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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a second-cycle validation study of the test of English at Matriculation (TEAM) following revisions made to the test in 1993. Candidates' scores from four academic sessions (1993-1997) were used to assess the relationship between the performance at the beginning of their degree course and their eventual academic outcome. Results suggest that: (1) the predictive capacity of the revised test is similar to that of the other tests of English for academic purposes; and (2) performance in the listening section remains the strongest single linguistic predictor of candidates' success in Master's degrees (even though it might have been expected that writing skills would have been a better predictor considering that most measures of student achievement in higher education is in written form). The overall correlation is slightly lower than for the first version of TEAM. It is concluded that the test as presently constructed is adequate for the purposes for which it is intended. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/KFT)

AN EVALUATION OF THE REVISED TEST OF ENGLISH AT MATRICULATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH

Tony Lynch (IALS)

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Abstract

This paper reports a second-cycle validation study of the Test of English at Matriculation (TEAM), following revisions made to the test in 1993. Candidates' scores from four academic sessions (1993-1997) were used to assess the relationship between performance on TEAM at the beginning of their degree course and their eventual academic outcome. Results suggest that (1) the predictive capacity of the revised test is similar to that of other tests of English for Academic Purposes and (2) performance in the Listening section remains the strongest single linguistic predictor of candidates' success in taught Master's degrees. The overall correlation is slightly lower than for the first version of TEAM; possible reasons are discussed in the paper.

1. Background

Applicants to the University of Edinburgh whose first language is not English are required to provide evidence of adequate proficiency in English, which in most cases takes the form of a certified score on IELTS or TOEFL. Most Faculties at Edinburgh now set their acceptance level at IELTS 6.5 overall, with no module score below 6.0; candidates who choose to take TOEFL must also take the supplementary Test of Written English. After acceptance, students are required to take TEAM as part of their matriculation process, in order to identify those who might benefit from in-session language classes - for example, students whose English has fallen away since they took IELTS/TOEFL, or whose score had in fact been boosted by attending one of the many intensive TOEFL or IELTS preparation courses that are popular in a number of countries, especially in East Asia.

TEAM was designed and is administered by the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) section of IALS, and is used to assess which students may be at risk linguistically. TEAM is the third test to have been used for diagnostic purposes in this way; the others were the English Language Battery (ELBA) and ELTS. Students who achieve a TEAM mean of below 50% are required to attend at least two of the ten courses which make up the English Language Testing and Tuition (ELTT) programme - see the Appendix for details. The courses that low-scoring students are required to take provide 42 hours of classes, focusing on grammar (Course 4) and writing (Course 5, for taught Master's students; Course 9, for first-year research students). A system of diagnosis and remedial in-session courses, free of charge, has been in operation at Edinburgh for many years, but the ELTT programme is considerably more extensive than its predecessors.

The original version of TEAM, which I will call TEAM 1 in this paper, comprised four sections: Vocabulary, Listening, Reading and Writing. Its concurrent and predictive validity was investigated over the three academic sessions 1989-92 in an earlier study (Lynch 1994a), and it was found to perform on a par with other established tests. On concurrent validity, overall correlations were satisfactory: 0.72 with ELTS, 0.81 with ELBA, and 0.94 with the English Proficiency Test Battery. As far as predictive validity is concerned, students' average TEAM scores showed a correlation of 0.31 with academic outcome, which is again comparable with 0.35 for ELTS/outcome (Criper and Davies 1988). The most efficient predictor among the four sections was Listening, at 0.32. The other three sections - Vocabulary, Reading and Writing - contributed little to the predictive power of the test.

The TEAM 1 study raised particular concerns over Reading and Vocabulary. The pattern of students' scores on Reading was erratic and its overall correlation with outcome was low (0.22). We decided to omit that section, given the amount of time required to design an adequate reading test that would effectively filter out the effects that knowledge of topic has on students' comprehension scores. The Vocabulary section in TEAM 1 had been taken from ELBA: a multiple-choice test originally designed for a predominantly European advanced-level audience. While it discriminates well among proficiency levels, it features general rather than academic vocabulary, and some of its 'general' items are relatively uncommon: e.g. *ferns*, *calf love* and *sow* (female pig). We decided to replace the Vocabulary section with a more academically oriented test.

The Writing section was retained, despite its relatively low discriminatory value. This was partly for reasons of face validity, since a sample of a student's written English potentially offers departmental staff 'readable' evidence of their current English level, although it has to be said that it is very rare for IALS to be asked by departments for copies of their students' TEAM scripts. However, on the advice of my IALS colleagues Cathy Benson and Liam Rodger, adjustments were made to the Writing marking scheme in order to extend the range of scores. The previous scheme, based on Jacobs et al. (1980), uses relatively high minimum scores on its five sections, which results in 'bunching' in the 40-50% band and tends to exaggerate some students' actual ability to express themselves in English.

2. Assessing the revised version of TEAM

2.1 Test design

The revised version of TEAM (from here on, TEAM 2), was introduced in Autumn 1993. It consists of three sections and takes approximately 50 minutes to administer:

Vocabulary comprises 25 four-way multiple choice items testing the recognition of core academic lexis, e.g. *evaluate*, *claim*, *empirical*, identified by Xue and Nation (1984). Students are allowed 5 minutes to complete the 25 items.

Listening is a once-only dictation of 12 spoken sentences, on the topic of the problems students are likely to encounter in understanding native-speaker English. The sentences range from 7 to 11 words (10 to 17 syllables) in length and together make a complete text of 100 words. The dictation text is recorded on cassette and played through an amplified public address system; the total duration of this part of TEAM is 10 minutes, including the pauses left to allow students to write down what they have heard, and a two-minute interlude for checking. Students' scripts are marked on the basis of semantic acceptability rather than verbatim recall, since competent listeners are known to process for meaning rather than for form (cf. Conrad 1985, Anderson and Lynch 1988).

The Writing section is similar to the data commentary task in the IELTS Writing module. The students are given a bar graph showing tobacco consumption in a range of countries for two years a decade apart, and are asked to summarise the main patterns of change they identify in the data and to suggest possible explanations for the differences in those patterns between countries. The students' instructions list the criteria that will be used to mark their script: content 30%, organisation 20%, vocabulary 20%, grammar 25% and mechanics (punctuation, spelling) 5%. They are allowed 30 minutes for this section.

2.2 Criteria

For the various 'readers' of TEAM scores (the students themselves, the staff teaching their departmental courses, Faculty officers, and ELTT teachers at IALS), a key issue is the extent to which students' scores indicate how well they are likely to do on their academic course. Like the earlier study, this one is based on data on students taking 12-month taught-course degrees (MSc, LIM, MBA, and MTh), because they are thought to run a greater risk of failure in their courses than students

doing research degrees (MLitt, MPhil or PhD), which require them to spend much longer in Britain and arguably increase their chances of improving their English.

In the TEAM 2 study I have retained the three-way outcome criteria from the TEAM 1 study (Lynch 1994a): Master's pass, Diploma pass, and failure. The decision to adopt three categories, rather than two (pass at Master's level on one hand, and Diploma pass/failure on the other), was taken for two reasons: firstly, it follows the methodology of the validation study of ELTS (Criper and Davies 1988), with which I compared TEAM 1; secondly, some organisers of Diploma/Master's courses at Edinburgh, especially of those with a strong 'applied' orientation, regard a Diploma pass on their courses as a positive achievement and not as a concealed failure.

2.3 Method

The data for the study was routinely collected information: TEAM scores at entry and degree outcome. Information on most students was available in Graduation Day booklets produced for the University's degree ceremonies. In the few cases where I was unable to find a student's name in the booklets, I asked the relevant Faculty Office staff to give me information on whether the student had not completed their course. In some cases, students had transferred to a research degree, without taking the Master's qualification for which they had originally matriculated; in others, they had been unable to complete their degree, or had taken the course and failed. Faculty staff were asked to reply using one of six categories, which were based on those used in the data collection for the TEAM 1 study: 'passed at Master's level', 'passed at Diploma level', 'failed the course', 'left before completing the course', 'transferred to a research degree', and 'non-graduating student'. (This last category arises when a student takes the wrong test; IALS runs separate tests - and courses - for non-graduating students such as SOCRATES exchange students, but each year a number of individuals misunderstand which test they should take, and others decide to take both tests, for good measure).

The definitive list of students who had taken TEAM and completed, not completed or failed a taught course comprised 475 individuals for the four academic years: 121 for 1993-94; 88 for 1994-5; 137 for 1995-6; and 129 for 1996-97.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Overall success and 'failure'

Table 1

M.Sc. success / failure rates of TEAM 2 candidates 1993-97

Master's pass	Diploma pass	failure	TOTAL
420 (88%)	32 (7%)	23 (5%)	475

It should be borne in mind that 'failure' covers more than a straightforward Fail. In the case of the two outcomes 'failed the course' and 'left before completing the course', I also asked Faculty staff to indicate any recorded reasons for lack of success. As a result, I was able to identify 10 of the 23 'failures' as ones where problems with English were thought to be partly or wholly to blame. However, I would remind the reader of the point made by Criper and Davies (1988), that even when non-linguistic or non-academic reasons for failure are cited (e.g. homesickness, problems of adaptation), they may have been used to save individual or institutional embarrassment.

So Table 1 shows that 5% of the students came under the category of 'failure', as defined above, and a further 7% were awarded a Diploma pass rather than the full Master's degree. In other words, approximately one in eight of the students who took TEAM 2 in the four years under study did not get their Master's degree. This is a rather different picture than emerged from the TEAM 1 study (see Table 2)

Table 2

Overall success / failure rates of TEAM 1 candidates 1989-92

Master's pass	Diploma pass	failure	TOTAL
230 (79%)	34 (12%)	27 (9%)	291

As that table shows, in the early 1990s one in five (21%) of the students who took TEAM 1 did not get the Master's degree for which they had registered. This may seem high, but is a rate close to the 19% (Diploma pass 12%, and failure 7%) reported for a wider and larger population of postgraduates in Britain in the mid-1980s (Criper and Davies 1988). The rise in the success rate is intriguing. Although it is not the purpose of this study to investigate academic assessment *per se*, it is natural to wonder why there should have been such a change at Edinburgh over a relatively short period, and whether other British universities have experienced a similar fall in the proportion of failures at this level. One possible linguistic interpretation might be that Edinburgh attracted higher-proficiency students in the second period under study, who did better on their chosen courses than their predecessors. There is some evidence for this in Table 3.

Table 3

Mean TEAM scores by year (1993-97)

	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	overall
Vocabulary	66.28	72.05	68.24	70.70	69.32
Listening	66.86	68.45	69.26	76.95	70.38
Writing	50.70	55.30	58.29	66.12	57.60
Average	61.26	65.34	65.24	71.23	65.77

Those figures show a rise in the English level, as measured by TEAM, of incoming taught-course graduates, particularly in the case of 1996-97 - a year when some Faculties brought in stricter entry requirements. However, a trend may already have been under way, since the mean scores on the (identical) Listening section in the TEAM 1 study had been 64%, compared with 67% (and higher) from the first year of TEAM 2. There is also the evidence of rising mean scores on Writing over the 1993-96 period.

An alternative and entirely speculative interpretation of the fall in the failure rate (Table 2) is that the creation of the 'new universities' in 1992-93 may have increased competition among all universities to find overseas students for their higher degree courses, and this might be encouraging a conscious or unconscious lowering of standards for Master's and Diploma passes (*pour ne pas décourager les autres*).

3.2 Section performance

The interrelationship among scores on the three TEAM 2 components is of central interest, since this study is intended to evaluate any changes resulting from the replacement of Vocabulary section and the adjustment to the marking scheme for the Writing section.

Table 4

TEAM 2: means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores
Master's course sample 1993-97 (n=475)

	Vocab.	List.	Writing	Ave.
mean	69.32	70.38	57.60	65.77
s.d.	16.48	20.32	14.17	13.90
min.	20	14	17	
max.	100	100	97	

Comparing these figures with those from the earlier study, we can see the extent of the change from TEAM 1; even on Listening, which remained exactly as in TEAM 1, we find evidence of a rise in English proficiency at entry (Table 5).

Table 5

TEAM 1: means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum scores
Master's course sample 1989-92 (n=291)

	Vocab.	List.	Read.	Writing	Ave.
mean	53.38	63.81	51.68	63.76	59.62
s.d.	14.31	21.26	25.94	16.08	15.03
min.	6	9	0	15	14.00
max.	100	100	100	100	99.00

The students taking the new academic Vocabulary section scored on average 16 percentage points higher than their predecessors did on TEAM 1. This could reflect the in-built bias in academic lexis towards items of Latin and Greek origin, which enable students with European first languages to recognise cognates. The adjustments made to the marking protocol for the Writing section, adopted in order to widen the range of scores, appear to have had their intended effect; the overall mean Writing score fell by approximately 6 percentage points.

What about TEAM 2's capacity to predict? There is initial evidence of the relationship between language proficiency and success on the departmental course in Table 6, in which I have grouped overall average TEAM 2 scores by deciles and compared them with outcome.

Table 6

Distributions of TEAM 2 Average scores and academic outcome
Master's course sample 1993-97

TEAM Ave.	Master's pass	Diploma pass	failure	Total
<40%	**7** (46.67%)	**4** (26.67%)	**4** (26.67%)	**15**
40-49%	**35** (81.39%)	**4** (9.30%)	**4** (9.30%)	**43**
50-59%	**76** (74.51%)	**17** (16.67%)	**9** (8.82%)	**102**
70-69%	**107** (93.04%)	**4** (3.48%)	**4** (3.48%)	**115**
70% or more	**195** (97.5%)	**3** (1.5%)	**2** (1.00%)	**200**
Total	**420** (88%)	**32** (7%)	**23** (5%)	**475**

The failure rate decreases with increasing English proficiency, falling from 27% for students with TEAM 2 scores below 40%, to a mere 1% for those with scores of 70% or more. Conversely, Master's pass rates rise from below half of the students scoring less than 40% on TEAM 2 to 97% for those achieving above 69% on TEAM 2. The mean failure rate of students covered in this study is 5%, so the 'watershed' of better-than-average chances in this non-native population of getting a Master's or Diploma pass is around 60% on TEAM 2. This was established in our earlier study to be the equivalent of IELTS 6.5, which suggests that Faculties setting 6.5 IELTS are wise in choosing that as a 'safe' level.

Having discussed the global pattern of TEAM 2 average scores, we now turn to performance on the three test sections (Table 7).

Table 7

Mean TEAM 2 section scores (%) by outcome

	Master's pass	Diploma pass	Failure	Overall
Vocabulary	70.46	59.75	61.91	69.32
Listening	72.78	50.03	54.87	70.38
Writing	58.78	46.81	50.91	57.60
Overall mean	67.35	52.22	55.83	65.77

If we compare the distinction between Master's and Diploma passes, we find that all three sections produce clear differences in the scores achieved by successful and unsuccessful students: a difference of 11 percentage points on the Vocabulary section, 23 points on Listening, and 12 points on Writing. However, the scores in the third column, 'failure', are all higher than those passing at Diploma level (though still significantly below the values for the Master's pass). This may reflect the fact that, as noted earlier, 'failure' covers more than outcome and therefore reflects more than one source of difficulty, of which inadequate English is only one.

3.2.3 Correlations among sections

Table 8 shows the internal correlations among the three components of TEAM 2. It is worth remembering at this point that one can regard low correlation values among different parts of a language test as 'a good thing' in terms of economy, since high correlations indicate that inefficient overlap, to the point of duplication.

Table 8

Correlations among TEAM 2 sections

	Vocabulary	Listening	Writing
Average	0.77	0.86	0.81
Writing	0.47	0.59	--
Listening	0.43	--	--

As in the TEAM 1 study, it is Listening scores that come closest to representing an 'overall' measure of English proficiency. Interestingly, the association between Listening and Writing is closer than that between Listening and Vocabulary. Recently there has been discussion of the links between lexical knowledge and aural comprehension (Nattinger and De Carrico 1992), and it has even been claimed that vocabulary is the key to listening in a second language, above a threshold level of competence (Kelly 1991). However, we should remember that the type of listening tested in TEAM is highly specific (dictation) and also taps writing skills and grammatical knowledge. Writers such as Oller (1976, 1979) have argued that dictation is not a 'pure' listening test, but much more - an effective probe of the learner's expectancy grammar, providing insight into general language competence. This would help explain the strength of Listening's contribution to TEAM performance overall.

How does TEAM 2 compare with the original version when it comes to predictive validity? Table 9 sets out the association between the respective tests and academic outcome.

Table 9

Correlations between TEAM sections and outcome
1989-92 and 1993-97

	1989-92	1993-97
Vocabulary	0.24	0.17
Listening	0.31	0.29
Writing	0.19	0.20
Average	0.32	0.28

In all cases $p < 0.05$

TEAM 2 scores show a slightly weaker predictive relationship overall. The measurable predictive power of TEAM remains at approximately 0.3. Although that may seem on the low side (representing less than 10% of variance in degree outcome), it is comparable with the correlation values established in other studies of the relationship between English scores at university entry and eventual success: 0.35 for ELTS/outcome (Criper and Davies 1988), and 0.32 for TEAM 1/outcome (Lynch 1994a). Ferguson and White (1994) found higher correlations - 0.39 for IELTS/outcome and 0.49, for TEAM 1/outcome - but their qualitative study involved a smaller sample of University of Edinburgh students (n=24).

3.2.4 Performance in different Faculties

In the Edinburgh context it is relevant to look for variations in the patterns of achievement across Faculties, which differ in their entry requirements (6.5 IELTS in most; 6.0 in others). Table 10 shows the scores for five Faculties; the numbers of TEAM 2 candidates from Divinity, Medicine and Music were too small to make mean scores meaningful.

Table 10

TEAM 2 section means by faculty 1993-97

	Vocab.	List.	Writing	Ave.
Arts	74.39	80.64	65.42	73.47
Law	66.11	79.44	61.06	68.86
SocSci	70.98	68.91	58.05	66.04
SciEng	69.08	65.30	53.57	62.63
VetMed	68.29	56.83	46.59	57.24

The fact that Faculty of Arts students scored highest overall may come as a surprise to those readers who know that the Faculty has held its entry requirement at IELTS 6.0 for a number of years (although it is being raised for the 1999-2000 session), while other faculties have increased the requirement to IELTS 6.5. However, one strong influence on the mean scores shown in Table 10 is that more than half the Arts students taking TEAM over the period were EFL teachers starting the MSc in Applied Linguistics.

There is also some variation in the extent to which the section scores foreshadow later academic success. Notably, the predictive value of (even) the TEAM Listening section is not significant in the case of students from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (n=46). On the other hand, there are relatively strong and significant values in all sections in the case of Law students.

Table 11

TEAM 2 section correlations with outcome, by faculty

	Vocabulary	Listening	Writing	Average
Arts	0.13	0.25*	0.09	0.19
Law	0.20*	0.35*	0.20*	0.32*
Sci/Eng	0.23*	0.21*	0.13	0.24*
SocSci	0.13	0.27*	0.12	0.23*
VetMed	0.04	0.08	0.11	0.09

* = $p<0.05$

One interpretation of the higher and uniformly significant correlations in Law is that we know (cf. Table 10) that the Law students taking TEAM 2 had relatively good English to begin with, so it could be that in general their performance on their degree course reflected that initial level. Interestingly, not a single Law student in the 1993-97 data fell into the 'failure' category; the only Law student who was identified by her TEAM scores as being at linguistic risk later transferred to a research degree.

In Veterinary Medicine, on the other hand, the mean level of TEAM scores was lower, but to compensate for that, students from the Faculty are among the most regular attenders of the in-session ELTT courses. They may also benefit from the fact that the staff teaching MSc courses - especially at the Centre for Tropical Veterinary Medicine - have substantial experience of working in developing countries and communicating with non-native students and colleagues. This, coupled with the fact that on some Veterinary Medicine courses the majority of students are non-native, may mean that they are able to exploit, in the positive sense, the discourse modifications made by academics used to native/non-native communication (e.g. Ready and Wesche 1985; Lynch 1994b).

4. Conclusions

As in the earlier study, Listening shows the strongest predictive association with students' eventual success. This may seem odd; one might have expected that, since the assessment of performance on postgraduate courses is based predominantly on written assignments (essays, projects, examinations and dissertation), measures of text skills (reading and/or writing) would reflect subject course performance better than a test of listening comprehension. Statistically, though, there is a stronger link between Listening and outcome than Writing and outcome.

The *actual* link between a student's academic success and their ability to listen (or, rather, to do well on a dictation test) is likely to be indirect. One factor is access to the subject matter covered in lectures; individuals who, from the very beginning of the first term of a one-year taught course, have difficulty in understanding their lecturers may well fall behind in their grasp of conceptual content and may never catch up. There is also the role of affective factors, such as confidence and communicative ease, which play an important part in an individual's success in using a foreign language (Lynch 1997). Students who realise they cannot cope adequately in lectures, seminars and tutorials may experience a negative *multiplier effect*: as they lose confidence in their ability to understand spoken English, they become more anxious about lectures and note-taking, and at the same time sense that they are falling behind their peers who are able to follow what is being said. More generally, problems in aural comprehension can represent a barrier that cuts non-native students off from the host culture, and this may in turn contribute to the loneliness and homesickness that can later surface as 'family' and 'medical' reasons for withdrawal from the course.

It is worth recalling that this study has revealed incidental grounds for more general encouragement: the rise in the Master's pass rate among the non-native population studied here will no doubt be welcome within the University (and to the students concerned!), even if TEAM 2 has played no part in that improvement. The students who matriculated in 1993-97 scored higher, even on the unchanged Listening test, than their counterparts in the three years investigated in the TEAM 1 study. Since Listening remains the strongest predictive component of TEAM 2, it is arguable that the Master's pass rate in the TEAM population has risen in part because of this attested increase in students' proficiency in English.

As a predictive instrument, TEAM 2 performs comparably with more complex and labour-intensive external tests, such as ELTS and IELTS. It does so at relatively low cost, both in terms of student time spent at the test session (less than an hour) and of IALS staff time on marking (15 minutes per script). It is true that the revised version has marginally lower predictive power than TEAM 1, but on the other hand it is encouraging that the adjustments to the Writing marking scheme have slightly increased its correlation with outcome. The decrease in predictive power can be ascribed mainly to the new Vocabulary section, which is substantially less discriminating than its predecessor. Further modifications should be made to Vocabulary to make it more demanding, for example, by including more items that are not transparent cognates of terms in other European languages.

In conclusion, TEAM remains a reasonably effective test for its limited purposes, which are: (1) to identify students who have achieved the minimum score required for acceptance by their Faculty at Edinburgh, but whose English proficiency is not yet fully adequate, and (2) to provide University staff (Faculty, department and IALS) with performance data that can be used to recommend specific combinations of ELTT courses for students needing help in particular areas of academic English.

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APPENDIX

ELTT PROGRAMME SCHEDULE 1998-99

	Course	*Times*	*Dates*	*Hours*
1	**Listening**	18.00-19.30	27 Oct-08 Dec	10
2	**Speaking**	16.00-18.00	27 Oct-09 Dec	14
3	**Writing Exam Answers**	16.30-18.00	29 Oct	12
4	**Essential Grammar**	14.00-17.00	30 Oct-11 Dec	21
5	**Writing Essays & Projects**	9.00-15.30	05 Jan-08 Jan	20
6	**Discussion group**	16.30-18.00	19 Jan-09 Mar	12
7	**Writing Exam Answers**	10.00-11.30	16 Jan	12
8	**Thesis Writing**	16.00-18.00	20 Jan-19 May	16
9	**Writing a First-Year Report/Research Proposal**	14.00-17.00	22 Jan-05 Mar	21
10	**Basic Writing**	9.30-12.00	23 Jan-13 Mar	20

Notes

1. **Course 5** is a full-time course, held **in the last week of the Christmas/New Year vacation**. If you are a Master's student in the 'TUITION REQUIRED' category, make sure you are in Edinburgh for all four days of the course. You must also take Course 4.

2. **Course 8** is for PhD students in their third (or later) year.

3. **Course 9** is for supervised postgraduate graduating students only. (Students doing an MSc by research take Course 5.) If you are an SPG in the 'TUITION REQUIRED' category, you must take this course and also Course 4.

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