

Read, J. (Ed) *Post-admission Language Assessment of University Students*.

Switzerland: Springer. 2016. Pp 269.

With increasing linguistic diversity among student populations, universities today face unique challenges in ensuring that students from non-English speaking backgrounds have the tools and help that they need to successfully complete their studies. While tests like IELTS and TOEFL allow students to demonstrate a general proficiency level adequate for university entrance, these tests do not provide students with the detailed information needed to identify potential areas of weakness in the academic context and to remedy them.

One method of identifying students whose language skills put them at risk of failure is the post-entry language assessment (PELA), the subject of a new collection of articles edited by John Read, *Post-admission Language Assessment of University Students* (2016). In the introduction, Read provides the historic context of increased use in PELAs, highlighting Monash University academic Bob Birrell's 2006 study showing a trend of international graduates of Australian universities who were unable to achieve the 6.0 IELTS score needed for a permanent residence or working visa (Birrell, 2006). Birrell viewed the university system as one which more often lowers the English language demands for low proficiency students rather than 'requiring a formal English test and then demanding supplemental English courses for students that are deficient' (Birrell, 2006:62). While the use of PELAs was not entirely new at this time, the ten years hence have seen an increase of their use globally, with an increasing number of universities stressing language support as a key responsibility towards international and domestic students.

Post-admission Language Assessment of University Students outlines the issues and concerns that create tension in the use of PELAs by presenting a survey of a number of different PELAs currently in use around the globe. A number of common themes emerge. As diagnostic tests, PELAs need to be able to accurately identify discrete areas in need of improvement and deliver this information coherently to students and other stakeholders. To do this, universities must make a number of decisions that balance the efficiency of such tests with the cost of administering them. Many PELAs are developed in-house so that test design can be tailored to capture evidence of specific skills, language and otherwise, valued in the context of use. This, too, requires resources and expertise in test development. Shorter and more easily administered tests (e.g. online)

can be delivered to larger groups, but may lack the comprehensive feedback of longer and more involved tests, which, due to costs, may only be targeted to the most at-risk of student.

The volume is less a how-to manual and more a set of discussions of 'works in progress'. Full evaluation of PELAs requires lengthy periods of study, following students through their studies and measuring long-term outcomes, and so for many of the tests discussed in the volume, the future will reveal a more detailed picture. What the volume does present the reader with is a clear picture of how various institutions around the world are approaching the use of PELAs and the variety of forms that PELAs can take. For educators and test developers, this perspective is particularly important, as PELAs are often home-grown tests, and as such, there is much more room for involvement by educators themselves, in both development and implementation, as compared to high-stakes proficiency tests. A strong understanding of the various issues associated with PELAs will help anyone involved in diagnostic testing, feedback and follow-through to approach the task with a more nuanced perspective.

The volume is organized into three sections, each focusing on a different aspect of PELA design and use. The first section looks at PELAs for undergraduate students in the context of Australia, Canada and Hong Kong. The second section focuses on the particular needs of doctoral students and how some of these needs can be diagnosed with PELAs, with two accounts from the United States and New Zealand. The final section looks at issues in PELA test design in the linguistic and social contexts of tertiary education in Oman and South Africa.

The first section, focused on diagnosing undergraduate needs, highlights the need for clear information on the decisions and consequences following PELA use. In the first article, Knoch, Elder and O'Hagan describe the validation process of the Post-admission Assessment of Language (PAAL), a PELA developed at the University of Melbourne. PAAL is intended for universal testing, targeting speakers of all languages and backgrounds through quick and convenient online delivery. According to Knoch, Elder and O'Hagan, while effective as a way to identify at-risk students, PAAL feedback does not seem to currently provide enough detailed information to point students in a clear remedial direction. Further, because such remediation is not a requirement but merely a suggestion as university policy, not all students who could benefit take advantage of opportunities to improve.

Similar problems emerge in Li's exploration of the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPA), developed at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and Urmston, Raquel and Aryadoust's examination of the Diagnostic English Language Tracking Assessment (DELTA), used at various Hong Kong Universities. Both tests are administered to students more than once, and are intended to help students shape and track their progress. The studies reveal that test takers of both tests were sometimes unable to make use of the test scores or suggested independent learning resources, and teachers were sometimes unclear of their expected role in this process.

Fox, Haggerty and Artemeva's extensive discussion of a holistic approach to language development taken by Carleton University's (Canada) Faculty of Engineering offers an example of good practice. In addition to the development of a PELA, an entire dedicated support centre was created and staffed in part by the students themselves. Fox, Haggerty and Artemeva explain that the PELA was crafted to include not only diagnostic information on language ability, but also skills related to engineering like fundamental mathematics skills. To ensure universal application, the PELA, once validated, was embedded into the coursework, and to encourage students to act upon feedback, a study centre for the students was created. According to Fox, Haggerty and Artemeva, student engagement in the process significantly reduced the perceived stigma of needing remedial help, and students saw the centre as a place not only to get help, but to meet people, socialize, and talk about the subject matter. The programme has had considerable success, in no small part due to the university policy that creates an ideal environment for PELAs to be fully useful.

The second section of the book explores a growing area of attention, including the use of PELAs for post-graduate work. Yan, Thirakunkovit, Kauper and Ginther's discussion of test taker perceptions of the Oral English Proficiency Test (OEPT), used to screen international teaching assistants (TAs) at Purdue University, explores how test-takers view and prepare for the test, which is designed with the TA context in the forefront. The OEPT is an unusual PELA as it focuses exclusively on oral ability, a skill that is essential in the role as teaching assistant. The chapter touches on many aspects of test preparation, delivery and consequences, and evaluates the use of semi-direct computer-mediated assessment of speaking through the test-takers' eyes. Read and von Randow's discussion of the use of the University of Auckland's Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA) for international PhD candidates explores a range of issues involving academic and socially-focused language contexts specific for this group of students. Following 20 doctoral candidates, the study records their

reaction not only to the DELNA itself, but to the mandated remedial work that may result from a low score. Read and von Randow note that the combination of a compulsory PELA and required follow-up have had positive outcomes for this group of students, who felt better prepared not only to write their thesis, but to communicate effectively with their supervisors and peers, essential but often lacking skills for this cohort.

The final section of the book looks at issues in PELA test design. Roche, Harrington, Sinha and Denman discuss the use of a streamlined computer-based vocabulary recognition test as a resource-efficient way to identify at-risk students in English-medium programmes in Oman. The results of test piloting support the idea that vocabulary recognition can be a predictor of academic English proficiency. However, the efficiency of the test comes at the cost of clear diagnostic information, and the study highlights the need for test takers themselves to be aware of the purpose and consequences of the test. This study is followed by two articles focused on the unique historical, cultural and linguistic issues that influence the design and use of PELAs in South Africa. Weideman, Patterson and Pot explore the appropriacy and inclusiveness of the construct underlying the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) and its Afrikaans counterpart, the Toets van Akademiese Geletterdheidsvlakke (TAG), and how this construct may need adjustment as the surrounding context of test use, e.g. the needs of students, changes over the years. Rambiritch and Weideman expand on the use of PELAs in South Africa with a narrative covering the development of the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS). The authors focus on the need for transparency, ensuring that test takers, test users and the general public have a clear idea of not only the purpose of the test, but what to expect when taking the test. They highlight the development of sample materials for potential candidates, stressing that such materials were not commonly available for similar tests in the South African context. Additionally, the authors discuss the importance of clearly outlining the use of the test to all stakeholders, and ensuring that appropriate remedial avenues are available to students.

As emphasized in this volume, a crucial element in the successful use of PELAs is clear follow-up and follow-through. This can be difficult, as funds are often limited and ensuring adequate resources for at-risk students requires money, time and planning. But without this, PELAs are not serving their purpose. Read reminds us that 'post-admission language assessment is not an end in itself, but a means of encouraging, if not requiring students at risk of poor academic performance to enhance their academic

language proficiency[.]’ This sentiment is echoed in Knoch, Elder and O’Hagan’s belief that PELA use must be ‘embedded in a more enlightened university policy which places a premium on the provision of opportunities for English language development[.]’ In the volume’s concluding chapter, Read highlights both the practical considerations of balancing resources with outcomes with the reminder that language support is a central responsibility that universities have to their students. An effective diagnostic instrument cannot reach its goals without strong institutional support.

Review by Michelle Czajkowski

The University of Melbourne

References

Birrell, B. (2006). Implications of low English standards among overseas students at Australian universities. *People and place*, 14(4), 53.