

International English Abbreviations: Manifestation of Proficiency in English

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Abstract: English abbreviations used on an international scale are of vital importance in the daily usage of English not only speaking, but also in listening, reading and writing. In order to be proficient in English, besides knowing the structures, vocabulary and other aspects of the language, EFL learners should be equipped with standard uses of international abbreviations such as WHO, ILO, and UN. To this end, 45 intermediate-level EFL students and 40 advanced students, studying at Kafkas University, Turkey, were assigned as the subjects of the study. The participants were given 20 most commonly used international English abbreviations in written form and they were asked to write how much they know them. The results were evaluated using SPSS 17 for windows. Descriptive statistics and Independent t-test were used for the assessment of the results. According to the result of the study, USA UK ,and NATO were known by the participants (100%) as they are encountered not only in the textbooks and materials but also in the media, however the least known abbreviations were ECHR 0(0%), RSVP 0(0%) and ILO 02(2,4%), respectively. The results showed that there was no significant difference between male and female students as well as between intermediate and advanced students ($p > 0,05$).

Keywords: International, abbreviations, Kafkas University, EFL, proficiency.

Introduction

Foreign or second language learning is a process which relies heavily on a continuous study and practice. In this respect, there has been abundant research on the theories of language teaching and learning (Koike, 1980; Bloom, 2000; Foster-Cohen, 2001; Diessel, 2004; Blommaert, 2006; Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; House, 2006; Lanksmanan, 2006) as well as language transfer (Selinker & Lansmanan, 1993; Jarvis, 2000; Pavlenko, 2000; Odlin, 2003;) and change (Hughes, 1988; McArthur, 1998; Croft, 2000; Fitch, 2005;) in order to contribute to the acquisition of second or foreign language.

In the last three decades English language has been very important all over the world due to partly the power of the US in the military affairs and to partly the scientific developments carried out in English. As Crystal (2003) maintains “you hear it on television spoken by politicians from all over the world. Wherever you travel, you see English signs and advertisements. Whenever you enter a hotel or restaurant in a foreign city, they will understand English, and there will be an English menu” (p.19). For Crystal “There is the closest of links between language dominance and economic, technological, and cultural power, too, and this relationship will become increasingly clear as the history of English is told” (p.7).

Therefore, English language is almost the global language of the world. From health issues to environmental, technical matters and internet communications almost everything is in English. Crystal (2003) maintains that “without a strong power-base, of whatever kind, no language can make progress as an international medium of communication. Language has no independent existence, living in some sort of mystical space apart from the people who speak it. Language exists only in the brains and mouths and ears and hands and eyes of its users. When they succeed, on the international stage, their language succeeds. When they fail, their language fails” (p.7). According to McCrum et al., (2002) “today, English is used by at least 750 million people, and barely half of those speak it as a mother tongue. Some estimates have put that figure closer to one billion.

Whatever the total, English at the end of the twentieth century is more widely scattered, more widely spoken and written, than any other language has ever been. It has become the language of the planet, the first truly global language” (pp. 9–10). As English language is so common in the world, it is inevitable that abbreviations of English are also used commonly all over the world. On the other hand, with the exceptions of dictionaries and a few Internet sources, it is difficult to encounter scientific studies on the common international abbreviations.

Problem

International abbreviations used in the textbooks and media are sometimes given in their long forms and can be understood by language learners easily, however, if they aren't given in long forms they cannot be understood by Turkish EFL students.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study is to shed light on the importance of international English abbreviations for EFL learners and determine whether Turkish EFL learners know them sufficiently or not.

Methodology

Subjects

45 intermediate-level EFL students and 40 advanced-level students, studying at Kafkas University, Kars, Turkey participated in this study.

Instrument

A questionnaire, containing 20 commonly used international abbreviations, formed by the researcher was used in this study. The first part of the questionnaire aimed to solicit information related to the classes and genders of the participants. The second part aimed to elicit information on how much the participants knew the given twenty common international abbreviations and where they learned them from. To this end, a five-point Likert type scale was used (1. Know exactly, 2. Know, 3. Not sure, 4. Don't know, and 5. Don't know at all). For the statistics SPSS 17 was used. Data were evaluated through Descriptive Statistics and Independent Sample t-test.

Procedure

In order to determine the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was carried out on 30 students and the reliability Cronbach's Alpha was computed as 0,67 reliable. As Özdamar (1999, p.522) maintains “if Alpha is higher than 0,60 and lower than 0,80, the scale is very reliable”.

Research Questions

1. How much do the EFL students know common international abbreviations?
2. Is there a significant difference between EFL students in relation to their gender?
3. Is there a significant difference between EFL students in relation to their level?

Results and Discussion

The genders and levels of the participants have been given in Table 1.

Level	Gender			
	Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%
Intermediate	16	35,6	29	64,4
Advanced	13	32,5	27	67,5
Total	29	44,0	56	66,0

Table 1. Genders and Levels of the Participants

According to Table 1, 29 (44%) of the students were males and 56(66%) were females. Of 85 students 45(53%) were intermediate level, whereas 40(47%) were advanced level.

Source	Frequency	%
Textbooks and materials	32	37,6
TV and similar sources	44	51,8
Friends and teachers	09	10,6
Total	85	100,0

Table 2. Sources the Participants Learn the International English Abbreviations

It is seen in Table 2 that students learn the International abbreviations from TV and similar sources 44(51,8%), textbooks and materials 32(37,6%), and friends and teachers 9(10,6%), respectively. It can be said that textbooks and materials do not contain enough information related with the abbreviations.

Answers to the Research Questions

1.How much do the EFL students know common international abbreviations?

According to the results of the study, participants could mostly know the very common abbreviations used in the textbooks or media, however, they couldn't know the ones which weren't found in the textbooks. The frequencies and percentages of the participants responses have been given in Table 3.

As seen in Table3, the highest frequencies of their awareness of common international abbreviations are USA 82(96,5%) exactly know, 03(3,5%) know, UK 81(95,3%) exactly know, 04(4,7%) know, NATO 72(84,7%) exactly know, 13(15,3%)know, respectively.

Abbreviation	Exactly Know		Know		Not Sure		Don't Know		Don't Know Exactly	
	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
WHO	35	41,2	19	22,4	09	10,6	18	21,2	4	04,7
ILO	02	02,4	05	5,9	14	16,5	45	52,9	19	22,4
UN	48	56,5	28	32,9	06	07,1	03	03,5	00	00
EU	57	67,1	19	22,4	05	05,9	04	04,7	00	00
NATO	72	84,7	13	15,3	00	00,0	00	00	00	00
UK	81	95,3	04	04,7	00	00,0	00	00	00	00
USA	82	96,5	03	03,5	00	00,0	00	00	00	00
FAO	01	01,2	08	09,4	46	54,1	30	35,3	00	00
UNESCO	39	45,9	32	37,6	12	14,1	02	02,4	00	00
PC	48	56,5	13	15,3	15	17,6	09	10,6	00	00
CV	46	54,1	21	24,7	10	11,8	08	09,4	00	00
NASA	40	47,1	27	31,8	10	11,8	08	09,4	00	00
PM	03	3,5	3	3,5	16	18,8	48	56,5	00	00
MA	00	00	12	14,1	16	18,8	43	50,6	14	16,5
PhD	04	4,7	14	16,5	19	22,4	40	47,1	08	09,4
OPEC	02	02,4	03	03,5	11	12,9	49	57,6	20	23,5
VIP	40	47,1	24	28,2	01	01,2	12	14,1	08	09,4
ECHR	00	00	00	00	04	04,7	42	49,4	39	45,9
RSVP	00	00	01	01,2	02	02,4	38	44,7	44	51,8
UNICEF	10	11,8	38	44,7	30	35,3	06	07,1	01	01,2

Table 3.Frequencies and Percentages of the Responses of Participants

The lowest ones are ECHR 00(0%) exactly know, 00(00%) know, RSVP 00(0%) know exactly, 01(1,2%) know, and ILO 02(2,4%) exactly know, 05(5,9%) know, respectively.

It is clear that the highest frequencies belong to the items used in daily life almost everyday in the textbooks, media and vice versa. However, even though used commonly in the world, the abbreviations ECHR, RSVP, and ILO do not exist in the textbooks so often, therefore participants mustn't have learned them.

2. Is there a significant difference between EFL students in relation to their gender?

Gender	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	t	p
Male	29	52,21	7,07	83	,140	,89
Female	56	52,00	6,12			

Table 4. Answers of the Students and their Genders

It is clear in table 4 that there is no significant difference between male and female students in answering the abbreviations, $t(83)=,140$, $p>,05$.

3. Is there a significant difference between EFL students in relation to their level?

Gender	N	\bar{X}	S	sd	t	p
Intermediate	45	53,27	7,10	83	1,85	,07
Advanced	40	50,73	5,33			

Table 5. Answers of the Students and their Levels

It can be seen in Table 5 that there is no significant difference between intermediate and advanced level students, $t(83)=1,85$, $p>,05$. It can be inferred that since the same abbreviations are mostly given in the textbooks and materials implicitly, both intermediate and advanced students know similar, if not the same, abbreviations.

Conclusion

Knowing a language proficiently is a challenging process as it requires micro skills as well as macro skills. Therefore, Turkish EFL students learning English should learn the structures, vocabulary, cultural norms, proper pronunciations, dialectical variations, and formal and informal uses of English language in order to be proficient enough.

The result of the study showed that Turkish EFL students could know the common English international abbreviations if they encounter in their textbooks and materials, yet if they do not encounter in the textbooks and materials, they couldn't know. There was no significant difference between intermediate and advanced students ($p>,05$) in relation to knowing international abbreviations. It is clear that students do not go beyond surface level of them even they study years. Therefore, in order for them to understand such abbreviations students

1. should be given abbreviations explicitly.
2. should realize the importance of them.
3. should be given textbooks and materials aiming to instruct such abbreviations.

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