

# IELTS as a Predictor of Academic Language Performance

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## INTRODUCTION

This study investigates the extent to which the proficiency scores obtained by 28 NESB tertiary level students could predict their language behaviour in the university context. The study also sought to ascertain the adequacy of that behaviour for the linguistic demands of each student's course and to consider the implications for raising or lowering entry levels to different courses.

Given the popularity of IELTS as an admissions tool to Australian universities, research into the uses of test scores and the meanings ascribed to them is vital (Elder & O'Loughlin 2003). Although the score a student achieves in an IELTS test is meant to indicate whether he/she has a sufficient level of English proficiency to cope with the linguistic demands of tertiary studies, it does not imply that they will succeed academically or that they will not struggle linguistically. IELTS suggests that a score of 7.0 is "probably acceptable" for linguistically demanding academic courses and "acceptable" for linguistically less demanding courses but cautions institutions *"to consider both the Overall Band Score and the Bands recorded for each individual module"* (IELTS 2003, p5) and determine individual entry on the basis of each course's profile of linguistic demands. In order for university administrators to do this, a clear understanding of the linguistic capabilities implied by IELTS scores is essential.

A number of predictive validity studies have sought to identify the connection between IELTS scores and academic performance, with inconsistent results. Some studies, (for example Cotton & Conrow, 1998 and Dooley, 1999) have found no link between the two, while others (for example, Bellingham 1993; Ferguson & White 1993; Hill, Storch & Lynch 1999; Kerstjens & Nery 2000; Feast 2002) have found generally positive (although sometimes weak or inconsistent) correlations between IELTS entry levels and GPAs . Other studies have focused on aspects such as test and rater reliability (for example, Bayliss 1996; Brown & Hill 1998; Merrylees & McDowell 1999; O'Loughlin 2000; Mickan 2003) and the influence of test preparation courses on test results and/or band score gain (Brown 1998; Elder & O'Loughlin 2003; Read & Hayes 2003).

Considering the many variables that influence academic success and the fact that IELTS measures only language proficiency, it is not surprising that attempts to correlate test scores with subsequent academic results have been inconsistent in their outcomes. In view of this, a number of other studies have, instead, investigated the level of difficulty experienced by NESB students in coping with the English demands of their coursework. For example Denham & Oner (1992) found little connection between the IELTS listening scores and subsequent listening comprehension difficulties, and Fiocco (1992 cited in Cotton & Conrow, 1998) found no meaningful statistical relationship between IELTS scores and language-related coursework tasks. In contrast, Elder (1993) cautiously suggested that subtest scores may be able to predict subsequent language-related difficulties in coursework writing, reading and listening tasks, while Cotton and Conrow (1998) and Kerstjens and Nery (2000) also found a relationship between IELTS scores and language-related coursework difficulties.

The findings of studies such as those outlined above contribute to debates as to whether the prescribed cut-offs in different institutional contexts have been set at an appropriate level, providing test-takers with the opportunity to demonstrate academic ability in their tertiary studies yet protecting them from failure due to inadequate language proficiency.

## **AIMS OF THE STUDY**

Recognising the many variables that may influence academic performance, rather than focus on a hypothetical relationship between English language proficiency and academic success, this study, instead, sought to focus on the extent to which IELTS test results were able to predict the actual subsequent language behaviour exhibited by students in the university context and the adequacy of that language for course-related tasks.

The study set out to investigate the following research questions:

1. To what extent is the language behaviour implied by their IELTS scores reflected in the language behaviour (in all four macro skills) of university students during the first six months of their degree program?
2. To what extent is the language behaviour observed adequate for the study program being undertaken by the student?
3. Are there implications for raising or lowering common IELTS requirements for entry to undergraduate or graduate courses?

## **STUDY CONTEXT**

28 international students (16 females and 12 males) were recruited from two tertiary campuses in Melbourne, Australia, where they were enrolled in the first six months of a full-time academic study program. Participants were aged from 19 to 35 years with the average age being 25.5 yrs. They came from China, Taiwan, Iran, Botswana, Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, Korea and Thailand, with the vast majority of Asian origin.

Half the participants were drawn from different faculties and departments at the University of Melbourne (UoM), studying at all levels ranging from undergraduate to PhD. The minimum overall entry level to the courses in which participants were enrolled ranged from 6.5 to 7.0, with a specified minimum score in writing which ranged from 6.0 to 7.0, according to faculty and course level. Faculties represented included Education, Veterinary Science, Architecture, Physiotherapy, Dentistry and Medicine. The remaining 14 participants were drawn from a postgraduate language-based course at Melbourne University Private (MUP). The course had a minimum entry set at an overall IELTS score of 5.5 (or equivalent) with no sub score less than 5.0. (Note: Melbourne University Private was closed in December 2005. This course is now offered by the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne.)

The English proficiency levels of the sample (based on the IELTS scores submitted with applications for course entry) ranged from an overall IELTS score of 5.0 to an overall score of 8.0. The mean overall score was 6.43 (median 6.5), with subskill band scores ranging from a minimum of 4.5 to a maximum of 9.0.

Eight students were involved in undergraduate programs, 10 were studying at the graduate certificate level, four students were studying at the graduate diploma level, four were enrolled in a masters program and two students were enrolled in a PhD.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Pre-study questionnaires (self-evaluations) were administered to all participants to gauge their self-perceptions of language proficiency. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with both student participants and teaching staff to obtain information about participant performance in the learning environment using English as the means of communication. Students were observed in a variety of class types (listening and note-taking in lectures and classes, participation in group discussions, pairwork and individual oral

presentations as well as interaction with both peers and academic staff), with their interactive behaviour noted on observation charts and their spoken language recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. All participants were observed in the learning context by at least one researcher on at least one occasion, although in most cases participants were observed in a minimum of three classes. Further data was obtained from the collection and analysis of students' lecture notes, written assignments and other class materials. A small number of classes were also videotaped in order to provide supplementary information about the level of student involvement and interaction in the learning context.

Data was analysed and rated against detailed language behaviour descriptors which had been developed for each of the four macro skills. The language descriptions were based on the publicly available IELTS Overall band scales (IELTS 2003:4) and informed by additional reference (with permission from IELTS Australia) to the individual IELTS Speaking and Writing assessment band scales. Focusing on key features of language behaviour in academic performance, they were used as a rating scale against which researchers could measure the students' language performance and compare their language behaviour with that implied in their IELTS scores.

### **Method of Analysis**

Students' perceptions of their own language proficiency were tabulated for Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. A global band score was then calculated on the basis of these self-ratings. Each of these scores was then compared with the scores the students had received on the actual IELTS test.

Data from the student interviews was entered into two databases, one providing an overview of each student participant and the other providing a collective record of all responses. Because of the intrusion of too many uncontrollable variables (such as the behaviour of other students in the classes, the variable nature of different class types and activities, and levels of student embarrassment due to researcher presence), it was decided not to use statistical correlations of the interview and observation data. Instead, a discursive approach was used to analyse and describe the students' spoken and written language as observed and recorded in the academic context. This included the transcripts of spoken interaction in classes, discussions and oral presentations as well as photocopies of lecture notes and assignments, each of which was analysed individually and rated against the language behaviour descriptors. Such features as syntax, language functions, range of lexis, language tasks, attitudes conveyed, organization of information, interpersonal relationships and related linguistic forms were studied and documented. The findings for each macro skill were written up as a discursive analysis, which was then compared and matched to the detailed behavioural descriptions which had been developed and subsequently to the students' actual IELTS scores.

Data from the interviews with academic staff was similarly analysed and recorded, with a discursive description of lecturer comments prepared for each student. This description was then rated against the detailed language descriptors to provide a 'lecturer's estimate' of student language behaviour.

## **RESULTS**

**Research Question 1:** *To what extent is the language behaviour implied by their IELTS scores reflected in the language behaviour of university students during the first six months of their degree program?*

This question was addressed by considering (i) the students' self-evaluations of their language proficiency, and (ii) the researcher analyses of the student's language behaviour.

The self-evaluations of the student participants (Table 1) provided useful information about their perceptions of their language abilities after studying for a short period of time in an English speaking context. One quarter (25%) of the 28 participants rated their overall language abilities at a level equal to that implied by their IELTS scores. Of the remainder, 36% rated themselves at a higher level and 39% at a lower level, with the overall variations ranging from two bands lower for individual macro skills to two bands higher than their IELTS scores.

Participant	IELTS overall	Self-eval overall	IELTS Reading	Self-eval Reading	IELTS Writing	Self-eval Writing	IELTS Listening	Self-eval Listening	IELTS Speaking	Self-eval Speaking
1	6.5	8	6	8	7	8	7	8	6	7
2	7.5	6.5	7.5	6	7	6	7.5	7	7	6
3	5	6	4.5	6	5	6.5	5.5	5.5	5	6
4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
5	6.5	6	6	5	6	6	6	6	7	6
6	6.5	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	6	7
7	7.5	7.5	7	8	7	8	8.5	8	8	6
8	5.5	5	5.5	5	5	4	5.5	5	5	5
9	7.5	8.5	7.5	8	8	8	8	9	7	8
10	8	7.5	8	9	7	5	9	9	8	6
11	5.5	6	5.5	6	5	6	6	6	5	5
12	5.5	4.5	6.5	5	5	5	6	4	5	4
13	5.5	5.5	5	5	5	6	6	5	5	6
14	6	7.5	5.5	7	7	7	6.5	8	6	7
15	6.5	7	5.5	7	6	7	7	7	7	7
16	6.5	6.5	7	6	6	6	6	7	5	6
17	5.5	5	5.5	5	5	4	5.5	5	6	5
18	6.5	7	6	7	6	7	7.5	7	7	7
19	6.5	7.5	7	8	5	7	7	8	6	7
20	6.5	6.5	7	7	6	6	6.5	6	6	6
21	6.5	6.5	6	7	6	6	7	7	6	6
22	6.5	5.5	6.5	6	7	6	7	5	6	5
23	7	6	8	6	7	6	7.5	6	6	6
24	7.5	6.5	7	6	7	7	8	7	7	6
25	6.5	5.5	7	6	6	6	7	5	6	5
26	6.5	6	5	7	7	6	6.5	5	7	5
27	6	6.5	5.5	7	6	7	5.5	7	7	6
28	6.5	6.5	6	7	7	6	7.5	7	6	7
Mean	6.45	6.43	6.30	6.54	6.21	6.27	6.75	6.52	6.21	6.04

Table 1 –Participant language proficiency evaluations compared with actual IELTS scores

On average, the group had relatively close perceptions of their language proficiency in relation to their IELTS scores. The groups mean variation was small, particularly for the overall result. The mean score of overall self-ratings was 6.43, in comparison to a mean IELTS overall rating of 6.45. This indicates that the students, as a group, rated their linguistic performance relatively consistently with the language behaviour predicted by their IELTS scores. However, the limits of agreement were significant. With variations of up to two bands lower or higher than individual scores, some students clearly had very different perceptions of their language strengths and/or weaknesses from those suggested by their IELTS results.

The researcher analyses of student language behaviour (Table 2), rated 89% of the group at a level equal to or greater than that implied by their IELTS scores. The remaining 11% were rated at a marginally lower level. However, in view of the different rating system applied, and particularly in view of the fact that the IELTS speaking test did not apply the same half-point rating the researchers had used, this difference was not surprising. However, it is interesting to note that in seven of the eight instances in which the overall researcher rating varied there was also a variation in the rating for Speaking. The limits of agreement ranged from –0.5 to

+0.5, indicating a perception of student language behaviour that matched the IELTS scores more closely than did the student self-evaluations.

Participant	IELTS Overall score	Researcher Overall rating	IELTS Writing	Researcher Writing	IELTS Listening	Researcher Listening	IELTS Speaking	Researcher Speaking
1	6.5	6.5	7	6.5	7	7	6	6.5
2	7.5	7	7	7	7.5	7	7	6.5
3	5	5	5	5	5.5	5.5	5	4.5
4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6.5
5	6.5	6	6	6	6	6	7	6.5
6	6.5	6.5	7	6.5	6	6	6	6
7	7.5	7.5	7	7	8.5	8	8	7.5
8	5.5	5.5	5	5	5.5	5	5	5.5
9	7.5	8	8	8	8	8	7	7.5
10	8	8	7	7	9	9	8	8
11	5.5	5.5	5	5	6	6	5	5
12	5.5	5.5	5	5	6	6	5	5
13	5.5	6	5	6	6	6	5	6
14	6	6.5	7	7	6.5	6.5	6	7
15	6.5	6.5	6	6	7	7	7	7
16	6.5	6.5	6	7	6	6	5	6
17	5.5	5	5	5	5.5	5	6	5
18	6.5	7	6	7	7.5	7	7	7
19	6.5	6.5	5	5	7	7	6	6.5
20	6.5	6.5	6	6	6.5	7	6	6
21	6.5	7	6	7	7	7	6	7
22	6.5	6.5	7	7	7	6.5	6	5.5
23	7	7	7	7	7.5	7	6	7
24	7.5	7.5	7	7	8	8	7	7
25	6.5	6.5	6	6	7	7	6	6
26	6.5	6.5	7	7	6.5	7	7	7
27	6	6	6	6	5.5	6.5	7	6.5
28	6.5	6.5	7	7	7.5	6.5	6	6.5
Mean	6.45	6.46	6.21	6.32	6.75	6.66	6.21	6.39

Table 2: Researcher Scores of Student Language Behaviour compared with IELTS Scores

Although the researcher ratings and those of the student participants differed, both rated the students' language behaviour at a level that was quite close to the students' actual IELTS scores. However, the ratings given by the researchers had the highest level of agreement with the students' actual IELTS band scores, particularly the overall result.

The findings suggest that IELTS scores can quite accurately predict students' language behaviour in the first six months of their study program but that individual students might perceive their language proficiency levels quite differently.

**Research question 2:** *To what extent is the language behaviour observed adequate for the study program being undertaken by the student?*

This question was addressed by considering (i) student questionnaire responses, (ii) interview responses from academic staff, and (iii) notes made by observers as they observed students in the academic context.

There was no clear correlation between individual students' IELTS scores and their reported experiences using English in the university context or their opinions of the adequacy of their English for study, although there did appear to be a relationship between writing proficiency and success in written tasks. Further, student perceptions of the adequacy of their language did not appear to relate with any consistency to the course of study, apart from an indication that in the Science (Medical) disciplines those with higher proficiency levels might judge their proficiency to be more adequate than those with lower proficiency levels. This suggested that although student perceptions of course difficulty or language adequacy may relate to factors other than language proficiency, the success they experienced in some written tasks may be related to proficiency level.

71% of students believed that their English language proficiency was either good enough (reasonably adequate) or completely adequate for their course of study, while the lecturers believed this to be the case for 79% of the participant cohort. Researchers reached the same conclusion for 71% of students.

While 29% of students believed that their English was not quite good enough, and lecturers held this view for 21%, researchers rated 14% as having slightly inadequate language for their tertiary studies and considered a further 14% to have completely inadequate language proficiency for the courses in which they were enrolled.

Students cited a range of different reasons for their confidence, their willingness or reluctance to participate in class and the difficulty (or lack of difficulty) they experienced in their studies. Although each course/faculty had required students to undertake a number of tasks that were similar in nature, each course was very different and the challenges faced by students were not consistent across faculties. For example, students who were enrolled in Medical Science subjects such as Physiotherapy, Dentistry and Medicine were required to interact with patients in professional settings during their first semester of studies. For students whose native language was not English, this was a daunting task.

Regardless of the audience (lecturer or member of the public in clinics), many of the students were struggling to communicate effectively, either because of native speaker accents, speed of speech or colloquialisms. Others, however, found that they were managing despite these challenges. In general, student participants believed that either their proficiency in English was continuing to improve, or they were adjusting to the learning environment and finding their experiences to be less problematic.

Lecturers indicated that some of the students experienced difficulty communicating in spoken English, with pronunciation, lack of vocabulary and grammatical inaccuracy as hindrances. In particular, lecturers in the Medical Science faculties expressed concern about the speaking proficiency of some of the students, particularly about their ability to function in professional contexts whilst training. In spite of this, many of the student participants were judged by their teaching staff as (currently) coping adequately in the learning environment, despite the difficulties they encountered, and demonstrating steady improvement.

The researchers were not as familiar with the students as were the academic staff, and based their evaluations on observation of students in the academic context, their analyses of spoken language transcripts and the analysis of written tasks submitted by students over the course of the semester. A small number of students were considered to have language problems which were so severe that lecturers questioned their capacity to maintain satisfactory future progress in the courses in which they were enrolled.

In order to determine whether or not the students' language behaviour was adequate for the nature of their studies, researchers categorised participants according to broad discipline

groups. These groups were Architecture, Arts (Applied Language Studies), Education and Science.

The proficiency level of each student was considered in terms of the entry level for each course. For the faculties of Architecture and Science, the entry level was an IELTS score of 6.5; for the Arts students (who were enrolled in studies at Melbourne University Private) the entry level was an overall IELTS score of 5.5, and for the Education Faculty the entry level (graduate) was an IELTS score of 7.0. Table 3 illustrates the proficiency levels of the different students in each faculty in terms of the researchers' decisions about the adequacy of their language for their respective courses.

Faculty	Entry level	Inadequate Language		Adequate Language	
		Participant	Proficiency level	Participant	Proficiency level
Architecture	6.5			18	6.5
				28	6.5
				25	6.5
Arts (Applied Language Studies)	5.5	3	5.0	1	6.5
		8	5.5	4	6.0
		11	5.5	5	6.5
		12	5.5	6	6.5
		17	5.5	13	5.5
		19	6.5	14	6.0
			15	6.5	
			20	6.5	
Education	7.0			21	7.0
				23	7.0
				24	7.5
(Medical) Science	6.5			2	7.5
				7	7.5
		22	6.5	9	7.5
		27	6.0	10	8.0
				16	6.5
			26	6.5	

Table 3: Adequacy of student language for individual faculties

As can be seen from the table, in the case of all but three of the student participants, a proficiency level of 6.5 or higher was considered to be adequate for the chosen course of study. However, in the medical science disciplines two students (one with an overall proficiency level of 6.5 and the other with a level of 6.0) were considered to have an inadequate level of proficiency. Of the Arts (Applied Language Studies) participants, all but one of the students who met the required entry score of 5.5 were considered to have an inadequate level of proficiency, and one participant with an overall score of 6.5 was also considered to have less than adequate language levels. The participants enrolled in the Faculty of Architecture (all of whom had an IELTS score of 6.5) were rated as having adequate English for their course. Similarly, students enrolled in Education, who met the entry requirement of 7.0 or higher, were also viewed to have adequate language for their studies.

The adequacy of different proficiency levels according to faculty is also shown in Figure 1. The information provided in this figure and Table 16 above indicates that students in the Applied Language Studies course who have an overall IELTS score of less than 6.0 clearly have a greater risk of language-related problems, and those in the medical science disciplines with a proficiency level of 6.5 (or less) also risk more language-related difficulties than those at a higher proficiency level.

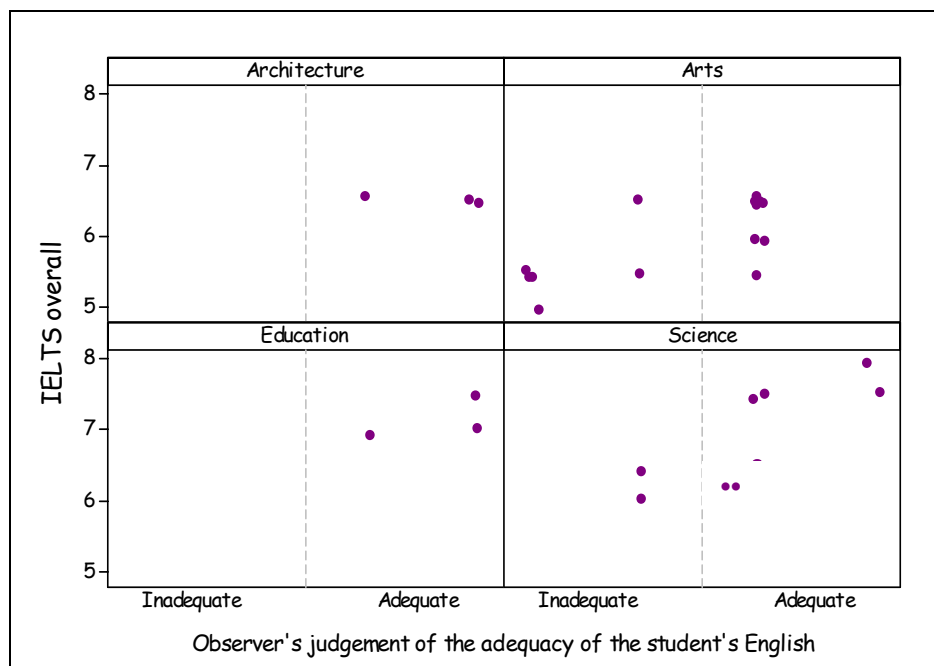


Fig. 1: Adequacy of student IELTS scores according to faculty

**Research question 3: Are there any implications for raising or lowering the IELTS scores for particular courses?**

With a total participant cohort of 28 students in this exploratory study, there were only a small number of students in each faculty. However, within the context of the study there were clear indications that a number of students were struggling in their university program, if not in all subjects, at least in some. The faculty areas providing greatest challenge to students in our study whose overall proficiency met, but did not exceed, the entry level requirements were those of Arts (Applied Language Studies) and the Health Sciences (Physiotherapy, Dentistry and Medicine).

Based on IELTS guidelines (See Table 4), faculties at the UoM such as Architecture and Education, with IELTS entry levels of 6.5 and 7.0 respectively, are offering NESB students admission to their courses with an English proficiency level that is 'probably acceptable' for their course of study. In other words, with this entry level it is assumed that their English should probably be adequate to cope with the language demands of the course.

Band	Linguistically demanding <b>academic</b> courses, e.g. Medicine, Law, Linguistics, Journalism, Library Studies	Linguistically less demanding <b>academic</b> courses, e.g. Agriculture, Pure Mathematics, Technology, Computer-based work, Telecommunications
9.0-7.5	Acceptable	Acceptable
7.0	Probably Acceptable	Acceptable
6.5	English study needed	Probably Acceptable
6.0	English study needed	English study needed
5.5	English study needed	English study needed

Table 4: IELTS guidance on acceptable language proficiency levels for different academic courses

Participants in the Faculty of Architecture were enrolled at all levels (undergraduate, Masters and PhD), with an IELTS entry requirement of 6.5 or higher. All students were performing at an adequate level, despite obvious language limitations and associated uncertainties. The students, the lecturers and the researcher/observers were all confident that these participants had adequate English proficiency to cope with the linguistic demands of their

study programs. On this basis of this exploratory study, an IELTS entry level of 6.5 seemed to be an acceptable level for this course.

Participants in the Faculty of Education at the UoM were all enrolled in a Masters program. With an entry level of 7.0 these students were performing satisfactorily, however the participant with an IELTS score of 7.0 was experiencing greater difficulty than her peers (who had an overall result of 7.5). Given the performance of the participants in this study, the current admission level of 7.0 appears to be appropriate.

In contrast, the Health Science faculties, are offering international students entry to their programs at a level at which IELTS recommends further English study (IELTS 6.5), suggesting that the language demands of the course are unlikely to be met by students with an IELTS score under 7.0. In these faculties, one participant with an Overall IELTS score of 6.0 was considered to have inadequate language proficiency for the program. Of two students with entry levels of 6.5, one was perceived to be struggling while the other was considered to be coping adequately with the course. In contrast, the one Veterinary Science student, who was enrolled in a PhD with an IELTS score of 6.5 (Reading 5.5), was coping with the initial language demands of her research program, which required only speaking and note-taking over the first twelve months of enrolment. Her supervisor did, however, express concerns about the possible standard of her writing when she eventually commenced work on her thesis. All other participants in the various Science faculties had IELTS scores in excess of 6.5 and were considered to have a level of English proficiency that was adequate for their course demands.

Although the sample size is small, the results suggest that students with an IELTS entry level of 6.5 who are enrolled in faculties such as Medical Sciences are likely to experience considerable difficulty with the linguistic demands of their studies. For these students (who are required, from the beginning of their courses, to interact in professional settings), there is an increased risk of failure due to language inadequacies rather than an inability to perform at the academic and intellectual level required for course success. In contrast, other Science faculties (including Veterinary Science) do not involve the same language tasks, such as those demanded by problem-based learning (PBL) tutorials and clinics, and thus pose less risk for students at this proficiency level.

Given the sample size, the results may not give a sufficiently definitive picture to warrant recommending the raising of entry scores to the Health Sciences courses, however they do justify a cautionary comment. If it is the intention of universities to admit students into their courses on the basis that they have sufficient English to cope with the demands of their academic study program without English proficiency levels interfering, there is more likelihood of student success if a conservative approach is adopted with the specification of entry levels. In other words, entry levels should be set on the high side, rather than at the current level of the barest minimum. This being the case, the advice that an IELTS level of 6.5 is inadequate for the linguistic demands of Medical courses such as Physiotherapy, Dentistry and Medicine should be heeded.

The School of Applied Language Studies at MUP, with an admission level of IELTS 5.5, enrolled students with a proficiency level lower than that recommended by IELTS for Linguistics courses, suggesting that further English study would be required. However, given the fact that these studies involve language development programs in the field of English as an International Language, the setting of an entry level lower than the 'probably acceptable' score of 7.0 is understandable. In addition to language development subjects, students subsequently select from an extensive range of Applied Linguistics subjects of which the language demands are challenging, particularly beyond the first semester of study. This needs to be taken into account by administrators in the setting of admission levels to this course.

Five of the six students at MUP deemed to have inadequate language proficiency had an overall IELTS score of 5.5 or less. However, not all of these participants agreed with the lecturer and observer evaluations of their linguistic inadequacy – some were confident in their language proficiency and believed they were doing well, despite poor results. A smaller number of participants who met the admission requirement of 5.5 were coping, but with difficulty. In spite of this, the results of this study suggest that students with the minimum IELTS entry level of only 5.5 are likely to struggle in the course, particularly when attempting to address the demands of lengthy discursive essays. For this reason the entry score of 5.5 seems low, particularly as this enables students with a Writing score of 5.0 to enrol.

Similar, if not greater, demands are placed on students enrolled in fields such as mainstream Arts/Humanities, Linguistics, Law, Education and Journalism. The results of this study indicated that, for linguistically demanding courses such as these, the recommended IELTS entry level of 7.0 is 'probably adequate', but admission to courses such as these with an overall IELTS score below 7.0 should be treated with caution.

## **DISCUSSION**

Without a clear understanding of the linguistic behaviour implied by IELTS scores the setting of appropriate entry levels to different university courses is a speculative exercise. The usefulness of a proficiency rating to key stakeholders is limited to their understanding of what that rating means and what the individual level descriptors imply. At present, IELTS proficiency descriptors provide little information about what a student should or should not be able to 'do' with language, making it difficult for university admissions staff and faculties to determine whether they are linguistically equipped to fulfil the task requirements of particular study disciplines.

Whilst a broader description of each proficiency level would undoubtedly facilitate the interpretation of scores, IELTS makes it clear that individual institutions and departments need to consider these scores 'in the light of knowledge of their own courses and their experience of overseas students taking them' (IELTS Handbook, 2005:5).

For some participants in this study perceptions about their performance and proficiency appeared to relate to their levels of self-confidence. This could have been a personality factor or the result of academic experiences. However, students with high confidence levels were more willing to participate and interact in class, enabling lecturers to more clearly identify their learning needs and providing the students with greater opportunity for feedback. Others, with low confidence levels, were unwilling to participate in class, making it harder for academic staff to identify, evaluate and consequently address their learning difficulties and leaving the students isolated in the learning environment.

Low confidence and poor performance may have related to a lack of adjustment to the Australian academic culture. If students are not attuned to the expectations and requirements of this culture, they are likely to struggle even with adequate language proficiency levels. Behaviours such as questioning or contradicting academic staff, participating in argumentative debates, applying critical thinking strategies, independently managing one's study regime and attending classes with other genders, age groups, social and cultural groups are all part of the Australian university experience. The cultural codes and practices of some NESB students may differ from those in Australia, and such behaviours may be unfamiliar and confronting. For students who are struggling with the English language, coping with these challenges will be even more difficult.

In the data-gathering process researchers noted the behaviour not only of participants in this study but also of other NESB students in each class. These observations have implications for the nature of pre-university language development courses offered to students, the

teaching strategies used by academic staff, and the measures taken by university faculties to encourage the adjustment and acculturation of NESB students. These behaviours included low participation levels in class, minimal note-taking, high levels of anxiety associated with oral presentations and little (if any) interaction with English-speaking peers.

Some participants indicated that their lack of participation was due to the time they needed to think over what they heard, process the information and complete assigned tasks. These comments were supported by the analyses of in-class dialogue and researcher observation. When questions were asked in tutorials (for example), local students generally responded before NESB students had processed the information and worked out how to express their answers. In group discussions, participants frequently used the entire time allocated for task completion to work out both what the task was and what information was relevant to it. This may have led both lecturers and peers to conclude that NESB students either did not know the answers or did not understand the questions. Academic staff, in general, appeared to be unaware of the different needs of their NESB students in terms of (i) understanding class content; (ii) clarifying task requirements; (iii) taking time to process information; and (iv) formulating responses.

Finally, it should be pointed out that informal discussions with some NESB students (who were not participants in this study) provided anecdotal evidence that many 'international' students, some of whom appeared to be experiencing language difficulties, had gained entry to their courses using pathways other than IELTS. Some, for example, had studied in secondary school with ESL as a subject while others had completed Foundation Studies or other courses with direct links to the university. As this was not the focus of the study, this issue was not explored in greater depth. However, this suggests that some international students may not be identified in the selection and enrolment processes as potentially being in need of English language support and, further, that inadequate linguistic readiness might be unfairly blamed on unreliable proficiency test scores.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study found that IELTS scores can quite accurately predict NESB students' language behaviour in the first six months of their study program, even though individual students might perceive their language proficiency levels quite differently. This suggests that the validity of ratings in IELTS tests should be relatively good, which is encouraging not only for IELTS but also for other stakeholders who rely on the test scores for placement.

Although an overall proficiency level of 6.5 may be adequate for some university courses, the language demands of individual disciplines differ greatly. Further study is clearly needed to identify (i) the connection between proficiency level and course difficulty, (ii) the language skills required for discipline-specific tasks, and (iii) what it is that contributes to the failure of students who are deemed to be 'not coping' in those tasks. In particular, research on a wider scale is recommended to determine whether or not the results obtained in this study are representative, especially in those discipline areas where students were struggling.

Based on the findings of this study, it is cautiously suggested that there may be implications for raising the IELTS entry levels for courses which require students to use spoken English in vocational training contexts in the early stages of their studies. These include courses in the medical science disciplines, where a score less than 7.0 in Speaking may not be adequate. Although other linguistically demanding disciplines such as Law were not included in this study, more extensive research seems justified into the potential effects of such a change (in one or more macro skills) on student performance in such disciplines.

There may also be implications for reviewing IELTS entry requirements for courses which place an early emphasis on written language proficiency (such as humanities-based

disciplines that require students to write critically evaluative essays), regardless of the level of in-built language support within those courses. The results of this study suggest that scores of less than 6.0 in individual macro skills, particularly in Writing and Speaking, are inadequate for study in these fields.

Finally, in view of the anecdotal evidence relating to the different entry paths used by NESB students, further study is also desirable to ascertain whether there is a clear link between language difficulties and different entry paths.

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