English testing for skilled migration in Australia: The "power" of test takers in shaping constructs and consequences

Kellie Frost, Jason Fan, Tim McNamara

School of Languages and Linguistics,
University of Melbourne

kmfrost@unimelb.edu.au

OVERVIEW

The way English test scores operate within skilled migration policy in Australia and the "validity chaos" this creates

The test experiences of accounting graduates seeking permanent residency in Australia, and the role of test taker agency in generating score meanings and policy consequences

TEST PURPOSES IN SKILLED MIGRATION POLICY

Skills assessment

Professional bodies (CPA, IPA, ICA) use scores as evidence of that individuals possess English level needed to enter the accounting profession (IELTS 7/ PTE A 65)

Allocation of permanent residency rights

Government uses scores within Points Test to select migrants most likely to gain employment in areas of skill shortage in the labour market (IELTS 6 – 8/ PTE A 50 - 79)

Recruitment

Big Four Accounting firms use scores to screen potential recruits on basis of likelihood of gaining PR, to mitigate risk of recruits not taking up positions (IELTS 8/ PTE A 79)

ENGLISH SCORES IN THE POINTS TEST

Age:	
At least 1 but less than 25 years	25
At least 25 but less than 33 years	30
At least 33 but less than 40 years	25
At least 40 but less than 45 years	15
English language:	
IELTS 8/ PTE A 79	20
IELTS 7/ PTE A 65	10
Education (Australia or overseas):	
Doctorate	20
Bachelor or above	15
Trade Qualification	10
Employment:	
1 year in Australia	5
3 years in Australia	10
5 years in Australia	15

Total points needed depends on labour market supply and demand – currently 65 points

Two individuals, both with Bachelor degrees (15 points). and 3 years experience in Australia (10 points)

One who is 24 years of age needs IELTS 8

One who is 25 years of age needs IELTS 7

A 'MESSY' TEST AND POLICY SPACE

Different test purposes depending on test user intentions

Shifting and arbitrary score requirements that depend on:

- *Government predictions about labour market supply and demand*
- *How individuals fare across other points test criteria*
- *The number and profile of other applicants*

A FURTHER COMPLICATION…

IELTS (General & Academic)	Pearson Test of English (Academic)
Paper-based test	Computer delivered
Monologic & dialogic speaking tasks: Speak on a topic, discussion of topic	Monologic speaking tasks: Read aloud, repeat sentence, describe image, re-tell lecture, short answer questions
Summary of visual information Argument based text	Summary of written text Argument based text
Human raters	Machine-scored

Different constructs but assumptions of score equivalencies:
IELTS 7 = PTE A 65 = Proficient English = 10 points
IELTS 8 = PTE A 79 = Superior English = 20 points

'MISALIGNMENT' BETWEEN TEST USES AND TEST PURPOSES

None of the tests used were designed for the purpose of skilled migrant selection

No way of articulating a clear relationship between score meanings and the real world language demands migrants face, nor between score meanings and decisions made on the basis of scores => "**validity chaos**" (Fulcher & Davidson, 2009, p. 125)

A WAY FORWARD…

How do test takers perceive and negotiate this test and policy space?

Our study:

- Examined the test experiences of 22 international accounting graduates transitioning from study to employment/permanent residency

- Most were from China (18/22), all had completed or were in their final semester of Masters of Accounting degrees

- All had decided to take PTE A over IELTS or other available tests, and 2/3 had previously attempted IELTS for skilled migration purposes

TEST TAKERS SHAPING CONSTRUCTS

Those who had few connections with English speakers viewed **tests as useful evaluation tools**:

"*If we do not take the test, we don't know if we can communicate with the local people, then we don't know if we can get involved with the company, so I think the test is good*" [P12]

Those who felt well integrated and who had gained employment viewed **tests as arbitrary, gatekeeping mechanisms**:

"*If you .. got a job, you just can understand your colleagues and your managers and you just can express yourself .. it's reasonable level to be in a company. But I think the test is much more strict. I think it just con- .. wanna control the number of migrations*" [P9]

…AND TEST CONSEQUENCES

Facilitating development of work-relevant English skills:

"*I think it -- it does improve, ah .. yeah, it … it improves .. my … well, .. it forces me to speak, to speak English every day, so .. it really make an improvement for me, ah, in part of speaking English*" [P5]

Hindering engagement with work:

"*even if I .. I don't feel difficulty in communicate with people in their daily life, the test is the … difficult to get the score… I need to .. ah, use more time to .. prepare for the test, and, ah, so I will use less time to do my job. And, ah, I want to .. spend more time and .. prepare for the exam*" [P16]

DESTABILISING CONSTRUCTS

Repeat test taking => experiences of scoring inconsistencies within and across different tests

"*The IELTS speaking exam is like you face to the real person, and .. it depends on him. Maybe he will think 'I don't wanna listen to you more' and give you really low mark, yes. It depends on him. But PTE is not, because on the computer. They're really fair.*" [P7]

THE "POWER" OF TEST TAKERS

Test takers got information from and fed details of their own experiences into **dynamic information sharing networks**, influencing information and advice provided by test preparation courses, tutors and English teachers, as well as migration agencies...

"*For Chinese students, IELTS is hard for writing and speaking. But PTE, you know, writing is much easier…The agency recommended and my friend said, 'oh, it's much easier than IELTS. Don't try IELTS again'*" [P6]

"*All you need to do is keep talking, they told me that although contents matters but they don't matter too much and uh, grammar doesn't matter too much as well*" [P2]

CONCLUSIONS

Test takers generate interpretations of score meanings based on their own experiences and intentions

Test takers' interpretations of score meanings are central to generating test and policy consequences, and there is no reason to think these will align with the intentions of test developers

Test taker experiences provide a means of identifying and evaluating the ways tests actually function as policy instruments in contexts where test purpose and/or score meanings cannot be readily specified.