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Negotiating the transition from IELTS to EAP

ELT IRELAND, 4TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE: DEVELOPING OUTCOMES IN ELT
GRIFFITH COLLEGE, DUBLIN

or,

Many university departments regard an IELTS score as the only acceptable indicator of an international student's readiness to study in English.

Others believe that such students benefit far more from taking a pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes programme.

Discuss both views and give your opinion.

Part 1

IELTS Writing Task
2-style response

Introduction

BACKGROUND STATEMENT

International applicants to English-speaking university programmes are typically required to achieve an overall score of 6.5 in IELTS for direct entry. However, students who do not have a good enough score may have the option of taking a pre-sessional programme as an alternative way of meeting the English language requirement.

Introduction

THESIS STATEMENT

Because these programmes prioritize teaching academic literacy and study skills over the strategies needed to pass a standardized exam, they may have longer-term benefits than intensive IELTS courses.

Introduction

FOCUS

~~This essay will examine the relative advantages and disadvantages of IELTS and pre-sessional programmes.~~

Body paragraph 1

TOPIC SENTENCE

It is generally accepted that IELTS scores reflect a student's ability to understand and use English as accurately as any secure English Language Test.

Body paragraph 1

SUPPORTING STATEMENT 1

Although exam strategies may help to some extent, it is impossible for a student to achieve a 6 or above without a wide range of general vocabulary and a reasonably secure grasp of English grammar.

SUPPORTING STATEMENT 2

In the interests of fairness and validity, it also makes sense to base university acceptance on a test that is the same for everybody.

Body paragraph 1

COUNTER-ARGUMENT

However, as many experts have noted, IELTS may not be an accurate predictor of *academic* success because it does not expose students to authentic academic situations.

EXAMPLE TO SUPPORT COUNTER-ARGUMENT

Even sections 3 and 4 of the Listening Test – a discussion in a university context and an extract from a lecture – do not fully reflect the demands of university listening.

Body paragraph 2

TOPIC SENTENCE

Pre-sessional programmes tend to be of much more practical value.

Body Paragraph 2

SUPPORTING STATEMENT 1

On completion, many students report improved academic literacy.

EXAMPLES TO SUPPORT SUPPORTING STATEMENT

They have learned, for example, how to use referencing, avoid plagiarism, take notes, and contribute to seminar discussions

Body Paragraph 2

CAVEAT (AND RESPONSE TO CAVEAT)

While there is often not enough time on short summer programmes for students to significantly improve their linguistic competence as well, their improved academic literacy may compensate for ongoing language difficulties.

Conclusion

BALANCED/HEDGED SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

In conclusion, IELTS and EAP courses have very different purposes.

Conclusion

CAUTIOUS DISAGREEMENT THAT IELTS IS BEST INDICATOR OF ACADEMIC READINESS

IELTS is effective as a Secure English Language Test, but the language use it requires is too restricted for it to emulate genuine academic situations.

CAUTIOUS SUPPORT FOR EAP PROGRAMMES OVER IELTS AS PREPARATION FOR ACADEMIC STUDY

EAP programmes may have value even for those who do meet their university's language requirements, but many students are likely to require ongoing language support even after successful completion.

Discussion

What distinguishes this essay as an IELTS essay rather than an academic essay?

What could I do to make it more academic?

Which academic skills or conventions might students acquire from taking IELTS? Which would they still need to learn?



PART 2

CRITICAL
VIEWS

From IELTS to academic English

‘However, as many experts have noted, IELTS may not be an accurate predictor of *academic* success because it does not expose students to authentic academic situations.’

Evidence needed!

From IELTS to academic English

‘IELTS involves a flavor of academic tasks, and to a degree some of the language, but without the rigour of academic cognitive activities such as **analysis**, **evaluation**, and **synthesis**.’

‘there is a tension between short-term goals (the need to pass the test) and longer term needs (to cope with the intended academic course of study)’

From IELTS Reading to Academic Reading

‘Overall the IELTS test did generally fall within the parameter ranges exhibited by our small corpus of undergraduate text extracts. However, in relation to a number of contextual parameters there is evidence that the demands imposed by even the most “difficult” of the IELTS texts may fall some way short of those imposed by the most challenging of the academic texts included here.’

From IELTS Listening to Academic Listening

Distance between IELTS Listening Section 4 (based on an extract from a lecture) and real-life lectures.

Real-life lectures include:

Handout material

PowerPoint slides

Facial expression and gestures of the lecturer

The tendency of the lecture mode towards redundancy in the form of repetition and rephrasing.

‘innovation is likely to prove necessary at some stage if the test is to increase its validity as a predictor of actual lecture-listening behaviour’

(Field, 2012)

From IELTS Listening to Academic Listening



Listening Part 3

From pre-sessional programme to degree programme

‘While there is often not enough time on short summer programmes for students to significantly improve their linguistic competence as well, their improved academic literacy may compensate for ongoing language difficulties.’

Do students improve linguistically?

Does improved academic literacy really compensate for ongoing language difficulties?

Institutional perspectives

‘students, irrespective of subject studied, who undertake a top-up course in English do notably poorer than students who arrive with either an acceptable IELTS score for their programme of study, or with other appropriate English language qualifications.’

(Thorpe et al, 2017)

Institutional perspectives

‘This suggests one of two things. Either the top-up courses undertaken do not bring the student up to the expected IELTS entry score, and/or that these students are in some way inherently weaker academically in any case—and this contributed to their low IELTS score in the first place.’

(Thorpe et al, 2017)

Institutional perspectives

‘How does your pre-sessional assessment align to IELTS scores?’

‘How does your pre-sessional assessment align to the CEFR?’

Do receiving schools and departments within institutions understand the purposes of pre-sessional programmes?

(Do pre-sessional co-ordinators and teachers?)

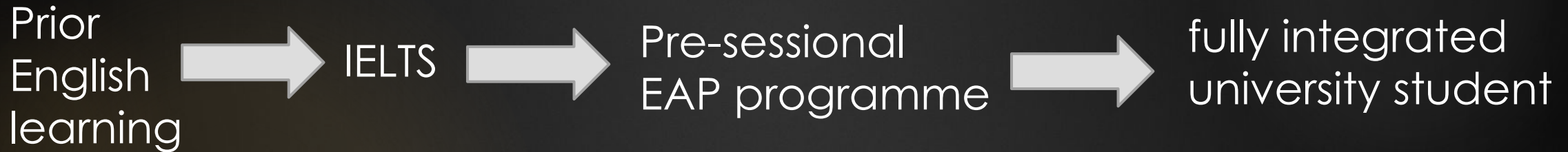
Do students?

PART 3

Student perspectives

The student's perspective

Students on a **pre**-sessional programme have a transitional status.



Students require an IELTS score to be admitted onto a pre-sessional programme.

The student's perspective

Why did you choose to take a pre-sessional programme?

'My agent recommended it'

'I did not have good enough IELTS scores for direct entry'

The student's perspective

'They [teachers in China] only taught me the skills to take an exam. I feel very disappointed with that.'

'the IELTS course will teach you how to deal with the exam... but it's not your really level of English. Maybe you can get 5.5 very easily after training, but actually your level is not 5.5'

'When I enter the IELTS, I start to learn academic vocabulary, how to read passage, how to write. I know it's not the real good academic writing, but at least I had a background before I enter the pre-session course.'

PART 4

Conclusions

Proposals

~~To sum up, this paper has carefully considered both views...~~

Proposal 1

Pre-sessional teaching should make reference, where possible, to students' prior learning – particularly their experience of IELTS – and make explicit the ways in which academic English differs from what they have learned before.

Where possible, IELTS teaching should also gesture forward to EAP / the kind of authentic language use that students will encounter at university.

~~As we all know~~, this may involve explicit un-teaching of 'test-wise' strategies and formulaic IELTS phrases.

Challenge

Not all EAP teachers have taught IELTS and not all IELTS teachers have taught EAP. Training will be required.

Proposal 2

As far as possible, students should be at the centre of pre-sessional programmes. Syllabi should be flexible enough to accommodate their particular needs.

A key objective of any pre-sessional programme should be to integrate students into an academic community.

Challenge

Pre-sessional programmes are so short and intensive that making time to conduct comprehensive needs analyses is difficult.

Reflecting on needs and personal goals/objectives is itself a high-level skill that may require explicit instruction.

Proposal 3

The objectives and expected outcomes of pre-sessional programmes should be communicated as clearly as possible to academic colleagues in receiving schools and departments.

Challenge

The objectives of any given EAP programme will always be local to some extent. Therefore it is hard to communicate a uniform vision.

There is still debate within the field of EAP regarding how to define the discipline and how to accommodate different subject areas under one umbrella.

The value of Academic English?

'a mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence... it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning.'

Orwell, 1946

Questions? / Discussion



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