Studies in Language Testing *19*

IELTS Collected Papers

Research in speaking and writing assessment

Edited by
Lynda Taylor
and Peter Falvey

Series Editors
Michael Milanovic
and Cyril Weir

UNIVERSITY *of* **CAMBRIDGE**
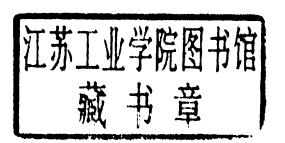ESOL Examinations

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Abbreviations

ACTFL	American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages
AIE	Arguments, Ideas and Evidence
ALTE	Association of Language Testers in Europe
BC	British Council
BC/IDPA	British Council/International Development Programme Australia
BEC	Business English Certificates
BSS	Business Studies and Social Sciences
CAE	Certificate in Advanced English
CASE	Cambridge Assessment of Spoken English
CB	computer-based
CC	Coherence and Cohesion
CLC	Cambridge Learner Corpus
CPE	Certificate of Proficiency in English
CQ	Communicative Quality
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ELT	English Language Teaching
ELTS	English Language Testing Service
ELTSVal	ELTS Validation Project
EPTB	English Proficiency Test Battery
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESOLComms	English for Speakers of Other Languages Communications (computerised test administration system)
ESP/LSP	English or Language for Specific Purposes
FCE	First Certificate in English
IDP	International Development Program
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ILTA	International Language Testing Association
IRT	item response theory
LMS	Life and Medical Sciences
MFRA	multifaceted Rasch analysis
NS	native speaker

OET	Occupational English Test
OMR	Optical Mark Reader
OPI	Oral Proficiency Interview
PET	Preliminary English Test
PSN	Professional Support Network
PST	Physical Sciences and Technology
QPP	Question Paper Production
SEM	standard error of measurement
TE	trainee examiner
TF	Task Fulfilment
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UCLES	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate
VSS	Vocabulary and Sentence Structure

Contributors

Caroline Coffin is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Language and Communication at The Open University (UK). Previously she worked as a lecturer at the University of Technology, Sydney and the University of New South Wales, Australia. Her area of expertise is functional linguistics with much of her research focusing on disciplinary knowledge construction. Recent publications include *Historical Discourse: the language of time, cause and evaluation,* (Continuum, 2006), *Applying English Grammar: functional and corpus approaches* (edited with Ann Hewings and Kieran O'Halloran, Hodder-Arnold, 2004) and, of relevance to this book, 'Arguing about how the world is or how the world should be: the role of argument in IELTS Tests' (*Journal of English for Academic Purposes,* Vol 3, no. 3).

Peter Falvey, who has an MA and PhD in Applied Linguistics, is currently a Consultant with Cambridge ESOL and teaches on the MA ELT programme at the University of Nottingham. Before returning to the UK in 2001, he taught for 13 years in the Faculty of Education at the University of Hong Kong where he was a Head of Department. Before that he was a specialist British Council Officer in ELT and ELT teacher education for 14 years, working in Kuwait, Iraq, Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia. He has published six books on Testing in ELT and Literature Methodology, numerous articles and has supervised over 10 PhD students, two of whom gained international awards for their theses. He was a co-principal investigator for the Hong Kong government from 1996–2000 in the ground-breaking language benchmark initiative setting standards of English proficiency for teachers of English in Hong Kong.

Clare Furneaux teaches in the School of Languages and European Studies (formerly Centre for Applied Language Studies), the University of Reading, England. Her background is in English for academic purposes and teacher education. She teaches on the campus-based MA in English Language Teaching and is academic director of the Distance Study programme. Her current research interests are distance learning and the teaching of writing.

Ann Hewings is a senior lecturer in the Centre for Language and Communication at The Open University (UK). She previously taught English in Europe, Asia, and Australia from primary to tertiary levels. She

worked for a number of years on the COBUILD project, researching and contributing to dictionaries and other English language reference material. Her current research focus is academic writing in disciplinary contexts, particularly at tertiary level and in electronic environments. Publications include 'IELTS as preparation for tertiary writing: distinctive interpersonal and textual strategies', with Caroline Coffin, in *Analysing Academic Writing* (eds Louise Ravelli and Rod Ellis, Continuum, 2004).

Professor Chris Kennedy has worked as teacher, trainer, adviser, and researcher in Africa, the Middle East, South-East Asia, and South America. His research and publications focus on Language Policy, Curriculum Innovation, and English as a Global Language, with interests also in Primary ELT, Professional Communication and Applied Corpus Linguistics. He is a Past President of IATEFL, and is Chair of the British Council's English Teaching Advisory Committee. He is Director of the Centre for English Language Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK, which runs in-house and distance Masters and PhD programmes in ELT, Applied Linguistics, and Translation Studies.

Barbara Mayor is a lecturer in the Centre for Language and Communication at The Open University (UK). She previously taught English at secondary and adult level in Europe and the Middle East. Her research interests include bilingualism and bilingual education, and the use of English as a global language of education. Recent publications include 'The English language and "global" teaching', with Joan Swann, in *Distributed Learning: Social and Cultural Approaches to Practice* (eds Mary Lea and Kathy Nicoll, Routledge Falmer, 2002) and 'Dialogic and Hortatory features in the writing of Chinese candidates for the IELTS test' *(Language, Culture and Curriculum, Vol 19, no 1)*.

Sarah North is a lecturer in the Centre for Language and Communication at The Open University (UK). After teaching EAP for several years in Indonesia, Singapore, Tanzania and China, she then moved into teacher education, working with teachers and teacher trainees from a range of countries, including India, Malaysia and Mexico. Her main research interests are English for academic purposes, language and literacy, and computer-mediated communication. She has published in *ELT Journal, Applied Linguistics* and *Studies in Higher Education*, and has recently written with Theresa Lillis a chapter on academic writing in *Doing Postgraduate Research* (ed Stephen Potter, Sage, 2006, 2nd edn).

Kieran O'Loughlin is currently Senior Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Melbourne. He was employed in the same position at the time both research projects reported in this volume were completed. He has worked in the fields of applied linguistics and TESOL for many years as a teacher,

teacher educator, manager and academic. In recent years he has continued to undertake research projects under the IELTS joint-funded research program including studies on test-taker score gains after intensive English language instruction and higher education degree programs as well as the use of the test for university selection in Australia.

Mark Rignall taught on the EAP programme at the University of Reading's Centre for Applied Language Studies through the 1990s and published EAP course material with Clare Furneaux. He has been a Senior Examiner for IELTS and, with colleagues at Reading, has carried out a number of small-scale research studies of rater behaviour and the effects of rater training.

Joan Swann is a senior lecturer and currently Director of the Centre for Language and Communication at The Open University (UK). Her teaching focuses on the design of multi-media materials in English language studies for international as well as UK audiences. Her main academic area is sociolinguistics, and her research includes the study of language and gender, language and educational policy and practice, and political and cultural issues in academic writing in English. Recent books include *The Art of English: Everyday Creativity* (co-edited with Janet Maybin, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); *A Dictionary of Sociolinguistics* (co-authored with Ana Deumert, Rajend Mesthrie and Theresa Lillis, Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

Lynda Taylor is Assistant Director of the Research and Validation Group at the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (part of Cambridge Assessment – a non-teaching department of the University). She assists in co-ordinating the research and validation programme to support Cambridge ESOL's wide range of language tests and teaching awards. She has extensive experience of the theoretical and practical issues involved in second language testing and assessment. She regularly writes and presents on the work of the Group and has been involved in providing expert assistance for a number of major test design and development projects in the UK and overseas.

Dilys Thorp has many years' experience of TESOL in China, Japan, Hong Kong and Britain. After thirteen years as Senior Lecturer in ELT at Thames Valley University, Ealing, London, she has worked freelance as a lecturer and researcher for a number of different universities. At the time of writing this paper she was working as a researcher with Chris Kennedy at Birmingham, whilst also teaching on the MEd TESOL at Bristol. Recently she has completed a research project for the Peninsula Medical School, Exeter, investigating the linguistic nature of reflective writing in a corpus of medical undergraduates' scripts.

Series Editors' note

This volume, the nineteenth in the *Studies in Language Testing* series, is dedicated to the memory of Dr Peter Hargreaves. Peter was appointed Chief Executive of Cambridge ESOL (known at that time as the UCLES EFL Division) in 1988; he saw its ESOL and Teacher Education Examinations and their validation and administrative services develop and grow during the 14 years he was in charge until his untimely death in January 2003. Among his many contributions to Cambridge ESOL, he encouraged the introduction of this series of language testing volumes in the early 1990s. Peter was involved with the development of IELTS from its very early stages while working with the British Council as a senior evaluation consultant and he continued this involvement for his whole time with Cambridge ESOL contributing greatly to the success of IELTS.

IELTS has developed over the years in line with theoretical and technical developments in assessment. Lynda Taylor's general introduction to this volume is a very useful guide for those who wish to learn about the beginnings of IELTS, its subsequent development and its recent changes, particularly in the Speaking and Writing components of the examination.

Since 1995, the IELTS partnership has provided funding for research into various aspects of IELTS, in particular its Speaking and Writing components. IDP Education Australia Limited (IDP) has to date published several volumes of the IDP-commissioned reports. This volume in the *Studies in Language Testing* series includes a selection of British Council as well as IDP-commissioned work. As the process of publishing hard copy takes time, often resulting in delays, it is our intention, in future, to publish more of the commissioned research studies in a web-based format. This will put recent and relevant research into the public domain more quickly, and so allow access to studies much earlier than hitherto.

The 10 studies published here provide insights into issues that were in the thoughts of those involved in the development and revision of IELTS in the late 1990s and the first half of this decade. An important rationale for this volume is to illustrate how applied research into specific issues contributed to the evolution of IELTS over this period. As such, the reader's attention will be drawn to Lynda Taylor's two chapters (5 and 12), which discuss the impact that these particular studies had on IELTS revisions. Issues investigated in Part 1 are: *interviewer style and candidate performance in the IELTS oral interview* (Brown and Hill); *the role of gender in the IELTS oral interview*

(O'Loughlin); *the rating process in the IELTS oral interview* (Brown); *examiner attitudes and behaviour in the IELTS oral interview* (Merrylees and McDowell).

The effects of interviewer style on candidate performance has been the focus of many studies in recent years. Likewise, the role of gender in assessment has become well-established over the past 10 years as an issue for discussion in assessment circles ever since attention began to focus on ethical matters. The rating process is a regular topic in direct tests of language production and surveys of examiner attitudes are always of value. What is of particular interest in this volume is that all the studies were commissioned specifically for IELTS performance tests.

Part 2 contains the six chapters focusing on various issues in writing assessment: *authenticity in Task 2 of the IELTS Academic Module Writing test* (Moore and Morton); *linguistic analysis of Chinese and Greek L1 scripts for IELTS Academic Writing Task 2* (Mayor et al); *corpus-based investigation of linguistic responses to an IELTS Academic Writing task* (Kennedy and Thorp); *task design in Academic Writing prompts* (O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth); *standardisation-training on rater-judgements for the IELTS Writing Module* (Furneaux and Rignall); *bias analysis feedback to raters for the IELTS Writing Module* (O'Sullivan and Rignall).

Once again, it is clear that the issues of authenticity, linguistic analyses of writing performance, the training of raters of writing, task design in writing prompts and feedback to raters of the IELTS Writing Module are all important topics. As Lynda Taylor shows in her chapter on the impact of these studies on the revisions to the Writing component of IELTS, all of these studies had either a direct influence on the revision process itself or provided evidence on which to base informed decisions.

A further component has been added at the end of each chapter which provides a commentary on the research methodology employed in each of the 10 research studies. These commentary sections are specifically designed to assist new/young researchers who are interested in research on assessment and assessment instruments. They were trialled with new researchers at the 2005 ALTE Conference in Berlin and were found to be helpful in stimulating questions about topics such as the formulation of research questions, the design of questionnaire-based surveys and the selection of appropriate research methodologies.

The general introduction to the volume along with Lynda Taylor's chapters on the impact of these studies on the work of IELTS and Peter Falvey's comments on the research methodology used in each study will be, we hope, a valuable contribution to the assessment community, not only for those who are already assessment professionals but particularly for new and recently-joining members of the community.

Michael Milanovic
Cyril Weir

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Introduction

The IELTS Joint-funded Research Program

To support the ongoing development of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the IELTS partners co-ordinate a comprehensive research and validation programme. A major component of this programme is the funded research sponsored jointly by IDP: IELTS Australia and the British Council, with active support from Cambridge ESOL.

The origins of this research programme date back to 1995 when the IELTS Australia Board first set aside grant funding and invited external researchers to submit IELTS-related proposals. The Board believed that such research would complement internal research and validation activities being conducted by the IELTS partnership and would provide valuable additional information on a range of issues relating to the quality and standing of IELTS; it could also help IELTS stakeholders (including English language professionals and teachers) to develop a greater knowledge and understanding of the test.

The first round of funded studies was conducted in 1995 and a selection of these were edited and published jointly by ELICOS and IELTS Australia as *IELTS Research Reports 1998*, Volume 1. IDP later went on to publish four more edited volumes of selected reports from the period 1996–2001 and further edited volumes are in production at the time of writing.

In 1998 the British Council joined IELTS Australia in setting aside annual funds for research grants and since that time the programme has been jointly funded by these two IELTS partners. Cambridge ESOL, the third IELTS partner, supports the programme by providing data, materials, advice and many other types of assistance to approved researchers.

The annual call for research proposals is widely publicised and aims to reflect current concerns and issues relating to IELTS as a major international English language proficiency test with high-stakes value. A Joint Research Committee, comprising representatives of the three IELTS partners, agrees on research priorities and oversees the tendering process. Research proposals are reviewed and evaluated according to the following criteria:

- relevance and benefit of outcomes to IELTS
- clarity and coherence of the proposal's rationale, objectives and methodology

- feasibility of outcomes, timelines and budget (including ability to keep to deadlines)
- qualifications and experience of proposed project staff
- potential of the project to be reported in a form which would be both useful to IELTS and of interest to an international audience.

In determining the quality of the proposals and the research to be carried out, the Committee routinely consults with a panel of external reviewers. The Committee also oversees the publication and/or presentation of research findings.

Over the past decade the outcomes of the funded research programme have made a significant contribution to the monitoring, evaluation and ongoing development of IELTS, especially in the following areas:

- the assessment of speaking in IELTS: issues of task design, candidate discourse, assessment criteria, test bias, examiner/rater behaviour, examiner/rater training and monitoring
- the assessment of writing in IELTS: issues of task design, construct validity, features of writing performance, rater training and monitoring, approaches to assessment
- the impact of IELTS in education and society: stakeholder attitudes, use of test scores, score gains, impact on courses and preparation materials, with key user groups
- computer-based IELTS: approaches to rating and issues of candidate processing.

In addition, one of the most valuable outcomes of reports from joint-funded projects is the surveys of recent literature they provide; these help the IELTS test developers stay up to date with theoretical and empirical work in a wide range of fields (including some that are only indirectly linked to language testing) allowing them to take account of these in their work.

Since 1995, nearly 70 research studies and more than 120 individual researchers have received grants under the joint-funded programme. Ten years on, the Joint-funded Research Program has become a key component within the larger research and validation agenda in support of IELTS and reflects the IELTS partners' commitment to continuing improvement of the test.

The background to this volume

For some years the IELTS partners have been working towards publishing a selection of the project reports from the Joint-funded Research Program as a single volume, based around a common theme. In this way it is hoped they will become available to a wider audience and illustrate the value of this work within the larger research and validation agenda which underpins IELTS.

Many of the funded research studies conducted during the past 10 years have focused on the IELTS Speaking and Writing Modules, both of which have received considerable attention in recent years from the test developers. Findings from the funded studies complemented internal validation and research studies conducted or commissioned by the IELTS partnership, especially those undertaken by Cambridge ESOL. Such studies directly informed major revision projects for the productive components of IELTS: the IELTS Speaking Revision Project took place between 1998 and 2001, and the IELTS Writing Revision Project was carried out between 2001 and 2005.

Ten reports have therefore been selected and edited for inclusion in this volume, all focusing on the IELTS Speaking and Writing Modules. A number of the studies – those which received funding from IDP: IELTS Australia – have already appeared in one of the five volumes of *IELTS Research Reports*, or in some cases been the basis of a refereed journal article. Others have been presented at conferences but have not appeared to date in published form. All 10 studies have impacted directly on recent changes to the IELTS Speaking and Writing components so will be of interest to test stakeholders and those involved with IELTS. However, they are also likely to be of interest to anyone concerned more generally with the assessment of written and oral proficiency. (At some point in the future, it is hoped that a partner volume can be published focusing on funded studies of the IELTS Reading and Listening Modules.)

The four studies reported in Part 1 (Chapters 1–4) focus on the IELTS Speaking test or 'oral interview' as it was operationalised during the period 1989–2001 and were conducted between 1995 and 1998. Findings from these studies provided valuable insights into the language and behaviour of both candidates and examiners in the IELTS Speaking test as it was at that time, as well as useful evidence relating to the validity, reliability, practicality and impact of the Speaking test; at the same time, they highlighted specific aspects of the test needing review and possible revision. In combination with outcomes from other commissioned studies and internal validation investigations, they directly informed the IELTS Speaking Revision Project (1998–2001) and had a significant impact on the revised design and implementation of the IELTS Speaking Module which became operational in July 2001.

The six studies reported in Part 2 (Chapters 6–11) focus on the IELTS Writing test as it was operationalised during the period 1995–2004 and were conducted between 1996 and 2001. Findings from these studies offered valuable insights into the nature of candidate performance and rater behaviour; they provided useful validation evidence in support of the test and at the same time pointed to areas of concern. As with the speaking-related studies, they were able to feed directly into the IELTS Writing Revision

Project (2001–2005) and inform changes made to the assessment criteria and rating scales for the Writing Module which became operational from January 2005.

The publication of this volume is seen by the IELTS partners as a positive contribution to the field of language testing and assessment. First of all, it allows more of the IELTS-related research which has been completed over the past decade to be shared with a wider audience, not just among IELTS stakeholders but within the broader language testing and assessment community. In addition to the ten reports, the volume includes a review and appraisal (immediately following each report) of the different methodologies used by the researchers across the studies. This should make it a useful resource for anyone involved in language testing research, especially novice researchers and others who are relatively new to the field. As explained earlier in this introduction, the rationale for the IELTS Joint-funded Research Program is to promote and support research activity among test stakeholders which contributes to the ongoing validation and development of the International English Language Testing System. For this reason two additional sections (Chapters 5 and 12) have been included – at the ends of Parts 1 and 2 – explaining how the findings of the studies reported in this volume impacted directly on subsequent changes to the Speaking and Writing Modules; these sections also explain why some recommendations made in the studies were not implemented. Finally, publication of this volume is an appropriate way of celebrating 10 years of the Joint-funded Program and acknowledging its overall contribution to the quality and standing of IELTS.

The development of writing and speaking assessment in IELTS

The direct assessment of L2 writing and oral proficiency in IELTS is a long-established feature of the test; its origins can be traced back at least 30 years to the development and introduction of ELTS (English Language Testing Service) – the test which preceded IELTS. To contextualise the more recent developments in the IELTS assessment of speaking and writing proficiency it may be helpful to review here how L2 writing and speaking ability were tested in the past in IELTS and its predecessors. The remainder of this introductory chapter summarises the history of the Writing and Speaking components to provide a brief chronological overview of the steady evolution of the test. For a more detailed and comprehensive account of the development of ELTS/IELTS and its role within the broader context of English language proficiency assessment for academic purposes over the past half century, the reader is recommended to consult a partner volume in the Studies in Language Testing series – Volume 23 (Davies, forthcoming).