Test Preparation: Does It Enhance Test Performance And English Language Proficiency?

This SSHRC Partnership Development Grant (SSHRC PDG), in potential partnership with the four largest international English language testing agencies, examines the effects of test preparation on test performance and English language proficiency among test-takers whose predominant language is not English. With the trend towards globalization, immigration, and internationalization of university campuses around the world, language tests are utilized extensively as powerful decision-making tools. Inferences drawn by decision-makers about test-takers' language abilities based on these test scores result in high-stakes decisions such as university admission, program placement, graduation, and immigration to English-speaking countries like Canada.

Previous research has demonstrated that teachers and students tend to tailor their instructional practices and language learning to reflect a test's demands when the decisions made based on the score is of consequence to them. One common practice is test preparation. The higher the stakes of the test, the stronger the urge to engage in specific test preparation practices that aim to enhance test performance. Many stakeholders implicitly believe that such practices also enhance language proficiency. What has not been researched, though, is whether and to what extent test preparation enhances test performance, as shown by an increase in test scores, and/or enhances test-takers' proficiency to communicate in English. Furthermore, previous research has been conducted solely from the perspective of test users without input from test designers. The proposed study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by providing empirical evidence on the predominant phenomenon of test preparation in partnership with four testing agencies, i.e., the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Pearson Test of English (PTE), and the College English Test (CET). We cannot fully evaluate the validity of inferences drawn from performance on these high-stakes tests or the accuracy of decisions made based on test scores without addressing this gap. This partnership development grant is therefore built on two distinct features: stakeholder involvement of test designers and test users, and international collaboration to provide training opportunities.

Due to the complexity of test preparation and the intricacy of partnership collaboration, the proposed study will be conducted over a three-year period using a sequential exploratory mixed method design. Data will be collected in Canada and internationally from international and immigrant students prior to and after they start their academic studies. **Year One** of the study will focus on understanding the nature and extent of test preparation by collecting baseline data on test preparation practices. The contexts of the study will be three test preparation centers – one in Toronto, Canada, one in Beijing, China, and one in Tehran, Iran. **Year Two** will be of an experimental design to empirically examine the effects of test preparation on test performance and English language proficiency. Four sets of experiments, with specific test preparation for each of the four tests under study, will be conducted: the IELTS in Iran, and the TOEFL, PTE, and CET in China. **Year Three** will focus on exploring the relationships between the obtained test scores and students' actual English language proficiency within the context of students' academic studies at one Canadian university and one Australian university.

The findings of the three-year study will provide both test-designers and test users with empirical evidence regarding the validity of these test scores. Erring in decisions of selection and access on the basis of inaccurate or improper inferences drawn from test scores will be costly, ultimately undermining knowledge transfer potential and threatening social, educational, and economic development in Canada.