

# IELTS and an English for academic study programme: Points of similarity and areas of divergence

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes an analysis of assessments in a pre-session English for Academic Study programme at a New Zealand university and of those in IELTS tests. The university accepts students with the required Band 6.0 overall in IELTS, and also those who graduate from the English for Academic Study (EAS) programme with Grade B and above for its undergraduate programmes. However, as far as we are aware, there has been no formal comparative study of the points of similarity and areas of divergence between IELTS and such programmes. The identification of similarities and differences allows for a detailed profile of the assessment of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by students who successfully complete such pre-session programmes, as compared with students who have completed an IELTS preparation programme. It is anticipated that the information provided will be of benefit to academic English and literacy practitioners.

## **Introduction**

### *IELTS and university entry*

IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is a widely accepted language test used as evidence of international students' English language proficiency for entry to university-level study. However, there are a number of problems associated with IELTS. The first is that it tends to be accorded a predictive validity that its developers do not claim. Some warn against the assumption of such validity (Coley, 1999; Deakin, 1997; Dooey & Oliver, 2002), and Chaloub-Delville and Turner (2000) note that the IELTS Annual Review urges test-users to conduct local research 'to verify the appropriateness and dependability of adopting a particular IELTS band scale for admission' (p. 532).

Furthermore, in discussing the experience of the University of Birmingham in the UK, Rees (1999) argues that there is good reason to question the reliability of the IELTS test, and Tonkyn (1995) points out that 'English language tests are poor predictors of academic performance of overseas students' (p. 40). IELTS band scores reflect English language proficiency alone and are not predictors of academic success

or failure (Rees, 1999). Indeed Dooley and Oliver (2002), in their study at Curtin University, note that the only significant correlation between IELTS scores and academic results was found in the case of the reading subtest. Further doubt has been cast on the validity of the IELTS test as a predictor of suitability and success by studies such as that of Moore and Morton (2005). They found that although IELTS writing shares some similarities with the predominant genre of university assignments – the essay – there is great diversity in the type of writing required of students in university coursework and in the types of tasks they are likely to encounter. They argue that 'the type of writing the [IELTS] test elicits may have more in common with certain public non-academic genres and thus should not be thought of as an appropriate model for university writing' (p. 43). Consequently, students who only take IELTS test preparation courses may be under-prepared for the written genres they will encounter in their tertiary studies.

Lea and Street (1998) refer to three approaches to learning in higher education: skills development, socialisation and academic literacies development, which IELTS preparation does not necessarily provide for, and which IELTS does not test. Researchers also point out that in addition to language use there are many factors other than language proficiency that are relevant to students' suitability for university-level entry (Chaloub-Deville & Turner, 2000; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Tonkyn, 1995).

#### *Pre-sessional academic English and literacy courses*

Partly in recognition of these issues, EAL (English as an additional language) students are encouraged to take English language and literacy programmes to further prepare them for university study. Such courses are designed to prepare students to meet not only language requirements, but also the academic literacy and socio-cultural demands of their prospective fields of study. The need for such provision has been underscored by the work of prominent researchers such as Hyland (1997), and there is considerable research to inform the design of such courses. For example, studies have investigated students' needs, with associated implications for programme design (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Carson, 2001; Gravatt, Richards & Lewis, 1997; Hale, Taylor, Bridgeman, Carson, Kroll & Kantor, 1996; Horowitz, 1986; Zhu, 2004). As a specific example, a further recent study by Evans and Green (2007), involving 5000 students from universities in Hong Kong, found that students' difficulties centred on particular aspects of academic writing and academic speaking, while other problems related to inadequate receptive and productive vocabulary. Their study also indicated that inadequate basic language competence results in lack of confidence, as students struggle to accomplish macro-linguistic tasks. Other authors have highlighted strategies for developing students' academic and study skills in such programmes (Benesch, 2001; Dudley-Evans, 2002; Hyland, 2000; Lea and Street, 1998).

### ***Rationale for the study***

As suitable evidence of language proficiency for undergraduate programmes, our university accepts students with an overall IELTS band score of 6.0, or an overall B grade in the English for Academic Study (EAS) programme, which is offered by the Department of English and Applied Linguistics. EAS students who achieve an A grade overall are automatically accepted into graduate or postgraduate programmes (subject to other relevant qualifications) while those who achieve an average C grade are accepted for certificate or diploma courses. However, as far as we are aware, there has been no formal comparative study of points of similarity and areas of divergence between IELTS and pre-sessional programmes such as EAS.

In terms of the knowledge and skills acquired by students who have completed such a course, Banerjee and Wall (2006) have produced a final assessment checklist for reporting student performance on a pre-sessional EAP course, which at the same time provides a detailed student profile. This is a somewhat unwieldy profile for the purposes, for example, of those who administer enrolments, and does not claim to provide a comparison with a student awarded a suitable IELTS score.

The purpose of our study, therefore, was to identify the similarities and differences between IELTS and assessments in the full-time EAS programme, in terms of what and how knowledge, skills and learning are assessed as evidence of students' language proficiency for university entry. The study investigates these comparisons by means of features for analysis derived from a synthesis of approaches adopted in previous studies, and aims to identify and profile the knowledge, skills, and competencies of students who complete tests or assessments successfully in each case. It was anticipated that findings would be informative for those involved in programme design as well as those who deal with entry requirements for tertiary institutions.

### **Study design and methods**

Research procedures involved document retrieval and content analysis of documents. The researchers agreed on allocation of responsibilities for data collection and analysis in the four main testing or assessment areas. One researcher was responsible for the IELTS Speaking test and the EAS Oral Interaction and Presentation Skills paper. Another was responsible for the IELTS Listening test and the Listening and Note-taking paper. A team of two worked on the IELTS Reading test and the Reading and Vocabulary Development paper; two worked on the IELTS Writing test and the Writing and Research Skills paper.

Publicly available documents relating to IELTS tests were downloaded and printed from the IELTS website ([www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)), in addition to relevant documents available in hard copy. Further documents including task instructions and marking criteria relating to the EAS assessments across the four papers were copied.

The framework for analysis of test and assessment documents was based on the features identified as relevant in previous studies (see below), and results in terms of

similarities and differences were presented in tabular form. Data in each area was then checked by a researcher who was not involved in the initial document analysis or in identification of relevant features in that area. In each case, these researchers reviewed the tabulated data independently of the first researcher(s), and where differences in interpretation or queries occurred, a conjoint re-assessment was carried out until agreement was reached. The final stage involved standardisation of categories of data for tabular presentation.

Earlier studies have established effective approaches to analysis and interpretation of material relating to academic assessments at this level. The analysis and classification of task types and features in this study was based upon a synthesis of relevant features adopted in published studies that have analysed academic assessment needs and tasks. Features included:

- location: whether tasks were conducted in or out of class (Carson, 2001; Hale et al., 1996)
- length of tasks (Hale et al., 1996)
- genres of task response (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Hale et al., 1996; Moore & Morton, 2005; Turner, 2005) and task prompt type (Carson, 2001; Turner, 2005)
- topics (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Horowitz, 1986)
- student preparation required (Carson, 2001)
- types of source texts or information sources provided or needed (Horowitz, 1986; Moore & Morton, 2005)
- implied cognitive demands such as recognition, retrieval of information, analysing relationships between data (Carson, 2001; Hale et al., 1996; Turner, 2005)

and for writing tasks in particular:

- rhetorical tasks such as narration and description (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Moore & Morton, 2005; Turner, 2005)
- patterns of exposition such as classification, definition (Hale et al., 1996)
- associated skills such as paraphrasing, summarising and synthesis (Turner, 2005)

The methodology enabled the researchers to contrast and compare overall features of IELTS and EAS, as well as allowing for identification of key similarities and differences between IELTS tests and EAS assessments in each of the skills areas.

## **Results of study and discussion**

### *Overview of similarities and differences between IELTS and EAS*

All the IELTS tests have to be completed in one day at any accredited IELTS Test Centre. The durations of the tests are one hour for Writing, one hour for Reading,

approximately 30 minutes for Listening and 15 minutes for Speaking. There is no break between the Reading, Writing and Listening tests although, sometimes, students may take the Speaking test a week after the other tests. Candidates receive a result sheet of the IELTS band scores, including the names of the test centre and the date on which the tests were taken. In terms of preparation, there is a wide range of preparation materials available for self-study and IELTS preparation courses are run by a number of institutions. These are of short, intensive duration of between four and eight weeks, and focus on test-taking strategies related to IELTS task types.

EAS, on the other hand, is a 15-week semester-long full-time course of 16 hours per week of class contact time. The tests or assessments for the four papers comprise two to three assessments, which include both in-class tests and out-of-class projects (Group Research Project and reading journal entries) undertaken in the course of the semester.

Both IELTS and EAS test tasks are assessed independently according to set criteria. IELTS tasks are assessed by trained and certificated IELTS examiners and frequently moderated by overseas trained IELTS examiners, while EAS papers are marked by the lecturers responsible for each paper and moderated within the teaching team. At the end of the semester, students who complete the programme successfully are awarded the university's Certificate in English for Academic Study.

Main general points of similarity between the IELTS Academic Module and EAS are in the areas of writing and reading – both IELTS and EAS test academic writing and reading skills. However, while EAS assesses academic skills in terms of listening and speaking, IELTS use the same generic listening and speaking tests for both the Academic and General Modules, which results in some significant differences. One of these is the fact that some EAS assessments are integrated across skills areas – oral presentations relate to a written research project. A further significant difference is that EAS assessments are designed to act as a prompt for learning and to foster learning, including the provision of feedback on student performance, as opposed to being solely an assessment of knowledge acquisition (Boud, 1998).

Another major difference between IELTS and EAS testing is in the development and use of digital technologies in EAS as part of both its formative and summative assessments. Writing assessments have a component where students use Excel to make graphs and Word to write up a group research project. Reading tests include reading from software programmes such as Issues in English (Protea Textware, 2004). Speaking assessments include giving a presentation using PowerPoint, and Listening tests utilise both PowerPoint presentations for note-taking and also student postings of recordings using Audacity or Windows Recorder.

#### *Summary of key similarities and differences in the four skills areas*

With regard to points of similarity and areas of divergence between IELTS and EAS assessments, the researchers investigated a range of assessment features as noted above as well as weighting of tasks and marking criteria. The table in Appendix 1

shows key similarities and differences between IELTS and EAS assessments. In doing so it also presents a profile of student knowledge, skills and capabilities tested by IELTS and achieved by students who successfully complete the EAS programme.

### **IELTS Listening and EAS Listening and Note-Taking**

There are similarities in the type of listening tasks required of students. Both IELTS and EAS require students to listen for gist, specific information, main points, opinion and overall comprehension. Each also utilises a range of question types such as filling in forms and tables, multiple choice, short answer and sentence completion. Both tests use tapes or CD-ROMs of recorded monologues or dialogues.

However, there are a number of key differences. The length of the EAS listening assessment is twice that of IELTS. Additionally, the academic listening tasks in IELTS cover only half of the 30-minute test as general listening is also covered in IELTS. Therefore academic listening in IELTS is 15 minutes compared with 60 minutes for EAS. This additional time in EAS offers greater assessment opportunities for determining student ability in listening to lectures and student PowerPoint presentations, and note-taking, which are necessary skills for academic study. Another difference is that the IELTS test is done in a language centre where students sit in a classroom with people they do not know, and with an administrator they do not know.

A further difference is that in IELTS students hear the recording once whereas in EAS students hear the recording twice. Justification for allowing students to listen twice relates to the notion of anxiety, which as Krashen (1982) points out contributes to the formation of an affective filter. Koba (2000) explains that anxious students may have difficulty in discriminating sounds and structures and in catching meaning. Field (1998) asserts that listening to a recording twice is acceptable because listening to a tape in a classroom is a highly artificial situation and also because listening to a strange voice may require a process of adjustment. Thus EAS testing accommodates the problems associated with a different, recorded voice by allowing students to listen twice to the recording. IELTS tests may cause more anxiety not only because students are aware that they will hear the recording only once, but also due to the unfamiliarity of the test administrators and fellow candidates, and the high stakes associated with the grade awarded.

The final major difference is in the marking of spelling and grammar errors. In IELTS an unspecified number of marks are deducted for these kinds of errors. In EAS answers are marked as incorrect if they are deemed to be listening errors. Spelling or grammar errors are not marked as incorrect because we argue that we are testing students' listening rather than writing skills.

### **IELTS Reading and EAS Reading and Vocabulary Development**

Similarities between the IELTS test and EAS assessments include task types and question types such as multiple choice, and sentence completion. However there are

a number of significant differences. Total IELTS assessment time is one hour, whereas EAS reading assessments total four and a half hours' in-class assessment, and further out-of-class work involved in assessments made up of several components. The IELTS test is similar to the two-hour EAS Assessment One (50%) in terms of task types and marking criteria. However, the EAS assessment involves additional skills foci, including the identification, extraction and use of relevant material from a linear text and its inclusion in a non-linear text. There is also a more specific focus on the identification and retrieval from memory of correct word forms, use of prepositions and verb tenses, as well as a focus on the meaning and function of referents.

EAS Assessment Two (50%), however, consists of ten separate in-class vocabulary tests involving the selection from a given list of academic vocabulary (selected from Coxhead, 1998) and the manipulation of vocabulary such as word form and tense (20%). In addition, the second assessment requires students to write two journal entries (24%). The first is based on a student-selected reading and involves paraphrasing and summarizing of key points, and the writer's point of view, as well as detailed vocabulary research work relating to self-selected vocabulary from the text (U, 2001). The text for the second journal entry is nominated by the lecturer and is selected from academic sources. A further 6% is allocated for computer laboratory-based vocabulary work.

#### **IELTS Speaking and EAS Oral Interaction and Presentation Skills**

Key areas of similarity include the skills foci tested, in particular pronunciation and clarity of speaking, vocabulary range and appropriacy of use, grammatical competency including range and accuracy, as well as fluency and coherence. Similarly, some of the range of cognitive skills required to complete assessments are comparable. These include the ability to analyse and understand questions, to identify information relevant to responses and organise this logically and according to topic, and the ability to present a point of view.

A significant area of difference is the genre of spoken texts. While the IELTS test focuses on each candidate individually, and their ability to answer questions and give a brief monologue on a general topic, the two EAS assessments are group assessments and thus reflect the demands of academic group exercises and the use of academic vocabulary. However, each student's individual, assessed contribution across the two EAS assessments equates to the total assessment time in IELTS of 10 to 15 minutes per candidate. Both EAS assessments are related to each other in terms of the development of a particular (researched) topic area, focusing on a prepared group discussion and group presentation. The group discussion assessment involves assessment of additional skills including turn-taking and politeness strategies. The group presentation is linked to a research project in the writing paper and involves the assessment of presentation skills as well as speaking skills. A further difference is that student preparation in terms of both secondary and primary research is involved in the EAS assessments.

### **IELTS Writing and EAS Writing and Research Skills**

With regard to the Writing test of the IELTS Academic Module, the test format consists of two tasks. Task 1 is a 20-minute, 150-word paragraph-based writing task. Candidates are asked to describe some information related to the given graphs, tables, diagrams, charts or maps and to present a description in their own words. EAS in-class Assessment Two Task 1 is similar, but also requires students to comment and/or provide possible explanations. IELTS Task 2 is a 40-minute, 250-word short essay response to a given prompt provided in the form of a question or statement. Candidates are required to write responses and ideas supported by evidence and examples which may be drawn from their own experience, to either present the solution to a problem, justify an opinion, or compare and contrast evidence. This is similar to the 300-word short essay in in-class EAS Assessment One and Assessment Two Task 2. However, in the latter assessment ideas are based on given texts, and in-text references and a reference list are required. In EAS Assessment Three, a group research report assignment, preparation includes primary and secondary research (involving library database searches) and the citing of information from source texts, with appropriate APA referencing and reference list.

### **Conclusion**

The comparative analysis undertaken in this study shows that similarities occur in features for assessment and between some task and question types (particularly in listening, reading and oral skills). Key differences relate to genres of assessment task, such as the group discussion, the oral presentation and the research report in EAS. Additional academic skills involved in EAS include the focus on vocabulary learning and on word and grammatical form, primary research skills, citation and referencing. Group assessments are integrated across skill areas in EAS, as opposed to individual, discrete skills testing in IELTS. Further significant areas of difference are the degree of preparation required of EAS students, the role of out-of-class assessments, in particular, as prompts for learning (U & Allan-Rae, 2003; U & Toh, 2006), and in the use of digital technology in assessment.

It is hoped that the findings will inform colleagues in a number of areas, including EAS programme staff, with regard to possible curriculum improvements and changes. As a result of the study, for example, the EAS teaching team has adapted the group discussion assessment in the Oral Interaction and Presentation Skills paper. Instead of preparing a specific discussion topic for this assessment, student groups now choose four topics from a list agreed between the class and the lecturer. On the day of the assessment the group is given one of these to discuss. It is felt that this change brings the EAS assessment closer to IELTS in terms of the level of spontaneity involved in students' oral contribution and responses, while retaining the group discussion.



Such information about the knowledge, skills, and competencies of students who successfully complete the pre-sessional EAS programme and those who have completed the IELTS tests will be of benefit to discipline-specific academic staff and administrators within our university, and other institutions who accept students from the course onto their discipline-specific programmes. The findings may also be useful to colleagues at other tertiary institutions involved in designing and teaching programmes that prepare students for academic study at this level. Equally, the comparative data, which provides a clearer understanding of students' capabilities and of possible future disciplinary needs, may also help to inform a wider debate about the issue of language entry criteria.

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## Appendix 1

Profile of Key Similarities and Differences between IELTS and EAS Assessment of Student Knowledge, Skills and Capabilities

<b>IELTS</b>	<b>IELTS &amp; EAS</b>	<b>EAS Reading &amp; Vocabulary Development Module/Paper</b>
<b>Academic Reading Module</b>		
Read given, non-specialist, general interest texts  - identify writer's views/ claims	Read & answer a range of question types, e.g. multiple choice, gap-fill, text completion, matching & short answer questions to:  - identify main points & detail - locate specific information - extract relevant information - extract information from a text & insert into diagram/table	Read given academic text and: - read for gist - classify information according to salient criteria - distinguish main idea from supporting detail - make inferences - differentiate opinions, attitudes & facts - identify writer's purpose, target audience & info sources  Out-of class journal entries re (1) student-selected article & (2) teacher-selected academic text: - paraphrase & summarise - identify writer's stance  Academic vocabulary (Coxhead's Academic Word List, 1998); - identify & adapt lexical form - investigate unfamiliar vocabulary for meaning, part of speech, pronunciation, tense, collocation  Complete gap-fill vocabulary tests of memory, retrieval & application  Use of digital technologies

<b>IELTS Listening Module</b>	<b>IELTS / EAS</b>	<b>EAS Listening &amp; Note Taking Module/Paper</b>
Listen to conversation, monologue texts with transactional purpose, & discussion in an academic context	Listen & answer various question types for overall comprehension, gist, specific information, main ideas, and speaker's attitude /opinion, and: - complete form/notes/table/flowchart/summary - answer multiple choice questions - write short-answer / complete given sentences - label plan/map/diagram - classify or match information	Listen to lectures, students' PowerPoint presentation, informal study-related dialogues and: - take notes - complete cloze - rate answers as true/false - listen for discourse markers  Use of digital technologies
<b>IELTS Speaking Module</b>	<b>IELTS / EAS</b>	<b>EAS Oral Interaction &amp; Presentation Skills Paper</b>
Individual response to open questions; descriptive monologue; dialogue about general, familiar topics	Identify & organise relevant information logically & cohesively; analyse & understand questions; present point of view  Assessed for: - pronunciation, clarity, fluency, vocabulary range, appropriateness (register), coherence - grammatical competency, range, structures, & accuracy; presentation of point of view	Contribute to prepared group discussion & prepared group presentation re research project; respond to student questions  Primary research of topics, use secondary, academic source texts, present project, analysis, results & conclusions  Additionally assessed for: presentation structure & organization, engagement with audience, turn-taking, politeness & interruption strategies; development & use of visual aids, management of group, transition between speakers & questions and answers  Group work, note-making skills

<b>IELTS Academic Writing Module</b>	<b>IELTS &amp; EAS</b>	<b>EAS Writing &amp; Research Skills Paper</b>
150 word, 1-2 paragraph description of graphic/tabulated data; 250 word short essay – convince on basis of own experience & world knowledge, by response to prompt	Task achievement, coherence & cohesion, lexical resource, grammatical range & accuracy, variation in sentence structures  Analyse data, provide reasons/ solution/comparisons/ opinion/ point of view/evidence & examples; evaluate pros & cons	300 word short essay: provide reasons/solution 150 word paragraph-based data interpretation & description: provide comment/explanations of data 300 word essay: present argument using referenced info cited from given texts 2000 word out-of class group research report  Additionally assessed for: register, accuracy of in-text referencing & reference lists, generic structure  Explain, define, classify, recommend, argue, summarise, cite, paraphrase, quote directly & indirectly  Group work; electronic database searches; word processing