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Exploring EFL Views about the Value of Test Preparation Exam for TOEFL

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Abstract
Background: Test preparation for high-stakes English language tests has attracted growing research attention in the language assessment scope. However, little is known about what aspects of test preparation learners attend to and value. While theoretical and empirical research has focused on test-takers' attitudes toward test preparation and test-taking strategies, adequate attention to broader socio-political and ethical issues remains insufficient. Additionally, there exists a gap between achieving required test scores and actual academic communication abilities. **Objective:** This study aims to investigate EFL learners' views about the value of TOEFL test preparation courses based on Scriven's (1998, 2007) model that conceptualizes value as merit (intrinsic qualities), worth (contextual cost-effectiveness), and significance (assigned importance). **Method:** This descriptive study involved in 40 EFL learners enrolled in various academic programs at a University in Canada. The research subjects were students who had successfully gained admission to educational institutions after completing TOEFL preparation and achieving required scores. **Results:** Findings revealed that quality (merit) was linked to instructor characteristics and teaching methods, benefit (worth) was evaluated through effectiveness and adaptation to TOEFL and English skill development, while importance (significance) included participation in learning communities and motivation to study. **Conclusion and Implications:** This research provides educational insights for EAP program instructors at a University in Canada to understand students' experiences and perceptions of appropriate and effective English language learning support. The findings are also important given the increasing number of international students who require additional language competencies for academic success.

Keyword: Scriven' model, Task Demands, Test Preparation Exam, TOEFL.

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INTRODUCTION

Test preparation has attracted remarkable considerations in second language (L2) instruction because of the important uses that rewarding and effective performance on a language test may have for academic promotion, future career chances, and immigration possibilities. Besides, an overstatement on test preparation has been disapproved of stimulating the development of construct-irrelevant test-taking procedures at the expense of improving general language proficiency (He, et al. 2025). Recently, language test-takers' attitudes to test preparation and the strategies involved in this kind of preparation have been at the center of much theoretical and empirical work (e.g. Cheng & DeLuca, 2011). Test preparation for these situations has grown into a typical social and instructional event in several countries (Ma, 2013) and, after beginning sometime between the late 1980s and early 1990s, has developed into a fast-increasing, rewarding industry (Matoush & Fu, 2012). How stakeholders mentally perceive and understand instructional situations and environments plays a crucial role in determining whether teaching is effective. This explains why many educational innovations fail—teachers often misinterpret or incorrectly implement these new approaches (Wall, 1996). Research has shown that students' perceptions of their educational environment are actually better predictors of their academic success than what actually occurs in the classroom (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008). Since assessment is an integral part of teaching, students and test-takers will naturally interpret and understand evaluation differently. These varied interpretations of assessment directly influence how learners approach their studies overall and how they prepare for tests specifically (Xie & Andrews, 2013).

According to Xie (2011), students' viewpoints and attitudes toward assessments are crucial from an instructional measurement perspective because they tend to encompass both construct and consequential elements of test validity. When there's a disconnect between what students believe a test is measuring and what test creators actually intend to assess, it can undermine the positive educational impact that test developers and educational policymakers hope to achieve. This represents a significant concern, particularly given that one key function of high-stakes testing is to drive educational reform (Karjo & Ronaldo, 2019).

Researchers argue that English proficiency test passing scores for university admissions are designed to predict students' academic research performance rather than their ability to communicate independently in academic settings (Zareva, 2005). Test preparation methods typically focus on test-style questions rather than authentic academic tasks (Fox & Curtis, 2009), leading to a gap where non-native English speakers may achieve required test scores but still struggle with English communication in academic environments (Fox, 2005; Read, 2008). Despite various research efforts to understand and support EFL students' academic integration (Cheng & Fox, 2008; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013), there remains limited understanding

of their experiences during test preparation and academic study. This research focuses on EFL students who successfully gained admission to educational institutions in Canada after completing TOEFL preparation and achieving required scores, analyzed through Scriven's (2007) value framework.

Literature Review

Test preparation studies typically examine its influence on instruction and performance. Varying impacts from previous research (Montgomery & Lilly, 2012) indicate the need for more empirical investigation from learners' perspectives to understand why test preparation may or may not improve performance.

Previous research on test preparation has primarily examined student characteristics and their participation in preparation programs (Liu, 2014; Mickan & Motteram, 2009; Yu, 2012). Studies show that students without formal English education and those with weaker language skills are more likely to enroll in test preparation courses (Cole, 1982; Ferman, 2004; Gan, 2009). Students' motivations for joining preparation courses extend beyond exam preparation to include developing academic abilities, reducing test anxiety, and meeting parental or employer expectations (Green, 2006a; Yu, 2012). Additionally, the test-taking techniques students acquire during preparation may be related to their testing motivation (Doe & Fox, 2011).

Test preparation research has examined various student factors including future self-concepts (Zhan & Andrews, 2014), self-perceptions and attitudes (Haggerty, 2010), views on assessment (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008), expectations (Green, 2007), assessment knowledge (Smith, Worsfold, Davies, Fisher & McPhail, 2013), and socioeconomic background and educational level (Buchmann, Condron & Roscigno, 2010).

The training EFL students received from preparation courses included becoming familiar with test content and structure, learning test-taking techniques (e.g., Razavipour, et al., 2018; Samaie, & Mohammadi, 2017), and developing strategies for specific English abilities (e.g., Samaie, & Mohammadi, 2017). Enrolling in preparation courses has been positively linked to improved test performance (Liu, 2014), though certain preparation methods (such as using formulaic writing approaches for all writing tasks) may not contribute to genuine English skill development (e.g., Chau, 2008). These findings indicate that test preparation courses may or may not enhance EFL students' English test performance, depending on the course design (Razavipour et al., 2018).

Most previous research has been conducted from teachers' viewpoints, with limited understanding of how students perceive their preparation experience, including which class aspects they focus on, what they gain, and whether their test-focused efforts are worthwhile (Green, 2006b). Student insights about effective and

ineffective preparation methods could provide valuable information to explain why certain preparation practices do or do not lead to improved test results and better academic success prediction following admission.

1. Test takers' Views of Assessments

Recent research has examined test-takers' perceptions of test content and purposes and their influence on language learning. Studies reveal discrepancies between test-takers' understanding versus intended measurement objectives (Sato & Ikeda, 2015), mixed attitudes toward TOEIC requirements (Hsieh; Nguyen & Gu, 2020), and differences between faculty and test developer views (Im & Cheng, 2019). Similar TOEFL findings exist in Indonesia and Canada (Karjo & Ronaldo, 2019; Fox & Cheng, 2015). Instrumentally motivated participants achieve better outcomes, while confident participants with higher task value engage in more intensive preparation (Xie & Andrews, 2013). Positive attitudes toward test validity increase participation in beneficial learning activities (Xie, 2015).

2. Test takers' Views of Test Use

Test-takers' perceptions of test purpose represent their immediate objectives, influencing the personal importance they assign to test success, which subsequently determines how extensively and intensively they prepare for the test. Essentially, these objectives interact with a test's "stake level" (Hamp-Lyons, 1998, p. 329). High-stakes examinations motivate test-takers to establish more significant test-related goals. This increases the personal significance they place on the test (subjective task value), resulting in greater investment of effort and time in preparation. Test-takers' understanding of English proficiency assessments—which involve sociopolitical and ethical considerations regarding fairness, justice, and validity—along with their testing experiences and test consequences, warrant careful examination, especially since research demonstrates that test outcomes influence international mobility (Ahearn, 2009; Deygers, 2017).

3. Test takers' Views of Task Demands

Perceptions of task requirements represent individuals' understanding of test content and preparation needs. Test-takers' personal interpretation of test material and the knowledge and abilities they believe essential for success constitute their views of test requirements. These assessments influence success expectations—if participants determine the examination is too simple or too difficult based on their abilities and the test's difficulty level, this lowers their success expectations and reduces engagement in test preparation (Ferman, 2004).

4. Conceptualization of Value

This study employed Scriven's (1998, 2007) framework of value as a theoretical model, building upon program assessment and evaluation research that emphasizes value judgments. In this framework, value forms the foundation of evaluation (Lincoln & Guba, 1980), with evaluation's purpose being to assess the worth of what is being examined. Scriven (1998, 2007) defines assessment as the systematic and objective process of determining the merit, worth, or significance of an entity. The characteristics and qualities of merit, worth, and significance serve as the theoretical framework for establishing an entity's value.

Evaluation researchers identify three dimensions in Scriven's model: merit (intrinsic qualities), worth (contextual cost-effectiveness), and significance (assigned importance) (Lincoln & Guba, 1980; Scriven, 1998, 2007). This research examines EFL learners' perceived value of TOEFL preparation through these dimensions: (a) course features, (b) costs and benefits, and (c) learners' associated significance. These dimensions structure the study's goals within Scriven's theoretical value framework.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore EFL learners' perspectives on the value of TOEFL test preparation courses. The descriptive approach was chosen to provide comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences and viewpoints regarding test preparation, allowing detailed exploration of their perceptions without variable manipulation.

Research Setting

The study was conducted at a University in Canada. This Islamic university was selected due to its diverse population of EFL learners who had completed TOEFL preparation courses before gaining admission to various academic programs.

Participants

The study involved 40 EFL learners enrolled in various academic programs at a University in Canada. Participants were selected using purposive sampling technique based on specific criteria: completion of TOEFL preparation courses before university admission, successful achievement of required TOEFL scores, current enrollment in academic programs, and representation from various academic disciplines to ensure diverse perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

The study utilized Scriven's (1998, 2007) conceptualization of value as the theoretical framework, consisting of three dimensions: merit (intrinsic qualities of test preparation courses), worth (contextual cost-effectiveness and benefits), and

significance (importance assigned by learners to their preparation experience). This framework provided systematic examination of participants' perceptions across multiple value dimensions.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with all 40 participants. The interview protocol was developed based on Scriven's three-dimensional framework, addressing course organization, instructor characteristics, teaching methods, perceived effectiveness, cost-benefit analysis, personal importance, and motivation. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Supplementary data included analysis of course materials, TOEFL score reports, and university admission requirements to provide contextual information and enhance data triangulation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach and framework analysis to organize data according to Scriven's three value dimensions. This approach allowed systematic comparison across participants while maintaining theoretical structure. Multiple data sources were used to enhance credibility and trustworthiness through triangulation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Both international educational experience and TOEFL testing experience represented aspects of teachers' real-world exposure to environments that their students aimed to encounter. Consequently, experiential advice for test-taking and English skill development was valued since, as Clark, a PhD student in electrical engineering, noted, "these teachers, who have personal experience in authentic settings, understand what is needed; and compared to instructors who strictly follow textbooks, I prefer and trust teachers with experiential instruction." However, availability of instructors with international educational backgrounds or TOEFL testing experience was limited. The course organization and academic content were also identified as factors determining test preparation course characteristics. The course framework consisted of four sections—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—that aligned with the four TOEFL test components. Given the restricted time allocated to TOEFL preparation, this framework provided "a foundation to identify and divide the comprehensive test preparation strategy into four essential components," as Rachel, an undergraduate student in mathematics and economics, explained.

This descriptive investigation examined what test preparation courses students valued before entering a Canadian academic environment, using Scriven's framework to assess multiple factors of quality (*merit*), benefit (*worth*), and importance

(*significance*). Quality was linked to instructor characteristics and teaching methods, benefit was evaluated through effectiveness and adaptation to TOEFL and English skill development, and importance included participation in learning communities and motivation to study. This study addresses a research gap by responding to Green's (2006b) call to investigate which aspects of test preparation classes students focus on and what they gain from them, representing one of the limited studies examining test preparation from students' perspectives. The findings could provide educational insights to EAP program instructors in Canada, particularly those working with Chinese students, to understand these students' experiences and perceptions of appropriate and effective English language learning support.

This research is important given the rapidly increasing Chinese students at a University in Canada and other campuses. Timing is crucial as international students must achieve required test scores for admission before arriving in Canada and develop additional language competencies for academic success.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings presented in this study, it can be concluded that EFL learners at University in Canada, demonstrate nuanced perspectives regarding the value of TOEFL test preparation courses when evaluated through Scriven's tri-dimensional framework. The study reveals that participants highly valued the merit aspects, particularly instructor characteristics such as international educational experience and TOEFL testing background, as well as the structured course organization that aligned with the four TOEFL components (reading, listening, speaking, and writing). In terms of worth, learners recognized the effectiveness of preparation courses in helping them achieve required test scores and develop essential test-taking strategies, though they acknowledged limitations in bridging the gap between test performance and authentic academic communication skills. Regarding significance, participants attributed considerable importance to their preparation experience as it facilitated their admission to university programs and provided motivation for continued English language learning within academic communities. These findings address the research gap identified by Green (2006b) by providing student perspectives on test preparation value, offering crucial insights for EAP program instructors in understanding what aspects of TOEFL preparation courses are most meaningful to learners and how these courses can be optimized to better serve the growing population of international students who require both test success and genuine academic language competencies.

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