Assessment symposium assessment practice in a changing world

Sharon Leslie

Southern Cross University

Thomas Roche

Southern Cross University

The University English Centres of Australia (UECA) 'Assessment Symposium: Assessment Practice in a Changing World' at Southern Cross University in October 2022 highlighted the growing interest in integrated assessment in Australian university direct entry programs (DEPs) for English as Additional Language (EAL) students. In keynote presentations, Professor Antony John Kunnan, Carnegie Mellon University; Professor Guoxing Yu, University of Bristol; and Dr Paul Moore, the University of Queensland, shared an overview of their scholarly work on integrated assessment. The Symposium also included practitioner and student voices from Australia's English language intensive courses for overseas students (ELICOS) sector in a panel discussion that considered the impacts of integrated and online assessment on assessment practices in their contexts over the previous three years. This paper provides excerpts from these speakers, contextualised with a brief discussion of DEPs globally, and focussing on the Australian university DEP context.

Key words: integrated assessment; UECA; direct entry pathways; ELICOS; English language assessment; validity

Introduction and context

Enrolments in university pathway programs for English as an additional language (EAL) international students have increased dramatically in the past three decades, in part driven by the continued expansion of English as a global language of scholarship and business (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Hyland & Jiang, 2021). The biggest growth in international student enrolment has occurred in Anglophone countries (de Wit & Altbach, 2021), including Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada

(which has two official languages: French and English), and New Zealand (which has three official languages: English, Māori, and New Zealand Sign Language). In 2019, approximately 22% of English language students worldwide studied in Australia (English Australia, 2020), and approximately 36,000 of those studied at one of Australia's 40 university language centres (English Australia, 2020). Increasingly English-medium (EMI) institutions in countries where English is not a national language have also attracted significant numbers of EAL students (e.g., in the Middle East, see Ahmed & Roche, 2021; in Asia, see Walkinshaw et al., 2017). This has resulted in a rise in the number of English for Academic Purposes, pre-sessional, and other English pathway programs as tertiary institutions globally seek to prepare an increasing number of EAL users for university study in English (Dafouz & Smit, 2020; Harrington & Roche, 2014; Macaro et al., 2018; Roche, et al., 2015).

English language Direct Entry Programs (DEPs) share two key interlinked goals (Brandon & Colman, 2009). They aim to prepare students for their subsequent studies by fostering the development of academic English (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Hyland, 2006; Roche, 2017), which often includes academic literacies (Lea & Street, 2006; McWilliams & Allan, 2014; Li, 2020). In doing so, DEPs also enable students to meet the published English language proficiency requirements of their principal course of study (e.g., in Australia, see Tertiary Education Quality & Standards Agency, 2019) without needing to sit an external high-stakes English proficiency test such as the International English language testing System (IELTS) or the Pearson Test of English (PTE).

Integrated assessment

Over the past two decades, interest in assessing language proficiency using integrated assessment tasks has grown. While testing of the macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing still dominates much of language testing (Plakans, 2022), there is a growing body of research exploring integrated assessment, focusing mainly on its use in university English DEPs (Göktürk Sağlam & Tsagari, 2022; Haug, 2021; O'Grady & Taşkesen, 2022; Tankó, 2021). Integrated assessment is assessment in which two or more macro skills are tested together (Yu, 2013). The most commonly used integrated assessments involve reading-to-writing or listening-to-writing (Plakans, 2015). In many of these integrated assessment task types, a reading or listening text provides the impetus or stimulus for the writing or speaking output (Chan et al., 2015; Haug, 2021).

The promises and the challenges of integrated assessment have been well-documented (Cumming 2013; Yu, 2013). Proponents of integrated assessment argue that its key benefits lie in its construct coverage which has greater ecological validity than discrete item macro-skills assessments, and its positive washback effects.

Integrated skills assessments' primary strength lies in their stronger validity, or the degree to which theory supports the interpretation of their scores (Kane, 1992), than many traditional sub-skill tests. Integrated skills assessments have broader English for Academic Purposes (EAP) construct coverage (Yu & Clark, 2014) than traditional macro skills assessments, which typically focus on isolated skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. There are few university study contexts where a single macro-skill is used in isolation (Cumming, 2013) and with this in mind, integrated skills tests assess the use of interlinked academic literacy skills needed for study (Cumming 2013; Yu, 2013). Integrated assessments, for example, go beyond assessing students' writing for coherence, lexical range/accuracy, and grammatical range/accuracy to assess reading-to-writing skills such as paraphrasing and related authorship acknowledgement practices – both of which are core EAP skills (Flowerdew & Li, 2007) taught in many Australian university-operated DEPs (Roche & Booth, 2021). Paraphrasing, also described as mediation in the updated *Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) of Languages Companion Volume* (Council of Europe, 2018; see Piccardo et al., 2019), is an essential academic skill which involves drawing on spoken or written sources (Cumming, 2013; Shaw & Weir, 2007). Integrated skills approaches are used to assess these essential reading-to-writing or speaking-to-writing skills not covered by isolated speaking, listening, reading, or writing tests. In doing so, integrated assessments measure important academic English practices students need in the subsequent university study – as such, they bring greater authenticity (Ajjawi et al., 2023) to DEP assessment with higher construct validity than discrete item macro-skills tests (for more on construct validity, see Bachman & Adrian, 2022). Integrated skills assessments are also more likely to predict behaviours in real-world settings and therefore have a higher ecological validity than assessments which assess language skills in isolation.

In effective educational contexts, assessment practices typically align with and drive content (Biggs, 2014). Considering which, it has been argued that integrated assessment has a positive washback effect on EAP teaching (Martel, 2019) and learning (Wei, 2017). An example of this can be seen in employing integrated reading-to-writing assessment in DEPs to promote a greater understanding of notions of academic ownership and authorship. For example, integrated assessment requiring paraphrasing and authorship acknowledgement practices assists in developing students' understanding of academic integrity practices and ability to produce unique responses to source materials, rather than selecting an answer from pre-existing choices, such as those found in discrete item tests (Hidri, 2020; Sotiriado, 2020).

There are also some identified 'perils' in integrated assessment of language proficiency, related to task design and the validity and reliability of scoring processes

(Plakans, 2022). Key among the criticisms is the potential for a student's ability in one macro-skill to impact another (Gebril, 2010; Lee, 2006; Rukthong & Brunfaut, 2020; Yu, 2013). This was one reason used to justify the change to the ELTS exam, the precursor to the IELTS exam, which used a reading-to-writing integrated test up until the 1990s rather than the separate reading and writing tests it now has (Charge & Taylor, 1997). Another perceived issue relates to inter-rater reliability (Westbrook, 2019). Reliable marking is key to all language assessment, but rater reliability in integrated assessment is under-researched (Chan et al., 2015; Xie, 2023), and the studies that have been conducted have pointed to the need for carefully designed rating scales and rater training to ensure reliability (Chan et al., 2015; Knoch & Sitajalabhorn, 2013). Apart from research that compares students' responses in the TOEFL integrated and independent writing tasks (Frost et al., 2020; Uludag, 2021), there is a dearth of research exploring student performance in other types of integrated and independent language assessments. In Australia, research in integrated assessment is growing and is being fostered by peak sector bodies, including the University English Centres of Australia, and this edition of the English Australia Journal may also go some way to addressing the paucity of research in this area.

The University English Centres of Australia (UECA)

The University English Centres of Australia (UECA) network plays a significant role in Australian ELICOS sector discussions related to English language assessment. UECA is one of three peak ELICOS sector organisations in Australia, along with the National English Language Teaching Accreditation Scheme (NEAS) and English Australia. Established in 1998, UECA comprises 32 Australian university English centres owned and operated by their parent universities (Roche & Booth, 2021). Chief among the programs offered by UECA member institutions are direct entry English language and academic pathway programs for international EAL students. UECA's role in bringing together Australia's universities to share research and data and engage in professional development related to English language assessment is evidenced in the range of sector-wide projects it has sponsored over the past five years. The *UECA External Referencing of the ELICOS Standards and International Education [ERESIE] Project* brought together 20 Australian universities in 2018 in a benchmarking project focused on the updated ELICOS (2018) Standard P4: Assessment of ELICOS students (Roche & Booth, 2021).

More recently, UECA has fostered the ELICOS sector's growing interest in integrated assessment through the *UECA Integrated Assessment Grant Opportunity*, which aims to support scholarship that extends the understanding and supports the quality delivery of integrated English language assessments (University English Centres of Australia [UECA], 2022). Another initiative is the annual *UECA Assessment Symposium,*

hosted by the University of Queensland in 2018 and 2019, by Southern Cross University in 2021 and 2022 and by Monash College in 2023.

The theme of the hybrid 2022 event was *Assessment Practice in a Changing World***.** It brought together leading academics in English language assessment with ELICOS sector directors, ELICOS program coordinators, English for Academic Purposes teachers, and their students to discuss changes to language assessment, including the renewed and growing interest in integrated assessment. In the next section, and with the consent of all panellists, the voices of researchers, practitioners, and a student who contributed to the *2022 UECA Assessment Symposium* have been included, sharing their views on integrated assessment, online teaching, new forms of feedback, and support through periods of challenge and change.

Researchers' views

What to consider when designing assessments?

Antony John Kunnan: What are the consequences of the test? How is it beneficial to the community, to society, as well as to the test taker, and what is the positive washback effect of the test? Is it going to help test takers get better at their work or at their university setting, or is it not? Then, we come to the actual test itself. What is the coverage of the test? We also have to be concerned with authenticity. How are these activities representative or whether these activities are representative of the language domain of the test taker? Are they representative of real-world activities?

The argument for integrated skills approaches

Paul Moore: Broadly, we've got cognitive approaches to second language acquisition and sociocultural approaches. Roever and Kasper (2018) talk about a psycholinguistic-individualist perspective that underlies most major tests, as opposed to a sociolinguistic-interactional perspective, that underlies interactional competence. Now, the issue is this: the psycholinguistic-individualist perspective really has a focus on language as production, so language output, and not so much on language as interaction, or on speaking as opposed to talking, in Roever and Kasper's words. With a particular focus on the IELTS test, Read (2022) has recently argued that "the constraints imposed on examiners through the structure of the test and the use of the examiner frame inevitably favour reliability at the expense of construct validity" (p. 12). And this has been represented by Galaczi and Taylor (2018,) as the "tug of war between reliability and construct coverage" (p. 224) or between control and interactional authenticity.

Antony John Kunnan: What are the purposes of integrative language skills? Well, one is it assesses language in naturally occurring contexts. We consider that an

important purpose because our focus in language learning is also to find ways of bringing naturally occurring contexts into the classroom.

Guoxing Yu: Integrated writing tasks provide realistic, authentic, and challenging literacy activities. They can engage test takers in writing that is responsible to a specific content. And task developers can counter test method or practice effects often associated with conventional item types, for example, multiple choice questions. Integrated assessment tasks can evaluate language abilities consistent with multiliteracy models.

What can be missed in discrete skills tests?

Antony John Kunnan: The Common European Framework was developed in 2001. In 2018, there came a companion volume with new descriptors. In this conceptualisation, they conceive of overall language proficiency as communicative language competencies and communicative language activities. There we have linguistic, social linguistic, and pragmatic competencies that all learners and test takers need to have. We need to have the ability to use linguistic resources like grammar and vocabulary. You also need to understand the social linguistic context. This is a new way of looking at language proficiency. Language proficiency in this conceptualisation is not looked at as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, but as reception, production, interaction, and mediation.

As we know over the last few years, not all work is done by individuals. Some of the work these days is done in groups, so there is no harm in designing tasks that involve collaboration and involve a partner. You could have peers — a peer assessment involves two or three people — and the ability of that group to bring forward a case for a certain product or a certain activity.

Guoxing Yu: Summarisation is an example to demonstrate the benefits, promises, and the premises of integrated tasks. It's an essential communicative activity. Summarising tasks are a very common exercise in pedagogy; a very common act in a university student's life. Summarisation skills are essential for content acquisition and academic success.

Paul Moore: Intercultural competence has recently been defined as a language user's "ability to participate in social interaction with others and fulfil expectations attached to social roles" (Roever & Ikeda, 2022, p. 8; see also Galaczi & Taylor, 2018); this involves turn management, topic management, breakdown repair, non-verbal behaviour, and interactive listening. Not all of these are represented in all tests, and some of them aren't represented in any tests, actually. Fulcher (2003) says that if we accept the view that conversation is co-constructed between participants talking in specific contexts, then our construct definition may have to take into account such

aspects of talk as the degree of interlocutor support, or all the other things that are represented in Seedhouse's research (e.g., Seedhouse, 2019) shows that repair initiations by test takers were considered disfluencies by markers. The examiner frame obviously gives a lot of power to the examiner, and this fact — that the interviewers or the examiners shape the interaction — limits test takers' opportunities to actually demonstrate their interactional competence, which is implicated in their scores.

A really important thing for students at university is acknowledgement practice. It's not just about 'beating' Turnitin, but being able to summarise and synthesise… Should pre-tertiary colleges teach referencing, for example? Well, I'd say why not? Also, those skills that I just mentioned, I think they're central to success at university — though they're not as central to passing most high-stakes tests.

On the challenges of integrated skills

Guoxing Yu: It often requires a certain threshold level of abilities to achieve successful performance. They can compound the measurement of writing ability with abilities of comprehending source materials. It's also quite difficult to distinguish the words that students produce, whether they come directly from the source text or they were their own production. So, there's a question I would ask about whether this is a reproductive process or a productive process in their writing.

Is it a question of either discrete or integrated skills?

Antony John Kunnan: I'm advocating for an integrated language skills kind of test, but we know that in many contexts, communities of teachers, principals, administrators, and even test takers may want to know how good is my listening? How good is my speaking? How good is my reading? How good is my writing? You could also give that an integrated score. How good is my listening and speaking put together? How good is my reading and writing put together? If your test takers, if your institutions need independent scores for different skills, listening, speaking, reading, writing, you can collect that through independent tasks. I would also encourage you in terms of what I presented and from the point of view of the Common European Framework with the companion volume, that the direction most people would like you to go is by combining skills. It will be valuable for people who are going to look at scores. Can they write based on some reading? Can they write based on some listening? That's a useful skill because it involves some summarisation, some understanding of the source, and then a production based on the source, so they don't have to invent information for their writing task.

Paul Moore: Toth and Davin (2016) have argued for a sociocognitive perspective on language teaching and learning. While researchers and theorists are arguing about which perspective is the most valid, the teachers in the classroom have to deal with

both. They have to deal with the cognitive side; they have to deal with the social side. Teachers in the classroom don't have the liberty, I think, to ignore either perspective.

Future assessment considerations

Paul Moore: Chapelle and Sauro (2017) argued in their chapter 'Toward langua-technocultural competence', if technology is part of the construct of language learning or language use, then how does it fit? We talk about authenticity in language learning — our interaction these days is increasingly mediated through and by technology. It's become an integral part of life, so it should be treated as an integral part of language learning, language teaching, and language testing.

Guoxing Yu: Researchers are looking at the integration of the use of technology with language and consider technology as an integral part of the construct of language assessment. So, terms like technology-integrated assessment are becoming quite popular these days as we consider technology as part of the construct of what we assess.

Practitioner and student views

Following the keynote presentations, four speakers representing practitioner and student voices joined a discussion panel at the *2022 UECA Assessment Symposium* to consider issues of authenticity, challenge, and support for DEP centres and their practitioners as they navigate the impacts of integrated and online assessment. The panel comprised **Associate Professor Simon Winetroube,** Director of Curtin English and UECA President; **Julia Pankowski,** Academic Manager at the University of Tasmania English Language Centre; **Angela Windsor,** teacher and coordinator of DEPs at the University of Southern Queensland; and **Karina Borges**, a direct entry English for Academic Purposes (EAP) graduate and current Southern Cross University Master of Social Work student. The panel was moderated by **Professor Thomas Roche**, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic Quality) and Dean of SCU College. Excerpts from this discussion follow.

Authentic assessment

Associate Professor Simon Winetroube: If you look at the context that our students are going to, they're going to have to read and then write and reference their reading in their writing. They're going to have to attend seminars and discuss and refer to what they've read in their seminars. So, if you're looking for authentic paths or authentic assessments, you've got to have integrated assessment. For me, it's just an obvious thing that we've got to do.

Of course, our parent universities want to satisfy regulators with a nice easy to prove number. They want to advertise to future students, 'This is the number you need',

etcetera. So, there are strong forces driving people towards those kinds of things that can be easily scored. However, I think it's really important, and it came up in your discussion with Paul (Dr Paul Moore) earlier: Are we preparing students to achieve the equivalent of an IELTS score, or are we preparing them to succeed at university? I think everyone in the room passionately agrees that we are preparing them to succeed at university, and we have to make that case to our parent universities. We have to make that case to the regulators. I think one of the best ways to do it is tracking studies, where we can demonstrate and prove that our students are succeeding when they go through to their mainstream programs. I think another thing is the benchmarking, and of course, UECA has done a lot of that work.

Karina Borges: I think everything (I learned in my DEP) has helped me a lot because the assessments are so real … it's the same as we are studying (now)...the structure of assessments, essays, and reports. I am using the report from EAP to do my current reports because when we are studying at uni, the teachers just say, 'You have to do a report' .... I think the background that I did in EAP was essential for my present (studies).

Online assessment and digital tools: risks and opportunities

Julia Pankowski: Being online, having assessments online, has brought to the forefront concerns around security and academic integrity.… and we're adapting to those issues, those threats, in stages. We are a very small team, so we have limited resources, and we need to make priorities. For example, we adjusted our rubric for our writing assessment tasks, making affordances for online language tools that could possibly be used in writing assessment tasks. We changed the weighting of those rubrics so that the grammar and vocabulary components were lessened, and the weighting of the academic writing and the stages of the writing process were greater. In terms of the future, I think that COVID has upended all those construct systems such as education. I see a future at our centre where the new normal will mean more use of technology.

Angela Windsor: Yes, I can say that that we had a similar experience. However, reflecting on this transition, I realise we have experienced a streamlining of our assessment. Prior to COVID, we had high-stakes integrated assessments at the end of our courses, and they were quite interactive. We had multiple input texts and outputs. So, with that move to online, it meant that they had to be streamlined, and it comes back to the capacity of the technology to do what we were originally doing with those integrated assessments. We had a streamlining process, the assessments were still integrated, but they became more unimodal, less interactive…. more recently we're coming back on campus, so we've moved our assessments back to

on-campus assessments, not all of them, some of the courses are still online and those assessments still take place online.

I think professional development was how we helped to mitigate risk. By looking at the tasks that we were asking students to do, looking at the tools we had online to facilitate that test made us really think about what are we asking: What's the task? Does this online tool allow us to gain that information?

Support through periods of changes (at the university and centre levels)
Associate Professor Simon Winetroube: Firstly, I think we (UECA) have a voice, and we can talk to regulators as we have in the past. We can provide papers as guidance for our members that they can refer to when they're talking to their parent body about what constitutes quality and assessment in a direct entry program. And, if you look at the integrated assessment projects that we've just started and that have been referred to a couple of times today, they will both give us professional development for a core of teachers and related people within our institutions. It will give us outputs, whether it's blueprints, literature reviews, etc., and it will support the quality of what we're doing in our centres. So, I think UECA can... we're a small organisation, we're not hugely resourced, but I think we can support that kind of activity which will help centres address those issues.

Julia Pankowski: I'm recently new to the position of academic manager, so … I have a lot of enthusiasm for the position. I think that is how I try and motivate the team (through change) by showing the team that I'm enthusiastic and that I want to lead that change. And I think that they appreciate that if I'm working to lead them into innovation. But, there is also definitely a need for a little bit of extra prompting to say it's in your best interest; it'll be worth it. It's a difficult thing to resolve. I think that all I can do is really show through my leadership that I'm embracing that change and make sure that teachers get the professional development that they need to help them through that change as well.

Conclusion

In sharing insights from the *2022 University English Centres of Australia (UECA) Assessment Symposium,* this paper has discussed the promises and challenges of integrated assessment and other recent assessment innovations in the ELICOS sector. It has drawn on the work of leading international scholars in the field of language assessment and also included voices from Australian university English language centres, sharing their lived experiences of assessment practices in a changing world in their specific contexts. In doing so, this paper acknowledges the growing interest

in the assessment of language proficiency using integrated assessment tasks in DEPs in Australian universities and contributes to scholarship in this field.

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Sharon Leslie is the Director of English Language programs at Southern Cross University. She has worked across the school, TAFE, and university sectors in her two-decade career in the TESOL sector. Her research interests are teacher identity and development, language program leadership, and international student experience and engagement.

Sharon.Leslie@scu.edu.au

Professor Thomas Roche leads Southern Cross University's education quality enhancement strategic initiatives, including Curriculum Design, Teaching Delivery, Academic Integrity, and the Scholarship of Learning and Teaching. As a specialist in the design, delivery, and management of higher education courses, his research interests include Applied Linguistics (academic literacies and assessment) and Higher Education (student success).

Thomas.Roche@scu.edu.au