

TEST PREPARATION RESEARCH

Assessment and Evaluation Group
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OVERVIEW OF PROJECT

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Immigration rates and numbers of international students applying for university in Canada and other English-speaking countries, are continually increasing (See Statistics Canada, 2009). McKay (2002) draws attention to the expanding population of English Language Learners by stating that in the 21st century bilingual speakers of English will outnumber native speakers.

To satisfy language requirements for immigration and university entrance, English Language Learners must pass a language proficiency test, e.g., Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS). English language testing industry is a

billion-dollar business. There have been more than 25

million reported TOEFL test takers to date (ETS, 2010). In 2006, there were 13 million College English Test (CET) test takers, making it the largest English language proficiency test in the world (Jin, 2005; Zheng & Cheng, 2008). Consequently, test preparation centers are flourishing around the world to prepare test takers in successfully passing such tests.

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Test preparation is a double-edged sword for students, teachers, administrators, and test developers. Appropriate test preparation practices may help test takers target their studying and improve overall language ability while simultaneously help them attain higher test scores. In sharp contrast, improper test preparation practices aim to teach students “tricks to beat the test” that may artificially inflate their test scores, and have little to no effect on test takers’ actual language ability (Koretz, 2005). Such inflated test scores are of grave concern for university entrance administrators, immigration officials, and potential employers. For instance, university students with inflated test scores will most likely struggle in their first-year courses and unduly strain the support services provided (e.g., Campbell & Li, 2008; May & Kettle, 2010).

With this in mind, this multi-year research study, *Test preparation: Does it enhance test performance and English Language Proficiency*, aims to examine the effects of test preparation on English language test performance and English language



**October 20-21, 2011.
In attendance via
online and in-
person were:**

Liying Cheng
Shahzad Saif
Hong Wang
Lynette May
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- **The project was recently highlighted on the Queen's University News Centre website. Please see:**
<http://www.queensu.ca/news/articles/federal-government-supports-collaborative-research-partnerships>

proficiency. The first year will take a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2008) to gain a deep understanding of test preparation centers. The second year will employ an experimental design to investigate the effects of test preparation on student performance on corresponding tests and their English language proficiency as determined by another measure. The third year will focus on the relationships between the obtained test scores and students' actual English language proficiency within the context of their academic studies at Canadian and Australian universities.

Unique to this study is the collaboration amongst researchers based at Canadian and Australian universities in partnership with international testing agencies. The research team is comprised of Liying Cheng, PhD, principal investigator at Queen's University. In addition, there are three co-investigators: (a) Hong Wang at Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Canada; (b) Lynette May at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia; and (c) Shahrzad Saif at Laval University, Quebec City, Canada. Currently, there are two partnerships with international testing agencies: The Pearson Test of English (PTE) with Ying Zheng, and the College English Test (CET) with Yan Jin.

In the next couple of months, **Year One** of the project will explore the nature and extent of test preparation courses and materials at three test preparation centers in Toronto or Halifax, Canada; Beijing, China; and Tehran, Iran, with the possibility of a fifth site in Brisbane, Australia. By taking a case study approach (Yin, 2008), this research aims to understand the intricacies of test preparation from the perspective of multiple stakeholders—the student, teacher, and administrator. The data collection for this first year of the study will conclude in the summer and fall 2012.

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