

Researcher

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Title of Project

Exploring the Language and Communication Demands of
Early Childhood and School Teachers in Australia:
Implications for Language Assessment for Teacher Registration

Research Supervisors

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**TIRF Research Topic Investigated**

Language Assessment

Supported by

British Council

Bio

Xiaoxiao Kong is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include language assessments for professional purposes and test validation. Her Ph.D. project investigates the language demands of early childhood and school teachers in Australia, and the appropriacy of currently approved English proficiency tests for teacher registration purposes.

Final Report**Motivation for the Research**

This study arose from the broader context of large-scale general or academic purpose language tests being used for professional registration. In Australia, IELTS Academic (IDP IELTS Australia, n.d.) has been used for teacher registration for applicants from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB) for more than a decade, yet little publicly available validation research has examined whether the test actually reflects the language and communication demands of teaching. Meanwhile, teachers' workplace language and communication demands have not been thoroughly investigated across early childhood, primary, and secondary education settings. This is significant in the current Australian context, given the ongoing teacher shortages and the increasing number of skilled migrants entering the teaching profession (e.g., Australian Government, Department of Education, 2022).

Research Questions

1. What are the language and communication demands of working as a teacher in early childhood, primary, and secondary education contexts in Australia?
 - a. What are the main language and communication tasks for teachers in the three education contexts?
 - b. What are the main language use characteristics of teachers in the three education contexts?

- c. Are there differences in teachers' language and communication demands across the three education contexts?
2. What language and communication challenges do NESB teachers face in early childhood, primary, and secondary education contexts in Australia, and to what extent are these challenges also experienced by L1 English teachers (i.e., teachers who speak English as a first language)?
3. To what extent are the language and communication demands of teachers working in early childhood, primary, and secondary education contexts reflected in the design of the IELTS Academic test tasks?

Research Methodology

The study was guided by an argument-based validation framework for language assessment for professional purposes (LAPP) and a needs analysis approach (Knoch & Macqueen, 2020; Long, 2005). It adopted a sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2014) incorporating five methods across three stages, with findings from each stage informing data collection in the next stage.

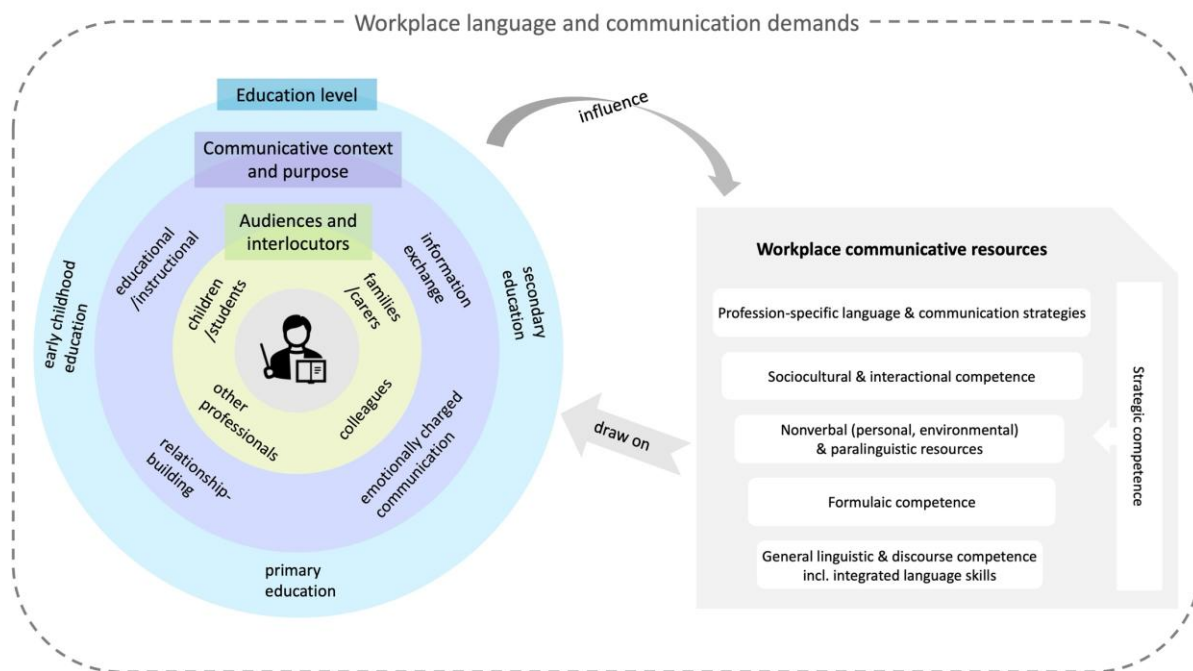
First, a review of existing research was conducted, and 106 teacher position descriptions from across Australia were thematically analysed to arrive at an initial list of the language and communication tasks performed by teachers within Australian educational settings. Then, 12 focus groups were convened with 37 early childhood, primary, and secondary teachers from a variety of language backgrounds across Australia. These focus groups helped to refine the list of workplace tasks, identified communication challenges faced by teachers, and reviewed sample tasks from the IELTS Academic and commented on their relevance to everyday work. A national survey involving 123 teachers then examined the frequency and importance of the workplace language and communication tasks identified and compared reported challenges across language backgrounds. Lastly, individual interviews with 18 teachers elicited descriptions of teachers' language use when performing important and frequent workplace tasks, as well as details of their commonly encountered challenges.

Summary of Findings

Across all three education levels, teachers communicated with children or students, families or carers, colleagues, and non-teaching professionals. Teachers described using simple vocabulary, paraphrasing or rewording ideas, and drawing on tone, facial expressions, gestures, physical proximity, pace, and other non-verbal and paralinguistic resources. Taken together, these findings show that teachers' workplace communication is integrated and context-specific, shaped by the audience or interlocutor group, communicative context and purpose, and education level. Figure 1 summarises these key features and the communicative resources teachers draw on in workplace situations.

Figure 2

Teachers' Workplace Language and Communication in the Australian Context



Differences in teachers' communication were most pronounced between early childhood and school settings. As education level increased, communication generally shifted from predominantly oral to greater use of reading and writing and more subject-specific instructional communication.

Most workplace communication challenges were shared across language backgrounds. In the survey, behaviour management and conflict resolution, and communicating concerns with families, were among the most commonly reported challenges, with L1 English and NESB teachers reporting them at similar rates. Interviews showed that these situations often involved sociocultural and interactional demands; for instance, knowing how direct to be, how to de-escalate, and how to maintain relationships while raising concerns. Many challenges reflected the complexity of teaching itself and the limited attention given to professional communication training in teacher education programs.

Teachers saw some workplace relevance in IELTS Academic. However, most test tasks were judged to have limited or very little relevance to teachers' workplace communication, with the clearest gaps in Speaking and Listening. Teachers noted the lack of two-way interaction and nonverbal communication, the absence of authentic children's speech and background noise, no opportunity to ask for clarification, and limited assessment of integrated listening and speaking. The test also does not adequately capture the skill of paraphrasing and rewording content in simple language, a crucial skill across education levels. Relevance also varied across education settings. The monologue speaking task in IELTS Academic, for example, was identified as somewhat resembling whole-class instruction at the school level but was much less relevant to early childhood education. Some tasks also reflected particular aspects of teachers' work while underrepresenting communication that was frequent, important, or central to professional practice. Overall, IELTS Academic captures some aspects of teachers' language use, but the evidence indicates limited target-domain relevance and representativeness, particularly for early childhood education.

Implications

The results support the need for stronger evidence that an assessment used for professional registration reflects the communication it is intended to predict. Teachers' communication directly affects students' learning, wellbeing and safety, as well as relationships with families and colleagues (e.g., Gribble et al., 2016; Hattie, 2003). Assessment design should draw on evidence from the workplace and domain insiders and consider both relevance and representativeness, including integrated skills, authentic interaction, nonverbal communication, paraphrasing and rewording, and differences across education settings.

The findings also have implications for teacher education and professional learning. Professional communication training should be available to teachers from all language backgrounds, rather than targeting only NESB teachers. It should explicitly address language and communication skills for behaviour management, sensitive conversations with families, sociocultural and interactional competence, and cross-cultural communication.

Decision-makers need to understand what a test does and does not measure, and what evidence supports using its scores for a new purpose. This has implications for fairness and workforce participation. If an assessment does not adequately reflect professional communication demands, capable teachers may be excluded from registration. In the context of teacher shortages, the social consequences of such assessment decisions warrant closer attention.

In addition to academic journal submissions that are currently in progress, I have also been working to communicate the findings through news articles on educational platforms and a one-page infographic for research participants and the wider teaching community. These forms of dissemination aim to return the findings to the teachers who contributed to the research and support discussions among teachers, teacher educators, language assessment specialists, and policymakers.

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