

We all put too much emphasis on test scores

1 October 2018, by Liying Cheng



Language tests are an important factor in determining whether international students are admitted to universities. Credit: Shutterstock

We live in testing times. We also live in a time of globalization, immigration and the internationalization of schools and universities around the world. Our current obsession with school accountability and student learning outcomes has resulted in the increased use and abuse of test scores—in particular language test scores.

Language [test scores](#) are now an admission ticket for post-secondary education and for skilled immigrants trying to gain entry into new countries. Test scores serve as the key to learning opportunities and professional success, impacting millions of lives. They also [play a crucial role in political, social and educational policies](#).

Despite the considerable consequences of language testing, what exactly do [test](#) scores indicate? What can we tell about someone and their achievement or professional capability from a single test score? What are the implications when bureaucrats and education officials misinterpret

test scores when making policy decisions on immigration or attracting more international students?

In my role as director of the [Assessment and Evaluation Group](#) in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University, I've been involved in research on how students are tested for language proficiency and the consequences of such testing.

Second language is essential

It's an important topic because evidence shows that an ability to speak a [second language](#) can determine so many things about an immigrant's future, including economic success, social integration and their overall ability to contribute to society. My research looks at the prevalence and impact of language testing. A key issue is how test scores are used or misused by policy makers.

We should not be using a single test score to make decisions that can have a huge impact on someone's life. However, governments and organizations tend to do this because it is cheaper and they believe it offers a more clean-cut case on immigration, university entrance and professional certification.

According to the [latest census data](#), Canada has more than 7.5 million foreign-born individuals who arrived as immigrants. That represents about 22 per cent of the population.

All skilled workers and professionals who wish to immigrate to Canada need to [demonstrate their English or French language ability via a language test](#), no matter where in the world they come from. The results of their test scores determine [whether they are permitted to settle](#) and to practise as recertified professionals in Canada.

Increase in international students

There has been a rapid increase in the number of international students who wish to study at Canadian universities. The latest federal government data shows Canada had roughly 500,000 international students at the end of 2017. Canada's international [student](#) population has nearly tripled over the past decade and [now ranks fourth behind the United States, the United Kingdom and China](#). Canada retains many of these international students as [skilled workers](#) through [Express Entry](#).

All [international students](#) are required to take a language test as part of the application process and their scores must meet the entrance requirements for Canadian universities.

It's natural to assume anyone taking those tests would be nervous, anxious or even frustrated. That is what we call high-stakes testing, which affects the lives of millions of people, all over the world, every day.

An incomplete picture

For example, when the stakes are high, research suggests that test-takers' [motivation](#) and [anxiety](#) are significant factors associated with their test performance. Judging someone's test [score](#) without taking those factors into account presents an incomplete picture of the person taking the test.

Successfully evaluating someone's English- or French-language abilities through various [language](#) tests has a direct impact on millions of lives of people who come to Canada to study and settle.

Education and government decision-makers should not rely solely on test scores when making decisions about admitting people to schools or the country. That's why test validation —ensuring accurate uses and interpretations of the test scores —has become so important and has grown into [a major field of research](#).

Our research at Queen's is intended to raise public awareness of the intended and unintended consequences of how test scores are used and to make the case that policy-makers need better training on how to properly interpret scores.

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