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1950-89 - the IELTS solution

Alan Davies

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Assessing Academic English

Testing English proficiency 1950–89:
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For George Perren

Acknowledgements

Describing what happened in history seems an easier task than explaining why it happened. But even the ‘what’ is by no means clear. This account of academic language proficiency testing in the UK over the last half century or so is very much a personal account, the ‘what’ just as much as the ‘why’. For much of that time I have been involved and when not involved I have been interested. In addition to my own recollection and no doubt prejudice I have been fortunate to have had help from a number of colleagues, most of whom are mentioned in Chapter 5. Here I would like to express my special thanks to Nick Charge, Mike Milanovic, Nick Saville and Lynda Taylor for their encouragement and professional support. I am particularly grateful to Lynda Taylor for her patience in shepherding me through successive drafts of the text and for taking responsibility for the section in Chapter 5 recording the development of IELTS.

Alan Davies
March 2007

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Series Editors' note

Alan Davies is ideally placed to trace the development of the assessment of academic English language proficiency from the 1950s to the 1990s having been deeply and personally involved for the entire period. This volume is a fascinating historical and personal account of an interesting and significant period in the development of language testing and assessment. The author takes us on a journey from the pre-scientific 50s through the psychometric-structuralist 60s and 70s and on into the communicative 80s and 90s, describing with great clarity the rationale for a number of developments and surveying the wide variety of people and organisations involved.

The journey begins in the earliest days of formal academic English assessment with the gradual emergence in the 1960s of important testing initiatives within British university contexts, initiatives such as the English Language Battery (ELBA) and the English Proficiency Test Battery (EPTB) – often referred to as the ‘Davies test’. These endeavours, together with other developments such as the creation of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in the USA, paved the way for more complex and ambitious attempts to devise appropriate tools for measuring the English language proficiency needed in academic contexts in the decades that followed.

Not surprisingly, great attention is paid by Davies to the development of the English Language Testing Service (ELTS) and the subsequent development of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which have changed the face of academic English language assessment over the past 25 years. Brendan Carroll’s work for the British Council in developing ELTS in the 1970s represented a real departure from the structurally focused approach of previous decades. Drawing on the work of Munby and others, Carroll approached test development in a very practically oriented and needs-based way. Carroll and his collaborators took on the challenge of defining the communicative demands faced by foreign students coming to study in the UK and then set about developing instruments designed to measure whether individuals possessed adequate language skills to deal with these demands. ELTS was a modular, subject-specific and diagnostic measure unlike anything that had gone before. Additionally, the team set out to define the nature and duration of the language courses that would be required to bring test takers up to the required standard. Such a definition is still sought today though we now recognise how difficult it is to determine given the complex inter-relationship of the many factors involved.

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Davies himself was heavily involved with Clive Criper in the validation of ELTS and was thus able to observe first hand not only the spectacular success of ELTS in relation to its innovative design but also the enormous problems and issues that this very success created. It was during this period that Cambridge Assessment (formerly known as the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate – UCLES) began to take on a role in the production of ELTS, a role which gradually grew through the 1980s to become very significant in the 1990s.

The ELTS Validation Study confirmed that the test battery was in need of further development. While high in face validity, it posed enormous practical, measurement and theoretical difficulties. The University of Lancaster was commissioned to undertake this redevelopment and the project was led by Charles Alderson and Caroline Clapham. Initially simply a redevelopment of ELTS, the project became IELTS when the International Development Program (IDP) of Australian Universities and Colleges joined the British Council and Cambridge Assessment to form the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). IELTS thus took on a truly international nature and became more than just a test to access UK tertiary education. With the involvement of the Australians it came to provide access to tertiary education in Australia and New Zealand and then, through its General Training Modules for the most part, became increasingly used in migration in these and other regions of the world.

The creation of the first version of IELTS in 1989 retained many of the innovative characteristics of ELTS but made the entire system more practical and manageable. The six Academic Modules became three and the separate study skills section disappeared. The measurement characteristics were focused on and improved, and greater attention was paid to the construct validity of the test.

IELTS survived in that form for five years but it soon became clear that the practical difficulties of successfully equating modules relating to different academic areas, while reduced, remained extremely problematic. The Lancaster team was aware of these difficulties as demonstrated by Caroline Clapham's PhD work (published in 1996 as Volume 4 in the Studies in Language Testing series – *The Development of IELTS: A study of the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension*), but the team was not in a position to influence the users to the point where they would readily accept a single academic stream. This point only came when Cambridge Assessment was able to demonstrate the difficulties of test production to the IELTS partners and propose a viable alternative to the three Academic Module system based on evidence collected over time. 1995 therefore saw the second main variant of IELTS where candidates could either take an academic stream or one related to general training and migration. Davies does not go into the development of further variants of IELTS in any detail, given that these are

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covered either by available documentation or by further volumes in this series. Volume 19 (*IELTS Collected Papers: Research in speaking and writing assessment*, edited by Lynda Taylor and Peter Falvey, 2007), for example, traces developments in the assessment of speaking and writing in IELTS; Roger Hawkey in Volume 24 (*Impact Theory and Practice: Studies of the IELTS test and Progetto Lingue 2000*, 2006) examines the impact of IELTS, as does Anthony Green in Volume 25 (*IELTS Washback in Context: Preparation for academic writing in higher education*, 2007).

As Davies points out, the international partnership which underpins IELTS is one of the factors which has contributed to the test's enduring success, and it is important here to acknowledge the substantial contribution made by the two organisations in partnership with Cambridge ESOL. The British Council was of course there at the outset and has always played a key role in the learning, teaching and assessment of international students who come to study in the UK. Without the foresight and commitment of the British Council over several decades there would have been no development of EPTB in the 1960s and ELTS in the 1970s. The collaborative relationship centred on ELTS that emerged in 1975 between the British Council and Cambridge Assessment (then UCLES) was significantly enhanced from 1987 onwards with the involvement of IDP. Partnership with IDP enabled the creation of IELTS and undoubtedly brought a new dynamism and an expanded perspective, establishing the international status of the test and ensuring its global reach in the future. Today these two partners both manage their respective test centre networks across the world and are the 'face' of IELTS for many test users; together with Cambridge ESOL, they share fully in the operational management and strategic direction of IELTS.

As Davies' account makes clear, research – both internally initiated and externally commissioned – has always been at the heart of the ELTS/IELTS story, and much of the research and validation work undertaken to develop ELTS, and later IELTS, is summarised or referred to here. Large-scale proficiency tests invariably attract considerable interest from the language testing and assessment research community, and since 1995 this has been acknowledged by the IELTS partners through the annual grant funding opportunities offered by the IELTS Joint-funded Research Program. Outcomes from such studies not only provide important test validation evidence and inform ongoing development of the test, but they also contribute to our wider knowledge and understanding in the fields of applied linguistics and language assessment. Interested readers are referred to recently published collections of research studies in Volume 19 of *Studies in Language Testing* (eds Taylor and Falvey, 2007), and IELTS Research Reports – Volumes 6 and 7, 2006 and 2007.

Alan Davies' authoritative account of the development of academic English language assessment over half a century is greatly enhanced by the

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wealth of appendices which have been brought together in this volume. These include facsimile copies of the original test versions for ELTS 1980 and IELTS 1989, as well as other documentation which casts light on the actual processes of test design, development and delivery; additional appendices show materials relating to other important tests from the period under examination, such as ELBA, EPTB and TEEP.

In conclusion, this volume helps us to understand why IELTS has become so very successful over its 17-year history. It represents a coming together of significant work in language testing over a great many years, drawing together the different traditions and approaches in such a way as to provide a reliable, valid and highly fit-for-purpose testing system.

Michael Milanovic and Cyril Weir
Cambridge – August 2007

Abbreviations

AEB	Associated Examining Board
ALTE	Association of Language Testers in Europe
ARELS	Association of Recognised English Language Schools
ASS	Arts and Social Science
AULC	American University Language Center
BC	The British Council
BEC	Business English Certificates
CB	Computer-based
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COE	Commonwealth Office of Education
CPE	Certificate of Proficiency in English
DAFE	Development, Administration, Finance and Economics
E2L	English as a Second Language
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
EEFS	English Examination for Foreign Students
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELBA	English Language Battery
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ELT	English Language Teaching
ELTS	English Language Testing Service
EPTB	English Proficiency Test Battery
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ESP	English for Specific Purposes
ETIC	English Teaching Information Centre
ETS	Educational Testing Service
IALS	Institute for Applied Language Studies
IDP	International Development Program
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
ILTA	International Language Testing Association
JMB	Joint Matriculation Board
LMS	Life and Medical Sciences
LSP	Language for Specific Purposes
MCQ	Multiple Choice Question

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Abbreviations

PST	Physical Sciences and Technology
QPP	Question Paper Production
TEC	Technical English Certificate
TEEP	Test of English for Educational Purposes
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication
TSE	Test of Spoken English
TWE	Test of Written English
UCH	Unitary Competence Hypothesis
UCLES	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate
VRIP	Validity, Reliability, Impact, Practicality