

The use of IELTS for assessing immigration eligibility in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom

Author

Glenys Merrifield
GBM & Associates

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This study examines the use of IELTS by immigration authorities in four English-speaking countries to determine the rationale for the use of language testing for immigration purposes, and the use of other language assessment systems.

[Click here to read the Introduction to this volume which includes an appraisal of this research, its context and impact.](#)

ABSTRACT

Over the past 20 years, the IELTS Test has been taken up by private bodies, professional associations and governments to fit a number of different purposes requiring assessment of language. One of the more recent uses of the testing system has been as a gateway for people seeking to immigrate or to work or study in a foreign country. This study examines the use of IELTS by immigration authorities in four English-speaking countries: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom.

The key issues examined in the study were the rationale for the use of language testing for immigration purposes, and the history of the use of IELTS and any alternative language assessment systems accepted by these four countries. Decision-making policies and influences on policies were also examined. The study included: desk research of immigration policies and documents; analysis of alternative examinations and assessment systems; and semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face, by telephone and by email.

Immigration authorities differed in the range of language assessment systems they accepted and their decision-making processes. Australia and New Zealand officially accepted only IELTS and the occasional Occupational English Test. Canada had approved IELTS and the CELPIP, both benchmarked against the Canadian Language Benchmarks. The United Kingdom Border Agency, on the other hand, had over 30 language assessment systems on the officially accepted list, with many of these having no limit of validity. Of the four countries, New Zealand and Canada had the most established and transparent decision-making systems.

The study found that there was general congruence in the stated purpose of language testing in all four countries. All considered that easier settlement, integration into the community and contribution to workforce knowledge were important outcomes of good English language skills. It was also found that language proficiency thresholds could be manipulated to limit numbers of immigrants and relieve pressure on funding of community support organisations. Regular changes in government policy in threshold language skills were being made during the course of the study in the case of Australia and the UK, aimed at adapting to changes in immigration patterns.

IELTS support services, particularly in relation to security and fraud prevention, are likely to be a major factor in the continued use of the Test for immigration.

AUTHOR BIODATA

GLENYS MERRIFIELD

Glenys Merrifield has been involved in international education and, in particular, the TESOL sector, since 1975, initially in the United Kingdom and then in Australia. She has owned her own business in the international English language teaching sector, is an experienced manager and has been involved in lecturing and training in universities and private vocational education and training for a number of years. She holds postgraduate qualifications in management.

From 1992 to 2004, Glenys managed the National ELT Accreditation Scheme (NEAS), the national accreditation and quality monitoring service for Australia's ELICOS sector and Adult Migrant English Program. Since 2004, she has run a consultancy business and has conducted research and project management for the international education industry in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, the USA and Canada, related to language testing, professional development, quality assurance in ELT, and other aspects of international education.

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IDP: IELTS Australia Pty Limited

ABN 84 008 664 766
Level 8, 535 Bourke St
Melbourne VIC 3000
Australia
Tel +61 3 9612 4400
Fax +61 3 9629 7697
Email ielts.communications@idp.com
Web www.ielts.org
© IDP: IELTS Australia Pty Limited 2012

British Council

Bridgewater House
58 Whitworth St
Manchester, M1 6BB
United Kingdom
Tel +44 161 957 7755
Fax +44 161 957 7762
Email ielts@britishcouncil.org
Web www.ielts.org
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REPORT 1: CONTENTS

1	Introduction and context	4
2	Key issues, approach and methodology	6
2.1	Scope	6
2.2	Key issues	6
2.3	Approach and methodology	6
3	Outcomes	7
3.1	Australia	7
3.1.1	Significance of language assessment for immigration into Australia	8
3.1.2	Language levels required for Australia	9
3.1.3	Alternative language assessment systems for Australia	9
3.2	New Zealand	9
3.2.1	Significance of language assessment for immigration into NZ	10
3.2.2	Language levels required for NZ	10
3.2.3	Alternative language assessment systems for NZ	11
3.3	Canada	11
3.3.1	Significance of language assessment for immigration into Canada	11
3.3.2	Language levels required for Canada	12
3.3.3	Alternative language assessment systems for Canada	12
3.4	The United Kingdom	13
3.4.1	Significance of language assessment for immigration into the UK	14
3.4.2	Language levels required for the UK	14
3.4.3	Alternative language assessment systems for the UK	15
4	Discussion	16
4.1	Rationale and purpose of language testing	16
4.2	Reasons for selecting IELTS	16
4.3	Alternative English language assessment systems accepted	17
4.4	Decision-making on language testing	18
4.5	Future plans for language testing	18
4.6	Support strategies and risk management	18
5	Conclusion	19
	References	20
	Appendix 1: Questions for interviews with migration bodies	22
	Appendix 2: Acknowledgements	25
	Appendix 3: Summary of outcomes	26
	Appendix 4: UK Border Agency English language tests accepted	30
	Appendix 5: Acronyms	32

1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The rapid spread of English language as a global *lingua franca* in recent times has given rise to multiple industries surrounding the teaching, learning and assessment of English. Proficiency in English has come to be viewed as a key to successful study, a facilitator for social, economic and cultural interaction on the internet, and an important skill in the development of a successful career on a global scale. The continuous upward trend in demand for English during the last 10 years has supported a general view that success depends on the ability to speak English. With this in mind, many countries for whom English is not their native language have been introducing English language programs at increasingly lower levels of the school curricula. The demographic of English learners is, therefore, becoming broader, ranging from primary school level to adult learners.

In English-speaking countries, this has given rise to major industries based on the teaching and learning of English. In particular, Australia, New Zealand (NZ), Canada, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) have all experienced a rapid growth in the teaching of English to people of non-English speaking backgrounds since the late 1980s. One area where this has been particularly lucrative is the international student sector, which provides English language teaching and testing services to students on temporary study visas.

In countries offering English to international students, a history of abuse of visa conditions has prompted legislators to take the view that such programs carry the risk of creating an illegal pathway to permanent residency, thus circumventing the usual stringent immigration procedures. Their response to this is generally to raise the minimum criteria for gaining a visa; the introduction of higher levels of English language proficiency is a kind of “blunt instrument” which can be used in this way.

The international student market is not the only area where the impact of language on social and political structures is being examined. Over the last 20 to 30 years, the number of people moving across national and international borders to seek a better life for themselves and their families has shown vast increases. Graddol (2006) observed that “between 1960 and 2000 the total number of international migrants had doubled to 175 million, representing nearly 3% of the world’s population” (p 28). This shows no signs of slowing.

The reasons for increased migration are many. Politically, for example, the freedom of the labour movement enabled by the formation of the European Union gave rise to an influx of migrant workers across national borders, many into the United Kingdom. Economically, governments in countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the UK, to which immigrants from less wealthy countries may be attracted, are constantly examining their labour markets and putting in place strategies and policies to ensure that the people entering the country will fill skilled labour shortages, or contribute to the nation’s economy through business or investment.

Governments are becoming increasingly aware that the impact of large numbers of people entering the community from other cultures is going to test and eventually change the socio-political contexts, if not the national identity, of the destination country. Saville (2006) observes that within the European context in particular:

One consequence of the large-scale and growing movement of populations around the world in recent years has been that notions of citizenship, and the role of language within citizenship, have assumed an increasingly high profile...For some years now a shift has been taking place in many European countries towards more rigorous conditions for those seeking to apply for citizenship. One of the new (or renewed) conditions for obtaining citizenship is language proficiency (pp 2-4).

This is also true for migration destinations outside of Europe. The policies and regulations surrounding immigration in the developed world tend to constitute extremely high stakes to governments because they are seen as “protective” measures; that is, they maintain barriers to people from other countries and cultures and are seen as a means of protecting a nation’s cultural identity and economic prosperity. The breakdown of these barriers tends to evoke highly emotional reactions from the general population, and is, therefore, taken very seriously by democratically elected governments.

Demand for English language testing has also been growing in the last 20 years, serviced by the development of internationally accessible tests such as the International English Language Testing Service (IELTS). Other popular assessment systems in growth mode are the internet-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (iBTOEFL), the Pearson Test of English (PTE), the Test of English for International Communication and the Cambridge suite of tests. In Europe, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages, while not an assessment test, has come to be a standard for describing language proficiency.

Language has had growing importance in the granting of permanent residency in the last 10 to 15 years, and this has occurred for very valid reasons. The ability of newcomers to settle in a country with an unfamiliar language is dramatically impacted if the individuals do not have the skills and knowledge to participate in simple daily interactions and to communicate socially. For example, at a basic level, individuals need to be able to understand simple signs designed to warn of safety hazards, labels on products showing what they are designed for or what their contents are, and laws of the country. At a more complex level, people seeking employment need to be able to communicate with co-workers on a social and work-related level, to understand safety precautions related to the workplace, and to communicate with bosses on matters affecting their job or their well-being.

This research study focuses on the use of IELTS for the purpose of assessing language skills for integration into an English-speaking environment, a non-traditional purpose for a test which was designed to assess capability to undertake study in an English-speaking environment. An IELTS band score is now formally accepted as evidence of language competency by immigration authorities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom. In order to develop an informed context for the use of IELTS for immigration purposes, this study explores how and in what contexts it is used, how authorities arrived at their decisions and policies on its use, and the impact, if any, that the use of IELTS may have had on immigration, study and the workplace.

2 KEY ISSUES, APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Scope

The study focuses on four immigration authorities:

- Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), Australia
- Immigration New Zealand (INZ)
- Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)
- United Kingdom Border Agency (UKBA).

2.2 Key issues

The following key issues were explored:

- the rationale behind the use of language testing as a criterion for immigration
- the range of language assessment systems accepted and a broad assessment of the risk they constitute to IELTS' market share
- the reasons for the selection of IELTS as an assessment tool for immigration, whether use of IELTS is mandatory or voluntary, and whether or not it is entrenched in policy or legislation
- the overall degree of understanding of the test by immigration staff (eg overall band scores vs skill band scores, Academic vs General Training, etc)
- the perceptions of both users and candidates where possible of whether IELTS fits the purpose and/or how IELTS could better fit the purpose for which they are using it
- additional support strategies that may be of value in enhancing understanding of the test, its outcomes and its appropriate uses
- risks/potential risks and strategies for managing them.

2.3 Approach and methodology

The approach was to conduct a qualitative research study based on interviews with key personnel in each of the immigration authorities and external experts in language testing and migrant support. Desk research was also conducted into both formal academic research articles and less formal media. While there was little documented research with direct relevance to the key issues, this served to provide a context for the use of language testing for immigration purposes.

In a study of this kind, there tends to be frequent change in the policies and legislation related to immigration assessment criteria, and these changes tend to be documented formally only after a protracted period of time. In addition, two of the four countries being studied, the United Kingdom and Australia, had an election which led to a change of government during the course of the study, with accompanying changes of policy being implemented by the newly constituted governments throughout 2010.

Because of this, primary sources of information tended to be more immediate but perhaps at times, less reliable forms of communication. These included press releases, copies of Ministerial speeches or letters which were considered newsworthy, news stories, copies of briefings, news reports on immigration websites and commentary by migration agents.

While some of these sources tended to be informal, they did provide insights into stakeholder viewpoints, and wherever possible, information has been verified before being included in this report.

In addition, there have been a number of updates to the information during the course of the study. As far as possible, these updates have been incorporated into the final document.

In relation to the information presented on the Australian immigration system and use of language testing, a number of DIAC officers were contacted but none was able to commit the time to an interview. In the case of one officer, participation was declined because the use of language tests was being reviewed and it was considered to be inappropriate to be involved in the study. No further information was forthcoming on this. As a result, information about DIAC's use of IELTS and language testing generally has been compiled from documents, news reports and websites, as well as third party input.

It should be noted that the information included in this study is not intended to constitute a comprehensive overview of visa classes and conditions in each of the four countries examined. Immigration classes and rules are not only extremely complex, but also fluid, and the information provided has been included as background only to the use of language assessment, the focus of this study.

3 OUTCOMES

3.1 Australia

Successive governments in Australia have viewed immigration as one of their most sensitive areas of policy. In the lead-up to the Australian election in August 2010, both major political parties focused on immigration (both legal and illegal) as an election issue. Initiatives in the area of immigration appeared to be aimed at reducing the number of people coming to Australia across the board, including full-fee paying students, skilled and unskilled migrants, refugees and so-called “boat people” (illegal political refugees who were transported by boat to Australia's more remote shores in an effort to circumvent immigration processes).

Immigration tends to be a vexed issue with the electorate, many of whom see it as a threat to their lifestyle and safety. Governments and economists, however, have long recognised the benefits of developing a multicultural society in Australia, acknowledging the fact that skilled and unskilled workers make a massive contribution to the prosperity of the country. Governments must, therefore, balance popular policy against the needs of the labour market and the country's economy, while maintaining the perception that they are protecting the country's borders.

In the report, “Integration Systems Compared 2010”, compiled by Andersson Elffers Felix (2010) on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment, Australia is described by Henk Snoeken, the Dutch Civic Integration Program Manager, as a “traditional immigration country” on the grounds that it has been officially dealing with multiculturalism since the early 1900s. The report points out that countries like Australia have lessons which can be learned by countries less experienced in forming integration policies. Language is one crucial aspect of this. Australia and other so-called “traditional immigration” countries are seen to be more selective than less experienced countries prior to accepting immigrants so that the needs of the country can be addressed in terms of labour needs (pp 7-8).

The report further points out that traditional immigration countries such as Australia focus their integration and support systems more on refugees than skilled migrants, particularly in relation to new arrivals finding employment and supporting themselves and their families once they are in the country.

Skilled migrants, on the other hand, tend to be selected on the basis of how well they will be able to survive financially and socially, and in accordance with the need that exists in-country for their specific skills or occupation. Language skills are a critical aspect of this. Full-fee paying international students are also expected to be able to support themselves during the period of their studies without undue pressure being placed on Australia's support services.

3.1.1 Significance of language assessment for immigration into Australia

A specific statement by DIAC concerning the value and significance of English language testing for migration purposes could not be located. As a general statement, English language assessment is viewed as an indication of the potential for a newcomer to integrate.

The Australian Government has a history of supporting the development of English language skills for migrants by providing up to 510 hours of free English language classes for those who do not have a functional level of English (Adult Migrant English Program). There are, however, two main sectors where pre-visa English language testing applies: skilled migration and international students.

An issues paper was produced at the request of the Rudd government in 2008 as part of an integrity review of the Temporary Skilled Worker Visa (457) (Deegan, 2008). This paper addressed concerns about the exploitation of migrant workers, salaries and English language levels for temporary skilled migrants. In the lead-up to the review, the number of approvals for this class of visa had increased from just over 30,000 in 1998 to approximately 110,000 in 2008.

At the basic level of skills, visa holders were required to have an IELTS General Training Module level of 4.5 overall (basic level of competence) unless their occupational level required higher levels of competence for registration purposes (eg doctors, nurses etc).

The review found that a basic level of English language was necessary to ensure that workers were able to:

- understand occupational health and safety practices and risks in their workplace
- discuss any concerns with authorities about welfare issues
- share skills with other workers
- participate and be effective in the workplace generally (p 11).

This review was clearly a response to negative concerns applying mainly to the workplace. It did not address community participation issues, although this is equally significant for successful integration.

Primary applicants for skilled migration visas who have not been educated in an English-speaking country are required to provide evidence that they are "proficient English speakers" by presenting an English language test outcome. Under Australian legislation, international students are able to apply for permanency under the General Skilled Migration (GSM) category, but success is contingent upon the Skilled Occupation List, which may change at any time.

In the international student sector, DIAC has divided the countries of the world into a set of Assessment Levels according to the level of "risk" they represent to Australia; risk of overstaying visas, or risk of non-compliance with the conditions of their visa, for example. Assessment Level 1 countries represent the least risk, and Level 4 countries represent a high level of risk; conditions of visa issue vary accordingly. Evidence of English language competency is required for some of the lower Assessment Levels for English language studies, or if students are enrolling in training programs or tertiary studies which require a minimum level of English.

In relation to skilled migration, in February 2010, several changes were announced by the Australian Government. These related to the abolition of the *Migration Occupation in Demand List* and the introduction of a new *Skilled Occupation List*. This negatively affected many international students whose study pathway had been selected with a specific occupation in mind so that it would provide a gateway to permanent residency.

3.1.2 Language levels required for Australia

The acceptable English language tests at the time of writing, according to published DIAC immigration information, were the IELTS Test and the Occupational English Test (OET).

Australia's Department of Immigration and Citizenship last revised its policies for Australia's General Skilled Migration program in December 2010, with the new rules to be applicable from July 2011. Two significant changes were: to increase the English language threshold for GSM visa applicants; and to reward GSM visa applicants who presented with high level English language proficiency. From July 2011, the threshold level was to be increased to an IELTS band score of 6.0 (competent) which would attract 0 points, 7.0 (proficient) which would attract 10 points and 8.0 (superior) for the maximum of 20 points towards the total points required for immigration to be approved.

Alternatively, applicants must have scored at least a B in each of the four components of the OET. The OET is designed specifically for health professionals and, while highly regarded by the health professions, it is less easily accessible than IELTS.

For the employer-sponsored visa, individuals must have passed IELTS with a band score of 5.0 in each macroskill.

Test documents must have been issued no more than two years prior to the application for a visa to be considered valid.

For some professions, a higher level or more professionally targeted assessment may be required, particularly under the sponsored migration scheme where applicants must have a skills assessment. Some examples of these are an Engineering Manager, whose skills would be assessed by Engineers Australia or the Australian Institute of Management, or a General Medical Practitioner, whose skills must be assessed by the relevant State/Territory or Federal Medical Board.

3.1.3 Alternative language assessment systems for Australia

The only alternative to IELTS at the time of writing was the Occupational English Test, as mentioned above. However, it appears that this was under review, although no information had been made available on the reasons for this or the process in place to assess alternatives.

3.2 New Zealand

New Zealand operates a Residence Program in which the number of available immigration places is reviewed each year. In 2008–9, between 45,000 and 50,000 places were available. Of these, approximately 60% were for business or skilled migrants, 30% for family reunion and 10% for humanitarian (<http://www.immigration.govt.nz/>). There was also demand for student visas which could lead to applications for permanent residency.

New Zealand has a system which actively encourages skilled migration in labour sectors where the country is experiencing a shortage. Applicants can apply for a work permit or for residency under a points-based system which includes a language assessment, with a total of at least 100 points required. The Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) is used by New Zealand to assess the level of skills of an applicant. Skilled migrants are given preference if they hold qualifications recognised by the New Zealand Government in its *List of Recognised Qualifications*, and have workplace experience in New Zealand.

Under the Skilled Migration Category, Immigration New Zealand requires people to have a reasonable standard of English to ensure they have the best opportunity to settle readily into work and life. Regulation changes introduced in 2008 removed the mandatory requirement to pre-purchase ESOL tuition, and introduced a requirement that immigration agents seek evidence of English language competency, which included a variety of criteria, rather than always requiring an IELTS Test statement.

Visas are also available for general work, investment, family re-unification and temporary study.

Criteria tend to fluctuate in accordance with trends in migrant numbers and changes in labour shortages. In addition, as New Zealand operates within the global market of English-speaking countries for both skilled migration and student visas, the number of visa applicants is affected, in some instances dramatically, by changes of government and policy amendments of its main competitors – Australia, the UK, Canada and the USA. As an example, New Zealand experienced very substantial growth in the number of visa applicants from India in 2010 as a direct result of the tightening of policy on student visa issue on the subcontinent by Australia and the UK.

3.2.1 Significance of language assessment for immigration into NZ

English language testing was first made mandatory for immigration purposes by the NZ Cabinet in 1994, and introduced with the new General Skills migration category in the following year. The IELTS Test was selected as the only appropriate test at that time because it was the only assessment system which tested all four macroskills.

While there have been policy changes since 1994, no alternatives have been ratified by the New Zealand Parliament.

Evidence of English language competency is now required for business and skilled migrant visa categories, working holiday-makers and investors. Skilled migrants are invited by NZ policy-makers to fill gaps in skills areas so that the country can develop its industries and services. Because of this, visa applicants are sought who are prepared to make a long-term contribution to the country. Those with both a good level of skills and English language competency are considered to be an asset to the country because they tend to assimilate more easily and are likely to make a more valuable contribution to society.

Fortnightly selections of *Expressions of Interest* from visa applicants are made on the basis of a points system which includes issues like whether or not the applicant has skills in the most needed categories, whether or not the applicant has a job offer and English language skills.

Student visa applicants are not required to provide evidence of English language competency, but their application is assessed on the basis of their competence to complete the course(s) for which they are applying. Educational institutions set minimum levels of English for entry to their courses, and so the assessment of language is seen as a risk mitigation process in that it precludes non-genuine students. Depending on their country of origin, many student visa applicants aim to remain in NZ as permanent residents after their studies are completed, and so their capability to complete their studies successfully and participate in society is dependent on being able to communicate on a variety of levels.

3.2.2 Language levels required for NZ

The Principal Applicant for a skilled migrant visa must have a minimum of 6.5 overall in the IELTS Test in either the General Training or the Academic Module, and the Test must have been taken within two years of the application being lodged. There is some scope for using alternative evidence but this is rare, according to immigration officials, and usually consists of evidence of at least 12 months of skilled employment in New Zealand at an earlier time, or a qualification in a course of study which was delivered in English.

A Non-Principal Applicant (eg spouse or child) requires an overall score of 5.0 in either the General Training or the Academic Module of IELTS. Alternatively, a range of other evidence, including a minimum of a C in the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) may be accepted. Advance purchase of a course in English may meet the requirements, but an IELTS Test score may still be required in order to avoid paying the maximum fee, which could be over NZ\$6500.

Under the Investor category, a main applicant requires IELTS scores of 5.0 in at least two macroskills at the most basic level ((NZ\$1 million), but the English language requirement reduces as the investment amount increases.

Under special programs such as the “Silver Fern” visa, which is designed to attract young skilled people to NZ for the purpose of seeking skilled jobs, the 6.5 IELTS requirement also applies.

New Zealand has Working Holiday visas under specially negotiated arrangements with 34 other countries. Until October 2010, applicants for these visas needed an IELTS score of 4.0 in order to qualify. This was, however, increased substantially from 4.0 to 5.5 from November 2010. The reasons for this change were, firstly, because it could be expected that young people with an IELTS level of 5.5 are likely to have a reasonably high level of education. Secondly, many more job opportunities could be made available to working holiday-makers if they had a higher communicative competence. Thirdly, a higher level of protection would apply to working holiday-makers if they had the skills to read and understand job contracts and other formal documents.

The latter two visa types operate on a quota system which tends to be filled very quickly.

3.2.3 Alternative language assessment systems for NZ

Generally speaking, alternatives to the IELTS are not accepted by Immigration New Zealand, although two were mentioned in immigration documents and by immigration officers interviewed. These were the Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE), in which a C pass was required, and the Occupational English Test (OET) which is healthcare related and may be accepted for nurses. This test is available at up to 30 locations worldwide and is offered approximately every two months, but not necessarily in all locations.

The IELTS Test is by far the most common language assessment accepted by Immigration New Zealand.

3.3 Canada

Canada has had a long history of operating a dual language policy, English and French being the two official languages of the country, and like Australia, it also has a variety of indigenous languages. In such a complex language environment, the country has had to focus on language skills in many areas of Canadian life. In the public domain, successive governments have had to deal with language issues as a matter of equity and accountability.

Immigration authorities consider language proficiency of the target society to be a major factor in assuring settlement success. Because of this, language policy for Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has been under continual review, with official policy on language assessment and testing frequently under the spotlight.

3.3.1 Significance of language assessment for immigration into Canada

The stated purpose of language testing for immigrants is to assist them to become established in Canadian society as full participants.

CIC has established a protocol for Third-Party Language Testing Agencies which includes a Panel of Language Experts on Third Party Language Testing, and a Policy Analyst and liaison officer to manage assessment policies. The Panel has set down the required characteristics of acceptable testing

instruments; they should have validity, reliability, integrity, security and availability. To be acceptable, testing systems must:

1. evaluate functional skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking
2. have comparable and consistent outcomes over a range of test-takers
3. maintain security standards in the organisation of the test, and have effective anti-fraud procedures in place
4. maintain a network of test centres so that applicants have easy access to the test (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, January 2009).

Canada's Federal Skilled Worker Program, like similar programs in the other three countries studied, operates under a system of points awards in which language proficiency is one area of consideration.

For the program known in Canada as the Canadian Experience Class (CEC), in which applicants apply for permanent residence from within Canada, provision of evidence of language proficiency is now mandatory. CEC applies to Temporary Foreign Workers or foreign students working in Canada with a Canadian credential. Permanent residency requirements include work experience in an area of labour need for Canada.

Before June 2010, under the two classes of immigration listed above, it was possible to demonstrate language competency with either an approved English language test score or a written submission by applicants intending to live or work in Canada. From 26 June 2010, however, policy required that a language test outcome be presented which had been assessed against the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB).

3.3.2 Language levels required for Canada

The only language assessment system which had been mapped to the Canadian Language Benchmarks at the time of writing was IELTS. An IELTS assessment had to be presented, gained in the previous 12 months, in the General Training Module. Depending on the occupational skill level required, this ranged from a minimum of 3.5 in Reading, 4.0 in Speaking and Writing and 4.5 in Listening, increasing to a range of 6.5 to 7.5 for more language intensive occupations.

Given the support and advice provided by the Panel of Language Experts on Third Party Language Testing, CIC did not consider that additional support was necessary from the IELTS administration.

3.3.3 Alternative language assessment systems for Canada

The structure of the language assessment system in Canada is such that stringent requirements need to be met for an assessment system to be judged as meeting the standards of the Panel of Language Experts on Third Party Language Testing. Citizenship and Immigration Canada have recognised the high-stakes nature of applications for citizenship and the potential for inequity in language assessment procedures in assessment systems which fall short in terms of accountability, validity, security and reliability.

The tests currently designated as appropriate are the Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program (CELPIP) for English language competency, run by Paragon Testing Enterprises Inc, University of British Columbia, and IELTS, General Training Module only. For both testing systems, the credential must be dated no more than one year prior to applying for immigration. Once the test outcome is achieved, it is assessed on its equivalency with the CLB.

While IELTS and CELPIP are the only tests now accepted, there is scope for any external testing agency to put a case to CIC for consideration against thorough and well-researched assessment criteria.

3.4 The United Kingdom

As with other countries, the requirements for immigration to the United Kingdom are constantly changing, and many of these changes are perceived by migrant advocacy groups to be designed to reduce access to the UK by narrowing the pathways to permanent residency. As part of the European Community (EC), the UK Government cannot legally language test citizens of the EC entering the country, and it is also bound by law to support the free movement of labour within the European Union (EU). The entry of eastern European countries to the EU has resulted in large numbers of skilled and unskilled workers seeking a new life in Britain, placing a heavy burden on both government and community support agencies and organisations.

Like Australia, there was an election in the UK in 2010, and in the lead-up, border protection was raised as a significant policy issue in the electorate. There was an increase in community concern about what was perceived as an influx of large numbers of immigrants, both legal and illegal. With pressure on community support facilities already being stretched because of free labour movement within the EU, the government needed to strike a balance. The new government set in motion policies to achieve the aim of reducing numbers of immigrants from key source countries, and this included changes in the English language assessment criteria.

Before 2010, migration pathways followed three traditional means of entering the country: by marriage (spouse or partner visas, which allowed unrestricted stay), by ancestry (having a grandparent born in the UK prior to March 1922 allowed the visa holder immediate entry to the UK for a period of five years without the need for a points-based skills assessment), and work.

In relation to the last of these, from 2008 visas were granted on a revised points-based system and were divided into Tiers 1 to 5. Applicants needed to amass a particular number of points which were conferred based on the desirability of the area of work in the context of the UK labour market, income level, educational background and English language competency. Table 1 sets out a basic explanation of the Tiers and the minimum language requirements in terms of the Council of Europe Framework of Reference (CEFR) for language competency.

TIER	CATEGORY OF MIGRANT	MINIMUM LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS
Tier 1	Highly skilled migrants	Minimum CEFR C1
	Investors	No minimum language requirement
Tier 2	Ministers of Religion	CEFR B2
	Skilled migrants not company sponsored but with job offer	The requirement is to have basic functional English, equivalent to CEFR A1
Tier 3	Temporary low skilled workers – not considered a route to settlement	No English language requirement other than what may be required by the industry or organisation operating the business
Tier 4	Students – temporary visa not intended as a route for settlement	CEFR B1 for students studying at a level below degree level
Tier 5	Youth mobility scheme or temporary workers	No specific language requirements but sponsors may set their own requirements.

(Source: <http://www.tier12345.co.uk>)

Table 1: The UK Tier system and minimum English language requirements

As the system now stands, applicants for indefinite leave to remain in the UK or for citizenship are required to take a test entitled “Life in the UK” (aimed at those with a CEFR of B1), or alternatively, applicants can enrol in an ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) course aimed at citizenship.

Announcements in the latter half of 2010 outlined government plans to introduce caps to immigration numbers in a number of categories. New requirements for international students were introduced in April 2010 in what was perceived by representatives of the international student industry as a strategy aimed at reducing the numbers of incoming students because of fears of overstay. Temporary caps were being introduced for skilled and highly skilled migrants, and it was intended that these caps would become permanent from April 2011, despite claims by industry that this was likely to damage major UK industries such as the automobile industry.

In addition, applicants for short visas entering the UK to study at pre-degree levels were capped, policy-makers claiming that these applicants tended to represent the greatest risk of overstay on visas.

According to the Home Secretary, the changes were aimed primarily at encouraging more entrepreneurs and investors to enter the UK, putting a stop to perceived abuse of the student visa route for entering the UK and severing the link between temporary immigration and permanent settlement (*workpermit.com*, 8 November 2010).

The most recent announcement on English language assessment concerned the introduction from 29 November 2010 of minimum language levels for spouses, civil partners, unmarried partners, same sex partners, fiances and proposed civil partners, a requirement which had never previously applied. The new policy required a minimum of A1 on the CEFR, which is generally described as basic survival level.

3.4.1 Significance of language assessment for immigration into the UK

In a briefing paper dated 25 October 2010, migrant advocacy bodies the Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association (ILPA) and the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) raised strong objections to the introduction of language standards for the spouse and partner category of migrants. It was pointed out that the new rules could affect up to 25,000 people, the majority from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Thailand. Many of these, the paper argued, may not be based in locations where so-called “approved test centres” were easily accessible, especially for those who lived in remote rural areas. It was further noted that many would not have the funds to take a test.

The Minister for Immigration at the time, Damian Green MP, in a letter in response to the ILPA and the JCWI (3 November 2010), justified the move by saying that this basic level of communication in English would support integration into UK society, help to remove cultural barriers, prevent exploitation, permit new migrants to derive greater benefits from the community as well as to contribute more, and reduce the costs to government of public support services like interpreting and translating.

3.4.2 Language levels required for the UK

Language assessment tools, including IELTS, are accepted as evidence of English language competence in the UK, based on their relationship to the CEFR. Language assessment tools accepted for the spouse and partner category had been adopted from the list of test and language assessment providers formerly in place for the Tier 2 Points Based System, with plans for a “full procurement exercise” to be conducted at a later date.

Minimum standards of English proficiency for IELTS varied according to the visa category. The minimum requirement for a Highly Skilled Migrant Visa (Tier 1) was 6.5, as an overall score on either the General Training Module or the Academic Module.

Tier 2, Skilled Migrants, required between 4.0 and 6.5 as a minimum, also as an overall score on either the General Training Module or the Academic Module. The same scale was introduced for spouses and partners under the new arrangements.

Students, who were Tier 4 applicants, required a minimum of 4.0 IELTS in all four macroskills in either the General Training Module or the Academic Module. Students were the only applicants who were required to gain a minimum in each skill rather than achieving an overall outcome.

3.4.3 Alternative language assessment systems for the UK

As pointed out above, at the time of writing there were many alternatives to the IELTS Test in the various visa application processes for the UK. The most common nomenclature for assessing English language proficiency appeared to be based on the CEFR. It is interesting to note that while the minimum English language requirement for Skilled Migrants and Spouse visas was A1 on the CEFR scale, the minimum IELTS Score was 4.0, which is assessed as equivalent to B1 by the British Council. A score of A1 is shown as equivalent to less than 3.0 IELTS.

The ILPA and acknowledged experts in linguistics and language testing took issue with the extensive range of course outcomes and tests which appeared to have been approved as being equivalent to A1 on the CEFR, with a list of no less than 35 alternatives. There had been some controversy about the equivalencies and the perceived lack of consultation with linguists in approving testing systems and setting the standards. The list is included in full in Appendix 4 of this report.

For Tier 1 applicants, 26 assessment systems and preparatory courses were accepted in addition to IELTS, and for Tier 4 applicants (Students) a slightly more limited range of 13 was accepted.

It is perhaps interesting to note that international tests such as IELTS, the internet-Based TOEFL and the Pearson Test of English were shown as having validity for only two years, whereas test outcomes from many of the UK-based organisations were considered to have no limit in validity. This could conceivably mean that a test outcome from one of the Cambridge ESOL suite of tests or an inhouse test offered by accepted UK institutions may have ongoing validity even if the outcome was gained many years ago, perhaps from a non-English speaking country, and without proven quality assurance processes in place. Given the reliability and validity auditing processes of the international tests, and the high levels of funding which they devote to maintaining test quality, validity and security, this would appear to be out of step with international best practice for English language assessment.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 Rationale and purpose of language testing

All four countries examined put the view that the main reasons for language testing of foreign nationals related to their ability to integrate into the community and the workplace, and to participate in community activities once in the country.

This is borne out by research. According to Boyd (2005), who examined the importance of language to the labour market in Canada, there would appear to be a correlation between level of language skills and the ability to be a full participant in the workplace. Boyd found that the employment rate of immigrants increased with their ability to speak English, and that job satisfaction was higher and hourly earnings increased with higher levels of language proficiency.

However, the frequent changes of policy which appear to be inherent in immigration management mean that the introduction of language testing for a particular category of migration, or manipulation of the required language levels, could result in either positive or negative growth in the number of immigrants entering a country. For example, raising the minimum language requirement for INZ Working Holiday visas may have positive outcomes in terms of the ability of holiday-makers to get jobs, and may increase the volume of language testing, but it also may reduce the number of successful applicants for these visas.

The UKBA, whose latest initiative was the introduction of language assessment for spouses and partners, made the point that in addition to assisting in integration, higher levels of English meant that immigrants required less support from community agencies than those with low levels, thus saving on funding of support services. Migrant advocacy groups put the view that this could also be a means of manipulating the number of successful applicants for visas in this category.

So, while language assessment can be used as a “blunt instrument” for the manipulation and control of numbers of successful immigrants, the ability of immigrants to contribute to the community and to workplace knowledge is a positive outcome of raised proficiency in language skills.

4.2 Reasons for selecting IELTS

The reasons for selecting IELTS and other assessment systems were not always clear as personnel in the immigration authorities had in some cases changed many times over since initial decisions on language testing had been made.

However, INZ indicated that at the time IELTS was ratified by the NZ Cabinet, it was the only international testing system which tested all four macroskills. Any changes to this would have to be approved by Cabinet and based on research and advice from government officials.

CIC had made the decision to accept IELTS based on an assessment of the essential criteria as specified by the Panel of Experts on Third Party Testing and ratified against the Canadian Language Benchmarks.

All immigration authorities specified minimum bandscales in the General Training Module of IELTS, or in either the General Training or Academic modules.

Given the high-stakes nature of language testing for immigration purposes, the security and validity of IELTS and the IELTS administration’s response to issues of fraud and other concerns of test users were raised by all users as an advantage of use of the assessment system.

4.3 Alternative English language assessment systems accepted

There was a substantial difference between the UK and the other three countries in terms of the language assessment systems that were officially accepted.

Australia, New Zealand and Canada all accepted either one or two assessment systems in addition to IELTS. In the case of Australia and New Zealand, the Occupational English Test was accepted as an alternative. This is a test targeting health professionals and, while generally regarded as an appropriate and reliable test, it is available in more limited locations than IELTS. Occasional alternatives were reportedly accepted by INZ, but this was rare.

Canada accepted the CELPIP as well as IELTS, but required that both tests be correlated with the Canadian Language Benchmarks rather than raw scores being presented.

The UK Border Agency, on the other hand, accepted up to 36 different test and assessment outcomes for Tier 2 Skilled Migrants and Spouses/Partners. In addition to IELTS, this included the Cambridge suite of tests. The most highly regarded of these are widely available through the British Council network and through in-country Secretariats, and testing procedures are highly regulated and tests secure and valid.

However, many of the others appeared to be credentials offered by in-country organisations, and constituted a somewhat confusing range of assessment types and language proficiency levels which may be difficult to monitor in terms of validity, reliability and security – all vitally important aspects of language assessment in such a high-stakes context.

Advice on acceptable language assessments systems was thought to be given by UK Civil Services (eg the Department of Education) and/or Cambridge University, with decisions made by the Minister.

In cases where there were insufficiently rigorous language testing or assessment criteria, independent employers or professional associations and registering bodies had traditionally taken matters into their own hands. For example, it is interesting to note that while the UK Border Agency listed up to 36 different test and assessment outcomes for skilled migrants at a range of levels and outcomes, a previous study into language assessment systems accepted by professional associations in the UK found that only two of 10 organisations involved in the study accepted any alternative to IELTS. The Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, for example, had established a minimum of 7.0 in IELTS in each of the four macroskills as its minimum language benchmark, with no other language assessment systems accepted. The General Optical Council in the UK similarly accepted only the IELTS Test (6.0-7.0) for entry to the College of Optometrists (Merrifield, 2009).

Recent testing policies, with the exception of the UK, required the test results to have been gained in the last 12 months to two years in order to be valid. In the case of Canada, test validity was for one year only. UK policy, however, required that international test scores like IELTS, the PTE and TOEFL be no more than two years old, but tests or assessments conducted by many of the in-country testing systems like the Cambridge suite of tests and local assessment providers had no specified limit on validity.

This raises the issue of second language attrition. This phenomenon has been well documented over the years, with one of the most basic reasons being lack of use (Weltens and Cohen, 1989, Ecke 2004). This is a phenomenon which is constantly observed by linguists and language teachers. Students of English who may have completed their course and sat for an English examination may lose skills over time if there is low frequency of use. Even in an English-speaking country individuals may lose English language skills over time if they spend the majority of their time in non-English speaking home and community environments, and in some circumstances, even in a non-English speaking workplace.

It is for this reason that most users of international testing systems place a limit on test validity of no more than two years so that test certificates are reliable and, more importantly, language proficiency is current.

4.4 Decision-making on language testing

Decision-making on language assessment and testing for immigration in New Zealand was done by department research and official advice to Cabinet.

In Canada, decision-making is devolved to a panel of experts in language testing convened specifically for the purpose of setting standards and assessing testing systems against those standards.

Decision-making processes are unknown for Australia and the UK.

4.5 Future plans for language testing

Language assessment will continue to be a major issue for immigration authorities. DIAC indicated that there was a review underway of the language assessment systems acceptable for immigration purposes, although no information was available on why this was taking place, the purpose of the review or when an outcome could be expected.

INZ has indicated that while IELTS is the only assessment system acceptable, this would not necessarily always be the case. If a quality alternative was put to Cabinet that was perceived to be in the interests of the authority and applicants for immigration, that decision could well change.

CIC now has a specialised structure for assessing language skills, and while there were only two assessment systems accepted at the time of writing, there was no reason why other tests could not be approved as long as they met all the criteria set down by the government and the expert panel.

The UK had a very broad range of assessment instruments and bodies whose assessments were accepted, and there was a suggestion that these would be reviewed at some stage in the future. There was no information available on the form the review would take, its aims and objectives or the expected outcomes. The timeframe for completing this was expected to be the end of 2010.

4.6 Support strategies and risk management

The IELTS support system would appear to constitute a major aspect of its risk management strategy. Of the four countries studied, NZ and Canada indicated that IELTS administration and field officers had been extremely proactive in addressing issues raised by the two countries.

In the case of New Zealand, one of the issues was identity fraud, particularly in countries like China and India. Strategies that had been put in place by IELTS administration were as follows:

- meetings between INZ staff and IELTS administration staff to discuss security options
- day of test photographs: these were reportedly time-consuming, particularly in China where there could be up to 300,000 tests conducted and 1000 test candidates in a single test, however, it meant that old or digitally altered photographs were eliminated
- hand-writing comparisons between completed test papers and new samples to identify anomalies
- oral interviews of suspect visa applicants by immigration staff.

Immigration New Zealand was working closely with the IELTS administration on this and the view was put that the support and proactive approach of IELTS administration was excellent.

IELTS was also reported to be reactive to feedback from CIC on fraud issues and CIC reported that frequent meetings took place between their language officers and IELTS administration staff and the British Council on any issues which arose.

5 CONCLUSION

In a global environment in which the mass movement of people across borders is increasing, immigration authorities need to be increasingly proactive in setting standards that are fair and equitable, but preserve standards of living and work. They need to temper this by being reactive and compassionate towards those who are fleeing threats to their safety and well-being.

Government responsibility to balance the needs of the nation with the need to admit overseas migrants and refugees is a complex and difficult one to manage. Language assessment is one means of controlling migration numbers, particularly skilled and semi-skilled workers, international students who are seen to constitute a risk of overstay, and family re-union. It is for this reason that policy changes are frequent and often include language assessment criteria.

Assessment of language proficiency is an extremely high-stakes industry, and the number of people who require it for the purpose of settling in a new land with new opportunities is growing. In an ever more competitive environment, it is incumbent on the IELTS administration to continue to be responsive to the needs of governments in relation to language testing.

IELTS currently has a very strong position in global English language testing. While there do not appear to be alternatives at this point which have a competitive market share to that of IELTS, governments of the countries involved in this study are putting in place processes so that other providers of language testing are able to make representations to them. It is critical, therefore, for IELTS to continue to be rigorous in managing risk, responding to issues and keeping lines of communication open.

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APPENDIX 1: QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS WITH MIGRATION BODIES AND ASSOCIATED STAKEHOLDERS

IELTS Research Project Interviews

Name

Organisation

Brief explanation of interviewee's position and/or involvement in immigration and/or language testing

.....

1. Introduction

- Explanation of the objectives of this study
- Reference to the significance of this study to IELTS Australia and Cambridge ESOL
- Brief background to the development and scope of use of IELTS

2. Guiding questions - IELTS

2.1 What is the purpose of the use of IELTS for immigration eligibility? (please provide details)

2.2 Which applicants are exempt from presenting a language proficiency level? Why?
 Do you think this is appropriate?

2.2 What levels of IELTS are required?

IELTS Module	Overall Band Score and/or Macroskill minimum score	Band Score required
General Training Module	Overall score	
	- Reading	
	- Writing	
	- Speaking	
	- Listening	
Academic Module	Overall score	
	- Reading	
	- Writing	
	- Speaking	
	- Listening	

2.3 IELTS assesses all skills at a single sitting, unlike some assessment systems in which candidates can present with the best results of each of the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) of two or three or more sittings. Is this appropriate to the use of IELTS for immigration purposes, in your view?

2.4 What other requirements are there for a person applying for immigration?

2.5 How many clients (approximately) will have their English language proficiency assessed in any one year?

2.6 Is this number increasing or decreasing?

2.7 How was the decision made on the appropriate threshold levels of IELTS for immigration purposes?

- 2.8 Who is responsible for making decisions on English language assessment levels for immigration?
- 2.9 Was any advice or support requested or received from IELTS Australia/Cambridge ESOL, or any other organisation, in making the decision on appropriate levels?
- 2.10 Has your decision on acceptable IELTS levels been reviewed?
- 2.10.1 If so,
- a. Why was it reviewed?
- b. What did the review process consist of?
- c. What was the outcome?
- 2.10.2 If not, is it planned to review it? Why or why not?
- 2.11 Are you aware of any gaps or inadequacies in the IELTS testing system?

3. Guiding questions – Alternative language assessment systems/strategies

- 3.1 What other language assessment systems/strategies are accepted? What are the levels accepted?

✓	TEST	LEVEL(S) REQUIRED
	Occupational English Test (OET)	
	Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Internet-based TOEFL (iB TOEFL)	
	Test of Spoken English (TSE)	
	Test of Written English (TWE)	
	Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC)	
	NAATI	
	International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR)	
	Cambridge Certificate of Advanced English (CAE)	
	Cambridge Certificate of Proficiency in English (CPE)	
	CEFR	
	Pearson Test	

Any others?

- 3.2 In your view, what are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Which assessment systems/strategies suit your organisation best and why?
- 3.3 Have candidates expressed a preference for a particular test? If so, which one and why?
- 3.4 Have you had any feedback about how the candidates perceive the IELTS test?

4. Guiding questions – Ongoing support

- 4.1 Did you receive any information or support from the IELTS administration when making the decision?
- 4.2 Have you had any follow-up briefing or support from IELTS administration?
- If yes, what support was given?
- If not, would it be useful to you? What form of support would be most useful?

5. Alternative language assessment systems

- 5.1 Will you continue to use the IELTS test as an English Language assessment instrument? Why or why not?
- 5.2 Will you continue to accept other language testing or assessment systems as equivalent to IELTS (eg iB TOEFL, TOEIC, the new Pearson assessment system, profession-specific assessment, ...)?

6. Research

- 6.1 Do you know of any research, articles or discussion papers that have been published focusing on English language competency or testing and assessment by professionals, academics, government or other relevant bodies? If so, please provide a copy or access details (name, author, publisher, year).

7. Do you have any further comments or issues you wish to raise?

Thank you for your time.

Glenys Merrifield, B Ed (TESOL), Dip TESOL, M Ed Administration Tel: 61 2 9438 2428 Mob: +61 (0)407 095 913 Skype: glenys.merrifield

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Mr Simon Spiers
Immigration Manager – Risk
Immigration New Zealand
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Ms Chona Iturralde
Research Manager
NHQ - Research and Evaluation
Citizenship and Immigration Canada
OTTAWA, CANADA

Ms Gail Devlin
Policy Analyst
Permanent Resident Policy and Program Division (SSE)
Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)
OTTAWA, CANADA

Ms Nicola Smith
Head of Permanent Migration Team
Immigration Policy
UK Border Agency
WESTMINSTER, LONDON

Ms Hina Majid
Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
LONDON

APPENDIX 3: SUMMARY OF OUTCOMES

	Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australia (DIAC)	Immigration New Zealand (INZ)	Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)	UK Border Agency (UKBA)
Purpose of the use of language assessment for immigration	Integration Skilled workers – OH&S knowledge and concerns, ability to take concerns to authorities, ability to contribute to Australian workplace	Better assimilation with the NZ community Make contribution to NZ as full participant in NZ society Successfully complete course of study	Assists immigrants to become economically established Assists immigrants to participate in Canadian society	Most recent rationale for introducing Eng language criteria for spouse/partner visas is to support integration, remove cultural barriers, broaden opportunities, prevent exploitation, reduce public service costs eg interpreting and translating. Integration of adults supports integration of children.
Applicants requiring English language assessment	Skilled Workers International Students Employer Sponsored Workers	Non-native speakers Business and skilled migrants Students enrolled in programs which require a minimum level of English Investors with Investment funds of \$NZ5 million or less	Federal Skilled Worker Program Applicants - CIC awards points for language proficiency Canadian Experience Class (CEC) (applying from within Canada) need defined proficiency level	Tier 1 Highly Skilled Migrants Tier 2 Ministers of Religion Tier 2 Skilled Migrants Tier 4 Students studying below degree level Spouses and partners
Applicants not requiring English language assessment	Family reunion	Partners, spouses, children of primary applicants Humanitarian Native speakers or English language educated Employed in English speaking context Investors with over \$NZ5 million	Family Class – spouses, dependent children, parents & grandparents Protected persons – refugees	Tier 1 Investors Tier 2 Inter-company transfers Tier 4 Govt sponsored students Tier 4 Students at degree level or above – In accordance with entry level of course Tier 4 Degree students with pre-sessional English course Tier 5 Temp workers People from English speaking countries or those educated in English
Minimum IELTS levels		Either GT OR Academic	Test scores to be correlated to Canadian Language Benchmarks to ensure consistency between test scores	Either GT OR Academic
General Training Module Overall score	Employer sponsored 5.0 General Skilled Migration 6.0 to 8.0 Students – in accordance with course of study	Principal Applicant Skilled Migrants 6.5 Non-Principal applicant 5.0 Working Holiday 5.5	Federal Skilled Worker (FSW)	4.0 - 6.5 Either GT OR Academic
GT Reading	N/A	N/A	FSW Min 3.5	N/A
GT Writing	N/A	N/A	FSW Min 4.0	N/A
GT Speaking	N/A	N/A	FSW Min 4.0	N/A
GT Listening	N/A	N/A	FSW Min 4.0	N/A

	Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australia (DIAC)	Immigration New Zealand (INZ)	Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)	UK Border Agency (UKBA)
Academic Module Overall	Employer sponsored 5.0 General Skilled Migration 6.0 to 8.0 Students – in accordance with course of study	Principal Applicant Skilled Migrants 6.5 Non-Principal applicant 5.0 Working Holiday 5.5	N/A	Either GT OR Academic 4.0 - 6.5 Either GT OR Academic
AM Reading	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
AM Writing	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
AM Speaking	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
AM Listening	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
One sitting or aggregate of test sittings?	One sitting, within the previous two years	One sitting – it is an overall score	One sitting considered more secure and less vulnerable to fraud. Should be within previous 12 months.	One sitting, within the previous two years
Strengths of IELTS Test	Unknown	Reliability, access to online verification, proactive approach to test fraud and identity verification	Responsive to requests for change Meets all requirements set by Panel of Experts	Not aware of any particular strengths that set IELTS apart.
Any gaps or inadequacies in IELTS test	Unknown	In some parts of the world eg India and China, identity fraud of test-takers is a big problem	No	None raised
Alternative language systems/ strategies accepted				List of acceptable language assessment systems is extensive. See Appendix 4 for ALL language assessment systems accepted by UKBA
CEFR	X	X	X	CEFR and ESOL specific framework are basis of language assessment across the UK Immigration system
TOEFL	X	X	X	X
iB TOEFL	X	May be presented occasionally, but this would be unusual	X	Equip CEFR B1-B2 55-120 Two years test validity
Pearson Test of English (Academic)	X	X	X	Equip CEFR A2-C1 30-76 Two years test validity
CELP	X	X	Matched to Canadian Language Benchmarks	X
TWE/TSE	X	X	X	X
TOEIC	X	X	X	Equip CEFR A1-C1 L & R 120-875 W & Sp 80-360

	Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australia (DIAC)	Immigration New Zealand (INZ)	Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)	UK Border Agency (UKBA)
Occupational English Test (OET)	Accepted for Health Professionals	May be accepted for Nurses	X	X
International Legal English Certificate	X	X	X	Equiv CEFR B2-C1 Weak - pass No expiry
International Certificate in Financial English	X	X	X	Equiv CEFR B2-C1 Weak - pass No expiry
Business English Certificate Vantage	X	X	X	B2 Weak- Grade C No expiry
Business English Certificate Higher	X	X	X	C1 Weak- Grade C No expiry
Business English Certificate Preliminary	X	X	X	B1 Borderline – Pass No expiry
Certificate in Advanced English	X	X	X	C1 Weak to Grade C No expiry
Certificate of Proficiency in English	X	Minimum C for Non-Principal applicants	X	C2 Weak to Grade C No expiry
First Certificate in English	X	X	X	B2 Weak to Grade C No expiry
Preliminary English Test	X	X	X	B1 Weak to Grade C No expiry
Has the decision on IELTS levels been reviewed?	Unknown. Language testing generally up for review at time of writing	Working Holiday visa - lifted from 4.0 to 5.5 Other policy reviews conducted from time to time	Reviewed every three years when test authorities must re-submit details for approval	Unknown
How/why was it reviewed?	Unknown	Broader job availability Better protection eg reading contracts of work	Last review result of changes to IELTS Reading and Writing tasks in response to requests by Aust, NZ, UK, Canada Immi	Unknown
What was outcome?	Unknown	Increased to 5.5 All reviews have resulted in same or higher levels	Revised tasks for Reading and Writing to better reflect needs of immigration	Unknown
Are there plans to review it?	Apparently	Not at this stage	Every three years as policy dictates	There are plans to review and revise all the language assessment tools now accepted by UKBA.
Number assessed annually	Unknown	India 9000 (90% students) China 5000	35,000-40,000	Unknown
Trend in numbers	Unknown	Increasing but dependent on policy of main competitors in Migration and Student Visa markets	Increasing as a result of introduction of mandatory language testing in June 2010	Changes made recently to reduce numbers of migrants and students, which would reduce numbers being assessed

	Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australia (DIAC)	Immigration New Zealand (INZ)	Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)	UK Border Agency (UKBA)
How was decision on threshold levels made?	Unknown	Consultation with officials, research nationally and internationally	Panel of experts on testing for immigration purposes in Canada	On advice of civil services, eg Dept of Education, or Cambridge Uni
Who was responsible for making decision?	Unknown	NZ Cabinet	As above, endorsed by Minister of Citizenship & Immigration	The Minister
Was advice or support requested or received?	Unknown	Support is available from the British Council and IELTS Australia	No, decision made by Panel and stakeholders	Yes
Assessment systems/ strategies which suit your organisation best	Unknown	IELTS	CELPPIP and IELTS	Big testing networks, or local education providers for onshore applicants
Candidate preferred test(s)	Unknown	IELTS is only option	IELTS because of its availability	Unknown
Feedback from candidates on IELTS?	Unknown	Only occasional – related to access to test in China, India, Africa	IELTS is easily accessible	Unknown
Follow-up briefing or support sought from IELTS admin?	Unknown	In countries where fraud is problem	Not required.	Unknown. Review process will determine this
Would it be useful?	Unknown	Very positive relationship – it is useful	No, the Panel provides any support needed	It may be.
Will you continue to use the IELTS?	Unknown	Yes	There is not reason not to at this stage	Unknown – review process with determine this
Are you aware of the verification service?	Unknown	Yes – it is one of the major strengths of the IELTS Test and an excellent selling point	Yes	Yes
Any further comments or issues?	Unknown	No	No	No

APPENDIX 4: UK BORDER AGENCY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTS ACCEPTED AND MINIMUM STANDARDS – TIERS 1, 2, 4 AND SPOUSES/PARTNERS

(CEFR levels apparently assessed as equivalents are shown in some cases)

	Tier 1 Highly Skilled Migrants	Tier 2 Skilled Migrants Ministers of religion	Tier 4 Students	Spouses and partners
Minimum IELTS levels				
General Training Module Overall score	6.5	4.0-6.5 B1-C1	4.0	4.0-6.5 B1-C1
GT Reading			4.0	
GT Writing			4.0	
GT Speaking			4.0	
GT Listening			4.0	
Academic Module Overall	6.5	4.0-6.5 B1-C1	4.0	4.0-6.5 B1-C1
Academic Mod Reading			4.0	
AM Writing			4.0	
AM Speaking			4.0	
AM Listening			4.0	
CEFR	C1-C2	A1-C2	B1 – C2	A1-C2
TOEFL				
iB TOEFL	110-120	87 B2	L 13 R 6 W 17 Sp 19 (55) B1	87 B2
Pearson Test of English	PTE Level 4- 5 C1-C2	Levels A1-5 A1-C2	X	Levels A1-5 A1-C2
Pearson Test of English (Academic)	76 C1	Overall score 30-59 A2-B2	L 43 R 43 W 43 Sp 43 B1	Overall score 30-59 A2-B2
TSE	X	X	X	X
TWE	X		X	X
TOEIC	L & R 875 W & Sp 360	L & R 120-875 W & Sp 80-360 A1-C1	X	L & R 120-875 W & Sp 80-360 A1-C1
Occupational English Test (OET)	X	X	X	X
International Legal English Certificate	Pass C1	Pass B2-C1	L R W Sp - Weak B2	Pass B2-C1
International Certificate in Financial English	Pass C1	Pass B2-C1	L R W Sp – Weak B2	Pass B2-C1
ESOL for Work	X	NQF Levels 3-1 B1-B2	X	NQF Levels 3-1 B1-B2
Business English Certificate Vantage	X	Grade C B2	L R W Sp - Weak B2	Grade C B2
Business English Certificate Higher	Grade C	Grade C C1	L R W Sp - Weak C1	Grade C C1
Business English Certificate Preliminary	X	Pass B1	L R W Sp – Borderline B1	Pass B1
Certificate in Advanced English	Grade C	Grade C C1	L R W Sp – Weak C1	Grade C C1
Certificate of Proficiency in English	Grade C	Grade C C2	L R W Sp – Weak C2	Grade C C2
First Certificate in English	X	Grade C B2	L R W Sp – Weak B2	Grade C B2
Preliminary English Test	X	Pass B1	L R W Sp – Borderline B1	Pass B1

	Tier 1 Highly Skilled Migrants	Tier 2 Skilled Migrants Ministers of religion	Tier 4 Students	Spouses and partners
Key English Test	X	Pass A2	X	Pass A2
ESOL Skills for Life	X	Pass at each level A1-C1	Entry Level 3 L R W Sp – Borderline B1	Pass at each level A1-C1
Points Based English Test	65%	65% C1	X	65% A1-B2 Pass C1
Ascentis Certificate 1-3 in ESOL	Cert 2-3 Pass C1-C2	Cert 1-3 Pass A1-C2	X	Cert 1-3 Pass A1-C2
Global Test of English Communication	L 200 R 200 W 200 Sp 200 C1	L 200 R 200 W 200 Sp 200 C1	X	L 60-200 R 60-200 W 70-200 Sp 80-200 A1-C1
Test in English for International Students	80	40-80 A1-C1	X	40-80 A1-C1
International ESOL Diploma	Expert	Preliminary – Expert A1-C1	X	Preliminary – Expert A1-C1
Certificate in English Language Test	50% C2	50% at each level A1-C2	X	50% at each level A1-C2
ESOL Skills for Life (Edxel)	Pass C1	Pass at each level A1-C1	X	Pass at each level A1-C1
English for Business Level 4 (IH)	50%	Pass A1	X	Prelim- Level 4 L 50% R 50% W 50% Sp 50% A1-C1
EDI Certificate in ESOL	50%	L 50% R 50% W 50% Sp 50% B2-C1	X	L 50% R 50% W 50% Sp 50% each level A1-C1
English Language Skills (EDI)	X	L 119-230 R 107- 212 W1 48-77 W2 2-5 Sp Novice high – Adv high A1-C1	X	L 119-230 R 107-212 W1 48-77 W2 2-5 Sp Novice high – Adv high A1-C1
EMD International English Language Assessment	50% C1	50% at each level A1-C1	X	50% at each level A1-C1
LIMT English Language Test	120-140 C1-C2	40-140+ A1-C2	X	40-140+ A1-C2
M-R English Language Testing System	85% C1	55-85% A2-C1	X	55-85% A2-C1
SQA National Qualifications in ESOL	Higher C1	Access 2-3, Interm, Higher A1-C1	X	Access 2-3, Interm, Higher A1-C1
EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency (Japan)	Grade 1	Grade 3-Grade 1 A1-C1	X	Grade 3-Grade 1 A1-C1
Integrated Skills in English (Trinity)	Pass C1-C2	Pass at each level A1-C2	X	Pass at each level A1-C2
University of Bath English Language Test	3.5	1.0-3. A1-C1	X	1.0-3.5 A1-C1
Business Language Testing Service (BULATS)	C1-C2	A1-C2	X	A1-C2
Elementary English Test (LSI)	X	Pass A1	X	Pass A1

SOURCE: UK Border Agency, <http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/>. Accessed November 2010

APPENDIX 5: ACRONYMS

CAE	Certificate in Advanced English (Cambridge ESOL)
CEC	Canadian Experience Class
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
CELPIP	Canadian English Language Proficiency Index Program
CIC	Citizenship and Immigration Canada
CLB	Canadian Language Benchmarks
CPE	Certificate of Proficiency in English (Cambridge ESOL)
DIAC	Department of Immigration and Citizenship
EC	European Community
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
ETS	Educational Testing Service
EU	European Union
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
FCE	First Certificate in English (Cambridge ESOL)
FSWP	Federal Skilled Worker Program (Canada)
GSM	General Skilled Migration (Australia)
iB TOEFL	Internet-Based Test of English as a Foreign Language
ILPA	Immigration Law Practitioners' Association (UK)
INZ	Immigration New Zealand
JCWI	Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (UK)
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication
TSE	Test of Spoken English
TWE	Test of Written English
UKBA	United Kingdom Border Agency