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## Teachers' English communication skills: Using IELTS to measure competence of graduates from a Singaporean teacher education program

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## **Teachers' English Communication Skills: Using IELTS to Measure Competence of Graduating Teachers from a Singaporean Teacher Education Programme**

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*Abstract: Possessing strong communication skills is essential in contributing to effective teaching. This paper investigates graduating student teachers' English language proficiency, as measured by IELTS tests scores, of graduating EL student teachers. The paper considers what teachers need to know about the English language given that English has been the medium of instruction (MoI) for Singapore schools since 1987. Given such a context, English language proficiency is an important consideration in the preparation of pre-service teachers in Singapore. Implications for additional training and preparation in language skills are also proposed.*

### **Introduction**

Effective communication skills are a critical component of teaching. If there is a mismatch between what is conveyed and what was intended to be conveyed, then even the best teaching decisions can bring out ineffective teaching outcomes. Barriers to effective communication include lack of empathetic listening and inadequate analysis of purpose, audience and context (Pelly, Tay & Zhang, 2009). In order to successfully convey their message, educators must foresee potential problems and try as far as possible to avoid them in their classroom interactions. It is important to recognize the significance of language and effective communication in the teaching and learning process. This is because teachers who recognise and understand this role can leverage on strong skills to bring about the best possible student learning outcomes.

In Singapore, English has been the medium of instruction (MoI) since 1987 (Chew, 1996). As a result, all teachers, except those who teach Mandarin, Malay and Tamil as a second language, are expected to deliver their lessons in English and to use the language to engage their students in the learning of their respective subject matter disciplines. Considering that being highly proficient in the English language is an important criterion for teaching in English, it is important to ascertain whether graduating student teachers from Singapore's sole teacher education institute possess the basic proficiency and competence necessary for communicating effectively in instructional settings. There has to be a minimum threshold level of competence and proficiency in the English language in order for them to

perform a range of spoken and written tasks in the professional setting of their work as teachers which can include communicating with their students, parents, colleagues, senior school personnel and other key stakeholders in the education profession. Making the best decision about the selection of teacher applicants is critical in building a quality teaching force, and having reliable information about an applicant's English language proficiency is an important part of that process. Currently, the Entrance Proficiency Test (EPT) is one of the entry requirements for admission to the National Institute of Education (NIE), Singapore. The localized English EPT, used since 1999, provides a threshold of proficiency in English for teacher candidates applying to teach English medium subjects. This 'gatekeeper' of minimal English standards is not a validated test instrument nor has it ever been internationally benchmarked. It is important for the EPT to be evaluated against other globally recognized tests of English language proficiency tests as international students are also admitted into teacher education programmes. Secondly, it is important to ascertain our student teachers' proficiency levels as measured by recognized English language tests.

The EPT comprises of both an oral and written paper. The oral component is made up of two parts; a read aloud passage and a talk on a given topic. The written paper consists of a listening comprehension section and another section that focuses on grammar, vocabulary and language in context. The changing profiles of student teacher entrants into the pre-service programmes in terms of their academic and professional backgrounds requires the consideration of a test that is able to accurately profile their language ability. Meanwhile, the structure of the EPT has remained relatively unchanged over the past 10 years. It is thus timely and critical that NIE explores alternative proficiency tests that can also help propel NIE practices to be recognized internationally.

This paper is based on a research study, commissioned by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, to profile the language skills of English language teachers. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has been selected because it has a high reputation as an internationally accredited test of language proficiency with a strong track record for language profiling purposes (Taylor & Jones, 2006). IELTS is said to measure "the language ability of candidates who intend to study or work where English is used as the language of communication" (IELTS, 2003).

## Review of Literature

The important role of communicative competence and language proficiency in language teaching has been the subject of study for many years (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia, 2008; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1995; McGroarty, 1984; Richards, 2010). According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence refers to a language user or teacher's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology and phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. Celce-Murcia (2008, pp. 46-50) proposed a revised model that includes:

- Sociocultural competence: the speaker's pragmatic knowledge, i.e. how to express message appropriately within the overall social and cultural context of communication;
- Discourse competence: the selection, sequencing, and arrangement of words, structures, and utterances to achieve a unified spoken message;
- Linguistic competence: including four types of knowledge: phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactic;
- Formulaic competence: the fixed and prefabricated chunks of language that speakers use to heavily in everyday interactions, e.g. routines (like *of course*, *How do you do?*), collocations, idioms);

- Interactional competence: including actional competence (e.g. apologizing, complaining, and expressing hopes), conversational competence (e.g. how to interrupt, how to backchannel) and nonverbal/paralinguistic competence (e.g. nonverbal turn-taking signals and affect markers);
- Strategic competence: learning or communication strategies such as cognitive and metacognitive strategies and self-monitoring).

While this model is comprehensive and accurate and, “suggests a number of principles for the design and implementation of language courses that aim at giving learners the knowledge and skills they need to be linguistically and culturally competent in a second or foreign language” (Celce-Murcia, 2008, p. 51), it is not without limitations. First, these six competencies may be an ideal knowledge base for competent teachers, however, in reality, it may hardly be achievable for most teachers, or may take the accumulation of many years of experience.

Second, the model is static rather than dynamic (Celce-Murcia, 2008). The application of the model, therefore, should be relative rather than absolute. In other words, some of the competencies may be deemed obligatory while others periphery, depending on different contexts. As McGroarty (1984) states, communicative competence can have different conceptualisations largely dependent on who the target learners are and on the specific contextual pedagogical objectives.

It is important to point out that in the case of Singapore where English is the MoI, the pedagogical context differs from countries where English is taught as a foreign language. When English is the MoI, not only is it essential for teachers to help their learners to achieve mastery of specific linguistic skills such as reading, writing, listening and speaking (Arkoudis, 2003; Uys, van der Walt, van der Berg & Botha, 2007), it is the role of all teachers to be able to promote effective literacy skills across the entire curriculum regardless of the content or discipline area that they are specifically teaching (Goodwyn & Findlay, 2003; Uys et al., 2007). Teachers of disciplines other than the English language must also be able to use English to effectively deliver content knowledge to their students (Walker & Tedick, 2000; Othman & Mohd Saat, 2009). They therefore need to be highly proficient in the English language themselves in order to deliver their specialised content area in English (Othman & Mohd Saat, 2009). As a result, even if a teacher is not being trained to teach the English Language as a curriculum subject, he or she must be able to impart content knowledge effectively using English.

Richards (2010, p. 103, as cited in Ellis, Chong & Choy 2013, p. 12-13) lists the basic linguistic competencies and tasks required of teachers who are using English as the MoI i.e. “to comprehend texts accurately, to be good language models, to maintain constant and fluent use of the target language in the classroom, to give explanations and instructions in the target language, to provide examples of words and grammatical structures and give accurate explanations (e.g. of vocabulary and language points), to use language appropriate for classroom usage, to select appropriate target-language resources, to be able to effectively monitor one’s own speech and writing accurately, to give correct feedback on learner language, to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty and to provide language-enrichment experiences for learners.”

It is important to ensure that student teachers are able to carry out the specific linguistic tasks above especially when they are teaching in contexts where English is the MoI. To achieve these highly demanding tasks, pre-service and in-service teachers need to have a level of English proficiency to be able to teach effectively (Richards, 2010). A teacher who has not reached this level will be more dependent on existing teaching resources (e.g. textbooks or PowerPoint slides) and be less able to create their own innovative pedagogies

(Medgyes, 2001). Al-Ansari (2000) and Short (2002) claim that learners' have a higher probability of mastering their academic disciplines if subject teachers, not just English language teachers, have the language proficiency that helps them to consciously promote the development of functional language skills in the subject content classrooms.

The communicative competence models proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Celce-Murcia (2008) as well as the language-specific competencies proposed by Richards (2010) each has its applicability to both English language teaching and learning of other subjects in English in Singapore, as well as a subject of study in schools (MOE, 2010). This means that teachers who do not teach English as a curriculum subject are still assumed to be adequately proficient in English to ensure effective teaching and learning. Given such a context, English language proficiency is an important consideration in the preparation of pre-service teachers in Singapore. There is, however, a paucity of published research done on how and to what extent pre-service teachers at NIE receive such training.

Currently, student teachers across all pre-service programmes are required to take a core course on "Communication Skills for Teachers" (CST) under the area of study entitled "Language Enhancement and Academic Discourse Skills (LEADS)" (PGDE Handbook, 2010-2011, p. 64). The course aims to provide student teachers with the oral and written skills necessary for effective communication as teachers in the classroom and in their professional interaction with colleagues, parents and the general public. It also aims to familiarize student teachers with the use of a pronunciation dictionary and online resources to help them resolve pronunciation and word stress difficulties. Student teachers learn the importance of considering the purpose, audience and context when communicating and how to communicate effectively to promote student learning (PGDE Handbook, 2010-2011, p. 64).

To strengthen student teachers' English language proficiency and upon the recommendation of the Singapore Ministry of Education (MOE), NIE also offers a programme titled 'English Language Content Enhancement (ELCE)' to Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) student teachers. ELCE, offered for all graduate teachers in the PGDE Program (Primary and Secondary) and the second year of teaching, includes three courses, namely Language Studies for Teachers, Pedagogical Grammar of English, and Understanding and Implementing an English Language Curriculum (for details about the objectives of these courses, see English Language and Literature, n.d.).

With all of these courses focusing on the development of Singapore student teachers' communicative competence, it would seem reasonable to speculate that their English language proficiency should have been elevated to a higher level than was observed in a study conducted by Lim, Gan and Sharpe (1997) which reported that English-medium teacher education programmes in Singapore did not necessarily prepare prospective English immersion teachers with adequate communicative competence to serve as suitable language models in the classroom. However, this speculation lacks empirical evidence since to date, there is no study, supported by results yielded from an internationally benchmarked language assessment instrument, which exists to corroborate it. Until such a study is undertaken, the true picture of English language proficiency of Singaporean pre-service teachers is not ascertainable. Until such time, teacher educators will remain uncertain about how effective their English language enhancement programmes are in terms of preparing their student teachers.

The present study therefore seeks to fill this gap by investigating the language proficiency of these graduand teachers using IELTS as the evaluation tool and in the light of the test's ability to measure both communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, 2008) and language proficiency (Richards, 2010) of the pre-service teachers surveyed in the present study.

## Aim of the Present Study

The main aim of this paper is to examine the language profile of graduating secondary school Language teachers using the IELTS as the evaluation tool. Specifically, the paper addressed the following research question:

Using IELTS scores as an evaluation tool, what are the English language proficiency levels of graduating teachers?

A total of 232 Graduating teachers from the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) Secondary programme participated in the study and sat for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Two hundred and four were graduating teachers who specialized in the English Language as a teaching subject while 28 were non-English Language specialists but who were expected to use English as the medium of instruction upon graduation.

## Background of IELTS

IELTS has been used by many universities in more than 120 countries as a means for ensuring baseline levels of proficiency in English required for entry into their respective programmes. Some of the more established teacher education institutes that use the test as an entry requirement are Teachers College at the University of Columbia in New York and the University of London's Institute of Education (ULIE). The "Academic" version of the test which was designed for those wishing to pursue a tertiary education in an English-medium university was selected because our subjects are those who minimally possess a Bachelor's Degree done in an English-medium university. The tests were conducted in June 2009 and the British Council administered the Academic version of the tests to our subjects.

The test comprises four test components, namely Writing, Speaking, Reading and Listening. Candidates must complete all four components in order to receive a score. The total test time is 2 hours and 45 minutes. The scores are given on a band scale of 1 to 9 for each test component. Each of the component scores is equally weighted and the overall band score is obtained by taking the mean of the sum of scores obtained in all four components. The descriptors for the band scores are shown in Table 1. IELTS is not meant to certify whether candidates have passed or failed the test. Instead, institutions must determine the minimum selection band score for entry into their programmes and courses.

9	Expert user	Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding
8	Very good user	Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well.
7	Good user	Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6	Competent user	Has generally effective command of the language despite some

		inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5	Modest user	Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4	Limited user	Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3	Extremely limited user	Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2	Intermittent user	No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
1	Non user	Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0	Did not attempt the test	No assessable information provided.

**Table 1: IELTS Band Scores (IELTS, 2006)**

## Results

Overall, the results showed that the graduating teachers who participated in the study were highly proficient in the English language. 48.7% of the 232 graduating teachers obtained an overall band score of 8.0 while nearly 44% of them scored between bands 7.5 and 8.5. The majority of the candidates are ranked in the level of “Good Users” and “Very Good Users” of the English Language. The descriptor states that for a “Very Good User”, the candidate “has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well” (IELTS, 2006). The mean score for the entire cohort is 7.9 while the standard deviation is 0.433, where most graduating teachers scored in the range of 7.5 to 8.5 (Figure 1).



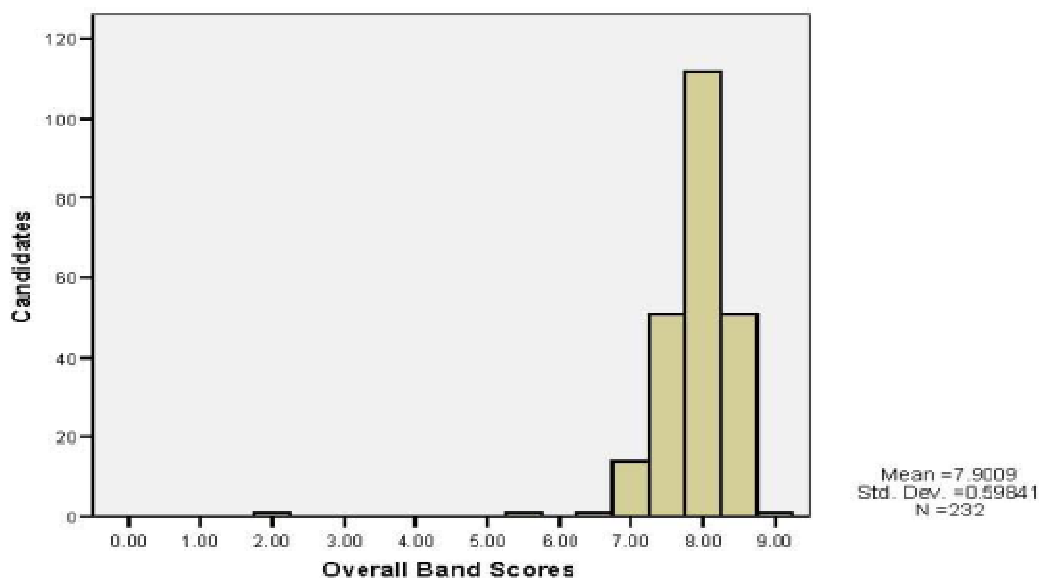


Figure 1: Distribution of Overall Scores

The mean scores obtained by our subjects by individual test components are shown in Figure 2 and the distribution of scores for each component is given in Table 2. Looking at both sets of results, it appears that our subjects are strongest in Listening (more than one-third obtained the highest possible band score of 9) and weakest in Writing. The mean band scores for Listening and Reading were 1 band higher than Writing and Speaking. The Writing test was the main area in which the teachers showed a relatively weaker competency but note that the average band obtained even for writing stands at 7.1, that of a ‘good user’ of English.

The writing component comprises two tasks and candidates are given 60 minutes to complete them. For both tasks, candidates needed to demonstrate their ability to write a response to a prompt question that is judged according to appropriacy of content, vocabulary and overall organisation of ideas which is appropriate in terms of content, vocabulary and the organisation of ideas.

In Task 1, a graph, table, chart or diagram is presented and candidates are asked to interpret the data by first describing what they see, summarising the main findings and attempt providing a possible explanation for the findings. In Task 2, candidates are required to write an essay in response to a prompt question that expressed a point of view, an argument or the presentation of a problem. For both tasks, a formal style of writing is required.

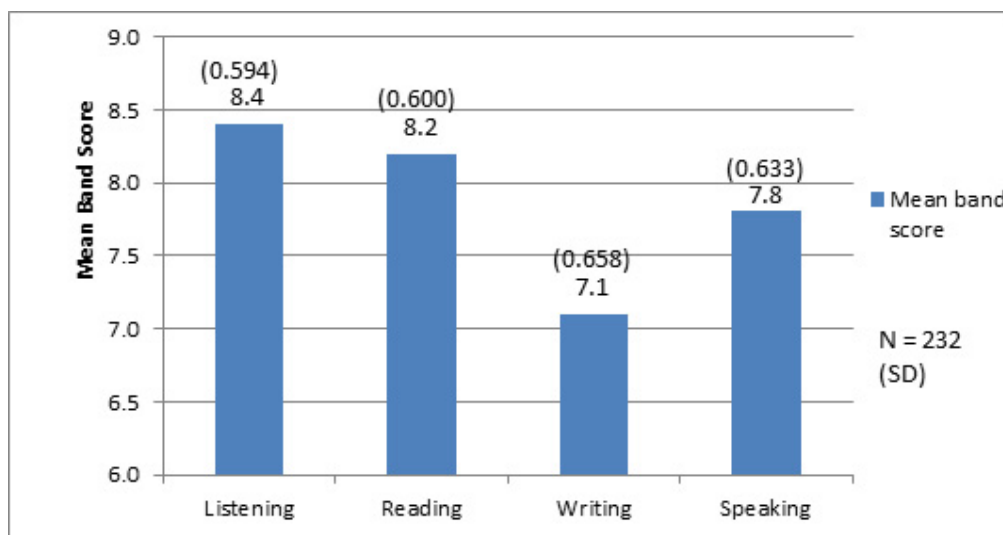


Figure 2: Mean Band Scores of the IELTS Modules

The feedback provided by the British Council suggested that the graduating teachers did not perform well in Task 1 of the Writing Test. They showed difficulty in terms of being able to articulate in their own words the data found in the graph/chart/ diagram and this lowered their overall scores (Chong, Alsagoff & Low, 2010).

For the speaking component, examiners singled out graduating teachers' pronunciation features which could have contributed to the lower mean score of 7.8 for Speaking, whereas mean scores for Reading and Writing were above 8 (Chong, Alsagoff & Low, 2010).

Band scores	Listening	%	Reading	%	Writing	%	Speaking	%
3.5	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.4%	0	0.0%
5.5	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	6	2.6%	0	0.0%
6	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	8	3.4%	0	0.0%
6.5	2	0.9%	5	2.2%	45	19.4%	9	3.9%
7	12	5.2%	17	7.3%	79	34.1%	33	14.2%
7.5	18	7.8%	22	9.5%	59	25.4%	71	30.6%
8	43	18.5%	63	27.2%	27	11.6%	63	27.2%
8.5	78	33.6%	89	38.4%	7	3.0%	35	15.1%
9	79	34.1%	36	15.5%	0	0.0%	21	9.1%

Table 2: Band Scores for Each Test Module

Table 2 shows that the lowest band score was 3.5 and it was obtained for the Writing component. The scores for the writing component range from a low of 3.5 to a high of 7 as compared to the other 3 test components (Listening, Speaking and Reading) which have a range of 6.5 to 9. Table 2 also shows the distribution of scores for each test module. Listening and Reading test modules have the highest percentage of scorers in band 8.5 at 33.6% and 38.4 percent respectively. The Speaking test scores have the highest percentage in band 7.5 with 30.6. The Writing test's highest percent is at band 7 with 34.1%.

## Discussion

We begin our discussion section by attempting to answer the following question:

Using IELTS scores as an evaluation tool, what are the English language proficiency levels of graduating teachers?

In answer to this question, it was established that graduating teachers in the present study fall into the categories of ‘very good’ or ‘good’ users of English and this is heartening to note since all these teachers are expected to use English as a medium of instruction and are therefore required to be highly proficient in order to bring about effective learning outcomes. Our EL graduating teachers exceed the typical IELTS entry requirement scores for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies in an English-speaking county like Australia, for example. Universities such as the University of Melbourne typically require an IELTS score of 6.5 for undergraduate entry (University of Melbourne, 2014).

A high quality language proficiency assessment therefore begins with a test that has been validated by research and that shows close alignment between what the tests set out to measure and the assessment modes. In addition to selecting a reliable, internationally benchmarked test of language proficiency, it is equally important for teacher education institutes to be knowledgeable about how to interpret the test scores (Banerjee, 2003)

A comparison of the IELTS results between teachers who are required to take the EPT and those exempted (meaning they have done well enough in the GCE O level English Language paper obtaining a score of at least B3 and above) revealed that the performance of teachers who were exempted from the EPT were about half a band higher than those who sat for the EPT. Table 3 below shows the IELTS mean band scores of teachers who took the EPT compared to those who did not need to take the EPT.

IELTS Test Component	All teachers involved in the research	Teachers who took EPT	Teachers exempted from EPT
Listening	8.4	7.8	8.5
Reading	8.2	7.7	8.3
Writing	7.1	6.7	7.2
Speaking	7.8	7.4	7.9
Overall	7.9	7.4	8.0

**Table 3: IELTS mean band scores of graduand teachers who did the EPT versus those who did not**

## Implications

It was established at the outset of this study that in order to communicate successfully, teachers should be adept in structuring the linguistic form of their message in a way that promotes clear understanding in their students. Both teacher preparation and professional development programmes should include intensive language programmes that can help pre-service and in-service teachers to improve their pedagogical content knowledge about language as well as their own language proficiency. The end goal is to prepare teachers who can bring about effective learning using English as a medium of instruction.

Benchmarking graduating teachers through the IELTS as done in the current study serves to help identify areas of strength and weakness in language proficiency. Professional

development for teachers in all mainstream schools is provided by NIE (Khong, 2008, p.153). Many such programs for improvement of language skills could take place in pre-service courses.

### **English Language Entrance Proficiency Test**

The English Language Entrance Proficiency (ELEPT), a new test for potential student teachers was implemented in 2013. Commissioned by the Singapore Ministry of Education, the ELEPT is applicable to candidates applying to teach English medium subjects. This examination tests the active skills of writing and speaking and serves as a screening test to determine eligibility of candidates who wish to teach in the Singapore school system (MOE, 2014).

The results will also be used to determine if those who are admitted require further English language courses at NIE to help them improve on their skills. A marginal pass score on the written component of the test would then necessitate additional writing or speaking courses at NIE which would need to be passed satisfactorily. The ELEPT replaces the replaces the EPT which is referred to in the introduction of this article.

### **Communication Skills**

Communication Skills for Teachers (CST), referred to in the introduction, was revamped between September 2010 and 2011 to better address the diverse needs of pre-service teachers. The revised version introduced more collaborative learning which was made available through Web2.0 platforms.

These innovations have allowed more autonomy in student learning as well as more personalized instruction from instructors for those students needing extra help with spoken and written skills. Within a 12 week period, the following areas are covered: pronunciation, voice and vocal health, oral communication, written communication, and classroom management.

Students can choose two out of four areas (voice and vocal health is mandatory) and study these online, while the rest are covered in traditional face-to-face (F2F) tutorial. Having all the course materials online also allows students to get additional practice after attending tutorials. (Hanington & Ellis, 2013)

### **Critical Thinking Skills**

The writing component, which emerged the weakest for the graduating student teachers, measures a candidate's ability to produce an extended piece of prose and to demonstrate critical evaluation skills. Integrating such skills into all aspects of teacher preparation is essential in order to prepare future teachers to be potential role models of effective thinking strategies.

It is important for teacher educators to "find ways to imbue pre-service teachers with the intellectual and professional experiences necessary to enable them to reflect on critical levels" (Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000, p.40). Lee (2007) explored the writing of dialogue journals and response journals to encourage reflection among pre-service teachers and concluded the potential as tools for critical reflection.

## Conclusion and Further Research

Continuing research on language proficiency assessment and baseline levels of proficiency of pre- and in-service teachers must periodically be conducted so as to provide the empirical evidence needed for continual programme development and enhancement. Locally, the study can be extended to survey the baseline proficiency levels of all pre-service teachers using English as a medium of instruction and not just those specialising in the teaching of EL as a subject.

Internationally, cross-comparative research data is needed to help improve test construction and validity of existing tests. For example, a study like the present one can be extended to include more than one country and comparisons can be made which can improve the quality and validity of the IELTS.

Moving ahead, longitudinal studies need to be undertaken that aim to correlate and track teachers' performance with higher language proficiency levels compared to those with lower ones over various points in their career in order to provide information that can further enhance existing pre- and in-service programmes and inform teacher selection and recruitment policies.

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