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English entrance requirements and language support for international postgraduate students

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Concerns have recently been raised about international student graduates' English language proficiency (Birrell, 2006). There have thus been calls for an increase in the required IELTS scores for students entering Australian universities. In this paper, I examine the validity of IELTS as an accurate predictor of academic success in postgraduate research degree contexts. I outline the literature which questions whether IELTS scores can accurately predict academic performance in the general student cohort. I then examine the IELTS writing and speaking examination tasks and evaluation procedures in relation to the literature on postgraduate research communication as well as the attributes and skills expected of postgraduate research students. I argue that raising the IELTS score would not necessarily result in greater academic success or improved written or spoken research communication in English after graduation. I therefore propose disciplinarily embedded research communication support in order to further develop international students' English research communication during their postgraduate research degree.

Keywords: Internationalisation, English standards, postgraduate study

Introduction

In recent years, both academic journals and the popular media in Australia have abounded with laments on international students and graduates' English proficiency. A recent study by Birell (2006) has added fuel to the fire. Birell compares data from international students' pre-enrolment IELTS scores and the scores of applicants for skilled migration to Australia who previously studied in Australian institutions. He concludes that their IELTS scores and thus English language proficiency actually declined during their studies at university in Australia. This, along with complaints by lecturers and supervisors, has created an impression that international students' English communication and hence academic standards are below par (Ewart, 2007). A sense of crises has been precipitated and universities are scurrying to increase the IELTS scores required by international students entering their institutions.

I contend that the reasoning behind these moves is flawed, particularly in relation to postgraduate research students. Firstly, it is highly debatable whether international students' English does in fact decline. Birell assumes that applicants for skilled migration, who have studied in Australia, sat the IELTS prior to embarking on their studies and scored a 6.0 (competent user) band score. In fact, international students enter Australian universities via a number of pathways including TAFE diploma,

High School Certificate, direct entry courses and the IELTS (Bochner, 2007). Therefore, the two groups in the study are not necessarily composed of the same research subjects. Also, international students intending to study in Australia often attend IELTS preparation courses just prior to taking the IELTS where they are 'taught to the test' which could result in a masking of their true level of proficiency. International students who have graduated from Australian universities are less likely to take these 'Test Preparation' courses than pre-enrolment candidates due to an increased confidence in their ability to speak and write in English and thus may lack test-taking skills since a wealth of literature suggests that test-taking preparation has a significant effect on results in standardized tests (Bangert-Drowns, 1983; Beidel, 1999; Ryan, 2001).

Academic success is influenced by a number of factors including professional experience, personal problems and motivation which are far greater predictors of academic success than a high IELTS score (Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000; Kitson, 2005). Additionally, research has suggested that academic difficulties of international students are more often related to a "clash of educational cultures" than merely "poor English" (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997).

Despite a perception that international students are less likely to achieve academic success, the situation at Australian universities reflects a different reality. 88.8 percent of international students pass their undergraduate or post graduate coursework at Australian universities, as opposed to a marginally higher 89.4 percent of Australian nationals (Olsen, Burgess, & Sharma, 2006) and in certain undergraduate courses such as Accounting, international students outperform local students (Hartnett, Römcke, & Yap, 2004). In the postgraduate research context, where academic success is determined by successful completion of the degree within the recommended four years, international students also outperform Australian nationals. One study conducted at six Australian universities (Bourke, Holbrook, Lovat, & Farley, 2004) indicated that native English speakers had significantly longer candidature than the non-native speaker mainly international student cohort and the Adelaide University Research Training Performance Report (University of Adelaide, 2006) showed 60% of the Australian 1996 postgraduate research cohort completed as opposed to 71% of the International cohort.

Despite these flaws in the research, studies like the one completed by Birell have reactivated the debate on academic standards and the relationship of English communication to standards and have emphasized the need for greater provision of ongoing language and academic support for both international and local students which has long been an issue in the higher education sector. Language and academic support is particularly lacking for postgraduate research students who are traditionally expected, to absorb "by osmosis" the language and academic skills required by their disciplines (Barron & Zeegers, 2002) - clearly a daunting task. Therefore, an examination of the contentious issues of English language entrance requirements and ongoing support for postgraduate students is useful. In order to examine these issues, I seek to answer the following questions:

1. Is a high IELTS score a predictor of academic success for postgraduate research students?

2. How do the IELTS test tasks relate to the attributes and skills required of postgraduate students?

Is a high IELTS score a predictor of academic success for postgraduate research students?

The literature reveals that a higher IELTS score does not necessarily predict the academic success of undergraduate students (Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Hill, Storch, & Lynch, 1999). In the case of postgraduate course work students, a higher IELTS score is only “moderately predictive” of academic success (Woodrow, 2006). Additionally, even studies which suggest a trend towards a “weak positive” relationship between higher IELTS scores and academic success as measured by GPA (Kerstjens & Nery, 2000), suggest that personal, social and cultural issues are far greater predictors of academic success than a high IELTS score (Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000). As yet, there have been no studies focussing specifically on postgraduate research students. However, the fact that international students are more likely to complete their research degrees within the recommended time suggests that IELTS is not necessarily a predictor of academic success in postgraduate research degrees since the majority of the current international cohort entered with a 6.0 overall band score (Feast, 2002) which is viewed as inadequate by some critics.

Although overall IELTS scores do not necessarily predict academic success, the IELTS reading subtest does appear to relate more strongly to academic achievement than the subtests for writing and speaking in undergraduate courses and postgraduate coursework courses (Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000). Perhaps this relationship is due to the fact that reading skills are more easily transferred to different learning environments than the more contextually embedded writing and speaking skills. A study measuring the transferability of certain reading skills (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) indicated that these skills can be transferred from one learning context to another. However, for transfer to occur, the students need to be taught self-monitoring practices along with the cognitive skill. In addition, the skill should be applicable in a variety of contexts (Nickerson, Perkins, & Smith, 1985; Perkins & Salomon, 1989). Reading skills such as “predicting” or “summarising” (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) or the skills of identifying “main ideas, supporting ideas, writer’s opinions and specific information” (IELTS, 2006a) may be applicable in a variety of learning contexts and thus a students’ ability to make effective use of these skills as measured by IELTS would probably be transferable to their undergraduate and postgraduate coursework studies. The correlation between high IELTS reading band scores and academic success in postgraduate research degrees is yet to be studied, but since the above-mentioned skills would also be utilised in reading discipline-specific texts, it is likely that there would be some correlation. It is also highly likely that some listening skills such as “following an academic argument, listening for main ideas, specific information, attitude and speaker’s opinions” (IELTS, 2006a) are transferable to different academic contexts including research degree contexts.

I contend that writing and speaking skills are far more difficult to transfer from one learning context to another than reading or listening skills. Some research has indicated that general Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is transferable from one language to another (Cummins, 1984, 1986, 1999, 2000) and

Cummins refers to CALP as “context-reduced” and “cognitively challenging” (Cummins, 1986, 1999). Although I concur that academic English, specifically the English needed to communicate in written and oral form in postgraduate research contexts, is cognitively challenging, I do not agree that these environments can be viewed as “context-reduced”; on the contrary, I suggest that context is of particular importance to researchers. However, although it may be possible to transfer cognitive written or oral skills across languages within a discipline, I believe that it is far more complex to transfer these skills between learning contexts since the skills and genres required by each discipline are affected by the Discourse(s) (“ways of being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities” of those disciplines (Gee, 1996). Therefore, I support the overwhelming amount of research that shows that the writing and speaking that occurs in research contexts is deeply embedded in these shared context(s) with a focus on shared content and the activities and language which express that content (Flowerdew, 2001; Strevens, 1988). A study in 1998 by Lea and Street (1998) highlights the conflicting views in two seemingly related disciplines at the same institution: history and anthropology. For example, although both disciplines required “argument” essays and deplored “plagiarism”, Lea and Street discovered that the understanding of these two concepts differed dramatically between the disciplines and lecturers had very different expectations of their students. Thus it is very difficult to teach or test generic academic writing or speaking skills, particularly for postgraduate research students because of these differing expectations even within a genre and across similar disciplines.

I suggest that one of the reasons why lower IELTS scores do not necessarily negatively impact on the academic success of postgraduate students is that the skills that are tested by IELTS do not reflect the attributes and skills that are expected in the university disciplinarily embedded environment and these students are not given an opportunity to display their disciplinarily embedded written and oral skills. This is particularly true of the skills tested in the IELTS writing and speaking subtests.

How do the IELTS test tasks relate to the attributes and skills required of postgraduate students?

Recently, universities have focussed on attempting to codify generic skills, behaviours and personal qualities required of university graduates (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Barrie, 2004; Moore & Hough, 2005) and institutional and pedagogical reforms currently emphasize the promotion and development of these “graduate attributes”. Some institutions have followed these up with “postgraduate attributes”.

An analysis of “postgraduate attributes” reveals that Australian universities expect postgraduate research students to be able to “critically” review and interpret information, be “appreciative of the cultural and social basis of knowledge”, demonstrate and apply “theoretical knowledge” and a variety of sources “to discipline-specific practical activity” as well as make a significant “contribution” to the knowledge in their field (The University of Adelaide, 2006; Victoria University Core Graduate Attributes Working Group, 2007). These attributes translate into the tasks that postgraduate research students perform during their research degrees which usually include writing a research proposal, journal articles, giving seminar and conference presentations and, of course, the production of a written thesis. From my

work with postgraduate students and supervisors, I infer that postgraduate research students are expected to demonstrate these graduate attributes in their written and oral communication. For example, the comments below by postgraduate supervisors from different disciplines imply that they expect students to support their arguments with appropriate literature and critically evaluate the literature:

An overview is given...the main issues were touched upon but not in appropriate depth...the approach is better than before but not critical enough...not critically comparing literature...
(Supervisor A)

X does not support her arguments appropriately from the literature...
(Supervisor B)

Y just drowns us in information, he does not tell us a cohesive story using the literature...his presentation is either just 'facts' or his own unsubstantiated opinion...
(Supervisor C)

Despite the fact that the supervisors expect students to display these generic skills, there is a vast difference between these skills and the generic skills tested in the IELTS speaking and writing tasks. Moore and Morton (2005) show how the skills required by the IELTS writing Task 2 differ dramatically from the skills required in a variety of undergraduate courses. In this paper I extrapolate this comparison to the general postgraduate research context. I further examine the IELTS Writing Task 1 and Speaking tasks using information from the IELTS websites and my own experience teaching IELTS preparation courses and examining IELTS and compare the tasks and the skills they require to the tasks and skills expected of postgraduate research students. The latter information is derived from texts describing research writing in different disciplines as well as descriptions of postgraduate attributes.

The IELTS Writing Task 2 consists of an "essay" (IELTS, 2006a) in which the candidates present a written argument. Moore and Martin (2005) describe this task as resembling a university "essay". However, they show that although this genre appears in some disciplines, a variety of other genres such as case study and research report are more common. In addition, although undergraduate students are required to present written "arguments", they need to substantiate these arguments using information from sources with appropriate citation. In contrast, the IELTS 'academic' writing essay expects candidates to "present a solution to a problem, present and justify an opinion, or evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or arguments" (IELTS, 2006a) without recourse to any primary or secondary sources. In fact, they are discouraged from quoting from or citing any of the materials they are given in the reading subtest (IELTS, 2006a). This is also unacceptable in the postgraduate research context where all documents need to be "accurately and cogently written", as well as "suitably illustrated and documented" (The University of Adelaide, 2006). The illustration and documentation of argument through appropriately cited literature is clearly a generic skill expected of all research writers (Mullins & Kiley, 2002; The University of Adelaide, 2006). It is not acceptable in university research contexts to make unsubstantiated statements without citation based only on "personal experience" (IELTS, 2006a) unless this personal experience is theoretically framed in some way.

Moore and Morton (2005) further describe how the IELTS Writing Task 2 focuses on the moral and social desirability of practices, while university tasks in the majority of disciplines focus on scientific validity and summarise views related to disciplinary practice. Postgraduate writing tasks are even more disciplinarily embedded requiring a critical evaluation based on a detailed understanding of the research context and a critical examination of the validity of data and/or theoretical position (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1993; Pechenik, 1993; Weissberg & Buker, 1990). According to Moore and Morton, the IELTS Writing Task 2 also focuses only on concrete objects of enquiry, while university tasks focus on both concrete and abstract objects of enquiry. This is clear from the sample question for Task 2 provided by IELTS Australia:

The first car appeared on British roads in 1888. By the year 2000 there may be as many as 29 million vehicles on British roads.

Alternative forms of transport should be encouraged and international laws introduced to control car ownership and use.

To what extent do you agree or disagree?

(IELTS, 2006d)

This contrasts sharply with the more abstract skill of expressing “theoretical knowledge” described in postgraduate attributes (The University of Adelaide, 2006; Victoria University Core Graduate Attributes Working Group, 2007).

IELTS Writing Task 1 similarly requires very different attributes and skills compared to those required of postgraduate research writers. In Task 1, students are either expected to organize, present or compare data or describe the stages of a process or procedure or explain how something works (IELTS, 2006). The first task possibly resembles the task of writing about research data in a research article or thesis, while the latter resembles the methodology section of these documents in scientific disciplines (Locke et al., 1993; Pechenik, 1993; Weissberg & Buker, 1990). However, postgraduate research writing requires discussion and critical evaluation of data as well as merely reporting of data, while methodologies require detailed information explaining how validity and reliability is ensured (Pechenik, 1993). On the other hand, IELTS describes Task 1 of the Writing subtest as “basically an information transfer task which relates narrowly to the factual content of an input diagram” and instructs candidates not to speculate on “explanations that lie outside the given data” since they will be penalised for doing so (IELTS, 2006e). Once again, if a research student has not been trained in this very specific genre, they would be penalised for implementing the very skills that are expected in postgraduate research writing.

The skills required in the Speaking subtest of the IELTS are dramatically different from the formal speaking requirements of postgraduate study. The speaking subtest, like the listening subtest is the same irrespective of whether candidates are doing the “General” (used to determine proficiency for employment or immigration purposes) or “Academic” (used to determine proficiency for entrance to educational institutions) version of the test. Although some of the skills tested in the Listening subtest such as “listening for specific information” and “following an argument” are clearly transferable into undergraduate and even postgraduate research contexts, the skills tested in the Speaking subtest do not appear to relate to the formal tasks required in research degrees. The tasks have been specifically “chosen to reflect common

experiences” and thus none of the candidates disciplinarily embedded speaking skills are tested. A postgraduate student may have presented successfully in English at international conferences and yet receive a low band score in the IELTS speaking module due to difficulties interacting on a one-to-one basis with the IELTS examiner as is expected in the IELTS interview (IELTS, 2006b). While the information communicated in the IELTS interview is “basic” and “personal”, research students are expected to communicate complex concepts from their own research (The University of Adelaide, 2006) and research communication is far more complex than the communication expected in the IELTS interview. Some research students may find it far easier to communicate their research interests than respond to prompts which require a personal response to social and moral issues like those in the example below.

Let’s consider first of all how people’s values have changed...

- What kind of things give status to people in your country?
- Have things changed since your parents. time?...
(IELTS, 2006c)

Research students are accustomed to supporting their arguments and opinions using relevant research or literature. Both as an academic English teacher and researcher educator, I have encountered students who are competent in communicating their research, but lack the confidence to discuss current affairs or make social chit-chat.

The relationship between the IELTS tasks and the skills they test and the tasks and skills required in a postgraduate research context are summarised in the table below:

Table 1: Tasks and Skills in IELTS versus those in Research Degrees

Task	IELTS	Research Degrees
Writing Task 1: “Describing information” (graph/ table/ chart diagram)”	Focuses on - Organizing, presenting and comparing data; or - Describing the stages of a process or procedure; or - Explaining how something works No speculation on the reasons for data, procedures or the way something work	Focuses on - Organizing, presenting and comparing data; or - Describing the stages of a process or procedure - Explaining how something works and; - Many other tasks All data incorporated into a “critical approach” Reasons suggested for data and procedures critiqued
Writing Task 2: “Essay”	Presenting a written argument or case on a given topic Information only from the prior knowledge No referencing, conclusions based purely on anecdotal evidence Focus on moral/ social desirability of practices Focus on concrete objects of enquiry	Many types of writing including “essays”, case study reports, research reports etcetera Information from primary or secondary research sources Appropriate citation vital Focus on scientific validity or summarising views related to practices Focus on both concrete and abstract objects of enquiry

Speaking subtest	Same content/ task types as the “General IELTS” examination Focus on: - Providing basic personal information; or -Expressing opinions; or - Explaining; or -Suggesting; or -Justifying opinions; or - - Speculating; or - Summarising; or - Contrasting Interacting in an interview with one examiner and a one to two minute individual ‘turn’ Information from personal knowledge and experience Conclusions based on anecdotal evidence	Specific field-related content/ task types Communicating complex ideas and/or independent research clearly and concisely Presenting at specialist and generalist national and international conferences, public forums and other professional contexts Information from independent research and/or respected secondary sources, appropriately acknowledged
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There are obviously significant differences in task types, source of information and mode of communication (Moore & Morton, 2005) between the tasks required in the IELTS and those required in postgraduate research. This section has only touched upon the vast differences between the ‘generic’ academic skills tested in IELTS and those common to most postgraduate contexts. The differences in task-types and skills between disciplines are potentially even larger. These differences make it very difficult to judge postgraduate research students’ possible academic success and even proficiency in English by looking at IELTS scores.

A lifting of the required overall IELTS score, as is proposed by many Australian universities, is unlikely to have any significant effect on the students’ ability to communicate more effectively within their faculties. The only likely effect would be an up to fifty percent reduction in the number of international students if, for example, the overall score was lifted from 6.0 to 6.5 (Feast, 2002). However, despite the fact that higher IELTS entrance requirements may not be the answer, many international students lack confidence in their own ability to communicate effectively in English which can lead to anxiety and lack of motivation (Bayliss & Ingram, 2006). Effective communication in English is particularly important to postgraduate research students who need to discuss complex issues with their colleagues and supervisors. Therefore, some provision to develop postgraduate research students’ written and oral communication is clearly needed.

Conclusion

I have indicated in this paper that IELTS scores are inadequate to provide a complete picture of postgraduate research students’ English proficiency or likely academic success. Therefore, I argue that far more research is required before Australian universities consider raising English entrance requirements for postgraduate courses and that some form of language support is needed for postgraduate research students while they are studying their research degrees. A variety of programs for postgraduate research students currently exist at Australian universities including semester or half-semester programs as described by Beasley (1999) and Cargill (1996), online

programs such as the one described by Larcombe and McCosker (2004) in-house faculty programs or one-to-one consultations as described by Chanock (1994). These programs all have some characteristics in common including the development of students' skills through their own research projects and some form of supervisor or faculty input. Systematic opportunities for international students to interact with their "community of practice" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992) in research conversation groups or formal opportunities to practice presentations either in-house in the disciplines or centrally should also be provided. I contend that all Australian universities should implement this type of support since it is potentially more useful in the improvement of postgraduate students' English proficiency than unilaterally raising IELTS band scores. Disciplinarily embedded "situated" use of English could assist in integrating international students into the Australian university culture and provide opportunities for them to practice and improve their research communication in English.

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