

Review article

## **Suitability of the PTE Academic for assessing whether students are prepared for academic study in the UK**

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Universities in English-speaking countries require prospective students from those countries without English as a first language to have evidence of English proficiency prior to the commencement of academic study. Evidence regarding this claim is presented to the academic institution in the form of a test score. Until recently, students wishing to undertake a programme of study in an English-speaking country would take whichever test the institution to which they were applying required: this was invariably split along geographical lines – US institutions requiring a score from the Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based Test™ (TOEFL iBT®), with those in the UK requiring a score from the International English Language testing System™ (IELTS®). More recently, however, the respective ‘spheres of influence’ of the two educational blocs have become increasingly blurred, and a third recognised test has emerged, the Pearson Test of Academic English™ (PTE Academic®). Potential applicants are now faced with a choice of three principal tests to pursue. Sitting these exams, and possibly undertaking a course of instruction in preparation is an expensive process, and hence a very important one for students.

Score equivalences between these examinations are often displayed on institutional websites<sup>1</sup>, copied and distributed around the world<sup>2</sup>; these tables are often of unknown origin and do not represent research-based findings. Score comparison is made difficult due to differing scoring systems: IELTS band scores are reported in incremental half-band increases, whereas TOEFL and PTE scores are presented on a continuous scale. In addition, a claim of comparison across the tests may be invalid due to differing content, differing conceptions of the target domain reflected in different item types and different test content. Nonetheless, as these tests aim to make similar decisions about test takers, that is, their readiness for higher education in the medium of English, questions will always remain regarding score and content comparability. Subsequently, such research has been undertaken by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States (ETS, 2007, 2010) and by Pearson (2012) resulting in their placing a score equivalence ‘widget’ on their website<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, as all students requiring a Tier 4 visa are required to demonstrate proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) at levels B1 or B2, test companies have been motivated to make claims of equivalence between the CEFR and performance according to their own scales (ETS, 2007; Pearson, 2009).

A major difference between the PTE and IELTS is the delivery model. The PTE is delivered in an online environment. Responses are captured and scored electronically. This also applies to the speaking component. Pearson advertise ‘20 integrated and innovative item types’

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<sup>1</sup> <http://secure.vec.bc.ca/toefl-equivalency-table.cfm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/departamental/internationalenglishcentre/englishlanguage requirements/Compare-IELTS,-TOEFL-and-TOEIC.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://pearsonpte.com/institutions/institutions/Pages/TestScores.aspx>

related to ‘responding in real time’ as a means of demonstrating effective communication. These item types integrate listening and speaking, speaking and reading, reading and writing, and listening and writing listening and reading. These items offer prompts to test takers who then have a limited window in which to create oral or written summaries of that material. Possibly the most interesting of these item types is the ‘elicited imitation’ items. Test takers listen to a sentence and are then required to repeat that sentence verbatim. Such items are scored by “counting the number of correct word sequences... rhythm, parsing and stress... [with] vowels and consonants pronounced in a native-like way” (Pearson, 2010: 43). This description is highly evocative of the pre-communicative language testing era, which Spolsky (1975) terms the psychometric-structuralist stage. Language is broken down into its constitutive components, each of which is measured individually. However, the key difference between the present and this early era that allows Pearson to claim ‘innovation’ is the fully-automated scoring procedure using Versant™ technology<sup>4</sup>. The utterance is awarded score from a partial-credit scoring model without any human raters (the scoring mechanism has been calibrated with speech extracts of more than 10,000 field test participants, against which individual test-taker utterances are compared [Pearson, 2008]).

This approach to language testing allows Pearson to provide extremely quick feedback to test-takers, but raises interesting questions of validity, as it suggests Pearson’s conception of the construct of academic speaking (as informed by this item type) does not include illocutionary or pragmatic competence (Bachman, 1990) that has informed the field of language testing since the 1980s. Defenders of elicited imitation items cite strong correlations ( $r=.67$ ) between EI items and communicative speaking tasks (as found in IELTS) (Erlam, 2006), but accept that these item types in isolation cannot be used to make judgements about individual test takers’ performance competence in a communicative environment with one or more interlocutors. Despite Pearson’s undoubtedly efficient scoring procedure, there is currently little chance of IELTS following suit and creating a solely internet-based test. Weir et al. (2007) specifically investigated performance on a paper-based and a computer-based version of IELTS and found that the medium of delivery did not impact upon performance. ETS, by contrast, offer a third way – an internet-based test which still requires human raters of speaking components.

The Pearson advertorial offers five bullet points regarding ‘what to look for in a language test’, including who accepts the test, the location of test centres and the time each score is valid. The Pearson PTE was recognised by the UK Universities and Colleges Administration Service (UCAS) in 2009, and by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) in 2010 (Pearson, 2013). Like IELTS and TOEFL, a score awarded by Pearson remains valid for two years<sup>5</sup>. It has subsequently launched a number of partnerships with education institutions in order to deliver test preparation courses. A number of ‘approved providers’ are advertised on their website<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, preparation course books produced independently of Pearson are also now offered by a number of publishers<sup>7</sup>.

In languages testing, the principle that there is no such thing as a valid test is well understood (Popham, 2003: 43). It is the inferences or decisions that are made on the basis of test scores that are valid or not valid. To this end, the research base underlying the PTE will continue to grow and provide potential test takers and other stakeholders with the information needed to

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.versanttest.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/applicationforms/new-approved-english-tests.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <http://pearsonpte.com/TestMe/Preparing/Pages/PreparationCourses.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://pearsonpte.com/PTEAcademic/RecommendedResources/Pages/IndependentPublications.aspx>

decide which of the three tests to take. Although not yet as widespread as IELTS or TOEFL, Pearson has invested considerable time and energy in establishing what is clearly a viable alternative to the ‘big two’.

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