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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47344/hba9mx84>*Aigerim Anuarbekova^{1*}, Mehmet Ali Yaylaci²*¹Dostyq School, Almaty, Kazakhstan²Galaxy International School, Almaty, Kazakhstan*e-mail: darkhanqyzy.a@gmail.com**CHALLENGES FACED BY HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN PREPARING FOR THE ENGLISH EXAM AT UNT IN KAZAKHSTAN**

Abstract. This study examines some primary challenges faced by 11th-grade students at Dostyq School in Kazakhstan as they get ready for the English section of the Unified National Testing (UNT). From semi-structured interviews of 15 students, a few themes that recurred emerged. Participants reported many difficulties with vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and grammar, which they identified as definite barriers to achieving high scores. Exam-related stress was also of important concern, with many students expressing feelings of anxiety and pressure leading up to the test. Some students considered preparing for the IELTS exam, with the possibility of converting IELTS scores into UNT points, while feeling unprepared in terms of time and language skills. Many students relied upon external support, such as several private tutors, multiple group courses, or diverse online platforms, including Juz40, EDUCON, KURSANT, and YouTube. However, many people noted that these resources frequently lacked some personalized guidance that they needed. They required this guidance to address their particular weaknesses. Students highlighted the emotional strain from parental expectations, in addition to academic challenges. These findings suggest a need for much more accessible as well as tailored preparatory materials, in addition to stronger emotional together with motivational support systems that better equip students for the demands of the English UNT.

Keywords: UNT (Unified National Testing), English Language, English exam, student preparation, vocabulary, emotional stress, Preparation for UNT, challenges, Kazakhstan, school exams.

Introduction

Unified National Testing is a significant tool for assessing school graduates' academic performance and plays a vital role, as it affects their entrance to university and their eligibility for a grant. The English language constitutes one of the few selected subjects of the exam, and its expertise guarantees academic and professional development, also helping secure a grant.

The Unified National Testing (UNT) constitutes a key element of Kazakhstan's educational system. It simultaneously serves as a graduation and entrance exam. First introduced in 2004, the UNT has become a tool for standardizing graduates' knowledge and combating corruption within university admissions (Israliev, 2013).

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2023), more than 70% of graduates annually pass the UNT, which confirms its status as the main exam of educational selection for higher education. The exam itself involves assessing students' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, use of English, and reading comprehension skills. In comparison with international exams like IELTS and TOEFL, UNT does not check listening and speaking skills. Despite the narrow format, preparation for the UNT requires a deep understanding of language structures and the ability to process information presented in a test format quickly. The UNT plays an essential role in ensuring transparency and objectivity in the distribution of state grants, especially for rural school graduates (Smagulov & Smagulov, 2018). Due to a unified approach to assessment, students from different regions receive equal conditions for participation in the competition for study at universities.

However, it is noted that excessive focus on the testing format leads to narrowing the school curriculum. The educational process is increasingly reduced to preparing for the test, which limits the development of critical thinking, creativity, and interdisciplinary connections (Oralbekova, 2024). This raises concerns among both educators and researchers who are studying the effectiveness of the education system as a whole. The literature also raises the issue of social inequality. Despite the formally equal conditions for passing the UNT, access to quality training, trial tests, and tutors remains uneven, especially in rural areas (Sagidolda & Zhanbyrbayev, 2024).

Along with this, several studies highlight the high level of stress in students. For example, Smagulov & Smagulov (2018) conducted a physiological assessment of high school students and found elevated cortisol levels, anxiety symptoms, and signs of emotional exhaustion. Physiological measurements show significant stress in school children during the period of preparation for the UNT, which reduces not only their academic performance but also their overall psycho-emotional state (Smagulov & Smagulov, 2018). Similarly, Tuleutayeva & Nurgaliyeva (2020) reported that students often experience sleep disorders and reduced academic motivation as testing approaches. These findings suggest that excessive academic pressure not only hinders learning but may also have long-term health implications. Now, Kazakhstan is actively reforming the UNT: the option of multiple passes has been added, the choice of subjects has been increased, and elements of profiling are gradually being introduced. Nevertheless, the issue of integrating a competency-based approach and flexible forms of assessment remains relevant (Zueva, 2017).

Students who prepare for the English exam at UNT face various challenges that reduce the effectiveness of their learning and exam results.

The purpose of this study is to identify the main challenges that students face when preparing for the English exam at UNT. The study answers the following question:

What difficulties do students face when preparing for the UNT in English?

Challenges Encountered in English Exam Preparation at UNT

Preparation for the UNT in English in Kazakhstan is a challenge for both students and teachers. Despite the growing popularity of this subject among graduates, there are a number of persistent problems that make it difficult to provide quality preparation. Despite efforts to develop trilingual education in Kazakhstan (Kazakh, Russian, and English), the level of English proficiency among the population remains low. According to the 2023 EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), Kazakhstan ranked 104th out of 113 countries, which corresponds to a “very low” level of English proficiency. In 2024, the situation improved only slightly: the country moved up to 103rd place out of 116, remaining in the very low proficiency group. These statistics show that, despite the introduction of trilingual education, many Kazakhstani students and adults continue to experience difficulties in mastering the English language.

One of the main difficulties is the mismatch between the school curriculum and the UNT format. School English classes are still focused on the grammar-translation approach, while testing requires reading comprehension skills and vocabulary knowledge (Ishmuratova & Nortseva, 2018). This leads to students not developing sustainable communication skills.

In addition, many graduates have insufficient language proficiency, especially in the regions. Research shows that even having received a high score on the UNT, students often have weak real-life communication skills in English (Zhumagulova & Nurpeys, 2016). An additional difficulty is the lack of a language environment and qualified teachers, especially in rural areas. As noted by Alzhanova and Baimenova (2021), many schools employ teachers whose level of English is below the level required to prepare for the exam.

Another important barrier is the psychological insecurity of the students themselves. Students are afraid of tests in English and prefer to choose more “predictable” subjects, such as the history of Kazakhstan or biology (Alyamova, 2017).

Teachers, in turn, do not always have modern methodological skills. English language teaching methods are often not adapted to the UNT format, and digital resources and trial tests remain

unavailable in many regions (Ibraeva & Kharchenko, 2018; Akhmetzhanova & Tusupbekov, 2016). Thus, to improve preparation for the UNT in English, it is necessary to develop the infrastructure of language education, strengthen support for teachers, and reform teaching methods toward a practice-oriented and communicative approach.

Factors Affecting Successful Preparation

Successful passing of the Unified National Test (UNT) in Kazakhstan depends not only on subject knowledge but also on many other factors - psychological, social, strategic, and even physiological. First of all, the students' cognitive abilities are essential. A higher level of subject knowledge and logical thinking, as well as the ability to analyze tasks, directly affect the final result (Ishmuratova & Nortseva, 2018). The capacity for consciously managing preparation processes is also important, for example, for identifying weaknesses and adjusting strategies (Zueva, 2017).

The psychological state of the student does play an equally important role. Research indicates that high anxiety may diminish academic success, despite possessing needed knowledge (Smagulov & Smagulov, 2018). At that same time, naturally motivated and self-confident students are apt to show a high degree of results.

Success is also affected by the environment. This includes the quality of teaching as well as the availability of additional resources — textbooks, practice tests, and online platforms (Akhmetzhanova & Tusupbekov, 2016). The family's level of support is also important: parental involvement, moral support, and trust—all of this creates a favorable atmosphere to prepare.

Preparation strategies, too, are important: students who fully plan their lessons in advance, divide material into parts and regularly practice practice assignments, usually feel confident during exams and show improved results.

Finally, physiological factors, such as adequate sleep and nutrition, can have a strong effect. Physical activity can also have an unexpectedly strong effect. Sufficiently little sleep before an exam can reduce concentration and performance. This commonly happens under stress.

Thus, successfully passing the UNT is the result of an integrated approach, such as a combination of knowledge, psychological stability, planned thinking, and a favorable educational environment.

Methods and Materials

The purpose of this study is to determine the key obstacles that 11th-grade students encounter as they prepare for the UNT English Exam, and to offer useful advice for how they can overcome these obstacles. The study intends to answer a research question: (1) What difficulties do students face in their preparation for the UNT in English?

To achieve the stated goals, a qualitative approach, combining a review of scientific literature and semi-structured interviews, was used. This design enables integration within theoretical frameworks alongside empirical understandings, allowing a deeper exploration into complex educational phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The literature review included studies published from 2015 through 2024, relating to the problems involved in preparation for the UNT, learning English at school, and also pedagogical, psychological, and organizational aspects concerning passing standardized tests. The main sources were scientific publications posted in the CyberLeninka, eLibrary, and Google Scholar databases. The purpose was to identify the already existing scientific approaches to the problem, formulate the present difficulties, and justify the need for empirical confirmation.

The empirical part of the study was implemented using a semi-structured interview. The interview involved around 15 11th-grade students, in preparation to pass the UNT in English and Geography or English and World History, at a private High School. Respondents were interviewed either in person or online, based on their availability. Each interview lasted for about 15-20 minutes.

The collected data were recorded and subjected to content analysis, following a structured process of coding and interpretation (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Semantic categories were identified,

including: cognitive and subject difficulties, preparation strategies, emotional states, resources used, and student suggestions. Generalizations and conclusions were formulated based on recurring themes and individual emphases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All study participants provided voluntary informed consent. The principles of anonymity, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of information were respected, in line with established ethical standards for qualitative research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). The data was used exclusively for research purposes.

Findings

The analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews with 11th-grade students preparing for the English section of the Unified National Testing (UNT) revealed six major semantic categories. These categories reflect the students' lived experiences, concerns, and perspectives during their exam preparation process.

1. Cognitive and Linguistic Challenges

The main challenge reported by students was related to linguistic knowledge, particularly vocabulary limitations. Many students stated that while they were familiar with grammatical rules, their restricted vocabulary made it difficult to understand reading texts and solve related tasks. The use of phrasal verbs and professional terminology was also frequently cited as problematic:

I know the rules of grammar, but when I read the test or texts, I often don't understand the meaning because of unknown words.

Students also mentioned that they could not always apply grammar effectively in context, especially under exam conditions. This disagreement between theoretical knowledge and practical application created confusion and lowered their confidence.

2. Preparation Strategies

Students used various strategies to prepare for the UNT. The most common approaches included private tutoring, group courses, and self-study using online platforms such as DOSTYQ, EDUCON, juz40, KURSANT, and YouTube channels. While tutoring and courses were seen as helpful, several students noted the lack of individualized attention in group settings:

In group classes, the teacher doesn't have time for everyone, and if you don't understand something, it stays unclear because the time of the online meeting is limited (Student 2)

Additionally, some digital resources were considered expensive or hard to access, especially for students living outside urban centers. This created disparities in preparation quality and access to effective tools.

3. Emotional Experiences

Anxiety, fear, and self-doubt emerged as central emotional experiences for most students. Stress was particularly high in the final months leading up to the exam. Many students reported feeling overwhelmed by the unpredictability of the test format and their own perceived lack of readiness. Students also shared their regrets about not passing the IELTS exam because the English scores will be converted to UNT scores.

Even when I prepare a lot, I feel nervous and scared. What if I forget everything? If I had IELTS 6.0, I would be confident in myself (Student 3)

These emotional responses were intensified by comparisons with peers and by external expectations from families.

4. Support Systems

Students' experiences with support systems varied. Some expressed appreciation for teachers who provided additional lessons or one-on-one help. However, others noted that school support was inconsistent and insufficient. In contrast, support from families was often perceived as pressure, not encouragement.

Teachers help when they can, but parents expect too much. It's stressful. (Student 4)

Psychological support was almost completely absent. Students felt that having access to a school psychologist or mentor could help manage stress during the preparation process.

5. Motivational Factors

Students were primarily motivated by the desire to enter university and obtain a scholarship or grant. Many saw academic success as a means of achieving financial independence and improving their future prospects. The influence of family members, particularly siblings who had already succeeded, was also a motivating factor.

My goal is to get a grant. I don't want to burden my family financially. (Student 5)

Some students viewed English not only as a subject for the exam but also as a valuable skill for future studies or life abroad.

6. Student Suggestions for Improvement

Participants offered a variety of suggestions for improving preparation for the English UNT. These included introducing more communicative, real-life tasks in English classes, creating free centralized online platforms with full preparation materials, and ensuring access to mock exams with automatic checking and feedback.

We need a website where everything is in one place—grammar, practice tests, and videos. (Student 8)

Students also emphasized the importance of having access to personalized feedback and suggested that schools provide psychological support to reduce exam-related anxiety.

The results obtained largely correspond to the findings of Ishmuratova and Nortseva (2018), who noted a lag in the vocabulary base from grammatical knowledge of students, and the studies of Smagulov and Smagulov (2018), recording a high level of anxiety. The observation of Akhmetzhanova and Tusupbekov (2016) about inequality in access to educational resources is also confirmed.

Thus, students clearly understand their strengths and weaknesses, are able to formulate needs, and have a critical view of the educational process. Their proposals can serve as a basis for pedagogical and administrative reforms aimed at improving the quality of preparation for the UNT.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by 11th-grade students in preparing for the English section in the Unified National Testing (UNT) of Kazakhstan. Based on a literature review and interviews with students, several key difficulties were identified. These included various limited vocabulary, multiple problems with understanding reading texts, weak grammar application, and a noticeable lack of access to personalized resources. Furthermore, most students experienced emotional stress. Such stress was frequently increased by parental pressure instead of school pressure.

While the students used various preparation methods, such as with tutors, through online platforms, and in group courses, they often felt that these were not enough to fully meet their needs.

A few expressed a preference for taking the IELTS instead of the UNT, as it offered another path toward university admission, though time and language barriers made that route rather difficult. The findings show that preparing for the English UNT is not just an academic challenge but a psychological as well as structural one. To improve overall outcomes, students need increasingly accessible and affordable learning materials, improved emotional support, and effective teaching methods that focus not only on test-taking but also on real language use. Hearing the voices of students as well as acting according to their feedback is necessary for making preparation for exams more effective and fair to everyone.

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Айгерім Ануарбекова^{1}, Мехмет Али Яйладжі²*

¹Dostyq School, Алматы, Қазақстан

²Galaxy International School, Алматы, Қазақстан

*e-mail: darkhanqyzy.a@gmail.com

ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ МЕКТЕП ОҚУШЫЛАРЫНЫҢ ҰБТ-ҒА АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІ БОЙЫНША ДАЙЫНДЫҚ КЕЗІНДЕ КЕЗДЕСЕТІН ҚИЫНДЫҚТАРЫ

Андатпа. Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы «Достық» мектебінің 11-сынып оқушыларының Ұлттық Бірыңғай тестілеудің (ҰБТ) ағылшын тілі бөліміне дайындалу барысында кездесетін негізгі қиындықтарын қарастырады. 15 оқушымен жүргізілген жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар нәтижесінде бірнеше қайталанатын тақырыптар анықталды. Қатысушылар сөздік қорын дамыту, мәтінді түсіну және грамматиканы меңгеру мәселелерін жоғары балл алуға кедергі келтіретін маңызды факторлар ретінде атап өтті. Емтиханға байланысты стресс те маңызды мәселе ретінде көрінді: көптеген оқушылар тест алдындағы қобалжу мен қысымды сезінетіндерін айтты. Кейбір оқушылар IELTS емтиханына дайындалуды қарастырғанымен, уақыт пен тілді меңгеру деңгейінің жеткіліксіздігіне байланысты өзін дайын емес сезінді. Көптеген оқушылар қосымша қолдауға сүйенген: жеке репетиторлар, топтық курстар немесе Juz40, EDUCON, KURSANT, YouTube секілді әртүрлі онлайн платформалар. Алайда, бұл ресурстардың көпшілігі оқушылардың нақты әлсіз тұстарын жекелей түсіндіретін бағыт-бағдар бере алмайтынын атап өтті. Сонымен қатар, ата-аналардың үмітімен байланысты эмоционалды жүктеме де оқушылар үшін қосымша қиындық туғызады. Осы зерттеу нәтижелері БҰТ-ке дайындықты жеңілдететін, қолжетімді әрі жеке қажеттіліктерге бейімделген оқу материалдары мен оқушылардың эмоциялық және мотивациялық жағдайларын қолдауға бағытталған жүйелердің қажеттілігін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: ҰБТ (Ұлттық Бірыңғай тестілеу), ағылшын тілі, ағылшын тілі емтиханы, оқушы дайындығы, сөздік қор, эмоционалды стресс, ҰБТ-ге дайындық, қиындықтар, Қазақстан, мектеп емтихандары.

Айгерім Ануарбекова^{1}, Мехмет Али Яйладжі²*

¹Dostyq School, Алматы, Казахстан

²Galaxy International School, Алматы, Казахстан

*e-mail: darkhanqyzy.a@gmail.com

ТРУДНОСТИ СТАРШЕКЛАССНИКОВ ПРИ ПОДГОТОВКЕ К ЕНТ ПО АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ

Аннотация. В этом исследовании рассматриваются некоторые основные проблемы, с которыми сталкиваются ученики 11-го класса школы «Достык» в Казахстане при подготовке к разделу английского языка Единого национального тестирования (ЕНТ). Из полуструктурированных интервью с 15 учениками было выявлено несколько повторяющихся тем. Участники сообщили о многочисленных трудностях с приобретением словарного запаса, пониманием прочитанного и грамматикой, которые они определили как определенные препятствия для достижения высоких баллов. Стресс, связанный с экзаменом, также был важной проблемой, поскольку многие ученики выражали чувство тревоги и давления перед тестом. Некоторые ученики рассматривали подготовку к экзамену IELTS с возможностью конвертации баллов IELTS в баллы ЕНТ, чувствуя себя неподготовленными по времени и языковым навыкам. Многие ученики полагались на внешнюю поддержку, такую как

несколько частных репетиторов, несколько групповых курсов или различные онлайн-платформы, включая Juz40, EDUCON, KURSANT и YouTube. Однако многие люди отметили, что этим ресурсам часто не хватало некоторых индивидуальных рекомендаций, в которых они нуждались. Им требовалось это руководство для решения их весьма специфических слабостей. Студенты подчеркнули эмоциональное напряжение от родительских ожиданий в дополнение к академическим трудностям. Эти результаты указывают на необходимость гораздо более доступных, а также адаптированных подготовительных материалов в дополнение к более сильным эмоциям вместе с системами мотивационной поддержки, которые лучше подготавливают студентов к требованиям ЕНТ по английскому языку.

Ключевые слова: ЕНТ (Единое национальное тестирование), английский язык, экзамен по английскому языку, подготовка студентов, словарный запас, эмоциональный стресс, подготовка к ЕНТ, трудности, Казахстан, школьные экзамены.

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