

Research Note: Examining Chinese Test-takers' PTE Academic Test Preparation: Practices, Effects and Perceptions

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1. Introduction

By 2008, nearly 1.4 million Chinese students study abroad for better education and future career (MoE, 2012). For these Chinese students, English language tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System test (IELTS), and the Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE Academic) are the main gatekeepers for their university entrance in an English speaking country. Therefore, many Chinese students take test preparation courses to have better performance on these English language tests. Test preparation, as a coaching mechanism to enhance students' test performance, thus has become a fast-growing industry in China.

There are a number of empirical studies on Chinese students' test preparation for high-stakes English language tests (Chau, 2008; Xie, 2008; 2010; Yu, 2012). Chau's study (2008) on Chinese students' test preparation for writing tasks of TOEFL paper-based test (TOEFL pBT) found that test preparation courses for TOEFL writing components may exert negative effects on students' attitudes to writing in English and also on their ability to write in English. Xie (2008, 2010) found that Chinese test-takers of College English Test (CET) perceived great importance of test-taking skills. They were thus driven by such perceptions and engaged in test preparation practices; and test preparation practices in turn produced positive effects on these CET test-takers' reading performance. Although these studies were conducted on test preparation practices on different English language tests (e.g., the TOEFL and the CET), the mixed findings of these studies demonstrate the complicated nature and effects of test preparation that Chinese test-takers have experienced and also indicate a necessity of further exploring this topic. The PTE Academic, as a high-stake English language test newly entering into language testing market in China, has become a test that Chinese students make efforts to prepare. Thus, Chinese students' test preparation for the PTE Academic provides a suitable research context to examine how Chinese test-takers' test performances are influenced by their test preparation practices.

2. Research purpose and research questions

Focusing on one test preparation course for the PTE Academic at one commercial test preparation centre in China, this study aimed to understand what Chinese students have experienced when preparing for the PTE Academic. To reach this purpose, three inter-related aspects of test preparation experience were examined by the following three research questions:

1. What specific practices were employed to help Chinese students prepare for the PTE Academic?

2. What was the relationship between these practices and Chinese students' test scores on the PTE Academic?
3. How did Chinese students perceive their experience of preparing for the PTE Academic?

3. Method

3.1 Research site

This study was conducted at a commercial test preparation centre in Beijing that offered test preparation courses for the PTE Academic. As one professional partner of the Pearson Academic, the centre started offering test preparation courses for the PTE Academic since 2010. This centre offered test preparation courses for PTE Academic according to variations in students' expectations, ability levels, and schedule availabilities. After communicating with one supervisor at this centre about various courses, I found the Extended test preparation courses for the PTE Academic was most suitable for participant recruitment and data collection of this study. This course had largest number of student registration and higher stability of students' flows compared to other short-term courses (e.g., courses on weekends or during summer/winter vacations); and the duration of this course (8 months) allowed the teachers and supervisors to establish closer ties with the students and also to track the students' progress.

3.2 Participants

The participants included 25 students, 1 teacher, and 1 supervisor. Among the forty-one students registered for the extended PTE Academic preparation courses at this centre in 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 academic years, twenty-five students were recruited to participate in this study, with 18 from the first cohort and 7 from the second one. There were 6 students from the first cohort volunteering to be interviewed. All of the student participants were in fourth year of university and planned to pursue postgraduate programs in the United Kingdom.

The teacher (female) was in charge of managing students' requests and recording students' progress to facilitate this course. She was assigned with this work since the centre started offering test preparation courses for the PTE Academic in 2010. The supervisor (male) was responsible for the administration and the coordination of this extended PTE Academic course among other courses at this centre (such as IELTS test preparation courses). These two participants had good understandings of the Extended test preparation courses for the PTE Academic and the students taking this course.

3.3 Instruments

This study used four instruments to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to answer three research questions: (1) the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) self-assessment grid in Chinese, (2) the questionnaire on students' PTE Academic test preparation experience, (3) the interview guide (for students) on test preparation for the PTE Academic, and (4) the interview guide (for teacher and supervisor) on test preparation for the PTE Academic.

The CEFR self-assessment grid collected data of student participants' self-assessment of their English language proficiency. This set of data was used as the variables of students' English proficiency in statistical analyses (e.g., correlations) to examine how their PTE Academic test performances were associated with their English language proficiency.

The questionnaire on students' PTE Academic test preparation experiences was designed to collect data of student participants' experiences of taking the PTE Academic test preparation course and their background information. The first section on the test preparation experience included the items on expectations of taking preparation course, course contents, practices employed to improve students' performance, test preparation resources/materials, and perceived effectiveness of the course. The second section on the background included items about student participants' background, such as gender, age, major, years of English language learning, previous PTE Academic test taking, hours of daily English learning in recent months. All of these data helped to understand what and how specific practices were used to prepare the students for the PTE Academic and to also the understand the relationship between these practices and the students PTE Academic test scores.

Two interview guides were designed to collect data of how the participants perceived their experience of taking preparation courses for the PTE Academic: one for student participants and the other for teacher and supervisor participants. The interview guide for student participants focused on how they perceived their learning through taking this course; and the interview guide for teacher and supervisor participants allowed them to reflect issues and challenges related to the PTE Academic test preparation and English language learning that their students reported.

In addition to the data collected through the above instruments, the students' PTE Academic test scores were also collected with the help of the teacher participant. Each student took the PTE Academic twice during their taking the preparation course (e.g., 1st test taking in December or January, 2nd in May to July), and each student had two sets of test scores (including one total score and four sub-skill scores) to be included in the dataset for later analyses.

3.4 Data analysis

The statistical analyses were performed on all quantitative data, including self-assessment data, student participants' questionnaire data, and students' PTE Academic test scores. First, descriptive statistics were calculated to describe characteristics of student participants, their experiences of taking preparation courses for the PTE Academic. Second, five individual one-way repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) were performed to examine whether the student participants' test scores on the PTE Academic changed over two test-takings, one on the total score, the others on the four sub-skill scores. Third, correlation analyses were conducted to investigate whether student participants' test preparation practices significantly correlated with their PTE Academic test performances. The construct mean scores of the practices for each sub-skill of the PTE Academic were calculated and entered as variables in correlation analyses with the variables of the students' PTE Academic total score and sub-skill scores. Correlations analyses were also performed on students' self-assessment data and their PTE Academic test scores to examine how these variables were correlated.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim using a transcription software f5. All interview transcripts were then combined into one Word document for analysis. An inductive approach was used to analyze interview data to understand participants' experience and perceptions of preparing for the PTE Academic. The meaningful segments (e.g., sentences, phrases, words, examples cited by participants) in relation to participants' experience and perceptions of in transcripts were coded, and the related codes were categorized to form themes.

4. Results

4.1 Results of quantitative data analyses

4.1.1 Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics showed that, for the constructs of test preparation practices on writing, reading and listening, the practice with the highest mean within each construct was all related to scanning: scanning texts for main ideas in writing summary task ($M=4.44$, $SD=.82$), scanning first paragraph of texts ($M=4.28$, $SD=.84$), and scanning questions to predict contents of listening scripts or tasks ($M=4.2$, $SD=.82$). Within each of these three constructs, all the practices specific to the PTE Academic had higher means than the practices pertinent to improving comprehensive English proficiency. This indicated that, when preparing for the writing, reading and listening, the students learned more about the practices specific to the PTE Academic. However, for the construct of test preparation practices on speaking, taking notes of key words was the practice with the highest mean ($M=4.24$, $SD=.66$). The practices on improving English speaking skill had higher means compared to this kind of practices in other three constructs (i.e., test preparation practices on reading, listening and writing), for example, practice logic in oral expressions ($M=4.1$, $SD=.91$).

The results of the instructional contents covered by the Extended test preparation courses showed that, the instruction on the PTE Academic specific training was reported with higher means compared to the general English language training. This indicates that the instruction towards the PTE Academic became the primary instructional contents, such as doing PTE Academic mock test, explaining scoring and rating scales of each task. It was interesting to note that the students ranked "improving English language proficiency" ($M=4.48$, $SD= 1.01$) higher than other expectations in relation to the PTE Academic test-taking. However, despite such expectation, the practices that the students learned from teachers' instruction tended to focus more on the PTE Academic.

The descriptive statistics of students test scores on two PTE Academic live tests (Table 1) showed that students achieved higher scores on both total score and sub-scores on their second PTE Academic test-taking, with the smallest increase of 0.37 points in sub-score of speaking and the largest increase of 5.75 points in sub-score of writing. With this increase, students' performance on writing improved from the least on their first PTE Academic test-taking to the second least on the second test-taking, with sub-score of writing ($M=46.83$) being higher than that of reading ($M=45.33$). Students' performances on sub-skills of speaking and listening remained consistently better than other two sub-skills across two test-takings.

Table 1: Descriptive Results of Students’ Test Performances on Two PTE Academic Test-takings

	1st PTE Academic (N=24)		2nd PTE Academic (N=25)		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Total	47.44	5.72	Total	49.79	5.54
Speaking	54.92	7.94	Speaking	55.29	7.14
Listening	46.72	6.24	Listening	49.83	7.18
Reading	42.88	7.28	Writing	46.83	6.62
Writing	41.08	7.35	Reading	45.33	6.77

4.1.2 Repeated measures of ANOVA

The repeated measures ANOVA (Table 2) indicated significant time effects on total score, the sub-scores of listening and writing. Referring to students’ better performance on their second test-taking observed from the descriptive results, the significant time effects revealed that students achieved significantly higher on their total score and sub-scores of listening and writing when they took the PTE Academic again. Students improved most on their writing performance, indicated by an effect size of .29, which was the largest effect size among these three significant time effects. No significant effects were found on the PTE Academic sub-scores of reading and speaking, indicating that students’ performances on the PTE Academic sub-scores of reading and speaking did not have significant difference over time.

Table 2: Results of One-way Repeated Measures ANOVA between 1st and 2nd PTE Academic Scores

	Wilks’ Lambda	F(1,23)	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Time effect on PTE Academic total score	0.77	6.72	.016	0.23
Time effect on PTE Academic listening score	0.79	6.18	.021	0.21
Time effect on PTE Academic writing score	0.71	9.3	.006	0.29

4.1.3 Correlations

Correlation analyses were performed to investigate whether there were significant correlations between students’ test preparation practices and their PTE Academic test performances. The four construct mean scores of students’ test preparation practices on four sub-skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) were used as variables with the students’ PTE Academic total scores and their sub-scores in correlation analyses. No significant correlations were found in these analyses.

Significant correlations (Table 3) were found between self-assessed scores (including self-total, self-listening, self-speaking and self-writing) and students’ PTE Academic scores. Interestingly, students’ self-assessed scores were more

significantly correlated with their first-time PTE Academic scores than with their test scores when they repeated the PTE Academic; and self-assessed scores were more significantly correlated with the PTE Academic speaking score than other sub-skill scores. Combined with results that showed the students’ score gains on listening, reading and writing between two test-takings, the significant correlations between the sub-skill score of speaking and the students’ self-assessed speaking score indicated that, the students’ speaking skill remained relatively stable.

Table 3: Significant Correlations of CEFR Self-assessment Grid Scores and PTE Academic Scores

	1st PTE Academic					2nd PTE Academic	
	Total	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing	Total	Speaking
CEFR self-total	.512**	.487*	.401*	.587**			.437*
CEFR self-listening	.570**	.592**	.457*	.611**	.407*	.411*	.462*
CEFR self-speaking	.507**	.489*		.583**			.504*
CEFR self-writing				.498*			

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

4.2 Results of qualitative data analyses

Four themes emerged from the inductive analysis of interview transcripts of the participants’ perceptions of PTE Academic preparation experience: familiarity of the PTE Academic, difficulty in the PTE Academic test score gains, perceived improvement in English language proficiency, and alternative to the PTE Academic.

Familiarity of the PTE Academic

All students commented that this course helped them familiarize the PTE Academic test, including delivery mode, procedure, test formats and specific test tasks. These participants mentioned that they did not have much experience in computerized testing, although they had taken many tests on their educational journey towards the undergraduate programs they were currently in. The course helped the students know what were involved in a computerized test and what they needed to attend to for this type of test. The students further commented that the course helped them know test formats. As a new test entering into China, the students there were limited resources available to prepare the test except for the Official Guide to PTE Academic; therefore taking test preparation course was regarded as the most efficient way to help the students “get ready”. Some teachers of the PTE Academic test preparation courses were professionally trained by the Pearson testing division, so these teachers knew what each test format was and what each test format required test takers to do. Therefore, the teachers’ instruction on introducing test formats of the PTE Academic demystified students’ uncertainty to this new test.

Difficulty in the PTE Academic test score gains

It is interesting that all students claimed it was difficult to improve their test scores. Some students commented that they had known their friends who took either the TOEFL iBT or the IELTS increased their scores by at least 5-10 points or 0.5 band score “very easily” after taking some short-term test preparation courses. However, they did not achieve such score gains as they expected. The teacher further commented the difficulty on increasing test scores by recalling

one student's experience of repeating the PTE Academic. The student got exactly same score on her three attempts on the PTE Academic, despite her improvement that the teacher had observed.

Some students also talked about reasons related to difficulty in increasing test scores. The PTE Academic was commented as "a test that is not involved too many strategies", therefore, the students said no tasks or items that could be completed by strategies or tricks even though test takers could not understand tasks or items. The limited exercises for the PTE Academic was also addressed as a reason because they believed that doing lots of exercises was a very common way that a majority of Chinese students used with the hope to achieve high scores. Except for the exercises on the Official Guide, students had difficulty in finding reliable exercises they could use to practice the PTE Academic tasks.

Perceived improvement in English language proficiency

All students claimed that their English language proficiency improved after taking this PTE Academic preparation course. Their perceptions of the improvement were based on their performance on the classroom-based assessment tasks and the evaluative feedbacks they received from their teachers of this course. The listening, speaking, and writing were listed as the skills that students thought they improved. For example, the students interpreted the less comments on correcting the students' errors in speaking tasks in class as the improvement in speaking skills. The trainings on academic writing skill compensated the limited instructions these students received in their undergraduate English courses, and also prepared them for the writing tasks in both the PTE Academic and the academic programs these students might be admitted.

Alternative to the PTE Academic

The difficulty in achieving the required test scores directly influenced the students' decisions of using the PTE Academic scores for their applications. Some could not obtain the required sub-scores on particular specific language skills even though their total scores had reached the requirements set by the universities they planned to apply. In such cases, this teacher said, these students would rather take the IELTS as an attempt to jump over score requirement hurdles. The supervisor who coordinated this course also discussed some students' alternative choice to the PTE Academic scores. He noticed that some universities in UK changed their requirements on minimum scores of the PTE Academic without notice. Students were unprepared for this change and found the requirements after change were difficult to reach in short period of time. The students from the previous cohort (2012-2-013 academic year), who took the PTE Academic tests but used the IELTS or the TOEFL iBT scores in their academic applications, recommended the IELTS or the TOEFL iBT to the next cohort, because the scores were also accepted by universities in UK, and more importantly, they believed that the trainings on these two tests might help increase test scores in short period of time.

5. Discussion

This study examined Chinese students' test preparation for the PTE Academic from three aspects: the test preparation practices, the relationship between these practices and the students PTE Academic test scores, and the perceptions of their experience preparing for the PTE Academic. The findings indicated that the test preparation practices influenced the students' PTE Academic test performance and self-perceived English language proficiency, and that the students' experience of preparing for the PTE Academic influenced PTE Academic their decisions of using the PTE Academic test scores.

5.1 PTE Academic performance

The repeated measures ANOVA showed that students performed better on their total score and sub-scores of listening and writing skills when they took the PTE Academic for the second time. Although no directly significant correlations were found between the test preparation practices and the students' test scores, the cross-referencing of the qualitative results may provide explanations to such observed test performance improvement. For example, some students mentioned that they listened to the native-English speaking teachers very carefully in order to perform the in-class tasks. The frequent practices of this kind, although not directly oriented to the PTE Academic tasks, might help the students improve their listening skills.

5.2 Self-perceived English language proficiency

Students reported the perceived improvement in their English language proficiency from taking the Extended preparation course for the PTE Academic. The characteristic of this course might account for the improvement they perceived. This extended course was offered throughout each academic year with two terms and approximately 400 instructions hours. The regular hours of instructions on English language course for undergraduate students in China were around 100 hours per academic year¹. It was necessary to attend to the fact that the College English course was compulsory in first two years of undergraduate programs. In this study, all students were fourth-year undergraduate students; therefore, they did not have access to any regular English language instructions at their universities. The PTE Academic test preparation course these students took, which was offered every other day in the first term and everyday in the second term, resumed their training in English language. Students' involvement in this extended test preparation course could be an explanation of their perceived improvement in English language proficiency.

5.3 PTE Academic test score use

The perceived difficulty in improving test performance and the challenges related to the PTE Academic test scores had influenced the students' use of the PTE Academic scores. The high percentage of students who had taken other English language tests (48%) shown by descriptive results and a declined number of students who chose to take the PTE Academic were the evidences of such influence. Although the challenge that the participants (including the students, the teacher and the supervisor) reported was out of Pearson's control (e.g., the change of test score requirements without notice), such challenge greatly influenced the students' decisions of using test scores on other testing programs as alternatives to the PTE Academic, and further have the impact on promoting the PTE Academic among Chinese students.

5.4 Limitations

As a new test that starts its administration in China, the PTE Academic has been experiencing a gradual process of being recognized by Chinese students. Therefore, this study had some difficulties of recruiting students to participate.

¹ The calculation is: 3 hours of instruction/week * 32-36 weeks in one academic year = 96-108 hours of instruction. The number of instruction hours per week used in this calculation was based on the researcher's experience of teaching College English course in China from 2001—2010, which was the compulsory course that Chinese undergraduate students were required to take.

The very small sample size (25 students) limited the study from performing some advanced inferential statistical analyses, (such as factor analyses, multiple regression analyses) that have more power than correlation analyses to investigate the relationship between the test preparation practices and the students' PTE Academic test scores. Future studies with larger sample size are suggested to compare with the findings of this study.

6. Conclusion

With an exploratory nature, this study provided empirical evidence to understand Chinese students' experience of preparing for the PTE Academic. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative data demonstrated that Chinese students performed better when they repeated the PTE Academic, and that they perceived improvement in their English language proficiency after taking test preparation course. The contextual factors (e.g., the characteristics of the PTE Academic test preparation course) needed to be considered when interpreting the results of improvements identified in statistical analyses and qualitative analyses. In addition, some factors related to the PTE Academic test score use had influenced prospective PTE Academic test-takers in China when making choices on English language proficiency tests they would use for their academic program applications.

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