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**TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS  
TOWARDS BEC EXAMS IN  
RUSSIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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## **TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS BEC EXAMS IN RUSSIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY<sup>3</sup>**

This is a qualitative study of teachers' attitudes to the content of, and preparation for, BEC exams, which was conducted at the Cambridge Exam Preparation Center in Perm, Russia. Purposive criterion sampling was used to select research participants, who were asked to take part in face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews. Overall, the teachers show a positive attitude to BEC at different exam levels. Teaching for BEC proves to be motivational as goal-oriented teaching tends to be more rewarding. The teachers generally recognize that while preparing students for BEC exams they have an opportunity for professional development, namely, in terms of systematic enrichment of Business English vocabulary. The respondents also demonstrate a positive attitude to teaching new content, and acknowledge that teaching for BEC has a positive effect on their university teaching in general because of the relevance of the course to the main curriculum, and its balanced format. The teachers recognize that preparation for BEC exams will be useful for students in their future professional life and are of the opinion that the exam preparation center contributes substantially to improving the University's reputation overall.

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## **1. Introduction**

The number of students taking standardized English language tests is constantly increasing. 5 million Cambridge English exams were taken in 130 countries in 2014 according to Cambridge English Annual review 2014. These statistics explain why research on standardized English language exams has been abundant in recent years.

Much of the research focuses on the construct validity and reliability of the most popular exams such as IELTS and TOEFL (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000; Zahedi & Shamsaee, 2012). Construct validity refers to how meaningful and appropriate the interpretation of the test score is (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). As emphasized by Zahedi & Shamsaee (2012), the construct validity of the IELTS speaking test is hardly ever called into question. In their study, Zahedi & Shamsaee (2012) compared the results of the candidates' speaking tests with their results obtained in the other three tests (reading, listening and writing), as well as with their overall result. The correlation coefficient consistently showed a strong relationship, which goes to show that the IELTS speaking test is meaningful and appropriate. Chalhoub-Deville & Turner (2000) stated that the validation process of IELTS is not a single action but an ongoing process, and that the test is research-based. However, Chalhoub-Deville & Turner (2000) also pointed out that IELTS was originally developed for use in the United Kingdom and Australia, and as IELTS is now being more widely used in the USA and Canada, the suitability of the test to the language differences in North America may become an issue.

Test reliability is defined as consistency of measurement (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). As noted by Zahedi & Shamsaee (2012), difficulties arise when an interviewer applies subjective ratings to candidates. Additionally, different interviewers can use different types of questioning, style and approach, which can affect candidates' responses (Brown, 2003). Chalhoub-Deville & Turner (2000) looked specifically at the reliability of the IELTS speaking test, and stated that any variable that affects test scores, other than the language itself, should be considered measurement error. However, reliability is regarded as being positive in consistency of assessment according to the rating scale on condition that open-ended items are used in interviews by all interviewers (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000).

A substantial body of research has considered the washback effect of international English language exams on test-takers and, in a broader context, on the way language teaching is organized in a particular country (Lewthwaite, 2007; Choi, 2008; Hayes, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004). Washback, or backwash, is generally defined as the impact of testing on the teaching/learning process, which

springs from the concept of measurement-driven instruction, i.e. the idea that “tests should drive teaching and hence learning” (Cheng, 2005, p. 26). Alderson (1986, p. 104) discussed the “potentially powerful influence offsets”, and put forward arguments for innovations in the language curriculum through modernized approaches to language testing. Since the 1990s, the phenomenon of washback with reference to language tests has been studied empirically. Hughes (1993) suggested viewing washback as a trichotomy: “washback to the participants (teachers, learners, and test/materials developers), processes (course curriculum, classroom material and teachers’ methodology) and products (the quality of learners’ learning)” (as cited in Reynolds, 2010, p. 10). Bachman and Palmer (1996) studied test impact at two levels: in terms of its micro effects on the individuals in the classroom, and its macro effects on education systems and society at large. It was also observed that there are different variables that should be taken into account when analyzing language testing washback, e.g. learners’ background, course length and the degree of learners’ exposure to the language outside the class (Green, 2007).

A growing number of studies tend to focus on exploring two types of washback – positive and negative. Cheng (2005) pointed out that the type of feedback is determined by “what the examination measures”: if the examination is relevant to the course content and purpose, the washback will be positive, otherwise it is likely to be negative. According to Cheng et al. (2004), washback exists and has consequences, often unintended, negative or positive, or both. Bailey (1996) asserts that “washback is positive or negative depending on whether or not the test promotes the learners’ language development” (as cited in Hayes, 2003, p. 14). This approach, however, has been disputed: for instance, Lewthwaite (2007, p. 3) concluded that “there is no automatic relationship between the use of an exam in a programme and washback of either a positive or negative variety”. A review of the literature on washback shows that “while there is acknowledgement of the potential for tests to influence teaching and learning, there is no unanimous agreement whether ‘washback exists’, whether it is positive or negative and how it actually works in practice” (Hayes, 2003, p. 11).

As the scope of high-stakes standardized testing expands, more and more researchers tend to attach great importance to its impact on teaching and learning. Washback is regarded as a complex educational phenomenon that should be evaluated with reference to “contextual variables of society’s goals and values, the educational system in which the test is used, and the potential outcomes of its use” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 35). Chen (2006) explored the relationship between washback and curriculum innovation in language teaching and learning, and found evidence of negative washback due to a lack of agreement between the testing objective and the new curriculum. Therefore, the study suggested that the washback of external testing should be

taken into consideration when introducing a new curriculum. Other researchers have investigated the impact of test preparation courses on both teaching and learning results. Rahimi and Nazhand (2010) concluded that IELTS preparation courses have a significant effect on students' perceptions and the expected course learning outcomes, and that, in fact, these courses include a narrower range of skills than other types of courses aimed at taking learners to the level of proficiency in English required for various academic and professional purposes. Green (2007) investigated the influence of test preparation courses on students' IELTS writing score. The research findings showed that test-driven instruction did not raise the students' scores, which implies that in order to improve learner's performance, the material covered by the test needs to be integrated into regular teaching. Green (2007) also raised the question of whether test preparation courses really prepare students well for academic study, and performed a comparative analysis of three course types: a test preparation course, a pre-sessional course in English for academic purposes (EAP), and a combination of the two. The results of the study revealed that the learners improved their IELTS academic writing scores in all three course types, but type 3 (combination course) produced the best scores, leading the author to the conclusion that test preparation courses have no clear advantage over other courses.

Some research also investigated standardized English language exams (mainly IELTS and TOEFL) as predictors of future academic performance (Graham, 1987) and academic language performance (Bayliss & Ingram, 2006; Kokhan, 2013). Although the research findings show that these exams have some predictive value, long-term academic performance is still difficult to predict on the basis of the language exams results alone.

Much less of the research appears to have considered the perceptions and attitudes of the key exam stakeholders – teachers and students – to the exam content (Huang, & Papakosmas, 2014; Melissourgou, & Frantzi, 2015; Suryaningsih, 2014). Moreover, these studies tend to concentrate on the most popular academic exams (IELTS, TOEFL), whereas studies of business-oriented English exams such as BEC (Business English Certificate) are rather fragmentary.

In view of the above, the article is intended to contribute to making this phenomenon an object of systematic theoretical and empirical study, and to fill in the gap in research by investigating teachers' attitudes to Business English exams – professional exams offered by Cambridge English Language Assessment. Thus, the research question is: “What are English-language teachers' attitudes to BEC exams?”

## 2. Methodology

This is a qualitative study of teachers' attitudes to the content of, and preparation for, BEC exams, which was conducted at the Cambridge Exam Preparation Center in Perm, Russia. The preparatory courses for BEC exams at this center last for 8 months from September through April, classes being given twice a week. The center offers preparatory courses for three exam levels: BEC Preliminary, BEC Vantage, and BEC Higher. Purposive criterion sampling was used to select research participants, who were asked to take part in face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted for 30 or 40 minutes depending on the length of the respondents' answers. The 4 teachers who were selected for this study all meet the following criteria: 1) university-level degree in language teaching; 2) at least 5 years' experience of preparing students for BEC exams; 3) positive feedback from the students attending the preparatory courses delivered by these teachers. Student feedback is anonymous, and is collected by the center on a regular basis twice per academic year. All of the respondents were females, which to a large extent reflects the gender situation with language teachers in Russia, and fell into the 35-44 age group. Overall, they were established English teachers with vast experience in preparing students for BEC exams. Each of them was asked the following questions:

1. Do you prepare students for BEC Preliminary/Vantage/Higher?
2. What aspects of the exam do you teach?
3. How long have you been preparing students for this exam/these exams?
4. How did you decide to start teaching for these exams?
5. How is exam preparation different from your university teaching?
6. What advantages/disadvantages do you see in preparing students for BEC?
7. How do you feel about the test format/content?
8. How did exam preparation make you change your teaching practices? (How did you benefit from teaching BEC?)
9. How else can stakeholders (university, administration, students, other teachers, community) benefit from BEC preparation and exam-taking? (What can be undertaken to sustain BEC preparation and exam-taking)?

### **3. Results**

#### **Teachers' attitudes and experience**

The results show the general tendency of a positive attitude among teachers towards BEC exam-preparation and exam-taking. Though BEC preparation was not a course of their choice to teach initially, many of them developed an interest in it. The reasons named include “trying a new course”, “extra pay”, “exam’s popularity among students” and “relevance to main curriculum”.

T1 The main course had an obligatory BEC component, so I had to teach what was in the curriculum. As for the commercial course with X Group, it was interesting to try a new course, to try something new. Another factor – it was paid teaching.

T2 I started teaching BEC in 2005. It was a “work necessity”, there was no other teacher to take the course. Another reason – it was interesting to take a new course, to see how students would accept it on a commercial basis, especially if they are the same university students in your main course.

T3 I started teaching because my immediate supervisor told me to do so.

T4 It’s difficult to say now how I started... I think I can name three reasons. This exam was interesting for me personally, it was interesting to start preparing for it... Then the exam was very popular with our students. And it is relevant to the university curriculum as well.

Sustained personal interest in the quality of the course explains why teachers continue teaching BEC courses for many years: 3 teachers out of 4 have been teaching BEC courses for over 10 years (since 2004 and 2005 respectively). The lower the level of exam proficiency (BEC Preliminary as opposed to BEC Higher), the higher the probability of all the four modules of the course (Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) being taught by the same teacher. Teachers prefer to specialize in teaching for a particular level (Preliminary, Vantage, Higher) and particular skills – oral vs written. However, 3 out of 4 teachers described their previous experience of teaching for BEC exam as being flexible with regard to level and skills.

T1 I prepare for Preliminary and Vantage, teaching mostly Reading and Writing. 1 year – Speaking and Listening, 1 year – all four aspects. I have been teaching university students as part of their core curriculum since 2006/07, the BEC course – since January 2007.

T2 I prepared students for all three exams, this year – Preliminary Speaking and Listening. I can teach all four aspects. I mainly teach Speaking and Listening, but I taught Vantage Reading and Writing for 3 years, Higher Reading and Writing – 1 year. I started teaching BEC in 2005.

T3 I prepare students for BEC Higher Listening and Speaking, I used to prepare them for Vantage Listening and Speaking. I have been teaching BEC for over 10 years.

T4 I prepare students for BEC Vantage only. I teach Speaking and Listening. I have been preparing students for about 5 or 6 years.

### **Teachers' attitudes to test format and content**

The respondents attribute value to BEC preparation and exams with reference to all four skills. The particular tasks and content vary depending on the level of proficiency. The teachers relate the level of task complexity to students' preparedness (their proficiency level, range of vocabulary, individual psychological traits, etc.).

T1 It's a balanced format. Having said that, the weighted tasks in Reading can sometimes disrupt a student psychologically: one part may be relatively easy, another much more difficult, and as a result the student cannot perform. Some parts of the test may be more difficult in a lexical or grammatical aspect than others. So this is a matter of individual preparation – it depends if a student is prepared or not. Certain parts may not be comprehended by some students, say, they cannot read a chart or derive a trend from the data therein.

The format is given, and I take it as it is. It checks skills. The positive thing about the four aspects is that the audio recording is played twice and there is enough time for each aspect. The format is above any criticism. It includes all the essential skills, they are general skills actually, to comprehend, to find out special information, and to find opinions. The good thing is that there are few tasks in the reading module about finding opinions, because in business opinions do not count that much. This does not irritate me.

The only difficulty is when a person does not know the format and goes to take the exam. So, the knowledge of the format is the teacher's responsibility.

T2 The format and content are ok... Well, take graphs, for instance: there are many things that do not depend on the knowledge of language but on one's visual perception. People with poor spatial reasoning are weak at understanding graphs. In BEC Higher the open cloze part is very



complicated for students, or cloze gap with multiple choice, where there are close synonyms. It is impossible to practice close synonym ranges in the given number of classroom hours.

T3 I think the format and content are standard, as in any other test. The format and content are adequate as they check all four skills.

T4 I like the exam, it is pleasant to teach for, though I sometimes find some texts much easier or much more difficult than others.

## **Perceptions of teaching for BEC**

The teachers' answers demonstrate mixed perceptions of how their teaching for BEC exams is different from general university teaching. Still, even though their reactions might be "no difference in teaching", the respondents unanimously admit that BEC preparation has a positive influence on their teaching. The particular semantics of explanation include "goal-orientation of BEC exam", "individual approach to teaching English", "preparation of teaching materials", "teachers' (improved) knowledge of content language", "variety of teaching materials and tasks for students", "more time-efficient teaching", "ability to motivate students with the content", "justifying students' tuition costs", "developing teaching techniques for exam skills".

T1 The difference is the result – to take a Cambridge exam is the goal of a BEC course, but not the university course... Now I have a much more clear understanding of how one learns a language... I know now how to take an individual approach and how to prepare materials more effectively.

T2 There is no difference. The level of responsibility is the same. The teaching standards are the same... I only know that students in the evening courses (external course-takers) work more slowly, they have to study the material more thoroughly, with me.

It basically influenced not my teaching techniques and methods, but my understanding of the themes, topics and terminology. I extended my 'stock' of special knowledge. And it is good to prepare students for different kinds of tests, you know. When you prepare other students for different tasks in other courses, I can do it at a more advanced level. For instance, when in the main course you are short of time to teach something, I understand and make my students understand different "traps" in the tasks or content.

T3 I try to create a relaxed atmosphere as they are all commercial students, through this I try to make them interested... It does influence my teaching! A lot! I also learned a new course with

them, I expanded my knowledge, and in my main course I also create a relaxed atmosphere, since it's hard to be one kind of teacher in one class and a different kind of teacher in another, so the border is blurred.

T4 The approach to teaching is the same. However, when I teach for the exam I pay more attention to detail and to the test format... Now I distinguish between teaching for the exam and teaching in general. I have also learnt how to draw students' attention to detail.

Perceived advantages in preparing for BEC vary and overlap with generally positive perceptions of teaching for BEC. A repeated theme in advantages is "Business English relevance to students' and teachers' knowledge because of the main curriculum"; "BEC course's benefits for students (especially in Writing, when compared with the main university course)", "(more) personalized motivation to study English", "teacher's linguistic competence".

T1 I think the advantage is the motivation. Students in a preparatory course are goal-oriented, this goal influences their study, it is a more effective study. The advantage is also the balanced 4 aspects – each 25%, in the main university course, we may have, say, 10-15% of writing only – 2 essays and 1 review paper, so there are less productive skills... The advantage for students is that this is the fulfillment of THEIR need, their desire, it is not compulsory. They can realize their opportunities in the language, meaning they have a level of language and they want to improve it and to get a certificate for this, to move further.

T2 The advantages are the following: all four skills are present, especially writing, one has to write in detail, thoroughly, learn to write formally. In speaking one has to learn to speak logically, with good argumentation.

T3 One girl put it in the best way: this course helps to structure all your knowledge received in other courses and to expand your business vocabulary.

T4 As for the advantages, it is additional language practice for me, it improves my language skills as well.

Perceived disadvantages in preparing for BEC vary: "routine teaching", "learners of different proficiency level in one class", "preparatory / teaching materials", "co-teaching", "Russian cultural specifics of perceiving a language exam", "combining work and study / combining work needs and study needs"

T1 Exam preparation for BEC Preliminary presents some difficulties, for instance, with a course book. Pass BEC Preliminary course book is outdated, it only slightly covers the topics and

does not correspond with the requirements of the exam... Another difficulty is in differentiating the aspects (Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking) for BEC Preliminary course. This differentiation requires high cooperation with another teacher. I can cooperate well with one teacher and cannot cooperate well with another... It is typical for Russians to focus on language, we believe this is effective learning. For example, we watched a Speaking part video on a website with Spanish candidates – Spaniards start speaking quickly, they are lively, but their command of the language is so-so. We would be embarrassed if we had to communicate using vocabulary/grammar that left much to be desired.

Sometimes there is a discrepancy between what they need for work and what they need for study within the framework of the course. For instance, they need to write letters at work. They say: I want to write letters of offer, not letters of complaint, because I don't have those in my work. They have narrow interests. They see these skills as applied skills, and tend to give priority to immediate benefits rather than taking a long-term view.

T3 The disadvantage is that students are of different levels, and it is impossible to work properly.

T4 Sometimes I dislike explaining the format, for example, in writing, when I have to give an example and then make students write several letters, again and again.

### **Teachers' perspective on BEC preparation and exams**

The teachers' responses mostly suggest [untapped] potential for marketing BEC preparation courses, for the benefit of both students and the organization.

The prevalent themes are: "systematic", "correspond to organizational setting and goals", "validity for life", "influence general knowledge", "building motivation for future careers (general professional skills)", "locality and reputation", "advertising", "certificate recognition and acceptance".

T1 BEC is an exam in a business context, and preparation for it requires a systemic approach, i.e. not learning by fits and starts, but as a whole course, and this is a correctly organized course, even though you may choose not to take the exam and show the certificate. ... The BEC course is ready-made. Everything has been developed, everything has been tested and probed, its effectiveness has been proven... [Other courses do] not correspond to the theory of organization, or management, or sociology...

T2 Even if you take away all the value of the certificate they get which does not have an expiration date, they still have a much better understanding of the language of their specialization. Often university administrators who take the course cannot differentiate between formal and informal letters in Russian. You can even improve and correct their writing in Russian... BEC is quite in demand ... It could be advisable for BEC Higher to be wider accepted in universities, like IELTS... I met a boy the other day, and he studied BEC Preliminary, Vantage with me and he came up to me in the supermarket and asked if we had BEC Higher evening classes, and I said no, and he said he needs it a lot, and nobody in the city offers a BEC Higher course. So, it's a matter of advertising [...] As for us, we all understand the right-mindedness of BEC...

T3 This year I can see students do not want to miss classes, it means they are seriously motivated, it will definitely help them in their future professional life, it will help them to build their careers, and along with this – they are more language-conscious students...

T4 I think it is beneficial for HSE to have an exam preparation center on the premises because it improves HSE recognition and enhances its image...

#### **4. Discussion**

Overall, the respondents show a positive attitude to BEC at different exam levels, which can be proved by the fact that once they start teaching for BEC they are not inclined to stop, and tend to continue teaching for a long time (up to ten years). The teachers acknowledge that these exams have a long-standing history and are exceptionally reliable.

Teaching for BEC proves to be motivational for our respondents as they find goal-oriented teaching more rewarding. The teachers generally recognize that while preparing students for BEC exams they have an opportunity for professional development, namely, in terms of systematic enrichment of Business English vocabulary.

Moreover, the respondents demonstrate a positive attitude to teaching new content and acknowledge that teaching for BEC has a positive effect on their university teaching in general because of the relevance of the course to the main curriculum, and its balanced format. The teachers emphasize the fact that preparation for BEC exams will be useful for students in their future professional life, and are of the opinion that the exam preparation center contributes substantially to improving the University's reputation overall.

## 5. Conclusions

As can be inferred from the above, exploring the teachers' views on Business English exams, with particular reference to BEC preparation courses, reveals a general trend, which makes this phenomenon, i.e. the perceptions and attitudes of the key exam stakeholders to the exam content, a subject well worth studying systematically and in more detail. The fact that the trend is "upwards" can be interpreted as evidence of positive washback, therefore this study can be seen as contributing to the body of research on the washback effect of international English language exams on teaching and learning.

Despite certain unavoidable limitations, e.g., a limited sample and a focus on a specific exam, this article provides a new perspective on high-stakes standardized English language testing, and raises awareness of the need for the perceptions and expectations of exam stakeholders, especially teachers, to be taken into account when designing exam preparation courses and assessing learning outcomes.

The potential of this research lies, first of all, in enriching the research methodology. This can be achieved by incorporating triangulation "as a methodological cornerstone" in the study, as suggested by Bailey (1999). Various approaches to triangulation may be used "to increase the quality control and representativeness of a study": data triangulation, in which "data from more than one source are brought to bear in answering a research question"; investigator (or researcher) triangulation, which "refers to using more than one person to collect and/or analyze the data"; theory triangulation, which implies that "more than one theory is used to generate the research questions and/or interpret the findings"; methodological (or technique) triangulation, whereby "more than one procedure is used for eliciting data" (Bailey, 1999, p.38).

Secondly, in addition to increasing the sample size, the research could be extended to cover a range of international English language exams, e.g., IELTS, FCE, CAE, TOEFL, rather than business-oriented exams only.

It would also seem meaningful to analyze the attitudes of the key exam stakeholders to standardized English language testing in the institutional context, with regard to the internal policies and objectives of various educational institutions as well as their core curricula.

Given the growing demand for international Business English certificates in the corporate sector, it might be worthwhile exploring the attitudes to standardized English language testing in different

types of work environment. Another question could be raised here: to what extent should BEC preparation courses be tailored to learners' industry-specific professional needs?

Finally, the very nature of international English language exams calls for a comparative analysis of how those exams as well as exam preparation courses are perceived by both teachers and students in different countries.

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