Language Assessment in EAP: Perspectives and Issues
A Public Seminar at Simon Fraser University, 2nd April 2019

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My existential moment at Sydney Airport
The Immigration Officer wanted to know my profession

What do you do in Hong Kong?

I’m a university teacher.

I see. What do you teach at university?

I teach English.
I gave an intuitive answer

I teach English.
I could have said it differently.

I teach EAP.
Issues with EAP

- The abbreviations are opaque
- EAP teachers do not know the subject content
- Every student belongs to their ‘home department’, which is not English
- Learner success is typically *not* measured by EAP/ESP teachers
Agenda for the Seminar

- Post-admission language assessment of university students
- Language assessment in EGAP
- Language assessment in ESAP
- Perspectives and issues with language assessment in EAP
The need: Greater diversity in linguistic abilities among university students

- Recruitment of international students
- Domestic population more multilingual
- National policies for equal opportunities
- Growth in the number of EMI universities
Universities face challenges

In all these countries, whether “English-speaking” or not, it cannot be assumed that students entering the university are adequately prepared to cope with the language and literacy demands of degree studies through the medium of English. (Read, 2016, 4)
Birrell (2006), an Australian academic specializing in immigration research... produced evidence that students were graduating with degrees in accounting and information technology, yet were unable to obtain the minimum score of 6.0 in IELTS needed for permanent residence and employment in Australia. (Read, 2016, 4-5)
In 2009, the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) developed **10 Good Practice Principles** for higher educational institutions to follow in order to improve the English language proficiency of international students.
Three Relevant Principles

1. Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to effectively participate in their university studies.

2. Students have responsibilities for further developing their ELP during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.

3. Students’ English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.

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Teaching Context at HKUST

Medium of Instruction: English (85% ethnic Chinese, 15% international)

English Curriculum: 12 credits (out of 120 credits for UG graduation)

English Core Course for Year One:
- 6 credits, front heavy loading of credits
- from CEFR B1 – B2 (IELTS 5.0 to 6.5) at the admission point
- weaker productive skills
- over 90% ethnic Chinese
- high expectations by the University
- a proficiency threshold to be achieved by the end of Year One
- How to measure the threshold? An external or internal test?
- **CLE**’s strategy – a home-grown English test (**ELPA**)
Role of **ELPA** at HKUST

- **Curriculum focus**
  - Foundation of academic literacy

- **Assessment focus**
  - Course achievements
  - Proficiency standards

- **ELPA** at HKUST
  - Discipline-specific English
  - School-based English
  - English Common Core (6 credits)
  - Threshold
The Design of **ELPA**

- **Speaking**
  - monologue
  - interview
  - 8-10 minutes

- **Writing**
  - expository essay
  - ~300 words
  - 40 minutes

- **Reading**
  - reading comprehension
  - text reconstruction
  - 40 minutes

- **Listening**
  - conversation
  - discussion
  - mini-lecture
  - 30 minutes

- **Vocabulary**
  - word recognition
  - 3K, 5K & 10K
  - Academic Word List
  - 40 minutes

**ELPA**
Curriculum Alignment

Support for Learners
- diagnostic
- formative
- summative
- learning support

Curriculum Standards
- externally benchmarked
- criterion-based
- achievable
- meaningful

Assessment Tool
- control & flexibility
- positive feedback
- curriculum driven & embedded

Assessment
- testing & teaching
- same set of constructs
- practical & practicable

Teaching
Curriculum Alignment

What we have done in order to create positive washback with ELPA:

- Curriculum-driven and -embedded
- Alignment – shared construct
- Types of feedback at different points
  - Diagnostic (pre-test)
  - Formative (course assessment and ELPA practice)
  - Summative (post-test)
- Teacher involvement in ELPA assessing, test development, test administration...
- An informal curriculum is developed to give language learning support to the (weaker) E Core students.
- ELPA ➞ a learning-oriented assessment
Perspectives & Issues in EAP Assessment

Applied Linguistics
- Test design
- Validity
- Reliability
- Assessment literacy of teachers

Language Education
- Positive washback
- Feedback provision
- Learner support

Decision-making processes
- Context
- Communication
- Compassion

Learning-oriented assessment

Collaboration with stakeholders
- Multiple purposes
- Multiple stakeholder implications

Educational Management

Perspectives & Issues in EAP Assessment
Miller (2014)’s model for EST courses

- General English
  - e.g. school English
- General English Skills
  - L/S/R/W
- Social English
  - e.g. private language school classes
- English for Specific Purposes (ESP)
- EOP
- EVP
- EPP
- EAP
  - ESAP
  - EGAP
What makes a good Mechanical Engineering lab report?

Does language matter with a lab report? And in what ways?

What do the marking criteria of lab reports look like?
Due diligence: the LANG 4034 assessment design roadmap

- Analyze lab reports
- Attend lectures
- Attend lab sessions
- Draft assessment criteria
- Interview TAs
- Read Lab Manual
- Seek endorsement of Professor and TAs
- Undertake standardization procedure with TAs
- Trial assessment criteria with students
Assessment in ESAP

The two explanations given to you were elicited using a diagram of the water cycle. Decide which one achieves the task more fully. Explain why.
Explanation A

(1) Initially, the water cycle begins as snow melts from the glaciers.
(2) The water then meanders through various water shed until it reaches rivers and lakes. Water eventually reaches the oceans.
(3) Water, then, becomes water vapour (it evaporates into the air) and accumulates in what we call clouds.
(4) The ‘clouds’ then distribute water in the form of rain, snow, or sleet back to the mountains where the cycle begins again.
The water cycle: The sun is the source of our water. The water, or hydrological, cycle begins when the sun heats up the ocean to produce water vapour through evaporation. This water vapour mixes with dust in the atmosphere and forms clouds. Cool air causes condensation of water droplets in the clouds, bringing about precipitation, or rain. This rain then falls into rivers, streams and lakes and eventually returns to the ocean, where the cycle begins again.
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Towards functional assessment

A competent assessor of these two texts should be able to recognize the difference in lines of meaning between the two explanations and how this difference is realized by a difference in wording... The assessor’s claim is based on the way Explanation B has used the resources of the language to create meaning in discourse, *in this case a causal explanation*. The claim is not based on whether Explanation B is more factually correct than A or whether B violates fewer grammar rules or discourse conventions than A. (Mohan, Leung and Slater, 2010: 226-7)
Towards functional assessment

We will argue that the question requires a view of text as making meaning with language resources rather than the traditional view of text as a display of linguistic forms. (Mohan, Leung and Slater, 2010: 218)

... an assessment should assess how wording constructs the meaning of the text as a whole in its context on a linguistically principled basis. (Mohan, Leung and Slater, 2010: 225)
Good practice in ESAP assessment

- Use a functional approach
- Conduct genre mapping to ensure validity
- Develop tasks and assessment criteria rigorously to ensure validity and reliability
- Focus on formative assessment and support for learners
Perspectives & Issues in EAP Assessment

Applied Linguistics

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Language Education

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- Feedback provision
- Learner support

Learning-oriented assessment

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Collaboration with stakeholders

- Multiple purposes
- Multiple stakeholder implications

Educational Management

Perspectives & Issues in EAP Assessment
Issues with ELPA for RPGs

- Multiple purposes served by the test
- Multiple stakeholders and implications
- Support for students
- Test of EGAP vs test of ESAP
Three purposes of ELPA for RPGs

Proficiency test
Ascertaining individuals’ proficiency levels

Diagnostic test
Identifying areas for improvements

Placement test
Deciding on needs for further support
The letter to the President: Misgivings expressed by RPGs

- Improvements not reflected in ELPA scores
- Different raters may use different standards
- Practical implications for RPGs
- Mismatch with IELTS results
Multiple stake-holder implications

RPG student
Pursuing academic studies through the medium of English AND serving as a TA in own disciplines

UG students
Benefiting from TA teaching

Relevant department
Making TA arrangements and supporting RPGs in multiple areas
Applied Linguistics

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Perspectives & Issues in EAP Assessment
Re-thinking language assessment in EAP

- Articulation of university policies on language and communication
- An “embedded” model in language learning and assessment
- A genre-based and register-sensitive approach
- A developmental approach to language assessment
Re-thinking language assessment in EAP

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On the positive side, a PELA can signal to various stakeholders a commitment on the part of the university to be responsive to the English language needs of incoming students by identifying those at risk of poor academic performance at an early stage. Potentially, it enhances the reputation of the institution if it is seen to be fulfilling its duty of care to the students. Assuming that students being admitted to the university through various pathways all take the same assessment, the PELA also provides an equitable basis for allocating English language tutoring and other specialist resources to the students who are most at risk. Thus, if the commitment is genuinely made, it reflects well on the institution in meeting its ethical responsibilities to a linguistically diverse student body. (Read, 2016, 222-223)
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New genres

- Poster presentations
- TED Talks
- Op-eds
- Infographics
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Register Theory (Derewianka, 1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenor</th>
<th>The relationship between the participants: speaker/listener; writer/reader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field</td>
<td>The subject matter of the text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>The channel of communication: written or spoken</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can more fruitfully think of language as a repertoire of genres and registers which are chosen according to the overall communicative purpose and the aspects of field, tenor and mode in different contexts of communication. (Lin, 2016: 19)
Crisscrossing the spoken-written continuum with the continuum of social distance

Lin, 2016: 20 (from Mahboob, 2013)
The Mohboobian Framework – towards a model of language variation for education

Lin, 2016: 21 (from Mahboob, 2013)
Re-thinking language assessment in EAP

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Assessing multilingual competencies

It is time for the language profession to think of a construct that will better match current research and knowledge and not serve ideologies of nation-states that interested mostly in homogeneous and monolingual citizens. These constructs need to incorporate the specific and unique competencies that demonstrate the advantages that bilingual students have in a number of areas, in spite of not being proficient in the dominant language. Language testers should take the role of resistance ‘from below’ to imposed ideologies and invent creative ways of testing, which reflect the diverse populations in this day and age and provide equal participation not limited to dominant languages and dominant people. (Shohamy, 2011, 428)
Re-thinking language assessment in EAP

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A developmental approach to language assessment
Jenkins... is particularly critical of the role of the international English proficiency tests (IELTS, TOEFL, Pearson Test of English (PTE)) in their gate-keeping role for entry to EMI degree programmes. She and others... argue that these and other tests of English for academic purposes serve to perpetuate the dominance of standard native-speaker English, to the detriment of ELF users, by requiring a high degree of linguistic accuracy, by associating an advanced level of proficiency with facility in idiomatic expression, and by not assessing the intercultural negotiating skills which are a key component of communication in English across linguistic boundaries... (Read, 2016, 230)
ELF and post-admission assessments

...post-admission assessments developed for particular universities can complement the major tests by representing flexible responses to local circumstances and to changing ideas about appropriate forms of assessment, such as those associated with ELF...

Perhaps the most revealing finding from Jenkins’ (2013) surveys was the extent to which academics in the UK and in EMI institutions elsewhere defined academic standards in traditional terms which favoured native-speaking students, and many appeared insensitive to ways in which they could modify their teaching and supervisory practices to accommodate international students, without “dumbing down” the curriculum... If an assessment is implemented in such an environment, it may basically perpetuate a deficit model of students’ language needs, which places the onus squarely on them... to “improve their English”, rather than being part of a broader commitment to the promotion of high standards of academic literacy for all students, regardless of their language background. (Read, 2016, 231)
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Arkoudis and Kelly cite studies which document “the limitations of communication skills programs which sit outside the disciplinary curricula and are supported by staff who are not recognized by students as disciplinary academics” (2016, p.4).

This quote highlights the point that academic English programmes are typically delivered as adjuncts to degree courses by tutors with low (and maybe insecure) status within the institution who may not have the relevant knowledge of discourse norms to address issues of academic literacy or professional communication skills within the disciplines.

This suggests that the way forward is to foster more collaboration between learning advisors and English language tutors on the one hand and academic teaching staff on the other. (Read, 2016, 227)
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ELPA 2 Development at HKUST

Context, setting and role

Audience and purposes

Tasks and skills

Texts
References


Thank you very much