

Questions and answers about language testing statistics: Overall English proficiency (whatever that is)

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Question:

As more and more language tests are developed, typically language teachers often want to know how the scores on new tests relate to more familiar tests scores. This seems particularly true among tests which claim to measure *general English ability*. ... can we say with confidence that there is, in fact, such a thing as general English ability?

Answer:

This is a question that I have been wrestling with for my whole career in language testing, and now, you seem to be having doubts about it too. What you are referring to as *general English ability* is also sometimes called *overall English proficiency* (or ELP), which is how I will refer to that idea here. From as far back as 1977, whenever I have said the words *overall English proficiency*, I have added (soto voce) *whatever that is*, which comes out something like “overall English proficiency (whatever that is).” Recently, I’ve been working on a number of papers circling this issue, but now I’m writing one that focuses directly on this topic. As a result, I have been doing a fair amount of thinking about the issue. Let me share some of my preliminary thoughts with you now in the hope that they will help answer your question and entice you into later tracking down the larger paper that I will eventually publish.

I think the central issue involved in the fuzziness of the overall ELP concept has to do with something else I have been dealing with for over four decades. Often when I say I’m specialized in *language testing*, teachers and researchers in other areas of the field ask me why language testing is so far behind the rest of the field (by which I think they mean *why are overall ELP tests like the TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, etc. so far behind the rest of the language teaching field*). I have typically answered rather defensively/snidely that it is much harder to operationalize (that is measure quantitatively) the many variables in our field than it is to sit around in an armchair and think them up. But my view of all that has changed now that I am retired and sitting around in an armchair way too old to be defensive. The bottom line is that developments in *language teaching* have exploded during my time in the field, and far outpaced changes in the overall ELP tests, which are trailing far behind. There are at least three main areas of change:

- Expansion of our views on the *nature of language learning*
- Growth in the number of *pedagogical options* available to teachers
- Opening up of our ideas about *who owns English*

Let me take each of those sets of issues separately.

Nature of Language Learning

As mentioned earlier, our conception of the *nature of language learning* has expanded enormously. Language testers have long discussed ways that our conceptions of the nature of language learning have expanded in the following stages that built one on the other:

1. language knowledge (Lado, 1961)
2. linguistic knowledge vs. channel control (Carroll, 1961)
3. competence vs. performance (Chomsky, 1965)
4. separate scales for skills with well-educated NS at top (ILR, 1985)
5. multiple dimension model of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1979, 1980, 1981, and Bachman, 1990)

Thus, from primitive views of language knowledge (e.g., where language learning involves gaining knowledge of phonemes, vocabulary and grammar ["1" above]) through the distinctions between linguistic knowledge vs. channel control ["2" above] and competence vs. performance ["3" above], we have managed to assess passive knowledge (green) (mostly the knowledge components to the left in each case) to the exclusion of active knowledge. Later more complex views of language competence developed that separated ELP into skills ["4" above] and a multidimensional model of communicative competence ["5" above], each of which are currently measured only partially (yellow).

The multidimensional model of communicative competence can be outlined as follows:

1. **organizational competence**
 - a. grammatical (i.e., vocabulary, syntax, morphology, & phonology/graphemes)
 - b. textual (i.e., cohesion & rhetorical)
2. **pragmatic competence**
 - a. illocutionary (i.e., ideational, heuristic, manipulative, & imaginative functions)
 - b. sociolinguistic (i.e., differences in dialect/variety, naturalness, differences in register, & cultural references and figures of speech)

Notice in the multidimensional model, that only a small portion is shaded in green. Perhaps this should be green and yellow because these aspects of ELP are largely measured passively and only partially in the sense that the spoken grammar, phonology of connected speech, etc. are not assessed at all. Note also that the *textual* subpart of organizational competence and the entire pragmatics competence second half of the model are typically not represented at all in the overall ELP tests.

Pedagogical Options

One set of *pedagogical options* in education is generally outlined in the taxonomy of the cognitive domain (Krathwohl, 2002):

- 1.0 Remember (Retrieving relevant knowledge from long-term memory)
 - 1.1 Recognizing
 - 1.2 Recalling
- 2.0 Understand (Determining the meaning of instructional messages, including oral, written, and graphic communication)
 - 2.1 Interpreting
 - 2.2 Exemplifying
 - 2.3 Classifying
 - 2.4 Summarizing
 - 2.5 Inferring
 - 2.6 Comparing
 - 2.7 Explaining
- 3.0 Apply (Carrying out or using a procedure in a given situation)
 - 3.1 Executing
 - 3.2 Implementing

4.0 Analyze (Breaking material into its constituent parts and detecting how the parts relate to one another and to an overall structure or purpose)

4.1 Differentiating

4.2 Organizing

4.3 Attributing

5.0 Evaluate (Making judgments based on criteria and standards)

5.1 Checking

5.2 Critiquing

6.0 Create (Putting elements together to form a novel, coherent whole or make an original product)

6.1 Generating

6.2 Planning

6.3 Producing

Notice that the lowest levels cognitive skills of **1.0 remembering** and the **interpreting part of 2.0 understanding** are typically tested on the overall ELP exams, at least passively, but that the rest of the middle to higher order skills are not involved at all. These lowest levels may cover the skills that undergraduate students are required to be able to do in English prior to heading for university, but they are not at all sufficient for the English needed to perform all the middle to higher order skills shown in 2.2 to 6.3 that graduate students (who also take these tests for university admissions) are required to be able to do in English.

Over the years, pedagogical approaches in language teaching have multiplied greatly. Consider the following approaches which each represent different belief systems that language teachers may hold singly or in combination (After Brown, 2016):

1. **Classical Approach**
2. **Grammar Translation Approach**
3. Direct Method Approach
4. **Audiolingual Approach**
5. **Cognitive Approach**
6. **Communicative Approach**

Notice that five of the six pedagogical belief systems only **passively** or **partially** underlie the typical overall ELP tests.

Consider also the following syllabuses which each represent different basic units around which language teaching/curricula are typically organized (after Brown 2016):

1. **Structural**
2. **Situational**
3. **Topical**
4. Functional
5. Notional
6. **Skills-based**
7. Task-based
8. **Lexical**
9. Pragmatic
10. Genre-based
11. Discourse-based
12. Communicative strategies

Notice that one of these syllabuses is typically covered typically covered in terms of **passive knowledge** by the overall ELP tests, while three can be said to be partially covered. That leaves seven syllabuses that are not usually covered at all. Think about the message that sends to teachers and students about the importance of these various syllabuses.

Who owns English?

Another way that the field has changed in recent years is in our ideas about *who owns English*. Essentially, we have moved from firmly believing in the native-speaker model of English (meaning that it is owned by native speakers) to the recognition of World Englishes, including Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle Englishes (Kachru, 1986) as shown below:

World Englishes

Inner Circle (UK English, North American English, Australian/New Zealand

Outer Circle (e.g., Singaporean English, Indian English, Jamaican English, etc.)

Expanding Circle (e.g., German English, Chinese English, Arabic English, etc.)

I have shaded the inner-circle Englishes in **yellow** because even they are typically partially represented in an idealized sort of educated or broadcast English, which of course ignores the reality of the huge variations in English due to class, education, location, and dialect that exist in each of these native-speaker Englishes. The overall ELP examinations typically ignore the outer and expanding circle Englishes altogether, saying things like our examinees are being admitted to North American universities so that is the English they will need. Never mind that the Japanese engineering graduate student admitted to a university based on her TOEFL score is far more likely to interact with outer and expanding circle speaking students and professors in her day-to-day life than with inner-circle native speakers—and even those few native speakers are likely to use all sorts of dialects that are definitely not the idealized North American sort of English.

Conclusion

In this column, I have tried to show how the expansion of our views on the *nature of language learning*, the growth in the number of *pedagogical options* available to teachers, and the opening up of our ideas about *who owns English* have outpaced any changes in the overall ELP tests that we use for important decisions about admissions to university (for undergraduate and graduate students alike). In direct answer to your question, I believe that the overall ELP examinations by and large assess general English ability (or overall ELP) only partially and most of that is focused on passive knowledge. Taking into account even the small number of the issues discussed in this column, it is hard to conclude that the overall ELP tests are adequately measuring overall ELP.

Worse yet, depending on which limited set of these many aspects of ELP particular tests decide to include in their design, the so-called overall ELP tests may be assessing quite different things and therefore may **not** be directly comparable despite the fancy tables that have been produced by various organizations.

I hope this column addressed your question(s) adequately and provided you with the information you need for thinking about *general English ability*, or if you prefer, *overall English proficiency*.

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A brief coda

All good things must come to an end, and thus, ends my contribution to this column. I have had the honor of writing this column two or three times per year for a little over 22 years (since Issue 1 Number 1 of the *Shiken* in April 1997). It has always been an interesting process, much of which was included in the book published by the JALT TEVAL (see Brown, 2016, in the references above). None of this would have been possible without the many questions submitted by readers, JALT TEVAL officers and members, *Shiken* editors, and the many graduate students who have passed through my classes on their way to better things. I thank them all for their curiosity and support, and I wish them all the very best in the years to come.

Aloha nui loa, JD

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