
Academic Success of International Postgraduate Education Students and the Role of English Proficiency

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This study investigated the predictive validity of the International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) test, and identified a number of other variables that were considered as possible influences on academic success. These variables included previous professional experience and previous English language learning experience. The study also considered the views of academic staff on English proficiency and whether this influenced the assessment of graduate education assignments. IELTS subtest scores were correlated against students' semester 1 grade point averages (GPA). Other personal experience variables obtained through a questionnaire were included in the analysis. Academic staff completed questionnaires concerning their views on the English proficiency of their students. A small number of the academic staff took part in an interview to investigate these views further. The results indicated further evidence for the predictive validity of IELTS. Weak but significant correlations were obtained between overall IELTS bands and GPA. Closer scrutiny revealed significant correlations between writing, speaking and listening subtests and GPA. The academic staff differed from the students in their attitudes to English proficiency. There were also differences within the academic staff group.

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INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of international students have led to much debate on issues concerning English language proficiency requirements and studying at university. Today universities depend more and more on full-fee-paying students for income, so the issue of the minimum English proficiency entry level is of great significance. From a teaching point of view, more academic staff have international and non-English speaking background students in their classes than previously. At the University of Sydney the majority of students take the English Language Testing Service (IELTS) test as a measure of their English proficiency. The IELTS test is designed to measure the types of skills typically found in tertiary settings and provides a profile of scores based on speaking, writing, listening and reading subtests. Appendix A presents the band descriptors for overall IELTS scores.

The IELTS is a high-stakes test. Life changing decisions are made on the basis of IELTS scores. The scores may determine whether a student studies overseas or not, or chooses one career path over another. Therefore the issue of test reliability is crucial. Various strategies have been implemented to raise reliability of IELTS. For example, from an administrative perspective, there are controls on the timing and execution of the test. From a testing perspective, the speaking test is now scripted, thus reducing variation between examiners. Such measures may indeed raise reliability but tend to lower the authenticity of the test (Ingram, 2005). Authenticity refers to the extent to which the IELTS test can be said to reflect and measure the types of skills necessary for tertiary study. However, since the IELTS is used as an entry measure, it is important to investigate the extent to which current IELTS levels are predictive of academic performance in specific academic settings.

There are a number of studies that examined the predictive validity of IELTS. Predictive validity refers to the extent to which a test measures the target behaviour, in this case, to what extent does IELTS predict academic success as measured by course grades. Every time a test is varied, for example changing a writing task or changing the assessment criteria, there are implications for validity. The IELTS test has undergone several changes since its introduction as the ELTS test in 1980. Validity is also influenced by context. Thus IELTS could possibly have more predictive power in a linguistically challenging discipline. There is hence a need for continuing predictive validity studies that take into account specific settings, for example undergraduate or postgraduate, sciences or arts. Postgraduate students in disciplines such as education, are often older and professionally experienced and as such represent a specific type of student that brings expertise to the learning situation. There have been no recent studies using postgraduate education students. It is important to provide context specific studies which may contribute to the wider literature of IELTS validity.

This study investigates the predictive validity of IELTS of education postgraduate coursework students' and academic staff attitudes to English proficiency. Predictive validity studies typically involve the statistical comparison of IELTS scores and academic performance. Academic performance may be measured using exam results or assignment grades. In postgraduate settings, all of the assessment is likely to be done by lecturers with formal exams being less popular. In this case, lecturers' attitudes to language proficiency may influence the academic outcome of students and, in turn, the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance. Academic success may be attributed to issues other than English language proficiency, particularly for those postgraduate students who need some professional experience as an entry requirement for their Master's courses.

The participants in this study were students and academic staff on postgraduate education units. Assessment on these units is through assignments marked by lecturers and tutors. The grade point averages (GPA) of students were collected and analysed in comparison to TOEFL or IELTS scores. Views of academic staff of the significance of English proficiency and its role in assessment were collected. Students and staff completed questionnaires concerning difficulties and problems in studying on graduate units. A number of academic staff were interviewed concerning their views on the English proficiency of these graduate students. The study also sought to identify other possible influences on the academic success of students in an education setting, such as professional experience, perceived difficulty of units, and study problems.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The issue of English language proficiency entry levels is controversial. There is a wide range of entry requirements between universities and disciplines. Some universities set the level low to attract more international students; some universities set it high in the belief that students will not be disadvantaged linguistically, and thus are more likely to excel. IELTS claim that less linguistically demanding academic courses, such as mathematics and technology, probably require band 6.5 or higher, while linguistically demanding courses, such as law or linguistics, probably would accept bands of 7 and higher (IELTS, 2005: 5). In reality, some universities may accept students with band 6 onto linguistically demanding courses. At the University of Sydney, band 6.5 is set as the minimum requirement with individual courses able to negotiate their own entry requirements where relevant. In the Faculty of Education and Social Work, graduate students need to attain band 6.5 with no single band below 6 for Master's courses, and band 5.5 for entry onto a Graduate Certificate course. The latter includes a substantial component of language training. Usually the Graduate Certificate students use the course as a pathway to a Master's course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been a number of studies that investigate the predictive validity of IELTS. This is usually calculated against a measure of student achievement, for example GPA of the first or second semester. Predictive validity is usually examined according to the subtests of IELTS: reading, writing, speaking and listening and how these correlate to a measure of academic achievement. The results of these studies are reviewed below.

Studies into the predictive validity of IELTS have produced mixed results with some studies not finding any evidence that English proficiency as measured by IELTS predicts academic performance (e.g., Cotton & Conrow, 1998; Dooley & Oliver, 2002). Other studies have found a weak but significant relationship between English proficiency measured by IELTS and academic performance (Elder, 1993). Academic performance is usually measured by grade point average of the first and subsequent semesters. These studies have varied in the findings concerning the predictive power of IELTS. One important element in reporting the predictive validity of IELTS concerns the test itself and the changes made in recent years. Based on a validation study conducted by Criper and Davies (1988), the original ELTS test was substantially revised to minimise the effect of subject specialist knowledge (Clapham, 1996). Before 1995, the then ELTS test included subject specific reading texts. These were abandoned in 1995 with the introduction of texts of a general academic nature. In 2001, a revised speaking test was introduced to increase inter-rater reliability. The speaking test moved from being an interview with guidelines, to a scripted interview with no opportunity for examiner improvisation. The assessment descriptors used by the examiners were changed substantially too. In 2005, new assessment criteria were introduced for writing. These changes could impact upon the predictive qualities of IELTS. The majority of predictive validity studies used an older version of the IELTS test. IELTS scores are valid for up to two years so this needs to be taken into account when equating predictive validity studies. These changes in the test and testing procedure need to be accompanied by validity studies to ensure validity is constant.

Some studies found no relationship between IELTS entry scores and academic performance. Cotton and Conrow conducted a predictive validity study with a range of students, both undergraduate and postgraduate across a number of disciplines, who entered university with a band 6 IELTS (Cotton & Conrow, 1998). They found no positive overall correlations between academic achievement and IELTS, but found a positive relationship between staff ratings of academic achievement and IELTS reading and writing subtests. The entry level for these students was band 6. Dooley and Oliver (2002), similarly found no relationship between IELTS scores and academic performance.

Other studies found general positive relationships between IELTS and academic performance although these are inconsistent. Elder, also using the old version of IELTS, focussed on education postgraduates. This study found a positive relationship between global IELTS and GPA in semester 1 ($r = .35 < .05, n = 32$). Of the sub tests only listening was related to achievement ($r = .40 < .05, n = 32$) (Elder, 1993). Dooey and Oliver (2002) investigated the predictive validity of IELTS in business, science and engineering undergraduate subjects using the revised IELTS. Again the benchmark for entry was band 6 although some students were admitted below that level in special circumstances. They found significant relationships between the reading subtest and overall achievement in the faculties from which the participants were drawn. Upon closer scrutiny the data indicated that there was no evidence for predictive validity in the science and engineering faculties. Feast (2002) conducted a multilevel analysis into IELTS and academic performance of undergraduate and graduate students studying a range of subjects. She found a significant weak relationship between IELTS and academic achievement as measured by GPA. She made the recommendation to increase the IELTS entry from band 6 to band 6.5 based on her calculations of academic success versus possible loss of students to institutions with lower IELTS entry requirements (Feast, 2002).

Kerstjens and Nery (2000) conducted a study which included a sample of business undergraduates and TAFE students. They found that the IELTS reading subtest predicted performance for the total sample totalling to 8.4% of the total variance and 9.1% of the total variance for the undergraduate group. This means that 8.4% and 9.1% of academic performance may be attributed to English proficiency as measured by IELTS.

Implications for the Study

As can be seen from the above, results are inconsistent concerning the predictive validity of IELTS and academic performance. In most of the studies reviewed above, reading was the most predictive variable. However, Elder (1993) found the listening subtest to be the most predictive with the sample of education postgraduates.

One possible reason the predictive validity is not very high could be the complex antecedents of academic achievement of which language proficiency is just one variable. Some of the above studies included a qualitative component that assessed such variables. Cotton and Conrow collected data concerning these variables. These included the degree of perceived difficulty and student motivation. This study highlighted that language proficiency is just one variable contributing to academic success (Cotton & Conrow, 1998). Kerstjens and Nery (2000) also identified sociocultural and psychosocial factors as contributing to academic outcomes in students' first semester.

It seems from the above that the results are influenced by the set entry level and the extent to which the discipline is linguistically challenging. There seems to be a continuing debate as to what is the most appropriate level to set the English proficiency entry levels, so institutions require empirical evidence to support the setting of entry levels. Thus, context specific studies are valued as they provide this evidence and contribute to an increasing literature on the relevance of IELTS in higher education settings.

In a setting with an emphasis on professional capabilities, like graduate education, previous professional experience may contribute to the achievement in assessment tasks. Often these assessment tasks include a practical component such as reflecting upon past experience or designing a lesson. What a grade point average is based on will greatly influence any analysis of variables contributing to academic performance. Since the assessment tasks of the current sample of students are designed and assessed by academic staff, attitudes of academic staff towards English proficiency are crucial.

The current study examined the predictive validity of IELTS on postgraduate education courses and examined other possible variables that could contribute to academic success. The other variables included English learning experience, perceived difficulty of units of study, study problems encountered and previous professional experience. Data concerning attitudes to English proficiency were collected from academic staff and students. There are other variables that may influence performance, such as age or gender. These variables were not investigated because the sample was mostly female and most students were in their late twenties, thus a range was not available.

The following research questions were posed:

1. What is the predictive validity of IELTS in relation to the academic performance of postgraduate education students?
2. Do perceived difficulty of study, study problems encountered and previous professional experience relate to academic performance?
3. What is the attitude of students and staff to English proficiency requirements of graduate study?

METHODS

Participants

The participants in the study were students and academic staff in the Faculty of Education and Social Work. The student sample consisted of 82 international students

(Female $n = 64$, male $n = 18$) studying postgraduate units in the faculty. Most of the students were from neighbouring Asian countries. The majority of these students took the IELTS test as an indicator of English proficiency ($n = 62$). Some students took TOEFL ($n = 10$) with the remaining participants using other means. The general IELTS entry level of this faculty is 6.5. The entry level using TOEFL is set at 577 for the paper based version and 233 for the computer based version. Those students who enrol on the Graduate Certificate TEFL may enter on IELTS 5.5 or TOEFL 520.

Table 1 shows the IELTS scores of the participants. There are seven missing values for the breakdown of IELTS because these scores were not available. Table 2 shows the TOEFL scores of the participants. Most students took the computer based versions. To assist analysis the paper based scores were transformed using the TOEFL iBT score comparison table (ETS, 2005).

TABLE 1
IELTS scores of student participants

IELTS	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Overall	62	5.50	8.50	6.79	0.58
Speaking	55	5.00	8.00	6.72	0.74
Reading	55	5.00	9.00	6.83	0.78
Writing	55	5.00	8.00	6.39	0.66
Listening	55	5.00	9.00	6.98	0.93

The staff sample comprised 15 academic staff members who taught international postgraduate students. This study employed mostly quantitative methods. The participants completed questionnaires including both open and closed questions. Several of the staff sample volunteered to take part in a semi-structured interview. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data used in this study represents only a portion of the interview of the staff members. Their attitudes to English proficiency were identified and reported.

TABLE 2
TOEFL scores of student participants

TOEFL	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
	10	233	267	248	12.34

The student sample completed a questionnaire comprising open and closed questions. The closed questions measured perceived difficulty of units and study problems. The perceived difficulty subscale was constructed in a 7-point Likert format. Students marked

a scale ranging from *easy* (1) to *difficult* (7). The study problems subscale reflected problems with resources, language and content. The scale ranged from *no problems* (1) to *problems* (7). The open ended items reflected perception of the adequacy of English proficiency measures to predict academic success, previous professional and academic experience, and previous English language learning. The questionnaire is given in Appendix B.

The grade point average of students' first semester work was calculated by taking an average of their percentage grades for the units they were enrolled in. The criteria for assessment of these assignments varied according to the unit taken. All of the grades were based on assignment work. The staff sample ($n = 15$) completed a questionnaire that included the same items as the student questionnaire concerning the study problems of students. The open ended questions provided data on the adequacy of English language proficiency entry requirements. Several of the staff sample ($n = 6$) were also interviewed concerning their attitudes to English proficiency and the possible impact this had on assessment and teaching. The items used in the survey are presented in Appendix B.

RESULTS

A reliability analysis was calculated on the scaled items measuring students' study problems. The alpha reliability coefficient indicated a reliable measure ($\alpha = 0.88$). To examine the relationship between English proficiency and academic performance as measured by GPA in semester 1, graphs were first generated. Figure 1 presents the data for IELTS. The graph shows the average percentages for units completed in semester 1 and IELTS overall scores. The general trend in the graph supports the notion that higher IELTS scores are related to higher academic achievement. Figure 2 presents similar data for TOEFL. There is no clear trend in this graph for increased academic performance in relation to English proficiency.

The predictive validity of IELTS was calculated using Pearson bivariate correlations based on students' GPA for their first semester of study. Table 3 presents the results for this analysis. The correlation between IELTS overall and GPA for semester 1 is: $r = 0.40$, $p = <.01$, $n = 62$. There was no significant relationship between TOEFL and GPA. The analysis shows the strongest relationships were between speaking, listening and GPA and, surprisingly, the relationship between reading and GPA was not significant. The correlations were not large, indicating English proficiency only accounts for a portion of academic success in students' first semester.

FIGURE 1
IELTS scores and mean semester 1 GPA percentages

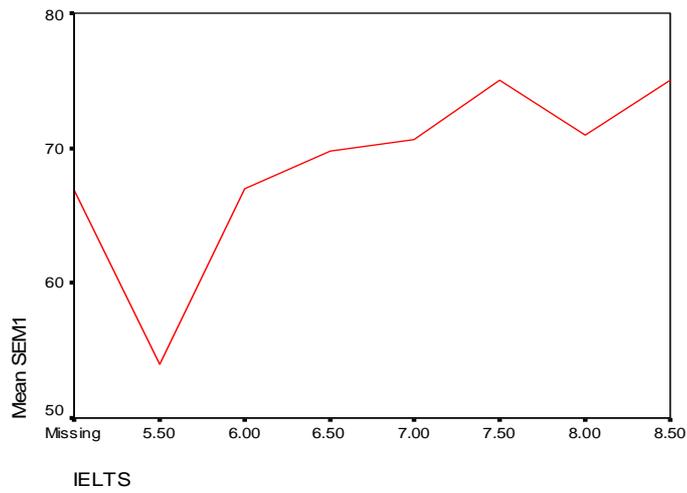


FIGURE 2
TOEFL scores and mean semester 1 GPA percentages

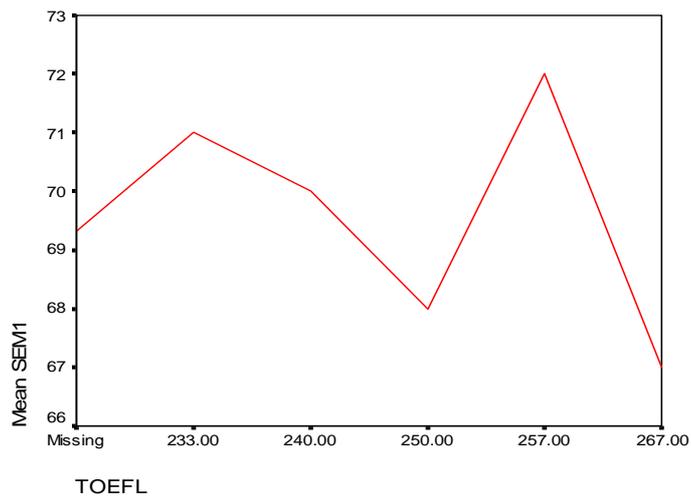


TABLE 3
Correlations between semester 1 grade point average and IELTS scores

	IELTS	GPA	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Listening
IELTS						
GPA	0.40**	1.00				
Speaking	0.49**	0.39**	1.00			
Reading	0.63**	0.11	-0.02	1.00		
Writing	0.63**	0.33*	0.23	0.30*	1.00	
Listening	0.78**	0.35*	0.22	0.48**	0.26	1.00

** significant at $p = < .01$

* significant at $p = < .05$

The sample did not include enough very low IELTS scores to investigate in depth the differences between levels of proficiency. Table 4 and Table 5 present the frequency of English proficiency scores.

TABLE 4
Frequency of IELTS overall bands of participants ($n = 62$)

IELTS Band	Number	%
5.5	2	2.4
6.0	8	9.6
6.5	22	26.5
7.0	21	25.3
7.5	5	6.0
8.0	3	3.6
8.5	1	1.2

One of the problems of examining predictive validity of IELTS is that a full range of IELTS scores is not available because IELTS serves a gate-keeping function. Thus lower bands are not available because the candidates did not achieve a high enough band to enter the university (Ferguson & White, 1993).

In an attempt to examine possible differences according to language proficiency, the IELTS participants were divided into two groups according to the descriptive statistics: those scoring band 6.5 and below, and those scoring band 7 and above. Correlations were executed to examine possible differences between those students who had just met the entry requirements (6.5 and below) and those who had exceeded the entry requirements

(7 and above). This distinction is important because the results could influence the decision whether to increase the IELTS entry requirements for postgraduate units.

TABLE 5
Frequency of TOEFL CBT scores of participants ($n = 10$)

TOEFL	Number	%
233	2	2.4
240	1	1.2
243	2	2.4
250	2	2.4
257	1	1.2
2670	2	2.4

The results indicated a positive correlation between GPA in semester 1 for those scoring 6.5 and under: $r = .52$, $p = <.01$, $n = 26$. However, there was no significant relationship between those scoring 7 or above and the GPA of semester 1: $r = .17$, ns, $n = 26$. These results suggest that when proficiency is at the lower end of the entry requirement it influences academic performance, whereas for those students who enter with scores in excess of the minimum requirement, no influence is detected.

TABLE 6
Reported levels of difficulty on TESOL academic units of study

Unit of study	N	Mean	SD
Methodology and language teaching*	9	3.33	1.50
Language teacher professional development	8	3.62	1.40
Contemporary developments in language teaching	20	4.15	1.42
English in Academic Settings	19	4.21	1.39
English for Specific Purposes	37	4.45	1.30
Literacy and language Teaching*	17	4.70	0.99
Grammar, text and context*	14	4.71	0.83
Teaching Oral English*	53	4.76	1.19
Second Language Acquisition*	15	4.87	1.36
Language as Social Practice	40	4.93	1.27

The data concerning perceived difficulty of units was varied. Most of the participants were enrolled in units concerned with teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). Students enrolled on MEd TESOL elect a minimum of two core units and two elective units in their first semester. The core units are marked * in Table 6. The perceived difficulty varied. This seemed to vary according to the level of theoretical focus. For

example, more practically oriented courses, such as the unit entitled “*Methodology in Language Teaching*”, were not perceived as difficult, while “*Language as Social Practice*”, which focussed on systemic functional linguistics, was perceived as difficult. These results are summarised in Table 6. The table ranges from the most practical units to the most theoretical.

The perceived difficulty of units was correlated against participants’ semester 1 GPA but no significant correlations were found between these variables. Data concerning study problems similarly were not significant in a correlational analysis with semester 1 GPA. The data concerning students’ study problems were collected from both the student sample and the academic staff sample. There was a difference between the views of the two samples with academic staff rating student study problems higher than the students’ reporting on themselves. Table 7 contrasts these findings.

TABLE 7
Study problems experienced by students reported by the two samples

Study area	Academic staff		Students	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Finding resources	4.42	1.86	4.35	1.80
Language of academic readings	4.92	1.61	3.66	1.68
Content of academic readings	4.77	1.83	3.66	1.62
Language of instructors	4.33	2.05	3.03	1.62
Content of instructors	4.86	1.70	3.08	1.58
Language of other students	4.15	2.12	2.75	1.66
Taking notes in lectures	3.92	1.71	3.27	1.95
Taking part in class discussions	4.71	1.49	3.04	1.80
Asking questions	4.79	1.67	3.00	1.69
Assignments, content	5.23	1.83	3.95	1.66
Assignments, language	5.87	1.73	3.90	1.74

The results show students reported that finding resources was the biggest problem they faced, whereas academic staff reported that issues concerning assignments caused the most problems. Both groups reported assignments as causing problems but the staff sample reported a much higher level.

Data were collected concerning other possible important influences on academic performance. These possible influences refer to previous professional experience, the number of years spent learning English, participation in language related courses and the length of time the student had resided in Australia. These data are presented in Table 8.

TABLE 8
Variables of personal experience

Variable	Mean	SD
Professional experience (years)	4.97	5.00
Years learning English (years)	12.55	4.80
Time in Australia (months)	10.45	31.28
	N	%
Learning centre	18	21.7
Unit for credit	22	26.5

The data collected about professional experience indicated that 70 of the student sample had professional experience prior to enrolling on units in the faculty, of whom 66 were ESL teachers. Data were collected on the number of years students had spent learning English and whether they had taken an in-session English for academic purposes (EAP) course within the University, as offered by the Learning Centre, or within the faculty, as offered as a unit for credit targeting academic writing. Again none of the above variables reached significance in a bivariate correlation analysis with academic performance as measured by semester 1 GPA.

The data relating to attitude to the IELTS entry requirement of the students' degree programme (6.5 with no band lower than 6.0) varied according to academic staff and student samples. A higher proportion of academic staff thought the entry level was low and a higher proportion of the student sample reported the entry level to be right. Table 9 summarises the responses of the academic staff and student sample concerning their attitude towards the entry level.

TABLE 9

Attitudes of student and academic staff towards English proficiency entry levels

Entry Level	Academic staff		Students	
	N	%	N	%
Too low	7	53.8	17	20.5
Too high	0	0	7	8.4
About right	6	46.2	54	65.1

Interview data were collected from 6 staff members and indicated a diversity of views concerning English language proficiency. Several of the interviewees were unaware of IELTS and the entry requirements in any detail. Most were unfamiliar with the test and its format. Most of the interviewees claimed having international students in their classes influenced their teaching. In particular some staff allowed students to submit drafts of

assignments for feedback prior to the final submission. The staff also varied in the extent to which English proficiency influenced their assessment practices. One staff member did not include any assessment criteria relating to language, for example grammar and vocabulary, and some staff members claimed students could fail assignments if their English was not deemed proficient enough.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results indicate that English language proficiency as measured by IELTS is moderately predictive of academic achievement in the first semester of study for the student sample in this study. In this study the overall IELTS represents 16% of the variance on academic achievement as measured by first semester GPA. The results are in keeping with other studies indicating that variables other than language proficiency are relevant. Because of the entry level, the full range of IELTS scores could not be examined as is the case in other IELTS predictive validity studies. The study examined other variables including professional experience; however, no significant correlational relationship between these and academic achievement as measured by semester 1 GPA was found. The analysis indicated that at a lower level of English, the relationship is stronger than at a higher level. Thus, for students scoring 6.5 or lower, proficiency may influence their achievement, whereas with students scoring 7 and above, English proficiency does not influence academic performance. Ingram (2005), who was involved in the development of IELTS specifications, recently reiterated his initial recommendation for an entry level of band 7. He acknowledges that for economic reasons the entry level could be set at 6.5 but recommends these students be provided with language support (Ingram, 2005). This advice seems to be supported by the current study with students scoring 6.5 and above performing adequately on semester 1 GPA.

The samples in this study indicated some difference in their assessment of the adequacy of IELTS to predict academic achievement. The student group felt the entry level was about right, whereas over 50% of the staff sample felt the level was too low. Coleman, Starfield and Hagan (2003) also found discrepancies between staff and student responses, with the students reporting more positive responses than the staff on the predictive ability of IELTS.

Previous studies identified the IELTS reading subtest as the most highly related skill to academic achievement (Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000). However, this study did not find the reading scores of the students to be correlated with performance, but found positive correlations between speaking, listening and writing on the one hand, and GPA in semester 1. Like this study, Elder (1993) found listening to be predictive of performance with her group of graduate education students. Perhaps the nature of the

assessment tasks in education courses relies more heavily on speaking and listening skills than in other disciplines. Pedagogy may influence the need for specific academic skills of the students, for example, in one academic course or discipline the delivery of course content may be dependent upon high level listening skills, whereas in another, access to course content may be through a heavy reading load. An investigation into the nature of assessment tasks in education courses and pedagogy could reveal valuable information that could assist academic staff in teaching international students. Surprisingly, this study did not find any individual issues, such as professional experience, to be related to academic performance.

This study was valuable because it used the revised version of IELTS. All of the participants had taken the new version of the speaking test introduced in 2001. Thus a continuation of validity have been demonstrated. The items included in the student questionnaire concerning reported levels of difficulty provided valuable feedback for lecturers on the TESOL programme in the faculty. The results indicated that those courses with a more practical component were classified as easier than those with a more theoretical perspective. This indicates the value of the professional experience of students in their learning experiences.

The student and academic staff samples differed in their reports of perceived study problems. Again, the student sample provided more positive responses than the staff sample. The students reported finding resources and assignments to be the most challenging, with the content and language of assignments being equally difficult. The staff sample reported assignments being the biggest problem facing students with the language aspect being the most problematic.

The staff interview data also indicated variation in views concerning English proficiency. This is possibly due to the self-selection of the interviewees. Participants may have volunteered because they felt strongly about issues faced by international students or English proficiency. Of particular interest is the variation in assessment criteria of assignments concerning language, with some lecturers including language as an assessment criteria and some not. This raises the issue of validity in the assessment of academic work. What exactly is being assessed and how does this compare to other assessment tasks in a similar subject area?

From a student perspective, it seems that students need to find out in detail the requirements and expectations for each unit and to be aware that expectations differ between academic staff and academic units of study. They need to be aware that there is not one type of academic literacy that will apply in all assessment situations. From a staff perspective, a more uniform approach could be adopted, bearing in mind the increasing number of international students.

In conclusion, academic achievement is a complex issue. This study has found English language, particularly at the low end of the acceptable proficiency scale, to be related to performance. Academic achievement for international students is partly based on language. In addition, this study highlighted the need for further research into IELTS and pedagogic choices made by academic staff. A need for more communication between academic staff and between staff and students concerning expectations of postgraduate students is evident from the findings.

THE AUTHOR

Lindy Woodrow is Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Sydney. She teaches on the MEd TESOL program. She has over 25 years experience teaching in Asia, Europe and Australia. She has a Master's degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Essex, UK, and a PhD from the University of Sydney. Her research interests include motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, learning strategies and English for specific and academic purposes. She has published articles in *Modern Language Journal*, *Foreign Language Annals* and *RELC Journal*.

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Appendix A: IELTS Band Scores (IELTS handbook, 2005: 4)

Band	User	Description
9	Expert user	Has fully operational command of the language; appropriate, accurate, fluent with complete understanding.
8	Very good user	Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex language well.
7	Good user	Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6	Competent user	Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5	Modest user	Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4	Limited user	Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3	Extremely limited user	Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2	Intermittent user	No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
1	Non user	Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0	Did not attempt the test	No accessible information provided

Taking notes in lectures	Problems ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: No problems
Taking part in class discussion	Problems ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: No problems
Asking questions	Problems ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: No problems
Preparing assignments - content	Problems ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: No problems
Preparing assignments - language	Problems ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: ___: No problems

5. Based on your own experience do you think the English language proficiency requirement (IELTS/TOEFL/ CET TEST etc) is an adequate predictor of academic success?

Entry level is too low Entry level is too high Entry level is about right

6. Do you have any work experience related to your area of study?

For example, teaching experience? List your jobs below

Position	Number of years