

**MA Candidates' Views towards the Entry Exam and the Graduate Program
in the Department of English at the Libyan Academy**

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Abstract

The paper aimed at investigating MA candidate's views towards the entry exam and the graduate program in the department of English in the School of Languages at the Libyan Academy. This was part of the effort to reform and improve the learning/teaching process in the department. A questionnaire was distributed to 157 candidates who attended the entry exam held on November 2014 to admit students for the academic year 2015. Results show overall satisfaction with both the entry exam and the MA program. However, some critical remarks and suggestions were given. Most of these remarks and suggestions argue for making more effort to improve the quality of the entry exam to make it fairer, more valid and more reliable. The ultimate goal is to have a more effective way of measuring students' qualifications required to join the MA program.

History of the English language MA programs in Libya

The English department for postgraduate study in the Libyan Academy was established in 1997 to satisfy the country's needs for staff members qualified to teach the English language in the Libyan universities and higher institutes. It was the first department in the whole country to offer MA programs in the English language.

At present, the department offers a program in applied linguistics which includes ten courses some of which are related to the nature of the English language while others are concerned with how to teach it. The following is a list of these ten courses:

- Syntax
- Morphology
- Syllabus design
- Academic writing
- General linguistics
- Research methodology
- English language testing
- Phonetics and phonology
- Second language acquisition
- English language teaching methodology

In addition to these ten courses, the students are required to write an MA thesis in order for them to be granted a master's degree in applied linguistics.

Similar MA programs in the English language are also found in the branches of the Academy in the cities of Benghazi, Misurata and Sebha. MA programs in the English language are also available in some Libyan universities including the University of Tripoli, the University of Zawia and the University of Benghazi.

Problem

Hundreds, if not thousands, of students apply to join the MA programs in the Libyan Academy every year. However, due to the limited capacity of the Academy, only a small number of these applicants are admitted. For example, the English department in the School of languages has accepted only 42 students this year from more than 157 applicants. Among those 42 students only a few of them have passed the entry exam while the others were admitted to the department because they obtained the marks closer to the pass mark which is 50 out of 100.

It is apparent from these results that the students have a low proficiency level which might not be sufficient for them to join (and do well in) the MA program in the

department. However, the problem cannot be attributed to the students without scientific evidence. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate this problem from the point of view of the candidates themselves regarding the entry exam and its suitability as a criterion for student selection. Another thing that will be investigated is the candidates' views towards the MA program in the Department of English and especially their reasons for choosing to study in the Libyan Academy in particular and not in other Libyan universities. This will eventually help in specifying problems and trying to find solutions to them. The ultimate goal is to make a good and suitable environment for the teaching/learning process in the English department and other departments in the Libyan Academy and other Libyan universities with similar circumstances.

Participants

Participants are 157 students applying to join the MA program in the Department of English and who attended the entry exam of the year 2015. All of them are BA holders majoring in English and come from different areas in the country.

Data collection

Data of this study was collected using questionnaire. The questionnaire covered three aspects. The first was related to general information including average of the BA, age and gender. The second aspect was the MA program about which 3 questions were asked. The final aspect was the entry exam and since it was the major one, 9 questions were devoted to it.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the questionnaires was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis was used to deal with numerical data such as age and gender. It was also used to know the total number of participants who chose a certain answer especially in Yes/No questions or multiple choice questions. Qualitative data, on the other hand, was used to deal with open ended questions which required from students to give comments or to elaborate on certain points. It is believed that both types of analysis would help in clarifying the situation.

Analysis of questionnaire

As said before, the questionnaire covered three aspects namely general information, the entry exam, and the MA program in the department of English in the Libyan Academy. Therefore, the analysis of the questionnaire will accordingly be divided into three sections.

1. General information

Students participated in the questionnaire were 157 divided into 103 females and 54 males.

As for their average in their BA degree, the results show that 35 students got 'pass', 55 students got an average of 'good', 47 students obtained an average of 'very good' and finally the average of 16 students was 'excellent'. 4 students chose not to give an answer to this question and left it blank (Throughout the paper percentages containing fractions are rounded to the nearest full number).

Average in BA	Pass	Good	Very good	Excellent	Missing values
Number of candidates	35	55	47	16	4
Percentage	22%	35%	30%	10%	3%

Regarding the age of the participants, the results show that the age of the majority of them ranged between 20 to 25 years (108 students). The following table shows the range of age of all the participants:

Age in years	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	More than 40
Number of candidates	108	32	11	4	2
Percentage	69%	20%	7%	3%	1%

2. MA program

The first question related to this aspect was asked to those who are more than 40 years old to know about the reasons that prevented them from joining the program in a younger age. As mentioned in the previous section, only two students reported that they are more than 40 years old. One of them attributed his delay to join the program to

family reasons while the other said that some people have disappointed him or let him down.

The second question asked candidates why they wanted to join the MA program in the English language. 149 answered the question while 8 of them did not. The following points summarize their reasons for joining the program:

- To improve one's language abilities and skills and to have a new experience in order to be more proficient in the English language. (49 students)
- To obtain a higher degree or to obtain a doctorate degree eventually. (43 students)
- To broaden and improve one's knowledge and to increase one's scientific achievement and learning level. (33 students)
- To improve one's self and to reach a higher degree of success in life. (17 students)
- Dream, motivation or desire (16 students)
- To be a good citizen in the society and to serve one's country and to participate in its development with this degree. (15 students)
- To improve the financial position or to have a better job opportunity. (10 students)
- To learn more and to be able to teach more clearly and correctly other people how to read, write and speak in English. (5 students)
- To improve the professional position. (4 students)
- To be able to communicate with the outer world. (3 students)
- To benefit from other people's experience and their scientific efficiency. (3 students)

The following are some of their direct comments:

- *"I want to improve myself instead of the boredom around us as a society as a result of the war and to increase my living income."*
- *"Because I love the English language and I wish that my language will improve if I join the Libyan academy and finish my study."*
- *"I wish to complete my study and continue searching for everything new in my field."*
- *"I want to achieve my goals and improve my linguistic abilities."*

- *"It is the dream of my life."*

The third and final question in this section asked students about their reasons for choosing to study in the Libyan Academy and not in any other Libyan university. Out of the total number which is 157, 142 participants answered this question while 15 students left it blank. The following points summarize the reasons given by participants for choosing to study in the Libyan Academy and not in the other Libyan universities:

- The reputation and the quality of the academy, or it is considered the best educational institution in Libya because of its high scientific level. (57 students)
- Nearness to the students' residency. (27 students)
- It is the only place available for postgraduate study at present. (18 students)
- The high quality of its teachers and their experience. (17 students)
- The Libyan Academy is the most suitable place for postgraduate studying. (16 students)
- The Libyan Academy has facilities and it is more disciplined. (11 students)
- The Libyan Academy is internationally acknowledged. (6 students)
- The graduates of the academy are efficient. (4 students)
- The Libyan Academy is located in a safer and more settled area. (4 students)
- There is a library which contains English books and references which is missing in other Libyan universities. (3 students)

The following are some of their comments:

- *"I trust it and because it has a difficult entry exam."*
- *"It was my dream to study in the academy since I was young."*
- *"Because I trust my country and its people."*
- *"Because I did not get a job opportunity."*
- *"I have the chance to study abroad, but if we leave Libya when it needs us, who will build it."*

3. Entry exam

The first question related to the entry exam asked candidates whether this is the first time that they apply to the postgraduate program and sit such an exam. 112 gave a positive answer while 44 gave a negative answer. One student did not answer this question, however.

Those who gave a negative answer to the previous question were further asked about the number of times they had sat the entry exam before. The following table shows their answers.

Number of times	2	3	4	Missing values	Total
Number of students	34	5	2	2	43
Percentage	79%	12%	5%	5%	100%

Those students who have previously sat the entry exam and did not pass it were asked about the reasons that made them fail. The reasons they gave can be summarized in the following points:

- *"I don't know."* (15 students)
- Lack of preparation for the exam. (9 student)
- The answer was not good enough. (3 student)
- Lack of concentration during the exam. (3 students)
- Bad luck. (3 students)
- Fear from the exam. (3 students)
- The big number of the students sitting the exam reduces the chance of passing it. (3 students)
- Being late for the exam. (2 students)
- The exam was too hard to pass. (2 student)
- The low level compared with others who attended the exam. (2 students)
- Some questions are not clear or difficult (2 students)
- The exam was limited to certain aspects and doesn't cover all language abilities. (1 student)
- Differences in the syllabuses at universities. (1 student)
- Lack of vocabulary. (1 student)

Students were then asked about their opinion about the entry exam. The following table shows their answers.

Choices	Difficult	Average	Easy	Missing values	Total
Number of students	49	100	3	5	157
Percentage	31%	64%	2%	3%	100%

Students were also asked about whether the entry exam is suitable for their university level and their knowledge abilities. 85 students gave a positive answer while 62 participants gave a negative answer. However, 10 students left the question unanswered.

Those who gave a negative answer, were further asked about the reasons which make the entry exam not suitable for them. They were allowed to choose more than one option and to give additional reasons if they are not available in the options given in the questionnaire.

In their answers to this question, 31 students chose the option that says the level of the exam is higher than what they have studied at university. 26 students chose the option which attributes the unsuitability of the exam to the low level of knowledge achievement of Libyan students in Libyan universities. The third reason related the unsuitability of the exam to the level of the students to the low level of teachers who taught the candidates at university and this was chosen by 20 students. Another reason was the weakness of university syllabus studied by candidates at university which was chosen by 38 students. The final reason that was given by the questionnaire was the widespread of cheating phenomenon which resulted in graduates who have a level that is lower than is required, and this option was selected by 18 candidates.

Students were also asked to give other reasons if they have. The following is a summary of other reasons for the unsuitability of the entry exam given by 18 candidates:

- There are no distinguished teachers in Libya and they are not able to choose right syllabuses nor to prepare good exams. In addition, teachers are not native speakers of the language.
- All things are not going well in this country and education is no exception. For example, facilities are only available in the capital universities and not in other universities of the country.
- There is neither motivation nor encouragement in Libyan faculties and universities to speak English. Therefore, most of the students are not able to speak grammatically correct sentences.

The following are some of their direct comments in this respect.

- *"Due to the fact that I have graduated from university for years now and I have not had the chance to improve my English since then, I do not blame myself for not answering the exam questions."*
- *"The questions are excellent and somewhat suitable to my scientific level. However, the time given did not allow me to check and revise my answers fairly well."*
- *"The most important and basic reason is that I am not interested in English but I am trying to fulfill the desire of my late father."*
- *"Carelessness and circumstances."*

Question 10 asked candidates whether the entry exam covered all aspects of language. The following table shows their answers:

Answer	Yes	No	Missing value	Total
Students	74	73	10	157
Percentage	47%	46%	6%	100%

As can be seen from the table, apart from the 10 students who did not give any answer, candidates were divided almost equally between 'Yes' and 'No'. Those who chose the 'No' option were further asked to mention the aspects which were not covered in the exam; however, no answer was given by them.

The final question in the questionnaire asked candidates whether they have any suggestions to improve entry exams in the future. The following table shows the results of this question:

Answer	Yes	No	Missing value	Total
Students	53	32	72	157
Percentage	34%	20%	46%	100%

The following points summarize the suggestions given by the 53 students who gave a positive answer to this question:

- Entry exams should be provided through the internet in the future to give opportunity to all to attend.

- Students should be familiarized with the exam in advance by giving them some idea about the type of questions used or by providing them with copies of previous exams.
- The exam should be suitable for the different levels of the students and in harmony with what they have studied at university. Also, it should consider the individual differences of the students.
- More respect and more time should be given to the students. Moreover, all exam requirements should be made available before the exam not during the exam.
- Focus in the exam should be on vocabulary and grammar, then on phonetics.
- The number of questions in the exam should be increased to give more opportunity to the students to pass the exam. Also, the number of the students admitted to the academy should be increased to give more opportunities to students wishing to join postgraduate studies.
- Entry exams should also include interview to assess the oral-aural abilities of the students which are also important.
- There should be more variety in the questions and of the topics covered in the exam.

Discussion of results

In the discussion of the results, the different sections of the questionnaire will be dealt with separately. Accordingly, there will be three subsections: general information, MA program and entry exam.

1. General information

The data obtained from the questionnaire show that the number of females is almost double the number of males. (103 females vs. 54 males). As a teaching staff member in several Libyan universities and higher educational institutes, the researcher has observed that males represent smaller proportions compared to those of females. This might be attributed to several factors the most important of which is that graduates from universities and educational institutes in the country and especially males find it difficult to get job opportunities related to their specializations. Therefore, a lot of males

tend to quit school or to search for jobs which do not demand educational qualifications like BA or MA.

What enhances the above mentioned phenomenon is the finding related to the age of participants. It was found that most of the participants are between 20 to 25 year old, which means that they have graduated from universities recently and instead of finding a job related to their university degree, they prefer to join postgraduate studies possibly because they cannot find job opportunities.

Regarding their average in BA degree, the results show that only 35 students obtained pass while the rest (i.e.118) obtained an average of 'good' and above. However, this is not reflected in the results of the entry exam in which only a few students have obtained the pass score while the rest were admitted to the department because they obtained the marks closer to the pass mark which is 50 out of 100. This may indicate the low level of the students in spite of their high average in their BA degree for several factors the discussion of which is beyond the scope and space of this paper. However, it can be mentioned here that a number of researchers (Abdullah 1972, Kara 1992, Al-Akhdar 2001, Omer 2014) agree that the level of learning English in Libyan schools and universities is generally low and that Libyan learners face difficulties and problems when learning English because of linguistic, educational, social, political and economic factors (Abdullah (1972).

2. MA program

When asked about their motivation behind joining the MA program, the first priority was given to their desire to improve their language abilities and skills and to have a new experience in order to be more proficient in the English language (49 students). The second priority was given to the desire to obtain a higher degree in the English language (43 participants). A third priority was given to broadening and improving knowledge and increasing scientific achievement and learning level (33 participants). Other but less popular priorities include improving one's self and reaching a higher degree of success in life (17 students), dream, motivation or desire (16 participants), being a good citizen in the society and serving one's country and

participating in its development (15 participants), and, finally, improving the financial position or having better job opportunities (10 participants).

It is clear from the result of this questionnaire item that the majority of the students, by joining the MA program, aim at improving their English language abilities and skills and to be more proficient in the English language. While it is true that the MA program enhances language skills, it is not meant to teach the basic language skills including the main four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students applying for the MA program are supposed to have at least some mastery of these skills so that they can do well in the MA program. For example, they need some sort of academic competence that would enable them to read relevant texts fluently in their subject area and to process oral L2 input during lectures and class discussions. They also need some proficiency in L2 academic writing in order to show their knowledge in their assignments and examinations (Troike 2006). As mentioned above, this might be an indication to the low level proficiency in the English language among Libyan students as it has been found by many researchers (e.g., Elabbar 2001, El-Bousefi 2001).

When asked about the reasons behind their choice to study in the Libyan Academy and not in other Libyan universities, most of them mentioned that there are advantages of the Academy behind their choice including its reputation and quality (57 participants), the quality of its teachers and their experience (17 participants), the facilities and discipline it has (11 students) ,and finally, its library which contained English books and references not found in other Libyan universities (3 participants).

However, most of the points mentioned in favor of the Academy do not mean that the Academy is in a satisfactory level of quality. The comparison with other universities in Libya made by participants only gives relative indications. The researcher has been a staff member in the academy for a couple of years and his contention is that the academy is not much better than other Libyan universities which suffer from lack of facilities and financial support due to the current unsettled situation in the country.

Other reasons behind the participants' choice of the Libyan Academy for their postgraduate study include its nearness to the students' residency (27 students), being the only place available for postgraduate study at the moment (18 participants), or being located in a safer and more settled area. The first and third reasons in particular may be

due to instability and widespread of arms in the country after the 17th February revolution which caused traveling and moving from one city to another in the country risky and dangerous.

3. Entry exam

The first questionnaire item related to the entry exam asked students whether it was the first time they apply to the postgraduate program and sit such an exam. 112 participants gave a positive answer while 44 gave a negative answer. Those who gave a negative answer were further asked about the reasons that made them fail previous sessions. Interestingly most of the reasons given by participants were related to the students themselves like lack of preparation for the exam (9 students), the answer was not good enough (3 students), lack of concentration during the exam (3 students), bad luck (3 students), fear from the exam (3 students), being late for the exam (2 students), and lack of vocabulary (1 student). Other two students were more honest and attributed their failure to their low level compared with others who attended the exam.

On the other hand, some other participants put blame for their failure on the exam itself by saying that the exam was too hard to pass (2 students), some questions were not clear and difficult (2 students), and, finally, the exam was limited to certain aspects and does not cover all language abilities (1 student).

As can be seen from the result of this item, the number of participants, who think that the exam is not suitable for them, is very small which cannot be reliable to make judgments on the suitability of the exam. Therefore, a further question was needed to clarify the situation. This question asked participants about the suitability of the entry exam for their university level and their knowledge ability. A narrow majority (85 participants) gave a positive answer while 62 participants gave a negative answer.

Their reasons included the level of the exam being higher than what they have studied at university (31 participants), low level of knowledge achievement of Libyan students in Libyan universities (26 participants), low level of teachers who taught the candidates at university (20 participants), weakness of university syllabuses studied by candidates at university (38 participants) and, finally, widespread of cheating

phenomenon which resulted in graduates who have a level that is lower than is required (18 participants).

Although the result of this question only shows the situation from the participants points of view, it gives some indication to the possible reasons behind the low level of the students including the low level of (some) teachers which resulted in weakness of syllabuses, and the widespread of cheating phenomenon as admitted by a considerable number of the students themselves.

A further question asked students whether the entry exam covered all aspects of language and students were divided between a positive answer (74 participants) and a negative answer (73 participants). Those who gave a negative answer were further asked about the language aspects that have not been covered in the exam but unfortunately no answer was given.

At the end of the questionnaire students were asked to give suggestions to improve entry exams in the future. Their suggestions included familiarizing the students with the exam and the nature of questions before sitting the exam, giving more time and increasing the number and variety of questions to give more opportunities to the students. Some students also suggested providing the entry exam through the internet to give opportunity to all students who want to attend. Others suggest including interviews to assess the oral aural abilities of the students which, they think, are also important.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper aimed at investigating MA candidate's views towards the entry exam and the graduate program in the department of English at the Libyan Academy. The research was motivated by the need for improving both entry exams and the graduate program in the Department of English in the School of Languages at the Libyan Academy and in similar departments at the Libyan universities. The results show overall satisfaction expressed by the participants of the questionnaire with both the entry exam and the MA program in the department of English. However, some critical remarks and suggestions were given by the participants that should be taken into consideration in

order to make the necessary reforms. Some of these suggestions and others are included in the following recommendations:

- The Department of English should make some effort to improve the quality of the exam by, for example including sections related to the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing in order for the test to reflect the overall proficiency of the students in the English language which in turn will have a positive effect on the learning process as a whole.
- Admission to the department should not only be conditional on passing the entry exam but also on passing an interview successfully; postgraduate study does not only require mental knowledge related to the field of study but other personal traits relates to such things as behaviour and state of health are also required.
- The country should pay more attention to and take more care of the postgraduate programs in the whole country by providing the necessary financial support needed in the educational institutions to improve the quality of the learning /teaching process by making facilities and related services like libraries, laboratories, and internet service available for all students and teaching staff members.
- Special and cooperative efforts should be made by both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research to reform the educational system, especially with regard to providing alternatives to less academically inclined students, giving regular training courses to teachers and staff members, and above all, strictly applying study regulations and laws especially those related to examinations and assessment.

To conclude, this paper is a trial to shed light on the situation related to entry exams and MA programs in the Department of English at the Libyan Academy. The investigation has shown that, in spite of the contention that the Academy is relatively better in many respects than other institutions in the country, reform is urgently required to improve the quality of the input (students admitted to the academy) as well as the output (students graduated from the academy).

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