



Iranian Candidates' Attitudes toward TOEFL iBT

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Abstract

Test of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) stands as an important criterion for admission, scholarship and graduation decisions to colleges and universities in the United States, England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and some other countries. Since 2005, the Internet based form of the TOEFL test has gained popularity across the world, and test takers from various countries take this test online. This study aimed at investigating the attitudes of Iranian candidates towards the Internet-based TOEFL. For this reason, an attitude questionnaire was distributed among 56 Iranian examinees who had taken this test in Iran. The questionnaire was validated in a pilot study to ensure its reliability and validity. Almost 22 days after taking the test, the candidates' test scores were announced and collected through their e-mails by the researcher. To find out the relationship between the participants' test scores and their attitude toward different sections of the test, the Pearson correlation coefficient was conducted. The obtained results showed that there was only a relationship between the candidates' overall attitude toward the test and their test scores.

Keywords: EFL learners, attitude, TOEFL, TOEFL iBT

INTRODUCTION

Zahedkazemi (2015) stated that in today's competitive and technological world, students need to develop effective skills in mastering the English language in order to communicate ideas, concepts, scientific and technological findings successfully. Making judgments about people is a universal aspect of our everyday life. During our lifetime, we are constantly evaluating the speech and behaviors of others, and criticizing our friends and colleagues informally. There are also formal institutional judgments in our lives, which act significantly. These evaluations play a major role in our social lives and may have direct consequences, so, they need to be reasonable judgments (McNamara, 2000). McNamara (2000) stated that during the testing life time, new situations of social or political changes cause the emergence of new tests or assessment procedures. These changes include the growth of international education, the educational influence of

immigration or refugee programs, modification of school curriculum, improvements of occupational education, and adult instruction due to technological advances.

According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), the social and educational value of testing should be considered by both test developers and test users. Due to this significance, the educational and social institutes of testing take the responsibility for administering the usefulness of the changes which happen in the field of testing.

Several researchers claimed that tests had influenced the teaching and learning practices in societies. By the emergence of standardized testing phenomenon, the social consequences of such tests have been evolved. The idea of whether candidates' successfulness in a standardized test guarantees their success in development of life skills required for everyday communication, has been introduced (Ghamarian, Motallebzadeh, & Fatemi, 2014).

Research in language testing has indicated that language ability is not the only thing that affects test takers' performance on a language test. Test performance can be affected by a wide range of factors, which can counteract with test takers' language ability and affect their test performance positively or negatively (Lumley & O'Sullivan, 2005, as cited in Amiryousefi & Tavakiloi, 2014).

McNamara (2000) mentioned that considering the school systems, the work of responding to changing needs arises from education organizations which are mostly related to the help of university researchers. Yet, he declared that with regard to adult assessment and in the places where assessment requires international contexts, testing agencies with professional experts in language testing become involved. Those agencies are responsible for the two major tests used to measure the English knowledge of international students who want to study at the universities of English-speaking countries. These two tests are the American Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the British\Australian International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a registered trademark of Educational Testing Service (ETS) which is administered worldwide. The test was first administered in 1964 and has since been taken by more than 23 million students. The test was originally developed at the Center for Applied Linguistics led by the linguist, Dr. Charles A. Ferguson.

According to Broukal and Nolan-Woods (1991), the purpose of the TOEFL is to evaluate the English proficiency of persons whose native language is not English. Most colleges and universities in the United States and Canada use a TOEFL score as part of the admission process for foreign students. Clark (1977) mentioned that a basic principle underlying the development of the TOEFL and the interpretation of TOEFL test scores is that the language tasks presented should be those which are relevant to the efficient linguistic performance of nonnative English speakers working or studying in the United States.

Since its development, TOEFL has seen major changes in the way it is administered. Generally, it has three versions: The computer-based (CBT), the paper-based (PBT), and

recently, the Internet-based (iBT) versions. The Internet-Based test (iBT) was first introduced in late 2005 and has gradually replaced both the computer-based (CBT) and paper-based (PBT) tests, although, paper-based testing is still used in some areas. This version, was introduced first in the United States, Canada, France, Germany, and Italy in 2005 and then, in the rest of the world in 2006, with test centers added regularly. The CBT was discontinued in September 2006 and these scores are no longer valid.

The concept of attitude, on the other hand, has been the center of attention in clarification of human manners presented by social psychologists. According to Rasti (2007), "attitude is usually defined as a disposition or tendency to react positively or negatively toward a certain thing such as an idea, object, person or situation" (p.111). Attitude has long been considered as one of the affective variables beside motivation in the realm of language learning as well (e.g., Gardner & Lambert, 1972, as cited in Rasti, 2007).

Having positive attitudes toward tests also is claimed to be one of the reasons which make students perform better on the tests (Malallah, 2000, as cited in Rasti, 2007). A large number of studies have investigated the relationship between attitudes and language proficiency (e.g., Bachman 1976; Malallah 2000; and Coleman & Strafield & Hagan 2003, as cited in Rasti, 2007). Gardner (1985, as cited in Rasti, 2007) stated that attitudes and other affective variables are as important as capacity for language achievement.

Gardner and Lambert (1972, as cited in Rasti, 2007) found a positive relation between attitude and linguistic abilities. Along with other parts of world, in Iran the popularity of TOEFL test, especially TOEFL iBT is growing rapidly. Most of our universities are holding the TOEFL iBT more than twice a month, and the students who need the TOEFL certification for educational reasons take this test in the selected locations. Besides its popularity in administration, and the growing number of organizations, universities, professional bodies and governments that recognize TOEFL results, it can be argued that, the number of studies and researches carried out about TOEFL test is also considerable.

However, the increased number of studies in this regard shows its importance and usefulness in the field of testing, so it can be inferred that, there is still a place for further researches. Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between Iranian TOEFL iBT candidates' attitudes toward different parts and aspects of the test and their scores or performance on the test.

Learners' attitudes toward language learning

Attitude, according to Allport (1971, as cited in Fan & Ji, 2014), refers to "a mental and neural state of readiness organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon individual's response to all objects and situations in which it is related" (p. 13).

According to what is mentioned in Lindsay' and Knight (2006) book, in some countries, learning another language is considered a normal and easy thing to do, while in others, it is considered an unusual and demanding task. These differences are well illustrated in the Netherlands and Britain. In the Netherlands, most people expect to learn at least two

languages, and by the time they are teenagers, many Dutch children speak excellent English. In Britain, on the other hand, few young children learn to speak a foreign language, and most teenagers consider language learning a very hard task.

According to Brown (2000), attitudes, like all aspects of cognition and affect in human beings, develop early in childhood and are the result of parents' and peers' attitudes, contact with people who are "different" in any number of ways, and interacting affective factors in the human experience. These attitudes form a part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living.

Uses of language tests

According to Birjandi et al. (2000), the major educational use of language testing is to determine readiness for instructional programs in order to separate those who are ready and prepared for an academic program from those who are not ready. According to Bachman (1990), the single most important consideration in both the development of language tests and the interpretation of their results is the purpose or purposes the particular tests are intended to serve.

Bachman noted that the two major uses of language test are: (1) as sources of information for making decisions within the context of educational programs; and (2) as indicators of abilities or attributes that are of interest in research on language, language acquisition, and language teaching. She continued that in educational settings, the major uses of test scores are related to evaluation, or making judgments about the learners' ability.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

- Q1- Is there a significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Environmental factors and their TOEFL score?
- H01: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Environmental factors and their TOEFL scores.
- Q2- Is there a significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Reading section of test and their TOEFL score?
- H02: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Reading section and their TOEFL scores.
- Q3- Is there a significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Listening section and their TOEFL score?
- H03: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Listening section and their TOEFL scores.
- Q4- Is there a significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Speaking section and their TOEFL score?
- H04: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Speaking section and their TOEFL scores.
- Q5- Is there a significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Writing section of test and their TOEFL score?

- H05: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Writing section of test and their TOEFL scores.
- Q6- Is there a significant relationship between Iranian candidates' overall attitude toward TOEFL test and their TOEFL scores?
- H06: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' overall attitude toward TOEFL test and their TOEFL scores.

METHODOLOGY

Design of the study

The design of this study was descriptive and a questionnaire was administered. In order to answer the research questions the reliability and the validity of the items of the questionnaire were checked. The independent variable in this study was the Iranian candidates' attitudes towards the TOEFL test which included the following subcategories: their attitude toward the environmental factors, reading, listening, speaking, and writing parts of the test, and their overall attitude toward the TOEFL test, and the dependent variable was the participants' total test score on TOEFL test.

Participants

The participants of this study were 56 Iranian Candidates of iBT TOEFL, who took this test in Sanjesh Organization in Tehran in 2010. These participants were male and female from different age groups and different educational background, that is, various majors and levels of education.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire with 51 questions which had five different sections, each of which checks the candidates' attitude about different issues. The first section which had eight questions, asked the candidates' attitudes toward the environmental factors and their feelings. The second section dealt with the candidates' attitude toward the reading part of the TOEFL test; this section had 10 questions. The third section had 13 questions and it asked the candidates' attitude toward the listening part of the test. The next section of questions was about the speaking part of TOEFL test; this section had nine questions. The last section of the questionnaire asked about the attitudes toward the writing part of the test and it had nine questions. At the end of the questionnaire, there were two other yes-no questions which were separated from the rest of the questions. The questionnaire was designed based on a Likert scale and the participants were supposed to choose one of these five possible answers: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. It was designed in Farsi language as all the candidates' first language was Farsi.

Procedures

This study consisted of a pilot study and a main study. In the pilot study the questionnaires were distributed among a sample of candidates who took the iBT TOEFL

in Sanjesh Organization of Tehran and 30 questionnaires were collected from them. The purpose of the pilot study was to administer the questionnaire to a small sample group, and to determine the reliability of the questionnaire. In order to measure the reliability of the questions Cronbach's alpha was calculated. Later the questionnaire was distributed among the candidates who took part in TOEFL iBT in Sanjesh Organization of Tehran.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to examine the relationship of each of the independent variables (environmental factors, reading, listening, speaking and writing) with the dependent variable which is the candidates' test scores and answer the research questions, we have to examine the null hypotheses. The rejection of the null hypothesis provides a positive answer to the research question. The level of significance for the rejection of the null hypotheses in this study is 0.05. In the following sections, the null hypotheses are examined one by one.

H01: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Environmental factors and their TOEFL scores.

Table 1 shows the result of Pearson's correlation analysis, which was used to determine the correlation between the candidates' attitudes toward the environmental factors and their test scores. The correlation is 0.262 and the significance 0.049. In order to reject the null hypothesis, the significance must be below 0.05. As the significance is 0.049, so the null hypothesis is rejected. That is, there is a relationship between the participants' attitudes toward the environmental factors and their test scores. This relationship is significant, and positive.

Table 1: Correlation of Attitude toward Environmental Factors and the Scores

Variables	Environmental Factors
Test Score	$r = .262$ $\text{sig} = .049$ $n = 56$

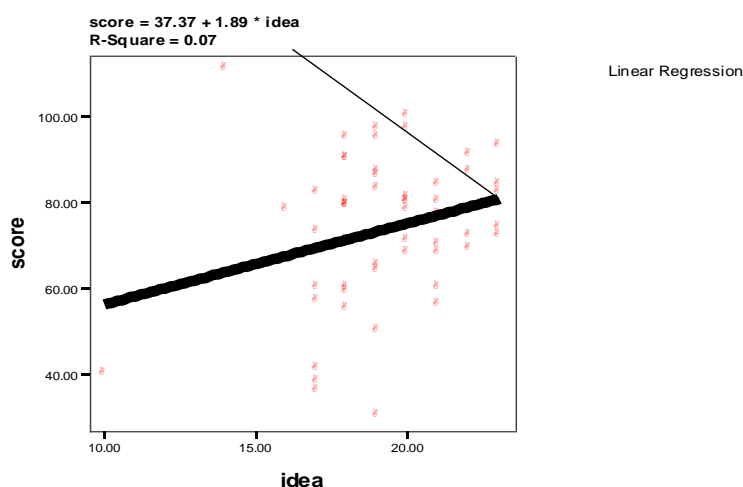


Figure 1: Correlation of Attitude toward Environmental Factors and the Scores

H2: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Reading section and their TOEFL scores.

According to Table 2 and the results of Pearson's correlation analysis, the significance is 0.115 and the correlation 0.213. Since the observed level of significance is higher than 0.05, the second null hypothesis is not rejected. In other words, it is accepted that there is no statistically significant correlation between the candidates' attitudes toward the Reading section of the test and their total test scores.

Table 2: Correlation Attitude toward Reading Section of TOEFL Test and the Scores

Variables	Reading
	r = .213
Test Score	sig = .115
	n = 56

H03: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Listening section and their TOEFL scores.

Table 3 illustrates the correlation between the candidates' attitudes toward the listening section of the test, and their test scores. The correlation is -0.122 and significance 0.371. Since the observed level of significance is higher than 0.05, the third null hypothesis is not rejected. In other words, it is accepted that there is no statistically significant correlation between the candidates' attitude toward the Listening section of the test and their total test scores.

Table 3: Correlation of Attitude toward Listening Section of TOEFL Test and the Scores

Variables	Listening
	r = -.122
Test Score	sig = .371
	n = 56

H04: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Speaking section and their TOEFL scores.

Table 4 illustrates the correlation between the candidates' attitudes toward the speaking section of the test, and their test scores. The correlation is 0.089 and significance 0.541. Since the observed level of significance is higher than 0.05, the fourth null hypothesis is not rejected. In other words, it is accepted that statistically, there is no significant correlation between the candidates' attitudes toward the Speaking section of the test and their total test scores.

Table 4: Correlation Attitude toward Speaking Section of TOEFL Test and the Scores

Variables	Speaking
	r = .089
Test Score	sig = .514
	n = 56

H05: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' attitudes toward the Writing section of test and their TOEFL scores.

Table 5 shows the correlation between the candidates' attitudes toward the Writing section of the test, and their test scores. Pearson correlation analysis was administered to identify the correlation, and the following results were obtained; the correlation is 0.086 and significance 0.527. Since the observed level of significance is higher than 0.05, the fifth null hypothesis is not rejected. In other words, it is accepted that statistically, there is no significant correlation between the candidates' attitudes toward the Writing section of the test and their total test scores.

Table 5: Correlation of Attitude toward Writing Section of TOEFL Test and the Scores

Variables	Writing
Test Score	r = .086 sig = .527 n = 56

H06: There is no significant relationship between Iranian candidates' overall attitude toward TOEFL test and their TOEFL scores.

Table 6 shows the correlation between the candidates' overall attitude toward the TOEFL test (that is, all parts of the test) and their test scores. Pearson correlation analysis was administered to identify the correlation. Based on the results, the correlation is 0.103 and significance 0.450. Since the observed level of significance is higher than 0.05, the sixth null hypothesis is not rejected. In other words, it is accepted that there is no statistically significant correlation between the candidates' overall attitude toward the test and their test scores.

Table 6: Correlation of Candidates' Overall Attitude toward TOEFL Test and their Scores

Variables	Overall attitude
Test Score	r = .103 sig = .450 n = 56

The results obtained from this study show that there is no significant relationship between the candidates' TOEFL scores and their attitudes toward different sections of the test. Yet, a correlation was found between the candidates' attitudes toward the environmental factors of test and their scores. So, it can be argued that the environmental factors are considered very important in test takers' opinions. In the present study nearly 69% on the candidates believed that familiarity with the place of the examination has improved their performance; 67% viewed fear of the test as an influential factor on their performance, and almost 80% of the candidates thought that familiarity with test format and test rubric had a positive effect on their performance. These finding are in line with the ideas of Bachman. Bachman (1990, p.118) classified the testing environment into four categories:

1) familiarity of the place and equipment used in administering the test; 2) the personnel involved in the test; 3) the time of test, and 4) physical conditions. Bachman stated that the *place* of testing may be either familiar or unfamiliar; however, one might find a familiar place to be less threatening than the unfamiliar one. Test takers tested with familiar *equipment* such as paper and pencil or tape recordings may perform better than those tested with unfamiliar equipment, like computers. Familiar *personnel* can cause a better performance. The *time of testing* may affect test performance; they can perform better or worse when the test is early in the day. Finally, test takers may perform differently under different *physical conditions*. These conditions include noise, temperature, humidity, seating arrangement, and lighting.

CONCLUSION

The results obtained from this study evidently revealed that Iranian candidates had positive attitude toward TOEFL iBT test. Clearly 68% of the participants had a high opinion of the test. Almost 69% of the respondents believed that familiarity with the place of the test improved their performance. Nearly 42% of the respondents accepted that taking a similar kind of test on the Internet could improve their performance. Test anxiety seemed to be a common problem for almost 67% the participants; specially, in the speaking section, 64.3% of them believed that stress was their main problem. 80.3% believed that familiarity with the format of the test has influenced them positively and nearly 66% mentioned that they had positive attitude toward TOEFL test. This is nearly in line with the final result obtained from the questionnaire. 73% of the respondents viewed the reading section as the most difficult part of the test and the second difficult section was the speaking section. The listening section was regarded as the easiest section of the TOEFL test. To investigate whether there was a significant relationship between Iranian TOEFL iBT test takers' attitudes toward this test and their test scores, Pearson Correlation Analysis was conducted and the finding revealed that there was only a slight relationship between the candidates' attitude toward the environmental factors of the test and their test scores, yet no significant relation was found between the candidates attitudes toward different sections of the test and their scores. Finally, it can be concluded that while Iranian TOEFL iBT test takers have positive attitude toward this test, no significant relationship exists between their attitudes toward the four sections of the test and their scores; only the environmental factors were found to be related to the candidates' scores.

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