

Test Preparation and the Role of Language Assessment Knowledge in a Globally Mobile Era



EALTA Webinar
May 21st 2020

Dr Tony Clark
Senior Research Manager
Cambridge Assessment English



Presentation Outline

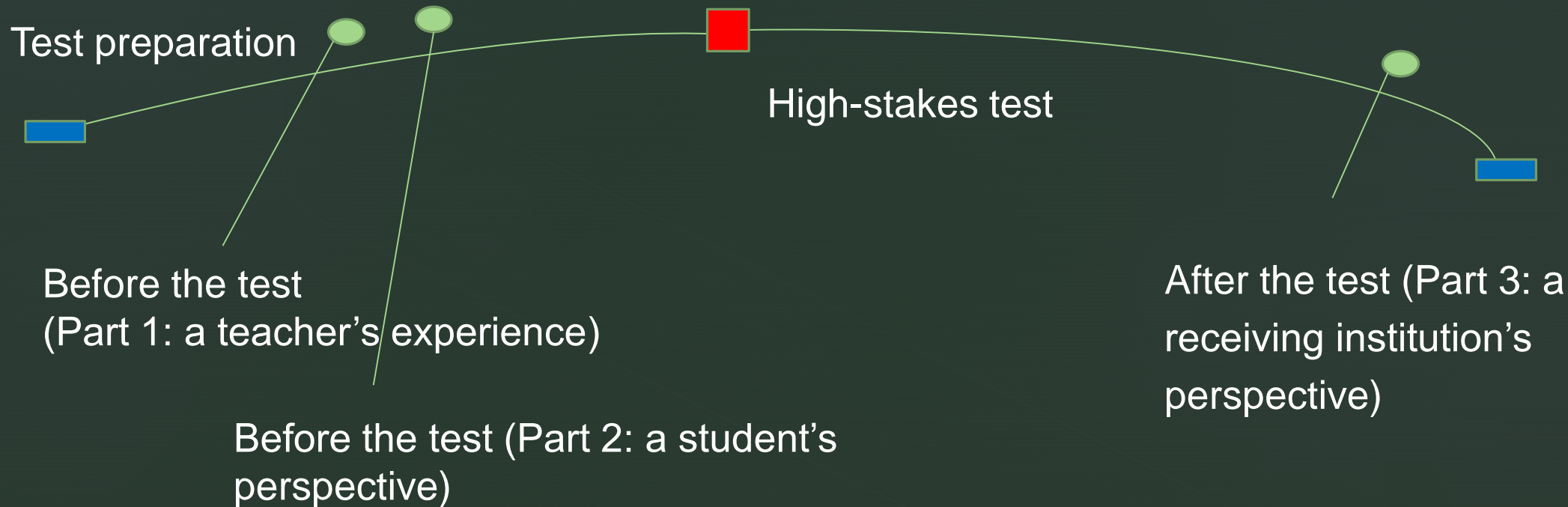
- Before the test (Part 1: a teacher's experience – personal reflection)
- Before the test (Part 2: a student's perspective)
- After the test (Part 3: a receiving institution's perspective)
- Challenges, progress, suggested directions beyond 2020*

*a look at recent literature (English language tests, IELTS and others)



Cambridge Assessment
English

Test Preparation as an Arc



Before the Test

Part 1: a teacher's experience

(Language Assessment Literacy) “concerns the assessment-related knowledge, skills, or principles held by those for whom the use or interpretation of language assessments is part of their professional responsibility.”

- Deygers & Malone, 2019, p.2

“When it comes to preparing teachers, assessment literacy should rank as a seriously close second to instructional proficiency.”

- Popham, 2011, p.280



Language Assessment Literacy for Test Preparation

- Test formats / purpose
- Scoring rubrics
- Appreciating high stakes (consequences)
- Acquiring test-taking strategies for students
- Assessment related resources
- Pedagogical approaches

Test Preparation: a teacher's experience

- Hungary (Low vision accommodations / TOEFL, IELTS, CPE - globally mobile)
 - Italy (PET, KET, FCE, the silver watch)
-
- British Council Morocco (YL's placement test, CAE)
 - British Council Japan (IELTS Intensive, Test Format Quiz, CAE)





Emerging Key Concerns

- Learning a trade in a high-stakes context
- Over-emphasis on self-development in the past
- Experience, further qualifications, a move to a more expensive language school or into management / materials writing or other
- Most teachers (European study) self-reported having received 'little' or 'no' LTA training. Purpose of testing least developed (Vogt & Tzagari, 2014).
- What teachers need to know depends on context (LAL vs the basics of test prep)
- Scoring rubrics help students understand their scores according to 50% of teachers in one large-scale survey (N=702), but 27% believed that students didn't pay attention to them (Crusan, Plakans & Gebril, 2014)
- At least *some* teachers need more support, particularly early on



Cambridge Assessment
English

Expectation, Pressure and the 'Demands of the Client'

“...the demand for test preparation classes and the expectation on behalf of the ‘client’ that they will get the results they require for international mobility. A teaching environment is created that is driven by the economic value placed on test scores.”

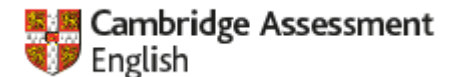
(Fulcher, 2012, p.114)

Challenge 1: Equipping teachers with the required language assessment knowledge to prepare students for high-stakes exams

- Development challenging to in-service teachers (time, funding, geography) but blended / distance learning, self-access & traditional methods is key (Malone, 2013)
- Progress made: Cambridge Delta module, Language Testing MA
- Cambridgeenglish.org (good self-directed materials)
- IELTS Teacher Essentials (BC China). How about smaller language schools?



Key question: how much do teachers need to know?



Before the Test

- **Part 2: a student's experience**

“Standardised language tests can have a crucial and long-lasting impact on the study, work and life trajectories of globally mobile people”.

(Chappell, Yates and Benson, 2019, P.8)



Cambridge Assessment
English

Chappell, Yates & Benson, 2019 IELTS Research Reports

Investigating test preparation practices: Reducing risks

Exploring a range of experiences among IELTS test-takers

- What did they know about the test?
- How did they prepare? (test-taking strategies vs daily life)

Mixed methods, large-scale questionnaires (N=679) in-depth interviews (N=27), IELTS
Candidates across Australia



Some emerging points of note*

- IELTS had high face validity for most participants, a 'benchmark'
- A good test of Academic English as intended, but the disconnect between daily English use and IELTS should be highlighted
- Scoring, repeated test attempts, test centres, timing, feedback and writing. Candidates did not know much about test-taking strategies, 50% reported no knowledge
- Advice from teachers vs scores received
- Difficulty interpreting the grading criteria (Writing)

*see IELTS Research Reports for results in full

Monitoring Levels of Practice and Impact*

“A significant implication of Winke and Lim’s (2014) investigation is that test companies should be acutely aware of the preparation practices undertaken by their clients:

“[W]e believe it is not clear if the testing companies monitor levels of practice (no practice, practice through free materials, practice through purchased materials and/or courses), nor does it appear that testing companies monitor the impact of different types of practice on scores. (p. 20)”

(*taken from Chappell, Yates and Benson, 2019, p.11)

Challenge 2: Helping candidates understand test purpose and what is expected of them creates 'buy in'

- Is it possible to reconcile teacher advice and scores received?

Possible solution: improved interpretation of **Band Descriptors** (Speaking and Writing)

- Candidates must understand more about the test purpose, create 'buy in' from an early stage, beyond face validity
- Test provider vs institutions' roles need clarified – repeated attempt issue

Key question: how much do students need to know?

Beyond the Test

Part 3: a receiving institution's perspective

“While IELTS speaking and writing band-score descriptors provide additional descriptive information for test score users, no descriptive information is provided for interpreting IELTS reading subtest scores.”

(Jang et al, 2019)



Cambridge Assessment
English

▶

Jang et al 2019 IELTS Research Reports

Improving IELTS reading test score interpretations and utilisation through cognitive diagnosis model-based skill profiling

To explore student and staff knowledge of what IELTS test scores mean (four phases, Canadian University)

Mixed methods, surveys, focus groups (students and faculty members) blended psychometric modelling.



Cambridge Assessment
English

Understanding and accommodating challenges after the test (faculty perspectives*)

- Discipline language, reading critically, interpreting academic articles, summarizing a text read, writing coherently (not just international students)
- ‘Bewilderment’ of first years / *worse* for international students
- 50% Chinese, many struggle to speak up in class for cultural reasons
- Linguistic ghettoization and ‘language silos’
- Pressure to balance admissions requirements with other universities and not ‘setting up students to fail’

*extracted according to relevance, see

IELTS Research Reports Jang et al (2019) for full list

Recommendations for test-takers and test score users*

- Seven recommendations to support reading academically (after IELTS or TOEFL)
- Devised by students

4) Challenges with reading academic materials are not just due to complex grammar or vocabulary. Texts convey meanings and views that are specific to certain cultures. When international students come from a different cultural background, they often struggle due to a lack of cultural or background knowledge.

- British newspaper political leanings - example
- My own PhD research is on this topic (see reference list, non-Western, writing)

* Excerpt from Jang et al 2019, p.44

Challenge 3: What can be expected of students?

- Progress made: Identification and exploration of post-test development required
- Recommendations for receiving institutions and test developers (Clark & Yu, forthcoming 2020, Jang et al, 2019)
- Areas of further development: stakeholders still require more language assessment knowledge (students, staff, admissions officers and more)

Key question: how much do university stakeholders need to know? Admissions officers are central here

- IELTS Stakeholder seminars (cross-party? Too important)

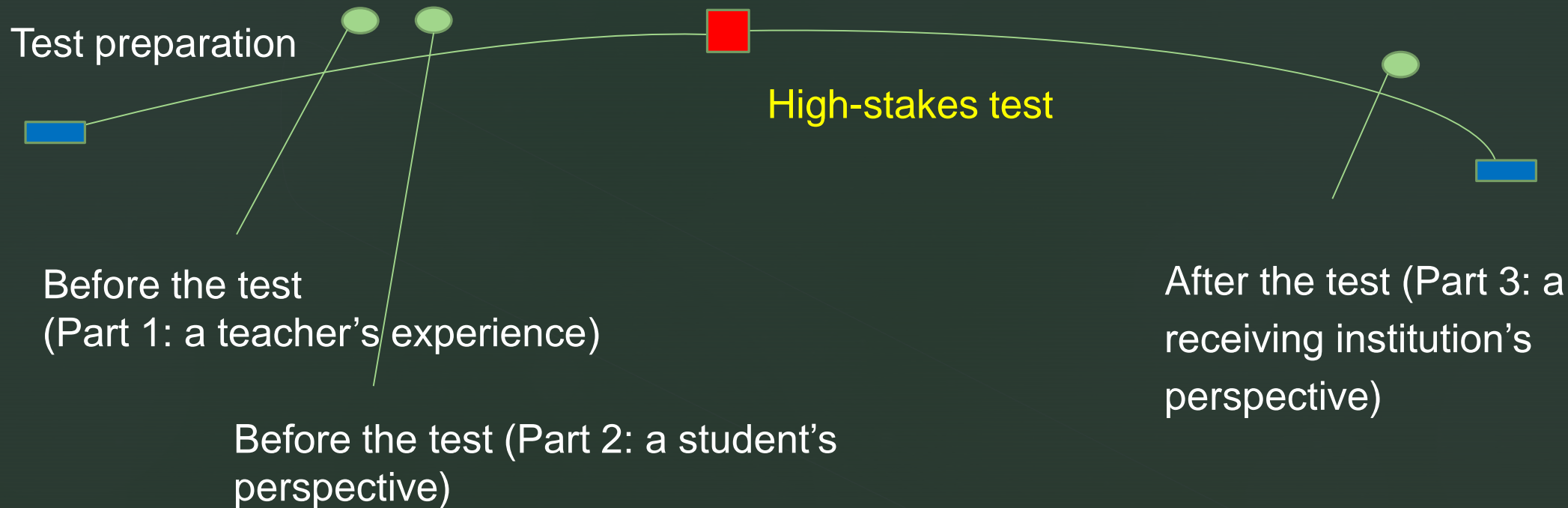
Conclusion - Positive Developments, but Work Remains to be Done

- **Challenge 1:** teacher Language Assessment Knowledge (my experience)
- **Challenge 2:** student Language Assessment Knowledge (Australia)
- **Challenge 3:** receiving institution (post-) Language Assessment knowledge (Canada)

Key question: how much do the above key stakeholders need to know?

(not *everybody* needs to know *everything*)

Test Preparation as an Arc



References

Chappell, P., Yates, L., and Benson, P. 2019. Investigating test preparation practices: Reducing risks. IELTS Research Reports Online Series, No. 3. British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia. Available at <https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/research-reports>

Clark, T. & G. Yu (forthcoming, 2020) Beyond the IELTS Test: Chinese and Japanese Postgraduate UK Experiences. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism: Language Testing Special Issue*.

Crusan, D. & Plakans, L. & Gebril, A.. (2016). Writing assessment literacy: Surveying second language teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices. *Assessing Writing*. 28. 43-56. 10.1016/j.asw.2016.03.001.

Deygers, Bart & Malone, Margaret. (2019). Language assessment literacy in university admission policies, or the dialogue that isn't. *Language Testing*. 36. 026553221982639. 10.1177/0265532219826390.

Fulcher, G. (2012) Assessment Literacy for the Language Classroom, *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 9:2, 113-132, DOI: 10.1080/15434303.2011.642041
Gulek, C. (2003). Preparing for High-Stakes Testing. *Theory Into Practice*, 42(1), 42-50. Retrieved May 13, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/1477317

Jang, E. E., Kim, H., Vincett, M., Barron, C., and Russell, B. 2019. Improving IELTS reading test score interpretations and utilisation through cognitive diagnosis model-based skill profiling. IELTS Research Reports Online Series, No. 2. British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia. Available at <https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/research-reports>

Malone, M. E. (2013). The essentials of assessment literacy: Contrasts between testers and users. *Language Testing*, 30(3), 329–344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532213480129>

Popham, w.J. (2011) Assessment Literacy Overlooked: A Teacher Educator's Confession, *The Teacher Educator*, 46:4, 265-273, DOI:10.1080/08878730.2011.605048

Vogt, K. & Tzagari, D. (2014) . Assessment Literacy of Foreign Language Teachers: Findings of a European Study.

Language Assessment Quarterly, 11:4, 374-402, DOI:10.1080/15434303.2014.960046

Winke, P., & Lim, H. (2014). Effects of test-wiseness and test-taking anxiety on L2 listening test performance: A visual (eye-tracking) and attentional investigation. IELTS Research Reports, No. 3/2014. IELTS Partners: British Council, Cambridge English Language Assessment and IDP:IELTS Australia.

