

Guide to Application of Language Proficiency Requirements for Pharmacists

Introduction

Members of six pharmacy regulatory authorities convened for a two-day standard setting workshop organized by NAPRA in Ottawa in September 2006. The workshop was facilitated by Dr. Alister Cumming of the Ontario Institute for Studies in English from the University of Toronto. The final report prepared by Dr. Cumming, “Standard Setting on Four English Language Proficiency Tests for Licensure as a Pharmacist in Canada”¹ details the methodology, findings and recommendations as a result of this exercise, and is available from the NAPRA office upon request. This guidance document has been prepared at the request of the Council of Pharmacy Registrars of Canada, to assist in the interpretation and application of the national model language proficiency requirements.

Tests Reviewed

Four commonly available tests of English language proficiency were reviewed:

1. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) – only the Internet-based test was reviewed (TOEFL-iBT); it was recommended to use the existing scores for TOEFL-CBT, TOEFL-PBT, which incorporates both the Test of Written English (TWE) and the Test of Spoken English (TSE), as Educational Testing Services® was in the process of phasing these out in favour of the TOEFL-iBT
2. Canadian Test of English for Scholars and Trainees (CanTEST)
3. Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB) – a new oral component had been added that had not previously been benchmarked
4. International English Language Testing System (IELTS) – the Academic format

Components Reviewed: Writing and Speaking

As indicated in the final report “Participants on the panel focused on judging samples of writing and speaking from each test because these holistic “constructed response” types of items ensure a closer linkage between the skills and knowledge of interest and the inferences that can be drawn from an examinees’ score on the test” (Cumming, 2006, p.4). Additionally, “...judgments about the multiple-choice and other fixed-item type responses typical of reading and listening comprehension assessments on these tests would have required panelists to have sophisticated, complex knowledge of linguistics and test design to interpret test items and responses, so these aspects of comprehension assessment were deemed inappropriate in the present context” (Cumming, 2006, p. 5).

According to Dr. Cumming “Minimum score levels need not be specified for reading and listening sections of the tests for two reasons. One is that performance standards have not been set systematically for these components of tests (and indeed it may be extremely difficult to do so in a valid way for pharmacy practice on tests that are not designed explicitly for pharmacy practice). The second reason is that doing so is probably not necessary because the total scores on the tests inevitably entail, and so implicitly account for, the scores aggregated from the reading and listening sections of the test” (Cumming, 2006, p. 19).

¹ Cumming, A. “Standard Setting on Four English Language Proficiency Tests for Licensure as a Pharmacist in Canada; Report Prepared for NAPRA”, September 2006.

Results

Test	Details		Minimum Score	Standard Error of Measurement (+/-)
1. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)	Internet-based test (iBT)	Speaking	27	2
		Writing	25	3
		Reading	-	-
		Listening	-	-
		Total	97	5
2. TOEFL	Computer-based test (CBT)	Writing	26	5
		TSE	50	-
		Total	237	10
	Paper-based test (PBT)	TWE	5	0.3
		TSE	50	-
		Total	580	14
3. Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB)	Written composition		82	3
	Listening comprehension		-	-
	Grammar, cloze, reading, vocabulary, comprehension		-	-
	Oral component		3+	-
	Total score		85	3
4. International English Language Testing System (IELTS)	Academic format	Speaking	6	0.5
		Writing	6	0.5
		Reading	6	0.4
		Listening	6	0.4
		Overall Band	7	0.5
5. Canadian Test of English for Scholars and Trainees (CanTest)		Speaking	4.5	-
		Writing	4.5	-
		Reading	4.5	-
		Listening	4.5	-

Standard Error of Measurement

As indicated in the final report "... the cut scores on tests established as performance standards for licensure as a pharmacist need to be interpreted with respect to the Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) associated with each test." (Cumming, 2006, p. 22). SEM is indicated (where available and applicable) to each component of the tests in the above chart.

As reported by Brooks and Cumming², “... every test of language has measurement error. Testing agencies calculate and report an index of this: the standard error of measurement (SEM)...consideration needs to be given to the SEM as a band around which people’s scores on the test may vary (up or down) according to the established accuracy of the test.” (Brooks and Cumming, 2006, p.5)

Interpretation of Results

Applicants must meet or exceed the minimum in each of the individually scored components, in addition to the minimum total score, in order to fulfill the language proficiency requirements. While the minimum scores have been determined through the standard-setting workshop, these scores must be interpreted in conjunction with the available SEM. For example:

Test	Details	Minimum Score	Standard Error of Measurement (+/-)
Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)	Internet-based test (iBT)	Speaking	27
		Writing	25
		Reading	-
		Listening	-
		Total	97

Candidates using the TOEFL-iBT must have a minimum of:

- 25-29 in Speaking (SEM of 2); **and**
- 22-28 in Writing (SEM of 3); **and**
- 92-102 as a Total (SEM of 5)

in order to meet the language proficiency requirements. While NAPRA will only publish the minimum scores for candidates seeking licensure, it is recommended that pharmacy regulatory authorities (PRAs) take into account the SEM when interpreting the results of scores submitted, in order to have a defensible position should the interpretation of scores be challenged. They may also want to confirm the candidate’s language proficiency by conducting an interview or similar assessment if the scores are consistently in the lower end of the range.

It is recommended that PRAs accept component scores from only one test (i.e. each candidate’s scores for speaking, writing, and a total score should be drawn from the same test). As indicated in the final report “Each test operationalizes the highly complex construct of English language proficiency uniquely, and assesses and scores it in different ways, making direct correspondences of the scores from different language tests a logical impossibility.” (Cumming, 2006, p. 21).

² Brooks, L., Cumming, A. “Overview of Four English Language Proficiency Tests; Report Prepared for NAPRA”, August 2006.