

## AN INVESTIGATION INTO FACTORS CAUSING STUDENTS' POOR RESULTS IN APTIS E-EXAM AT SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, THAI NGUYEN UNIVERSITY

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### ABSTRACT

E-exams have been extremely popular and introduced to meet the requirement of both candidates and educational providers. Established by British Council, Aptis is an e-exam which requires students to address at the test venue and perform with computers connected to the Internet. Although Aptis has just been applied for several years, a wide range of institutions across Vietnam has chosen this form of assessment as a learning outcome regulation and School of Foreign Languages, Thai Nguyen University (hereafter called SFL, TNU) is not an exception. However, there is a higher rate of students failing this e-exam compared to paper-based exams. Hence, this research is conducted to explore factors causing SFL – TNU English majored students' failure and students' attitudes towards Aptis e-exam. Qualitative and quantitative methods are mixed to analyse data of this research project. The findings show that nervousness, preparation, use of technology, personal problem and test difficulty are main factors causing students' poor results. It is expected that the results of this paper would contribute to the improvement of the assessment form at SFL - TNU.

**Keywords:** *Testing and assessment; factor; investigation; students' poor results; Aptis e-exam.*

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## NGHIÊN CỨU CÁC YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN KẾT QUẢ THẤP CỦA SINH VIÊN KHI THAM DỰ KỶ THI APTIS TẠI KHOA NGOẠI NGỮ - ĐẠI HỌC THÁI NGUYÊN

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### TÓM TẮT

Những kỳ thi qua mạng Internet dường như đã quá phổ biến và được giới thiệu để đáp ứng nhu cầu của người tham dự và các nhà cung cấp giáo dục. Kỳ thi Aptis do Hội đồng Anh thành lập, yêu cầu thí sinh phải có mặt tại điểm thi và thực hiện bài thi trên máy tính có kết nối Internet. Mặc dù Aptis mới chỉ được áp dụng tại Việt Nam trong vài năm gần đây, đã có nhiều đơn vị lựa chọn hình thức thi này để làm chuẩn đầu ra cho sinh viên và Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên cũng không phải ngoại lệ. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện để tìm ra các yếu tố khiến sinh viên tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên nhận được kết quả thấp và suy nghĩ của sinh viên đối với kỳ thi Aptis. Phương pháp nghiên cứu định lượng và định tính được sử dụng cho bài nghiên cứu này. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng các yếu tố khiến cho sinh viên không đạt kết quả mong muốn khi tham gia kỳ thi Aptis bao gồm sự lo lắng, quá trình ôn thi, kỹ năng sử dụng công nghệ thông tin, vấn đề về mắt, vấn đề cá nhân và độ khó của bài thi. Tác giả kỳ vọng rằng kết quả nghiên cứu sẽ góp phần nâng cao chất lượng kiểm tra đánh giá tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên.

**Từ khóa:** *Kiểm tra và đánh giá; các yếu tố; điều tra; kết quả thấp của sinh viên; kỳ thi Aptis.*

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## 1. Introduction

Following the requirement of National Foreign Language Project 2020, all students majoring in English have to attain a certificate with the minimum competent level of B2 as one of the outcome commitments. Obviously, this has created a pressure to students but a benefit to different language centres. The evaluation of students' learning outcome at tertiary institutions via e-assessment has been widely applied at various institutions as it is useful in evaluating a large number of students at the same time [1]. Besides, e-exam eliminates students' cheating since they must undergo a security check and computers are also locked to prevent copying and pasting data [2].

Students of all majors are able to choose different test forms such as VSTEP, Cambridge Examinations, IELTS, TOEFL iBT as long as the certificate is labelled. However, Aptis test is chosen since the fee is reasonable and the certificate is also accepted in a large number of institutions worldwide. Moreover, the result of each skill is also categorized based on the six-level Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Last but not least, the fee for Aptis test is much cheaper compared to IELTS and TOEFL; thus, most students are appealed to this test. Despite the success of those gaining target scores, a high proportion of students fail to reach required level.

This study, therefore, is carried out to mainly investigate the possible effects resulting in students' unexpected level of language proficiency. Two research questions are focused including (1) *What factors lead students to failure when performing Aptis e-exam?* And (2) *What are students' attitudes towards Aptis e-exam?*

Studies on factors causing English majored students' (EMS) poor performance in traditional setting with paper – based format

have been conducted previously. The study results of [3] showed that mother's education could help children improve their performance. Another factor was related to mother's age. As mothers are getting older, they have little control on their offspring, thus this indirectly influences students' performance. Research by Rasul and Bukhsh [4] indicated that causes for university students' academic exam poor performance included psychology, physic, socio-economy, education, change in pattern of question papers prior to exam, unfair means in exam and lack of proper guidance. In their paper, Alotabibi and Alrabah [5] investigated the reasons why secondary students in Kuwaiti were weak in English language between 2012 and 2013 in terms of teachers' perspective. The findings revealed three main causes ranging from the suitability of the curriculum and its content, positive and negative statements about the interrelated factors regarding classroom teaching and students' weakness in English basics such as grammar and vocabulary. In contrast, Saad and Usman [6] collected responses from both students and teachers at five different senior secondary schools in Metropolis of Jigawa State, Nigeria to find out the causes of poor performance in English language. As a result, the dominance of mother tongue, inadequate qualified teachers of English, negative attitudes of students towards English language, improper laboratory for teaching English were the main problems involving in the low results of students on performing English.

In the context of Southeast Asia, Souriyavongsa et al [7] presented six explanations for weak English language performance namely non-qualified English teachers, students' lack of English foundation background, students' lack of confidence, inappropriate curriculum, the difficulty of English language and no English speaking environment. Surprisingly, there is no research linked to the problems resulting in students' low academic achievement in Aptis e-exam.

## 2. Methodology

The study utilised the framework of [8] to discover the facets affecting English majors' test achievements. This process considered the five major categories of the framework called (1) the testing environment, (2) the test rubric, (3) the nature of the input the test taker receives, (4) the nature of the expected response to that input, and (5) the relationship between input and response.

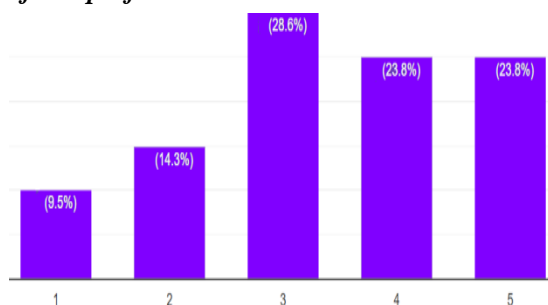
The study was carried out at a university in Vietnam with the participation of former students who had experience in participating in Aptis e-exam.

As implied by this choice, data collection for this research project was done by a mixed methodology with the integration of quantitative and qualitative techniques. In phase 1, structured purposed – designed questionnaires were delivered to students of various ages. In phase 2, 10 students were randomly chosen to be interviewees. To analyse the data, SPSS was of necessity. Then, recordings were transcribed carefully without losing specific information and statistic meaning.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Answering the first research question: What factors lead students to failure when performing Aptis e-exam?

**Statement 1: I feel nervous during the time of test performance.**

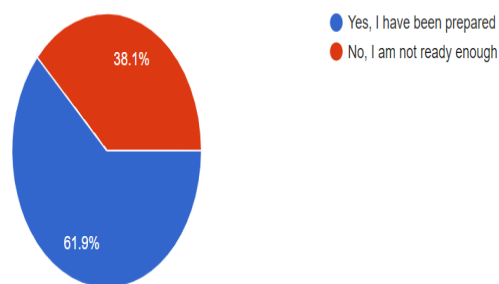


**Figure 1.** Nervousness during Aptis e-exam performance

As seen in figure 1, those who are nervous account for 23.8% which is half of the non-

nervous students. Meanwhile, 28.6% students state that they are neutral when coming to Aptis e-exam.

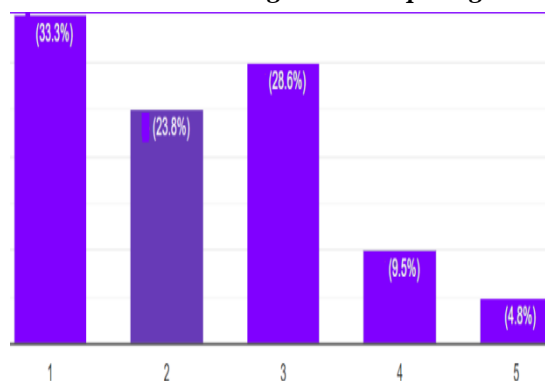
**Statement 2: I haven't been well - prepared or I am not ready for Aptis e-exam.**



**Figure 2.** Preparation for Aptis e-exam

Figure 2 shows the preparation of students when participating in Aptis e-exam. Obviously, while 61.9% of students reveal that they revise carefully for the exam, 38.1% think that they need more time for preparation.

**Statement 3: I am not good at computing skill.**



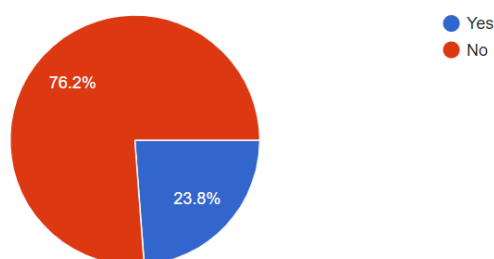
**Figure 3.** Use of Technology

It is clear from figure 3 that those who are professional in using computer account for over 50% while the rest is either normal or low when being required to sit in front of computers when completing the exam for a certain period of time.

**Statement 4: I have technical problems during the test.**

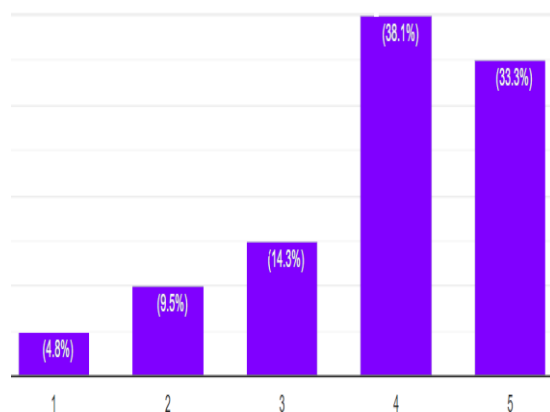
Figure 4 demonstrates the technical troubles of students when working with computers. Interestingly, nearly a quarter of students

have to face technical problems during the test. In contrast, over three fourths perform smoothly without any obstacles.



**Figure 4.** *Problems during the test*

**Statement 5:** *I have problem with my eyes and I cannot read on computer for more than 1 hour.*



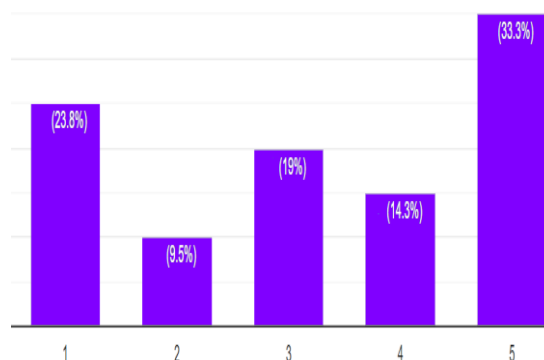
**Figure 5.** *Eye problem when working with computer*

From figure 5, it can be seen that 14.3% of students state that they cannot focus on the computer screen for more than an hour. The same rate is for those who find it normal to work on computer for a long period of time. However, the proportion of students who have no problems with eyes when contacting with computer is 71.4%.

**Statement 6.** *I feel stressful when seeing the screen clock counting down*

Looking at figure 6, it is obvious that timer on screen is a trouble that causes stress on students when performing the test. Over 33% of students feel more stressful when looking

at the timer on the computer screen. Meanwhile, 19% of them feel neutral and 47,6% can overcome timer trouble.



**Figure 6.** *Stress due to timer on the screen*

**3.2. Answering the first research question: What are students’ attitudes towards Aptis e-exam?**

With reference to the second research question, some students state that they totally have no views on this new form of examination. Others reply that they are not familiar with testing on computer as well as the form of Aptis exam. Some express that they would like to go to the restroom during the test, but they are afraid that there is not enough time for them to finish the test. One student answers that he is not confident about himself and he often experiences nervousness before and during the test which make him get the poor results. A small number of students confess that their bad results in Aptis exam are due to their laziness and lack of knowledge.

In terms of the parts in the exam, while some students spend too much time on reading section and cannot complete all the tasks, others find listening is the most difficult part. Some students have difficulties in writing section and waste more time in completing the tasks.

Interestingly, some students are happy to say that their results are better than their aims. What they need is level B2 (CEFR), but they attain level C (CEFR). For this, they are over-

excited and thankful for their effort in a certain time. They are also motivated to participate in other international tests namely IELTS, TOEFL or other Cambridge ESOL exams.

#### 4. Conclusion and Discussion

Overall, various factors have led to most of students' low results when facing to e-exam. These factors include nervousness, preparation, use of technology, eye problem and timer on the screen. Besides, other factors that contribute to the poor results of the test after interview are familiarity of the test form, personal problem and level of difficulty of the test.

Part of the finding is similar to [7] when students believe that it is the lack of confidence causing poor result in English exam. The rests are totally different from the previous studies of researchers worldwide. In their findings, most students blame on their mother's age, teachers' qualification, inappropriate curriculum and English native speaking environment for their poor results.

There is no doubt that testing has never been easy for students and English exam is even more difficult. In the scene that all institutions require international results of English exam for various purposes, students therefore are advised to prepare with much energy to be on the peak of success. Many students have to take the exams several times because of failure to obtain the necessary level following CEFR. This, of course, makes them tired, stressed and upset on the way to hold the bachelor degree.

Although there are lots of available techniques and useful strategies on the Internet, students might find it hard to follow. This is because those may not fit all followers as their levels of understanding and applying are not the same.

On the contrary, several students get higher results than they expect. This seems not

surprising since they have to spend huge amount of time on practicing. In this case, "Practice makes perfect" is applicable and they deserve for academic achievement.

One issue that catch students' concern is private centres that design courses to help students revise and prepare for Aptis exam. These centres are not partners of British Council; they operate because the need of students is great. By running these courses, they earn a large sum of profit from lots of students.

Despite the availability of distinct test forms such as IELTS, TOEFL, VSTEP and Cambridge examinations, students still choose Aptis as the fee is much cheaper and the difficult level seems to be lower. To be honest, each test form has its own strengths and limitation and students must be wisely choosing the correct one to achieve their purpose of academic career. For instance, those who aim to study further must take IELTS or TOEFL into consideration; meanwhile, others who want to graduate from university just need to pass Aptis. Hence, the final advice is that basing on purpose; students should choose the right test form.

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