

*Full Length Research Paper*

## **Using the English placement test (EPT) for proficiency assessment in Sana'a community college, Yemen**

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The research reported in this paper is to provide practical advice for those taking the English placement test (EPT) into Sana'a community college (SCC) and to report on one means to meet the applicant's needs after failing in the English college admission test (ECAT). SCC has an open-door enrollment policy that conflicts with the failure of the new applicants in passing ECAT. This study investigates the relationship between success on the EPT and academic success at SCC. The literature review supports the importance of taking the EPT to enter SCC by giving evidence from the experiences of other Community Colleges that have the same educational policy. The results show that there is a significant relationship between the EPT and student academic success, and the differences in student levels of English proficiency based on their years of study are not significant. Recommended steps to take in the creation of a useful and accurate EPT include assembling an assessment team, defining test takers and objectives, developing rubrics and rating scales, taking the test, and training administrators of the test. In respect to the outcomes of the research, there are some relevant suggestions and recommendations put forth.

**Key words:** Academic achievement, English placement test, English proficiency, community college.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sana'a community college (SCC) in Yemen is one of the few community colleges in that country that strives to achieve its goals in accordance with Law No 5 of 1998, which defines the goals and objectives of community colleges as follows: 1) preparing human resources required for development in fields of engineering, technology and business management, 2) assisting the community through the extension of training and consultancy services, 3) establishing a flexible educational system, which is able to cope with advances in technology and to meet requirements of the labor market, and provide vocational and technical training for the citizens of the community in order to upgrade their technical and vocational skills and acquaint them with new technologies.

However, admission procedures at SCC typically employ an open-door policy. This allows all applicants,

regardless of prior experience or educational background, to have the same chance of admission. As the number of applications increases, colleges face greater risks when accepting students who fail in the English college admission test (ECAT). Hence, the need for the English Placement Test (EPT) has arisen as one way to help college administrations to arrange the students according to their different levels and abilities. The students who pass in the ECAT can join their academic year, while those who fail can take preparatory course in English according to their levels of proficiency. The students can thus improve their abilities in the English language and use the time to well equip themselves with the requirements of the college.

Currently, there is no mechanism in place to identify students with low probability of program success. In past years, the number of vacancies in the programs was sufficient to accommodate students with both high and low probabilities of success. So, this study will illustrate the importance of the EPT and its relationship to the students' academic success, and how it can be used as a

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**Table 1.** Number of the candidates applied for ECAT and accepted at SCC

Total	Accepted candidates		Candidates applied	Year
	Male	Female		
98	90	8	114	2000 to 2001
134	102	32	416	2001 to 2002
236	197	39	834	2002 to 2003
337	276	61	1219	2003 to 2004
634	511	123	2762	2004 to 2005
864	738	126	3588	2005 to 2006
1079	855	224	2900	2006 to 2007
3382	2769	613	11833	Total

measurement to assess a student's weakness or strength in English and his academic success at SCC. In addition, this study is supported by many experiments conducted at global universities, colleges, technical and community colleges on the gap between the abilities of students and their academic success. Many educators are aware of the shortcomings in the process of teaching using a foreign language. Difficulties arise both in the learning of science in English in non-speaking countries or in English speaking countries for minority groups whose mother tongue is not English. These issues are studied under the assumption that one's proficiency in the language of instruction correlates positively with academic achievement (Najib, 1999).

SCC enrollment is open to all eligible students who have demonstrated that they are ready for college-level academic work by passing the college's ECAT. Although SCC has this policy, which is open door for all students who want to join in the college, even if their High School Grades (HSGs) are low (about 60). SCC does not explicitly define college readiness standards for high school students. The followings will give a clear picture about the problem at SCC with its students' lack of proficiency in English language and its relation to academic success. New applicants every academic year are accepted to enroll into SCC program of study in different technical and science fields. The candidates are accepted with low preparation for academic study after high school. The low scores in the English proficiency and HSGs affect the students' academic achievements and may conflict with Community colleges policy.

Table 1 shows the number of candidates who applied and were accepted at SCC during the academic year from 2000 to 2007.

### English college admission test (ECAT)

ECAT are given to the new candidates every academic year as one of the criteria for acceptance to SCC. The criteria are as follows:

a) Taking the ECAT in its determined date.

b) Getting 50% out of the full ECAT score.

The ECAT tests the kinds of the English skills needed for academic success. The ECAT tests the candidate's proficiency in English in such skills as reading and writing. Although ECAT follows certain criteria, the inability to abide fully by the mechanism and standard set up for ECAT conflicted with the policy of SCC. For example, the new candidates are accepted even if they get less than a score of 50 due to the open door policy. Consequently, candidates are accepted without fulfilling the admission criterion, many with exceptionally low proficiency of English. There is no mechanism in place at SCC to identify students with low probability of success, such as the EPT or ECAT standardized tests. In the past, before the college increased the number of its students, the limited number of vacancies in the program was enough to prevent those with low probability of success from enrolling in the college. However the current policy of accepting a huge number of students with no standard runs the risk of admitting applicants with low probability of success.

Most college subjects are taught in the English Language (EL), such as computer subjects and technical English courses, start from the first year. In the first year, students take an English course daily to prepare themselves for the next level. Then, students in later years of study take technical English courses in addition to other courses which are taught in English. With low English proficiency, low High School Grades (HSGs) and thus lack of preparation for meeting the requirements of studying in SCC, students fail not just in the English subjects but also in other subjects which are taught in EL. Therefore, at the end of each semester, the administration of the college follows the student affairs regulation of 2002, which states that if students get less than 60% on their Cumulative Grade Point Averages' (CGPA), they are dismissed from the college. SCC follows the policy of employing foreigners as lecturers in the college according to agreements between Yemen and other countries such as Canada, Germany, Netherland, Russia and India. These lecturers from overseas use EL in their teaching. Consequently,

**Table 2.** EPT results.

Results	EPT		
	First year	Second year	Third year
Mean	25.40	23.45	26.86
Median	23.33	21.66	25.16
Mode	16	20	24
Minimum	9.67	12.67	16
Maximum	45	39	45.67

students may face the challenges in such classes. If the students cannot understand or communicate well in class; they will be silent in class and fail to do their assignments successfully. Lecturers may also suffer from their weaknesses in English and fail to get the appropriate responses.

The objective of this study is to rationalize the need for the use of EPT. Using the EPT at SCC can help place new students in their appropriate level of English proficiency with an appropriate English placement course (EPC) as an English Remedial Course (ERC). It is assumed that the new students who enroll and pass EPT and ERC can improve their involvement in their program of study and have positive impact on their academic achievements. According to the SCC Report in 2003, every academic year SCC faces a problem with those applicants who apply with low English proficiencies and low CGPAs of high school. Given this situation, it is appropriate that SCC administration makes a serious effort to determine the possible factors that will decrease the challenges of the open door policy system.

It is important to conduct research studies and provide SCC with information based on research findings on the EPT and its relation to the student's academic success. It is also important to determine how the EPT can make a positive difference on students' academic achievements and at the same time keep most of the features of SCC open door system.

### Research objectives

The objectives of this study were to investigate the relationship between the EPT and the students' English proficiency (English proficiency here refers to High school grades, high school English grades on the English admission test) and the relationship between EPT scores and students' academic success.

### Research design

The data were collected and analyzed in two phases: in the first stage, a pilot English test was given to 50 first year students to determine the test's reliability level using

the test-re-test method. Then in the second stage, the EPT was given to 138 respondents based on their year of study; 55 respondents from the first year, 41 from the second year and 42 from the third year. The design of this study is descriptive and based on correlation. According to Najib (1999), a descriptive analysis is a method used to explain any phenomena that happened within a large population. However, this research is classified under the correlation research, which is designed to measure the variables and determine the relation (correlations) between the EPT scores and students' proficiency of English, and between EPT and students' academic success.

The instrumentation used in this study was an English test divided into four sections: Reading, Vocabulary, Grammar and Writing utilizing 49 multiple question items and one essay question item. The EPT test used the same questions items as in pilot study after revising and modifying some materials.

### Findings

The EPT results were analyzed to measure the English proficiency of the respondents based on their year of study. Table 2 and Figure 1 present the results pertaining to the EPT. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents' English proficiency according to the EPT results. The CGPA results were analyzed according to the respondents' year of study to compare their academic achievements, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 2.

### Relationship between EPT scores and Students' academic success

The students' academic success refers to the student's results based on his CGPA. Relationship between the EPT scores and academic success were analyzed to test the null hypotheses that there is no relationship between the EPT and a student's CGPA. Table 4 illustrates the statistical significance of the correlation coefficient Pearson  $r$  indicating the relationship between the EPT scores and the students' academic success based on their CGPAs for the second and third year students. First year students, of course, have no CGPAs. The level of significance selected is at the probability value,  $p = 0.01$  for accepting or rejecting the null hypothesis as stated above.

The correlation between the two variables of the EPT scores and CGPAs for the second year students in first semester is a positive 0.39. This low correlation implies that there is a significant relationship between the EPT scores and their CGPAs for the second year students for first semester. For the second semester the correlation coefficient of the EPT scores and CGPAs for the second year students is 0.057. This is positive but low and is not

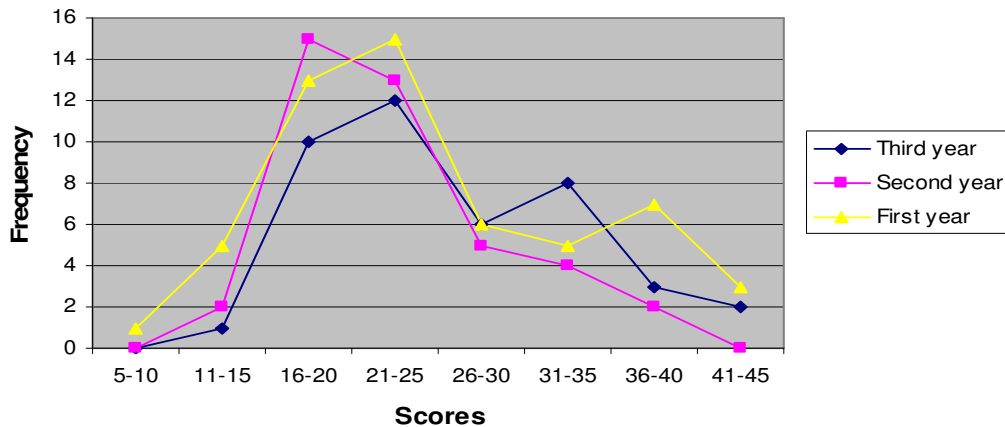


Figure 1. The EPT result.

Table 3. CGPA results.

Result	Second year students		Third year students CGPA	
	First year of study	Second year of study	First year of study	Second year of study
N	41	42	42	42
Mean	63.92	68.18	65.85	67.75
Median	60.60	67.75	66.95	67.75
Mode	59.90	57.70	20.40	57.70
Minimum	54.50	43.20	20.40	43.20
Maximum	83.20	88	91.10	88

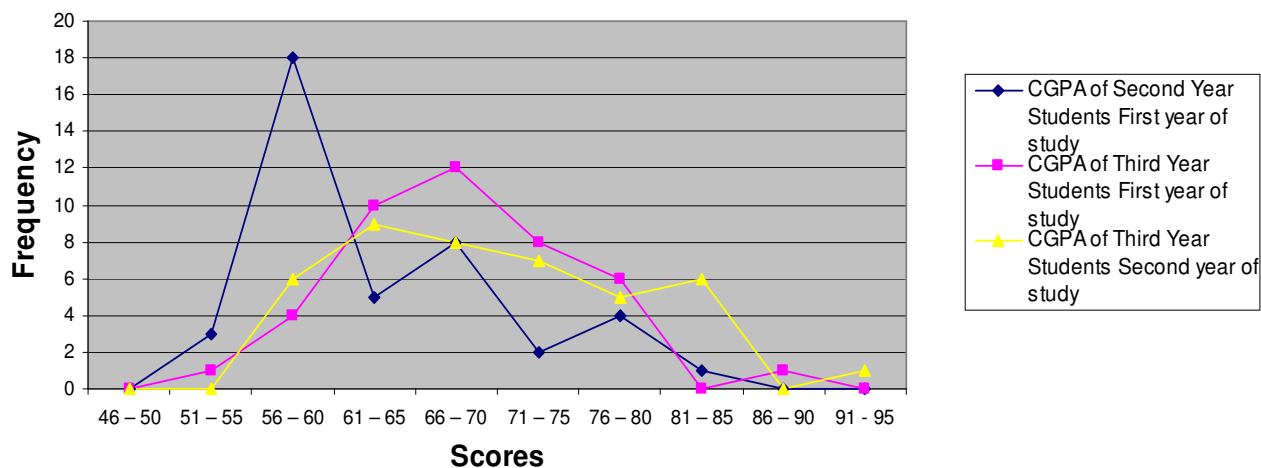


Figure 2. The CGPAs for second and third year students

a significant correlation. This implies the correlation between the EPT scores and CGPAs is negligible.

The correlation coefficient Pearson  $r$  of the relationship between the EPT scores and CGPAs of the first, second, third and fourth semesters for third year students are as

follows. The correlation coefficient between EPT scores and CGPAs for the first semester is 0.53. This implies a significant, moderate and positive relationship between the EPT scores and CGPAs. The correlation coefficient for the second semester is 0.49, which implies the

**Table 4.** Correlation between the EPT scores and CGPAs.

Variables	Second year students		Third year students			
	Correlation coefficient ( r )		Correlation coefficient ( r )			
	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 3	Semester 4
EPT and CGPA	0.39**	0.057	0.53**	0.49**	0.50**	0.46**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

**Table 5.** The differences of English language and the year of study.

Sig. (2 tailed)	Df	t	Std. deviation	Mean	Year of study
0.21	40	1.26	10.55	2.28	Pair 1 First year and second year
0.33	40	-2.20	10.31	-3.55	Pair 2 Second year and third year
0.65	41	-0.45	12.30	-0.86	Pair 3 First year and third year

\*Difference is significant at the 0.01 level.

correlation is significant and moderate and indicates that the relationship between the EPT and CGPAs is substantial. The correlation coefficient between the EPT scores and CGPAs for the third semester of third year students is 0.50. This implies that the correlation is significant, moderate but positive. The correlation coefficient between the EPT scores and CGPAs of the fourth semester for third year students is 0.467. This positive and significant correlation implies that the relationship between the EPT scores and CGPAs is substantial.

Another procedure of this study is to test the students' English proficiency differences according to their year of study by using the EPT results that were tested and analyzed by using a T-test. The level of significance selected is at the probability value of  $p = 0.01$  for accepting or rejecting the null hypothesis stated above. Table 5 shows the comparison of the English language proficiencies according to the students' year of study. The results of T-test indicate for the first and second year students there is no significant difference in the respondents' English proficiency. By comparing the second and the third year students, it can also be concluded that there is no significant difference in the level of proficiency between the two. The Table also shows the comparison of the proficiency of English language between the first and the third year students indicate that there is no significant difference in the level of the proficiency of English language.

The analysis strengthens the belief that there is no development in the language proficiencies of the students due to the fact that their scores are not significantly different. Thus the need to periodically assess students English proficiency, maybe using EPT and provide intervention programs. According to Kirst (1997) many secondary schools and students are caught in a quandary about what type of knowledge is most worth

possessing, caused in part by the fact that prospective university students receive conflicting signals from universities. In addition, Kirst states that none of the university admission examinations are coordinated with their curriculums. For this study, the EPT was given to Sana'a Community College (SCC) students to investigate the relationship between: a) the EPT and the respondents' proficiency of English language based on the year of study and b) the EPT and the students' academic success.

In addition, the EPT was administered to find the differences among the respondents' English proficiency according to their year of study. Based on the results of this study, the EPT is recommended to be used in SCC to place candidates with low scores at appropriate levels. Therefore, they must take the English Remedial Courses (ERC) to help them meet the requirements for English language proficiency and insure their academic achievements. However, the ERC will not be counted towards college graduation.

### Comparison of the results of the EPT according to the year of study

This research has been conducted to determine the results of the EPT based on the year of study. The mean values of respondents' from the first, the second and the third year are 25.40, 23.45 and 26.86 respectively, the values implying that there were no large differences in distribution. However, further analysis on the distribution of frequency of the EPT scores for the 178 respondents shows forty respondents got scores "between 21 to 25", 38 respondents got the scores "between 16 to 20," and 5 respondents got the scores from 41 to 45. This distribution of scores and its frequencies indicates that the respondents' level of English proficiency according to

the EPT results are low.

The HSGs for the respondents for the first year is 76.91, for the second year is 71.56 and for the third year is 72.52. A total of 63 of respondents who enrolled in SCC were distributed between the scores of 69 to 75. This low HSG distribution strongly suggests that, the students with such HSGs have a low preparation readiness for study at SCC. Maleki and Zangani (2007) in their study on Iranian students conclude that the result of the correlation reveals a significant relation between English language proficiency and academic achievement (GPA). The correlation coefficient of the two sets of scores was 0.48. This suggests that as English proficiency increases, so does academic success.

The result shows a significant correlation between the EPT scores and CGPAs for the second year for the first semester and the significant correlation between the EPT scores and CGPAs for the third year. This finding of a correlation among the variables of the EPT, CGPAs and the EPT implies that students who do not possess the necessary skills will not be able to do well in college examinations. In short, in this study, it has been found that there is relationship between the EPT scores and students' academic success.

Dougherty (2006) states that students' academic readiness for college when they leave high school has long been recognized as an important predictor of college completion rates. Dougherty states that one approach to strengthening high school students' college readiness has been to increase their participation in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and examinations, as students who take and pass AP examinations have demonstrated the ability to do college-level work prior to leaving high school. Traditionally, AP courses have been confined to a small minority of highly prepared students, and some high schools exclude all but their top students from taking those courses. More recently participation in AP courses has expanded as selective colleges take students' AP course participation into account in their admissions decisions.

In conclusion, these findings enable the researcher to conclude that there might be other factors contributing to academic achievements and student's proficiency in English. In addition, these findings might be interpreted according to the interpretation of Warburton et al, 2000, for the variables that influence the academic success such as academic preparation, post-secondary achievements and parents' education. In addition, the findings imply that there is no significant difference in levels of English language proficiency among the first, the second and the third year students.

Furthermore, the findings on students' proficiency levels indicate that those students have a lack of proficiency for English language. It can be assumed that the significant relationship between EPT and students' academic success implies low academic achievements and performances are associated with low results of EPT

and vice versa. There were no significance differences in the students' levels of English proficiency for the first, the second and the third year students. Likewise, these low levels of assessed English proficiency and low readiness are attributable to poor achievements.

On the other hand, the similarity of English proficiency levels among the first, the second and the third year students indicates that there is no improvement of English skills for these students and they might not advance successfully. By revising the academic strategy for college's enrollment policy and recognizing to the importance of using the EPT as one means by which to assess poor academic performance and accordingly placing students at appropriate levels after their enrollment may contribute significantly to their success at technical college. To conclude, this research suggests that the EPT can be used to determine the level of English proficiency of students and how to affect the students' academic success and achievements. The importance of the EPT results indicates the need for schools and colleges to pay close attention not only to the quality of teaching in courses but also to improving the academic preparation of students prior to their enrollment in those courses.

These above hypotheses are supported by Buck's (1997) theory on the relationship between students' levels, placement test, college readiness and success measures. Furthermore, Fry (2008) reports that students designated as English language learners (ELL) tend to go to public schools that have low standardized test scores. However, these low levels of assessed proficiency are not solely attributable to poor achievements by ELL students. These same schools report poor achievements by other major student groups as well, and have a set of characteristics associated generally with poor standardized test performances such as high student-teacher ratios, high student enrollments and high levels of students living in or near poverty.

According to a Pew Hispanic Center analysis of newly available standardized testing data for public schools in the five states with the largest numbers of ELL students, when ELL students are not isolated in these low-achieving schools, their gap in test score results is considerably narrower.

## Conclusion

High school students who intend to enroll at SCC have no information on how to prepare for its crucial admission test. They are not notified on the test content before they take it, nor are they provided with an analysis on their performance. Many students need to take another test to place them into correct level and then those with low scores are given a remedial course. Placement tests should be designed to diagnose student weaknesses, so that high school courses can be revamped to better

prepare students for admission. SCC re-administers its placement tests to a representative sample of students who have completed remedial course work to determine the magnitude of skill improvement.

Students who are well prepared for post-secondary education were very likely to show better academic performance. Obviously, the Ministry of Education should pay more attention to the need for modification and improvement of the school curriculums, especially the need for teaching English language from the first grade in public schools instead of starting from the seventh grade. Current policies hinder collaboration between higher education and high schools in devising courses that prepare students for university success and should be changed (Kirst, 1997).

One approach to strengthen the readiness of high school students for college has been taken to increase their participation in Advanced Placement courses and examinations, as students who take and pass the EPT have demonstrated the ability to do college-level work prior to leaving high school. Traditionally Advanced English Placement courses were confined to a small minority of highly prepared students, and some high schools excluded all but their top students from taking those courses. This should be altered. More recently participation in advanced placement courses has expanded as colleges take students' EP course-taking into account in their admissions decisions. Incentive programs have been introduced to encourage students to take EP courses and examinations. There should be focus on Academic EP Courses and examinations. For each student, it can be recorded whether he took at least one academic EPT course, took at least one academic EPT, and what the student's highest score was on an academic EPT.

In this study, "academic" EP courses and examinations refer to those in English, on the premise that this is most likely to predict a student's college readiness. Based on results of the EPT of SCC students, students can be divided into four groups as follows:

- i) Passed the EPT: Students who took and passed at least one academic Advanced Placement examinations with a certain score the committee of the EPT will determine.
- ii) Took, but did not Pass the EPT: Students who took one or more academic EPT, but did not pass any of them.
- iii) Took the EPT Course, Not the EPT: Students who took one or more academic EP courses, but did not take any academic EPT.
- iv) Took No EPT Course or Exam: Students who took no academic EPT courses or exams.

A student who took the EPT without taking the corresponding EP course would be placed in the first or the second group, depending on his score on the examinations. Some basic new policies would help clarify this confusing situation. Sana'a Community College policy and rules should be aligned with the other community colleges' Commission on Placement Test Standards and Performance curricular standards. After these standards and placement examinations are coordinated, students should have the opportunity to take the examinations and the EP course at SCC as soon as they pass their English admission test as a requirement of the college.

If high school students fail in a placement test, they should receive specific information on their strengths and weaknesses and be advised to take classes that address their deficiencies.

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