



# One teacher's take on using a 'test' for diagnostic purposes in the classroom



Christine Doe<sup>\*</sup>

Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

More and more large-scale assessments are said to have diagnostic or formative potential for classroom instruction and student learning. However, there is limited research examining how a language teacher actually uses such assessments to inform his or her teaching. An empirically-developed framework on classroom-based language assessment (Hill & McNamara, 2011) frames the study. Using a case study approach this study offers an account of how one classroom teacher used diagnostic feedback, from the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment, to inform her teaching in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. This case was considered *intrinsic* (Stake, 1995) because of the considerable instructional support offered to the teacher, as well as her integral role in creating the diagnostic assessment profiles. Data collection strategies included three interviews, five classroom observations, and document analysis. The results highlighted the possible tensions for the teacher related to course planning, curriculum alignment, and conflicts with intuitive judgments in the day-to-day assessment of student ability.

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines the decisions made by one teacher in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classroom using a large-scale test for diagnostic purposes. Due to changes in the EAP program context, students could be placed into one of three EAP courses through test scores obtained from three different academic language-based tests, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). As a result of variations in the placement procedure, the needs of students admitted into the program varied considerably. To respond to increasing linguistic diversity, one teacher used the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment to create diagnostic profiles of students. She was also able to draw on support from myself to create the profiles and from teaching assistants to create targeted groups.

In this article, I explore this teacher's decision-making of using a test typically used for admissions and placement decisions for more formative, diagnostic purposes in the classroom. To do so, I first describe some of the literature on needs analysis in EAP instruction and post-entry language assessment (PELA) in university contexts, outline a framework for analyzing the teacher's decision-making in using assessment results to inform instruction, and then describe the research questions and methods. I then present the findings from interview and document analysis data and finally discuss the implications for teachers in using large-scale assessment results for diagnostic purposes.

<sup>\*</sup> Faculty of Education, Mount Saint Vincent University, 166 Bedford Hwy, Halifax, NS, Canada B3M 2J6. Tel.: +1 902 457 5554.

E-mail address: [christine.doe@msvu.ca](mailto:christine.doe@msvu.ca).

## 2. Needs analysis

Hyland (2006) describes needs analysis in EAP instruction as “collecting and assessing information relevant to course design” (p. 73). According to Hamp-Lyons (2011), a needs analysis approach to EAP instruction has occurred since the 1970s and 1980s with such work as Bridgeman and Carlson (1983) and Johns (1981). Identification of instructional needs focused course requirements (Johns, 1981) or on general academic skills, such as academic writing (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1983). Swales (1990) and Candlin and Plum (1999) demonstrated through discourse and genre analysis that students’ needs differ depending of the specific academic discipline they were entering. In response to needs analysis in EAP contexts, development of EAP materials has expanded to be a major business of commercial textbooks. While needs analysis traditionally predicted the skills students would require for academic success without taking into account the students’ background, a greater emphasis in EAP programs has been to develop in-house materials geared towards specific student populations (Hamp-Lyons, 2011).

Expanding this tailored approach to instruction, EAP programs and universities are drawing on language assessments to identify students’ academic language strengths and weaknesses to provide support to students at a program and course level (Dunworth, 2009; Fox & Haggerty, 2014; Read & von Randow, 2013). At the University of Auckland, New Zealand, results from the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) are used to determine if students require further support and will make recommendations for academic support (Read & von Randow, 2013). It is important to note that in the University of Auckland context, all first year students are required to participate in the first phase of the DELNA, and thus, it is not specific to students who speak English as an additional language. In Canada, Fox and Haggerty (2014) described how the DELNA was adapted to a Faculty of Engineering recognizing the needs that are specific to engineering students. Across such EAP contexts, only a few studies have been conducted to examine EAP teachers’ use of diagnostic profiles for informing instruction (e.g., Fox, 2009). Assessments such as the DELNA are typically referred to as Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA) as a way to distinguish them from the sophisticated cognitive diagnostic assessments that are capable of delivering fine-grain feedback (Doe, 2014; Read & von Randow, 2013). For the purposes of this study, I am focusing on the diagnostic feedback that the teacher used in this study and do not claim that the test used was a diagnostic assessment.

This article reports on the findings from a larger study that examined the validity of the CAEL for diagnostic purposes from the rater, teacher and student perspective (Doe, 2013). A portion of the teacher perspective was reported in Doe (2011). This article extends the findings reported on the teacher perspective (Doe, 2011, 2013) by considering the pedagogical decision-making through Hill and McNamara’s (2011) framework on classroom-based assessment. In the next section, I describe the guiding framework.

## 3. Guiding framework

I draw on an adapted version of Hill and McNamara’s (2011) empirically-developed framework to analyze one teacher’s interpretation and use of assessment results for diagnostic purposes in a classroom setting. To develop the initial framework, Hill and McNamara (2011) first identified a comprehensive list of processes and outcomes researched in previous studies. The authors then examined three Indonesian language learning classrooms (one primary and two secondary) set in Australia using participant observation, individual and focus group interview data and document analysis to test and refine the framework. Below I outline an adapted version of framework around the two questions of what do teachers believe? and what do teachers do? (Adapted from Hill & McNamara, 2011, Table 7, p. 415).

### 3.1. What do teachers believe?

Hill and McNamara (2011) articulated and labeled this dimension broadly around the “theory or standards” (p. 411) teachers draw on to inform their assessment practice with sub-categories of beliefs about teaching and language learning, and assessment. For the purposes of this study, I have framed this dimension around beliefs and perspectives of language learning, EAP instruction, and assessment. Teachers’ perceptions of the test or assessment data proved critical in Fox’s (2009) study in an EAP program. Fox collected qualitative accounts from four teachers based on interviews, emails, and information collected from meetings. Fox observed that the teachers’ uptake of the CAEL feedback was passive or negative and influenced whether or not they used the feedback.

### 3.2. What do teachers do?

Hill and McNamara (2011) identified four key processes (planning, framing, conducting, and using) under the broad category of “what do teachers do?” (p. 401). For *planning* processes, the authors examined syllabi documents and discussions with teachers to determine the extent assessment tasks and guidelines were outlined for students. According to Hill and McNamara, *conducting* ranged from planned and incidental assessment (both embedded in instruction) to formal assessment (tests and assignments). When coding the data, Hill and McNamara commented that it was important to identify assessment activities at the individual and group level. For the *using* processes, five purposes of assessment were identified as “teaching, learning, reporting, management, and socialization” (Hill & McNamara, 2011, p. 405), which the authors noted are not necessarily separate categories.

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