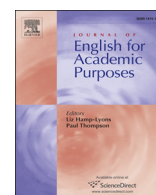




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Voices from stakeholders: What makes an academic English test 'international'?

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed a growing number of speakers of all varieties of English in English-medium higher education. It has also become increasingly common for an academic English test to be used and accepted in multiple countries for admissions purposes. Both trends have implications for the definition of the target language use domain for tests of English for academic purposes, and have brought challenges to traditional test development practices based on one of the Standard varieties of English. In this study we investigated what properties a global academic English test should include from the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups, including test takers, English teachers, score users, and language testing professionals. Survey responses from the participants indicated both willingness to embrace diversity and reservations about accommodating differences. Further analysis by stakeholder indicated that perceptions varied to a certain extent across stakeholder groups. The results also indicated that various factors were recognized as contributing to an academic test's global perception. The findings contribute to our understanding of assessing academic English in the global context. The results can also inform the alignment of testing practices with the reality of English language use globally, which suggests implications for test development and delivery.

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There has been an increasing demand to make tests of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) more 'international' in recent years due to the globalized nature of the students' experiences and the use of tests themselves. Two notable trends have emerged which highlight this phenomenon. Firstly, many different varieties of English are spoken in English-medium higher education institutions, both in and out of classes, by individuals of different roles such as students, faculty, and teaching/research assistants (Abeywickrama, 2013; Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2005; Ockey & French, *in press*). It follows that degree-seeking candidates of all nationalities are expected to understand different varieties of English that they will be exposed to on campus. Secondly, it has also become increasingly common for an academic English test to be used and accepted in multiple countries for admissions purposes. As observed by Chalhoub-Deville and Wigglesworth (2005), uses of major international language tests have been expanded beyond their original market of users. Hence, prospective students who have not yet determined which institution they will eventually choose to enroll in may prefer to take one test that is more widely accepted instead of several tests that are regionally affiliated.

These international trends have motivated language testers to re-examine the language use in English-medium institutions of higher education, which constitutes the target language use (TLU) domain for an EAP test. A student's expected

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success in performing language tasks in a real-world context, which is the TLU domain, is usually inferred from that student's performance on a test; thus, a more accurate representation of the TLU domain on a test will usually lead to greater validity of inferences made regarding test takers' language abilities. Because of the internationalized nature of the TLU domain for a global EAP test, Abeywickrama (2013) argues that limiting test input to one native speaker variety is a misrepresentation of the TLU domain. From a test validation point of view, failure to fully reflect the language spoken in the TLU domain limits the representation of the test construct, which in turn hinders the usefulness of test scores (Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, 2000). Therefore, the guiding principle of developing tests used in the global context, as argued by Taylor (2006), is for a test to represent the kinds of English varieties that test takers are likely to encounter in the TLU domain.

From a broader perspective, this emerging need to include multiple varieties of English in language testing coincides with the changing paradigm of applied linguistics due to the World Englishes movement. With the rapidly expanding use of English in international communication in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries, the 'Standard English' perspective has been challenged by the 'World Englishes' perspective, with resulting implications for language assessment (Canagarajah, 2006; Zhang & Elder, 2011). The former upholds that native speaker competence serve as the norm of language teaching and testing. The latter challenges the relevance of the native speaker norm and calls for recognizing the local linguistic and cultural influences on the English language. Depending on the prevalence of English language use in educational and business contexts, Kachru (1984, 1985, 1992) categorized countries into three kinds: inner-circle countries where English is used as the primary language (i.e., United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), outer-circle countries where English has special administrative status (e.g., India and Hong Kong), and expanding-circle countries where English is considered important but has no special administrative status (e.g., Brazil and China). This highly influential categorization has challenged the formerly-held notion of the ownership of English and the status of the native speaker norm. Furthermore, influenced by Kachru's proposal, researchers have advocated English varieties developed and used in expanding- and outer-circle countries as legitimate varieties that are different from Standard English (Jenkins, 2006; Lowenberg, 2002). This conversation has gradually shifted the traditional view of English based on the native speaker norm to one that recognizes English as a heterogeneous language based on multiple norms (Canagarajah, 2006).

In response to these concerns, EAP assessments developed by major testing organizations have either revised their test specifications to incorporate the 'international' aspects to a certain extent or claimed that their tests already embrace international qualities. For example, the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) claims to be a test of English language proficiency in academic settings (Chapelle, Enright, & Jamieson, 2008) without a direct association with any specific region of the world. To that effect, the test has recently started to include multiple native-speaker accents, including accents from the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Australia, and North America in the listening and speaking sections.² Similarly, the academic module of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), developed by the Cambridge English Language Assessment in partnership with the British Council and International Development Program (IDP), asserts that its content is "internationally focused".³ This claim is based on the fact that the listening input in the test includes a range of native-speaker accents (North American, Australian, New Zealand, and British), and that all Standard varieties of English are accepted in evaluating candidates' responses to the test. In addition, being a native speaker of English is not a qualification requirement for becoming a writing or oral examiner, and test content is produced by writers of different Standard varieties of English (Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, the Pearson Test of English (PTE) Academic also claims to assess "international English", and is "not being designed with an assumption that students are necessarily headed for one country or another."⁴ In evidence of this, the test features a spoken response scoring protocol that can accommodate international varieties of English.

In sum, the review of these large-scale, internationally administrated academic English tests reveals two distinct directions that testing organizations have taken in an effort to make their tests internationally acceptable – (a) incorporating more than one Standard variety of English in the aural input and (b) recognizing multiple varieties of English in scoring oral responses. This observation coincides with Taylor's (2002) assertion that when designing a test for international use, the nature of the test input, the standards against which candidates' responses are assessed, as well as rater qualifications must be carefully considered.

While test organizations have implemented changes to the traditional test development practice where the target construct is defined based on one of the Standard varieties of English, researchers have conducted empirical studies to better understand the effects of incorporating multiple varieties of English on the validity of score interpretation and use. A review of previous research reveals the following two strands of inquiry. The first examines the impact of the use of accented English in test input on listening comprehension (e.g., Abeywickrama, 2013; Harding, 2012; Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002; Major et al., 2005; Ockey & French, in press; Smith & Bisazza, 1982), and the second investigates the impact of the use of raters from specific linguistic backgrounds on ratings of oral performance (e.g., Carey, Mannell, & Dunn, 2011; Chalhoub-Deville & Wigglesworth, 2005; Kim, 2009; Zhang & Elder, 2011). The results are mixed and inconclusive, giving rise to two seemingly conflicting issues, *authenticity* and *fairness*, regarding how testing practices should respond to the demands of assessing English in an international context. Although researchers generally agree that accommodating various English varieties would enhance the authenticity of the test, thereby better representing the TLU, this

² www.ets.org/toefl/important_update/english_accents_added.

³ www.ielts.org/PDF/Information_for_Candidates_booklet.pdf.

⁴ www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/10/02/english.

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