

A Study to Examine College Weekend Students' Attitudes toward the English Proficiency Tests

Tung-Yuang Liou, Nai-Ying Chang

Abstract

Most recent articles explored issues related to regular school system, but few investigated weekend students' schooling. This study aimed to understand weekend students' attitudes toward English Proficiency Tests (EPTs) in college level. A 28-item survey was administrated to 160 freshmen in April, 2008. Respondents consisted of 89 (55.6%) daytime students, 17 (10.6%) nighttime students, and 54 (33.75%) weekend students. All respondents were grouped in a basis of class. The survey was developed according to the model proposed by Clark and Este (2002) to examine respondents' conceptual attitudes and their learning behaviors toward EPTs. Clark and Este's model suggested that three key analytic domains are vital to understand individual performance: knowledge, motivation, and social culture. Alpha coefficient was obtained to assess the internal consistency of the survey ($\alpha=.79$).

In order to test differences among the student populations, this study conducted the cross tabulation table to examine respondents' attitudes toward EPTs in multiple domains. The findings showed that there were significant differences between daytime and weekend students in knowledge ($\chi^2=35.5$, $p<.001$), motivation ($\chi^2=19.8$, $p<.05$), and social culture ($\chi^2=27.4$, $p<.01$). Weekend students differed from nighttime students in knowledge ($\chi^2=25.3$, $p<.001$) and social culture ($\chi^2=28$, $p<.01$), but there was no significant difference found in the levels of motivation. Students' academic fields can be an influencing factor toward EPTs. English majored students were quite different to the students with non-English major both in knowledge ($\chi^2=52.8$, $p<.001$) and social culture ($\chi^2=58.6$, $p<.001$).

Results indicated that gender can be a factor mediated in conceptual differences. In this study, I found that female students showed higher understanding of EPT than male students ($\chi^2=16.5$, $p<.05$). However, there were no significant differences between females and males in the domains of motivation and social culture. This study also made recommendations for researchers and educational practitioners to advance weekend students' achievements in school.

Keywords: weekend student, English Proficiency Test, English achievement.

進修學院學生對英語能力測驗的態度探討

劉東遠、張乃英

摘要

本研究旨在了解大專學院學生對於英檢測驗的態度。160位受試者在2008年4月填答一份英檢測驗態度量表。受試者包含89位(55.6%)日間部學生,17位(10.6%)進修部學生(或稱夜間部)與54(33.75%)位進修學院學生。問卷以Clark與Este所發展的理論做為基礎,該理論認為行為分析的基礎,必須強調知識、動機與文化,方能將達到績效提升。問卷信度 α 值為.79。

分析方式主要以交叉分析表進行,用來比較不同學制的學生對於英檢測驗在理解知識、參加動機、團體文化等三個軸向的差別。結果顯示日間部學生與進修學院學生在三個軸向都有差別。而進修部與進修學院的學生在知識($\chi^2=25.3, p<.001$)與團體文化($\chi^2=28, p<.01$)上出現顯著差異。此外,如果將樣本群以主修科目區分時,分析結果顯示英語與非英語主修學生,在知識($52.8, p<.001$)與團體文化($58.6, p<.001$)上有顯著差異。

性別差異只有顯現在對英檢測驗的知識理解上($\chi^2=16.5, p<.05$),在另外兩個軸向上並未發現有顯著的差異性。

關鍵詞：進修學院、英檢測驗、英文能力。

Introduction

English has become an international language for decades. The mastery of the language does not only allow individuals to obtain knowledge by reading the global language, but also provide them with opportunities in career. For the past years, English educators and advocates have introduced multiple English Proficiency Tests (EPTs) into Taiwan. Local society and students put weights on the tests, which becomes an important goal for learners' schooling and career opportunities.

EPTs have become highly valued by individuals and organizations in local society (張武昌, 民 95 & 張武昌, 民 96). Especially, the government just revised its policy and decided to take the tests as one essential factor of annual evaluation for public servants. In addition, many private enterprises have adopted English proficiency as a means of recruiting and evaluating employees for years. Since the language tests become significant in Taiwan, more than 2.2 million people have taken the English proficiency tests since 2000 (LTTC, 2006). With the surprising numbers of the test participants, it is no doubt that English certificates become public recognized prizes for all English learners.

Although the trend of taking English tests is so overwhelming in Taiwan, English achievements are not necessary as satisfying as what we expect. Our government and the educational advocates have put their efforts to promote students' English achievements. The outcomes do not show desired performance. Especially, for technical school students, they were more likely to have lower achievements than those from colleges and universities in English learning (周中天, 民 91; 張武昌, 民 96).

A longitude study reported its analysis of college students' English achievements (LTTC, 2004). The study released its report annually and showed comparisons among different student populations. Students of public schools achieved higher than those of private schools. Daytime students tended to have higher English achievements than night school students. The analysis of the annual report is consistent with a recent study (張武昌, 民 96). Chang pointed out current problems in English achievements. Learning achievements in English education varied from student populations, in terms of the places of students reside and the school systems. Students in urban areas showed higher English achievements than those in countryside. Daytime students performed better than the students of night school and weekend school.

Chang indicated problems at different learning stages of English teaching in Taiwan

(張武昌, 民 96). In his study, one of Chang's foci identified the achievement gap between technical college students and regular college students in EPTs. The author pointed out that technical college students have less learning hours in their high school time and most of them were frustrated in their early years of English learning at schools. Their lower achievements and lower motivation are actually the consequences of unequal curriculum and frustrated experiences in technical high schools or even early years of English learning.

Chang and Tu (2007) further reviewed at the strategies adopted by technical universities and provided their solutions to current English learning problems of technical students. In their study, authors appreciated technical schools' efforts of setting graduation threshold of English for students. However, the graduation threshold has been only adopted by a few technical universities and the threshold has not become effective at all. Their study suggested that the lower English achievements of technical students could be promoted by government advancement, such as funding on more English learning hours, reviewing of current teaching curriculum and increasing activities to promote students' motivation.

Purposes of the study

This study was initiated by an annual report in which college freshmen were investigated in many domains (LTTC, 2004). The 3-year research collected data of freshmen's background information, learning motivation, academic achievements in multiple disciplines. One of its foci was to understand students' participation in EPT. The analysis of the longitude research drew my attention to language learning among technical college students. The research put its concerns on major populations: daytime and night time students. It seemed that the study missed one major student population, weekend students, and failed to explore how the population did with EPTs. In addition, after searching a great body of related studies, I came to realize that more researches are needed to understand the needs of the weekend students in technical schools.

Weekend students constitute a major part of student populations in a school. Ministry of Education (MOE) considers the students as a mainstream of the Continuing Education. The Continuing Education aims to provide adult learners with educational opportunities designed to meet their needs for career advancement, professional growth, and life enrichment. In fact, weekend students are quite difference from regular students in terms of the students' demographic and the intention to pursue their career goals.

The primary purpose of the study is to understand weekend students' perceptual differences to other student populations. This study intends to answer the questions as

follow,

1. Do weekend students differ from other student populations in taking EPTs?
2. Do weekend students with English majored differ from non-English majored students toward EPTs?
3. Are there differences among the English majored students toward EPTs?

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study was conducted from April to May, 2008 in a technical college located in central Taiwan. Like many other technical colleges, this college offered multiple school systems in several academic disciplines. Samples included 160 respondents who were in their first year in the college. The freshmen were grouped in class base and asked to offer their responses to a survey. Ten respondents were not included in the study because of incomplete survey. Table 1 entailed the characteristics of the respondents. Among the 160 participants, 89 (55.6%) were daytime (regular school system) students, 17 (10.6%) were from night school, and 54 (33.8%) were drawn from weekend school. There were 78 (48.8%) male participants and 82 (51.2%) female. Sixty-six participants reported that they have taken English Proficiency Tests and 36 of them reported that they have participated EPTs more than once.

Table 1 (N=160) Characters of Respondents

School System	English Major	Non-English Major	Total
Day	29	60	89
Night	17	0	17
Weekend	37	17	54
Total	83	77	160

Instrument

A survey was developed to measure respondents' levels in three domains: knowledge, motivation, and social culture. The items of knowledge were to explore respondents' levels of what they know about EPTs. Motivation included items to investigate respondents' levels of intention to take EPTs. Social culture was to understand how the respondents and their friends (or classmates) view the EPTs and their group behaviors to prepare EPTs.

To explore the conceptual differences among respondents from different school systems, this study adopted a model which was capable to differentiate conception levels among our respondents. Clark and Estes (2002) pointed out that an effective analysis for individual's performance must be able to explore the levels of individual's knowledge to the task, their motivation levels, and social culture among the target group. The model proposed by the researchers has been applied to a major college curriculum and business improving plans

(Clark and Este, 2002;

https://www.usc.edu/schools/education/programs/edd_program/index.html).

The survey consisted of three subtests that were designed to measure respondents' levels of knowledge, motivation, and social culture, respectively. Sample items are like "I am familiar with EPT."; "I will practice EPT items when I have time." Students marked their response with Yes (rated 1) or No (rated 0). The survey was downsized from 33 items to 28 items with a pretest analysis. Alpha coefficient was obtained to assess the internal consistency of the survey ($\alpha=.79$).

Results

One major purpose of this study was to explore the differences of weekend students to other student populations. Cross table check and Chi square test were conducted to compare weekend students' attitudes and behaviors toward EPTs to those of other student populations. In this section, the study demonstrated comparisons among student populations in multiple domains that were students' knowledge of EPTs, motivation levels of taking EPTs, and social culture of taking EPTs.

Among students from multiple school systems, significant differences were found in all three domains. Table 2 illuminated comparisons among multiple student populations from school systems. While comparing students from day, night, and weekend schools, the analysis showed that there were significant differences in all three domains. Chi-square values were found 45.0 ($p<.001$) for the domain of knowledge, 37.0 ($p<.01$) for respondents' motivation levels, and 52.0 ($p<.001$) for social culture toward EPTs. It meant that the respondents were different in the levels of what the EPTs are as well as how to take EPTs. In addition, the samples from multiple school systems showed moderate difference in their motivation levels of how they valued the EPTs. At last, the respondents also reported differently how the respondents put their group efforts in taking EPTs, which was defined as

social culture in taking EPTs.

In order to understand how the weekend students differ from other students, I conducted more comparisons and also made the comparisons in multiple domains. I further compared two populations of day time and weekend students. The values of Chi square demonstrated significant differences in three domains as well. Weekend students reported different levels of their knowledge of EPTs from that of the day time students (35.5, $p < .001$). When taking a close look at the day time respondents, a factor might influence the students' responses due to their personal concerns. Respondents from day time school system consisted of both English majored and non-English majored students. For non-English majored students, EPTs certificates might not be on their priority list to pursue during their college time. For the weekend students, they were all English majored and were more familiar with EPTs. The value of Chi square of motivation indicated a moderate level of difference among the two populations (19.8, $p < .01$). In the group views in taking EPTs, a value of 27.4 ($p < .001$) strongly suggested a significantly difference among the two student populations.

The same comparisons were conducted between night school and weekend students. The students were different in knowledge (25.3, $p < .001$) and social culture (28.0, $p < .01$). The analysis showed very little surprising result because there was no significant difference between the two populations of the levels of motivation. Usually, it was presumed by most teachers that night school students and weekend students were quite common in many ways due to the nature of the school system. Both the school systems are to provide education opportunities for adults who may have full-time jobs but wish to continue their education. They tend to show higher motivation than the daytime students.

Table 2 Comparisons among Students from Multiple School Systems

	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Social Culture</i>
Day, Night, Weekend (N= 160)	$\chi^2=45.0^{***}$	$\chi^2=37.0^{**}$	$\chi^2=52.0^{***}$
Day vs. Weekend (N=143)	$\chi^2=35.5^{***}$	$\chi^2=19.8^*$	$\chi^2=27.4^{**}$
Night vs. Weekend (N=71)	$\chi^2=25.3^{***}$	$\chi^2=16.1$	$\chi^2=28.0^{**}$

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Table 3 shows a comparison of two populations. Respondents were examined to understand their differences in three domains based on the academic fields they study. The results indicated that the academic fields can be a significant influence their knowledge

(52.8, $p < .001$) of EPTs and their group efforts to prepare EPTs (58.6, $p < .001$). The results were consistent with our common sense that English majored students know more and do more to be ready for EPTs than students with other majored.

Table 3 Comparison between English majored students and non-English majored

	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Social Culture</i>
English majored vs. Non-English (N=160)	$\chi^2=52.8^{***}$	$\chi^2=11.4$	$\chi^2=58.6^{***}$

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Moreover, one purpose of this study was to explore the differences among the English majored students. Table 4 demonstrated the analyses of English majored students from three school systems. The daytime students were significantly different from the weekend students both in knowledge (13.9, $p < .05$) and in motivation (17.1, $p < .05$) toward EPTs. However, there was no significant difference among the students in social culture.

In addition, I further examined the students from night school and weekend students. The results showed that the two student populations differed in the knowledge (29.5, $p < .01$) and social culture (24.6, $p < .05$).

To understand the difference within the weekend student groups, I compared two-year junior students (二專) and two-year senior students (二技) to look for differences. The results showed that the two groups only differed in the social culture (18.7, $p < .05$). That is, the respondents put different group efforts to prepare EPTs. However, the value is reported at moderate level.

Table 4 Comparisons among students with English Majored

	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Social culture</i>
Day vs. Weekend (N=66)	$\chi^2=13.9^*$	$\chi^2=17.1^*$	$\chi^2=4.7$
Night vs. Weekend (N=54)	$\chi^2=29.5^{**}$	$\chi^2=16.2$	$\chi^2=24.6^*$
Two-year Seniors vs. two-year Juniors (N=37)	$\chi^2=9.8$	$\chi^2=8.9$	$\chi^2=18.7^*$

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

For most people, it is assumed that girls were more motivated and more likely to have better achievement in language learning. To test the assumption, this study included gender as a factor to examine the differences among the respondents. Results showed that male

respondents and female respondents were only different in knowledge ($\chi^2=18.74$, $p<.01$). The analysis did not find difference in both respondents' motivation levels and group learning behaviors.

Table 5 Comparison of Gender Difference in EPTs

	<i>Knowledge</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Social Culture</i>
Gender (N=160)	$\chi^2=18.747^{**}$	$\chi^2=9.116$	$\chi^2=8.462$

*** $p<.001$, ** $p<.01$, * $p<.05$

Discussion

In general, it is clear that the students' academic disciplines can be a significant factor that influenced their conceptual attitudes toward EPTs. Respondents showed moderate level to no significant difference when respondents' academic majored was controlled. In this study, the findings clearly showed that respondents reported significant differences at noticeable levels, especially in knowledge and social culture. It may be the reason that those respondents who were with English majored tended to receive more information and were frequently encouraged to take EPTs than other students did. Therefore, they became more familiar with the EPTs.

The analyses indicated little difference among the respondents when they were asked questions about how motivated to take EPTs. The statistical comparisons above showed moderate level to no significant difference among student populations in the domain of motivation. If realizing the trend of taking EPTs in local society, it is easy to understand why the level of motivation did not show significant difference. EPTs have become so overwhelming and local people in Taiwan have been educated or become well aware of the importance of the tests.

Furthermore, the collected data showed there was a high percentage of taking EPTs. For daytime students, there was almost half of the respondents have participated in EPTs (49.4%). Night school students and the two-year junior ones were 58.8% and 38.5%, respectively. The numbers reveal respondents' views of EPTs. They do not only agree the importance of the tests, but also put their efforts into actually moves.

When examining the gender difference, this study did not find difference among the respondents. I further took at respondents' attempts of taking EPTs. Male respondents were far beyond female respondents of taking the tests. There was 44 females (49.4%) have taken the test at least one time; however, only 22 males (31.0%) reported they have taken the tests

before. The difference between males and females, indeed, exist in local society in language learning. It also calls for more attention to explore the differences in gender and more efforts in closing the gaps.

Limitation

Although this study provided several surprising findings and they challenged our views toward the weekend students, the findings of this study were bounded by several limitations as follows,

First, two major drawbacks of sampling apparently impacted the findings. All respondents were withdrawn from a single educational institution. With the limited samples, its findings could only apply to describe the characteristics of the populations the participating school. The limitation is widely applicable to quantitative research due to its nature.

This study tried to recruit reasonable numbers of samples from multiple school systems. However, we encountered problems that prevented us from reasonable sampling. It resulted in sampling errors that the numbers of school systems differ from each other. The problem also bound our findings and impact the study.

Second, although this study conducted analyses to find the differences how the weekend students varied to other student populations, it failed to identify which student population owned higher or lower levels of taking EPTs in knowledge, motivation and their social culture. Due to the limitations of the self-designed survey, the analyses in this study are unavailable.

Recommendations and implications

This study intends to provide suggestions for future research and educators based on the findings of this study.

First, according to the MOE's goals for college's education, the Continuing Education is designed to provide educational opportunities for adults who look for practical needs in their career. The Continuing Education consists of both weekend school and night school systems. This study aimed to explore understanding of weekend students' conceptual knowledge, attitudes and groups views toward EPTs. However, I have strongly believed that night school students need to be paid much more attention on their schooling. For example, this study found that night school students showed lower attitude levels toward EPTs. It

may alert that there are differences between the students to other student populations in learning characteristics.

Second, the findings were consistent with public beliefs that weekend students were considered as more self-motivated than other students. With the strong motivation, any students could be very possible to achieve goals. Although the students may not be as academic competent as students of regular school system, educators or schools need to provide appropriate curriculum and strategies to assist the students to achieve their learning goals.

At last, the number of weekend students has been descended at surprising speed for several private technical colleges and universities. The impacts of descending student numbers may include significant changes of students' characteristics, which the study have noticed but failed to explore.

Conclusion

Weekend school usually enrolls students with working experiences or with full-time jobs. Most of the students are with high motivation of their schooling. With curiosity of weekend student's learning, we decided to explore the students' attitudes toward English proficiency tests (EPTs). With a decade of teaching English, I have strongly felt the overwhelming trend of English learning. More and more EPTs were developed or introduced by private or public sectors. The surprising numbers of EPTs participants is telling the society that English learning has become "a national sport". It seems impossible to escape the trend.

The EPTs were chosen to be our primary research subject because they have become so significant for most civilians and students in Taiwan. This study intended to identify the differences of the weekend students to other student populations. The results were mostly consistent with assumptions that the students were different in taking EPTs. In addition, this study calls for more attentions on this particular student population in further research. Doing so will promote our understanding of the students schooling and advance more opportunities to succeed.

References

- Clark, R. E. & Estes, F. (1996). Cognitive task analysis, *International Journal of Education Research*, 25(5), 403-417.
- Clark, R. E. & Estes, F. (2002). Turning research into results: A guide to selecting the right performance solutions. Atlanta, GA: CEP Press.
- Language Training and Test Center. (2004). 技專校院學生英語能力檢測計畫：九十二學年度英語能力檢測成績報告. Taipei.
- Language Training and Testing Center. (2006). The English summary of the 2006 LTTC annual report. Taipei.
- 周中天(民91)。英語成績差距懸殊的危機—「雙峰」曲線的省思。《康軒教育雜誌》，3，2-3。
- 張仁家 & 涂雅玲 (民 96，11 月)。國內技專校院學生英語能力畢業門檻現況與省思。2007 海峽兩岸高等技術與職業教育學術研討會。
- 張武昌 (民 95)。台灣英語教育：現況與省思。《教育資料與研究》，69，129-144。
- 張武昌 (民 96)。提升臺灣大學生英語文能力的政策與策略，《教育資料與研究》，85，157-174。
-