

## **Addressing the Gap between Standardized Test and Language Proficiency**

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A fact that cannot be ignored is that an increasing number of international students is fighting to be admitted by American universities to enjoy high-quality education. In 2015, the total international student enrollment in the U.S. reached 1.13 million, a 14.18% increase since 2014 (ICE, 2015). As one of the admission requirements, students—most of whom are English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, are asked to submit a transcript of standardized language test results along with other documents. Thus, a tendency prevails: Students prioritize passing standardized tests with flying colors. To cater to students' needs, some schools and English language institutes, inside or outside the United States, share the similar inclination toward curriculum that emphasizes skills and strategies for passing standardized tests. During the teaching and learning process, a gap emerges between the results of standardized tests and language proficiency revealed in the classroom for some English-studying international students.

Standardized tests, which are scored in a consistent manner, can be administered to large populations of students to compare the relative performance of individual students. These benefits have led to an increase in the popularity of standardized testing all over the globe. The test by Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is the widely accepted standardized test for English mastery, serving more than 9,000 colleges and universities in more than 130 countries. Most universities in the U.S. apply TOEFL results as the benchmark weighing foreign applicants' English proficiency. When such a mandatory assessment dominates admissions, students are engrossed in language test preparation.

Educational Testing Service (ETS), sponsor of TOEFL, stated in its 2015 report that international students obtained an average score of 81 out of 120. According to US News, an authoritative reference for university information, the average TOEFL score required by U.S. universities is 81. That is to say, international students' English proficiency indeed meets the requirement for admission, on average. However, the real challenge plays out when they sit in the classroom. Some international students enrolled in U.S. universities claim they find it difficult catching up with teachers' speaking rate, understanding vocabulary during lectures, and distinguishing teachers' accents and idiomatic styles (Andrade, 2006). Some university teachers assert that a portion of international students lack critical thinking skills and confidence (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Though most international students are rated proficient by the TOEFL test, they are struggling in the classroom. This phenomenon highlights the existence of the gap, separating test results from real language proficiency.

According to research, the emergence of this gap is related to excessive emphasis on passing the test. In other words, the implementation of test-centered pedagogy in language classrooms has given rise to a lack of true language proficiency. Test-centered teaching methods include

teaching test-taking skills, teaching the content known to be covered by the test, sharing tips for reducing stress, providing students with more time, or sharing materials (Smith, 1991).

This teaching method is known to have major drawbacks, which are believed to have a negative impact on students' language proficiency. First, too much classroom time is allocated to test preparation rather than learning the language for use in practical ways. Andrews (1995) and Lam (1994) find that two-thirds of class time is allegedly given to exam-related content. Suggested by Gibbons (2015), teachers should let students use the language in the context of target culture and in authentic situations, like how to greet, how to buy things in a shop, or how to participate in a class. Yet, the lopsided devotion of classroom time to test preparation deprives students of the chance to use language authentically, thus shaping student performance into rigid repetitions of test-preferred language.

Second, teachers in exam-preparation classrooms tend to eliminate topics that are not likely to appear in the test. Alderson and Wall (1993) show that exam preparation has demonstrable effect on the content of language lessons, narrowing the curriculum to the areas to be assessed. Bailey (1996) suggests that downsizing “run[s] contrary to the principles and practices of current approaches to language learning”.

Third, learning materials are sometimes modified to fit test preparation at the expense of in-depth learning and critical thinking. According to research on standardized testing conducted by a team at Columbia University (2013), the test-centered method hinders students' overall learning potential. Such a method makes the learning environment boring and lacks creativeness. The same report also notes that test preparation teachers often forget to teach students skills that are beyond test-taking skills. Yet in a language classroom, critical thinking skills help students master communicative language tasks, appreciate authentic texts, critique literature, and further develop their brain, as well as prepare for the test (Hughes, 2014).

Lastly, teachers take a dominant role in test-centered classroom. As Alderson and Hamp Lyons (1996) state, exam classes spend little time on pair work, teachers talk too much, and as such student performance is overshadowed. Consistent teacher talk goes against the nature of the U.S. classroom, which is characterized by Anderson and Powell (1991) as Socratic in that teacher and students collaborate in pursuit of knowledge. The learning environment in the U.S. classroom is firmly learner-centered, which builds a cooperative, participatory, interactive relation between instructor and learners, allowing discussion in groups even during lectures (Smithee, Greenblatt & Eland, 2004).

All of the disadvantages listed lead to the formation of international students' struggles in the classroom, since some of the linchpins in language teaching are missing. Nonetheless, these deficiencies are amendable. To bridge the gap, the equilibrium amidst language, content, and culture in the classroom should be restored. Doing so will lead to great student comprehension and use of language. Spratt (2005) illustrates the importance of teachers in this process, as they are responsible for making choices about “the best ways of teaching and promoting learning to achieve both good exam results and good learning of the content domain of a syllabus.”

Content-based instruction, differentiated instruction, and PACE (Presentation, Attention,

Co-Construction, Extension) lessons are plausible solutions to the issue evoked in this article. More possible approaches for fusing test-taking skills, language skills, and culture should be further explored and their feasibility tested in real language classrooms.

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