

Learning Task 4: A Language Assessment Instrument for English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

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This assessment was designed for an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class, and is an achievement test intended to be a midterm exam taken during a term of study. The specific class and course that this exam was created for is hypothetical, however, the content and course objectives were modelled off of an actual class at Alexander College in British Columbia, Canada. This specific class is an intermediate-level “academic preparation” class, in which the course objectives include the following:

1. Learning to take notes on main ideas and basic supporting details from listening and reading excerpts.
2. Outlining, drafting, revising and editing a variety of paragraphs and a five paragraph opinion essay
3. Integrating direct quotes and using reliable sources
4. Writing and speaking with limited complex sentence structures and accurate contextual vocabulary
5. Answering a variety of questions in response to level appropriate media, including presentations and academic speeches (Alexandra College, n.d.)

The test content created for this assignment is based on the preceding objectives. One reason for choosing an objectives-based assessment is overall practicality – this is a hypothetical class and not one which is currently being taught, therefore a detailed syllabus does not exist. The second reason is due to the advantages that there are for basing test content directly on the objectives of a course. These advantages include not only course objectives being made explicit by course designers to students, but also student performance on the test being more indicative of their achievement of course objectives (Hughes, 2003, p. 13).

Though this test is primarily objectives-based, it contains syllabus-based material which will be covered over the course of the academic term. In addition to being shown various strategies which pertain to note-taking and essay-writing (such as the creation of an outline), there will be specific language forms that will be covered in the course as well as on the test. Specific language forms include modal verbs and phrasal verbs. Language use which will be covered includes comparing/contrasting and using persuasive language to formulate an argument. In terms of content, all topics on this test will be covered in-class in order to equip students with all of the language necessary to succeed on the assessment. There will be units on traditional food culture, climate change, and the internet. These units will serve to teach students new vocabulary which will be used on the test.

The test is designed to be two to two and a half hours long and contains four sections: listening, reading, vocabulary/grammar, and writing. Due to logistics and time constraints, speaking will be assessed in a separate test. The test is pen-and-paper, and students will receive a test paper as well as a separate exam booklet for note-taking and short essay-writing. Students will be told before the test to prepare one letter-sized sheet of notes, which may be double-sided but may not contain any pre-written material aside from quotations from other sources. This double-sided sheet of notes will be used for the short essay portion of the test.

Testing Instrument

The following is the actual testing instrument which will be used for the assessment. It has been formatted to reflect an authentic testing situation, and includes the points that will be awarded for each question or component. After further trialing of the test, these points may possibly be adjusted.

Midterm Exam – Intermediate Academic Preparation

1. With this test paper, you will receive an exam booklet. For the Listening section, please write your notes in the booklet. For the Writing section, please also write your essay in the booklet. All other questions should be answered on this test paper.
2. You may bring one letter-sized paper with notes to this exam. This paper may not contain any pre-written material for your essay.
3. This test has four parts. You have two hours to complete all four parts.
4. Please write your answers in black or blue ink.
5. This test contains 8 pages. Please make sure that you have all pages before you begin.

PART ONE: LISTENING (15 POINTS)

You will first listen and watch a clip from a TED Talk. While you are listening and watching the talk, take notes in your exam booklet. You will need these notes later to complete the short answer questions. The video will be played twice.

TED Talk Title: “Your Online Life, Permanent as a Tattoo” (0:00 – 2:44) ¹

Presenter: Juan Enriquez (TED 2013)

NOTE TAKING (5 POINTS)

While you listen and watch the talk, please take notes in your exam booklet.

SHORT ANSWER AND FILL IN THE BLANK (10 POINTS):

¹ Source: https://www.ted.com/talks/juan_enriquez_how_to_think_about_digital_tattoos?language=en

1. What are three examples of “electronic tattoos” that the speaker mentions? (3 POINTS)

2. Electronic tattoos are hard to hide from, but another thing that is getting really good is _____ (2 POINTS). You can take a picture with an iPhone and get all the names, but sometimes it makes _____ (1 POINT).

3. What does the speaker mean when he says that your face is “tied” to social media? (1 POINT)

4. What happened to face.com ? (1 POINT)

5. What is Andy’s theory? How does the speaker “flip” (or change) this theory? (2 POINTS)

PART TWO: READING (15 POINTS)

Read the following passage and answer the questions in PART A and PART B.

Is Climate Change Fanning Megafires?

Many areas across the world have seen a rise in extreme fires in recent years. Those include western U.S. states and southern Europe. They also include places you might not expect. For

example, wildfires used to be uncommon on Alaska's North Slope. This region borders the Arctic Ocean and is home to the largest U.S. oil field. Now, however, fires are igniting there more frequently. The same is true in other Arctic regions. In July, for instance, people had to evacuate cities in northern Sweden as wildfires swept through them.

Some reasons for the rise in destructive fires are clear. People have been building homes on the edge of forests that face a high risk of fire. Periods of heavy rainfall can also spur a massive growth in vegetation. If that same area later experiences a drought — and California has suffered from many droughts in recent years — that new vegetation may dry out and become tinder that burns easily.

“The Napa Valley fires were a good example of this,” said Timothy Brown. He spoke during an online press briefing in August 2018. (It had been organized by a science communication project called SciLine.) During the briefing, experts talked about climate and weather. “Extreme precipitation in the winter and spring allowed for extensive [vegetation] growth,” he noted. “Then, when that dried later in the fall, it became very flammable and susceptible to ignition.” Brown is a climate scientist at the Desert Research Institute in Reno, Nev.

The signal of climate change

Studies have long predicted that warmer temperatures, due to climate change, make droughts and heat waves more likely. Many areas hit by recent fires had suffered through extreme droughts and heat waves.

But connecting individual fires to climate change is complicated. That's partly because fire is complicated. Blaming climate change for any single fire is too simple. It ignores the natural conditions that make fire possible. But hotter days and warmer nights, caused by changes in the climate, do likely boost the risk of fire.

Many studies predict that climate change will boost the number of droughts and heat waves. Fire-ravaged areas, including California and Sweden, have had extreme droughts and extreme heat in recent years. Some scientists point to these weather events as proof that climate change makes wildfires worse.

Source: Ornes (2018)

PART A (5 POINTS):

Circle the best answer.

1. There has been an extreme rise in fires in recent years and it includes places you might not expect. An example of a place like this is:
 - a) The western United States
 - b) The Arctic Ocean
 - c) Alaska's North Slope
 - d) British Columbia, Canada

2. According to the article, why is blaming wildfires on climate change complicated?
 - a) There are natural conditions which contribute to fires.
 - b) Hotter days and warmer nights make wildfires worse.
 - c) Lots of rain means more vegetation growth.
 - d) Wildfires used to be uncommon on Alaska's North Slope.

3. According to the article, what is one reason for the spread of destructive fires?
 - a) Vegetation growth burns very easily after it dries in the fall.
 - b) Wildfires are uncommon in certain areas.
 - c) Fire are complicated and do not behave predictably.

- d) Weather events are proof that climate change makes wildfires worse.
4. According to the article, people in Arctic Regions have been...
- a) Completely unaffected by fire.
 - b) Evacuating from cities in Northern Sweden.
 - c) Igniting fires more frequently.
 - d) Going camping in July.
5. What do scientists think is proof that climate change makes wildfires worse?
- a) Blaming climate change for any single fire is too simple.
 - b) The Napa Valley fire and how destructive it was.
 - c) Weather events such as extreme droughts and extreme heat.
 - d) People have been building homes in areas that face a high risk of fire.

PART B (10 POINTS):

Fill in the blanks with the correct word. Each word is only used once.

Connecting wildfires to this is complicated, but scientists now think that _____
_____ (2 words) makes wildfires worse. Areas hit by recent _____
have suffered through extreme droughts and heatwaves. Examples of these areas are
_____ and _____. Studies have predicted for a long time that warmer
_____ make droughts and heatwaves more likely. To make the problem worse, if
you have extreme _____ in the winter and spring, this allows for extensive
_____ growth. Later, drought may _____ out vegetation, which

makes it tinder that burns easily. One reason why fires have become more _____ is because people have been building homes on the edge of forests. This is concerning because many areas across the world have seen a rise in extreme fires.

PART THREE: GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY (15 POINTS)

PART A (9 POINTS):

Fill in the blank(s) with the word which best fits. This word will be a phrasal verb, a modal verb, or a word of comparison/contrast.

1. _____ the Food Processing Technician program requires class study, it also has a co-op option.
2. An associate's degree is only two years long _____ a bachelor's degree is four years long.
3. In order to counteract climate change, governments _____ take urgent action now.
4. Please _____ this form for me.
5. I do not want to do my homework, but I _____ do it.
6. _____ the Korean alphabet is easy to learn, Chinese has a difficult character system.
7. On the way to the winery, my mom _____ some cute deer in the vineyard.
8. He _____ do that for you, but he doesn't want to do it.
9. The psychology program is popular _____ it is very competitive.

PART B (6 POINTS):

In the following passage, underline and label:

1. Two examples of persuasive language. Write “PL” by the examples.
2. One example of comparative language. Write “CL” by the example.
3. Three examples of phrasal verbs. Write “PV” by the examples.

Why Can’t Bugs Be Grub?

Most Westerners — people who live in North America and Western Europe — don’t eat insects. But the Western diet includes a number of foods that can seem just as gross when you stop to think about them. Cheeses are made with mold and bacteria. Escargot, a dish eaten in France and other countries, consists of cooked snails. Shrimp and lobsters look kind of like giant bugs.

Europeans “considered the people they encountered beastlike because they ate insects,” Lesnik says. As Westerners colonized other cultures, they needed to make themselves feel superior to those cultures, she says. She suspects that this need strengthened Western disgust toward eating insects.

Disgust also can be learned by various messages shared within a culture, says Lesnik. We aren’t necessarily born thinking that insects are gross. “If a kid tries to put a bug in his mouth, many parents discourage that behavior and tell the kid it’s icky,” she observes.

Source: Landhuis (2018)

PART FOUR: SHORT OPINION ESSAY (20 POINTS) ²

² See Appendix 1 for a sample rubric that would be used for marking this portion of the test.

There are many things which can influence how people think of food. These things can be celebrity chefs, food availability, culture and food prices. Compare and contrast food in Canada and food in another country. You can talk about food in your home country or another place that you have visited.

Essay Requirements:

1. PART A (4 POINTS): Write an outline and plan your essay in your exam booklet.
2. PART B (16 POINTS): Write your essay in your exam booklet. It should contain at least three paragraphs and be at least one page long. In your essay, please quote or paraphrase two reliable sources. Make sure to cite them.

Test Instrument Rationale

The choice to write this test as a midterm and not a final exam is based on my own inexperience in teaching EAP. My background teaching experience is in an EFL context in which I taught elementary school aged children, and while it was tempting to write an assessment for this context, the reality is that I do not plan to return to teaching in this context. I hope to teach adults and therefore will likely be teaching EAP, therefore I thought that writing an assessment for EAP was the most practical. With this in mind, this assessment is intended to be diagnostic in nature. Assessment serves two general purposes – one of those is to assess learner performance and program effectiveness, and the other is to improve teaching and learning (Huang, 2018, p. 71). In this case, considering my own inexperience with teaching EAP, this assessment is mostly intended to improve teaching and is a low-stakes exam for students.

The formatting of the test was influenced by how seamlessly each section would follow the other. It was determined that the test would be best started with the listening section, which involves watching and listening to a video clip, and ended with the writing section, as that would likely take candidates the most time to complete. In addition to overall flow, validity, reliability and overall usefulness were all carefully considered in the test's design.

Validity

When assessing EAP, like with other language assessment measures, in order to accurately assess candidates' language abilities, "it is important to try to sample widely across a range of language use tasks" (Brindley & Ross, 2001, p. 152). The course objectives encompass all five skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary/grammar), therefore the first step in designing this exam was to include a section measuring each ability, minus speaking. As mentioned previously, the choice to not include speaking was based on logistics and the time that it would take to conduct this section during the exam. It therefore will be assessed separately, perhaps in a less formal testing environment. After determining which skills to include on the test and which to exclude, there was an attempt to make each section equal in weight with an equal amount of questions or points in each. The one exception to this is the writing section – given the fact that writing an essay is arguably more demanding on students' overall language skills than say, fill in the blank questions, this section was given more weight.

One of the main course objectives is learning effective note-taking from listening and reading excerpts. Note-taking and summarizing are two skills that are difficult to master, but are essential academic writing skills and are often necessary for many standardized proficiency tests (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011, p. 116). Simulations of academic lectures provide different examples of lecture styles and content, which can help provide "strategy training for successful note-taking, note-processing, and review management" (Brindley & Ross, 2001, p. 160). In order to

test note-taking from a listening perspective, the test begins with test-takers watching and listening to a less-than-three-minute clip from a TED Talk. The efficacy of TED Talks and whether they qualify as a “simulation of an academic lecture” is a matter of debate in the literature. While TED Talks seem very useful at face value, on average they have lower levels of academic vocabulary when compared to lecture discourse (Wingrove, 2017, p. 93). In upper-level EAP courses this may be a concern, however, given the intermediate level of the students for which this test is intended, the fact that TED Talks have lower levels of academic vocabulary is an advantage. Again, this course is the first step up from English foundations courses, therefore students may likely be overwhelmed by content which contains too high of a level of academic words. TED Talks can be used as a “stepping stone for students struggling with authentic lecture discourse,” provided that the talks are carefully selected for content as well as rate of speech (Wingrove, 2017, p. 93). Watkins and Wilkins agree that TED Talks are an effective way to start developing academic skills such as note-taking (p. 116). The talk chosen for this test was evaluated for rate of speech, length, and content to ensure that it would not affect the reliability of the assessment, but still remain a valid way to assess note-taking ability as well as general comprehension. Following the note-taking exercise, students will use these notes to help them answer five short answer and fill-in-the-blank questions.

When deciding which assessment tasks to apply to each skill, each item is written so that it only assesses the skill which it is intended to assess. If an item inadvertently tests more than one skill, it affects validity (Hughes, 2003, p. 155). In order to test reading specifically, five multiple choice questions were included in the reading section of the exam. Like listening, reading is a receptive skill (Hughes, 2003, p. 160), therefore the ability to identify a correct response in an item is a valid way to test the skill, despite the drawbacks to multiple choice testing. With this in mind along with the short length of the accompanying article, the multiple

choice section was kept short so that it could be followed with another, more direct testing method. Immediately following the multiple choice section is a gap fill component, which tests whether candidates have grasped the main ideas of the excerpt that they were required to read (Hughes, 2003, p. 148). The gap fill was written so that readers could not simply get the answers from the preceding multiple choice section. Using gap fill in lieu of short answer or essay-style questions lessens the demand on test-takers' overall writing ability. With that in mind, any other items which do not specifically concern writing will not be marked for grammar and spelling.

Reliability

As this is a midterm exam and not a final, while the content of this test is more academic in nature to reflect the fact that it is an EAP assessment, some of the content remains at-level with regular adult ESL assessment. As an intermediate level class that is just starting to build their academic language skills, language scaffolding is imperative, therefore while learners are exposed to new content, care has been taken to ensure that input is still comprehensible to them (Krashen, 1982). To make the test more reliable, topics and mediums used in the assessment will be familiar to students prior to the commencement of the test (Hughes, 2003, p. 140). For example, students will already be familiar with note-taking from a TED Talk, and in working with these talks, the teacher will provide sample models of notes as well as point out things that students can look for in future talks that they view (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011, p. 116). This means that when exam day arrives, students already know what to expect and what is expected, and will have enough familiarity with the topic to understand crucial vocabulary, but not so much familiarity that it makes the task "too easy" and therefore compromises validity (Hughes, 2003).

One problem with language testing is that student performance in examination conditions may not reflect their actual language ability, or may differ considerably from work that is

produced in the classroom (Brindley & Ross, 2001, p. 152). This can happen for a number of reasons and can be attributed to a number of factors, including testing environment, test questions, and the learner themselves (Hughes, 2003, p. 36). A specific factor that can affect learner performance on a language test is test-taking anxiety, particularly on high-stakes exams. Given that this test is intended to be low-stakes, one can hope that test-taking anxiety would be lessened, but nonetheless, it is a midterm examination that students will be graded on. Multiple measures have been taken to lessen candidates' anxiety about taking a test. One such measure is offering two opportunities to listen and watch the TED Talk, which may help reduce test-taking anxiety (Kim, 2018, p. 10) and also allowing test-takers to employ macro and micro-listening strategies (Choi, 2008, p. 47). The decision to conduct the listening portion of the test in this way was based on my analysis of another language assessment (Cinnamon, 2018).

Another measure intended to lessen learner anxiety, as well as improve reliability of the test, is allowing candidates to bring a double-sided notes page into the exam to help them write their essays. The downfall of this is that candidates will already have access to the topic that they are required to write about, which may affect reliability, particularly if candidates attempt to pre-write and memorize an essay. Candidates will be cautioned not to do this, and care will be taken to ensure that no pre-writing has taken place on the notes page itself. Students will also be required to hand in their notes pages to help mitigate cheating. The potential problems involved in allowing students a notes page are outweighed by the perceived benefits. Hughes (2003) states that writing tasks should be made as authentic as possible (p. 93) – in this case, the course objectives encompass writing an academic essay. Students at an intermediate level are still getting acquainted with the academic essay, and while they may have background knowledge from the course to complete the task, it arguably would be more difficult for them to write an essay on a test with no notes. By allowing students a note page, this gives them a step up while

practicing how to write an essay in a test-taking environment (which they will be required to do in university studies), and also allows the teacher to see how students' note-taking translates directly to their writing. Furthermore, students will be required to quote and cite two sources in their essay, which creates more need to bring a notes page into the exam.

A trial of the assessment revealed potential reliability issues which were then corrected in the final draft. The first issue was test-taker confusion, particularly in regard to fill-in-the-blank questions both in the reading section of the exam, as well as the grammar and vocabulary section. In the grammar and vocabulary section, the language in the items was edited to be unique and independent from content and language used for other items in the test. To mitigate further confusion, in cases where candidates were required to provide a two word answer, the test was edited with two blanks to reflect this. It is possible that this may provide too strong of a clue for test-takers (Hughes, 2003, p. 81), however, this would need to be determined by further trialing on non-native speakers. While writing fill-in-the-blank questions, care was also taken to mitigate the potential for more than one possible answer, as that would affect scoring reliability (Hughes, 2003 p. 48).

Usefulness and Backwash

This test has been designed with a specific teaching context and course in mind, which makes it more useful than, for example, a standardized language test. O'Sullivan (2011) argues that a test which is "designed with no specific candidature in mind is unlikely to offer an appropriate measure of the language abilities required for a given context" (p. 264). This is corroborated by Schmitt and Hamp-Lyons (2015), who state that local tests "in [their] closer link to EAP teaching... [have] the potential to better represent the construct of academic language in use than any existing standardized exam," (p. 4). This test measures language use which correlates directly to completing specific academic tasks (Schmitt & Hamp-Lyons, 2015, p. 6).

Therefore, candidates are able to demonstrate what they have learned in this specific course, and the teacher is able to evaluate their own teaching. If student performance were to be evaluated by a standardized exam such as TOEFL, the results from that particular test would be less useful because it does not measure the specific language abilities that this course is designed to teach.

Some researchers such as Brindley and Ross (2001) have suggested that in an EAP context, the “gap between formal test and classroom practice” may lend other methods of assessment such as portfolios more credibility (p. 152). However, portfolios come with their own issues in regard to reliability, particularly because they are difficult to score (Brindley & Ross, 2001, p. 154). Furthermore, in this particular context, using a traditional language test over a formative form of assessment is a better fit for the test’s overall purpose. Again, the main purpose for this test is to evaluate teaching and course content, while the evaluation of student language ability and progress is secondary. Therefore, like standardized language tests, portfolios would be a less useful form of assessment in this situation. This is supported by researchers such as Huang (2018), who agree that “the choice of an assessment instrument should match the purposes it is designed to achieve” (p. 71)

There is potential for beneficial backwash from this assessment for multiple reasons. One reason is the fact that this is a midterm exam, which offers students the opportunity to see where they are at, learning-wise, before moving on to a more high-stakes assessment. The second is that this assessment will allow the teacher to gain valuable information in terms of what is working and what is not working in the classroom in this particular course. This allows the teacher to make adjustments to course content, course delivery and other assessments in order to improve the quality of the class and thus student experience. A third reason is that this assessment tests the abilities whose development the teacher wants to encourage (Hughes, 2003, p. 53). These specific abilities are: note taking, as seen in the listening portion of the test, and to

an extent, the writing portion; identifying and using accurate contextual vocabulary, as demonstrated in the grammar/vocabulary section as well as the writing portion; integrating quotes and using reliable sources in an essay; outlining an opinion essay and answering a variety of questions in response to level appropriate media in the reading and writing sections. Other factors that encourage beneficial backwash which are applicable to this particular test are basing the test on course objectives, mostly employing direct testing methods (Hughes, 2003, pp. 54 – 55), and using authentic source material (Schmitt & Hamp-Lyons, 2015, p. 5).

Conclusion

The items and tasks chosen for this assessment were carefully considered for validity, reliability, overall usefulness, and potential to encourage beneficial backwash. Though the test has been presented in a complete form, further trialing will need to take place before this is used in an actual classroom situation. As such, the class that this test was designed for is hypothetical, and is a “hoped-for” future teaching context. While this test was designed for a hypothetical class, the sources used to help write this test were authentic resources. The course itself is an actual class offered by a college in Canada, and an EAP classroom textbook (Chazal & Rogers, 2012) was consulted for test content ideas, particularly in the case of vocabulary and grammar. The TED Talk (Enriquez, 2013) and news articles presented in the reading and grammar/vocabulary sections of the test (Landhuis, 2018; Ornes, 2018) are also examples of authentic resources, and were chosen carefully to ensure that they would be accessible to intermediate-level students just beginning to learn academic English. This test is intended to be beneficial to students as well as the teacher, and will offer feedback not only in relation to student progress at a halfway point in the term, but also overall teaching.

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Appendix 1: Assessment Rubric for Essay Question

	1	2	3	4
Outline	There is some semblance of an outline, though it is incomplete.	Outline is incomplete but shows some organization and planning.	Outline is mostly complete and shows clear organization and planning.	Outline is complete. Shows clear organization and planning for essay. Matches models used in class.
Organization	Essay is not organized and is lacking in transitions.	Essay is a little disorganized and transitions need improvement.	Essay is well-organized but may seem a little “choppy,” or need improvement in regard to transitions.	Essay is clearly organized and makes good use of transitions.
Grammar	Understanding of concepts learned over the term is not demonstrated.	Grammatical errors are frequent, though understanding of learned concepts is evident.	Some grammatical errors are made, but usage of learned concepts is mostly successful.	Mostly free of grammatical errors. Clear understanding of learned concepts.
Vocabulary Use	Many spelling errors, is repetitive, does not use full sentences, does not demonstrate knowledge of vocabulary learned during the course.	Sentences are repetitive, demonstrates some knowledge of vocabulary learned during the course, makes frequent spelling errors.	Uses varied vocabulary, and properly uses vocabulary learned during the course.	Uses varied vocabulary, including previously learned vocabulary as well as vocabulary learned during the course.
Overall Effect	The overall effect is poor and the essay does not demonstrate successful learning of concepts covered in the course.	The essay is confusing to read, but demonstrates some understanding of concepts learned in the course.	Essay is adequately clear and well-thought out. Demonstrates understanding of concepts learned in the course.	Essay meaning is clear and arguments are well-supported. Demonstrates clear understanding of concepts learned in the course.