

Proficiency Testing of English for Specific Academic Purpose: Using a Pilot Test in a Taiwanese University as an Example

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Abstract : Courses of English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) have become popular for higher education in Taiwan; however, no standardized tests have been developed for evaluating learners' English proficiency in individual designated fields. Assuming a learner's proficiency in a specific academic area is built up with one's general proficiency in English with specific knowledge and vocabulary in the content areas, an adequate ESAP proficiency test may be constructed by some selected test items related to the designated academic areas. In this study, through collaboration between a language testing institution and a university in Taiwan, three sets of ESAP tests, covering three disciplinary areas of business and the workplace, science and engineering, and health and medicine majors, were developed and administered to sophomore students (N=1704) who were enrolled in ESAP courses at a university in southern Taiwan. For this study, the courses were grouped into the above-mentioned three disciplines, and students took the specialized proficiency test based on the ESAP course they were taking. Because students were free to select which ESAP course to take, each course had both major and non-major students. Toward the end of the one-semester course, ending in January, 2015, each student took two tests, one of general English (General English Proficiency Test, or GEPT) and the other ESAP. Following each test, students filled out a survey, reporting their test taking experiences. After comparing students' two test scores, it was found that business majors and health and medical students performed better in ESAP than the non-majors in the class, whereas science and engineering majors did about the same as their non-major counterparts. In addition, test takers with CERF B2 (upper intermediate) level or above performed well in both tests, while students who are below B2 did slightly better in ESAP. The findings suggest that students' test performance have been enhanced by their specialist content and vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, results of the survey show that the difficulty levels reported by students are consistent with their test performances. Based on the item analysis, the findings can be used to develop proficiency tests for specific disciplines and to identify ability indicators for college students in their designated fields.

Keywords : english for specific academic purposes (ESAP), general english proficiency test (GEPT), higher education, proficiency test

Conference Title : ICFLTAL 2015 : International Conference on Foreign Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics

Conference Location : Vancouver, Canada

Conference Dates : August 06-07, 2015