Determining the Language Assessment Literacy of Admissions Decision-Makers in Higher Education

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PRESENTATION OVERVIEW

- Overview of the LAL project
- Our research questions and method
- Results of Phase 1
- Details of Phase 2 (completed) and Phase 3 (in progress)
- Questions (in English ou en français)
The LAL Project Team: Rika Tsushima, Shujiao Wang, Beverly Baker (PI), Mariusz Galczynski, Sarah DesRoches
Primary Objective:

To bridge the gap between language assessment specialists/researchers/developers and the people who make use of language test scores

More specifically, to cultivate greater collaboration with admissions decision-makers at higher education institutions
LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT LITERACY (LAL)

- Described by Taylor (2009) as “the level of knowledge, skills, and understanding of assessment principles and practice that is increasingly required by other test stakeholder groups... (e.g., among educational advisors or government officials, policy planners and decision makers, the media, and the general public)” (p. 24).

- Fulcher (2012): a definition of LAL that includes skills, knowledge and abilities but also an awareness of “the role and impact of testing on society, institutions and individuals” (p. 125).
O’Loughlin (IELTS; 2011, 2013): University stakeholders need to build their LAL

Ginther & Elder—TOEFL, IELTS, & PTE (2013): Admissions officers report concerns regarding their limited knowledge about the use and interpretation of these tests

Rea-Dickins, Kiely & Yu (IELTS; 2007): university admissions staff not always sufficiently knowledgeable about meaning of IELTS test scores

Hyatt & Brooks (2009) reported a lack of knowledge among admissions stakeholders
Research Questions:

1) What is the LAL needed for users of language test scores in admissions decision-making at postsecondary institutions in Canada?

2) What useful materials can be created to develop this LAL for these score users?
Steps in the LAL Project

**Phase 1**
- Survey of admissions officers—development, piloting, delivery, analysis
  (Spring 2012-Winter 2013)

**Phase 2**
- Workshop material creation; workshop delivery; collection of feedback on usefulness
  (Winter-Fall 2013)

**Phase 3 (in progress)**
- Analysis of workshop transcripts and feedback; resource materials creation
  (present)
PROJECT PHASE 1: SURVEY OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Method:

- Survey Adapted from O’Loughlin (see handout)
- Questions focused on knowledge, beliefs, and levels of confidence in making use of language test scores in decision-making
- Survey questions extensively reviewed/revised using a “systematic instrument appraisal list” (Fowler and Cosenza 2009)
- Survey administered online to initial contact list (53 institutions)
Results: Closed-Ended Questions

- N=19 (36% of initial contact list); from 8 provinces in all regions of Canada

- Representation from smaller primarily undergraduate institutions (>10,000 undergraduate students) and larger research-intensive universities (<20,000 undergraduate students).
Language Tests

- TOEFL: 19
- IELTS: 19
- CAEL: 17
- MELAB: 13
- Internal ESL Proficiency Test: 11
- CanTEST: 5
- PTE: 3
- CPE: 3
- CAE: 2
- Cambridge ESOL: 1
- SAT: 1
Survey respondents’ tasks in the admissions process

- **Decide cutoff scores or decide to waive score**: 3
- **Calculate information on applications (e.g., GPA, language test scores)**: 12
- **Record language test scores**: 14
- **Read and evaluate admission files**: 14
- **Compile admission information and set policy**: 15
- **Communicate with students about admission issues**: 16
Who should have a good understanding of admissions language tests?

- Personnel in ESL Program: 2
- Admissions Committee: 2
- University Academic Faculty: 3
- Recruitment Personnel: 5
- Admissions--Support Staff: 5
- Admissions and Faculty-Level Student Advisors: 5
- Admissions--Senior: 14
Theme 1: *The construct of measurement*

P19: “[Language tests] may not be the only factor on a student’s success but they do allow for a minimum benchmark to be established on the expectations of English preparedness.”

- Evidence of some misconceptions:

  P6: “[I would want to know] how many times a student had taken the same test.”
RESULTS—QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS

Theme 2: predictive validity

- P3: “Language tests are useful in determining whether the student will be able to participate fully in class discussions and class work.”

- P9: “The university’s language requirements have been a good indicator of a student's undergraduate success...”
RESULTS—QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS

Theme 3: The university’s role in continued student language development

P6: “We as university’s [sic] need to do a better job of assisting ESL students once on campus to ensure they have resources for success.”
RESULTS—QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS (CON’T)

Theme 4: Concerns/requests for more information

- How do all the different tests compare? Do they all measure the same thing?
- What is the relationship between test scores and success at university?
- How concerned should I be about test fraud?
Discussion

- Respondents demonstrate awareness of concepts related to validity in language assessment.

- Previous literature found LAL lacking in these stakeholders, but not whether these stakeholders see the value of LAL or are interested in developing it.

- Therefore, it is an important finding that these participants have a strong interest in developing their own LAL.
Future Work

Test Fraud:

P11: “I am becoming more and more skeptical of high scores and believe there is a lot of fraud….What measures are in place for fraud prevention?”

P12: “For all tests I have concerns about security so would be useful to know more about that.”
PHASE 2: WORKSHOPS

Materials designed to respond to common concerns and observed misconceptions, using research, test providers, and fellow admissions officers as sources. Key questions addressed:

1) How do all the different tests compare? Do they all measure the same thing?

2) What is the relationship between test scores and success at university?

3) How concerned should I be about test fraud?
Phase 3 (In Progress)

- Analysis of workshop transcripts to compare with themes emerging from the surveys
- Creation of informational materials to be distributed across the country
THANK YOU!

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### Question 1: How do the major tests compare?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>TOEFL</th>
<th>IELTS</th>
<th>CAEL</th>
<th>MELAB</th>
<th>CanTEST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **What it measures** | Ability to use and understand English at the university level, as well as skills to perform academic tasks | **Academic Module:** Formal language skills required for academic purposes  
**General Training:** Basic language survival skills | Ability to use English as it is used in Canadian universities and colleges | General assessment of English language proficiency | Ability to meet admission requirements of Canadian postsecondary institutions or fluency requirements of professional licensing associations |
| **Scoring** | 0-120 total score, 0-30 subsections | 1-9 band level | 10-90 band level | 33-99 total score | 1-5 band level |
| **Locations** | +165 countries ≈ 4500 test sites | +130 countries ≈ 800 test sites | 6 countries ≈ 35 test sites | +50 countries ≈ 300 test sites | Canada (major cities only) |
| **Duration** | 4.5 hours | 3 hours* | 2 hours | 3 hours | 3.5 hours |
| **Fees** | $250 | $300 | $185 | $300 | $150 ($250 w/Speaking) |
| **Score Reporting** | Mail, Online | Mail, Online | Mail | Mail | Mail |

*IELTS speaking test may be taken on same day or ± 7 days.
Question 2: What is the relationship between language test scores and success at university?
**Question 2: What is the relationship between language test scores and success at university?**

Participants provided with the following:

- Information from test providers about the construct of measurement;

- Research on predictive relationship between language test scores and university success or correlations with academic performance indicators (criterion-related validity studies)
QUESTION 3: SHOULD I BE CONCERNED ABOUT TEST FRAUD?

- Discussion of what fraudulent acts may include
- How test agencies prevent fraud
- Advice on actions when fraud is suspected
# Range of Cutoff Scores Accepted Across Canada

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Cutoff Scores (Undergrad)</th>
<th>Cutoff Scores (Grad)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IELTS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>low</td>
<td>high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOEFL iBT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
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<td>Listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAEL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELAB*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* Overall score does not include the optional speaking test
According to test providers: IELTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BAND SCORE</th>
<th>LINGUISTICALLY DEMANDING ACADEMIC COURSES</th>
<th>LINGUISTICALLY LESS DEMANDING ACADEMIC COURSES</th>
<th>LINGUISTICALLY DEMANDING TRAINING COURSES</th>
<th>LINGUISTICALLY LESS DEMANDING TRAINING COURSES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.0 - 7.5</td>
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<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>Probably acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>English study needed</td>
<td>Probably acceptable</td>
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<td>Probably acceptable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IELTS Guidance on Acceptable Language Proficiency Levels for Different Academic Courses (IELTS, 2012)
Who makes decisions on cutoff scores

- Admissions Cmte/Director/Registrar: 45%
- Senate upon recommendation of Registrar: 25%
- ESL program Director: 5%
- Academic Committee: 5%
- Provost: 5%
- Director of Student Services: 5%
- International Admissions: 10%