The present study is a pragmatic attempt to investigate the challenges encountered by Iraqi sixth preparatory students in using the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Sixth preparatory students were selected as a sample of the study because they are the most advanced students among the preparatory stages of education. Generally, Iraqi sixth preparatory students suffer greatly from English language curricula, which is negatively reflected throughout their examination scores. This negative implication is related to the fact that their linguistic competence is very poor at the reading, writing, speaking, and listening levels, on which the English textbook for the preparatory stages is based. The present study aims to investigate the difficulties that Iraqi sixth preparatory students may face in writing compositions, reading passages, speaking and pronouncing certain problematic vocabularies, and listening to audio conversations. The research also aims at suggesting several possible solutions for students in learning the four language skills mentioned. It is the intention of this study to provide support to Iraqi sixth preparatory stage students in improving their language skills, particularly in terms of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, as their curricula is based on these four language skills. Moreover, the study aims to be pedagogical importance to the textbook, and curricula designers to include language materials that fit the level of the learners, and which lead to linguistic progress in terms of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The study is based on a diagnostic test to measure the difficulties of learners relating to the four language skills. This diagnostic test is essentially classified into productive, and recognitive components. The productive component is designed to measure the students’ ability in writing short requested compositions, reading certain given passages from their student textbook, and responding orally to certain short given (written)
conversations. Whereas, the recognitive part is designed to measure the students’ ability in comprehending short read passages. In other words, the students are requested to tick the correct options, complete certain required options, or to choose the proper choice that best matches the item(s) employed in the passage. The researchers have relied upon statistical methods to analyse the study sample responses for accurate results, and a proper hypotheses testing. The research concludes with several important recommendations, and suggestions for further studies.

**Keywords:** Preparatory stages, Recognitive level, Productive level, Diagnostic test.

**Introduction**

It is worth mentioning, that the teacher preparation of a lesson prior to giving a lecture is an effective and important method to achieve a successful academic or scientific value. In regard to English language teaching, teachers are expected to identify the gaps or the areas of weakness among the learners, so that they can overcome these gaps by preparing flexible materials (lessons), which could fit their competence, when giving the lecture. These gaps might mark the students’ abilities in reading, writing, speaking, and/or listening. Hence, the present paper is an attempt to shed light on the most common difficulties which the Iraqi sixth preparatory students may encounter in learning the English language and specifically, in terms of their language skills. Moreover, this study proposes a set of recommendations for teachers of the English language to consider when giving lectures aimed at achieving a better academic performance.

**Research Methodology**

**Problem of the Study**

A majority of the Iraqi sixth preparatory school students suffer greatly when learning the English language due to their lack of one or more of the language learning skills, which cripples their ability to acquire successful learning outcomes. Several of the reasons behind Iraqi students’ difficulties in learning the English language might be attributed to differences in the mother tongue, in general or due to the unplanned continuous changes in the English curricula, which prevents the students from tracking and learning several English aspects. Based on the above, the problem of the study is formulated upon finding answers to the following questions:

1. What is the extent of the difficulties experienced by the Iraqi sixth preparatory students in learning the English language?
2. What is the most difficult language learning skill the students suffer from when learning the English language?
3. What is the most optimal solution suggested to overcome the potential difficulties, which a majority of Iraqi sixth preparatory students may encounter in learning the English language?

**Significance of the Study**

It is hoped that the present research will be of special significance to Iraqi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in the sixth preparatory grades, as well as to the teachers of the English language by highlighting the most common difficulties the learners may encounter in learning the target language, and thus, applying appropriate remedies to the difficulties found. Moreover, it is intended that the study will be of significance to curricula designers to employ proper syllabuses, which can help in improving the learning level of the Iraqi EFL learners in the sixth preparatory grades.

**Hypotheses of the Study**

The present study is based on the following hypotheses:

1. A majority of the Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students’ listening skills are better than their reading skills.
2. A majority of the Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students’ writing skills are better than their speaking skills.

**Objectives of the Study**

The current research aims at achieving the following objectives:

1. Investigating the most common difficulties that Iraqi EFL preparatory students may encounter at their sixth stages in learning the English language.
2. Suggesting appropriate solutions which might help resolve the challenges found.

**Limits of the Study**

Basically, the present research is limited to:

1. Analysing the four language learning skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.
2. It is also limited to Iraqi EFL learners in the sixth preparatory stages, who were selected from two different preparatory schools within the Diwaniyah province: Al-Zaytoon Preparatory School, and Ghamas Preparatory School for Boys. The reason behind choosing a boys only school was that the researchers attempted to narrow the scope of the study by avoiding the gender differences factor.
Language Skills

Due to the evolution of life, its complexity, and the absence of the majority of generations on the originality of the language, the researchers' perceptions of the teaching and learning of language has developed. Therefore, the researchers dedicated a considerable effort to highlighting the nature of language, its significance in life, and the need of the learner to the language. As language is a means of communication, and communication is an interactive process between two parties in order to achieve partnership and friction, the study of linguistic skills emerged to achieve the hopes of the human desire. According to Nell (1988), skill means the ability to perform the organised and integrated performance of complex motor work, accurately and easily, while adapting to the changing conditions surrounding the work. It is the ease, speed, and accuracy in the performance of work after learning with an economy of effort.

To communicate in terms of language abilities, we should initially pass on the hypothesis of correspondence, and its fundamental components: the sender, the recipient, the message, the methods, and so on. The methods are the language, its words, and structures that bear the significance, which is the objective, in such manner, since correspondence is only between the sender, and the beneficiary, as the principle parties. The sender is just a speaker or an essayist, and the beneficiary (recipient) is just an audience or peruser. In this way, the language is comprised of four aptitudes: tuning in, and talking when discourse is immediate, and perusing, and composing (Krashen, 1993, p. 85).

In order to become a competent interactant, one needs to be proficient in each of the four language skills. These four learner skills provide opportunities to create contexts in which language can be used to exchange real information, evidence of their ability to demonstrate learning, and most importantly, trust. Listening and reading are skills received because learners do not need to produce language, they receive, and understand it. These skills are sometimes known as ‘negative skills’ (Graff, 1982, p.82). Productive skills are to speak and write because learners apply these skills in the need of language production. These two latter skills can be termed as ‘active skills’. These features were taken into consideration by the researchers in formulating the practical part of the study to measure the weaknesses, and strengths of the study sample, and specifically in terms of learning the English language (Al Khanaifsawy, 2017).

Listening Skills

It is worth mentioning that the skill of listening is a receptive language skill, which most learners find difficult to master in language learning because they often feel they are under unnecessary pressure to understand every word. The listener has to be oriented to the listening portion, as well as be all ears, and attentive.
The skill of listening is a first language skill, which should be given great attention, as its importance lies in the fact that the human being is more a of listener in the different circumstances of his life, than he is a speaker. In addition, language begins with hearing primarily. Hopper (2005) points out that the child hears first, and speaks second, and subsequently he reads, and writes at the same time. It is also noticeable that man hears, and speaks more than he reads, and writes. Therefore, the neglect of listening skills leads to a lack of the mastery of good speech, and good reading.

Throughout the daily participations, the researchers observed that the students have difficulty in responding to their teachers due to their incomplete perception to what has been posed. Moreover, while playing several audio types in the classroom, the students were expected to attentively listen to the native speakers of English, when reading certain passages. Subsequently, they were asked to state what they grasped from the speaker, in their mother tongue. Unfortunately, they were unable to do so, due to their poor listening skills, which require improvement. Hence, this research attempts to fill the gap.

**Reading Skills**

The reading skill refers to the capacity to comprehend composed content. It is appropriate to build up this ability at an early time of tutoring. At the point when understudies grasp or comprehend composed content, and join their comprehension with earlier information, they can play out the accompanying three perusing understanding abilities (Fawson , 1999, p. 22):

1. **Literal comprehension:** identifying simple facts presented in written text.
2. **Evaluative comprehension:** making judgments about the written text’s content.
3. **Inferential comprehension:** connecting the text to other written passages, and situations.

The improvement of these reading comprehension skills is vital to EFL learners’ language development. A significant number of studies have demonstrated the link between competency in reading, and overall attainment in school (literacy attainment and other outcomes). According to a program for International Student Assessment (PISA), ‘reading for pleasure is more important for children’s educational success than their family’s socioeconomic status’ (OECD, 2002). Besides, there are several other key benefits to engaging EFL learners in reading from an early age. This is because the development of reading is a key to future success, both in school, and in life. By supporting EFL learners to read in their leisure time at every age, parents can help to ensure that the learners are equipped with the necessary skills to succeed in later life (Scribner & Coles, 1981, p.121–122).
Speaking Skills

Language is a means for communication through which we transmit our thoughts, and feelings with other interactants by using varying ways that can be linguistic (spoken or written mediums) or paralinguistic (including gestures, and facial expressions). In terms of the language levels, we should take into account that the level of language input (listening) must be higher than the level of language production (speaking or writing). In English speaking communities, elocution and recitation are the main sources to master the sounds, rhythms, and intonation of the English language, which is achieved through simple reproduction in primary schools. The manifestations of the language in games, and pair work activities are encouraging sources to learn to speak the language. This assists the learners to begin to use the language by presenting them with a certain amount of choice, albeit within a controlled situation. This skill could be improved by understanding para-linguistic attributes, such as voice quality, volume and tone, voice modulation, articulation, pronunciation, etc. This could also be further elevated with the help of debates, and discussions. In order to achieve a good expression (speaking skill improvement) by the learner, the following issues should be considered (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000, p. 36):

1. The learner must have the technicality, and the means of speech through the existing conditions that encourage them to speak in the English language under the supervision, and follow-up of a teacher, whom can be attentive to them with an interest to correct, and improve their mistakes. The appropriate conditions are the establishment of activities in the English language such as plays and other activities that require the involvement of the learners.

2. The subject to be taught to improve the EFL learners’ speaking skills should be relevant to their life, express their issues, and arouse their interests and desires, thus exciting learners to express themselves.

Writing Skills

Writing provides a learner with the physical evidence of his or her achievements, and through which they can measure their improvement. Writing helps to consolidate the learner’s grasp of vocabulary and structure, and complements the other language skills. Moreover, it helps to understand the text, and write compositions. It can foster the learner’s ability to summarise, and to use the language freely. To write flawless language, one should excel in writing skills, with the help of various methods. Importance should be given to composition, and creative writing. One should also focus on coherence, and cohesiveness when it comes to writing a language. Among the rest of the skills, the skill of writing comes late in the order. It comes after the skill of reading because it is linked to it. There are three crucial linguistic elements that should be carefully considered in writing skills: grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
These elements are the key in written communication and are essential to understanding the text. Errors are likely to lead the recipients to form a negative impression. Significant attention should be given to these three factors by the teachers of English. Furthermore, the Iraqi EFL learners of the sixth preparatory grades need to employ them in their works of writing, mainly in their writing of compositions, as most of the learners rely highly on composition writings in their tests to obtain several of the marks required. The researchers took these three basic elements into account when analysing the results in the practical part of this research.

**Practical Analysis**

**Methodology**

This section presents the practical side of the study. For the purposes of achieving the objectives of the study, and verifying its hypotheses, a test was designed. The present section aims at describing the whole aspects of the test, namely: the sample of the study, the test objectives, selection of the test items, test validity, the pilot test, the main test, test reliability, and the scoring scheme. Additionally, analysing the test results to locate the areas of difficulty experienced by Iraqi EFL preparatory sixth stage learners in their study of English. This objective can be achieved by surveying the students’ performance on each question, implementing statistical procedures to ensure the scientific bases of these results, analysing the subjects’ responses for each item to specify the levels of difficulty and discrimination, and to show the frequencies of the study sample’s responses concerning the four language learning environment. Finally, the research concludes with testing the validity of the study hypotheses.

**Population of the Study**

The sample of the study was comprised of 100 Iraqi EFL preparatory students who were chosen randomly from different sections or specifically, 50 students per preparatory school involved. These students were affiliated with two schools in the Diwaniyah Province. The reason for choosing the sixth stage was related to the assumption that these students are more advanced compared to the other stages, and they are more exposed to the language four skills to be tested in their English curriculum. The students were aged between 18–19 years old. All of the students share the same social, economic, and cultural levels, as the variation of these levels among the students may affect the test results.

**Test Description**

The test of the present research is composed of two main parts: ‘Part I’, and ‘Part II’ (see Appendix 1). Part I is designed to measure the students’ skills of listening at the productive level. Whereas, Part II is composed of three sections: A, B, and C. It aims to measure the students’ skills of reading, writing, and listening.
Test Objectives

A language test is a means of assessing the students’ performance through “the elicitation of certain behaviour from which one can make inferences about certain characteristics of an individual” (Bachman & Palmer 1996, p.20). The test adopted here is a diagnostic one, which is intended to show how Iraqi EFL preparatory sixth stage students can deal with the four language skills in an attempt to master the English language. Moreover, the test tries to specify the obstacles that the learners encounter, and to specify the sources of their errors to suggest remedial recommendations, depending on the results of the test.

Selection of the Test Items

In relation to the elicitation, and the inclusion of the test items, they are all authentic and were taken from the ‘Student’s Book’ and ‘Activity Book of English for Iraq’. The items were chosen in a way which covered the four language skills of writing, reading, speaking, and listening.

To conduct a ‘writing’ test, the researchers chose a well-known paragraph-writing lesson that the students were very familiar with, which was taken from their ‘Activity Book’. They were requested to write about why ‘cigarette advertising should be illegal’. This part of the productive test aims to measure the main difficulties which the study sample may encounter through the choice of their own words in an appropriate context, the structure of the sentences used, spelling, and punctuation.

For the ‘reading’ test component, the researchers chose several paragraphs which were taken from textbook passages in the ‘Student’s Book’. The study sample is supposed to read in a clear voice to measure their level of pronunciation, including stress, and intonation.

The ‘speaking’ test was designed in a way to measure the verbal difficulties of the study sample. The students were requested to take turns in the test with their peers and/or sometimes with the researchers, to measure their spoken level, and to mark up the most prominent defects they have while speaking, such as pronunciation, and their vocabulary utilisation.

To measure students’ ‘listening’ skills, the researchers chose short oral passages where the study sample were requested to listen carefully, and do as instructed by following the various selection methods. For example, choosing the correct options by ticking the right answers, and/or competing blank fields with suitable answers which fit the context of the short passage given.
It is worth mentioning that the entire test was submitted to several teachers with Mater and Doctorate degrees to decide the appropriateness, and the difficulty level of the items chosen. The test items were moderate in their difficulty level. Several of the test items were modified, whereas others were removed due to their difficulty, and thus might not reflect the credibility of the results reached. A good test is designed to exclude items which are very easy for all the respondents to answer or are very difficult that none of the respondents can answer. Hence, the very easy or difficult item(s) should be excluded, and the items which are of an average difficulty should be selected (Lzard, 2005, p.25).

**Test Validity**

Heaton (1988, p.162) points out that ‘test validity’ indicates the degree to which the test actually measures what it is supposed to measure, and nothing else. Moreover, test validity is the extent to which inferences, conclusions, and decisions are made based on the test scores which are appropriate and meaningful (ibid). The test validity has three variations: content validity, face validity, and construction validity. The content validity is a non-statistical type of validity, which involves “the systematic examination of the test content to determine whether it is a representative sample of the behaviour domain to be measured” (Crocker & Algina, 1986, p.114). It depends upon a theoretical basis to assume if a test is assessing all the domain of a criterion.

Content validity is built into a test via the careful selection of the items that are to be included. The items are chosen so that they can comply with the test specification, which is drawn up through a thorough examination of the subject domain (ibid). To ensure content validity, the test is carefully constructed to provide an opportunity to cover all four language skills of language learning. Furthermore, the validity is ensured by the fact that the sample are familiar with the items selected or the questions submitted (Blundell et al., 1996). For example, the population of the study are familiar with tests concerning the four language skills, as they have sat them almost every month since their intermediate stages of education.

**The Pilot Study**

The significance of the pilot test is that it reveals the necessary time required for the main test (Comrie, 1976). Furthermore, it discloses the effects in individual items, which are not noticed when writing the test. In order to determine the effectiveness of the data collecting techniques, the appropriateness of the situations, and exploring any problems that may interfere with the proper administration of the data collecting tool, a pilot test was conducted in April 2019. The test involved twenty sixth preparatory stage students who were selected randomly from two preparatory schools, which were located in different areas of Diwaniyah. These study sample members were excluded from the main test. The results of this study were found to confirm the
effectiveness of the techniques, and the appropriateness of the test items. In addition, the results reinforced that a time limit of sixty minutes is sufficient to allow all students to finish the task. Moreover, the results of this study reveal the importance of explaining several vocabularies in Arabic, which the subjects may not be familiar with, to ensure their satisfactory performance in the main test, during its final administration. All the results obtained from the pilot test have been incorporated into the final version of the test.

**Administration of the Main Test**

The main test was carried out between 24–25 February during the 2018–2019 academic year, and was divided into two sittings. The study sample were given one hour to answer a written test which covered paragraph writing and composition, and reading selected short passages. Moreover, the sample of the study were given an additional hour for the second part of the test, which included speaking in turns with peers, and a listening comprehension test. In addition, the sample were assured that the aim behind the test was for research purposes, and had nothing to do with their overall marks.

Before commencing the task, the subjects were asked to respond seriously to all sections of the test. The sample was given certain instructions on how to answer the questions in English and Arabic, as recommended by Olshtain and Cohen (1983, p.32), who believe that the respondents’ native language should be used to make them fully understand what they are required to do. Moreover, Olshtain and Cohen believe that giving instructions in the target language may bias the subjects towards using certain expressions, a matter which surely affects the results of the study. Additionally, the students were encouraged not to hesitate about asking for any clarification or explanation they might require during their performance. In order to save time and effort, they were asked to write their responses on the papers of the test. To avoid any embarrassment, they were asked not to provide their names on the test sheet, thus de-identifying them. Subsequently, the researchers completed the process of marking all tests following the score scheme, as presented in the upcoming section.

**Scoring Scheme**

An important means of achieving objectivity, and reliability is through the manipulation of a definite scoring scheme (Ebel, 1972). Thus, each test paper is scored out of 100. The scores are equally distributed over the test parts: Part I, and Part II, including subsections A, B, and C. Scores of twenty-five were assigned to each section, and a mark of zero was given for an incorrect answer, and to any part or item that was left blank, as this result creates the impression that the student was not successful or able to manage the test part or item(s). The Part I, listening comprehension test was given 25 marks, including five marks for each question. Moreover, a zero mark was assigned to an incorrect response or a question left blank. Whereas, Part II was
assigned 75 scores. Each subsection (A, B, and C) was assigned 25 scores. The following table illustrates the scoring scheme adopted for the test:

**Table 1: Distribution of the Test Scores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of Question</th>
<th>Level Targeted</th>
<th>No. of Items</th>
<th>Scores</th>
<th>Rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Part I: Listening Skills Measurement</td>
<td>Recognitive</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II, Section A: Reading Skills Measurement</td>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II, Section B: Writing Skills Measurement</td>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part II, Section C: Speaking Skills Measurement</td>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results Analysis**

**Listening Skills Analysis**

After analysing the oral comprehension test for measuring the ‘listening skills’ at the cognitive level, it was found that 65 Iraqi EFL preparatory stage learners passed the test, whereas only 35 members failed to attain the pass score. The reasoning behind this failure is related to the poor listening competence which the students possess, and which might be attributed to the lack of English laboratories in the school for improving the students listening level. Table 2 below illustrates the sample’s listening cognitive skills performance with the following percentages:

**Table 2: Students’ Listening Skills Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Total No.</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Succeeded sample</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed sample</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample’s total actual responses</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of correct responses</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of incorrect responses</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of blank items</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 illustrates that the total number of students involved in the oral comprehension test is 100, and which was comprised of 65 students who passed the test, at a rate of 65 per cent. Moreover, it shows that 35 students failed to attain the pass score at a rate of 35 per cent. The number of actual responses registered on the test paper was 495, and at an overall rate of 99 per cent. Among the actual responses were 305 correct ones or 61 per cent of the total
responses. Furthermore, the table shows that the number of the incorrect responses reached 190, which comprised 38 per cent of the overall actual responses. Finally, only five responses were left blank, and which the researchers considered to be incorrect due to the impression that the students were unable to manage the test items. These responses represented five per cent of the overall responses.

**Reading Skills Analysis**

As far as the reading skill test at the productive level was concerned, the study sample were given a short piece of passage, which they were familiar with (see Appendix 2). The passage, which talks about ‘Ziad Tariq and the Shark’, was taken from the student textbook in their first academic course. This means that the students were exposed to the passage repetitively and were expected to know the passage very well. The students were asked to read the passage with a clear voice, considering grammar, punctuation, and phonological functions, such as intonation, and stress, when necessary.

After collecting the data for analysis, the researchers found that a majority of the students had failed to conduct a proper reading test. Most of the study sample members were unable to pronounce many of the words properly, they ignored the functions of punctuation, and neglected the rules of grammar in the passage.

Concerning the phonological aspect, most of the students confused the letter ‘p’ with the letter ‘b’, particularly in words such as ‘push’, ‘reporters’, ‘pray’, and ‘hospital’. This failure is attributed to their lack of reading practices, which should be given greater attention by both the teachers, and students. Moreover, the students’ negligence to their reading skills might be related to the fact that the final ministerial test did not activate or include a reading test. Thus, the students’ resort to the language skills which grant themselves success.

Regarding the phonological level, the students pronounced certain sounds that should be silent in some words. As far as the tone role was concerned, the researchers found that none of the students had read the passage considering the roles of the intonation and/or stress. They ignored the fact that the stress of intonation adds several functions or prominence to the words pronounced. For instance, stressing the pronunciation of a word could either give that word a specific importance in the sentence meaning as a whole, and placing stress can also change the word component of the speech from a verb to a noun, and vice versa.

In respect to the punctuation considerations, the sample of the study failed to consider the punctuations while reading. For instance, the readers should have stopped and paused when they recognised the symbol ‘.’, which is called a period or full stop. Instead of stopping completely in certain sentences, the students passed straight onto the next sentence. This
provides an impression that the students have a competence deficiency in regard to punctuation functions.

Furthermore, it was also observed that the study sample committed grammatical issues while reading the passage. For example, they pronounced certain words which end with ‘ed’, such as ‘pushed’, as ‘id’. Table 3 below best demonstrates the study samples’ productive level in the reading skills test.

**Table 3: Students’ Reading Skills Performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Total No.</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Succeeded sample</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed sample</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total sample with phonological issues</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intonation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 illustrates that the overall number of study sample members was 100. The number of the students which succeeded was 55, with a percentage of 55 per cent of the overall study sample. Whereas, 44 study sample members failed the test, which comprised 44 per cent of the study sample. Furthermore, the table demonstrates the students’ difficulties encountered while reading the passage. The difficulties included those of a phonological nature, pertaining to pronunciation, intonation, and stress, and at a rate of 78 per cent. This formed the largest difficulty encountered by the study sample. As far as the punctuation difficulties were concerned, the researchers registered 72 violations, such as those related to the use of a full stop or colon. These violations occurred at a rate of 72 per cent. Lastly, the study sample experienced difficulties in considering the grammatical rules by choosing to ignore reading the verbs in their past forms.

Based on the statistical analyses, the students’ performance at the listening productive level was 65 per cent, as shown in Table 2, and was higher than their performance at the reading productive level, which was at a rate of 55 per cent, as shown in Table 3. Hence, the first hypothesis of the study: ‘A majority of the Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students’ listening skills are better than their reading skills’, has been validated, and proven.
Speaking Skills Analysis

The researchers relied heavily on the ‘Student’s Book’ and ‘Activity Book’ in formulating the tests of the study, although, several modifications were made to match the research result requirements.

The sample of the study were asked to converse in pairs by determining a well-known topic a week prior to the test. The chosen topic was to discuss health problems, which incorporated the body parts found in the ‘Activity Book’, on page two, and in lesson one, exercise ‘B’. The exercise was selected because the students were very familiar with it.

After conducting the speaking productive test, the researchers found several violations, and difficulties in the students’ speaking skills. Several of these difficulties were represented by the wrong vocabulary, grammatical structures, issues in pronunciations, and an incapability of utilising new vocabularies in the conversation from the students’ own vocabulary. In other words, none of the students were found to possess the ability to use words relating to body parts or health issues from their academic curriculum. Moreover, the students failed to use the proper words in the appropriate contexts. For example, one of the informants said: “my back is tired”, however, literally meant: “my back hurts”. This literal language-to-language conversion created confusion within the study sample to choose the proper word in the correct context. Table 4 below statically summarises the students’ success status, and their productive performance of speaking skills with the difficulties experienced.

Table 4: Students’ Speaking Skills Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total No. of the sample</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Succeeded sample</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed sample</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical violations</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phonological difficulties</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary selection issues</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 indicates that the total number of students who passed the speaking test was 40, which was 40 per cent of all study participants. This was a low success rate compared to the other three language skills, as shown by their statistical analyses. This means that 60 Iraqi EFL sixth grade preparatory students have failed to attain the success score. Their difficulties were distributed among grammatical violations at a rate of 70 per cent, phonological difficulties at 13 per cent, and the incorrect selection of vocabularies, if the students own, at 17 per cent. This establishes a clear understanding that the students are not exposed to face-to-face interactions using the English language.
Writing Skills Analysis

It is worthy to mention that most of the Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students rely heavily upon their writing skills to obtain high success scores. Their core reliance is directed to writing paragraphs, as it is normally allocated 30 marks in their ministerial test. Therefore, the researchers anticipated that the students’ performance in the writing skills test should peak. As the students are subjected to writing various paragraphs about different topics at their sixth stage, the researchers made use of one of the paragraph writings. Moreover, the topic chosen was well known and clear to the students, which was: ‘cigarette advertising should be illegal’. The test was assigned 25 marks, which were distributed across the students’ spelling, punctuation, vocabulary selection, and grammar, despite the fact that grammar, and punctuation are deprioritised in the final ministerial test.

After collecting, and analysing the data, it was found that the number of students who passed the writing skills test was 57. Whereas, the students who failed to reach the pass score totalled 43 students. The most frequent difficulties encountered among the study sample were related to the spelling, and grammatical components. Moreover, several other difficulties which were registered were relevant to the incorrect choice of vocabulary within the specific context. Table 5 below best clarifies the students’ productive writing skills level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total No. of the sample</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Succeeded sample</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed sample</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical violations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of students who succeeded was 55, which was 55 per cent of the study sample. This means that the students’ performance in the writing skills test was higher than their performance at the speaking skills level, which reached 40 per cent. This supports, and validates the second hypothesis: ‘A majority of the Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students’ writing skills are better than their speaking skills’.

Conclusions

In light of the previous analyses of the four language skills, and testing the hypotheses of the study, the following results were reached:
1. The Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory stages rely heavily upon writing skills compared to other language skills. This is related to the fact that ‘listening’, and ‘reading’ are not essentially employed in the ministerial examinations.

2. A majority of the Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students do not prioritise punctuations while reading. They are not aware of the functions that punctuation can perform, and its impact on meaning.

3. A majority of the Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory students faced difficulties in pronunciation. In addition, they had no idea what the phoneme can do to the meaning when it is changed.

4. The Iraqi EFL sixth preparatory stages rely heavily upon ticking the proper answer in the listening comprehension test rather than issuing or writing down the correct answer. This is attributed to their poor writing performance.

**Recommendations**

In light of the previous findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Activating the role of English laboratories in schools to improve the pronunciation of students.
2. Teachers of English language dedicating extra efforts to conduct classroom conversations in pairs, at least once a week.
3. Giving home assignments to the students about certain curricula related subjects and requesting the students to write about the subject using their own vocabularies.
4. Developing the four language skills of the students can be done by involving the teachers in extensive educational courses.
REFERENCES


Lzard, J. (2005). Trial testing and item analysis in test construction. UNESCO.


APPENDIX I

The Test
Part One

Recognition of Listening Skills

Listening Comprehension Test

Q1. Read the following passage carefully:

Two friends do not like going out at night because they are afraid of ghosts. One night, they were coming back home late from a cinema, as the movie was very long. While they were walking and talking about how funny the movie was, all the street lights went out suddenly. Everything became immersed in a deep and quiet darkness. They heard something like a whisper. Therefore, they held each other’s hands tightly, and shouted loudly, “who is there?” Then, two cops appeared from behind a tree. They explained that they were hiding to catch a thief, as the neighbours had reported an expected robbery.

Now answer the following questions: (25 Marks)
1. The two friends were watching .......... a. comedy movie   b. documentary movie   c. horror movie
2. The two cops were hiding behind the tree to .......... (complete)
3. The underlined word ‘whisper’ is closer in meaning to .......... a. speaking loudly   b. speaking quietly   c. shouting at the top of one’s voice
4. The word ‘cops’ in the passage is closer in meaning to ...... a. drivers   b. teachers   c. policemen
5. The neighbours were expecting a theft crime.
   True or False

APPENDIX II

Part Two

Section A: Production of Reading Skills

Q2. Read the following article taken from the ‘Student’s Book’: (25 Marks)
It was a calm morning in the beautiful seaside town of Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. Twenty-year-old Ziad Tariq, a tourist from Iraq, was floating peacefully 150 metres from the shore when he felt something push him. “I didn’t know what it was”, he told the reporters. “I thought, perhaps, my airbed had hit a piece of wood. Then it pushed even harder and I fell into the water. That is when I saw it was a shark.”

He was trying to swim away when the shark bit his arm. Tariq, who was losing a lot of blood, and thought he was about to die, screamed as loud as he could. “I was praying to God to save me”, he said, “when some dolphin swam up and frightened the shark away. There were at least six of them, and they made a circle around me. The shark couldn’t get near me.”

Coastguard Jameel Elalawi heard Tariq’s screams, and rescued him by boat. While he was giving Tariq first aid on the boat, his partner, Ahmed Misri, called the emergency services. An ambulance was waiting for Tariq on the shore, and he was immediately taken to the hospital at Sharm El Sheikh.

“It was the most frightening day of my life”, Tariq told reporters from his hospital bed. “That shark wanted to have me for breakfast, but the dolphins saved me, thank God.”

APPENDIX III

Section B: Production of Writing Skills

Q3. Write 100–120 words on this topic: ‘Cigarette advertising should be illegal’. (25 Marks)

APPENDIX III

Section C: Production of Speaking Skills

Q4. Work in pairs, choosing a health problem on page 6 of the ‘Student’s Book’. Kindly, speak loudly with a clear voice. (25 Marks)