

Part 3 The hidden risks of inadequate language skill: how ELP policies protect students

The more accurately an assessment reflects realistic uses of language in higher education, the more clarity students will have about their current language proficiency and their ability to be successful in an English course of study. As Gulnaz Kordanova, graduate student at Harvard University and Founder of Connect-Ed candidly expressed:

“I scored 5.5 in IELTS and obviously I didn’t get into the school. Although it was in Kazakhstan, it was fully in English. However, it was a good thing that I didn’t make it to the school at that time because just knowing what my language proficiency was at that time, I don’t think I would have succeeded if I got into the school with that score.” (Gulnaz Kordanova, 2024 PIE Live North America)

International education demands significant commitment, including the determination to develop English language skills for successful communication in both academic and social settings. Understanding the relationship between language proficiency and a student's success is key for institutions, as inaccurate English proficiency assessment admission scores could lead to a mismatch between student abilities and institutional expectations.

This can be a significant hidden barrier to success if students' expectations of the language needed to be successful on your campus is not clearly represented by your English language proficiency scores. Scores that are too low could drive students to dedicate less time to improving their proficiency prior to enrollment, which can lead to significant challenges once students arrive.

Case study: **Maria's story**

Maria, a capable international student, had her sights set on a U.S. engineering degree. She considered the risks, knowing her English proficiency needed to improve. Encouraged by the belief she could quickly improve her English once she was on campus, Maria chose to take an assessment that was affordable and supposedly, easier. She was thrilled to get the score she needed to meet the admissions requirements of the school that was her top pick. A few days after her courses began, she quickly found herself struggling to keep up, which led to poor academic performance and social isolation.

The language barrier extended beyond the classroom, impacting Maria's ability to form meaningful connections with her peers and professors. She felt like an outsider, unable to fully participate in the vibrant campus life she had envisioned. The additional tutoring and language support she sought were expensive and time-consuming, further hindering her academic progress.

The financial strain of additional language support, coupled with the emotional toll of feeling lost and alone in a new country, ultimately forced her to abandon her dream of a U.S. education. Maria's experience serves as a cautionary tale, emphasizing the importance of choosing a reputable English language assessment that accurately reflects the language demands of academic programs.

When it comes to learning English, there are few shortcuts. Research indicates that several factors influence how long the English language learning process takes, including the student's native language, the intensity and duration of their study, the learning environment, and their motivation (Benigno, de Jong, & Van Moere, 2017; Cambridge University Press, 2018; Kang et al, 2023).

While there may not be shortcuts in language learning, investing in high-quality assessments, such as IELTS, can accelerate students' progress and equip them with skills that extend beyond language proficiency, fostering academic success. IELTS scores and subscores offer valuable insights into a student's language capabilities, allowing you to accurately assess applicants' readiness for the academic rigors of your institution.

By understanding applicants' strengths and weaknesses in each skill area, you can set them and campus partners on a path toward student success and retention from day one. This data-driven approach not only improves student outcomes but also enhances your institution's reputation for fostering a supportive and successful learning environment.

Case study: **uncover more insight**

What are the potential risks and rewards for international students pursuing academic programs in countries where the primary language of instruction may not be their first language?

In what ways can admissions mitigate the financial implications for international students who require additional supports to meet the language demands of the academic programs in a new country?

Skill	IELTS Preparation Impact	Application in Academic/Life Contexts
Listening	Understanding diverse accents Comprehending complex narratives	International programs, global studies, multicultural student groups Research seminars, lecture comprehension, peer reviews
Reading	Analyzing and synthesizing information	Academic research, literature review, critical analysis
Writing	Argument structuring, clarity in expression Practice in descriptive writing	Thesis writing, research proposals, academic publishing Creative writing courses, marketing and communications
Speaking	Fluency and interactive communication Organizing thoughts for presentation	Classroom discussions, conference presentations, networking Graduate TA roles, academic symposiums, group projects

Figure 1: How IELTS preparation benefits learners' development of academic and career skills (Green, 2007)

Intensity is a significant factor to achieve this progress, where students dedicate up to five hours a day, for 10-12 weeks at a time, to move their language skills to new levels. The focus often pays dividends in the development of all language skills, and can be especially effective in the development of productive communication skills—speaking and writing—areas essential for academic success and future careers (Allen, 2017).

The commitment to learning, the intensity of study, and the skills students will build ensure they are ready for the future challenges your institution has to offer.



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