

J-1 Language Proficiency Assessment

Frequently Asked Questions

With the recent announcement of a change in the way that we assess an exchange visitor's English language proficiency, a number of questions have been asked. This document attempts to answer to some of those questions, but please do not hesitate contacting the staff of ISR if you have additional questions or concerns.

Why the change?

The requirement that J-1's have sufficient proficiency in the English language has always been part of the Exchange Visitor Program. However, in January of 2015, the U. S. Department of State strengthened the regulation and now requires Program Sponsors (WesternU) to objectively and consistently assess language proficiency and retain documentation of same in the J-1 file. Additionally, consular officials who conduct the visa interviews for incoming J-1's make note of the candidate's proficiency level in their documentation. Discrepancies between the consular evaluation and our own would potentially invite greater scrutiny from the Department of State. The revised regulations also require that sponsors provide interpreters 24/7 for those J-1's who are deficient in their language proficiency.

It is important to remember that the J-1 visa is the diplomatic visa of the United States. Because of this the Department of State places a heavy emphasis on J-1's being able to interact with our culture and the English language skills they need to do this. While the Department of State is concerned about how they function in a laboratory or in a classroom, they are more concerned with how they function in their day-to-day activities, and whether their language proficiency enables them to accomplish that. In a recent communique, the Department of State restated its concern that insufficient language proficiency may endanger the safety and welfare of the exchange visitor.

WesternU's initial implementation of this rule change was to use the faculty/PI interview to assess language proficiency. Unfortunately, almost all of the scholars who went through this method of assessment arrived with very little spoken language skills. Because the potential for subjective bias is very strong for the interview process, it is not the best way to objectively and consistently assess language ability.

Why not TOEFL or IELTS?

We opted not to use TOEFL or IELTS, primarily due to the huge problem with **test cheating** on these exams, particularly in Asia where most of our J-1's are coming from. The following articles illustrate the growing problem on standardized test cheating and the impact it has on the integrity of any evaluative process:

- <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/10/19/professors-experience-unprepared-chinese-students-essay>
- <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/hyderabad/Toefl-fraud-could-be-tip-of-the-iceberg/articleshow/46114710.cms>
- <http://thepienews.com/news/uk-onshore-testing-ets-suspended-amid-fraud-allegations/>

- <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1309&dat=19860502&id=nYJUAAAIBAJ&sjid=9I8DAAAIBAJ&pg=6638,450096&hl=en>
- <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/feb/10/student-visa-tests-suspended-fraud>
- <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/03/how-sophisticated-test-scams-from-china-are-making-their-way-into-the-us/474474/>
- <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-26024375>
- <http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-china-justice-idUSKBN0OD1VO20150528>
- <http://www.sbs.com.au/yourlanguage/vietnamese/en/content/ielts-fraud-uncovered-australia>
- <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/10/26/ielts-sale-whistleblowers-reveal-scams>
- http://www.eltnews.com/news/archives/2011/06/ielts_hit_by_fr.html
- <http://thepienews.com/news/ielts-fraud-uncovered-in-australia/>

TOEFL and IELTS are both **multiple choice tests**, a feature that makes them particularly vulnerable to scams and the potential for an invalid assessment of a scholar's language proficiency. One of the largest TOEFL test prep centers in China annually sends 5,000 teachers to take the TOEFL exam, asking each of them to memorize 10-20 questions. They then compile the questions and answers into their "preparation books" for the year. Students in the test centers are taught the best strategies for taking multiple-choice tests, practice a little bit of spoken English, but primarily focus on memorizing the test. Thus, the test does not accurately assess their language proficiency and they come to the U. S. unprepared to face real-life situations.

In addition, we found that both the TOEFL and the IELTS are considerably **more expensive** than the English3 assessment that we have chosen as our only method of evaluating a scholar's language proficiency. The cost for taking TOEFL or IELTS ranges from \$99 to \$250 while the assessment fee for English3 is \$99 and can be taken in the scholar's home on a personal computer with a web-cam. Ultimately saving the scholar time and money.



I've never heard of English3, can you tell me something about the company?

While the English3 Proficiency Test is new, the company was founded in 2006 so has been involved with teaching English for over a decade. English3 has worked with some of the largest companies in the world including Starbucks and Intel, as well as a number of universities, including the University of Minnesota, [Texas A&M University, Kansas University Medical Center, University of Florida, University of Oregon], among others.

How does English3 guard against cheating?

Scholars who take the English3 proficiency exam must first upload a government-issued photo ID. The picture on the identification card can be compared to the image of the test-taker, as recorded on the web-cam. Also, since the test does not rely on multiple-choice questions but rather on spoken and written answers, it is less likely that the test can be scammed, replicated or that the test-taker can memorize and regurgitate the material.

Describe the test.

The purpose of language assessment for the exchange visitor program is to evaluate the candidate's ability to speak and write in everyday situations as opposed to knowing what part of speech a given verb is. English3 purposes to provide a real snapshot of what the scholar can do. Will they show up and be of use in the lab or classroom? Or will they become more of a burden to supervisors and PI's because of the language barrier?

The English3 proficiency test is actually an easier test than the TOEFL if you know how to speak English well. International students/scholars tend to struggle with this because they focus their training on parts of speech, grammar and vocabulary and other things that might help them pass a TOEFL-type test. The English3 assessment is designed to determine how well an individual performs when placed in a simulated academic environment.

The language assessment is a standardized test that incorporates written and spoken responses covering 14 different sections. Test-takers are given three hours to complete the test which includes questions such as, "Listen to this four-minute lecture and summarize it verbally;" or "Here are two viewpoints on a topic; pick one viewpoint and verbally defend your position;" or "What is your favorite childhood memory? Why is it memorable to you?" There are no grammar questions and only one vocabulary question. The questions are geared towards situations normally encountered in everyday life.

What is the pass/fail rate?

Approximately 25 percent of the individuals who take the English3 language proficiency test fail to earn a passing score. Of this 25 percent, approximately 10 percent enroll in one month of English remediation with English3 at a cost of \$199 (\$799 for a semester of instruction). The students who retake the test after a month of remediation pass at a rate of 95% or better.

Scholars who fall below our acceptable score of 72 on the English3 assessment (comparable to WesternU's admission requirement of 79 on TOEFL and 6.5 on the IELTS), will enter a secondary evaluation process. The video recordings of these scholars will be evaluated by a WesternU committee of three individuals. Exceptions to the required score may be granted based on the professional judgment of the committee. This ability to review the video recordings and determine if, in the professional judgment of WesternU evaluators the scholar has enough proficiency to do well at WesternU, gives us greater flexibility than TOEFL or IELTS.

What remediation does English3 offer?

English3's language acquisition methodology quickly enables non-English speaking individuals to gain a level of fluency in the spoken language to be able to function well in everyday situations. Our mandate to assess language proficiency is not an academic one but rather one that looks at functional language ability.

Scholars who do not have a level of proficiency to do well in day-to-day interactions can benefit from the remediation program offered by English3 but they are not required to do so. They may opt to immerse themselves in the English language via videos, TV, movies or socializing with English-speaking individuals and gain a level of proficiency that will enable them to achieve a passing score on the assessment.

Those who opt to enroll in English3's tutoring program can set their own pace and typically gain enough proficiency within a month to successfully pass the proficiency assessment.

What if this new policy and procedure doesn't work?

Any change brings anxiety and pushback-we like things to remain the way they have always been. The Exchange Visitor Program is incredibly important to the mission of WesternU and to our ongoing research that is changing lives around the world. Because of this, we want to do everything we can to preserve the integrity of the program and to ensure that it remains compliant with all Federal regulations.

We also recognize that for many J-1's the exchange visitor program is a first step in a career trajectory that sometimes includes immigration to the United States. While the language proficiency assessment process may seem unnecessary for the immediate career or research goals, taking the time to gain some language proficiency can only help for long-range goals. And, it is important for the cultural exchange as well as for the well-being and safety of the exchange visitor.