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Test review: The versant by Pearson English placement test

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Abstract

This review focuses on the Versant by Pearson English Placement Test (VEPT). The VEPT is a quick and practical test for evaluating a person's speaking and comprehension abilities in English. The test targets independent learners, language training centres and academic institutions. As such, it aims to place adult English learners into language courses matching their abilities. The test achieves its intended impact, reliability and validity to some extent. The review is divided into two parts: a general description and an appraisal of the test. The general description provides an overview of the test, including details about preparation, scoring, and structure. The appraisal then evaluates the test's construct, validation, and washback in light of the claims made about test score uses. The review provides insights for the developer in improving and promoting the VEPT and useful information for test users.



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Test background

The Versant by Pearson English Placement Test (VEPT) is one of a series of Versant tests offered by Pearson PLC, a British publishing and education company. The Versant tests are intended for non-native English speakers who need to demonstrate their language abilities for academic or professional purposes. These tests assess one or more of the four core language skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading, and range in duration from 17 to 50 minutes. They are graded using artificial intelligence (AI) (meaning a computer scores the test, and results are available immediately). The four Versant tests are: VEPT, Versant English Speaking Test, Versant English Writing Test, and Versant 4 Skills Essential Test. The last three are most commonly used by hiring departments and job applicants, while the VEPT is mainly designed for students and academic institutions. It is the most comprehensive of the four since it lasts 50 minutes and evaluates all four skills. The VEPT applies Ordinate technology (an automated system that uses speech recognition and artificial intelligence) to measure how well a person understands and uses English on common, everyday topics (Versant by Pearson English Placement Test Handbook [referred to hereafter as the VEPT Handbook], 2024). Pearson introduced the VEPT in 2011 in collaboration with Navitas Australia, a global education provider that partners with universities to deliver pathway programs for international students. According to Pearson (2017), more than 10,000 university students from 80 countries take the VEPT each year.

Intended clientele and testing centres

The Versant English Placement Test is a student placement test and, therefore, used for educational purposes. Academic institutions and private language schools use it to place students into English language courses. The VEPT is meant for students above 16 years of age (VEPT Handbook, 2024). No specific test centres or examiners exist since the test is web-based. The test lasts 50 minutes and is administered via Versant for Web (VfW), a browser-based system. As such, it can be taken by students at the time and place of their convenience. Academic institutions may send the test to students to take on their phones or computers or have them take it at a university testing centre on campus. During testing, test takers are required to enter a testing number (TIN)—they interact with the testing system, are allowed to ask any questions they may have, and receive the test instructions and materials on the computer screen five minutes before the start of the test.

Test Preparation

The VEPT testing materials and test preparation resources for test takers and administrators can be found at the following website: (<https://www.pearson.com/english/versant/tests/student-placement->

test.html). The VEPT Demo Test contains sample questions that would appear on each section of the actual test (VEPT Handbook, 2024). However, the demo test does not include as many questions as the actual test and is, therefore, shorter. The questions given in the demo test are taken from previous VEPTs; the demo allows you to answer the questions on the screen, and a voice prompt follows each question, as it would be in the actual test. Although the responses are not saved or scored, the demo test gives students a sample Score Report at the end to see how the test is graded. There is also the option to buy a practice test through the website. The entire practice test costs \$15 USD, while the actual test costs \$39.95 USD. The cost of the test has implications for practicality, which is discussed under the Practicality and Washback section. In addition, the website has videos linked to a YouTube channel, VersantTests, including preparation videos such as “Versant Test-Taking Tips” and “What type of speaking questions do you have on your test?” (VersantTests, n.d.).

Scoring system and score reporting

The Ordinate scoring system gathers information from test takers' spoken answers, such as speed, timing, rhythm, voice strength, stress, intonation and pronunciation accuracy. It also notes the words chosen by the speakers (even if mispronounced) and assesses their responses' content, relevance and coherence (Pearson, 2011). During scoring, the VEPT assigns equal weight (25%) to each of the four skills—reading, writing, speaking and listening—as effective communication requires proficiency in all these areas. For speaking, the test uses an automated speech recogniser designed to process non-native speech, with criteria adjusted for both native and non-native distributions. These scores are further rescaled to align with human judgments on speaking ability. Written responses are automatically evaluated through the Versant testing system. Like the spoken tasks, the Sentence Completion and Dictation tasks are scored based on the correct order of words. However, other sections, such as Passage Reconstruction and Summary and Opinion, are assessed on content, including grammar, spelling, punctuation, capitalisation and syntax.

At the end of the test, the student receives a Score Report (VEPT Handbook, 2024). This report gives the overall score in the top left-hand corner of the document, ranging from 20 to 80. It is aligned with the Global Scale of English (GSE), calculated on a score of 10 to 90. The equivalent European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scores are also provided along with the GSE score. Higher scores reflect increased English language proficiency. Below the overall score, the Score Report breaks down the scores for each skill: reading, writing, listening and speaking. These scores are accompanied

by can-do statements, allowing the learner to see what they can do at their level. The second page of the Score Report also includes a section with feedback on what someone at a specific level should do to improve their English skills. Moreover, the report provides test takers with typing speed and accuracy information. This information is included in the Score Report as some parts of the test need written responses—the report tells learners how many words per minute and the percentage of accuracy one needs to achieve a valid score.

Components of the test

The VEPT consists of 81 items in total and is divided into nine sections: *Read Aloud, Repeats, Sentence Builds, Conversations, Sentence Completion, Dictation, Passage Reconstruction, and Summary & Opinion*. The nine sections are described in the following paragraphs. The *Read-Aloud task* requires test takers to read two passages aloud; they are given 30 seconds to read each passage. The passages are 60-70 words long and use simple vocabulary and structure. This part assesses pronunciation and oral reading fluency skills. In the *Repeat task*, test takers must repeat verbatim sentences that are read out loud to them. The sentences consist of about 3 to 15 words and are presented conversationally. This part taps into test takers' mastery of phrase and sentence structure. It also measures the test takers' fluency and pronunciation skills as they are required to repeat whole sentences. For the *Sentence Build task*, test takers hear three short phrases they need to rearrange to form a sentence. For example, *my boss/in Germany/arrived (My boss arrived in Germany)*. Since the *Sentence Build task* requires test takers to construct and articulate sentences, it taps into their ability to master sentences, pronunciation and fluency. In the *Conversation task*, test takers listen to a short dialogue. The dialogue consists of three speaking turns. After that, test takers are asked a comprehension question, which they must answer with a word or a phrase. This task assesses test takers' listening comprehension skills.

In the *Sentence Completion task*, test takers are required to fill in gaps with appropriate words to complete the sentences. Test takers are given 25 seconds to type the appropriate word in each text box. Sentences consist of five to 25 words, and in most cases, there is more than one possible answer. This task tests vocabulary knowledge (e.g. *His favourite hobby is _____ . He has so many books*). In the *Dictation task*, test takers listen to a sentence and are given 25 seconds to type it exactly as they heard it. Sentences are about three to 14 words in length and appear in order of difficulty. This task assesses comprehension, language processing and writing skills.

Regarding the *Passage Reconstruction task*, test takers are presented with a short passage; they have 30 seconds to read through it. The passage disappears, and they are asked to rewrite it within 90 seconds. The passages consist of about 45 to 65 words. They are short stories about everyday situations—they measure reading and writing comprehension. For the *Summary and Opinion task*, test takers are given 18 minutes to read and summarise the main ideas in 25 to 50 words and write their opinion about the passage's topic in at least 50 words. The passages express an opinion on everyday life, have a simple structure and use high-frequency vocabulary. The *Summary and Opinion task* measures test takers' writing skills and ability to comprehend, interpret, make inferences and summarise texts. Although the ninth section, a *Typing task*, assesses typing speed and accuracy, it is not scored. A passage is presented to test takers; they must type it exactly as it appears within 60 seconds. This task uses simple vocabulary and consists of about 90 to 100 words. This task helps test takers familiarise themselves with the keyboard before completing the scored writing task.

Appraisal of the test

Construct and test score uses

The VEPT measures a candidate's ability to understand spoken and written English and respond appropriately in speaking and writing on everyday topics, at a natural pace and with clear, intelligible English. That is, the test assesses how effectively candidates can handle spoken and written English. This includes their comprehension skills, the appropriateness of their responses and the speed at which they can produce them. The key factor in distinguishing performance among test takers is their level of automaticity—how quickly and efficiently they can respond to tasks. Automaticity refers to the ability to access vocabulary, construct phrases and sentences, and respond without consciously focusing on the rules of the language. In essence, the overall score on the VEPT reflects a candidate's proficiency in processing and producing language fluently and effortlessly. The VEPT test scores are used to identify a student's level of English and place them into the appropriate courses based on their level. These test scores can also be used to measure a student's progress in an English language class and function as an exit test. The minimum score required for the test is determined by the institutions or organisations using the results, depending on their specific purposes (e.g., based on course placement cut-off scores of a department). Although the Score Report provides individuals with their equivalent CEFR score (as mentioned above), there is no standard way to

measure how scores are applied, since each institution interprets them differently based on its particular context (VEPT Handbook, 2024).

The construct or ability assessed by a test should reflect the tasks and language uses in the subsequent Target Language Use (TLU) domain. As a placement, progress or exit test, the TLU is the English language classroom or the real-world context in which learners are expected to use the language to communicate (Bachman & Damböck, 2018; Bachman & Palmer, 2010). The construct of VEPT is narrow, given the claims made for test score use and may not work well for the intended purposes. First, the tasks that take up most of the test are monologic (i.e. seven out of the eight graded tasks). Although such tasks may reflect a picture of the abilities of high-proficiency learners in interactions, their predictive power is limited for low-ability learners (Roever & Ikeda, 2022).

Another issue is related to the unnatural way language is assessed. Some VEPT tasks, such as *Dictation*, *Sentence Build* and *Repeat*, require learners to repeat long sentences and hold phrases in memory to reconstruct a sentence. However, classroom or real-world English tasks go beyond sentence memorisation, particularly at the intermediate and advanced levels. As such, the VEPT construct may not fully reflect and capture TLU tasks and abilities. Moreover, the test may favour students with exceptional working memory (Biedroń, 2012). The developers argue that memory is not a significant factor in the tasks because 90% of educated native speakers performed well on the tasks (VEPT Handbook, 2024), indicating that memory span was not an essential component of the performance of these tasks. The argument that memory is irrelevant solely based on native speakers' responses overlooks several important considerations, including the generalisation to the targeted population of English learners. Native speakers, by their familiarity with the language, may do well in these activities, even if memory is a factor in their performance. It is vital to compare how non-native learners (with different memory capacities for language structures) perform, as this might indicate how memory affects task performance. These issues undermine the VEPT's construct validity, as performance may reflect memory rather than actual language ability (i.e. construct underrepresentation) and the test may not function equivalently across all learner groups (i.e. construct-irrelevant variance)

Furthermore, the VEPT excludes incorporating pragmatic, sociolinguistic and interactional competence (Council of Europe, 2021), which are crucial components of classroom English language tasks. According to the developer, VEPT measures "the psycholinguistic elements of spoken and

written language performance rather than the social, rhetorical, and cognitive elements of communication" (VEPT Handbook, 2024, p.14). While the use of context-independent tasks may aim to limit specialised abilities (e.g. knowledge of cultural referents) and thus focus on basic words, eliminating world knowledge, it is important to consider that language is inherently cultural. Learners need to understand the implied pragmatic meaning of vocabulary in context to process language and attain higher proficiency. From a practical perspective, this can make the test more efficient since less time is given to context and more time is dedicated to collecting the test takers' speech samples. Moreover, in defence of the VEPT, the focus on general context-independent tasks can facilitate test fairness and eliminate bias (Pan & Wang, 2023). However, this narrows the construct, which may not fully capture the variety of real-world language that learners are required to know and could limit the test's construct validity in terms of relevance (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). If it fails to test the actual language needs students will encounter in English language classrooms, it might not be able to provide sufficient difficulty levels required to distinguish and place students into appropriate classes for their learning needs precisely. This finding was consistent with Elder, Knoch & Kim (2016), who also found that the difficulty level of test items on the VEPT was not high. So, the VEPT may not reliably measure performance above the B2 level. There is a likelihood that a ceiling effect may be observed for high-proficiency test takers. The test may not provide helpful information about their language abilities in such cases.

Information about test validation activities

Results from spoken and written performance data from native English speakers and L2 learners were assessed by the developer to evaluate the VEPT's internal and concurrent validity. The internal validity of the VEPT was assessed through four key aspects: reliability, machine accuracy, dimensionality and differentiation. Reliability is concerned with the consistency of the VEPT results. Machine accuracy evaluates how closely the automated scores align with those given by human raters. Dimensionality examines whether the four skill scores on the VEPT are sufficiently distinct from each other. Lastly, differentiation among populations assesses whether the test effectively differentiates between English language learners and native speakers. On the other hand, concurrent validity looks at how the VEPT scores correlate to the scores of two related tests: the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (VEPT Handbook, 2024).

The findings from 214 participants revealed that Split-half Reliability (0.96), which compared the scores given by the automated machine with the scores of expert humans, was highly reliable because the computerised machine scores were almost identical to human ratings. The Standard Error of Measurement and Test-retest Reliability were also tested and demonstrated relatively high reliability (VEPT Handbook, 2024). Moreover, population differences were evaluated to identify divergences between native and non-native English speakers. The results indicated that no native speakers scored over 68 on the GSE scale, and only 3% of non-native speakers scored above this rating (VEPT Handbook, 2024). For concurrent validity, the VEPT scores compared with IELTS and TOEFL showed a high correlation between the VEPT and two English tests, indicating a high level of concurrent validity (VEPT Handbook, 2024).

The VEPT has a considerable level of information transparency. The VEPT and the VEPT Handbook provide detailed information about the testing procedure, resources available for preparation and the scoring process. The *Demo Test* offers hands-on practice and familiarisation with the various components of the test. A rubric is not provided, but the sample *Score Report* gives test takers an idea about the criteria for assessing the four language skills. This transparency supports the test's validity in an age of test accountability.

Practicality and washback

The cost of the test, at \$39.95 USD, may be reasonable for learners in high-income contexts but could pose a challenge in lower-income regions. Limited financial resources and restricted access to digital devices or reliable internet may further hinder participation, affecting the overall practicality of the test. However, the test developer provides bulk purchases at discounted rates for institutions, which enhances affordability for larger groups. As a result, from a cost perspective, the test's practicality is considered substantial. In addition to the cost, the test is also practical due to the automated scoring. Students taking the exam receive their scores within minutes, which helps to place the students faster. The automated scoring also eliminates the need for human examiners. The developer provides no information regarding testing accommodation. However, several academic institutions that have licenced the VEPT have mentioned that testing accommodations may be requested and will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

The VEPT may positively affect test takers since the preparation process helps them hone their pronunciation, typing, writing, reading, listening and speaking skills. However, some studies have shown that the test generated negative views from learners. Koksal and Olum (2018) surveyed 308 students, and 69.2% believed that it assessed their memory rather than language abilities, while 53% felt it was unreliable in measuring their actual language skills. Participants in Fan (2014) generally had a positive perception of the test and its assessment of their language skills despite showing a preference for authentic speaking tasks (such as those in IELTS) that measured a broader range of English language skills. Overall, these studies show mixed results regarding its impact on learners' attitudes, although it is unclear how this affects English language learning. There remains a paucity of further research on the test's washback, the role of memory and construct relevance.

Summary

Although not a perfect test, the VEPT has high reliability and is a practical way to meet the institutional needs for fast and efficient placement testing. As it is one of the first automated tests, its development and administration, particularly in this era of the AI wave, could lead to more effective placement testing in the near future. The construct coverage of the test requires more effort to upgrade it. This will ensure that a broader range of English language skills are assessed and reflect the language skills learners must demonstrate in real-life communicative situations. Moreover, more research on the test's washback is needed.

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Conflict of interest

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