

## EUROPEAN LANGUAGE PORTFOLIO: IMPROVING PRELIMINARY ENGLISH TEST (PET) READING SCORES

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### *Abstract*

European Language Portfolio (ELP) adopts a vision for a better language teaching and learning process. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is a product of the ELP, provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe in order to describe the levels of proficiency required by existing standards, tests and examinations and to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualifications. Cambridge ESOL examinations are also aligned to CEFR. This study aims to improve reading scores of Preliminary English Test (PET) from Cambridge ESOL exams and to investigate the contributions of the ELP and PET to achievement in reading skills. Firstly, forty students were selected according to the results of questionnaire containing language proficiency items in CEFR, and then they were classified in two groups as control and experimental. Self-assessment checklist in CEFR was conducted as pre-test and post-test in order to cross-check in detail each two groups in reading skills. Readings with materials prepared for the levels in CEFR were also applied to both groups. But, extra activities supporting PET were performed in only experimental group during the implementation. In addition, PET as a standardized test was also applied to both groups as pre-test and post-test both at the beginning and at the end of the study. The data of the study were quantitatively analyzed. Research results revealed that the ELP made a significant contribution to the achievements of the students in reading skills. This study also indicated that ELP and PET were rather effective to improve PET reading scores of foreign language learners in Turkey. Further research can focus on the contribution of the ELP to the various language examinations at different levels.

**Keywords:** ELP, CEFR, PET, language examination, reading.

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## Introduction

Recently, there has been a growing interest in European Language Portfolio (ELP) and CEFR studies in language teaching and learning fields (Council of Europe, 2009; Göksu, 2011; Little, 2005, 2007; Martyniuk, 2005; Taylor & Jones, 2006). The ELP aiming for a better learning and teaching process provides significant new concepts and tools for language teachers and students to proceed towards such a holistic view of foreign language education (Kohonen, 2002). There have been many studies related to the ELP and CEFR in the world as well as in Turkey. Although these studies focus on the implementation and contribution of the ELP and CEFR to the language teaching and learning in Turkey, there is almost no research focusing especially on improving language examination scores. However, increasing the scores is very important for many language learners. The purpose of this study is to improve reading scores of Preliminary English Test (PET), one of the language examinations, with the help of ELP.

## European Language Portfolio

The ELP created by the Council of Europe is a tool for recording our language and intercultural experiences at schools. It is also a document to illustrate our language competences as well as our knowledge and experiences of other cultures (Ministry of Education & Council of Europe, 2003). The ELP has three components (Council of Europe, 2000): (a) *Language passport* provides an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time. (b) *Language biography* facilitates the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress. (c) *Dossier* offers the learner the opportunity to select materials to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the Language Biography or Passport. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which is a part of the ELP, is a reference tool which provides categories, levels and descriptors that educational professionals can merge or sub-divide, elaborate or summarize while still relating to the common hierarchical structure (Council of Europe, 2009). The CEFR has a global scale which describes overall communicative proficiency at each level. This language scale which covers language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing can be used to

compare language skills and certificates with diplomas or certificates at various languages. For each language skill, self-attributed descriptors are formulated, which results in 6 proficiency levels such as A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2. In general, the ELP aims to educate students to become autonomous, life-long language learners who can assess their proficiency realistically in the different language skills and can communicate this knowledge to institutions to acquire further education, future employers, and other interested parties (Mansilla & Riejos, 2007). Mirici (2008) points out that the ELP is a concrete attempt to harmonise foreign language teaching/learning activities within the European context and to improve the quality of communication among European people, who have different languages and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the ELP provides the learner with insights into what he/she wants to learn, collecting in a dossier the concrete results of what has been learnt makes him/her aware of the learning process (Stockmann, 2006). There are four basic language skills namely speaking, listening, reading and writing in language teaching and learning. Reading, one of the fundamental language skills, has a great importance as the most frequently used instrument in the language teaching and learning process. In general, reading is used as an activity to improve foreign language learners' levels, and is often considered as the only means since foreign language learners in non-English speaking countries like Turkey have limited contact with speakers of the target language. The importance of reading in foreign language learning can be understood better since conversing in English is limited or difficult for many English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Turkey. Moreover, many foreign language learners in Turkey except for a few learners can learn the target language with reading activities (Kuzu, 1999; Lee, 2004). There are many studies related to the ELP covering different perspectives in the world including Turkey. For instance, Little (2005) investigated learners and their judgements in the assessment process with the CEFR and ELP. In his study, learners open up the possibility of developing an assessment culture in which language tests are much more closely related to teaching and learning than has usually been the case when the CEFR and the ELP are adapted to a specific domain of language learning. In addition, the ELP offers to play a key role in such a culture because it assigns a central role to self-assessment and the development of language learner. In addition, Ceylan

(2006) examined the ELP as a tool promoting self-directed learning and the views of the students, teachers and administrators about the ELP. According to the results of her study, many students believed that the ELP was a significant tool for language learning and they had positive attitudes towards the ELP although they had limited time to work with the ELP. Furthermore, the ELP increased the motivation of the students slightly because they became more aware of how to learn a language. In another study, Schärer (2008) reports a concise summary of ELP activities and their impact from 2001 to October 2007. He summarizes the activities, developments and outcomes of the ELP as: (a) The ELP contributes significantly to the dissemination of European goals, values, concepts and principles (b) The ELP makes a difference in educational practice (c) The ELP is an effective catalyst for change at European, national and local levels.

### **CEFR and language examinations**

The CEFR, which is a product of the ELP, provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. The CEFR describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively (Council of Europe, 2001; p.1). It has also a worldwide growing influence on language testing organisations and stakeholders. Therefore, many language testers have aligned their exams to the CEFR. Council of Europe (2001; p.19) points out that CEFR can be used:

- for the specification of the content of tests and examinations
- for stating the criteria for the attainment of a learning objective, both in relation to the assessment of a particular spoken or written performance, and in relation to continuous teacher-, peer- or self-assessment
- for describing the levels of proficiency in existing tests and examinations thus enabling comparisons to be made across different systems of qualifications.

Martyniuk (2005) also expresses that the CEFR was developed in order to assist language examinations and national and international providers of examinations in relating their certificates and diplomas to the CEFR in a reliable and proven manner. The Council of Europe (2009; p.1) both suggests

and encourages examination providers in order to:

- increase the transparency of the content of examinations (theoretical rationale, aims of examination, etc.)
- increase the transparency of the intended level of examinations
- give test takers, test users and teaching and testing professionals the opportunity to analyse the quality of an examination and of the claimed relation with the CEFR

The ELP and CEFR describes common standards which facilitate the recording, planning, and validation of lifelong language learning for language teaching and learning in many educational institutions and organizations in Europe and other parts of the world (Glover, Mirici & Aksu, 2005; Vosicki, n.d.). Little (2007) states that the CEFR was embraced immediately by language testing organisations such as Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) of which Cambridge Examinations is a member. Furthermore, the CEFR is also a focus of language examination providers to overcome difficulties in establishing valid and reliable links between the results of their systems and the levels of the CEFR in order to make these links transparent to users of their language examinations.

For Cambridge ESOL, CEFR offers a valuable frame of reference for foreign language learners' work and for their stakeholder community. The quality of the relationship between the CEFR and Cambridge ESOL exams is perhaps best judged by the extent to which together they enable language learning to flourish, encourage achievements to be recognized and so enrich the lives of individuals and communities (Alderson et al., 2004; Taylor, & Jones, 2006).

Preliminary English Test (PET), one of the Cambridge ESOL Examinations, is an exam for people who can use everyday written and spoken English at an intermediate level. It also provides practical language practice in a variety of everyday work, study and leisure situations (ESOL Examinations, n.d., retrieved from <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/>). As for the implementation of CEFR and ELP on the language examination, there are many studies performed by researchers (Figueras et al., 2005; Milanovic, 2009; Martyniuk, 2005; Trim, 2001).

For example, Taylor and Jones (2006) express that syllabus designers, course book publishers and language test providers worldwide including Cambridge

ESOL seek to align their exams to the CEFR for reasons of transparency and coherence. Furthermore, the relationship between the CEFR and Cambridge ESOL exams can be best judged by the extent to which they together enable language learning to flourish, encourage achievements to be recognised and enrich the lives of individuals and communities. In another study, Figueras et al. (2005) state that Cambridge ESOL has supported the authoring and piloting of the Council of Europe's Manual Relating Language Examinations to the CEFR which presents a linking process based on some sets of procedures. Furthermore, an extensive range of documentation for all exams (examiner training materials, test handbooks and examination reports) assists in specifying the content and purpose of existing and new exams with direct reference to the CEFR. Turkey, one of the members of the Council of Europe, has reorganized its language teaching programs in parallel with the standards improved by the Council of Europe. Although many studies focus on the ELP and CEFR from various perspectives in Turkey (Ceylan, 2006; Demirel & Güneşli, 2006; Göksu, 2011; İşisağ, 2008), there is almost no research aiming to improve language examination scores with the help of the ELP or CEFR in reading skills. This study aims to improve PET reading scores of the students studying with the ELP and CEFR.

### **Methodology**

The aim of the study, which is quantitative in nature, was to investigate the contributions of ELP and PET to achievements of Turkish speakers of English in reading skills. Data for the study were collected via a questionnaire, self-assessment checklists and PET reading test. Participants, instrumentation, data collection and analysis procedures will be described in detail in the following parts.

### **Participants**

The participants for this study consisted of 65 students studying in the 10th grade in a private high school in Erzurum, Turkey. The students' age ranged between 15 and 16. Gender was not considered as a variable for this study. Considering the participants' age range, this study was limited to levels A1, A2, B1 and B2 from CEFR.

At the beginning of the study, a questionnaire consisting of language proficiency levels such as A1, A2, B1 and B2 from the CEFR was conducted on 65 students. According to given responses, the levels of the students were arranged as A1, A2, B1 and B2. There were 25 students for only A1 level, 40 students for B1 level and no students for level B2. Although 20 students at B1 level were willing to study with ELP and PET, the other 20 students at B1 level were not willing to study with PET but ELP. By considering the numbers in each group, all students at level B1 were classified in two categories as control and experimental groups. According to the CEFR, learners have to be successful at levels A1 and A2 to pass to the level B1. Eventually, the students at level B1 were successful not only at B1 level but also at A1 and A2 levels. In this study, the experimental group comprised of 20 students, while the control group also consisted of 20 students.

## **Instruments**

### **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire developed by Council of Europe (2001) consisted of 20 yes/no questions covering four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) at A1, A2, B1 and B2 levels in the CEFR. At the beginning of the study, the questionnaire was given to 65 students in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade to determine their language levels, and then classes were arranged as A1, A2, B1 and B2 levels according to obtained results from this questionnaire.

### **Self Assessment Checklist**

In this study, self-assessment checklist developed by Council of Europe (2001) consisted only of reading part of B1 level in the CEFR. In the self-assessment checklist, there were 8 “Can-Do” statements for B1 level. Self-assessment checklist was in the form of the five-likert scale from (5) Always to (1) Never. At the beginning and at the end of the study, self-assessment checklist was conducted on both experimental and control groups as pre test and post test in order to cross-check in detail participants own reading skills. Besides, it was also observed whether there were significant differences between checklists in each two groups.





As seen in Figure 1, this equivalence makes it easy for anyone involved in language teaching and testing (learners, teachers, teacher trainers etc.) to see the level of different qualifications. It also means that employers and educational institutions can easily compare qualifications and see how they relate to exams they already know in their own country (ESOL Examinations, n.d., retrieved from <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/>). In addition, it can also be seen in Figure 1 that PET from Cambridge ESOL exams and B1 level from the Council of Europe are at the same language level. Since the participants of the study were at B1 level according to the questionnaire results, PET was performed to collect data for this study. The questions in the PET were prepared beforehand using in the “Preliminary English Test” of the Cambridge ESOL Examinations (2008). The reading part of PET consisted of twenty-five questions each of which had four points, and it was conducted on the experimental and control groups as pre and post tests at the beginning and at the end of the study in 2010-2011 academic year. Readings with materials prepared for the levels in CEFR were applied to both experimental and control groups. But extra activities supporting PET were performed only for experimental group during the implementation of the research. The results of pre and post tests of PET were compared in SPSS, paired sampled t-test analyses of their scores were computed, and it was also observed whether there were significant differences between them.

### **Data collection and analysis procedures**

The data from this study were gathered nearly throughout a fall term from October to January in 2010-2011 academic year. The data were collected from the participants at the beginning and at the end of the term. After giving information about the ELP and ESOL examinations to the participants, the ELP was implemented in English courses by the teachers of English at school. In addition, reading texts and examination materials prepared for the B1 level and sample PET reading tests were also performed in only experimental group during the study. During the data collection, while the level questionnaires were applied at the beginning of the study; PET and self assessment checklists for B1 levels were conducted on the participants as pre tests-post tests both at the beginning and at the end of study. In the analysis procedure of the data, the

questionnaire evaluating students' levels was only used to determine the students' language levels. When the quantitative data were considered for the study, the fundamental analysis procedure consisted of two sections including PET as standardized test, and self assessment checklist for B1 level. While self assessment checklist was quantitatively analyzed, t-test analyses of PET scores were computed by using SPSS and compared separately. In addition, it was also observed whether there was a significant difference between them.

## Results

### Results of the Self-assessment Checklist

After the levels of the experimental and control groups were determined as B1, self-assessment checklist consisting of sample “Can-Do” statements of reading part of the B1 level was conducted on both groups to cross-check in detail their own reading skills. The self-assessment checklists applied before and after the study not only cross-checked the reading skills of both groups again, but also it was observed that there were significant differences between pre and post tests for both groups.

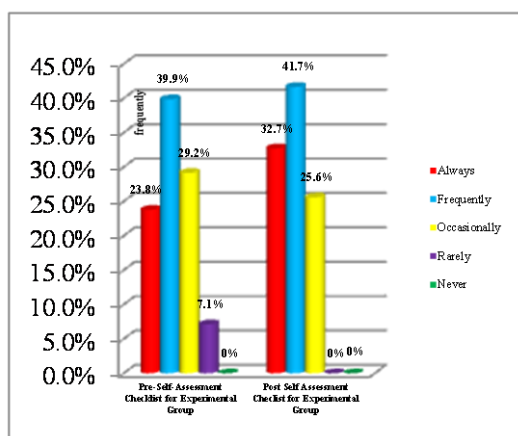


Figure 2. The Results of Pre-Post Self-assessment Checklists for Experimental Group

As seen in Figure 2, according to the responses given to “Can-do” statements in the experimental group, there was a remarkable increase in the percentage of “always” and “frequently” responses from pre test to post test. This shows that

the obtained results cross-checked again reading proficiency levels of the participants in experimental group.

In addition, the participants developed a high level of self-confidence after having been taught English through ELP. In addition, the responses given to the self assessment checklist from control group were analyzed.

As applied in experimental group, the self-assessment checklist was also conducted on the control group before and after the study, and cross-checked again the level of students in reading skills.

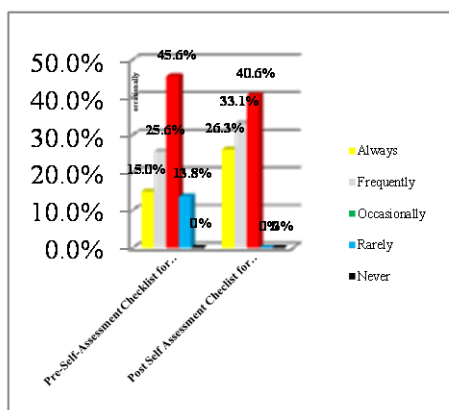


Figure 3. The Results of Pre-Post Self-assessment Checklists for Control Group

As seen in Figure 3, there was a significant increase in the percentage of “always” and “frequently” responses from pre test to post test. Furthermore, the obtained results confirmed again the reading proficiency levels of students in the control group. Results of self-assessment checklists of experimental and control groups above showed that the ELP affected positively achievement of both groups in their reading skills at level B1 when the percentages of the pre and post self-assessment checklists of both groups were compared. In addition, it was also seen that almost all students studying with ELP were more successful in their reading skills.

**Results of the Preliminary English Test (PET)**

In the first part of the PET reading scores analyses, pre PET reading scores obtained from experimental and control groups were initially analyzed, and a t-test on these pre PET reading scores was computed.

In Table 1, it was observed the t-test result of PET reading scores and significance of the difference between pre PET reading scores.

Table 1. Paired t-test result of pre PET reading scores

PET Readingtest	N	X	Sd	Df	t	p*
Pre-test in experimental group	20	58	8.97	19	1.60	.125
Pre-test in control group	20	53	12.83			

\*p>.05

As seen in Table 1, there was no statistically significant increase from pre test to post test.  $t(19)=6,60; p>.05$ . Although the mean scores of pre tests (58; 53) in both groups were not equal, it did not give a significant result ( $p=0.000$ ). This showed that the participants in experimental and control groups had the same success in PET reading scores at the beginning of the study.

In the second part of the analyses, post PET reading scores obtained from both groups were quantitatively analyzed, and a t-test on these scores was also computed. In Table 2, it can be seen the number of students, mean scores, t-test result between post PET reading scores.

Table 2. Paired t-test result of post PET reading scores

PET Readingtest	N	X	Sd	Df	t	p*
Post test in experimental group	20	74	9.03	19	4.27	0.000
Post test in control group	20	61	10.55			

\*p<.05

As seen in Table 2, there was a statistically significant increase from pre test to post test.  $t(19)=4.27$ ;  $p<.05$ . The result of the mean scores between two tests gives a significant result ( $p=0.000$ ). Furthermore, according to the mean scores of post PET reading tests, all participants in both groups were more successful in post tests (74;61) than pre-tests (58;53).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to improve PET reading scores of the Turkish speakers of English by means of the ELP and CEFR. Findings obtained from self-assessment checklists and PET reading tests revealed that the ELP and CEFR made significant contributions to the achievement (PET reading scores) of EFL learners in Turkey. The language level questionnaire conducted at the beginning of the study determined students' language proficiency levels, and this classified the participants as experimental and control groups. According to the results of the questionnaire, everybody in the class was at the same level. In his way, their teacher could teach English according to the students' level, and students could also learn English as a foreign language better in their levels and assess their levels. The results of pre and post self-assessment checklists conducted on the experimental and control groups confirmed again the level of the participants in reading skills at the beginning and at the end of the study. In addition, self-assessment checklists also indicated that the ELP and CEFR had a remarkable contribution to students' reading skills. Furthermore, it was seen that there were significant increases in the percentages from pre checklists to post checklists. The results of the PET reading tests indicated that there were significant differences between pre-test and post-test conducted on both groups. When the results of the post tests in both groups were compared, the participants in the experimental group were more successful than the ones in the control group. In addition, it was also seen that the ELP had an important tool to improve PET reading scores, but obtained findings from PET reading tests showed that students studying with ELP and PET were more successful than students studying with only ELP. The results of this study are consistent with the previous study (Milanovic, 2009) that demonstrated by working collaboratively with the CEFR and ELP, language examinations can be addressed more effectively, with data collected to enable well-informed

refinements to be made as our understanding increases. As Trim (2001) expressed in his study, CEFR can be used to describe the levels of proficiency in existing tests and language examinations thus enabling comparisons to be made across different systems of qualifications. Regarding language examinations and CEFR, Heyworth (2006) also states that the members of ALTE (Cambridge ESOL, the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française and other national bodies) have calibrated their examinations according to the six levels in CEFR, and they are influencing the way in which course books levels are indicated. In spite of the strengths of the study which improved PET reading scores with different quantitative data collected including questionnaire, self-assessment checklists and PET reading test, this study had some limitations related to the numbers of participants and data collection methodology. Future studies can focus on language learners at different levels with additional evidence from empirical studies including mixed data collection methodology. In summary, this study reveals that the ELP including CEFR improved PET reading scores of the participants and contributed to the PET achievements of students. But all obtained results also showed that studying with PET and ELP was highly effective on the achievements of students in order to improve PET reading scores. Language learners studying at their own language levels and using materials at the target language level can be more successful in language examinations. This research can be used by many researchers in language teaching and learning fields since it reflects that the ELP can be used to improve students' reading skills and to increase their achievement or success in Cambridge language exams. Further research can focus on the contribution of the ELP to the various language exams at different levels. In addition, it is also possible to research the effects of the ELP on both students and teachers in foreign language teaching and learning process.

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