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Testing the tester

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ABSTRACT

Over the summer of 2022. I was tasked with testing the language proficiency of many potential students who were unable to access the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), either due to displacement or other adverse circumstances. The largest cohort was that of Ukrainian students, following the Scottish government's announcement that free education and living support would be available for those qualifying students. The second cohort was less homogenous. It varied in nationality, age, background, circumstances and fell under the broad umbrella of refugees and asylum seekers. The Ukrainian students, on acceptance of academic and language qualifications would directly enter faculty as undergraduates. In contrast, the refugees and asylum seekers would join the last five weeks of a 34-week pre-sessional course and then proceed to a Widening Access Course. Completion of this, and successful settled status would then enable them to enter degree courses. To facilitate the entry process, I use a reading-to-write integrated test based on an academic paper, followed by an interview of 20 – 30 minutes duration for all students who are unable to access IELTS or other recognised commercial language tests. Due to the urgency and sheer number of undergraduates needing to be tested over July/August 2022, I made the decision to use English for General Academic Purposes materials and conducted invigilated reading-to-write tests on Zoom, with individual interviews being conducted over the following days. While this format had been used successfully in the past with displaced PGT/PGR students, it quickly became apparent that it was unsuitable for the second cohort of refugees and asylum seekers. Here I reflect on my role and consider future test design.

Keywords: language testing, ethics, widening participation, asylum seekers

Introduction

> Principle of ILTA Code of Ethics 1
> Language testers shall have respect for the humanity and dignity of each of their test takers. They shall provide them with the best possible professional consideration and shall respect all persons' needs, values and cultures in the provision of their language testing service. (International Language Testing Association, 2007)

The International Language Testing Association was established in 1992 for the purpose of sharing and developing knowledge of the field. The Code of Ethics was approved in 2000. In my role as Language Testing Officer, it is incumbent upon me to adhere to professional standards including ethics. The area of language testing has been much concerned with ethics, with an emphasis on transparency and the need to prove validity crucial (Fulcher, 2015). However, Fulcher also cites Kunnan and Davidson, who contend that it is

nigh on impossible to cover every context in the testing field (2003, as cited in Fulcher, 2015). This conflict between principles and real-life contexts is reflected in my experience of the summer of 2022.

I test external candidates who are unable to access the normal gatekeeping tests. I use journal articles from the student's intended degree course and often consult with the intended supervisor. Follow-up interviews take the form of discussions around the article, previous study and intended study. The reading-to-write integrated tests provide information, linguistic accessibility and allow the student to utilise knowledge of text navigation, which is reflected in the first writing task, a short summary. The second task is a personal critical response to the text allowing the student to demonstrate stance. I use both holistic and multiple trait approaches to mark lexical range, grammar and cohesion but also evidence of academic literacy.

Definitions of academic literacies and their convergence with English for Academic Purposes vary, but recurring themes are the expectation of 'meaning-making,' and knowledge of academic conventions (Lillis & Tuck, 2016). As Li (2022) points out "there still lacks a clear definition and operationalization of the construct" (p.1). Recent research argues that academic literacies encompass a much wider field than previously noted, for example, students' roles should move from that of recipients of knowledge to being involved in knowledge construction (Gebhard, 2004). However, as wider academic socialisation is not yet appropriate at this juncture, I use the English for Academic Purposes genre approach which is focused on the development of textual knowledge and academic language acquisition (Wingate & Tribble, 2012). It is therefore a narrow lens, constrained within a test environment, with a focus on the tenets of academic writing such as precision, formality, successful integration of sources, and a clear written macro structure.

Most students I test are PGT or PGR; however, the recent influx of Ukrainian students have been undergraduates, who have experienced disruption in their degrees. Therefore, my expectation would be that there is a degree of familiarity with the expectations of academic writing, particularly when a source has been provided. This is the crux of the problem I faced in respect of test design for one cohort; there were, however, other considerations, which I shall also address.

The two cohorts

The needs of the two cohorts were quite different. Apart from the immediacy of the situation in Ukraine, the Scottish Government had implemented an explicit policy which was publicly available. The students in Cohort 1, were for the most part, 2nd and 3rd year undergraduates who had experienced around six months disrupted education at their home institutions. In contrast, Cohort 2, the asylum seekers, were of various nationalities, and had been displaced for several years, often at a young age and in several countries. They were being tested for admission to the final five weeks of an intensive 35-week pre-sessional course, and then onto a Widening Access course. At the completion of this, if they had then been granted leave to remain, they could apply for a degree course. This would mean that their journey to a degree would take at least another year and could not be guaranteed.

Challenges encountered by refugees

Jungblut (2017, as cited in Reinhardt et al., 2018) identified five issues affecting refugees in the European context: lack of official status, lack of official documentation, lack of language support, difficulties in adjusting to local contexts, and culture. I would add to this the gap in education. For a 'traditional international student' we tend to see the transition from high school to undergraduate to postgraduate.

Most of these students have had a linear education journey, with a small number having had relevant work experience. Our traditional international students, although facing challenges, have the advantage of continuous education, and study momentum. This is not the case with some of the asylum seekers. In fact, it appeared to be diametrically opposite.

Suitability of the test for cohort 2

The reading-to-write test was not designed for novices, but to ascertain whether the students were ready to commence HE study predominantly in terms of language ability, but also text structuring, logical development, critical analysis, avoiding plagiarism, and other components of academic writing. This worked well with potential PGT/PGR applicants, and for Cohort 1, but not in relation to Cohort 2. I conducted a Zoom session, with some students requiring laptops and study spaces. The effect of having an invigilated Zoom test with other students who were complete strangers seemed to be quite stressful. The second step, following a semi-scripted interview with each student individually also did not seem befitting, as questions were based on previous/intended research, and I was aware that questions regarding the students' previous study may be linked to past trauma. I was also cognisant of the fact that there was no guarantee that they would be granted leave to remain. I wondered if it was even ethical to discuss a future that might be unattainable for reasons beyond their control. I had considered all variables before beginning the invigilated test, but I quickly realised that I had to throw out the script and adopt more of an ad hoc approach. Although I was prepared, I came to realise that the students were not. I also realised from a professional perspective that construct irrelevant variance interfered with skills assessment (Messick, 1989); in fact, it was a critical incident (Tripp, 1993). I questioned my role, the validity of the test, factors that impinged upon its reliability and how best to approach marking and interviews. I became aware that the 60 minutes reading-to-write test was stress-inducing for students who were unprepared for this type of task. It should be noted that due to the sheer numbers and deadlines, there was no alternative in 2022, but I very much felt that I needed to investigate alternative test design.

The test had a tried and trusted format. It was suitable for advanced pre-sessional course admission or direct entry to faculty. The test was designed for those already in HE or who were preparing for HE but had prior experience in academic literacies. However, it did not fit the profiles of these students. Post-test I wondered if a more traditional English language test would have worked better. It perhaps would be less opaque to the students and reduce the weighting of the academic expectations of reading-to-write submissions, which can be challenging to differentiate in discrete skill evaluation. Providing short texts with typical reading comprehension questions may alleviate some of the in-test anxiety experienced by this cohort. However, 'traditional' students have had access to IELTS practice tests and recent coaching. Therefore, while using a classic four skill discrete testing structure would remove academic literacies aspects, including summarising, identifying stance and avoiding plagiarism, a general assumption would be that it was highly unlikely that the students in Cohort 2 have had access to this type of preparation. Indeed, the more formalised listening tests and structured speaking tasks might prove to be more challenging, and more de-personalising. Focusing again on the disparate backgrounds of the Cohort 2 students in terms of nationality, age, the different and often traumatic journeys, I considered that using formalised testing structures such as the gatekeeping test, IELTS, or our pre-sessional tests, which are constructively aligned with course materials, albeit English for General Academic Purposes, did not allow for awareness or respect for their unique situations.

Parity of language proficiency entrance tests

However, was it fair to treat this cohort differently in terms of entrance tests? While the Ukrainian students were going straight to faculty, Cohort 2 would be eligible to enrol in the Widening Access course, therefore their destinations were quite different. So, it would seem logical to write tests for Cohort 2 that were less demanding. It should be noted here that some of the asylum seekers did well both in writing and interviews, and there were other personal variables that may have influenced this. However, a second problem was that the pre-sessional course they were embarking on demanded skills levels of 6.5 IELTS equivalent. It became apparent that not just the test, but also the entry point was inappropriate for some, as they were joining students who had, in some cases, been studying for nearly 30 weeks and were in the home stretch in the last 5 weeks of a bridging course. In addition, a clear requirement for extra pastoral support had been identified. Therefore, the considerations were appropriate testing, appropriate course entry, and appropriate levels of support. My task then was to consider restructuring the test, with potentially a requirement to drop the entry level if future students were then to enrol on an earlier course. This then led to a reflection – was this then a case of 'benevolent' othering? By trying to accommodate and support the students, was it more harmful, creating a special case and possibly leading to student expectations of similarly 'special treatment' on their degree courses, which might not occur. It was not a case of lowering the bar but more a case of providing a unique channel for the students. If it were to be a unique and insulated assessment, then was it formalising, or even problematising the students' journey to access HE? To help me find answers, I then turned to the literature.

One study looked at Kiron Open Higher Education, an NGO which provides MOOCs for Jordanian and Lebanese communities and refugees globally. These online programmes were evaluated by Reinhardt et al. (2018) in a project, Success and Opportunities for Refugees in Higher Education (SUCCESS). An interesting finding is that:

> the students' knowledge and skills at the outset of these Kiron courses are analyzed, and the development of their (domain-specific) knowledge and academic skills in the different phases of their programs is traced (Reinhardt et al., 2018, p.204).

One of the findings was the difference in level of education; for example, Syrian students tended to have completed more years of high school than those from Afghanistan. I would argue that this is the amount of detail that needs to be collected to place students at the appropriate level. Interviews are also required for the European Qualification Passport for Refugees (Reinhardt et al., 2018). These are of 45-minute duration, where individuals' backgrounds and language proficiency levels are recorded. In terms of logistics, this would require time and resources; however, it could facilitate a more appropriate match with courses. Obviously, there are fundamental differences in the aims of the Kiron organisation and those of a single university; nevertheless, similarities remain in terms of promoting access to education for refugees. Ideally it would be this level of individualised information gathering and selective placement with appropriate support in place. From my perspective, it suggests that at the earlier testing stage, much more data is required so that the test minimises interference and only tests the targeted constructs.

In-sessional support for refugees

If entry tests and procedures are modified to be a better 'fit' then assistance should continue once students are placed in faculty. Kavuro argues that refugees should be considered as a distinct cohort deserving tailored support to compensate for adverse circumstances (2013, as cited in Maringe, Ojo, & Chiramba, 2017). Kavuro, discussing social justice, distinguishes between distributive and retributive, with retributive

justice promoting special treatment of refugees in academia. Retributive justice must begin at the first stage to be truly of value, otherwise potential applicants may fail at the first hurdle.

Maringe et al. (2017, p.225) further point out that academics are not trained therapists or mentors equipped to support non-traditional students, and comment that the "academic environment is built round the survival of the fittest". Other salient factors include "deleted identities" (p.226). The priority in higher education is the 'academic identity' with no acknowledgement of previous trauma. This justifies the essential provision of mentoring and support. Maringe et al. also notes the importance of:

> Avoiding the concealment of refugees as international students […] concealment contributes to greater marginalization of a very vulnerable group (2017, p.227).

Therefore, despite the fear of benevolent 'othering', failure to recognise the unique circumstances of each refugee student denies them the opportunity to calibrate their unique identity with an academic self. Indeed, Unangst and Crea (2020) recommend using an intersectional lens, through which factors of identity such as gender, age, first language, and religion, are institutionally acknowledged and appropriate support programmes are established. The purpose of this is to recognise identity and increase agency. The researchers further argue that by offering such provision and allowing the students to choose which aspects of identity they wish to engage in, they are empowering students.

Recent research on what constitutes the ideal university student discusses hidden rules and implicit expectations (Wong & Chiu, 2020; Wong & Chiu, 2021). The researchers recommend explicit approaches, suggesting workshops and study skills sessions. However, we should also be aware of the skills that asylum seekers and refugees bring with them. Wong et al.'s (2022) review of UK graduate attributes included mention of this University's inclusion of an 'adaptability' attribute in its graduate attribute matrix (University of Glasgow, n.d.). The transferable dimension states: "Demonstrate resilience, perseverance, and positivity in multi-tasking, dealing with change and meeting new challenges". For this cohort of students, surely this has been demonstrated in their journey. An intervention conducted by Bauer et al. (2021) focused on the refugees' perseverance and coping strategies in adverse circumstances. The researchers conducted an identity-reframing intervention which used hypothetical university material to show how refugees could build upon experience to adapt and succeed in university life. Themes such as autonomy and agency emerged. The students then chose a task from a number of options, labelled 'difficult' or 'easy.' 65% of the intervention group of students selected the difficult task, compared to 38% of the control group (Bauer et al. 2021, p.1901). The intervention exercise was brief; ten-minutes duration. Yet this appears to be sufficient to affirm that skills are transferable and help to close the (possibly) (mis)perceived gap between distinct cohorts of students. This type of intervention exercise could be integrated into the induction process and administered pre-entry test.

A potential solution for entry testing

A two-tiered approach to testing may offer a solution. Firstly, a free workshop for potential students as an awareness-raising event. This would provide information on the course requirements, allow the students to sample materials, and to facilitate a platform for discussion. This is already partly in place, in the form of an Induction Session. There is also a case here for an intervention such as that conducted by Bauer et al. (2021). Designing a short activity where the students would be provided with an opportunity to reflect on their strengths and how these can be best applied to academic study, may be beneficial and confidence-boosting. Similarly, guest speakers, enrolled students who are nearing the end of their degree

courses, could discuss their academic experiences, and be available for Q & A. In addition, needs analysis should be conducted to identify any knowledge gaps, which could lead to extra support. Ideally it should prove to be a more effective and ethical transition aligned with the university's stated objectives. Students would then be placed on a level-appropriate course with a more staggered introduction to both advanced language acquisition and to academic literacies.

A mentor should be appointed to provide support beyond academic and language assistance. This would include economic and psychological aid as suggested by Maringe et al. (2017). Without recognition of the challenges faced, this cohort of students may yet be disadvantaged in academia. Another crucial factor is the training of staff including trauma-informed pedagogy as is conducted at the University of Leicester (Palanac, 2019). I would recommend expansion of training sessions to include all staff whom the students would encounter in academia. This is further endorsed by the University of Sanctuary Status project, which this university was awarded in 2022. The University of Sanctuary award developed from Cities of Sanctuary, which was initiated in 2005 in Sheffield. The resource guide states "Universities […] have a responsibility to support people from all walks of life to reach their potential" (City of Sanctuary, p.3). They also recommend all staff involved undergo compulsory training covering potential challenges and solutions, and discussions are ongoing at this institution to ensure best practice processes are implemented.

From my language tester perspective, more information-gathering would inform ethical and reliable test design, and contribute to a comprehensive principled approach. It is my intention to produce a needs analysis document that would inform language test construction, aiming to identify areas which require further support while not impacting on assessing language proficiency levels.

Biography

Siriol Lewis is a lecturer in English for Academic Study at the University of Glasgow. She holds qualifications in Applied Linguistics and Language Testing.

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