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OPTIMIZING ENGLISH LANGUAGE PREPARATION FOR UNIFIED NATIONAL TESTING: ACADEMIC WORKLOAD AND STRESS

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Abstract. The article considers effective ways to reduce academic stress among students preparing for the test called “English Language” of the Unified National Testing (UNT). In particular, it highlights the issue of optimizing the workload and decreasing the psychological stress of students thanks to a special preparation program with specified terms. The scientific work is based on textbooks and test descriptions, which have been selected according to the test content structural requirements.

The content of the material for studying the English language includes such domains as vocabulary and orthography, morphology, syntax, synthesis, and analysis, as well as reading. These domains comprise systematically specified topics, which makes it possible to study the test material comprehensively and constantly develop competencies in the subject field.

The aim of the research is to systemize materials used in English language textbooks and pedagogical-methodological collections according to the requirements of the UNT and offer ways to master it aimed at preventing students' academic stress.

As a research method, one can use analysis, systematization, classification, and quantification. The students' level of material mastery was estimated in terms of their mastery coefficient, which was calculated based on the proportion of correctly completed tasks to the total number of tasks.

Scientific novelty of the research includes conducting a systematic analysis and classification of materials from English language textbooks according to the requirements of the UNT and suggesting a way to reach material mastery for high school students thanks to specially developed tasks. A preparatory process was conducted in three main stages – planning the preparation, working with the experimental group, and analyzing results and drawing conclusions.

Keywords: Unified National Testing, English language preparation, academic workload optimization, test-related stress, academic stress reduction, structured learning plan, English language, high school students

Introduction

Nowadays, high stakes exams represent an essential instrument in modern educational systems and in the evaluation of foreign language proficiency in particular. Tests are associated with important consequences for students (admission to university, graduation, scholarships, future career, etc.). Therefore,

such language assessment represents a special type of high-forced sociolinguistic setting, affecting language learning process and behavior.

In terms of applied linguistics, high-stakes testing results in a highly structured communicative environment where language usage is strictly restricted to standardized format, tasks, and scoring.

The study investigates how stress-management practices affect students' performance in the English section of Unified National Testing (UNT), focusing specifically on vocabulary and orthography, morphology and syntax, synthesis and analysis, reading comprehension. The researcher will investigate how test-oriented training and affective management facilitate effective demonstration of existing language competencies.

Moreover, the study aims to determine recurring errors made due to cognitive overload and time constraints in the English section of UNT. The researcher will examine how structured preparation, test familiarity, and blended approach affect test-taking performance under conditions of anxiety. Self-regulatory language abilities and control of linguistic performance will be evaluated based on non-clinical measures of stress. Finally, the study will identify the role of stress reduction strategies in increasing assessment validity and reliability.

Unlike the previous studies concerned exclusively with language anxiety or general language development, the present research focuses on test-induced stress as a source of construct-irrelevant variation that distorts language performance of test takers. Moreover, the methodology employed in the current study differs from other works in its combination of linguistic and self-regulatory measures as well as introduction of structured, blended approach to test preparation. In particular, the study will emphasize the need for comprehensive grammar revision as a basis for test success. Finally, the present research will constitute one of the pioneering works dedicated to stress management in the English part of UNT.

The findings may provide practical recommendations for teachers and educational administrators involved in examination preparation.

Teachers modify their teaching methods according to the demands of upcoming tests, focusing on language proficiency (accuracy, speed, familiarity with the task types) while ignoring communicative possibilities (fluency, creative usage of language). Thus, the test situation turns into a prevailing communicative environment that learners get accustomed to not only learning grammar and vocabulary but also mastering specific discursive practices [1].

The Unified National Testing represents a high-stakes test that plays a critical role in accessing higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. Being extremely important for students' further lives, the examination causes serious mental tension, especially in the English section where linguistic skills and cognitive control under time constraints determine the success rate.

In case of the English section of UNT, stress occurs not only due to test-taking experience but also because of the socially constructed nature of test situations, determined by institutional expectations, parental pressure, and societal views on academic success.

Test-related stress has been discussed by numerous researchers studying the problem of second language acquisition and development. Krashen proposed the hypothesis of an affective filter claiming that anxiety, fear of failure, and poor self-image inhibit learners' access to linguistic input and restrict the production of language output during testing. Several subsequent studies confirmed that increased anxiety negatively affected speaking, writing, and reading performances in second languages [2].

The same effect can be explained with reference to cognitive load theory, suggested by Sweller. High stress level takes up working memory necessary for processing information, making language users face problems with lexicon access, grammar, and text understanding. Empirical evidence in the field of language testing proved that time constraints and test anxiety increase number and frequency of errors, impairing the quality of performance [3].

From the perspective of language assessment literature, test validity is ensured by the fact that the results of a test truly reflect learners' linguistic competence without being influenced by any other factors such as anxiety or unfamiliar task types. This point was argued by Bachman and Palmer who emphasized the necessity of distinguishing between language competence and psycholinguistic performance [4]. Similar conclusions were reached by Green and Fulcher who stated that test literacy and familiarity with different task types were crucial for better test performance [5].

A growing body of empirical literature devoted to the problem of stress reduction shows that exam preparation, repeated test taking, and self-regulatory strategies reduce test anxiety. Furthermore, blended learning approach and guidance decrease the level of mental stress and improve language performance under pressure [6].

As noted by Suleimenova, anxiety in foreign languages is a common psychological phenomenon experienced by students while taking language tests and learning grammar. Anxiety impedes fluency and accuracy as well as limits learners' desire to demonstrate their linguistic competence, despite being competent enough [7].

According to Serikova and Mynbayeva, high academic stress levels impair cognitive flexibility and emotions necessary for successful test taking. Pedagogical techniques aimed at stress reduction result in greater learner self-confidence and better academic performance [8].

Materials and methods

For the research, an experiment design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to analyze learners' language performance was selected. In particular, pre-test and post-test were used to explore changes in language performance after employing the prepared instruction and stress reduction techniques. This design choice was dictated by some practical limitations associated with the possibility of forming randomly chosen control and experimental groups due to their limited number of participants.

This study is based on official documents regulating the English component of the UNT in Kazakhstan. The primary sources include 32 English textbooks approved by the government of Kazakhstan and official UNT test specification published by the National testing center.

According to the official test specification, the test versions include 3 types of items, with each of them belonging to one of the following difficulty levels: basic (Level A), intermediate (Level B), and advanced (Level C). Specifically, 50% of all questions are basic-level items intended to check the basic level of knowledge of students, including identification of familiar language structures, performing assigned tasks, and applying elementary concepts. Moreover, 30% of all items belong to the intermediate difficulty level and require applying core concepts to novel situations, analyzing and comparing different pieces of information, as well as providing simple conclusions. Finally, 20% of items belong to the advanced difficulty level requiring advanced cognitive skills of identifying complex linguistic phenomena, applying different types of knowledge to solve problems, as well as providing analytical conclusions.

The UNT English test includes 40 items: 25 multiple-choice questions with one correct answer, one contextual task including 5 multiple-choice questions with one correct answer, 5 tasks with one or more correct answers, and 5 matching tasks. All kinds of questions test both language knowledge and its applications.

Based on the previously mentioned materials, the researcher developed a set of instruction guidelines and stress reduction methods that will allow evaluating the connection between the structured preparation and linguistic performance of learners.

According to the content domains specified in the official UNT materials, namely vocabulary and orthography, morphology, syntax, synthesis, and analysis, reading, 80 topics were identified and categorized. These topics were selected and grouped depending on the test specifications and linguistic skills required to perform successfully.

Table 1- Classification of course content

Main category	Topics
Vocabulary and orthography	The Alphabet. Phonetics; Types of Syllables; Compound nouns; Abstract nouns; Quantifiers; Numerals; The usage of numbers; Compound adjectives; Gradable and Non-gradable adjectives; Exclamation; Quite / Rather / Fairly / Pretty; Affixes (prefixes, suffixes); Dependent prepositions; Prepositional phrases; Degrees of certainty; Nominalization
Morphology	Nouns (countable / uncountable / singular / plural); Possessive case; Articles (1, 2); Both / Either / Neither / All / None / Whole; Every / Each / Other / Others; Pronouns; Adjectives (degree and sequence); Adjective complements; Adverbs; Degrees and sequence of adverbs; Modals (present and past); Phrases expressing modality; Infinitives; Gerunds; Difference between infinitive and gerund; Tenses of infinitive and gerund; Participles (I, II, Perfect)

Syntax	There is / There are; Prepositions of time, place and movement; The sentence. Word order; Transitive and intransitive verbs; Tenses (Present Simple, Continuous; Past Simple, Continuous; Perfect forms; Future forms); State verbs; Used to / be used to / get used to; Moods (imperative, subjunctive, indicative); Types of questions; Passive voice; Cleft sentences; Complex object; Complex subject; Impersonal sentences; Personal and impersonal constructions; Causative construction
Synthesis and analysis	Comparisons (like / as); Comparative constructions; Apposition; Conditionals (Zero, First, Second, Third, Mixed); Inversion in if-clauses; Relative clauses; Defining and non- defining clauses; Clauses of purpose, result, time, reason, concession, contrast and place; Pre-modifying and post-modifying noun structures; Reported statements, commands and questions
Reading	The context; Textual referencing; Topic-based reading texts

The study employed a structured instructional framework based on officially approved UNT English materials, including textbooks and test specifications. Eighty topics were systematized across the main content areas to reflect the linguistic skills assessed in the UNT English section. These topics were distributed over a 16-week instructional period, with five topics covered each week. Relevant content from the textbooks was synthesized into instructional presentations, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the required language components.

For each topic, homework assignments were designed and compiled in PDF format to provide consistent practice opportunities and reinforce the material covered during instruction.

Vocabulary items were grouped into 16 thematic units (*Nature and Ecology; Time and Finances; Trips and Sightseeing; Wildlife; Creatures; Innovation and Technology; Fashion and Apparel; Arts and Entertainment; Phrasal Verbs I; Society; Leisure and Activities; Phrasal Verbs II; Idioms; Expressions; Body Parts; Health and Treatment*) to support systematic lexical development.

Results and Discussion

In general, test anxiety significantly impacts language processing, as it hampers language processing at multiple linguistic levels. Firstly, in terms of lexical processing, anxiety leads to hesitations and prevents the quick recall of vocabulary; thus, testees resort to shallow semantic processing and superficial connections between words. Secondly, at the level of grammatical processing, anxiety encourages simplification and contributes to more errors in tense use, agreement, and function words. Thirdly, in the case of discourse-level processing, testees tend to apply the strategies associated with test-taking, which include the identification of keywords rather than understanding textual coherence.

The research project relied on the application of blended learning to address academic anxiety in students preparing for the English test in UNT. The project involved a structured instructional experiment with 12 learners enrolled for the English section of the UNT exam. The intervention was designed in compliance with the principles of blended learning, implying combining the use of in-class

activities and videos, electronic resources, and online tests for enhancing content mastery and decreasing academic anxiety.

For four months (16 weeks), a total of 80 topics (organized in accordance with the main UNT content areas: vocabulary and orthography, morphology, syntax, synthesis and analysis, and reading) were covered by learners. The following materials were applied to cover each topic:

- Video Lessons: Pre-recorded video lessons were produced for all topics. Every lesson included detailed explanations about grammar and techniques to perform well in UNT test as well as the elements designed to alleviate students' anxiety. To improve students' motivation, every lesson ended with motivational quotes that were aimed at building up confidence and reducing fear. Videos were regularly sent to students via Telegram channels.

- Homework Assignments: Exercises corresponding to particular topics were prepared based on approved textbooks. Students should complete 3-4 various tasks, e.g., multiple choice questions or written tasks for each topic. The list of homework exercises was compiled in PDF documents.

- Vocabulary Practice: Thematic units of 5 vocabulary topics each were created and uploaded to Quizlet. Every vocabulary item included its translation, explanations, and image, as needed.

- Formative Assessments: Quizzes were created for every topic based on UNT test structure. Every quiz was composed of 40 multiple choice, matching exercises, and questions with several correct answers. Quizzes helped students monitor their progress and calculate percentage scores.

During the trial period, the participants should actively engage in all elements of blended learning process described above:

1. Take notes independently at home for every topic.
2. Repeat grammatical structures verbally during class.
3. Complete all exercises and show them to the instructor offline.
4. Learn vocabulary through Quizlet by using translations, explanations, and images.
5. Take Quizzes every week and evaluate your performance by yourself.
6. Conduct an item analysis and learn from mistakes.

By using pre-recorded video lectures and completing online quizzes, the instructor and the learners could save the time spent on classroom teaching and focus on practice. In other words, integrated instructional model helped combine flexibility and traditional approaches in learning.

Throughout the course of 16 weeks, the following performance metrics were recorded:

- homework submission rates and exercise quality;
- Quizizz test participation rates and scores in percentages;
- vocabulary acquisition (through the analysis of Quizlet);
- active class participation and topic explanation skills.

Finally, after applying performance criteria and evaluating students' work, improvements were achieved.

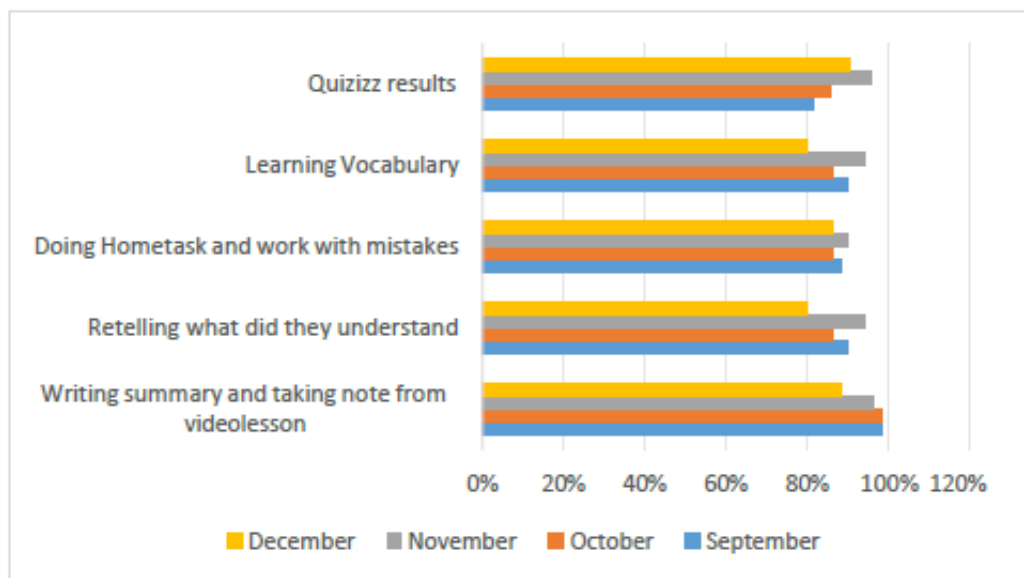


Figure 1 – Students' progress over the four months

The obtained findings indicate that students maintained consistently high rates of task completion throughout the instructional period. Specifically, the most stable parameters were indicators of summary writing and video lesson note-taking, which varied from 88% to 98%. In addition, there were some reductions in the percentage indicators of retelling comprehension, home tasks completion and mistakes correction, and vocabulary learning in October and December. However, in November, the students showed an essential improvement in those skills, demonstrating an average range of 90–94%. The gradual improvement in Quizizz results indicates that digital learning tools contributed to higher student motivation and engagement. Although slight declines in vocabulary, retelling were observed in December due to increased academic workload and fatigue, students maintained a consistently high level of overall achievement.

During the learning process, the Student Survey Results served as a basis to collect the necessary feedback from students concerning difficulties associated with the learning process and effectiveness of the developed program. There are three main dimensions that were assessed as follows: level of content difficulty, clarity of explanations provided by the tutor, and the progress made by the students in the process of preparing for the Unified National Testing (UNT).

The findings suggest that grammar complexity and limited study time were the main learning challenges. Nevertheless, video lessons, homework, vocabulary practice and quizzes supported self-regulated learning by helping students monitor their progress and improve specific language competencies. The instructional approach contributed to:

- minimize students' stress related to preparation for the test;
- monitor personal progress of the students;
- effectively manage one's time and prioritize tasks to be completed;

- get thorough and detailed information about complicated grammatical constructions used in UNT tasks.

As a result, after the four-month intervention, the student performance was compared with the official results of UNT English section. In order to obtain the Post-test scores, one needed to enter the results on the official site of National Testing Center, indicating overall percentages achieved by students individually. Thus, the analysis of Pre-test and Post-test scores for all 12 students demonstrates that:

- Vocabulary and orthography. The improvement in lexical retrieval and spelling is explained by the regular training conducted by means of thematic Quizlet sets.

- Morphology and syntax. The students became better at applying grammar rules while creating correct sentences and avoiding mistakes related to verb tenses, articles, and agreement.

- Synthesis and analysis. The skills required to synthesize and analyze the given information are improved due to regular tests and quizzes performed by the students.

- Reading comprehension. More efficient processing of the information and increased accuracy in extracting main ideas, logical connections, and inferential meanings.

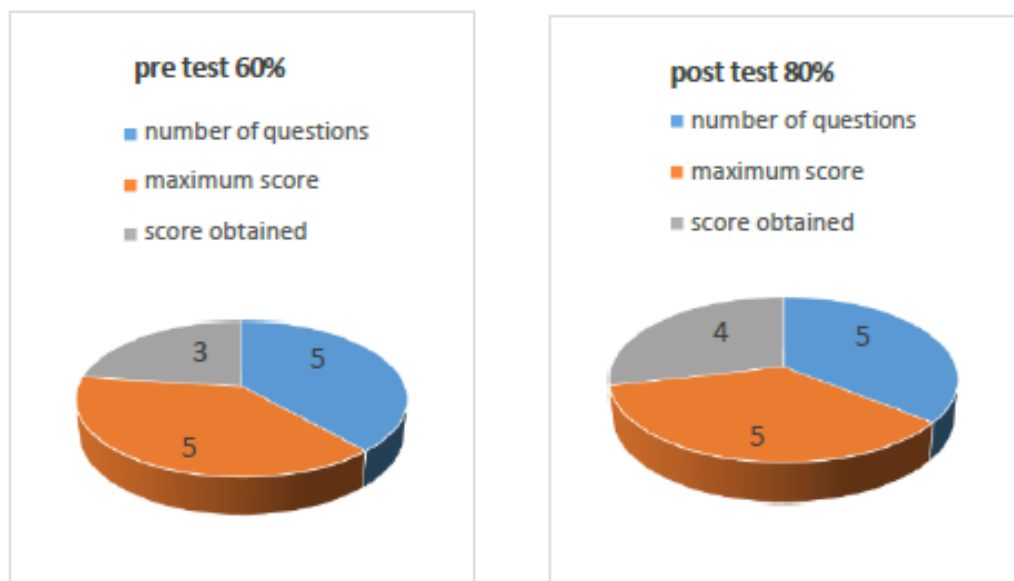


Figure 2 – Comparative performance in vocabulary and orthography

The increase in results from 60% to 80% indicates substantial progress; however, achieving a full score proved challenging due to the inherent complexity and variability of lexical choice and form.

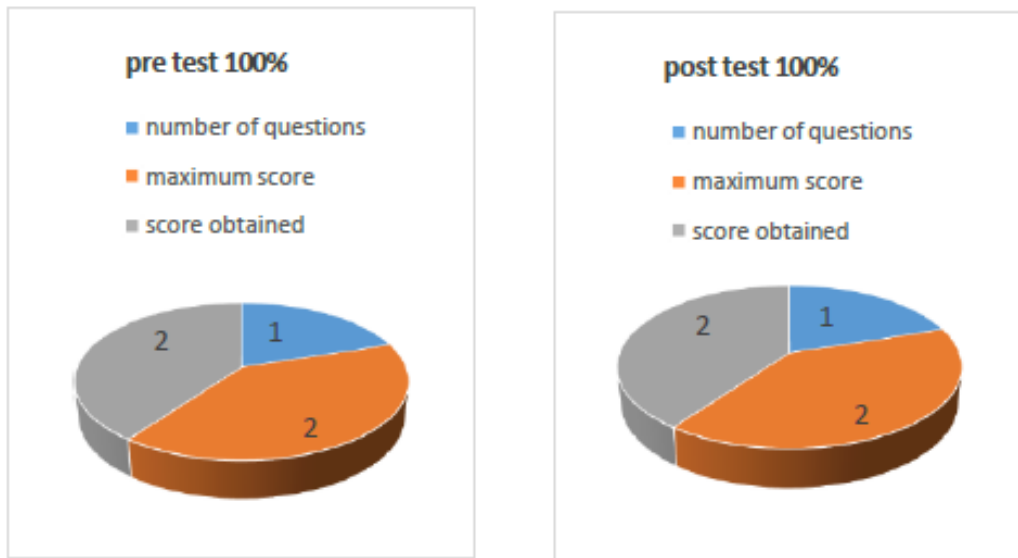


Figure 3 – Comparison of synthesis and analysis

This result indicates that students did not experience difficulty with this content, and the limited number of questions did not negatively affect their performance or lead to lower indicators.

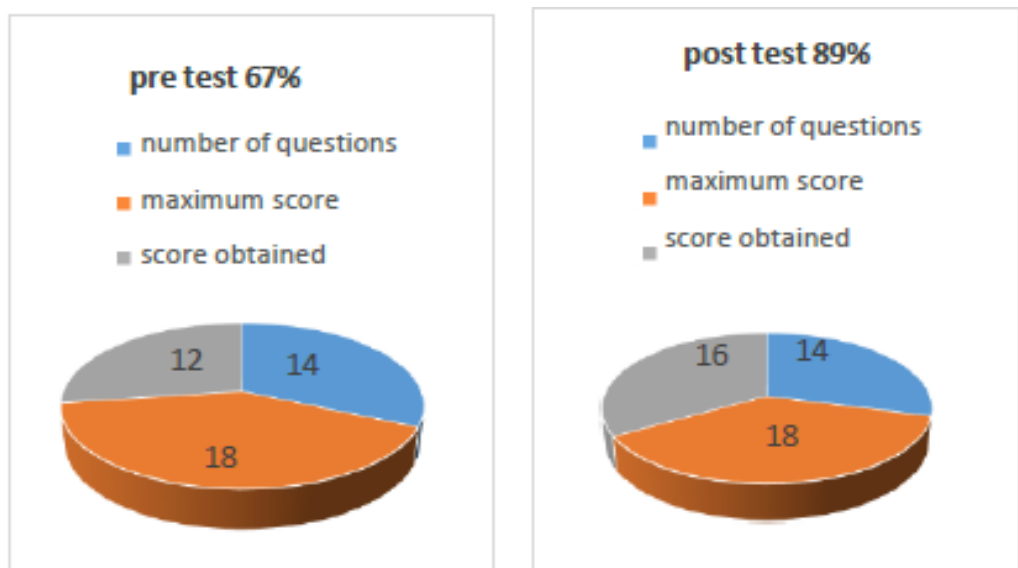


Figure 4 – Changes in learner performance in morphology

Analysis of the assessment data collected before and after the instructional program revealed noticeable positive changes in student's performance with average achievement levels rose by 22 percentage points during the intervention period. This progress indicates that the integrated instructional approach not only

enhanced students’ engagement and motivation but also contributed to deeper understanding, retention, and application of complex grammatical concepts.

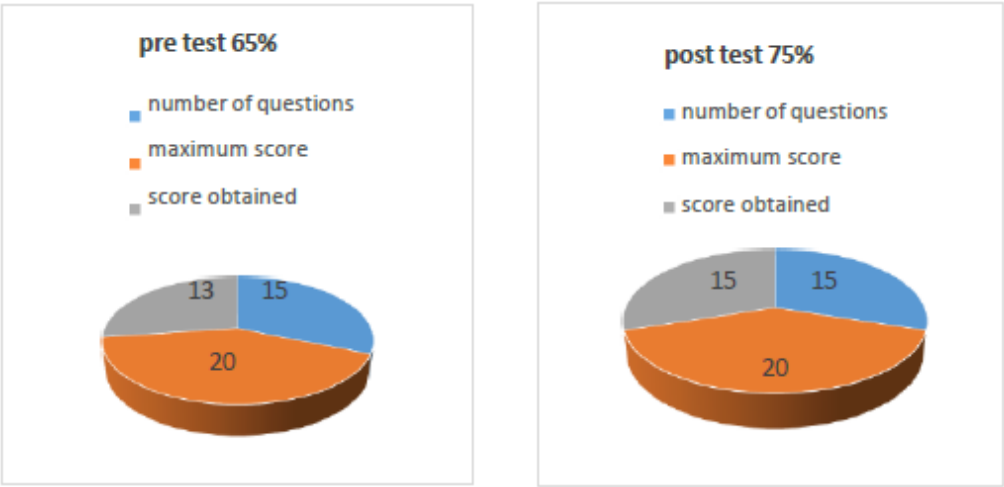


Figure 5 – Growth in syntax scores

Following the instructional program, the participants achieved higher average scores, improving from 65% at the initial assessment to 75% at the final assessment. This change reflects the overall progress of the cohort.

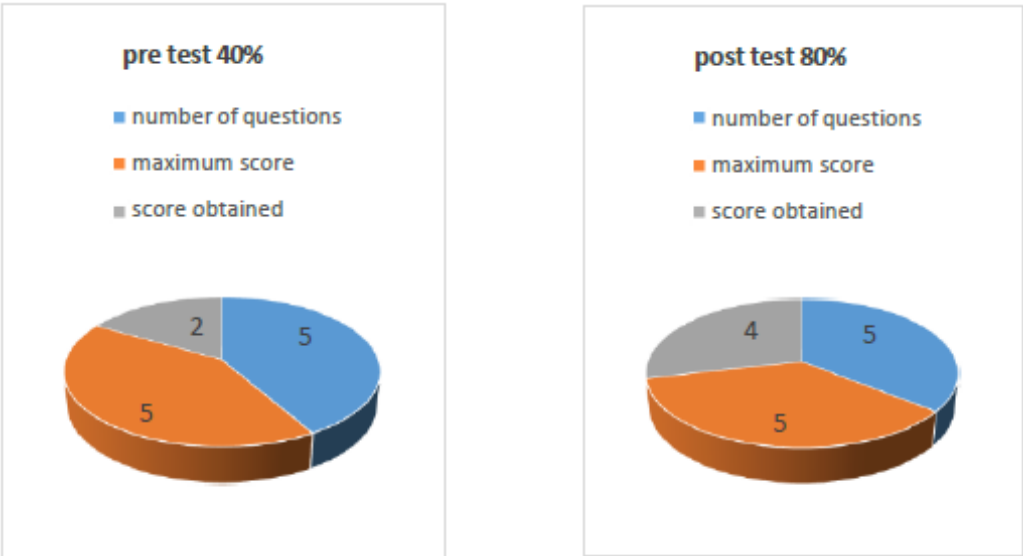


Figure 6 – Changes in learner performance in reading

The reading module was tested through five questions (items 26-30) out of the total forty questions. In the pre-test results, there were twelve students who scored an average of two out of five, demonstrating that the students had initial problems in searching for text information. With reading guidance and

note taking, the post-test mean score rose to four out of five points. This implies that the specific task practice made it easier for the students to understand the text and answer test items.

For the sixteen-week period and during the January Unified National Testing, the English subtest scores of all twelve participants were collected from the National Testing Center. The total score for the Unified National Testing English test is fifty points.

Table 2- Distribution of students by English section score ranges

English section score	Number of students	Percentage of students
50 – 45	2	17%
44 – 40	5	41%
39 – 35	2	17%
34 – 30	2	17%
29 – 25	1	8%
24 – 20	0	0%

In relation to the theme, this article sheds light on the importance of understanding stress as an intervening variable in language testing. From the perspective of the English section of the Unified National Testing model, test performance should not only be regarded as an indicator of language abilities [9]. Test performance should be seen as an outcome reflecting language knowledge, cognitive limitations, emotion regulation, and conditions under which testing occurs. Test stress reduction measures such as proper preparation, test taking awareness, and self-regulation techniques are important for improving test scores.

It is empirically proven that increased levels of test anxiety lead to reduced working memory capacity, information processing, and attention, which are necessary for efficient performance in language tasks. Regarding foreign language assessment, anxiety has been shown to influence learners' true language level, leading to poor test results despite good preparation [10].

Conclusion

The history of attempts to develop means to facilitate personal development is relatively long when considered in international terms. As psychological and educational progress advances internationally, different programs and approaches emerge with the primary goal of increasing quality of life and facilitating personal development [11].

The current paper examines the effect of stress reduction on language achievement in terms of the English portion of the Unified National Test. It is found that a certain set of skills, techniques, and tools for test preparation allows for a notable improvement in test takers' performance in terms of vocabulary, orthography, morphology, syntax, synthesis and analysis, and reading comprehension in high stakes testing. Quantitative analysis yielded moderate to practically significant effects, suggesting that stress reduction allows for better access to existing knowledge and abilities.

Furthermore, there is no reason to suggest that performance improvement could be attributed to the amount of instructional input given the fact that test preparation in this case focused mainly on developing linguistic skills necessary for Unified National Testing English test, and not for any other task or situation. Thus, performance improvement reflects increased processing efficiency, fewer errors in performance variance, and enhanced cognitive stability. These results provide empirical evidence that test anxiety can act as an intervening variable which can distort language performance to a large extent.

In terms of pedagogy, the results show how different affective and cognitive states can influence language use and acquisition by studying lexical choices, grammar mistakes, and discourse-level comprehension in stressful conditions. In particular, language performance mistakes made during tests do not necessarily reflect insufficient knowledge but a result of a systematic attempt by the learner to cope with cognitive stress in a certain linguistic environment.

Overall, the paper stresses the importance of introducing stress awareness into assessment procedures and preparation process. High stakes tests need to be treated as not just tests but as linguistically active environments, which will benefit from test takers being prepared for stress reduction before entering the testing phase. Stress reduction-focused preparations, blended learning, and self-regulation learning practices make it possible to increase validity of assessment and to achieve more equal testing.

In particular, the results obtained allow educators to suggest that it is possible to reduce test-induced performance disparities in a valid manner and without lowering assessment criteria and thus contribute to more equal language tests and higher levels of assessment. Possible future research directions could include longitudinal studies, studies using a larger number of participants, and test-comparison designs.

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АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІ БОЙЫНША ҰБТ-ҒА ДАЙЫНДЫҚ ҮДЕРІСІН ОҢТАЙЛАНДЫРУ: ОҚУ ЖҮКТЕМЕСІ МЕН АКАДЕМИЯЛЫҚ КҮЙЗЕЛІС МӘСЕЛЕЛЕРІ

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Аңдатпа. Мақалада Бірыңғай ұлттық тестілеудегі (ҰБТ) «Ағылшын тілі» пәніне дайындалатын оқушылардың академиялық күйзелісін төмендетудің тиімді жолдары қарастырылады. Атап айтқанда, нақты мерзімдерге негізделген арнайы дайындық бағдарламасы арқылы оқу жүктемесін оңтайландыру және оқушылардың психологиялық күйзелісін азайту мәселесіне назар аударылады. Зерттеу жұмысы тест мазмұнының құрылымдық талаптарына сәйкес іріктелген оқулықтар мен тест сипаттамаларына негізделген.

Ағылшын тілін оқытуға арналған материалдың мазмұны лексика мен орфографияны, морфологияны, синтаксисті, синтез бен талдауды, сондай-ақ оқылымды қамтиды. Бұл бөлімдер жүйелендірілген тақырыптардан тұрады, сондықтан тест материалын жан-жақты меңгеруге және пәндік құзыреттерді жүйелі түрде дамытуға мүмкіндік береді.

Зерттеудің мақсаты – ағылшын тілі оқулықтары мен оқу-әдістемелік құралдарындағы материалдарды ҰБТ талаптарына сәйкес жүйелеу және оқушылардың академиялық күйзелісінің алдын алуға бағытталған оларды меңгеру тәсілдерін ұсыну.

Зерттеу әдістері ретінде талдау, жүйелеу, жіктеу және сандық бағалау қолданылды. Материалды меңгеру деңгейі дұрыс орындалған тапсырмалар санының жалпы тапсырмалар санына қатынасы негізінде есептелген меңгеру коэффициенті арқылы анықталды.

Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы ағылшын тілі оқулықтарындағы материалдарды ҰБТ талаптарына сәйкес жүйелі талдау мен жіктеуді жүргізуде және арнайы әзірленген тапсырмалар арқылы жоғары сынып оқушыларының материалды меңгеру деңгейін арттыру тәсілін ұсынуда көрінеді. Дайындық үдерісі үш негізгі кезең бойынша жүзеге асырылды: дайындықты жоспарлау, эксперименттік топпен жұмыс жүргізу және нәтижелерді талдап, қорытындылар жасау.

Тірек сөздер: Ұлттық бірыңғай тестілеу, ағылшын тіліне дайындық, оқу жүктемесін оңтайландыру, тестілік стресс, академиялық күйзеліс, құрылымдалған оқу жоспары, ағылшын тілі, жоғары сынып оқушылары

ОПТИМИЗАЦИЯ ПРОЦЕССА ПОДГОТОВКИ ПО АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ К ЕДИНОМУ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОМУ ТЕСТИРОВАНИЮ: УЧЕБНАЯ НАГРУЗКА И АКАДЕМИЧЕСКИЙ СТРЕСС

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются эффективные способы снижения академического стресса у учащихся, готовящихся к тесту «Английский язык» Единого национального тестирования (ЕНТ). Особое внимание уделяется оптимизации учебной нагрузки и снижению психологического напряжения обучающихся посредством специальной программы подготовки с четко определёнными сроками. Исследование основано на учебниках и описаниях тестов, отобранных в соответствии со структурными требованиями содержания тестирования.

Содержание учебного материала по английскому языку включает такие разделы, как лексика и орфография, морфология, синтаксис, синтез и анализ, а также чтение. Эти разделы охватывают систематизированные темы, что позволяет комплексно изучать тестовый материал и последовательно развивать предметные компетенции.

Цель исследования заключается в систематизации материалов учебников и учебно-методических пособий по английскому языку в соответствии с требованиями ЕНТ, а также в разработке способов их освоения, направленных на предупреждение академического стресса у учащихся.

В качестве методов исследования использованы анализ, систематизация, классификация и количественная оценка. Уровень усвоения материала определялся с помощью коэффициента усвоения, рассчитанного как отношение количества правильно выполненных заданий к их общему числу.

Научная новизна исследования заключается в проведении системного анализа и классификации материалов учебников английского языка в соответствии с требованиями ЕНТ, а также в предложении способа достижения высокого уровня усвоения материала старшеклассниками посредством специально разработанных заданий. Подготовительный процесс осуществлялся в три основных этапа: планирование подготовки, работа с экспериментальной группой и анализ результатов с формулированием выводов.

Ключевые слова: Единое национальное тестирование, подготовка по английскому языку, оптимизация учебной нагрузки, экзаменационный стресс, академический стресс, структурированный учебный план, английский язык, учащиеся старших классов

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