

TEST PREPARATION RESEARCH

Assessment and Evaluation Group
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UPDATE FROM AUSTRALIA

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Test preparation in Australia

While a variety of English language proficiency tests are now accepted as evidence of meeting the language requirements for tertiary study in Australia, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic module is described as being “dominant for entry to higher education in the UK and Australia” (Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012, p21).

In the Australian context, concerns relate to the impact of test preparation courses, in terms of artificially inflating test scores, the interpretation of these scores by university administrators (O'Loughlin, 2011), and the impact of repeated test taking (Mickan & Motteram, 2009). More recently, there has been a focus on the English

language
proficiency
levels of
students for
whom
English in a

second language at the completion of degrees (Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012).

The study of preparation practices raises theoretical questions about language learning and development.
Mickan & Motteram, 2009

Year One: Case Study

The test preparation project has provided a unique opportunity for case studies at test preparation centres in Australia, Canada, China and Iran. The value

of case studies lies in “foregrounding individual experiences, generating insights into candidates’ circumstances and identifying factors impinging on test-taking” (Mickan & Motteram, 2009, p20). The Australian site was a private language centre in Brisbane that offered intensive test preparation for a range of high stakes tests, including IELTS. In order to more fully understand the nature and complexity of test preparation, the data collection included interviews with a senior administrator and two IELTS preparation teachers, two focus groups with students undertaking IELTS preparation courses and regular classroom observation of two IELTS preparation classes over a

period of ten weeks. In addition, the materials used in classes were collected and students provided samples of writing tasks with feedback that had been provided by teachers. This enabled a

nuanced and contextualised understanding of the phenomenon of test preparation and the views of stakeholders, including administrators, teachers and students.

I presented findings from an analysis of classroom discourse at the Association for Language Testing and Assessment of Australia and New

UPDATES

1. Year Two of the Project Successfully Completed in China and Iran
2. Data Collection of Year Three Undertaking in Canada and Australia
3. Test Preparation Project “Test Preparation: A Double-Edged Sword” (Cheng & Doe, 2013) is to Appear in International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language’s Testing, Evaluation and Assessment Special Interest Group (IATEFL-TEASIG) newsletter in September
<http://tea.iatefl.org/Newsletter.html>
4. Jia Ma Received Pearson External Research Doctoral Funding on “The Effects of Test Preparation on Chinese Test Takers’ PTE Academic Performance, English Language Proficiency”

Zealand (ALTAANZ) conference held at the University of Sydney in November, 2012. Themes that emerged from the class observations included the reliance on textbooks as syllabus, the legitimacy of the teachers and textbooks as the ultimate authority on IELTS and an explicit modeling of a relatively narrow range of spoken and written genres (May, 2012). Team members will be working on an article that compares the findings from the four case studies in the near future.

The conference presentation was followed by a workshop to teaching staff at the language centre where the data had been collected. The focus of this workshop was on feedback given on IELTS writing tasks. In thanking me for providing the workshop, the Director of Studies commented that it was “very well-received by the teachers and there’s been a nice buzz around the staffroom today – it’s stimulated discussion amongst the IELTS, FCE, CAE and GE teachers about the various issues you raised”.

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.

Year Three- Survey and interviews with undergraduate students and teaching staff

I am currently engaged in beginning the data collection for Year Three of the study, where undergraduate students will be surveyed on their experience in taking high stakes English language courses, and the extent to which they are coping with the linguistic demands of tertiary study. In addition to the

to the survey, students will be invited to participate in focus groups and lecturers from courses with a high intake of international students will be interviewed. The Year Three study will involve two sites: a university in Australia, and a university in Canada. At the Australian site, the survey is now in the process of being piloted with a small group of international students. Based on the results from this pilot, any necessary modifications will be made before sending the survey to the international undergraduate student population.

The opportunity to visit Queen’s University as a funded visiting scholar

Thanks to the nomination by Professor Liying Cheng, I had the opportunity to spend three weeks at Queen’s University as a Visiting Scholar at the beginning of this year. This visit was generously supported through the Queen’s Principal’s Development Fund and it enabled me to engage in discussions with team members on data collection and analysis. The visit included talks with Queen’s faculty, the chance to work with postgraduate students in the Evaluation group and a public presentation. A highlight of the visit was the opportunity to travel with Professor Cheng to Quebec City, where we met with our co-investigator Associate Professor Shahrzad Saif at the Universite Laval.

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