Developing a Web-based Academic English Placement Test using Authentic Text

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This presentation reports the design and development process of a new web-based Academic English Test, an ESL placement test at a large university in the U.S. The purpose of the test is to identify the incoming international students who need English language support for undergraduate or postgraduate studies and to place them into appropriate language courses. The faculty of the university has been reporting inconsistencies between international students’ scores on standardized academic English proficiency tests and their actual English language skills in academic settings. In order to address this issue, we made three substantial changes from the earlier test, with regard to the listening section, the writing section, and the medium of delivery. The previously scripted, audio-only listening test has been replaced with an audio-visual academic listening test using authentic lectures video-recorded from undergraduate classes at the university. The previously independent, single-task writing test has been replaced with a combination of an independent narrative writing task and a read-to-write integrated argumentative task. Both listening and writing tests have been changed from paper-based to web-based tests, where not only test-taking but also scoring is entirely done on computers. The test development procedure thoroughly followed the principles of designing language tests (Bachman 1990; Carr, 2011; Davidson & Lynch, 2002), focusing on the authenticity of the test (Lewkowicz, 2000) and incorporating the input from the stakeholders (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Feedback from 293 examinees from the pilot showed that the new test measures the target constructs as intended. The test results from 516 examinees showed acceptability reliability for each section. We argue that the new test using authentic text has greater construct representation, greater practicality of scoring, and less measurement errors than the earlier test. We also discuss the benefits and challenges of using authentic lecture videos and authentic written text for developing a large-scale language test.

References