in order to better identify the aspects of the reading part that need to be improved in terms of their qualities, the analysis revealed that one of the drawbacks of some of the reading comprehension items is that although they assess the inferential and recognition abilities of the language test takers as recommended by Farhadi, Jafarpour, and Birjandi (2009), they do not test their ability to understand the grammatical structures of the text as well as the tone, mood, and literary style of the writer.

2.2.2 Disadvantages of the Grammar Items

Besides, the test can be more substantiated if all of the grammar questions follow the favored pattern as proposed by Farhadi, Jafarpour, and Birjandi (2009), which includes very brief natural casual conversation of about two sentences with a blank followed by four choices. These optimal types of questions provide a context which helps the test takers to get the correct answer.

Still, it is recommended that all of the grammatical items provide economical choices which avoid making the subjects weary. Besides, in some rare instances, the grammatical options were not of equal lengths. This inequality in terms of the options' length may give a clue to the test takers to get the correct answer by chance rather than using their actual language knowledge (Farhadi, Jafarpour, & Birjandi, 2009; Fulcher, 2013).

2.2.3 Other Disadvantages

The results of the study conducted by Sahrai and Mamagani (2013) on the validity and reliability of 10 MSRT tests revealed that although the test benefits from the efficient reliability and validity in general, it needs to be more substantiated in terms of the validity of its subsequent sections in particular. More specifically, the

correlation coefficients between the listening and grammar sections as well as the listening and reading comprehension parts were found to be less than the correlation coefficients between the grammar and reading comprehension sections.

Another defect of the MSRT test relates to the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) proficiency test with which the MSRT exam has been validated concurrently. The results of the investigation by Sahrai and Mamagani (2013) showed that the TOEFL proficiency test is not an efficient criterion for assessing the language skills of the examinees since it not only lacks the speaking skill but also assesses the grammar and vocabulary skills separately and not in an integrative communicative form.

Still another weakness of the MSRT test seems to stem from the fact that it has no negative points for correction for guessing although there is a widespread assumption that students may guess the answers by chance in closed response items such as multiple-choice questions (Burton, 2001; as cited in Fulcher, 2013). Moreover, the listening testing conditions of the mentioned test can be more improved by the inclusion of the individual-based listening apparatus, the lack of the use of which may explain one of the reasons for the average poor performance of the Iranian test takers on the listening comprehension section of the MSRT proficiency test while their performance is more efficient on the reading comprehension and grammar parts (Sahrai & Mamagani, 2013).

One other pitfall of the MSRT test as other standardized tests, which test the knowledge or understanding of the examinees in general, is their lack of generalizability to the whole population's needs since the standardized test scores are more prone to the systematic errors such as fatigue and inattention ("advantages and disadvantages of standardized tests," 2016). In sum, it should be mentioned the MSRT test can be more substantiated provided that it makes use of the computerized adaptive testing methods in which the difficulty level of the test is adjusted according to the examinee's language ability levels (Bachman, 1990).

3. Concluding Remarks

The current review article aimed at the investigation of the merits and demerits of the different parts of the MSRT proficiency test as a whole through the analysis of the respective test items as well

as a review of the studies conducted to date with respect to the mentioned proficiency test. In general, though the MSRT proficiency test as a nationally conducted exam attracts a large number of participants each year due to its efficient general reliability and validity, well planned language items, ease of accessibility, as well as the reasonable fees, it also needs to be more substantiated in terms of the inclusion of the speaking skill assessment, the utilization of the computerized adaptive assessment procedures, the consideration of the integrative communicative tests for its concurrent validity purposes, the provision of more efficient conditions for testing listening, and the inclusion of the correction factor for guessing. While the listening, grammar, and reading comprehension items of the MSRT proficiency test seem effective, they need to be more improved in terms of the mentioned drawbacks in order to more appropriately select the proficient from the non-proficient applicants for further academic studies.

In sum, the results of the current study may contribute to express a voice as for the refinement of the MSRT test as one of the nationally conducted proficiency test in order to make it more suitable to distinct proficient from non-proficient applicants of further academic studies in the Iranian context.

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