

Validity of Language Testing in TNPSC Exams: An Exploratory Approach

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Abstract: Among all the criteria required for a test, Validity is the most important criterion as it ensures that the test measures what it claims to measure. Hence all tests, especially the ones that make a major impact on the life of people, must undergo a validity check. Such a check will ensure that the huge efforts by the government in terms of test construction, and administration is justified. One of these major test administrators in Tamil Nadu is the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC) which offers various tests that diagnose the level of applicants for various administrative positions in the civil society. In this paper the authors try to comment on the language tests employed in the TNPSC exams, and make a theoretical prediction of their validity. During this exploration, efforts will also be made to investigate into the criterion, content and construct validity of the test items.

I. VALIDITY IN ASSESSMENT

Validity – the extent to which the construct measures what it says it is measuring, decides the success of a test. Any compromise in these criteria results in the loss of the purpose of the test. Hence it is essential that Validity and Reliability are always ensured in any tests administered.

Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995:179) cite Henning's definition of validity as following:

"Validity in general refers to the appropriateness of a given test or any of its component parts as a measure of what it is purported to measure. A test is said to be valid to the extent that it measures what it is supposed to measure. It follows that the term is valid when used to describe a test may be valid for some purpose, but not for other". A test's validity is determined by how well it samples the range of knowledge, skills, and abilities that students were supposed to acquire.

Validity is further differentiated into different types namely:

1. Criterion related validity
 - a. Predictive validity
 - b. Concurrent validity
2. Rational validity
 - a. Content validity
 - b. Construct validity, and
3. Face validity

Criterion or concrete validity is the extent to which a measure is related to an outcome. It looks at the relationship between a test score and an outcome. Criterion validity is often divided into concurrent and predictive validity. Concurrent validity refers to a comparison between the measure in question and an outcome assessed at the same time. Predictive validity, on the other hand, compares the measure in question with an outcome assessed at a later time.

Content validity addresses the match between test questions and the content or subject area they are intended to assess. Content validity is normally judged by experts of the particular field to ensure that each test covers content that matches all relevant subject matter in its academic discipline.

Construct validity refers to the degree to which a test or other measure assesses the underlying theoretical construct it is supposed to measure. As an example, think about a test of English grammar. If a test is designed to assess knowledge of rules of grammar, but test questions are phrased in long and complex reading passages, then perhaps reading skills are inadvertently being measured instead of factual knowledge of English grammar. Construct validation requires the compilation of multiple sources of evidence. In order to demonstrate construct validity, evidence that the test measures what it purports to measure (in this case English grammar) as well as evidence that the test does not measure irrelevant attributes (reading ability) are both required. These are referred to as convergent and discriminant validity.

Face validity refers to the extent to which a test or the questions on a test appear to measure a particular construct as viewed by laypersons, clients, examinees, test users, the public, or other stakeholders. Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995:172) state it to be the 'surface credibility or public acceptability' of a test, and Bachman (1990:307) states that 'face validity is the appearance of real life'. In other words, it looks like a reasonable test for whatever purpose it is being used. This common sense approach to validity is often important in convincing laypersons to allow the use of a test, regardless of the availability of more scientific means.

II. NEED FOR VALIDITY

While it is understood that every test needs to be validated, the emphasis on validity increases with the quantum of effect a test has on the test takers. For instance, examiners designing a test need to be more focused on ensuring the above criteria if the exam is conducted for a large population or if the exam is used for High-Stakes Conditions. This paper explores into the validity of the language tests conducted by one of the most significant examination body in Tamil Nadu, India – Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC).

III. TNPSC

One of the largest test administrators for recruitment purposes is the Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission (TNPSC). It came into being under an Act of Madras Legislature in 1929, as the Madras Service Commission and was modified as The Madras Public Service Commission in 1936. It was again renamed as Tamil Nadu Public Service Commission in 1970. The provisions relating to the Public Service Commissions are contained in Articles 315 to 323 of the Constitution of India, Chapter II of Part XIV. TNPSC has to discharge the duties and functions specified in Article 320 of the Constitution of India. The Commission is required to advise the Government on all matters relating to framing of recruitment rules, principles to be followed in making appointments and promotions and transfers from one service to another service, in respect of disciplinary matters affecting Government Servants and to conduct examinations for selection of candidates under direct recruitment to the State, Subordinate and Ministerial Services. The Commission conducts Departmental Examinations for Government Servants and also conducts the examination on behalf of the Government of India, Ministry of Defence for admission to the School run by the Rashtriya Indian Military College, Dehra Dun.

TNPSC has administered about 147 examinations in areas like civil administration, police, forest, legal, and medical services. Approximately 36,76,336 candidates applied / appeared for these examinations. Of these there are about 14 examinations which include tests on English Language proficiency.

The TNPSC exams that include tests of English language include:

1. Combined Civil Services – Group – 1 & 1 C
2. Combined Sub-ordinate Service Examination (CSSE) – 1
3. Group-IV - Differently Abled Persons
4. Village Administrative Officer (VAO)
5. Group-I (B) Assistant Commissioner in HR&CE
6. Forest Apprentice
7. School Assistant
8. Special Assistant in DVAC
9. Group VIII – Executive Officer Grade IV
10. Group VII B – Executive Officer Grade III
11. CSSE-I – Executive Officer Grade III in TN HR & CE
12. CSSE-II – Group IV
13. Group-IV Services & Executive Officer Grade VIII
14. Executive Officer Grade I

(As per information obtained from <http://www.tnpsc.gov.in/syllabus.html> on 06 November 2015)

IV. VALIDITY ANALYSIS OF TNPSC TESTS

While all the tests need to be validated, for want of time the authors have preferred to analyse the validity of a single test. In this case the paper selected was the 'General Knowledge with General English' paper administered for the Group-I (B) Assistant Commissioner in Hindu Religious & Charitable Endowments Department in 2011.

The test consists of 200 multiple choice questions with an overall weight of 300 marks, to be answered in 3 hours, and all questions carrying equal marks. The first 100 questions test the general knowledge of the candidates and the last 100 questions test the language proficiency. The items that are used for the language test include:

1. Match the words in column A with their meanings in Column B
2. Choose the correct synonym for the italicised word
3. Choose the correct antonym for the italicised word
4. Select the word with correct prefix
5. Fill in the blank with the suitable article
6. Fill in the blank with the suitable preposition

7. Select a correct question tag
8. Select the correct tense
9. Select the correct voice
10. Fill in the blank with suitable participle
11. Fill in the blank with suitable infinitive
12. Fill in the blank with suitable gerund
13. Identify the sentence pattern
14. Change the following verb into noun
15. Change the following noun into verb
16. Change the following adjective into adverb
17. Fill in the blank with a suitable homophone
18. Comprehension
19. Select the correct sentence
20. Find out the error
21. Find the odd word
22. Select the correct plural form for the given word
23. Identify the Simple / Compound / Complex sentence
24. Identify the degree (Positive / Comparative / Superlative)

Again, as the scope of the paper and time for analysis is limited, this study takes into account only a few sample questions related to reading comprehension (No. 18 listed above) for its analysis. Many methods exist to evaluate the validity of test items. The researchers who have done field testing by administering the tests have used various methods to analyse the numerical data obtained from their study including Factor analysis (Baker, 1989), Multitrait-Multimethod designs (Campbell and Fiske, 1959), and Protocol Analysis (Cohen, 1984).

This analysis, which does not involve any field testing, cannot employ any of the above methods. Therefore, the Guidelines for Developing a Valid Level 2 Evaluations (Ken Phillips, 2009) are used for the analysis. The guidelines proposed by Ken Phillips for a valid test include:

1. Focus on creating Level 2 evaluations that test for understanding not just knowledge.
2. Where appropriate, use Level 2 evaluations for reinforcement as well as evaluation.
3. Group questions by topic or concept for scoring, but randomize for administration.
4. All evaluation items should discriminate between participants who know the material taught really well from those who don't.
5. Avoid compound questions that ask for more than one thing.
6. Don't test participants on concepts or material that wasn't covered in the learning program.
7. Write all test items the same way the material was taught.
8. Provide clear test instructions.
9. Allow participants to use test aids during the evaluation, if they use them when performing their job.
10. Avoid developing evaluation items that contain trivial information.

Going by the above guidelines, it is found that guidelines 2, 4, 6, 7 & 9 do not apply to the exam under consideration, as the exam is not conducted as a formative or summative assessment after a course. Hence they are not considered for the analysis.

1. Focus on creating Level 2 evaluations that test for understanding not just knowledge.

All the questions merely requires verbatim recall of the words in the given passage, which represents lower order thinking, and does not require any higher order thinking. Hence there is no test of understanding involved in these items.

167. A. He had not given back the right change
168. A. Nature had implanted a good sturdy spirit
169. D. Northern Coast of South America
170. C. North Pole
171. B. Reading

3. Group questions by topic or concept for scoring, but randomize for administration.

All the questions are grouped by topic / concept for scoring, in this case Reading Comprehension. While the items as such do not provide any clue that the test taker can use to answer for the subsequent questions, the test does not randomize the questions to prevent any unforeseen possibility of the test taker influenced by the pattern that emerges in the question paper. It may also be noted that the test designers have not randomized the questions despite the answers being marked on the Optical Mark Reader (OMR) Sheets which make it easy to compute and correlate any patterns.

5. Avoid compound questions that ask for more than one thing.

Learners find compound questions and questions requiring compound answers confusing and view them as unfair, and should be avoided. However, in this case there are no questions that are compound and there are no questions that need compound answers. Therefore, the test items comply with this guideline.

8. Provide clear test instructions.

The instructions provided are brief and the test items do not need elaborate instructions. Hence, the guideline has been followed.

10. Avoid developing evaluation items that contain trivial information.

Trivial information is anything included in the item that is not needed to understand the question. In this case, questions 167, 168, and 171 seem to test the underlying idea that is required for the development of the central idea of the passage, questions 169 and 170 test on the trivial information not exactly vital for the development of the theme / central idea.

Even while going through these analyses, which are rather superficial, there are inconsistencies found in the examinations conducted by TNPSC. Hence a detailed study on all the measures of validity, with empirical studies and scientific analysis of data, will be fruitful to ensure that the exams of this magnitude serve the purpose of their administration, which the authors propose to explore further.

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