

TITLE

Evaluating APTIS tests with teacher training students and in-service primary school teachers in Durban, South Africa

This is a summary of a report by Julie Douglas and Charlotte Mbali as part of the ARAGs Research Online Series. For a copy of the full report, see www.britishcouncil.org/exam/aptis/research/publications/

WHAT WE LOOKED AT:

South Africa is a multi-lingual country where although English is the chosen language of instruction in most schools, many teachers still struggle with English proficiency. It seemed to us in Durban, in 2013, that some trials of the new British Council APTIS test with local primary school teachers or teachers in training would be useful.

We were intrigued to see how South African candidates would take to computerized delivery of the test. So the questions that guided our research were:

1. To what extent is APTIS seen by test-takers in South Africa as an acceptable way of measuring their language proficiency?
2. To what extent do test-takers' results on APTIS correlate with other measures of their English language proficiency?
3. To what extent is APTIS accessible within the practical constraints of South Africa's mix of urban centres and remote deep rural areas?
4. To what extent is APTIS appropriate to the particular context and domain of language uses' in South Africa?

HOW WE DID IT:

A local teacher training institute made their computer LAN available for testing. Groups of their Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) students were identified to take APTIS:

- Thirty 1st and 2nd year B.Ed. students
- Thirty 4th year B.Ed. students
- Nine primary school teachers from a township (peri-urban) school.

The researchers also completed APTIS tests, and observed the students as they were taking APTIS. After the test, all candidates completed a questionnaire about the test experience, some took part in focus group discussions about the test and several were interviewed. Thus data for this research consisted of:

- Analysis of questionnaire responses, for each group and then collectively
- Analysis of focus group discussions
- Analysis of individual interviews and then collectively
- Analysis of APTIS scores for each group and then collectively
- Correlation of APTIS scores with other direct and indirect assessments and tests of English language ability taken prior to APTIS testing.

WHAT WE FOUND:

On the whole candidates were positive about the test experience, even the older ones with limited or no computer skills. Many candidates complained about the strict time-keeping problems across all test components

Correlation with other local tests gave mixed results, and this merits further investigation. Poor results in the Speaking test for all candidates compared to the other tests were notable too.

Testing using computers was not as problematic as we had expected. Even candidates without computer experience learned quickly with support how to complete the required tasks. The greatest problem, however, was the poor bandwidth which slowed downloads and uploads to the extent that some students lost their connections and some speaking tests were never relayed to the APTIS markers.

Our South African candidates found some stimulus items were unfamiliar and confusing. We noted several British cultural references in test items that meant little to our candidates and that they misunderstood, such as the Colosseum as a site for tourists, or the concepts of gardening clubs, book clubs and health clubs which are not familiar to most South Africans. This raises questions about whether it would be possible to screen the test item bank for such culturally laden items, and substitute locally relevant ones. Interference in language testing by culturally laden items will differ in different contexts, particularly in those countries where English is a *lingua franca* and where APTIS is most likely to be used. APTIS content may have to be developed that will not disadvantage candidates who are not familiar with British culture.