

Standard Setting: The Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment and the International English Language Competency Assessment (IELCA)

Summary Report and Recommendations

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BACKGROUND

Policy makers must be aware of the considerations that drive the assessment system. They should be aware of what the assessment and the cut scores are intended to accomplish. They must be aware of the effects of the operational cut scores on students, faculties, schools and other stakeholders. (Zieky & Perie, 2004, p. 7)

The purpose of this study was to establish equivalencies between the International English Proficiency Test (IELCA) and the Canadian Academic English Language (CAEL) Assessment (i.e., in reading, listening, speaking and writing). The study responded to the need for formal standard setting (Cizek, 2001; Cizek & Bunch, 2007) by evaluating the relationship between the IELCA and the CAEL Assessment. The CAEL is an English proficiency test used across Canada by Canadian institutions for admission and accreditation purposes. According to Learning Resource Network (LRN), the IELCA also operationalizes the construct of academic English.

At the time of the study, no formal standard setting research had been conducted in relation to Canadian standards, and, as Cizek and Bunch (2007) point out, "...if categorical decisions must be made, they will be fairer, wiser, more open, more valid, more efficient, and more defensible when they utilize established, systematic processes that result in cut-scores that are based on non-arbitrary, explicit criteria" (p. 8). Thus, the purpose of the present study was to relate IELCA test item/task difficulty (in reading and listening) and test performance (in speaking and writing) to criteria defined by the CAEL Assessment in order to make recommendations on test equivalencies.

Seventeen panelists were recruited to participate in the standard setting study. This report summarizes the methods, procedures, data collection, analysis and findings leading to the proposed recommendations.

OVERVIEW OF THE IELCA AND THE CAEL ASSESSMENT

THE IELCA is intended to assess the English language skills of students, who want to study or work in an English language environment. The IELCA assesses four aspects of English language that include reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The IELCA is offered in two types of modules academic and general training. The former module assesses the students' ability to study in undergraduate or postgraduate level in any educational institutions, colleges, and universities of English speaking countries. The latter module assesses the basic essential English language skills in a wide range of frameworks of the social and educational environment. The general training component is also appropriate for people who want to study in secondary education, immigration purposes, work experience and other training

purposes. Both the academic and general training modules assess four components of the language ability i.e., reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Table 1. IELCA by skill focus, item/task type and time

SKILL FOCUS	ITEM/TASK TYPE	TIME
Reading	Multiple-choice (single answer)	80 minutes
	True/False	
Listening	Multiple-choice (single answer)	30 minutes
	Fill in the blanks	
Speaking	Face to face interview	12-15 minutes
	General questions about home, family, hobbies, work, and studies	
	Question short answer	
Writing	Task 1: description of a chart, graph, table or diagram	60 minutes
	Task 2: an essay reflecting candidate's own opinions, views, arguments, problems or analysis on a specific writing prompt	

DESCRIPTION AND SPECIFICATIONS OF THE FOUR LANGUAGE SKILLS AS MEASURED BY IELCA

Reading

In the Reading Test, candidates are asked a range of questions to assess their reading ability. The main components of the questions include a central theme, general ideas, skim reading, detail reading, main arguments, opinions, views, attitude and substance of the text. The reading passage has three long texts between 700 to 800 words. These are factual, critical, narrative, discursive and analytical. The passages are extracted from newspapers, journals and books. The passage is easy to get to a non-specialist audience which is appropriate for enrolling to undergraduate, postgraduate course, immigration purposes and professional accreditation.

Listening

the listening section assesses the ability to understand the central ideas, factual information, purpose, viewpoint and development of the ideas and information. Candidates need to listen carefully the main ideas and answer multiple choice questions within a set time frame. The audio recordings feature speakers from various English-speaking countries; they have different accents and dialects reflecting their international environment.

Speaking

The speaking test is a face to face oral interview with an examiner. This test is recorded. There are three parts in this test. In the first part, candidates are asked general questions about themselves, their home, family, hobbies, work and study. In the second part, candidates are given a specific topic in which they have to speak about 2 minutes like speaking about a topic in the classroom. There is one minute time to

prepare a note prior to speaking on the topic. In the last part of the speaking test, candidates are asked questions about the topic related to part 2. These are short questions and the candidates have the opportunity to clarify and add some more information on the topic.

Writing

The writing section of the test has two tasks of 120 words and 220 words. The candidates are assessed on the basis of their ability to write in a clear manner including appropriate language, content, vocabulary and analytical ideas.

Academic Writing

In Academic Writing, candidates have to write a description of a chart, graph, table or diagram. In task 1 candidates are required to write clearly and in their own words. Task 2 is an essay and candidate have to include their own opinions, views, arguments, problems or analysis. It is expected that the tone of the writing responds to formal language maxims as it is required in academia.

General Writing

The General Training module is also composed of two tasks. In the first task candidates need to write a letter about either an explanation of a given situation or writing a letter requesting information. The letter may be in any format: formal, informal or personal. It should be written in at least 120 words. In the second task, candidates are asked to write an essay in any form in at least 220 words.

THE CAEL ASSESSMENT is a criterion-referenced, topic-based performance test, comprised of an integrated set of language activities. The language tasks and activities in the CAEL Assessment are systematically sampled from those that are commonly undertaken within the university academic community. The content for the tasks on the CAEL Assessment is drawn from introductory university courses at times when professors are introducing new topics to their students with the expectation that the students know little or nothing about the content. The test is comprised of representative tasks and performances that characterize academic study (see Table 2, below), for example:

- speaking about academic experience, information, or understanding,
- listening to, taking notes, and transferring or applying information on a topic introduced or extended by an academic lecture,
- reading and selectively applying information from academic articles and texts about a topic introduced or extended by a lecture, and
- incorporating what has been learned from the lecture and readings in writing a formal, academic response to an academic task.

Table 2. CAEL Assessment by skill focus, item/task type and time

SKILL FOCUS	ITEM/TASK TYPE	TIME
Reading	Multiple-choice (single answer)	55 minutes
	Multiple-choice (multiple answers)	
	Short answer	
	Fill Charts and tables	

	Fill in the blanks	
	Label diagrams	
Listening	Summarize spoken text	25 minutes
	Multiple-choice (single answer)	
	Multiple-choice (multiple answers)	
	Fill in the blanks	
	Short answer response	
	Fill in tables or charts/information transfer	
	Take notes on spoken text	
	Extended response	
Speaking	Personal Introduction	25 minutes
	Lecture re-tell	
	Question short answer	
	Text read aloud	
	Impromptu mini presentation	
Writing	Write essay based on information in reading and listening lecture	45 minutes

Similarities between the two tests are important to establish equivalencies and relating test scores on the IELCA to the CAEL Assessment. Both tests operationalize a construct of English for academic purposes (EAP) at the level of undergraduate/first-year university/college admission. Both tests feature task topics pertinent to academic genre. Both tests report proficiency on the four language skills and all speaking and writing performances are marked by human raters

There are, however, important differences between the two tests. Although both CAEL and IELCA tasks are academic related topics, they differ in that IELCA items/tasks sample from a wide range of topics and contexts; CAEL items/tasks are *fully integrated* within a single topic. CAEL test takers are provided with the essay prompt for the writing sub-test at the beginning of the test, introduced to the topic through the readings (two-three) with items/tasks that are used for the reading sub-test scores. The listening sub-test consists of an extended lecture on the same topic with items/tasks that are used for the listening sub-test scores. Test takers use the information from the readings and lecture in responding to the prompt in the writing sub-test at the end of the test.

IELCA reading and listening texts and tasks are shorter with mainly multiple choice or fill-in the blanks responses; CAEL reading and listening texts are longer and involve extended reading and listening with such tasks such as written summaries, information transfer, and short answer responses.

All performance on the CAEL Assessment (within sub-skills and overall score) is defined by criterion-referenced band scores ranging from 10 to 90 (see Appendix 3). **These criteria served as performance level descriptions (Cizek & Bunch, 2007, p. 46) for categorizing IELCA performance/proficiency and/or item/task difficulty in the standard setting sessions.**

Although CAEL Assessment proficiency standards are set internally by tertiary institutions in relation to their own programs, **in general most institutions in Canada require a band 70 on the CAEL Assessment for admission; a number of institutions accept band 60.** Only two institutions in Canada require proficiency above band 70 for admission to their first-year, undergraduate programs.

COMMITTEE SELECTION FOR THE PTE ACADEMIC STANDARDS SETTING PANEL

When planning standard settings it is of paramount importance to ensure that the panel members understand the procedures being used to set the standards and have expertise in the field and context where tests are implemented. In fact, “participants in the standard-setting process are critical to the success of the endeavor and are a source of variability of standard setting results” (Cizek & Bunch, 2007, p. 49).

As a result, (N=17) panelists were recruited for the standard setting. They were strategically selected to provide a representative sample of adequate expertise in language proficiency required for university studies and included panelist drawn from the groups below.

- 1) **Certified raters**, (CAEL, CELPIP, IELTS, CLB Exit Assessment)
- 1) **EAP specialists**, with extensive teaching experience at the academic level.
- 2) **Undergraduate students**, majoring in Applied Linguistics and enrolled in the fourth year undergraduate course in language testing and assessment (ALDS 4201) at Carleton University.
- 3) **Graduate Students in Applied Linguistics**, with expertise in language testing and assessment, teaching in universities in Canada or abroad, who were specializing in language assessment at the MA or PhD level.
- 4) **Professional test developers/researchers**, continually conducting research on test construct and validation at Carleton University.

Overview of panelists’ characteristics

Gender

Male: 17.64%

Female: 82.36%

Years of teaching	EAP/ESL Canada	EFL (abroad)	Countries

0	5 (29.41%)			
1-5	5 (29.41%)	yes yes yes yes yes	no no no no yes	China and Mexico
6-10	4 (23.53%)	yes yes yes yes	no no no no	
11-15	3 (17.65%)	yes yes yes	yes yes yes	Dominican Republic Indonesia and Singapore Ecuador, Peru, Qatar

Language Testing Experience	
Rating of high stakes tests 6	(CAEL, CELPIP, IELTS)
Test Development 9	(CAEL, IELTS)
Test Research 4	(CAEL, CELPIP, CLB)
Standard Setting Experience 4	(PTE Academic; Canadian Language Benchmarks; CELPIP-G)

Other relevant experience in contexts where cut-points for language proficiency have played a role

8 panelists (CAEL, TOEFL iBT, Pearson Academic, CLB)

In summary, the standard setting panel was composed of participants who had expertise in language testing research, ESL teaching, and participants who were relevant to the context of the standard setting study (e.g., students enrolled in an fourth year language testing and assessment undergraduate course (ALDS 4201) at Carleton University. In all, the standard setting panel represented key expertise in the evaluation of English language proficiency relevant to the main selection context of both the IELCA and the CAEL Assessment.