**Introduction**

We, the authors, are researchers and lecturers in the area of academic support for students. Much of what we research (presented here) relates to exploring the ‘English’ students need to succeed at university. As lecturers, we work with students to help them succeed academically and much of our practice is informed by research. In our research, we find this ‘English’ to be fundamentally different from that of the IELTS test. Thus, in this article, we challenge the power invested by HE institutions in the IELTS test and suggest this power be reallocated to subject specialists. We argue that ‘English’, rather than being an abstract and objective entity that can be removed from context for the purposes of testing anywhere, as IELTS assumes, is in fact individual and subjective and uniquely intertwined with its subject content and context (Voloshinov, 1929; Author and Author, 2016; Author and Author, 2016, cf. Hymes, 1964).

Our article is structured as follows: we first consider the IELTS test and its ‘English’. Second, we present theory and arguments around abstract objectivist and individual subjectivist perspectives of language (e.g. Voloshinov, 1929; Bakhtin, 1982) and the importance of context to language usage. Third, we detail how we have used interviews and focus groups to gather data from lecturers in Engineering, Nursing, Psychology, Design, Business, and Computing. We then present and, in relation to the theory, analyse and discuss our data around the following three themes:

1. How ‘English’ is specific to the content of subjects.

2. How the ‘English’ of subjects has unique ideological and psychological elements.

3. How the non-textual elements of different subjects are intertwined with their ‘English’.

We argue that our data supports these three themes and thus, IELTS cannot test this ‘English’. Consequently, the power accorded to it by our institutions needs to be challenged. In the conclusion we suggest ways forward to determine students’ ‘English’ preparedness.

**IELTS**

A British Council website states: “IELTS is the world’s most popular English language test for higher education and global migration. IELTS is accepted by over 9,000 organisations worldwide including universities, employers, immigration authorities and professional bodies. Over 2.2 million IELTS tests were taken globally last year” (Future Learn 2015). As IELTS note, “IELTS is recognized as a secure, valid and reliable indicator of true-to-life ability to communicate in English for education, immigration and professional accreditation” (IELTS, 2015). Further, much research (e.g. Turner, 2004; IELTS 2015) is conducted in the frame (Goffmann, 1974) or paradigm (Kuhn, 1970) that the ‘English’ of IELTS equates to the ‘English’ needed for study. UK universities, and HE institutions worldwide (e.g. in the UK, Australia, the Netherlands, Taiwan, and the United States) base their recruitment on the assumption that a prescribed ‘English’ score in IELTS represents student preparedness to study in ‘English’. These institutions thus accord the power to IELTS to do this.

Nevertheless, IELTS is not without its critics. Although some research claims high correlation between IELTS scores and academic performance (e.g. Feast 2002; Bayliss & Ingram, 2006), much claims correlation is low. Hirsch (2007) cites many studies (e.g. Davies 1988; Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000) and notes the “predictive validity of test scores is poor at around 9%” (Hirsch, 2007, p.197). Others argue *higher* prescribed IELTS scores are needed (e.g. Coley, 1999; Müller, 2015), or that some subjects require higher ‘levels’ of ‘English’. For instance, Bayliss and Ingram (2006) suggest Medical Science needs higher ‘levels’ of ‘English’. Even in Language for Specific Purposes testing, the argument that “the principle of distinct language abilities has more to do with content than with language” (Davies, 2001, p.133) is relied on to justify separate content and language testing. Others suggest that IELTS scores be supplemented by pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes course provision, (Harris, 2014). Overall, “nobody would argue that ELP [English Language Proficiency] has no role to play in academic achievement” (Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999, p.63). Indeed, it is argued, ‘Degree-level study without language competency is absurd’ (Harris, 2014, p.27). Thus, HE institutions assume IELTS scores represent preparedness, and even when such scores are critiqued in the research literature, it is assumed that content and language are separate entities, that English Language Proficiency is fundamental to academic achievement, and can be assessed and supported as an abstract objective entity (Voloshinov, 1929). Thus, the power IELTS has to test English per se is not challenged, and when it is challenged, this is often to suggest increasing prescribed scores. Therefore, HE institutions, assume the ‘English’ of IELTS equates to the ‘English’ needed for study at a HE institution. They assume ‘English’ is an abstract objective entity that can be removed for testing and teaching.

Yet, the IELTS test does have unique vocabulary and unique ideological and psychological elements. Preparation materials help students with specific terminology such as ‘karate’ and ‘hockey’ (Aish and Tomlinson, 2012a), and dictionary definitions are key. For example, from an IELTS vocabulary guide: “valuable: ADJECTIVE if you describe someone as **valuable**, you mean that they are very useful and helpful. *Many of our teachers also have valuable academic links with Heidelberg University. The experience was very valuable.”* (Williams, 2012, p. 19). Much Academic IELTS vocabulary is based on the specific Cambridge Learner corpus which in turn is based on research “known to be useful to candidates” (Brooke-Hart and Jakeman 2012, p.6; Brooke-Hart and Jakeman, 2013, p.6). For example, ‘value’ in the Collins COBUILD for IELTS, is described as ““1. Uncountable noun. The value of something such as a quality, attitude, or method is its importance or usefulness. If you place a particular value on something that is the importance you think it has” (Moore, 2011, p. 433). Also, for ‘vulnerable’: “vulnerable ADJECTIVE Someone who is **vulnerable** is weak and without protection, with the result that they are easily hurt physically or emotionally. *Old people are particularly vulnerable members of our society*” (Williams, 2012, p. 7; see also Moore, 2011). Such definitions, although neutral and decontextualized, are clearly assumed to represent the ‘English’ needed by students.

In addition to having unique vocabulary, IELTS has unique ideological and psychological elements, of ‘grammatical accuracy’; ‘accurate spelling’; ‘spontaneity’ and ‘flexibility’. Such elements students “need to master in order to achieve the IELTS score required by many universities and employers”(Moore, 2011, p.4). Accuracy is greatly stressed, and inaccuracy penalised: “you will be expected to know the spellings of common words and names… an answer wrongly spelt will be marked incorrect, so get plenty of practice before the exam”(Short, 2012, p.11). Furthermore: “grammatical accuracy and range are part of the marking criteria for the IELTS Writing and Speaking papers. Also, grammatical accuracy is important in the IELTS Listening and Reading papers”(Aish and Tomlinson 2012b, p.4). Regarding spontaneity and flexibility, students are reminded, “it is very important that you do not memorise entire sentences or answers. IELTS examiners are trained to spot this and will change the topic if they think you are repeating memorized answers” (Snelling, 2012, p.5). IELTS topics could be, for example: family; free time; special occasions; hometown; TV and radio; weather; studying; work; holidays and travel; health; important events; possessions (Snelling 2012) and perhaps Bio-fuels; Obesity; and Home composting (Tyreman, 2012). For IELTS, ‘content’ is general, for example “In… the Listening test you will hear one person talking about an academic topic of general interest” (Short, 2012, p.30). In the second IELTS writing task, general questions could be, ‘What are the advantages and disadvantages of children using mobile phones?’ or ‘A country which has free healthcare has a healthier population. To what extent do you agree or disagree?’ (Aish and Tomlinson, 2012a). These elements are thus assumed by our HE institutions to be key elements that students need to succeed.

IELTS thus tests an ‘English’ with neutral and decontextualised vocabulary, and with key ideological and psychological elements of grammatical accuracy, spontaneity and flexibility. HE institutions, by according power to IELTS to determine the preparedness of ‘English’, must inevitably assume this vocabulary, and these elements are key. The fundamental basis of this assumption is that the ‘English’ students need to succeed at a HE institution can be removed from context and tested *separately*, as an abstract objectivist entity (Voloshinov, 1929). We now challenge this assumption, and thereby challenge the power our HE institutions accord to the IELTS test. We argue that ‘English’ is an individual subjectivist entity, and that context is fundamental to the ’English’ used.

**The importance of context to language usage**

The assumption that IELTS can be relied on to determine students’ ‘English’ preparedness neglects the importance of context (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986) and dialogue (Bakhtin, 1981) to language. It is an assumption grounded in an abstract objectivist view of language (Voloshinov, 1929) that sees language as stable and immutable, a “system of normatively identical forms which the individual consciousness finds ready-made and which is incontestable for that consciousness” (Voloshinov, 1929, p.57). Such a system, once acquired, is assumed comparable to ‘English’ anywhere. Indeed, much research into linguistics and language is also based on this assumption. For example, corpus linguistics (e.g. McEnery and Hardie, 2011) deals with huge bodies of separated text fed into computers to produce frequency lists. Genre Analysis (Swales, 1990) examines separated text (usually written, occasionally oral) for key discourse markers and linguistic moves. Academic Literacies (Lea and Street, 1998) undoubtedly involves consideration of social elements, of elements of power and even occasionally of visual elements, but all such elements are accessible through the text, i.e. the language is assumed removable and analysable outside its context.

Conversely, an individual subjectivist view of language sees language underpinned by ideological and psychological elements unique to specific contexts and dialogue. Here, the language does not represent a stable normative system, but is only “the inert crust, the hardened lava of language creativity, of which linguistics makes an abstract construct in the interests of the practical teaching of language as a ready-made instrument” (Voloshinov, 1929, p.48).

Rather, the user’s individual psychology and consciousness (Voloshinov, 1929) within the context of usage gives language its meaning. This stresses the key role played by psychological and ideological elements such as thoughts, intonation, and individual consciousness (Voloshinov, 1929). These contexts, what Wittgenstein (1953) calls world-settings, and what Hymes (1964) called key elements in an ethnography of communication, are where language usage and meaning lie. As Vygotsky noted, “the meaning of a word represents such a close amalgam of thought and language that it is hard to tell whether it is a phenomenon of speech or a phenomenon of thought” (Vygotsky 1962, p.120).

In terms of lexical meaning, Bakhtin (1986) identifies three owners of words: the user (the addresser); the receiver (the addressee) and; nobody (the dictionary meaning). For Bakhtin, dictionary definitions are decontextualized and neutral. Theoretically therefore, the ‘English’ in context is underpinned by individual verbal or non-verbal elements. Such elements constitute psychological or conscious underpinning that mean the ‘English’ appears similar on the surface, but is in fact unique, and not comparable to ‘English’ elsewhere (Voloshinov, 1929). In their world-setting, underpinned by the individual psychological and conscious elements of an individual subject area (cf. Author & Author, 2016), words can have very different meanings (cf. Author and Author, 2014; Author and Author, 2016) for which dictionaries provide only neutralised definitions. To assume that such ‘English’ is representative of all contexts is on this basis misplaced. Further, if this assumption is misplaced, and if key ideological and psychological elements also underpin language usage in context, it is arguable that the ‘English’ used will be appropriated differently and understood differently once a context changes.

**Data collection**

The data we draw on is from interviews and focus groups from a number of projects (e.g. Author and Author, 2014; Author and Author, 2016; Author and Author, 2016). The theme of these was the ‘English’ required by students to succeed in their subjects and the thinking underpinning it. As researchers and lecturers working in academic support for students, our motivation for these projects was to research how to help support the students we were teaching. One project explored the different perceptions of lecturers and students regarding assessment terms such as ‘Discuss’ and ‘Analyse’ (Author and Author, 2014) and another to explore the ‘English’ lecturers felt students needed to succeed in their subjects (Author and Author, 2016, Author and Author, 2016). A further project related to how lecturers would describe and critically evaluate a physical object in their subject area, and hence what would be expected of students. The physical object chosen was a brightly coloured ceramic teapot that we had successfully used with Design students to illustrate and facilitate description and critique in Design. We wanted to explore how other subject areas such as Nursing and Engineering would describe and critique it. For these projects, lecturers (50 in total) came from the broad subject areas of Engineering, Design, Nursing, Psychology, Business and Computing. These subject areas and lecturers were chosen as the students they teach are also ones that we help support. We note that these are professional subjects as such and would have a professional or applied vocabulary to them. All data were transcribed by the authors (Bird, 2005) and analysed with a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2011). This consisted of reading and rereading the transcripts to explore emerging themes. These themes often changed or diffracted (Mazzei, 2014) until we arrived at those we present and discuss below. All study was ethically approved and all data is anonymised (Christians, 2011).

**Presentation and analysis of results**

We present and analyse our results in response to the three themes:

1. How ‘English’ is specific to the content of subjects.

2. How the ‘English’ of subjects has unique ideological and psychological elements.

3. How the non-textual elements of different subjects are intertwined with their ‘English’.

We then discuss this data in light of how it challenges the power given to IELTS by our institutions, and how it underlines the need to undertake any assessment of the ‘English’ students need for their studies in the subject context.

**1. How ‘English’ is specific to the content of subjects.**

Many lecturers’ comments show subject specific content of the ‘English’ used. For example, in Service Management (Business): *“it’s quite complex language… we look at MacDonaldization so we have words… like calculability… ‘rationality’, ‘standardisation’ ‘customization’.”* Elsewhere, in Marketing (Business), for *“social psychology you’ll be talking about normative beliefs and… all sorts of classic conditionings and… heuristics.”* Similarly, in Business Information Systems (Computing), one lecturer commented that when students, *“‘discuss’ something … the student needs to be able to place it within its subject domain… and it actually includes things like ‘define’… to… ‘discuss’ the role of ERP* [Enterprise Resource Planning] *systems integrating data in organisations… first… I would expect them to ‘define’ an ERP system.”* Another Information Systems lecturer felt that for a term such as ‘business value’, in contrast to the IELTS definition (see above) the dictionary definition would give only, *“a very narrow interpretation of the term.”* Consequently, they helped students develop *“an understanding… through discussing the terms and what they mean, operationalising or actually using the term in a business case study, putting them in context, putting them into operation, carrying out a value analysis, looking at different types of value… establishing that ‘value’ is not just economic - there are different levels of service value and quality aspects as well.”*

Also, ‘Empathy’ was viewed uniquely, in one Product Design lecturer’s words: *“empathy within Design is usually with the idea of having some sort of resolution at the end of it, and yet, there may be no resolution in… Nursing, it might be more to do with merely being willing to understand and listen.”* This Product Design lecturer also contrasted the use of English in Design with Engineering through relating the experiences of an Engineering student: *“our use of language in Art Design has been completely different to the experience they have in Engineering... sometimes words change… It might have more complex meaning, a more complex nature than the initial A to B story telling type of approach.”* In a Child nursing context, for the term ‘vulnerability’, in contrast to the IELTS definition (see above) *“there’s a clearly defined definition around child development… we would say to them well, actually, there’s difficulties with the dictionary definition.”* Thus, not only was it the case that the subject had its own specific vocabulary that IELTS, with its need to assess all students, can not assess, but also, and more importantly, the ‘English’ ‘words’ IELTS does assess, such as ‘value’ or ‘vulnerable’ were appropriated uniquely in the subject context. Therefore, the words only represented the ‘inert hardened crust’ (Voloshinov, 1929) of the language and needed to be placed in context (cf Bakhtin, 1981) and subject world setting (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953). IELTS, with its emphasis on neutralized dictionary definitions (Williams, 2012) cannot do this.

Indeed, one Interactive Media Design (Computing) lecturer was highly critical of IELTS ‘English’ regarding its indication of preparedness to study: *“French students with the IELTS we’ve had real issues…* [they have] *great* [Design] *subject knowledge… but their grasp of English is, can be challenging and that’s where I don’t think IELTS particularly works because… it’s not… subject specific so the terminology just really starts to throw them… the nuances are different or the terminology they’ve got slightly wrong or they’ve misinterpreted coz they’re translating from an English textbook into French… it’s not necessarily a case of just upping the level on IELTS either… it would help them maybe discursively in a tutorial perhaps but it doesn’t help with the technical jargon or the subject specific language.”*

Here, this lecturer’s use of the phrase *“it’s not necessarily a case of just upping the IELTS either”* provides a compelling illustration that raising the prescribed score of the IELTS required is insufficient, given that *“it doesn’t help with the technical jargon or the subject specific language.”* Indeed, when this is considered with the above data that illustrates how the words are indeed appropriated uniquely in their subject context (cf. Bakhtin, 1981) and how words such as ‘empathy’; ‘value’ and ‘vulnerable’ would be understood and used differently in the specific subject context, it shows that the power accorded to IELTS by our HE institutions needs to be challenged. It underlines the need to undertake any assessment of the ‘English’ students need to succeed in HE within their subject context. Worryingly, what it also shows is that, given that when removed from its context the words only represents the ‘inert hardened crust’ (Voloshinov, 1929) of the language, what the IELTS test is actually assessing is only a neutralized and decontextualized hardened crust.

**2. How the ‘English’ of subjects has unique ideological and psychological elements.**

In Design, a key content-linked ideological element underpinning the subject was visual. For example, in Graphic Design, *“because we are teaching a visual subject, referencing lots of visual language… referencing great cinema or literature, just in snippets of conversation you talk about something or a play.”* Graphic Design thus had an underlying element of *“a visual English, yes. You’ve got the semiotics of that.”* This did not mean, however, that a written element was not important to Design. As one Product Design lecturer commented: *“With designers we have to be careful that we don't start wearing the visual learners thing overly much. The writing thing is fantastic and I love to be able to write.”* Yet, underlying this writing were key elements of process, form, surface, texture, a whole host of visual elements. As one product designer commented on how they would evaluate a teapot they were presented with: *“from a designer's point of view… that is not quite right with me… I would be questioning why they had done all the things with the form, surface, texture, colouring, patterning, decoration that they had done. I would be looking for reasons for all of that.”*

In Nursing, key content-linked ideological and psychological elements were empathy, compassion, emotion. As one Nursing lecturer commented in a focus group: *“we very much aim to… teach compassion as part of our curriculum, that’s actually a code of core element of the curriculum and increasingly so across all of nursing.”* One Mental Health lecturer noted, *“attitudes and values are… a huge part of Mental Health…if they use language that was derogatory… disrespectful… insensitive in some way then we would pick up on that side in their written work.”* In General Nursing and their own approach to a task, another lecturer commented, *“I’m always looking at things from a safety aspect from a caring aspect from a health aspect from a hygiene aspect… looking and thinking and observing.”* The idea of a mind-set and of key content-linked elements underpinning the ‘English’ used are also illustrated by a Learning Disability Nursing Lecturer comments, who, when first presented in the project using a colourful ceramic teapot as an object to describe and evaluate, said: *“as soon as you said teapot I was already thinking cups of tea, making things… I think that’s just a mind-set you know I wasn’t thinking about circumference or the height you know… I was thinking ‘Oh, we could make that!’ And that’d be a really good thing to do… communication, warmth, empathy, teapot.”*

In contrast, for Psychology lecturers who specialised in therapy, any use of ‘English’ was underpinned by focusing on the people behind an object, *“I suppose because of the therapist in* [me]*, I’m person centred… I’m interested in people, relationships so instantly I go about what’s the person behind it and what’s his or her relationship with that object and then… what impact this teapot has on me on others and… that’s… when I see it attracts my attention is it to my taste?”* One Social Psychology lecturer also commented on the different mind-set they had compared to nursing lecturers: *“they* [nurses] *are much more practical, we are much more theoretical… and also we look at different aspects of things.”*

In Engineering, however, key content-linked underpinning elements related to material properties. One Materials Engineering Lecturer, when asked to evaluate the teapot they were presented with commented on the fact that, *“this [picks up teapot] is a commodity ceramic, I use engineering ceramics but if I wanted to push this aspect – that's porous because it's very difficult to get a solid ceramic and that's why that's a commodity ceramic. Whereas engineering ceramic would be less porous but then you could utilise the use of porous. For gas flow and surface area increase.”* This lecturer went on to say that, *“this year, one of my reports was a 1L, carbonated drinks vessel. They had to critically evaluate the application to get the properties required and then to work out the materials you could use. And then from the choice of materials which would be evaluated they would then choose the manufacturing process. That is year two.”*

Thus, underpinning the ‘English’ used in the subject contexts were unique ideological and psychological elements. In Design, the visual was key, in Nursing, empathy, safety, and emotion were key, in Psychology, thinking about the person behind the object was key, and in Engineering the materials used and their properties were key. Inevitably, these elements would influence the choice of language used, they would inform the thinking and the words and the thoughts would be inextricably intertwined (cf. Vygotsky, 1962). Here again, therefore, the context (cf. Bakhtin, 1981) and subject world setting (cf. Wittgenstein, 1953) were of fundamental importance. It was this context that influenced the mind-set that in turn determined the ‘English’ used and what underlay its meaning. The significance of this in terms of challenging the power invested by our HE institutions in the IELTS test can be illustrated by considering one of the topics IELTS candidates may be asked to talk about: Home Composting (Tyreman, 2012). For IELTS, it would focus on grammatical accuracy and spontaneity. Yet, for designers, the ‘English’ they would use to talk about Home Composting would emphasise the visual and surround the design of the container, for nurses it would consider the empathy involved perhaps in working together to compost at home, and health and safety. For psychologists, the person behind the Home Composter would be key, and for engineers, they may consider the materials used and their properties, and perhaps measure the thermal qualities of the compost material.

Notably, many lecturers commented on the linkage between thought and language. One Service management lecturer commented that, *“language is… how we think… so if you take the term of ‘positivism’ well ‘positivism’s’ incredibly broad church… we’re thinking aloud so if you don’t have the vocabulary you won’t have access to the concepts, if you don’t have access to the concepts… your thinking won’t develop.”* Critically, as one Psychology lecturer specialised in Therapy commented: *“thought only exists within the language framework… if you change the language then the thought process will change… the more advanced your language the more advanced is your thinking, end of.”*

The underpinning psychological and ideological elements of the IELTS test are grammatical accuracy, and spontaneity and flexibility (Moore, 2011; Short, 2012). Yet, and as some of the lecturers we spoke to noted, of their own accord we stress, these underpinning elements may actually be disadvantageous. For example, one Product Design lecturer even commented that the IELTS test itself would be assessing elements that penalised good designers: *“predominantly a lot of students who might come onto an arts course might be dyslexic... I think that if I was taking people… in the sense of how well they do on the* [IELTS] *test I would probably have a really rubbish Design program. Usually some of my best students are actually the worst* [at IELTS]*. But brilliant designers.”* Further, in contrast to the need for absolute grammatical accuracy in IELTS, one Accounting lecturer commented that, *“a general point we have to say to students, particularly overseas ones, it would be nice if your English was perfect but it doesn’t really matter that much because our view has always been it’s a degree given in English not an English degree… the bottom line is we are not really that bothered by that if we can understand.”* Similarly, in Nursing, one Health Care Administration lecturer commented that, *“I’m not looking at spelling, I’m not looking at tenses quite so much…. then, because I think it’s more important for them to have the knowledge.”*

We argue that this data provides further weight to the challenge we make against the power our HE institutions invest in the IELTS test. In addition to the way in which vocabulary is both unique and appropriated uniquely, we believe this data shows the key role of underpinning ideological and psychological elements that are fundamental to the thinking and meaning of the ‘English’ used in the specific context (Bakhtin, 1981). The very nature of the ‘English’ students need to succeed in their subjects is thus altered according to the specific subject concerned. Thus, ‘English’ is an individual subjective entity (Voloshinov, 1929). This being the case, IELTS can not test the ‘English’ of these subjects. Indeed, the data underline the need to determine students’ preparedness in ‘English’ in the subject context they will be going on to study. Worryingly, it also shows that the decontextualized and unique elements underpinning the IELTS test suggest our HE institutions are entrusting too much power to a test that assesses *its own* individual subjective type of ‘English’ that differs from the ‘English’ students need to succeed.

**3. How the non-textual elements of different subjects are intertwined with their ‘English’.**

IELTS does not, and indeed can not, test non-textual elements, it only tests textual (verbal or written) elements. The subjects we have researched, in contrast, have key non-textual elements that, critically, were intertwined with their ‘English’. For example, in Accounting (Business) one lecturer commented on how words were ‘tied in’ with non-textual elements, in their case numbers: *“there may well be many numerical examples, and… that tends to aid the understanding perhaps because it gives them something to hang the words on.”* Similarly, in Engineering, one lecturer underlined that students *“are writing mathematics. Some people would say that is a language.”* This lecturer then related a story of how they had *“once impressed a… Chinese student. He had… his [Chinese] University maths textbook with him, and I had a look at it, and he thought I could read Chinese. I said no I can't read Chinese but I can read mathematics. If you are a mathematician sometimes you need the words and sometimes words would be helpful but it's still possible to read something without any language. Apart from mathematical language.”* Similarly, in Thermal Fluids Engineering, although writing was required, this was mostly non-textual and mathematical: *“[I - In terms of writing… how much writing would be involved?] Sometimes quite a lot: numerical work, numerical analysis; in terms of written prose, not a great deal.”*

In Computing, non-textual elements of code were key. One Human Computer Interaction lecturer related how they “*teach a course for a Japanese company every summer, their ‘English’ is very poor but as soon as you get on to something technical the interaction between staff and delegates is much quicker, the… relevant electronic program, start showing code and they understand and they’re more confident talking about it.”* Thus, here also key non-textual elements figured prominently, and were inextricably linked with the verbal English used, in dialogue in the specific context (cf. Bakhtin, 1981). In Interactive Media Design, the content-linked non-textual element of the visual played such a key role in comparison to textual English at times that for students from China, *“we let them submit in Mandarin.”* In fact, this lecturer said they told students, *“we can understand whether you’re telling the story, we are not interested in whether your English is perfect. It’s not what this module is about, it’s about your ability to take media and tell stories through it… quite often it won’t be in a written way… it will be make a video or make a poster, describe it in a visual way.”*

In Nursing also, content-linked non-textual elements played a role. As a Learning Disability Nursing lecturer noted: *“for some of our people… even the English itself probably isn’t that important. The tone and the empathy and the warmth you could probably almost speak gobbledygook and it wouldn’t matter as long as a tone is engaging you are still communicating something… their non-verbal communication can actually be more important than their verbal communication.”*  Such emotional and empathic elements were also key in other areas of nursing, for example on the ward: *“‘the role of silence’* [and] *‘know when to hold your tongue’ those are probably non-verbal... you need to be able to… take a telling sometimes and… that’s how it works realistically in the ward… hold their ground in an appropriate way, knowing when to back off, knowing when to just sit and take it.”* When listening to people, the psychological and ideological elements of emotion and empathy were fundamental to the non-verbal communication that took place in Mental Health Nursing also *“to listen (pause) fully…. to listen to how the person is feeling… so it’s kind of in the area kind of counselling and therapy really.”*

Thus, key non-textual elements figured prominently in the subjects we researched. In Accounting and Engineering it was mathematics, in Computing it was code, in Design it was the visual element, in Nursing it was empathy, non-verbal communication and silence. These elements were often inextricably intertwined with the ‘English’ used, students could ‘hang their words’ onto the mathematics, or the importance of the elements could mean that traditional IELTS elements became of less relevance. For example in Design, students would be allowed to submit in Mandarin as the visual storytelling was key, and in Learning Disability Nursing students could be talking in ‘gobbledygook’ but still communicate with an engaging tone. Here again, subject context is fundamental to the ‘English’ and the non-verbal language used. Thought and language are inextricably connected (Vygotsky, 1962). Not only this, but clearly, the ‘English’ could not be cut away from its context for testing. It was not abstract objectivist, rather, it was individual subjectivist (Voloshinov, 1929).

**Discussion**

What ‘English’ then, does the IELTS test actually test? We argue the above theory and data show that IELTS tests a decontextualized and neutralised ‘English’ whose content is linked with ideological elements of spontaneity and grammatical accuracy. Not only may these elements not be of relevance to the subjects we researched above, but those subjects instead had their own unique ideological and psychological elements that underpinned their use of ‘English’. Furthermore, they had unique vocabulary, they appropriated vocabulary in a unique way, and they had unique non-textual elements. The IELTS test cannot test any of these elements, and it is on this basis that we challenge the power our HE institutions accord to the IELTS test to show the preparedness of students’ ‘English’.

We argue there are a number of implications of our HE institutions relying on and giving the power they do to the IELTS test as a determiner of the ‘English’ preparedness of students. We argue that firstly we are giving the wrong message to students and staff by saying that students’ ‘English’ is prepared to study here based on their attainment of a prescribed score in IELTS. Thus, when students struggle, they may feel it is their own fault, or perhaps that they have been misled. Staff, in comparison, may feel the test is not working or that the institution needs to ‘up the prescribed IELTS score’ for admissions when actually, as the above data arguably shows, their IELTS score may well have nothing to do with their students’ ‘English’ preparedness. What then, is the solution? We suggest reallocating this power to subject specialists in the institutions. We propose students be tested and assessed in ‘English’ through the subject content and subject context they will be going on to study, and that this be assessed and marked by subject specialists. Only in this way can we accurately judge the preparedness of students’ ‘English’ to study in English on their subject degrees in terms of the unique vocabulary, the unique appropriation of vocabulary, the individual ideological and psychological elements, and the key non-textual elements surrounding or supplanting the ‘English’ used.

**Conclusion**

As researchers and lecturers in the area of academic support for students, we research the ‘English’ students need to succeed at university, and help students with their university work through the academic support we give. Our investigations into the broad subject areas of Design, Engineering, Computing, Nursing, Psychology and Business have shown us that the ‘English’ used is unique and content-linked in both terminology and vocabulary; content-linked to underpinning ideological and psychological elements, and; content-linked with unique non-textual elements. We anticipate other subject areas would have their own unique elements, and indeed, that in more liberal arts type subjects such as English Literature or Philosophy this could differ greatly. None of these elements are tested, nor can they be tested by IELTS, and IELTS tests its own unique vocabulary and underpinning elements.

Thus, we challenge the power our HE institutions accord to the IELTS test. As a solution, we propose this power be reallocated to subject specialists to undertake assessment of students’ ‘English’ in the subject contexts they will study. Only then do we envision their ‘English’ can be appropriately assessed. We do not expect such a proposal to be popular or well received by ‘English’ language specialists, IELTS itself, subject specialists, or even students. We imagine that ‘English’ language specialists and IELTS itself may resist reallocation of such testing, particularly given the scale and lucrative properties of IELTS testing. We imagine subject specialists may not be happy the testing be done by them given the time pressures upon them in their daily workloads. We also wonder whether students may be unhappy that they need to show their ability in language in their subject given the need to change any preparation undertaken for ‘English’ assessment. We suggest, however, that such a power shift could be managed through an assessment procedure involving subject specialists, language specialists, IELTS itself, and preparation materials that already exist such as ‘A’ level subject texts and materials. Furthermore, and most importantly, we argue that if the power invested in IELTS is challenged, and if this power is given to subject specialists to undertake the assessment of ‘English’, then we will be effectively determining students preparedness for study and giving students a more accurate indication of the preparedness of their ‘English’ to do so. In terms of future avenues of research we would suggest exploring ways in which this testing can be done in the subject, and in studying other subject areas (particularly non-professional type subjects such as History) to reveal their underlying elements. We also suggest consulting subject lecturers regarding how they would feel about changing the English testing to be more subject specific, and how this could be done. Further, whether they felt there were any positive features of the IELTS test that it would be worth keeping. In addition, we consider it valuable to research wider questions that arise from the above, such as ‘Why does the idea of a ‘neutralised and decontextualized’ language have such appeal?’ ‘What role does IELTS play in its commodification?’ and, importantly, ‘Who stands to gain from the current testing status quo?’

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