Arusyak Harutyunyan (ISEC NAS RA)

EFFECTIVENESS OF HYBRID TOEFL iBT COURSE: SUCCESS BY TRIALS AND ERRORS

Test Purpose

The purpose of the TOEFL iBT test is to evaluate the English proficiency of people whose native language is not English. TOEFL iBT scores are primarily used as a measure of the ability of international students to use English in an academic environment. To quote the original TOEFL working paper, the purpose of the test is "to measure the communicative language ability of people whose first language is not English . . . in situations and tasks reflective of university life"[1].

Landscape analysis of TOEFL iBT in Armenia

Who are TOEFL iBT test takers in Armenia?

> ➢ Students seeking admission in a university where language of instruction is English, as well as people seeking for scholarship and certification

The American University of Armenia (AUA) is the leader in establishing the demand in TOEFL iBT test setting English language proficiency requirement for all undergraduate and graduate degree programs in the form of target score of 79.[2] Nevertheless, the analysis of entering class profiles demonstrates that the average score required for admission is much higher than the initially set target score. Below is the 2020 entering class profile compiling the average test scores of all students admitted during the fall 2020 undergraduate admissions cycle:[3]

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[1]**Jamieson, J., Jones, S., Kirsch, I., Mosenthal, P., & Taylor, C.** (1999). *TOEFL 2000 framework: A working paper* (TOEFL Monograph No. 16). Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, p.10

[2] https://admissions.aua.am/undergraduate/application-requirements/

[3] https://admissions.aua.am/undergraduate/selection-process-and-the-aua-student-profile/#entering

	BA in Business	BA in English & Communications	BS in Computer Science	BS in Data Science	BS in Engineering Sciences
TOEFL iBT	93.8	91.4	93.3	97.1	93.2
IELTS	6.9	6.8	6.8	7.3	6.8
SAT	703.0	587.3	734.7	744.7	732.4
ACT	31.5	24.7	30.4	32.6	32.0

The second cohort of students in need of TOEFL iBT or Academic IELTS for their further studies are Bachelor students having graduated from Armenian universities and wishing to continue their education abroad or applying for Erasmus Mundus Joint Master degrees or a wide diversity of scholarships.

✓ Applicants for PhD and professional certification

TOEFL was first introduced as a compulsory entrance examination for PhD (Candidate in Sciences) back in 2006 with the order of RA Education and Science Minister[4] where AUA served as a test preparation center and International Research & Exchanges Board, Representation in Armenia ("IREX ARMENIA") served as a test center (later AUA became an ETS-Authorized TOEFL® iBT Certified Test Administration Site and replaced IREX). Differentiated threshold scores were set for natural sciences, social sciences and humanities:

TOEFL iBT- 54, (iTP-480) for natural and technical sciences,

TOEFL iBT- 61, (iTP-500) for social sciences,

TOEFL iBT- 79, (iTP-550) for humanities and philological sciences.

In 2016, with the governmental resolution N 238-Ն[5] the threshold score was changed for TOEFL iBT laying it down to 54 for all research directions, as well as introducing IELTS as an alternative to the foreign language entrance examination for PhD studies setting the minimum required score at 5.5 band score. Currently, Yerevan with its population of 1,086,000[6] people has 4 ETS-Authorized TOEFL® iBT Certified Test Administration Sites in AUA, ESOLARM, Master Style Educational Center and Yerevan State University[7], which comes to prove the popularity of and high demand in this test.

Taking into account that annually the Armenian Government approves around 150[8] governmentally-funded full-time PhD positions and significantly more part-time PhD

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[4] https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=27932

[5] https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=104366

[6] https://populationstat.com/armenia/yerevan

[7] https://www.toefl.givemesomeenglish.com/toefl-testing-dates-and-locations/toefl-testing-dates-and-locations-by-country-letter-a/armenia-toefl-testing-dates-and-locations/toefl-testing-centers-in-armenia/

[8] http://escs.am/am/news/6397

positions in all HEIs in Armenia, we can predict that any free-of-charge TOEFL IBT preparation course would be of high demand.

Below we show the number of applicants having admitted to full-time and part-time PhD positions taken from the official website of RA Statistical Committee, www.armstat.am, in all the HEIs in Armenia including the National Academy of Sciences of Armenia, starting from 2006 to 2018 inclusive given the obligatory requirement of taking TOEFL test as an entrance examination:

Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of full-time PhD students	195	188	216	137	177	173	174	159	153	160	166	108	127
Number of part-time PhD students	250	183	166	135	98	195	199	236	168	193	230	157	121

After quality assurance processes took a full swing in Armenia, a number of non-linguistic universities set requirements for taking a TOEFL iBT or Academic IELTS for their English-teaching academic staff mainly teaching English for Specific Purposes. Moreover, certain universities, such as Yerevan State University, awards credits for a TOEFL-iBT certificate within the frameworks of continuous professional development.

Context
Given the high popularity of the TOEFL iBT test, iBT blended course had been developed and run at Yerevan and Gyumri American Corners (AC) back in 2018. This initiative had been possible to implement with the US Embassy Yerevan funding. The said course was a hybrid 8-week-long TOEFL iBT course built on the Moodle of the US Embassy in Yerevan, offering one online session for Yerevan and Gyumri groups together per week and one face-to-face lesson in Yerevan AC and Gyumri AC each, respectively. Overall, the course included 24 sessions – 8 online and 16 F2F sessions, out of which 8 F2F sessions were conducted at Yerevan AC and 8 F2F sessions were conducted at Gyumri AC.

The learning objectives of the blended course were as follows:

By the end of the course the participants will:

- Acquire an insight into the four sections of the TOEFL test: Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing
- Learn helpful tips to prepare for the TOEFL test
- Improve English language skills
- Be able to find test prep resources for the TOEFL test
- Learn how the TOEFL test is scored
- Learn how to register for the TOEFL test

During the course the participants had an opportunity to have an in-depth look at all four sections of the TOEFL test: Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing. Each week the course participants learned more about the question types and were provided with resources to help them prepare for the actual test day. Test preparation tips and practice materials were provided during the whole course. The learners were expected to spend 6 to 8 hours per week to get the most out of this course (2-hour-long online session + 2-hour-long F2F session + Moodle activities). The course included video lectures (ready-made), discussion forums, weekly quizzes, practice tests and recommended readings. The instructor moderated the discussions and provided feedback to writing and speaking tasks on a weekly basis.

Method

The evaluation of the project was approached from qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The main evaluation tools included an end-of-course survey completed by the participants and e-mail communication with the participants who had withdrawn from the project. During the communication, the learners cited the main reasons for their withdrawal and during the survey they reported what they had found useful about the course and their learning experience overall and which aspects they would like to see improved if a similar project was hosted. The data collected from the survey aimed to help the teams of instructors and course designers to recognize the problems the participants experienced throughout the project and tackle them in their practice. At the same time, throughout the project, methods of statistical data analysis and Moodle statistics were used to keep track.

Motivation of Online Learners
Understanding motivation to learn in online environments is gaining much interest among researchers. For example, Shroff, Vogel, and Coombes (2008)[9] found that online learners

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[9] **Shroff, R. H., Vogel, D. R., & Coombes, J.** (2008). *Assessing individual-level factors supporting student intrinsic motivation in online discussions: a qualitative study*. Journal of Information Systems Education, 19(1), 111-125.

were more intrinsically motivated than their on-campus counterparts. Cho and Heron (2015)[10] found that online learners' intrinsic motivation is positively related to their learning performance. Studies on online learning suggest that unmotivated students may fail to use cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies, such as mastery learning or self-monitoring. In the context of MOOCs, because it is an open and free learning environment, participants tend to choose only segments of the learning environment, following their goals and interests (Kizilcec & Schneider, 2015). For example, Wang and Baker (2015) found that course completers tend to be more interested in the course content, whereas non-completers tend to be more interested in MOOCs as a type of learning experience. In a wider perspective, Kizilcec and Schneider (2015)[11] found that different motivational goals (e.g. relevant to job, career change, meet new friends), may predict different behavioral patterns for MOOC learners. In specific, they found that learners who enrolled with friends were more likely to be engaged with course materials than their counterparts. These results correspond with other studies, showing that MOOC participants who were engaged in significant interactions with peers were less likely to dropout (Ferguson & Clow, 2015).[12]

Research Findings

In the first run of the course, after two-full-day long interviews with over 100 applicants in Yerevan and around 50 applicants in Gyumri, eventually 45 applicants were selected the main filter being their language proficiency of B2 under CEFR. Out of the aforesaid 45 applicants, only 43 took part in the IT training and were registered on the Moodle course, but one participant was never active on Moodle thus making up the kick-off number 42.

In the first week of the course, a pre-course survey was carried out among the participants to find out their expectations of the course and the online experience of the participants. Survey participation constituted 50% of the total number. The initial aim of the pre-course survey was to identify the specific learning needs and provide a platform where all participants will be able to raise any questions they would like to ask without being identified.

The survey showed that around 50% of the participants had not previously had any experience of taking online courses, nevertheless, the course structure and instructions were clear for them and they did not have any additional questions.

[10] **Moon-Heum Cho & Michele L. Heron** (2015) *Self-regulated learning: the role of motivation, emotion, and use of learning strategies in students' learning experiences in a self-paced online mathematics course*, Distance Education, 36:1, pp80-99, DOI: 10.1080/01587919.2015.1019963

[11] **Kizilcec, R. F., & Schneider, E.** (2015). *Motivation as a lens to understand online learners: toward data-driven design with the OLEI scale*. ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interactions, 22(2). http://dx.doi.org./10.1145/2699735.

[12] **Ferguson, R., & Clow, D.** (2015). *Examining engagement: analysing learner subpopulations in massive open online courses (MOOCs)*. In The 5th International learning analytics and knowledge Conference (LAK15), pp. 16-20, March 2015.

After the first introductory week, each week of the online course contained ready-made videos, tips, assignments which were assessed and given feedback to. During the actual course, around 50 speaking tasks and over 40 writings tasks were assessed, commented and given feedback to. At the end of the course, 12 participants completed a full mock test, where the average of the scores was around 90 out of 120 maximum.

Eventually, the course had 16 graduates 9 at Yerevan AC and 7 at Gyumri AC. Some of the reasons for such a dropout rate were the inability to attend the course in the business hours (15:00-17:00 at AC Yerevan), being recruited halfway, too much homework and assignments etc. Also, participants did not feel any commitment to continue the course, as the course was free of charge with no financial burden on their shoulders.

A post-course survey was also carried out to find out the satisfaction level of the participants with the course in general, and the course instructor. Overall, the course received on average 9.5 satisfaction rate out of 10, while the course instructor's satisfaction rate was 10 out of 10. The post-course survey also helped to receive some useful information on how to improve the course for its further applications.

Based on the first-run of the course, learners' feedback the course instructor's recommendation for further improvement were as follows:

First of all, there was a need to change the course participation appraisal scheme: the certificates were issued based on their participation in the F2F sessions only, thus leaving behind their participation in the online sessions and Moodle activities. If online participation had also been taken into account, the number of final graduates would have definitely been higher. In case of hybrid courses, it is suggested using the following appraisal scheme: F2F participation (30%), participation in online sessions (30%), completion of Moodle quizzes and assignments (20%) and final mock test (20%).

The second recommendation was to communicate all the selected applicants from the very beginning that dropping the course without any excused and substantiation reason will deprive them of any opportunity to take part in the other courses offered by ACs.

The course was again offered in 2019 taking into account the lessons learns and the feedback of the learners concerning both the course content and its delivery mode with the final aim of having lower dropout rate in parallel with ensuring quality teaching.

After two-full-day long interviews with over 100 interviewees in Yerevan and Gyumri, eventually 38 candidates were selected the main filter being their language proficiency of B2 under CEFR. 14 more participants were enrolled automatically as there were the graduates of Business English course and already possessed the relevant language level thus making the commencing number 52. With lower interviewee figures both in Yerevan and Gyumri, 100 in 2019 versus 150 in 2018, the progress of the course and the number of graduates in both ACs came to prove that in 2019 the interviewees were more insightful and aware of TOELF iBT course requirements, examination structure etc.

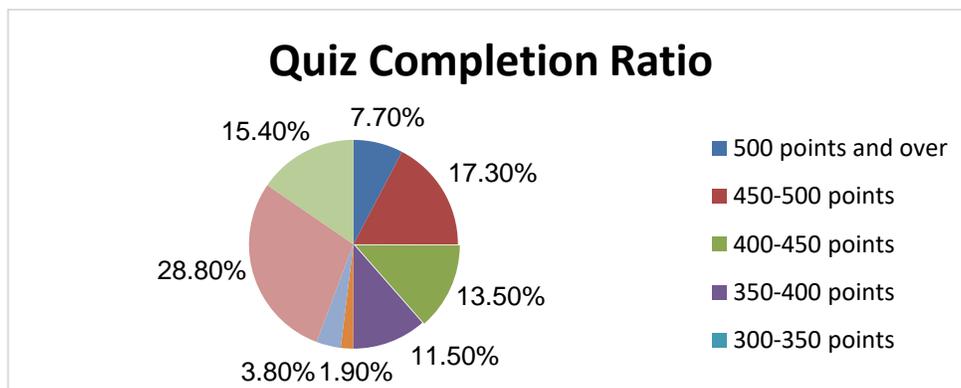| First course run in 2018		
	Yerevan	Gyumri
Number of Interviewees	100	50
Number of Admitted Learners	22	20
Number of Course Graduates	9	7
Second course run in 2019		
Number of Interviewees	60	40
Number of Admitted Learners	24	27
Number of Course Graduates	15	15

Like in 2018, a pre-course survey was carried out in the first week of the course among the participants to find out the expectations of the course and the online experience of the participants, where 1/3 of participants took part in this survey. The survey showed that around 50% of the respondents didn't have an experience of taking online courses, nevertheless, the course structure and instructions were clear for them and they didn't have any additional questions.

The course underwent certain changes before its re-launch based on the feedback of the course learners for 2018: vocabulary quizzes were added to each unit in addition to writing and speaking assignments, as listening and reading quizzes were already available on the Moodle.

The gradebook of the Moodle showed that out of 540 maximum points available, 30 course participants scored half of the points and over, thus, successfully digesting the course materials and performing the assignments.

The table below demonstrates the ratio of quiz and assignment completion by the learners:

Table 1

Quiz Completion Ratio

Pie chart legend:
- 500 points and over: 7.70%
- 450-500 points: 17.30%
- 400-450 points: 13.50%
- 350-400 points: 11.50%
- 300-350 points: 1.90%
- (additional segments): 3.80%, 28.80%, 15.40%

During the actual course, around 50 speaking tasks were assessed, commented and given feedback to, as well as over 63 writings tasks were checked and corrected by the course instructors, nevertheless, the speaking tasks assessed were not included in the Moodle gradebook.

It should be highlighted that some participants completed the online component but were not granted certificates as they were not able to attend the F2F sessions because of different reasons. In the long run, the course promoted building language skills and empowered the following groups: 1) English teachers and teachers of other languages, 2) students, 3) university professors and other representatives.

Some of the reasons for such a dropout rate were the inability to attend the course in the business hours (15:00-17:00 at AC Yerevan), holiday season, personal/family affairs etc. It should be outlined that as the attendance sheets showed many of the participants didn't attend the course from the very beginning which proves the hypothesis on the lack of commitment due to the absence of financial burden, while the actual dropout during the course was insignificant.

A post-course survey was also carried out to find out the satisfaction level of the participants with the course, in general, and the course instructors. Overall, the course received on average 9.43 satisfaction rate out of 10, while the course instructors' satisfaction rate was 10 out of 10. The table below included the questions from the post-course survey and the analysis of the responses:

Table 2

Question	Responses Average
Overall, how satisfied were you with this course? Please use a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is Extremely dissatisfied and 10 is Extremely satisfied.	9.5

How much has your understanding of the TOEFL iBT® test improved as a result of taking this course? Please use a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is Not at all and 10 is Improved significantly.	9.25
Based on your experience with this course, how likely would you be to recommend this course to a family member, friend, or student? Where 1 - Definitely would not and 10 - Definitely would	9.75
What changes could we make that would MOST increase your satisfaction with this course? For example, reduce the amount of text, add more practice questions, add more preparation tips, reduce the number of videos, add more videos or any other .	The responses ranged from "Adding more quizzes, adding more F2F lessons and more practice materials" to "I would not make any changes as everything was organized perfectly."
How would you rate the amount of material covered?	9.75
What was the (average) amount of time you spent on this e-learning course?	The responses ranged from "4 hours per week, 2 hours per day, 8 hours per week to around 20 hours per week"
Rate the technical quality of the course materials	9.75
Rate the experience of the instructors to run e-learning courses and preparing for the TOEFL iBT exam	10
Testimonials: How has this course helped you achieve your goals?	The responses ranged from "I am sure that after this course I can get higher score from TOEFL iBT test" to "The course helped me take an insight into the TOEFL test and the process in general."

CONCLUSIONS

Hybrid TOEFL iBT course offered by American Corners in Yerevan and Gyumri aided the course learners to have a thorough understanding of TOEFL questions. This hybrid course can help the students to prepare themselves in encountering the TOEFL test and to overcome their anxiety in a test. The positive attitudes are showed by the students in this online learning environment to learn English, particularly TOEFL skills that can encourage and support them to create an effective learning environment. Moreover, this hybrid learning environment can form an atmosphere where such a learning environment can

increase students' confidence and motivation to get over their inhibitions and to ease their learning.

With lower interviewee figures both in Yerevan and Gyumri, 100 in 2019 versus 150 in 2018, the progress of the course and the number of graduates in both ACs came to prove that in 2019 the interviewees were more insightful and aware of TOELF iBT course requirements, examination structure etc., which eventually, resulted in having higher number of graduates despite lower entry figures largely due to different motivational goals (e.g. relevant to job, career change, studies abroad, boosting competitiveness in the job market etc).

Արուսյակ Հարությունյան, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ ԳԿՄԿ - «TOEFL iBT» հիբրիդային դասընթացի արդյունավետությունը. փորձահեն հաջողություն - Այս հետազոտության նպատակն է ուսումնասիրել «TOEFL iBT» հիբրիդային նախապատրաստական դասընթացի արդյունավետությունը՝ հիմնվելով դասընթացի մասնակիցների հետադարձ կապի և հարցումների արդյունքների վերլուծության վրա: Հետազոտության մեթոդը քանակական է. շեշտադրվել է օբյեկտիվ չափումների և հավաքված տվյալների վիճակագրական վերլուծությունը: Տվյալները հավաքվել են 2018-19 թթ.«TOEFL iBT» հիբրիդային դասընթացի փորձարկումների հիման վրա. յուրաքանչյուր տարի անցկացվել է երկուական հարցում՝ մասնակիցների փորձառության վերաբերյալ տեղեկատվություն ստանալու նպատակով. առաջին հարցումն անցկացվել է նախքան դասընթացի մեկնարկը, իսկ հիմնական հարցումն անցկացվել է դասընթացի ավարտին: Դա հնարավորություն է ընձեռել համեմատել և հակադրել մասնակիցների ակնկալիքները և ուսումնառության վերջնարդյունքները: Հետազոտության հիմնական արդյունքներից է այն, որ, հաշվի առնելով այն փաստը, որ որևէ ֆինանսական պարտավորություն առկա չէ, դասընթացն ավարտելու կարևորագույն պայման է դառնում մասնակիցների՝ բաց դասընթացներին մասնակցելու մոտիվացիայի կարևորությունը: