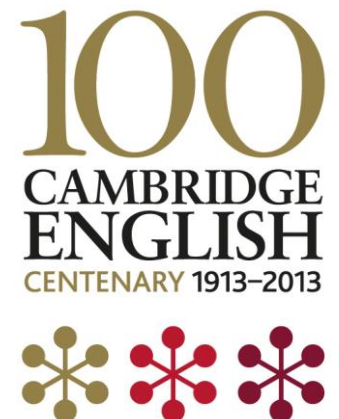




Assessing students with disabilities: Voices from the stakeholder community

Lynda Taylor and Hanan Khalifa





Acknowledgement

This presentation is based upon a chapter by
Taylor & Khalifa in:

Tsagari, D & Spanoudis, G (eds) (2013)
*“Assessing Second Language Students with
Learning and Other Disabilities”*



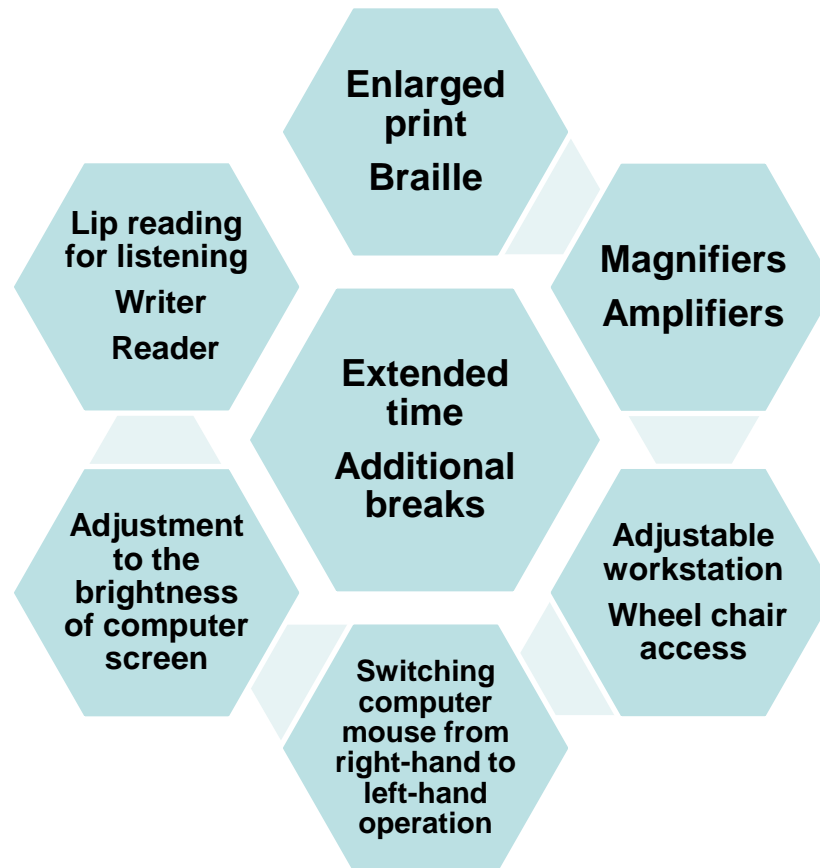
Context

Test accommodations (TA) typically involve:

- modifications to testing materials
- adjustments to test administration conditions



Some common provisions





Policy and practice

Decisions about the nature and extent of test accommodations tend to be

- based upon **expert judgment** of **test developers**
- informed by **insights** from the educational and health **professional bodies** working in a given disability area
- underpinned by a limited amount of **empirical research**



The role of research

Undertaking large-scale empirical research into accommodated tests can involve significant ethical, logistical and measurement challenges.

Smaller scale empirical studies can still generate insights for the development and validation of accommodated tests.



Investigating test impact

There is greater understanding today of the ways in which a test can impact upon a range of test stakeholders.

But there has been relatively little work in this area so far in relation to accommodated tests.



Our study

Purpose: to investigate stakeholders' perspectives on the accommodations offered by one test provider.

The **stakeholder groups** that were identified:

- **test developers** who prepare modified materials
- **exam centres** responsible for requesting a modified test and arranging for its administration
- **examiners** who conduct + rate the modified test
- **test takers** themselves



Methodology

A **documentary review** of current exam board policy and practice was **triangulated** with **survey and interview data** from stakeholder groups to:

- investigate the match between policy and practice
- identify any issues meriting attention and further development

Data collection period: 2012



TA requests from exam centres in 2012

Test Accommodation	%
Extra time	86.0%
Separate invigilation	62.5%
Use of word processor/copier/typewriter/assistive technology	46.3%
Special listening test	44.9%
A3 enlarged print papers	40.4%
Single candidate versions of the speaking test	37.5%
Use of amanuensis/reader	30.9%
A4 modified enlarged print papers	25.7%
Braille papers	26.5%
Supervised breaks as necessary	26.5%
Lip reading version of the listening test	24.3%
Braille and enlarged print versions of the speaking test	22.8%
Exemptions from listening/speaking test	19.9%
Electronic version of paper – PDF	2.2%
Other	6.6%



Data collection: (1) document review

- Test writer guidelines for producing test materials
- Administrative documentation for test centres
- Speaking Examiner training and support documentation
- Internal exam board annual reports/reviews
- Chapters on test-taker characteristics in *Studies on Language Testing* volumes 26, 29, 30 and 35 (Chap 2)
- Guidance notes for teachers
- Desk research of provisions offered by other test providers



Data collection: (2) surveys

Survey for Exam centres to elicit perspectives on:

- extent of the testing centre's applications for TA
- accessibility of information provided by the board on TA provision
- user-friendliness of the board's TA application process
- nature of TA support offered to the centre
- impact of the TA on the testing centre



Data collection: (2) surveys

Survey for Test takers inviting candidates to comment on:

- whether the TA had met their needs
- whether any improvements to the TA were needed
- whether they had felt at a disadvantage at any time



Data collection: (3) interviews

Interviews were arranged with those responsible for

- developing modified test materials for all skills
- delivering the face-to-face speaking tests and providing test scores (i.e. speaking examiners).

Interview protocols were developed to guide the semi-structured interviews and sent to participants beforehand.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Field notes were also taken.



Results

Perspectives of four stakeholder groups:

1. Test developers/writers
2. Exam centres
3. Speaking test examiners/raters
4. Test takers



1. Test developers' perspective

Policy and practice evolves over time:

test modification on a request by request basis → a systematic policy of pre-modifying tests for an “on-the-shelf” solution

Growing professional collaboration:

between test providers and relevant health professional bodies: sharing good practice in and accessing specialist expertise regarding a given area of disability



1. Test developers' perspective

Some specific challenges

Providing modified test materials where there is a potential combination of : high visual content, range of colours, candidates with limited braille skills.

In speaking tests, providing a stimulus in non-standard test which is equivalent to visual input for standard test

Managing candidates' expectations due to varying regulations from one country to another with regard to provisions made.



2. Exam centres' perspective

Some numbers to report

249 centres applied for TA in 2012 (all invited to take part)

Responses received from 144 centres based in 34 countries in Europe, Asia and the Americas

Roles of respondents varied from Centre Exams Manager (72%) to other staff members (28%) e.g. Exam Administrators, Exam Assistants, Exam Officers, Exam Coordinator.

All respondents had experience of dealing with TA management, with 78% of the respondents having more than two years of experience

TA requests in the 144 centres were made for all of the Cambridge English exams including *IELTS*.



Accessibility of information on TA provision (according to exam centres)

	Agree	Disagree	No experience
Information on how to apply is easily accessible	94%	5%	1%
The application procedure is explained clearly	89%	9%	2%
The Special Requirements Booklet is helpful and easy to read	89%	9%	2%
The application procedure is straightforward	87%	11%	2%
There is plenty of information on website	68%	23%	9%
Using in-house portal to find information and download forms is straightforward	73%	24%	3%
The application form is easy to complete	92%	6%	2%



Test provider's service to exam centres

88% agreed that the Special Requirements unit at Cambridge was efficient and helpful

89% thought the Helpdesk in Cambridge was helpful.

80% felt that test provider staff explained procedures clearly



Exam centres' own service to TA applicants

96%: felt that candidates sitting for exams at their centres found the arrangements helpful.

24%: reported encountering difficulties in making arrangements (e.g. organising extra rooms, extra invigilators, a reader)



“...when students need extra time and, therefore, separate invigilation, that means arranging for a special room just for them, an invigilator just for them, and setting up extra speakers just for them. All of this, beside bringing more hassle, is more expense. We completely agree with the special arrangement system but it does put extra strain on the centre...”



Exam centres – some specific challenges encountered

“A blind candidate who is not familiar with braille and requested specialized computer software for all the four skills.”

“A YLE Starters student with Down’s Syndrome. We thought it would be a problem because of the age (Starters is for 5-7 while the candidate was 17) and because we weren’t sure what Special Arrangements were needed”



Exam centres – some specific challenges encountered

“We had a case where the candidate has limited motor skills and it takes an extremely long time for the candidate to type the answers onto the computer. The 4 parts of the test on one day is extremely taxing and we accordingly requested that the candidate take the examination over 2 days. The candidate must lie down while working.”



3. Examiners/raters' perspective

Difficulty for speaking test examiners of building-up comprehensive and sustained expertise in this area:

- opportunities for examining test takers receiving accommodations are relatively infrequent
- types of disability encountered can be very varied



3. Examiners/raters' perspective

A conflicting sense of wanting to be “*kind and supportive*” but at the same time being “*fair*”, of “*getting warmth across and making candidates feel at ease*” while still conducting a reliable and valid assessment.

The “*intense concentration*” needed (on the part of the Assessor) to evaluate the linguistic production of a test taker with a speech impediment, i.e. “*disentangling lack of fluency due to a stammer from the rest of the test taker's skill in speaking English*”.



3. Examiners/raters' perspective

A sense of feeling less well prepared to examine test takers with specific learning difficulties, e.g. attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

The need to sometimes “*think on your feet*” in unexpected and demanding situations.

The potentially unhelpful (interfering?) presence of a relative/friend who is accompanying the test taker for support (requiring firm but sensitive handling by the test centre).



4. Test takers' perspective

In general, comments invited from test takers were positive with few requests for improvement.

The following quotes are representative of the views expressed.

“I am really glad to have done the exam with the special arrangements provided. I have Writer’s Cramp, a disease which affects my handwriting and causes involuntary spasms affecting certain muscles of my hand and fingers. As I am no longer able to write, I need to use the computer as a means of written communication”.



4. Test takers' perspective

*“I felt well because I could sit for the exam **just like my classmates.**”*

*“I’m afraid the listening paper arrangements were **not much of help, as I had someone sitting very close to me. I did not feel comfortable.** I would suggest you provide the recording with **longer pauses** or the **possibility of listening three times.**”*



Conclusions and recommendations

Increase the extent and nature of information provided to stakeholders:

- provide more online exemplar materials
- awareness-raising of inconsistencies in national and international disability legislation
- provision of clearer instructions on how to deal with the mismatch between UK practices and elsewhere

e.g. under Dutch Law medical practitioners are not permitted to provide medical statements; in Italy all dyslexic students are exempted from taking writing examinations



Conclusions and recommendations

Offering more comprehensive training

- providing a range of exemplar recordings showing test takers receiving different test accommodations accompanied by in-depth guidance for examiners, readers
- adequate briefing in advance and appropriate support on the day
- addressing the challenge of achieving a consistent and professional approach in face to face speaking assessment



Conclusions and recommendations

The need for further research

- in the area of assistive technology
 - “Skill levels in using Braille can vary among blind candidates, with younger learners not necessarily learning Braille nowadays but instead using a computer and screen reading program for their reading and writing”.
- matters of equipment compatibility and technical support
- observational studies of test takers completing a modified task
- exploring other stakeholder perspectives, e.g. score users, professional disability agencies



The personal story



[Photo taken from the website of the
Down's Syndrome Association, UK]

“A YLE Starters student with Down’s syndrome. We thought it would be a problem because of the age (Starters is for 5-7 while the candidate was 17) and because we weren’t sure what Special Arrangements were needed. In the end, it was a very positive experience - for us, for the school she came from, and for the candidate.”



Thank you for your attention.

Questions/comments?