

## Learning English

# Cheating gives lie to our test dependence

**Opinion**  
Glenn Fulcher

Wherever there is testing, there is cheating. But by any standards 2011 will be remembered as a significant year in cheating history.

In June the Chinese media was reporting “high-tech cheating devices” and the equally innovative use of mobile signal jamming and tracking units. These were stationed outside halls where candidates were sitting the highly competitive national college entrance test, the “gaokao”, to catch any reprobates.

Similar tales emerged from Vietnam to Venezuela. But this wasn't the only reason for the notoriety of 2011. It was also the industrial-scale cheating by test administrators and teachers, and the professional institutionalisation of cheating practices.

The longest running saga has been the story of Curtin University English language centre in Australia where it was alleged that staff accepted bribes to alter certificates in the Ielts test of English. Criminal investigations led to the closure of the centre. A Curtin employee and eight others have since been convicted.

Another rapidly expanding form of cheating is known as “ghost writing”, where a student pays a professional test taker to sit the test for them. In June Mandarin language reports on the Australian SBS international news site revealed that ghost writers were operating in Ielts centres in Hong Kong. The response of Ielts representatives was to claim the “integrity” of the test. The response of competitors was to claim their tests were more secure.

The China Daily newspaper subsequently reported that thousands of mainland Chinese students use ghost writing companies based in Hong Kong to avoid the lifetime ban imposed on cheats by Ielts administrators in mainland China.

The US public education sector was rocked earlier this year by revelations that teachers and school principals in the Atlanta education district had changed student responses on state standardised tests before they were marked.

Clearly something is going on that isn't limited to one corner of the globe. What is it? Well, there are major changes in the world to do with money, opportunity and accountability about which language educators and decisions makers need to be aware.

Meritocratic test use was pio-



**High stakes ... parents wait for their children to complete China's competitive college entrance exam Reuters**

neered in China and introduced to the west in England to open up the civil service to the newly educated Victorian middle classes. But test use has now extended well beyond benign selection processes. The most striking use of language tests by politicians today is as a surrogate for immigration policies. Which in turn has endowed test scores with more economic value. Australia and most European countries now require minimum scores on selected tests as an absolute requirement for being issued with a student or work visa.

If your future depends upon travel, study or work opportunities and you cannot meet the bar, the value you place upon the test score may outweigh the cost and fear of being caught cheating. Language testing has therefore generated subsidiary industries, from ghost writing, to the sham marriages of India. Arranged by specialist match-making legal firms, “Ielts girls”, who have attained a high score in the test but who cannot afford to study abroad

**'Ielts girls' partner with rich boys: she gets a university place; he gets a visa**

are partnered with boys from rich families. She gets a university place; he gets a spousal work permit.

Policy makers are also increasingly keen on testing to control educational systems. Using test scores to create school league tables is now commonplace. Many schools at the lower ends of the tables are described as “failing”. This may result in loss of funding, the imposition of new management, or even closure.

More recently, individual teachers are being evaluated largely on the basis of their students' scores on tests. Nowhere has this been more contentious than in the US under the No Child Left Behind legislation.

Accountability is also about money and opportunity, both for the schools and their staff. Certain test scores have become an extremely valuable and sought-after commodity. Humans trade in commodities. When they cannot trade, they sometimes steal. The temptation to cheat is greater when it is the gateway to future happiness and wellbeing, but tantalisingly just outside our grasp.

The object of desire is not the test score - it is the life in another country, the job, the success and recognition we crave, the income that provides security, the home of our dreams - or just keeping a job. The test score is merely the means to access these things.

Therefore it does not command any essential respect in and of itself. This explains why students are prepared to take the risks, pay the price, and succour the satellite industries.

Testing evolved as a meritocratic means to distribute scarce resources. Policy makers are using it to carry a larger social burden than it can reasonably bear. Let it do the one thing it is good at. Language testing assumes that scores are indexical of the linguistic abilities required for a real-world communicative purpose. Validity is about whether scores are genuinely useful for making decisions about an individual's likely communicative success. This protects the individual: “Don't go to college now, do some more academic English so you don't fail.” And it protects society: “You aren't ready to practice as an air traffic controller yet.”

Cheating threatens validity. We therefore need to de-couple language testing from what it does least well: implementing immigration policies, evaluating teachers, rank ordering schools. There are other more useful and humane tools for doing these things. The temptation to cheat may not evaporate, but it would decline.

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