

Implementing an integrated skills test in a Direct Entry project

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Introduction

Testing for language proficiency in Direct Entry (DE) pathway programs at the English Language Programs (ELP) at Macquarie University College (MQC) has long included discrete writing, reading and listening tests. Despite their longstanding presence, the assessment team recently considered whether discrete item tests provide the most effective method to assess students' language proficiency. Reasons for this include the need to assess the specific skills taught in the course and for assessments to reflect how language is used in real-world contexts. Therefore, they began to analyse other methods of assessment. As a result of this examination, the assessment team decided that discrete item tests would no longer be used as the final assessment in Direct Entry and an integrated skills test would be implemented. This test would require students to use reading, listening, and writing skills together. One reason for the implementation of integrated skills testing is that, in comparison to testing skills in isolation integrated skills testing can provide opportunities for more authentic assessment and provide more developed insights into student performance, which are transferable to the real world (Plakans 2012:249). A further possible benefit is that washback from integrated skills testing can also allow for the development of more relevant linguistic skills than those developed by traditional test items, such as multiple-choice and gap fill questions (Cheng, Watanabe and Curtis (Eds) 2004). In addition, Read (2015:186) argues that discrete assessment does not consider the fact that 'actual academic language use tasks routinely involve combinations of skills'. Despite these benefits, there are potential challenges in relation to the design, introduction and teaching of integrated skills testing, such as resistance from stakeholders accustomed to discrete test types, rubric design, and standardisation of scores.

Research focus

In 2020, I had been part of the team that redeveloped Direct Entry and in 2021 was part of the team implementing the new assessment. I saw this change in assessment as an interesting opportunity to understand the perceptions of integrated skills testing of stakeholders, the assessment team, teachers, and students. I was also interested in analysing the process of implementing a new assessment task. Such a significant change in assessment provided a unique opportunity to examine and understand how teachers and students can be supported through the process.

My research addressed the following questions:

- How do key stakeholders view integrated skills testing to assess English language proficiency?
- How can the ELP best support teachers and students during the implementation of a new assessment task?
- What impact does the test have on the classroom and students' preparation for tertiary study?

Participants and context

Direct Entry is a 10-week course which runs twice a year. It is an alternate pathway for entry to tertiary study and prepares students for university by developing academic language and literacy skills. In the first five weeks of Direct Entry, students work on building listening and reading skills relevant to the integrated skills test. The integrated skills test is introduced in Week 6 of the course. There is a formative feedback task in Week 7 and students receive a marked rubric and detailed comments. They complete the final summative assessment in Week 9.

Previously, the final assessments were a discussion essay and discrete item listening and reading tests with questions and texts on topics taught in the course. The new test requires students to read a short text, listen twice to a short lecture and then write a discussion essay using Harvard referencing. The question format is similar to the following:

Task instructions

You will read a passage on the topic of X and then listen to a short lecture on the same theme.

Use your notes from the reading and the lecture to answer the following question.

Discuss the benefits and limitations of X and provide your own opinion in the conclusion.

In the course delivery in which the research took place, there were four classes each with 18 students. This was lower than usual due to COVID-19 border closures. This smaller number of classes meant that a change in assessment was more manageable. All classes were taught online. Most students studied for the entire 10 weeks; however, a small number of students joined the classes for the last five weeks as they had higher entry scores. The majority of students were on pathway to Master's degrees at MQC and had a required entry score of IELTS 6.5 with a minimum band score of 6.0.

Data collection

I used focus groups, interviews, surveys and content analysis. Before the course began, I conducted a focus group with five ELP teachers. At the time of the focus group, it had not been confirmed if these teachers would be teaching on the Direct Entry course. I aimed to find out about teachers' awareness of and views on integrated skills tests. In this focus group, I did not ask questions about the exact assessment task to be used and focused on integrated skills testing in general. Shortly before the test was first introduced to the students, I conducted a second focus group with the five teachers who were teaching on the course, one of whom had attended the previous group. I again asked about awareness of integrated skills testing but also focused on the format of the specific test that would be used in Direct Entry. At different points in the course, I interviewed the three members of the assessment team to understand the reasons why the test was implemented and the process of development. I was especially interested in the development of the rubric and the format of the test. For reasons explained below, I surveyed 46 students using Qualtrics after the final grades were released. I asked about their views on the test and how they felt taking the test. After the course ended, I interviewed four of the teachers who taught on the course and the course coordinator.

Course content changes

With the change to an integrated skills test, the following changes needed to be made to the course content:

- removal of most discrete item listening and reading activities (especially gap fills)
- increased emphasis on note-taking techniques for both listening and reading
- increased emphasis on paraphrasing and summarising.

I made relevant changes to the content for Weeks 1 to 5 prior to the commencement of Direct Entry. The changes to Weeks 6 to 9 were completed by the assessment team based on the design of the test. The desired outcome of the changes was that students be well placed to identify the main ideas and distinguish the key ideas of listening and reading texts, to enable them to use those ideas in the integrated skills test.

The existing course content already had a reasonable emphasis on note-taking, summarising and paraphrasing, so the changes to Weeks 1 to 4 were less onerous than expected. The approach I took was to simplify some of the early listening gap fills but leave them in place, as they now represented basic scaffolds of good note-taking practice. As the weeks passed, and the students built up their note-taking abilities, the gap fills were stripped right back and eventually eliminated, replaced with decreasingly scaffolded note taking activities.

I also added more paraphrasing activities and summary writing activities as the course proceeded. The paraphrasing encouraged students to use their own words to convey ideas, while the summary writing enabled students to think explicitly about writers' and speakers' ideas and how to convey them. I had initially expected that I might need to add some listening or reading texts to the course content, but close examination of the existing texts revealed that they were suitable – in terms of number, level of complexity, and topics – without any additions.

Findings

Assessment team views

The assessment team gave three clear reasons for the change to an integrated skills test. Firstly, it is a more valid and practical way of assessing English proficiency. One member of the assessment team stated that 'integrated skills testing [offers] more cognitive validity because of those mental processes that people have to go through'. Secondly, there were also concerns around academic integrity breaches in the existing tests especially since the move to online teaching. This was due to a variety of features of the tests, including the ability to share answers more easily to discrete item questions and the lack of ability to see when answers had been shared. A member of the team stated 'they can use tools to transcribe ... so it ends up being probably a reading test rather than listening test ... the test is not valid anymore, they can easily share answers'. Finally, practical concerns around the time needed to develop test versions were also a key driver to the move to integrated skills testing as discussed here: 'I've been involved in test development, and I know how long it takes to develop those tests [discrete item tests] and it's you know it can be up to 100 hours per test if you're doing it properly.'

Teachers' views

Initial focus groups showed that none of the teachers had ever taught on a course with an integrated skills test. This lack of exposure possibly influenced the views around integrated skills testing and the support needed throughout the course. Teachers reported strong concerns about the integrated skills test. Whilst any new assessment and course change can cause challenges for teachers, the level of anxiety that presented itself in the focus group was unexpected. It may have been influenced by the number of other changes that had occurred over the year in international education and the long period of online teaching.

The main concern before the test delivery related to students failing the task, and thus the course, due to a weakness in one area (writing, reading or listening). The primary concern was around students with weak listening skills who would miss the content of the lecture and not be able to write the essay. Comments included (comments are unedited to maintain authenticity):

I think the students who have poor listening skills will be disadvantaged.

We have six students [in a class of 18] that will probably fail because of the weighting.

There were also concerns that students did not have sufficient paraphrasing and referencing skills. Teachers were particularly worried as they were now being asked to use these skills in a test environment as described here:

In terms of paraphrasing it does take a lot of time for our students who are quite low in using synonyms or academic language to be able to paraphrase.

Finally, in contrast to the assessment team view, teachers stated that the integrated skills test would make it easier for students to copy, use transcription or cheat in other ways, as in this comment:

Because if you're asking our students at this level, to paraphrase in your time limit this is like tempting them to open something to help themselves.

As a result of this concern, we implemented a number of features. These included:

- a short video for teachers and students explaining the reasons for the implementation of the test
- an extra meeting to discuss the rubric with teachers
- extra support around marking time to discuss how to best approach scoring this style of assessment.

Teachers' views at the end of Direct Entry were radically different to those at course commencement. Despite initial concern about a weakness in one skill area significantly impacting on the whole task, in the post-course interviews teachers reported that this was not the case, as this quote illustrates:

I was very concerned about you know, three or four students who are really, really weak in listening... the rubric allowed for this not to fail them for the whole task.

Teachers also stated that there was a lower number of academic integrity breaches in this test compared to the previous style of test used. A Direct Entry teacher reported that:

It limits instances of external plagiarism. Students don't ... google, the topic and find sentences that are not their own and use them in a test.

In the post-course interviews, teachers reported that after the experience of teaching and marking the integrated skills test, they believed that the test was useful to prepare students for their tertiary study. Comments from teachers included:

Identifying the main ideas. I think that's very, very helpful for them. That's what they're actually going to do later on when they go to uni.

We are allowing the students to focus on the skills that they really need for uni so skills like paraphrasing ...

A number of factors contributed to this change in opinion for the integrated skills test. Firstly, the implementation of extra support mechanisms provided essential information and assistance to build teacher knowledge of and confidence in integrated skills testing. In addition, the process of marking and scoring the feedback task lowered teacher anxiety as they saw that students had the skills to complete the task successfully. Finally, the process of teaching the content provided and seeing the assessment task showed teachers that the course content appropriately supported students to complete the integrated skills task.

Teachers also reported that they greatly appreciated the opportunity to contribute to the development of the assessment and course content. They provided feedback on a criterion of the rubric that they found difficult to score as it required teachers to quantify main ideas. The assessment team made changes based on this feedback. This helped build teacher confidence in the task and in the rationale behind the task.

Student views

Initially, I planned to survey students at the beginning of the course and at the end of the course to ascertain their views of this form of testing and to see how they changed over the delivery. However, due to the views of the teachers and the level of anxiety expressed in the focus group, I decided not to survey the students at the beginning of the course as I did not wish to contribute to this anxiety. Therefore, a clear comparison and contrast of how the views changed is not possible.

To attempt to understand how students felt when they were first told about the integrated skills test, I asked the teachers in the final interviews. Comments from teachers show that they felt that students were worried when the integrated skills test was introduced.

There were many questions, so I can sense that they were concerned. I don't think they understood the concept really well at the beginning.

I think my main concern was that the students at the very beginning were stressed.

The students' views of integrated skills testing also evolved over the delivery of the course. Surveys at the end of the course (Figure 1) showed that students believed the integrated skills test was a suitable way to test all three skill areas, as shown by these quotes:

I was so excited to write what I understand from listening and reading. Also, I was not struggling to find ideas, it provided my content from listening and reading. Therefore, it makes writing easier to explain and support ideas.

It was testing my all-round learning ability.

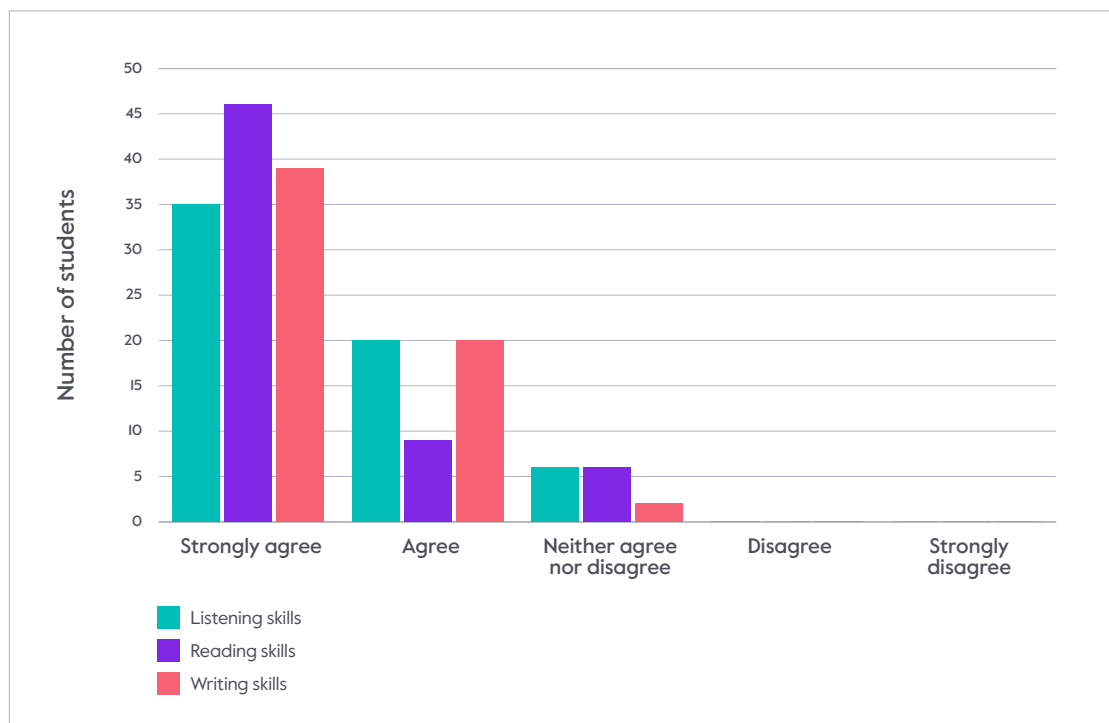


Figure 1: The integrated skills test is suitable to assess my reading/writing/listening skills

Students also believed that the integrated skills test was helpful in preparing them for university as evidenced by these quotes:

It will be useful for me, because I notice that I need to use those skills in the university in the future.

The integrated skills test is an excellent way to help students improve their English skills that are necessary for future studies in university.

The majority of students agreed that the test was helpful for preparing them for university as seen in Figure 2.

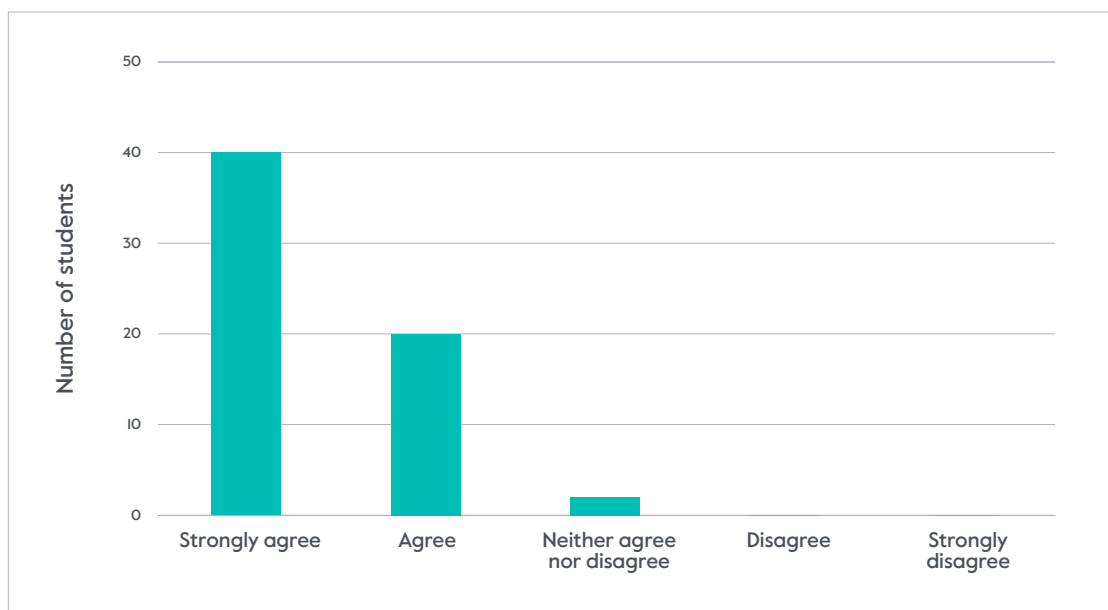


Figure 2: The integrated skills test is useful for helping me prepare for university

Marks analysis

I completed an analysis of the marks for the feedback and final tasks. The highest number of fails in both the feedback and final tasks were in the Language Accuracy criterion. Whilst there was some improvement, this was slight. Other areas of concern in the feedback task were in relation to Academic Style. There were a comparatively high number of fails in Formal Style, Attribution and In-text Referencing. All these three criteria showed a lower number of fails in the final task; however, they were still relatively high. Another area that students struggled with was the Introduction and Conclusion.

Areas which are most strongly linked to the content of the lecture and reading, such as Addressing the Task and Development, showed a lower number of fails. This is interesting due to the initial concerns that a low level of listening skills would negatively impact on students' grades. If students did not understand the listening text, then it would most likely show in these two areas with a lack of ability to address the task and a lack of development.

The initial fear of a higher level of plagiarism also did not eventuate. There was a lower number of academic integrity breaches than in previous deliveries with discrete item testing.

An analysis of the marks shows a need for a continued and extended focus on paragraph structure, in-text referencing and academic skills. These are not areas that I focused on when I added content before the delivery as I focused more on listening and paraphrasing skills. The need for more content and student support in these areas was also highlighted by teachers in interviews after the completion of the course.

Conclusions and moving forward

Overall, teachers and students came to view the integrated skills test positively and stated that it helped prepare for tertiary study. However, there were opportunities for improvement in a number of areas of its implementation. Earlier and clearer communication on why the test was being implemented and its benefits could have lowered teachers', and subsequently students', anxiety.

The research project clearly reinforced the need to support teachers consistently and practically throughout the implementation of a new assessment task. Proactively developing support materials to educate and support teachers is key to a smooth introduction of a new test.

Teachers stated that further practice opportunities were required as these were the main support mechanism to allow for success in the test. A second feedback task would be difficult to incorporate due to timing and marking load; however, other forms of practice related to specific skills required to complete the task, such as shorter listening tasks, paraphrasing, referencing, or synthesising, could be employed.

A key theme raised throughout the research process was that teachers greatly appreciated having input into the assessment development process. An example is that during an analysis of the rubric, teachers commented that it was difficult to grade how many main ideas the students included. Therefore, this area of the rubric was altered. This ability to contribute to the development of the rubric fostered confidence in the assessment task amongst teachers.

Teachers reported that they found the integrated skills test more time consuming to grade accurately than the previously used discrete tests. This was to be expected due to the need to check paraphrasing and use of sources. In future, professional development and guidance on the marking process could help alleviate any marking burden on teachers.

Professionally, the action research project showed me how changes in a course can impact teachers in unexpected ways. As a curriculum developer, it is important to factor this into the roll out of courses and assessments. Timing and communication are also key to the successful implementation of new courses and assessment.

References

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Please click the following link to view the author's presentation at the 2021 English Australia Action Research in ELICOS Colloquium: <https://youtu.be/yusRZiYuotM>