



Det Humanistiske Fakultet



Life After Certification: The Formative Aspect of TOEPAS

Slobodanka Dimova

Centre for Internationalisation and Parallel
Language Use (CIP)

CIP Symposium 2012
November 1, 2012



Test of Oral English Proficiency for Academic Staff (TOEPAS)

Development: Fall 2008

Reason: University management requires that those who teach in COME programs are certified for English proficiency

Purpose: screening of graduate faculty at the university for English proficiency

Assessment method: simulated mini-lecture

Structure: (1) warm up (10min), (2) mini-lecture (20min), and (3) interaction (5-7)

Scale: five-level scale (1-5), certified ≥ 3

Score report: score, video, and written report

(Kling & Stæhr, 2011; Stæhr & Kling, 2009).



Research Issue

- TOEPAS appears to be a high-stakes test
- CIP believes that taking the TOEPAS should also represent a learning experience for test-takers, but we don't know whether and how the video, the performance description and the recommendations are used for further language improvement
- We don't know exactly how the TOEPAS scores are used for decision making
- We don't know what the test consequences are



What the Literature States

- Test-makers need to be informed about the consequences and the impact of test so that they can identify possible misues (Schohamy, 2001).
- Test-takers, as important stakeholders, should be included in reasearch about score use and test impact (Hamp-Lyons, 1997).
- Impact is integral to any validation work because validity must include the sociopolitical consequences of tests and their uses (Bachman, 1990; McNamara, 2008; Shohamy, 2001).



Research Questions

RQ1: What are the test consequences?

RQ2: Do test-takers use the video recording and the written report to improve their English skills? If so, how?

RQ3: What impact does TOEPAS have on test-takers?



Research Design

Participants:

10 faculty members (PhD student, postdoc, assistant, associate, and full professors)

Participant selection procedures

-**29** participants (roughly 9% of all tested) were randomly selected from the test database in MS Access

-**41%** of the selected couldn't be reached by phone or e-mail (not employed at KU any more; on leave; or not reached after 7 phone calls and 2 e-mails)

Of those contacted:

-**24%** declined to participate

-**76%** agreed to participate, but due to their busy schedules, only **59%** were interviewed



Participants

Years at KU: mean=10.5, SD=7.9

L1: Danish (N=9) and Portuguese (N=1)

Departments

Computer Science

Department of Forest and Landscape

Institute of Food and Ressource Economics

Department of Agriculture and Ecology

Department of Food Science

Department of Large Animal Science

Department of Human Nutrition

Law



Research Design

Instrument

- Semi-structured interview (20-30min.)
- 23 questions organized in four sections
 1. Background information
 2. Video
 3. Written report
 4. Impact

Data collection procedures

- participants were interviewed in their offices
- interviews were recorded on a *MacBook* laptop using the software *GarageBand*
- interviews were transcribed and coded in *Nvivo 10*



Results: Context

Teaching

Number of courses in English

20% didn't teach regular courses (mentoring and course assistance)

70% taught one or two graduate courses in English

10% taught in Danish with some modules in English

Students

- Those who teach in English reported $\geq 50\%$ of international students in their classes.
- Apart from Nordic students, participants claimed their students came from Southeastern Europe (**40%**), Africa (**10%**), South America (**20%**), and China (**10%**).
- One participant believed that the class make-up depended on what agency awards stipends and scholarships.



“...my guess is that um international students are attracted by stipends, and if there have been some people here who have attracted funding for stipends, then we have certain nationalities. If it’s an EU stipend for Europeans, it will be majority of Europeans, but if there is some other type of stipends, there will be some people from developing countries...”

Participant#9



Teaching

Language use in classroom

- All participants stated that they lectured in English.
- One participant switched to Danish during group work (if the group was Danish).
- Three participants used Danish during breaks.
- One participant refused to use Danish.

” P4:Um... I refuse to teach in Danish.

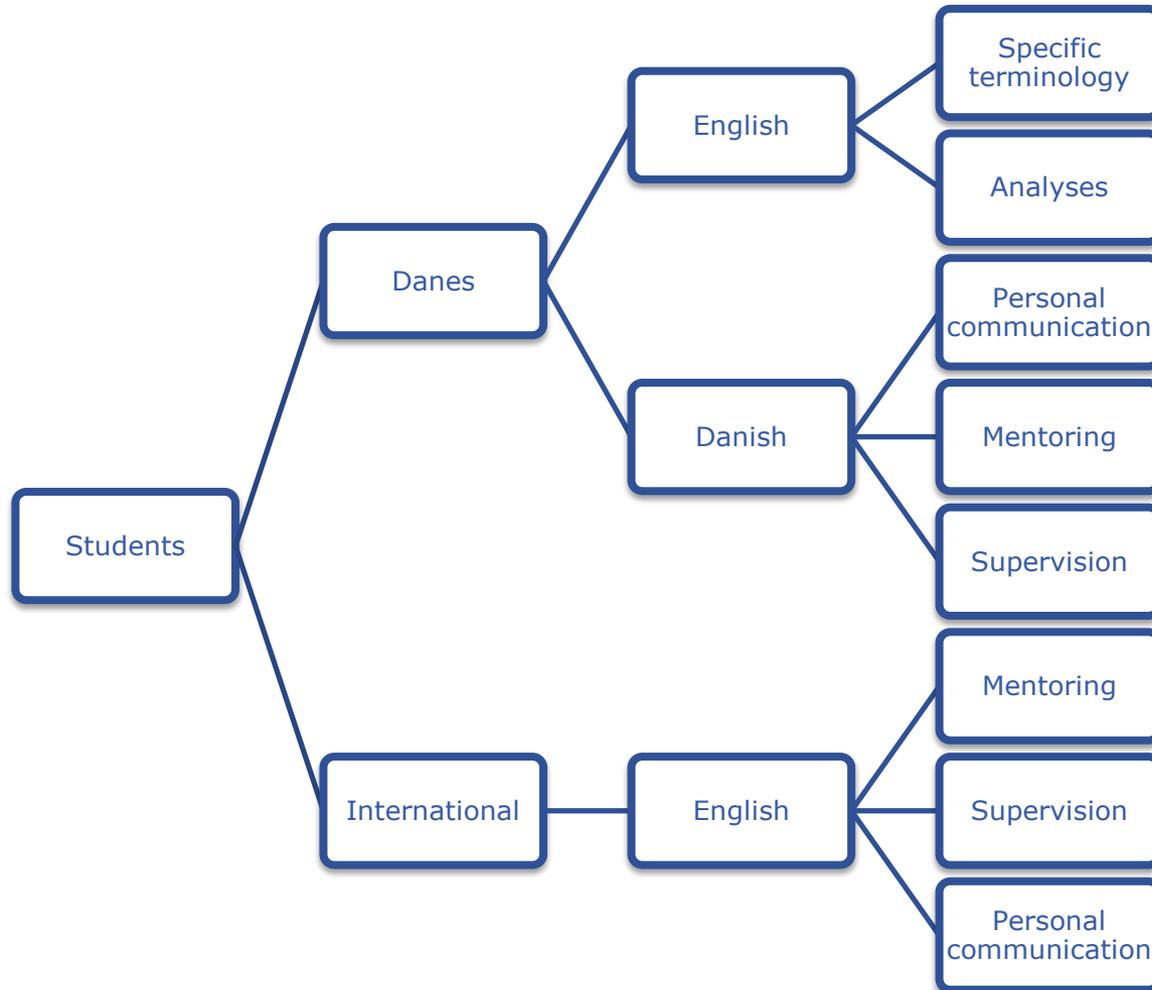
I:Why?

P4: I don't have the terminology in Danish. The terms are not translated... um... so for me it would be awkward. And also politically... I wouldn't want to teach in Danish 'cos I think it's ridiculous to teach international law in Danish.”

Participant#4



Language use outside the classroom



Language Policy

- **30%** thought that there was no official policy at their institute
- **20%** did not know what the policy was
- **50%** stated that there was a policy, but the policies they reported were slightly different

- For example,
 - Master's courses must be taught in English, so assistant and associate professors have to get certified.
 - Only postdocs and up have to be certified, while PhD students do not. It's up to professors to decide whether the students are proficient enough.
 - Master's courses should be taught in English unless there are only Danish students. In such case, in agreement with the students, instructors can elect to teach in Danish.
 - English must be used whenever there are non-Danish speaking students or colleagues.



RQ1: What are the test consequences

- All participants reported no changes in the number of courses in English they taught before or after the exam.
- None of the participants thought that failing to become certified would affect their teaching.
- Teaching assignments would be better if certified.

“No, because we are teaching according to profession...they just can't go out and find somebody else who can do what I can do, so they'll have to manage what I can do.” Participant#3

“If I didn't pass then, well, I don't know how it would be in practice, but I think the institute's policy is to offer help. I seriously doubt that they'd actually say 'you didn't pass so you cannot teach this course. We'll find someone else'.” Participant#10

“I think it's just a pure formality.” Participant#5

RQ2: Do test-takers use the video recording

- 70% kept the video
- One participant didn't receive it due to technical reasons
- One couldn't open the video file
- One didn't keep it

However,

- Only one participant watched the video a few times
- One watched it once
- One watched it half way through



Reasons for not watching the video

"P4: I found...the feedback report sufficient. And then I mean.... watching yourself on the video ...I think it would be embarrassing for me to watch.

I: Why?

P4: I don't know. Perhaps you get aware of some body language or something that is just you think its funny or perhaps you think its awkward you look awkward or something so better not be aware of it."

" P2: I don't know maybe I would that would be uncomfortable to a certain extent.

I: Why?

P2: Well because I'm not as good looking as I have imagined."

"P7: Well, I guess I got bored hahaha."

" I was certified as a native speaker. I thought that was brilliant. And then I never thought about it since."

RQ2: Do test-takers use the written report

- All, but one, participants kept the written report.
- All, but two, remember in general terms what the report stated about their performance, and think that they learned from it.
- They found the specific examples from their performance useful, while they had problems understanding some of the terminology we used in the description.

term	understand	don't
Discourse markers	40%	60%
Pragmatic meaning	30%	70%
Hesitations	70%	30%
Sound contrasts	10%	90%



RQ2: Do test-takers use the score for other purposes

- Four participants reported that they have either included or will include the score in their job application documents to show that they were certified to teach in English.
- One indicated that he couldn't use it anywhere else but KU because the TOEPAS score was not aligned with a standard scale.
- None reported discussing the score with his/her boss. The only people they discussed it with were the other two with whom they took the exam, or some of their co-workers.



Discourse markers

"Discourse markers is another way of saying that I show the problem I presented in different ways." Participant#5

"Discourse markers are different words or phrases that indicate which direction you want to go." Participant#3

"It is that I use words that somehow point in directions."
Participant#4

Sound contrasts

"I suppose it relates to pronunciation, but I don't know exactly what sound contrasts are." Participant#2



RQ3: What impact does TOEPAS have on test-takers

- The test results didn't change the participants' self-perception of their English speaking ability. Five participants explicitly stated that the test confirmed their opinion, which was reassuring for them.
- 40% claimed that the test result impacted the way they used English in the classroom because they paid more attention to some of the problems pointed in the written report.
- However, none, except for the participant who didn't pass, have actively tried to improve their English by taking courses, tutorials, or self-instruction.
- All participants who passed claimed that they didn't see getting more instruction a priority because they could function in the classroom.



RQ3: What impact does TOEPAS have on test-takers

- All participants reported that the biggest impact of failing the test would be embarrassment and disappointment.
 - Only one participant expressed fear of failing the test.
- ” ...obviously you are judged on something that ...you are going to use it in your professional career. There is a kind of...at least for me, it was a kind of nervous atmosphere. It feels a little bit like an examination. You get a bad mark, what can you do really? ...They are there to judge you. That’s it...I was a little bit anxious to see the test results because if you had bad test results what do you do then?” Participant#4



Conclusions and Implications

- Some test-takers, especially the self-confident ones, may not take it seriously and prepare well because they think the certification is just a formality.
- Only those who are not certified seek further instruction, but they don't always try to get re-certified.
- Examples from test-taker's test performance are very useful, but we need to make sure we explain some of the technical terms we use in the written reports.
- It seems that the TOEPAS scores may be used to show a qualification to teach in English beyond KU.



Limitations and Future Research

Limitations

- Exploratory nature of the study
- Only one of the 10 participants wasn't certified

Further research

- Investigate how management at departmental level and higher use the scores for decision-making
- Investigate how test-takers prepare for the test and how that affects their performance, and subsequently their scores
- Investigate whether departments have specific language policies and what they are





Thank you!

plq379@hum.ku.dk