

剑桥语言测试研究丛书

Assessing Academic English

Testing English Proficiency
1950-1989 — the IELTS
Solution

学术英语评估：

雅思英语能力测试方案（1950—1989）

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出版说明

语言测试作为语言教学的重要组成部分，一直是社会关注的焦点。近年来，我国学术界对语言测试研究的关注也在逐渐升温。国际上，学者们对语言测试的研究已经达到较高的水平，无论是从理论框架的形成到复杂数学模型的建构及其应用方面都取得了实质性的进展，而且在对有国际影响力的外语考试（如雅思、托福等）的信度、效度的研究方面也取得了不俗的成果，出版了不少优秀的著作。

英国剑桥大学出版社出版的“*Studies in Language Testing*”是其中较有影响力的系列之一。丛书由剑桥语言测评中心策划推出，从测试领域的各个研究视角入手，展示了该领域研究的设计、数据收集和数据分析等环节的基础理论与实践操作，反映了测试领域的最新研究动态。

外教社从中精选9种，引进出版。这些图书中，有对语言测试听说读写等方面的效度和质性研究，也有对测试反拨效应及其对教学影响的研究，还有对雅思考试和欧洲语言共同参考框架的分析思考。希望丛书的出版可以为我国语言测试研究领域的发展和创新提供具有借鉴意义的启示，打开更广阔的研究思路。

Assessing Academic English

Testing English proficiency 1950–1989—
the IELTS solution

Alan Davies

For George Perren

Acknowledgements

Describing what happened in history seems an easier task than explaining why it happened. But even the 'what' is by no means clear. This account of academic language proficiency testing in the UK over the last half century or so is very much a personal account, the 'what' just as much as the 'why'. For much of that time I have been involved and when not involved I have been interested. In addition to my own recollection and no doubt prejudice I have been fortunate to have had help from a number of colleagues, most of whom are mentioned in Chapter 5. Here I would like to express my special thanks to Nick Charge, Mike Milanovic, Nick Saville and Lynda Taylor for their encouragement and professional support. I am particularly grateful to Lynda Taylor for her patience in shepherding me through successive drafts of the text and for taking responsibility for the section in Chapter 5 recording the development of IELTS.

Alan Davies
March 2007

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Series Editors' note

Alan Davies is ideally placed to trace the development of the assessment of academic English language proficiency from the 1950s to the 1990s having been deeply and personally involved for the entire period. This volume is a fascinating historical and personal account of an interesting and significant period in the development of language testing and assessment. The author takes us on a journey from the pre-scientific 50s through the psychometric-structuralist 60s and 70s and on into the communicative 80s and 90s, describing with great clarity the rationale for a number of developments and surveying the wide variety of people and organisations involved.

The journey begins in the earliest days of formal academic English assessment with the gradual emergence in the 1960s of important testing initiatives within British university contexts, initiatives such as the English Language Battery (ELBA) and the English Proficiency Test Battery (EPTB) – often referred to as the ‘Davies test’. These endeavours, together with other developments such as the creation of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in the USA, paved the way for more complex and ambitious attempts to devise appropriate tools for measuring the English language proficiency needed in academic contexts in the decades that followed.

Not surprisingly, great attention is paid by Davies to the development of the English Language Testing Service (ELTS) and the subsequent development of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which have changed the face of academic English language assessment over the past 25 years. Brendan Carroll’s work for the British Council in developing ELTS in the 1970s represented a real departure from the structurally focused approach of previous decades. Drawing on the work of Munby and others, Carroll approached test development in a very practically oriented and needs-based way. Carroll and his collaborators took on the challenge of defining the communicative demands faced by foreign students coming to study in the UK and then set about developing instruments designed to measure whether individuals possessed adequate language skills to deal with these demands. ELTS was a modular, subject-specific and diagnostic measure unlike anything that had gone before. Additionally, the team set out to define the nature and duration of the language courses that would be required to bring test takers up to the required standard. Such a definition is still sought today though we now recognise how difficult it is to determine given the complex inter-relationship of the many factors involved.

Davies himself was heavily involved with Clive Criper in the validation of ELTS and was thus able to observe first hand not only the spectacular success of ELTS in relation to its innovative design but also the enormous problems and issues that this very success created. It was during this period that Cambridge Assessment (formerly known as the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate – UCLES) began to take on a role in the production of ELTS, a role which gradually grew through the 1980s to become very significant in the 1990s.

The ELTS Validation Study confirmed that the test battery was in need of further development. While high in face validity, it posed enormous practical, measurement and theoretical difficulties. The University of Lancaster was commissioned to undertake this redevelopment and the project was led by Charles Alderson and Caroline Clapham. Initially simply a redevelopment of ELTS, the project became IELTS when the International Development Program (IDP) of Australian Universities and Colleges joined the British Council and Cambridge Assessment to form the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). IELTS thus took on a truly international nature and became more than just a test to access UK tertiary education. With the involvement of the Australians it came to provide access to tertiary education in Australia and New Zealand and then, through its General Training Modules for the most part, became increasingly used in migration in these and other regions of the world.

The creation of the first version of IELTS in 1989 retained many of the innovative characteristics of ELTS but made the entire system more practical and manageable. The six Academic Modules became three and the separate study skills section disappeared. The measurement characteristics were focused on and improved, and greater attention was paid to the construct validity of the test.

IELTS survived in that form for five years but it soon became clear that the practical difficulties of successfully equating modules relating to different academic areas, while reduced, remained extremely problematic. The Lancaster team was aware of these difficulties as demonstrated by Caroline Clapham's PhD work (published in 1996 as Volume 4 in the Studies in Language Testing series – *The Development of IELTS: A study of the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension*), but the team was not in a position to influence the users to the point where they would readily accept a single academic stream. This point only came when Cambridge Assessment was able to demonstrate the difficulties of test production to the IELTS partners and propose a viable alternative to the three Academic Module system based on evidence collected over time. 1995 therefore saw the second main variant of IELTS where candidates could either take an academic stream or one related to general training and migration. Davies does not go into the development of further variants of IELTS in any detail, given that these are

covered either by available documentation or by further volumes in this series. Volume 19 (*IELTS Collected Papers: Research in speaking and writing assessment*, edited by Lynda Taylor and Peter Falvey, 2007), for example, traces developments in the assessment of speaking and writing in IELTS; Roger Hawkey in Volume 24 (*Impact Theory and Practice: Studies of the IELTS test and Progetto Lingue 2000*, 2006) examines the impact of IELTS, as does Anthony Green in Volume 25 (*IELTS Washback in Context: Preparation for academic writing in higher education*, 2007).

As Davies points out, the international partnership which underpins IELTS is one of the factors which has contributed to the test's enduring success, and it is important here to acknowledge the substantial contribution made by the two organisations in partnership with Cambridge ESOL. The British Council was of course there at the outset and has always played a key role in the learning, teaching and assessment of international students who come to study in the UK. Without the foresight and commitment of the British Council over several decades there would have been no development of EPTB in the 1960s and ELTS in the 1970s. The collaborative relationship centred on ELTS that emerged in 1975 between the British Council and Cambridge Assessment (then UCLES) was significantly enhanced from 1987 onwards with the involvement of IDP. Partnership with IDP enabled the creation of IELTS and undoubtedly brought a new dynamism and an expanded perspective, establishing the international status of the test and ensuring its global reach in the future. Today these two partners both manage their respective test centre networks across the world and are the 'face' of IELTS for many test users; together with Cambridge ESOL, they share fully in the operational management and strategic direction of IELTS.

As Davies' account makes clear, research – both internally initiated and externally commissioned – has always been at the heart of the ELTS/IELTS story, and much of the research and validation work undertaken to develop ELTS, and later IELTS, is summarised or referred to here. Large-scale proficiency tests invariably attract considerable interest from the language testing and assessment research community, and since 1995 this has been acknowledged by the IELTS partners through the annual grant funding opportunities offered by the IELTS Joint-funded Research Program. Outcomes from such studies not only provide important test validation evidence and inform ongoing development of the test, but they also contribute to our wider knowledge and understanding in the fields of applied linguistics and language assessment. Interested readers are referred to recently published collections of research studies in Volume 19 of *Studies in Language Testing* (eds Taylor and Falvey, 2007), and *IELTS Research Reports – Volumes 6 and 7*, 2006 and 2007.

Alan Davies' authoritative account of the development of academic English language assessment over half a century is greatly enhanced by the

wealth of appendices which have been brought together in this volume. These include facsimile copies of the original test versions for ELTS 1980 and IELTS 1989, as well as other documentation which casts light on the actual processes of test design, development and delivery; additional appendices show materials relating to other important tests from the period under examination, such as ELBA, EPTB and TEEP.

In conclusion, this volume helps us to understand why IELTS has become so very successful over its 17-year history. It represents a coming together of significant work in language testing over a great many years, drawing together the different traditions and approaches in such a way as to provide a reliable, valid and highly fit-for-purpose testing system.

Michael Milanovic and Cyril Weir
Cambridge – August 2007

Abbreviations

AEB	Associated Examining Board
ALTE	Association of Language Testers in Europe
ARELS	Association of Recognised English Language Schools
ASS	Arts and Social Science
AULC	American University Language Center
BC	The British Council
BEC	Business English Certificates
CB	Computer-based
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COE	Commonwealth Office of Education
CPE	Certificate of Proficiency in English
DAFE	Development, Administration, Finance and Economics
E2L	English as a Second Language
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EEFS	English Examination for Foreign Students
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELBA	English Language Battery
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ELT	English Language Teaching
ELTS	English Language Testing Service
EPTB	English Proficiency Test Battery
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
ETIC	English Teaching Information Centre
ETS	Educational Testing Service
IALS	Institute for Applied Language Studies
IDP	International Development Program
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ILTA	International Language Testing Association
JMB	Joint Matriculation Board
LMS	Life and Medical Sciences
LSP	Language for Specific Purposes
MCQ	Multiple Choice Question

Abbreviations

PST	Physical Sciences and Technology
QPP	Question Paper Production
TEC	Technical English Certificate
TEEP	Test of English for Educational Purposes
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication
TSE	Test of Spoken English
TWE	Test of Written English
UCH	Unitary Competence Hypothesis
UCLES	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate
VRIP	Validity, Reliability, Impact, Practicality

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1

The 1950s and 1960s: the English Proficiency Test Battery

Introduction

In this volume I discuss attempts in the UK since about 1950 to represent proficiency in academic English by means of language test instruments. By proficiency in academic English I mean the ability to operate successfully in the English used in the academic domain. Such uses of English vary along several dimensions: the receptive–productive, the spoken–written, the general–specific, to name the most obvious. How far these variations in the use of academic English impact on proficiency is a matter of debate, as we shall see. Representing that proficiency in a language test requires a decision on the language content of the test, its language sample. As we explain in this volume, there are differing views on how to make that decision. In academic language proficiency testing, where the domain consists of large areas of the language, it is just not possible to test everything. And so the test constructor must sample the domain and face up to the question of how to make rational choices.

Alongside the increase in the numbers of second language English speakers over the years requiring to be tested for their academic proficiency, there are two related stories to tell. One is the debate about content and method of testing. The other concerns the growing attention to means of test administration, delivery and analysis. The first story reflects very closely the changing views about the nature of language and of language learning over this period: the emphasis has shifted to and fro between language form and language use. Thus, in the period before large-scale tests began, the focus (in the so-called traditional stage) was on language use (translation, essays, literature, summarising); then, in the so-called structural period, attention shifted to language form (grammar, phonemic discrimination, vocabulary). This was followed by the various communicative approaches, moving from the extreme of specific language domain use to the present compromise which still privileges language use but as a general approach to academic study. At all stages, some kind of balance has been maintained, such that in the traditional period there was some attention to, for example, vocabulary; in

the structural period, to reading comprehension, and in the period of communicative tests some attention was usually paid to grammar. The second story reminds us that large-scale language testing is both a practical and an applied enterprise in which delivery and administration are as important as any more theoretical concerns.

This volume argues that language testing has matured over the period under discussion, moving from a dependence on fashions dictated by linguistics, applied linguistics and language teaching studies to an independent confidence in itself, as we see to some extent in tests such as the current International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The argument is therefore as much one about the development of a discipline as of the history of a particular test. What this means, in our view, is that when, as must happen, changes are made to IELTS, these will come about more as a result of development within language testing, less as a direct reflection of external influences.

The need for proficiency tests

Between the early 1950s and the early 1960s the number of overseas ('international') students from non-English-speaking countries in UK higher education institutions rose fivefold (from 12,500 to 64,000). In 2003/4 there were some 300,000 overseas students in UK higher education, over 95% of them from non-English-speaking countries.

Higher education in all English-speaking countries is currently experiencing a sharp increase in international (or foreign or overseas) students; for example, in 2001, in New Zealand, the University of Waikato had 1,000 students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Such students present special linguistic and cultural challenges to their receiving institutions.

The problems facing the institutions which have admitted these students include unprepared admissions officers, a shortage of interpreting staff in the international offices, the failure of institutions to provide adequate English language support even for those students who have tested out at the appropriate admissions level on tests such as the IELTS test or the USA Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), a lack of trained teaching staff to mount in-session English language courses, and a shortage of teaching space in which to conduct these courses. The influx in New Zealand is such that new students may wait months before they can be given the proficiency test (usually IELTS) they need for admission. In addition institutions lack understanding of the very different cultural expectations these students may bring with regard to what independent study means. The institutions may also lack awareness of these students' very real problems, problems of isolation, of culture clash, of inadequate language proficiency and consequently, very often, of unsatisfactory academic progress.