“Readiness is more than a test score”

Efficacy: Student perceptions of English language tests as indicators of academic preparedness

Dr. Stephen Howlett & John Gardiner
The Centre for English Teaching

RESULTS
OCTOBER 2014
### What I know about the tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Media</th>
<th>IELTS</th>
<th>PTE Academic</th>
<th>TOEFL iBT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results available</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## What I know about the tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CAE</th>
<th>IELTS</th>
<th>PTE Academic</th>
<th>TOEFL iBT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
<td>paper based</td>
<td>paper based</td>
<td>online</td>
<td>online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speaking</strong></td>
<td>15m</td>
<td>11 – 14m</td>
<td>77 – 93m sp &amp; wr</td>
<td>20m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td>1h 15m</td>
<td>1h</td>
<td>32 – 41m</td>
<td>60 – 100m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing</strong></td>
<td>1h 30m</td>
<td>1h</td>
<td></td>
<td>50m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Listening</strong></td>
<td>1h “use of English”</td>
<td>30m + 10m</td>
<td>45 -57m</td>
<td>60 – 90m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Test time</strong></td>
<td>4h</td>
<td>2h 55m</td>
<td>3h 10m</td>
<td>3h 20m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Register</strong></td>
<td>2w</td>
<td>5d</td>
<td>48h</td>
<td>3 – 4mth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Results available</strong></td>
<td>2 – 4w (online option available)</td>
<td>10d</td>
<td>5d</td>
<td>10d</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The literature now questions gate-keeper language proficiency tests as determinants of preparedness for academic study. (Dunworth, 2010; O’Loughlin, 2011).

Student perceptions of the experience across two domains -‘washback’ (Messick 1996).

Better understand the relationship between testing and preparedness for postgraduate study and the development of graduate attributes.

This efficacy knowledge would assist us to give advice when consulting students about their learning trajectory and the best test fit for their intended purpose.
‘Raw quantitative overall band scores [mean] that little [can] be concluded about the stories behind each of the students, and ... whether there were differences in particular English language skills.’

(Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson 2012, p.7 on Birrell 2006)


• Description of the research

• ‘Take-homes’ for English Language Teachers

• Findings
Collegial discourse

- August 2012 USYD TESOL Colloquium: “Unexplored and contested territory.”
- September 2012 English Australia conference: “Fraught with danger!”
- November 2012 ALTAANZ conference: “How will you convince them?”
- March 2013 Test providers: “… never regarded as an indicator for determining preparedness for academic study.”
- October 2013 HREC approval
- November 2013 Volunteers recruited
- Jan – Feb 2014 Prep classes + 4 tests
- May 2014 First follow-up focus group
- August 2014 Second follow-up focus group
- October 2014 UECA PDFest: First release of results
What we did

- 25 international student volunteers.
  - 1 withdrew after 1 test; 24 undertook all 4 tests
  - 11 BRA, 11 CHN, 2 SAU; lower-intermediate - advanced
  - Equal proportions M/F; median age 23 y.o.; Business, Arts, Study Abroad, media, Architecture, Engineering & IT

- 4 English language tests over a 6 week period before starting UG degree studies.
  - 10-hour prep class before each test.

- Follow-up interviews S1, 2014
  - May – mid-way after first assignments
  - August – week 2, S2

- Analysis using thematic coding and logical cross-analysis of perceptions. related to both the student experience in CET and at university. (Moore and Morton, 2005)
1. IELTS
2. PTE
3. CAE
4. TOEFL iBT
“In the end, it’s just a test.”

- No ‘ranking’ of tests; no scores recorded in our data.
- Perceptions are … just that.
- And, they change over time!
- “Overall, helpful. Pushed me to improve English.”
- “Test preparation is real-time English language learning.”
- “Test taking is all about technique.”
- Integrated test items sometimes confusing.
- Education background with handwriting or keyboard skills skews writing test preferences, and possibly outcomes.
- “Sometimes it felt as if certain questions were there so that we couldn’t answer them.”
- “In the end, it’s just a test. And that’s helpful for uni.”
‘Take-homes’

- It’s our job to know about the tests we prescribe.
- In testing, we assume to know what we think is best, but what do your students think?
- Continue to do research, but listen to student voice as part of the research (SST > TTT).
- Ss familiarity with an upcoming test is important. There is an element of comfort with the known / familiar.
- Education background with handwriting or keyboard skills skews writing test preferences, and possibly outcomes.
- For the near future, Ss will prefer face-to-face speaking because it is more familiar to them; until Skype or Siri becomes the new norm!

Birrell, B. 2006, 'Implications of Low English Standards Among Overseas Students at Australian Universities', *People and Place*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 53-64.


Dunworth, K. 2010, 'Clothing the emperor: Addressing the issue of English language proficiency in Australian universities', *Australian Universities' Review*, vol. 55, no. 2, pp. 5-10.


Thank you for helping us today

Your feedback is always welcome

john.gardiner@sydney.edu.au
stephen.howlett@sydney.edu.au