

Concurrent validity and EAP instructor-assessed final grades

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ABSTRACT

Establishing the validity of EAP pathways is important for assuring stakeholders that these pathways are a viable alternative to standardised English language testing. This study was carried out to gather evidence contributing to the concurrent validity of instructor-assessed final exit grades in an EAP program. Correlational analysis (Pearson r) examined the relationship between final grades and concurrently obtained scores on the TOEFL ITP. Results point to statistically significant moderate correlations. While the results contribute to evidence of concurrent validity, the constructs tested by the TOEFL ITP and represented by the instructor-assessed final exit grades appear to diverge in meaningful ways.

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Introduction

In countries such as Canada, recruiting increasing numbers of international students is an important national goal. For example, Canada aims to double the current number of international students to 450,000 learners by the year 2022 (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, 2014). For Canadian universities, such as the University of British Columbia (UBC), most international students from non-English speaking backgrounds have to meet the English Language Admission Standard (ELAS). A common way to meet the ELAS is by providing the required level of approved standardised English language proficiency test scores. However, for academically admissible students who do not meet the required standardised English language proficiency test scores, EAP programs, such as the English Foundation Program (EFP) on UBC's Okanagan campus, provide an instructor-assessed pathway to admission as an alternative to English language testing options of the ELAS. As the number of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds eligible for UBC admission but not meeting the ELAS increases, the importance of ensuring the validity of instructor-assessed pathways to university, such as the EFP, is necessary for maintaining the legitimacy of an instructor-assessed entrance to mainstream university studies. The current study aims to explore the use of independently administered assessments of academic language proficiency as a means to contribute evidence to the validity of instructor-assessed EAP pathways to higher education.

Background

Instead of standardised English language proficiency scores, one way to promote the development of the academic English language proficiency needed for successful engagement with the educational opportunities afforded by undergraduate studies at an English medium university is by providing English language pathway programs as an alternative entry point to higher education. These pathway programs can have multiple characteristics, but typically they accept academically qualified students who are just below the English language proficiency requirements mandated by the institution. These programs house EAP courses aiming to develop the academic English language proficiency needed for

higher education in English. Depending on the program, students may or may not be conditionally admitted to a regular program of academic studies and may or may not be able to take concurrent academic courses counting towards their degree requirements.

In Australia, a country with large numbers of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Murray and O’Loughlin (2007) have called for large-scale tracking studies of international students passing through English language pathways into university. They point out that program requirements and academic outcomes are not standardised across Australia and nor are they monitored externally. Because of this, Murray and O’Loughlin contend that public confidence in the ability of EAP programs to prepare students for university studies can be undermined by “a perception of possibly fluid equivalence arrangements between institutions and ELT providers which might appear to allow direct entry by students through other than formal test regimes” (p. 19). This lack of public confidence is also found in the Canadian context. An article in the *Kamloops Daily News* (Paillard, 2012) echoes these sentiments with the perception that a shortcut is given to international students gaining access to higher education through pathway programs because these students do not undergo standardised testing, with universities instead relying on the assessment of the language pathway provider. One possible way to gain public confidence could be by establishing the validity of EAP final grades.

Validity can be conceptualized as the extent to which a score represents what it claims to represent. In this case, the scores under examination are the instructor-assessed final exit grades in the EFP. One of the major goals of the EFP is the development of advanced academic English language proficiency. Thus, it can be reasonably assumed that the exit level final grades represent an assessment of advanced academic English language proficiency. If evidence can be provided that the final grades are in fact measuring advanced academic English language proficiency, they can be accepted as having validity. One aspect of validity is that of concurrent validity. Concurrent validity can be established for one set of measures by correlating them with a second set of measures gathered in the same time frame and generally accepted to be measuring the same construct (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). In the current study, the second set of measures chosen is the TOEFL ITP. If there appears to be a correlational relationship between a set of TOEFL ITP scores and a set of instructor-assessed final exit grades, this will contribute to providing evidence of the validity of the final grades and the EFP. The overarching research question for the current study was concerned with whether the instructor-assessed final exit grades were valid. The refined question was as follows: What is the relationship between the EAP instructor-assessed final exit grades and concurrently obtained TOEFL ITP scores?

Procedures

Participants

Located on UBC’s Okanagan campus, the EFP is designed for students who are academically admissible to UBC, but who have not met the ELAS. On successfully completing the EFP, students are guaranteed full admission to their programs of study on UBC’s Okanagan campus. Participants were recruited from students registered in the exit level EFP course. Data were gathered over two semesters in 2012/2013 and two semesters in 2013/2014. From a potential pool of 85 EFP students, 65 students agreed to participate in the study, representing 76% of the EFP exit level student population during the time frame under study.

Instructor-assessed final grades

The exit level of the EFP consists of an integrated skills EAP course. The course runs for 13 weeks, with 20 hours of classes and language labs per week. Course work contributing to the final grades consists of a variety of assignments with a language through content focus. No more than 40% of the final grade comes from an instructor prepared final exam.

TOEFL Institutional Testing Program

The TOEFL ITP evaluates academic English language proficiency in the domains of listening proficiency, structure and written expression, and reading. A sub-score is produced for each of these domains, as well as an overall score. The test papers are formerly administered versions of the TOEFL paper-based test. The test duration is two hours, with 50 listening comprehension questions, 40 structure and written expression questions, and 50 reading questions for a total of 140 questions (ETS Canada, n.d.).

Procedures

Correlational analysis was used to investigate evidence contributing to the concurrent validity of instructor-assessed final exit level grades by comparing the final grades to scores provided by the TOEFL ITP administered towards the end of each semester during the study. Scores from the TOEFL ITP were compared with the final grades by correlating TOEFL ITP overall scores and sub-scores with the final grades using the product moment correlation coefficient (Pearson r). All statistical analyses were carried out with IBM SPSS 22.

Results

Correlational analysis revealed there were statistically significant moderate positive correlations between the EFP final grades and the overall TOEFL ITP scores ($r = .55, n = 65, p < 0.01$), the EFP final grades and the Listening Comprehension sub-score ($r = .41, n = 65, p < 0.01$), the EFP final grades and the Structure and Written Expression sub-score ($r = .35, n = 65, p < 0.01$), and the EFP final grades and the Reading sub-score ($r = .51, n = 65, p < 0.01$). Overall, as the EFP final grades increased, there was an accompanying general increase in TOEFL ITP scores and sub-scores.

Discussion

The strongest relationship, with a moderate positive correlation, was between the overall TOEFL ITP scores and the instructor-assessed final exit grades. The next strongest correlation was the moderate positive correlation between the TOEFL ITP Reading sub-score and instructor-assessed final exit grades. There also appeared to be a relationship, although weaker but still moderate, between listening skills, as measured by the TOEFL ITP, and the EFP final grades. The weakest, but still moderate, relationship was between Structure and Written Expression and the EFP final grades.

The results of this study represent an important step towards establishing the validity of the EFP as a pathway to undergraduate programs at UBC's Okanagan campus. Because of the moderate relationships between what is being measured by the TOEFL ITP and instructor-assessed final grades, it can be said that they are in part measuring the same construct of academic English. This relationship contributes to confirming that the EFP final exit grades are a reflection of participants' academic English language proficiency. In

addition, the lack of very strong positive correlations between the two sets of measures does not point to the failure of EFP final exit grades in providing meaningful information regarding the academic language proficiency of participants. Rather, the TOEFL ITP scores represent a single sample of participants' abilities at a moment in time, whereas the EFP final grades represent a broader meaningful measure of the wide range of skills associated with academic preparation, including, but not limited to, academic language proficiency.

It has to be remembered that the TOEFL ITP examines a specific range of language skills. In the Listening section of the TOEFL ITP, test-takers are examined on their ability to comprehend conversations and talks students typical of English speaking post-secondary institutions. In the Structure and Written Expression section students attempt to recognise suitable language for standard written English. In the final Reading section, students are tested on reading and comprehending short reading passages (ETS, 2014). However, the instructor-assessed final grades represent a wider range of abilities than what the TOEFL ITP tests. The instructor-assessed final grades represent multiple incidences of assessment of student work over an entire semester in a variety of format and modalities. This work promotes advanced communication skills with students participating in “complex academic activities and situations involving multiple purposes and participants” (Ortis, 2014, p. 1). As a result, very strong correlations between TOEFL ITP scores and EFP final grades would not be expected as the two measures diverge somewhat in what they are purporting to measure. However, some convergence is expected in that part of what the EFP aims to do is foster advanced academic English language proficiency. All in all, the preliminary results of the present study contribute to understanding that what is being tested by the TOEFL ITP is related in part to what is being represented by the EFP final grades. If validity is the extent to which a measure represents what it claims to measure, the preliminary results of the current study can play a role in contributing to the validity of the EFP final grades.

Conclusion

Concurrent validity is merely part of an overall understanding of validity. Further studies investigating the predictive validity of the EFP final grades, in other words, the relationship between EFP exit outcomes and eventual academic performance, are needed to provide a more complete picture of the legitimacy of instructor-assessed academic language development pathways to higher education. Investigations into student perceptions of their own EAP experiences are also called for, with post-EAP students reflecting back on what best prepared them for their academic studies as well as reflecting on what might have been missing from their experiences. Added to this should be ongoing explorations of content validity to ensure that the materials students work with in their EAP experiences authentically reflect the materials they will eventually encounter in their undergraduate classes. Finally, expanding the number of participants in studies such as the current one would contribute to providing a better picture of the potential of examining the relationship between standardised test scores and EAP pathway final grades as a means to explore concurrent validity.

The numbers of international students from non-English speaking backgrounds seeking to study in English-medium colleges and universities is set to increase. As academically qualified students who have not fulfilled a university's English language proficiency requirements are admitted to post-secondary studies via EAP pathway programs, validating what EAP final grades mean is important for ensuring quality standards and public confidence in these programs. As a result, it is important that providers of EAP pathway programs invest in the validation process and conduct validation studies in order to contribute to creating exit grades that are meaningful to EAP program stakeholders.

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