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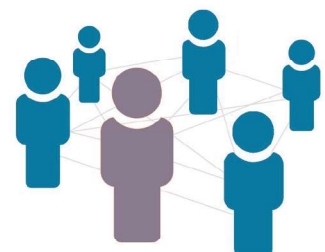
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High-stakes online testing: A comparative study of English for Academic Purposes home-based exams

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the rise of online high-stakes English for Academic Purposes (EAP) exams, focusing on IELTS (International English Language Testing System) Online, TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) iBT Home Edition, and Pearson Test of English (PTE) Academic. It compares and contrasts these exams across various aspects, including format, assessed skills, scoring mechanisms, technical requirements, and security measures. Key findings reveal that while all three exams assess the four primary language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) and offer similar benefits, such as convenience and accessibility, they also exhibit notable differences. These include task types, scoring approaches (human vs AI), and speaking assessment methods (human interaction vs. recorded responses). The article acknowledges the ongoing debate regarding the reliability of AI scoring in productive skills (speaking and writing). While some studies emphasise AI's objectivity and consistency, others highlight the lack of transparent validation evidence. Additionally, the article examines security measures employed in online exams to ensure test integrity, such as remote invigilation, candidate authentication, data encryption, and software restrictions to prevent unauthorised access and cheating. In conclusion, this article provides a comprehensive overview of three leading online EAP certification exams, highlighting their similarities, differences, and ongoing discussions surrounding AI scoring and exam security.

1 Introduction

Online testing has become a prevalent reality, driven by recent technological advancements and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These developments, along with the advantages of online assessment, have facilitated its adoption in high-stakes exams. While online testing offers numerous benefits – such as accessibility, flexibility, and reduced logistical constraints – concerns regarding security and validity persist, particularly given the challenges associated with the rapid implementation of online exams during lockdowns (see European Centre for Modern Languages, 2021; Kılıçkaya, 2023; Sendur & Kościńska, 2021).

Despite these concerns, online high-stakes testing has become increasingly embedded within educational and certification systems. However, the growing availability of foreign language certification exams is accompanied by a lack of familiarity with their online format.

Consequently, there is a pressing need to provide stakeholders with comprehensive information about these evolving assessment methods. Candidates require a clear understanding of test formats and expectations, while institutions must rely on valid and reliable data to make informed decisions about recognising online certifications. Among these stakeholders, higher education institutions represent a primary consumer of language proficiency certifications, utilising them for both admission and graduation purposes. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) certifications are particularly valued for measuring candidates' academic language proficiency.

Given the demand for reliable and widely accepted online assessment options, this review focuses on three of the most well-established EAP exams offered in a home-based format: IELTS Online, TOEFL iBT Home Edition, and PTE Academic Online. These tests are recognised as multilevel assessments of EAP, with their test-centre counterparts long serving as benchmarks for university admissions and graduation requirements.

Other certification exams, such as the Duolingo English Test (DET) and TOEFL Essentials, also claim to assess English for both general and academic purposes and are available in a home-based format. However, they have not been considered in this research, as they belong to a different category – computer adaptive tests (CATs). Unlike multi-level tests, CATs adjust the difficulty of questions based on a test-taker's responses, resulting in a fundamentally different assessment structure. As this article focuses specifically on multilevel EAP exams, such tests fall outside the scope of the analysis.

While individual English proficiency exams – both centre-based (Pearson, 2023; Read, 2022) and online versions (Rahmatillah et al., 2023; Shin et al., 2022; Wagner, 2020) – have been the subject of prior research, and some comparative studies on online tests have been conducted (García Laborda & Fernández Álvarez, 2021; Isbell & Kremmel, 2020; Sendur, 2023), a dedicated comparison of online EAP certification exams remains lacking.

Using document analysis of official resources and relevant research, this review examines key aspects of the three selected exams from an international perspective. The study does not focus on a single country's policies but evaluates these exams as globally recognised assessments. Key aspects under analysis include their structure, assessed skills and abilities, task types, scoring mechanisms, technology requirements, and security measures. Through a comparative analysis of these features, this study aims to identify the key similarities and differences between the selected online EAP exams. Ultimately, this evaluation will assess their effectiveness as valid and reliable high-stakes assessments for EAP.

2 IELTS online

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), jointly owned by the British Council, IDP IELTS, and Cambridge University Press & Assessment, has been a leading English proficiency certification for over four decades since its launch in 1980. It is available in two versions: General Training and Academic. The IELTS Academic test can be taken at a test centre (on paper or computer) or remotely through IELTS Online, which was introduced in 2022 (IELTS, 2022).

IELTS Online closely mirrors the format and features of the centre-based IELTS Academic, maintaining the same structure and assessment criteria. It evaluates all four core language skills – listening, reading, writing, and speaking – and is currently available in a limited number of countries.

2.1 Online exam format

The IELTS Academic Online test is available five days a week, offering flexible scheduling with nearly round-the-clock availability. It consists of four mandatory sections: Listening (approximately 20 minutes), Reading (approximately 60 minutes), Writing (approximately 60 minutes), and Speaking (11–14 minutes). The Speaking test is typically conducted on a different day via an online video call with a human examiner before the written portion of the exam.

The Listening section comprises four parts, each containing ten questions. The first two focus on everyday social situations: Part 1 features a conversation between two speakers, while Part 2 consists of a monologue by one speaker. The remaining two parts revolve around educational and training contexts. The recordings are played once, requiring candidates to respond to a variety of open- and closed-ended questions. Tasks include multiple choice or multiple selection, matching, plan/map/diagram labelling, form/note/table/flow-chart/summary completion, sentence completion, and short-answer questions.

The Reading section in the Academic test features three long texts, chosen for a nonspecialist audience and suitable for university-level candidates. If a passage contains technical terms, a simple glossary is provided. The test includes 40 questions designed to assess a range of reading skills through various task types, including multiple choice, multiple selection, matching, fill-in-the-gap, and short-answer questions.

The Writing section consists of two mandatory tasks. In Task 1, test takers must describe, summarise, or explain visual information – such as a graph, chart, or diagram – in at least 150 words within 20 minutes. Task 2 requires candidates to discuss a point of view, argument, or problem, producing a response of at least 250 words in approximately 40 minutes.

The Speaking section is a live, face-to-face interview lasting 11–14 minutes, conducted via video call with a human examiner and recorded for assessment. Unlike the other two exams under review, IELTS Online features real-time interaction, simulating a genuine conversation. The test assesses candidates' ability to speak about both personal and abstract topics while also evaluating their capacity to engage in a more extended, thoughtful discussion. It is divided into three parts, measuring various aspects of speaking proficiency.

2.2 Scoring

IELTS emphasises the reliability of its scoring by employing certified markers who undergo regular monitoring. All answer sheets are further analysed after marking. Penalties are applied for poor spelling and grammar in open-ended tasks, exceeding word limits, and irrelevant or incomplete responses. In the Writing task, there is a bottom word limit given, and candidates are penalised if their answer is too short. They will also lose points if their response is off-topic or not written as a full, connected text. Additionally, plagiarism is strictly

penalised. Writing assessments consider task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy. Speaking is evaluated based on fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation.

Writing assessments are evaluated based on four criteria: task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy. The Speaking section is assessed using similar parameters, namely fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation.

2.3 Results and certificates

Each section of the IELTS exam is scored on a 9-band scale, ranging from 0 to 9, with whole and half-band scores awarded for each language skill as well as for the overall result. To aid stakeholders in interpreting scores, the IELTS website provides alignment scales that map the 9-band scale to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages, offering clear equivalencies.

As of March 2025, IELTS Online test results are typically available within six to eight calendar days after completing the exam. The scores remain valid for two years. Candidates who take the online format receive their results electronically as an IELTS Test Report Form (eTRF), which enables easy score sharing with institutions. These institutions can then verify results directly through the IELTS Results Service.

2.4 Prices

The cost of IELTS Online varies by location, with notable differences in fees even within the same country. As of March 2024, the average test fee is approximately USD 255. For a detailed breakdown of pricing across different regions, refer to Table 1 in the Appendix.

2.5 Technical requirements

To take IELTS Online, candidates must use a laptop or desktop computer, as the exam cannot be taken on a mobile device. The technical setup must include a built-in or external camera, microphone, and external or built-in speakers. The use of headphones, headsets, or any ear devices is strictly prohibited.

Candidates must also ensure a stable internet connection and an operating system compatible with either Windows or macOS. Only one screen is permitted during the exam. Additionally, test takers are required to prepare a quiet, private workspace with a clear desk and have their ID ready for verification before starting the test.

2.6 Exam security

To ensure a secure testing environment, IELTS Online employs multiple security measures. During check-in, candidates must use a tablet or mobile phone with a camera to perform a comprehensive room scan. Once the scan is completed, these devices must be switched off and placed out of reach.

Candidates must also download the Inpera Exam Portal, a secure testing software that restricts access to other computer functionalities for the duration of the exam. Throughout the test, candidates are monitored via their computer's camera, with a combination of human and AI invigilation ensuring adherence to exam regulations.

The IELTS Academic Online test allows candidates to take digital notes directly on the screen using a keyboard and built-in tools. These include a highlighting function in the Reading section and a note-taking feature in the Listening and Reading sections. The use of physical pen and paper is strictly prohibited. To familiarise themselves with these digital tools, candidates can access practice sessions and tutorials provided on the IELTS platform (British Council. IELTS, n.d.-b).

3 TOEFL iBT Home Edition

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), offered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), is an internationally recognised test that measures 'academic English communication' and assesses the four core English skills 'the way they are actually used in a classroom' (ETS, n.d.-a.). It is available in three formats: on paper at a test centre, on a computer at a test centre or on a computer at home. The computer-delivered versions, offered at test centres and home locations, are identical in structure, content, and length. The paper edition differs from the computer-delivered tests and has limited availability.

TOEFL has a long-standing history, having been launched in 1964 (ETS, 2020d). The Home Edition has been available since 2020 (ETS, 2020a).

3.1 Online exam format

The TOEFL iBT Home Edition offers flexible scheduling, allowing candidates to take the test four days a week, 24 hours a day, with appointments available as early as 24 hours after registration. The test lasts under two hours and consists of four sections that assess different language skills: Reading (approximately 35 minutes), Listening (approximately 36 minutes), Speaking (approximately 16 minutes), and Writing (approximately 29 minutes).

The Listening section consists of 28 closed-ended questions, presented in either multiple-choice or multiple-selection format. Candidates listen to recordings of academic lectures and campus conversations before answering questions displayed on the screen. The recordings are played only once, except for selected fragments that may be replayed for specific follow-up questions. Some tasks require test takers to select two or three answers, and the system prevents them from progressing until the required number of responses is chosen. Visual aids, such as keywords displayed on a virtual board, may accompany the audio content.

In the Reading section, test takers read two university-level textbook excerpts, each followed by ten questions. The passages cover a range of academic subjects, but prior knowledge of the topics is not required, as all necessary information is contained within the texts. A built-in glossary provides definitions for less common words, and all tasks are in multiple-choice or multiple-selection formats.

The Speaking section consists of four tasks, all of which are completed without an interlocutor. Candidates record their responses using a microphone. The first task requires them to express their opinion on a familiar topic, while the remaining three involve integrated tasks that require summarising information from short reading and/or listening passages. Responses last between 45 and 60 seconds and are evaluated based on clarity, coherence, and the accurate integration of the input material.

The Writing section includes two integrated tasks. In the first task, candidates read a passage and listen to a lecture, then write a response explaining how the two relate. This task has a 20-minute time limit. The second task, Writing for an Academic Discussion, simulates an online class discussion where candidates read a professor's question and student responses, then write their own post, presenting and supporting their viewpoint within a 10-minute time limit.

3.2 Scoring

The Reading and Listening sections of the TOEFL iBT are entirely machine-scored, as they consist exclusively of multiple-choice and multiple-selection questions. In contrast, the Speaking and Writing tasks are evaluated using a combination of AI scoring and human assessment. Certified human raters assess responses based on detailed scoring rubrics, ensuring fairness and accuracy. To maintain consistency and reliability, multiple evaluators contribute to the final scores for both the Speaking and Writing sections.

3.3 Results and certificates

TOEFL iBT scores are released online approximately 4–8 days after the test date. In addition to being accessible through the test taker's ETS account, official score reports are sent to institutions designated during registration. These scores remain valid for two years and cannot be reported or verified beyond this period.

Each section of the TOEFL iBT is scored on a 0–30 scale, with section scores contributing to a total score ranging from 0 to 120. The test report includes four scaled section scores along with a comprehensive total score, providing an overview of the candidate's performance. Additionally, test takers receive personalised feedback and performance insights, highlighting strengths and areas for improvement. While the official score report does not explicitly reference CEFR equivalencies, alignment scales mapping TOEFL iBT scores to CEFR levels are available on the ETS website (ETS, n.d.-a).

3.4 Prices

The TOEFL iBT Home Edition test fees vary by country, with some notable differences in pricing. As of the time of writing, the average cost is approximately USD 255. However, certain regions may experience significant price variations. For specific country-based price differences, refer to Table 1, which provides a detailed breakdown of fees across various locations.

3.5 Technical requirements

To take the TOEFL iBT Home Edition, candidates must first download the ETS Secure Browser. The test must be completed on a desktop or laptop computer running a licensed Windows or Mac operating system, as mobile devices and tablets are not allowed. Additionally, only one screen or monitor may be used during the exam.

Candidates are required to have an internal or external speaker and a microphone for test-taking and communication with the invigilator; headsets and earphones are not allowed. A separate webcam or a built-in camera is necessary to facilitate exam monitoring. Before the test begins, candidates must use their camera to perform a 360-degree room scan, including a clear view of their tabletop and the area beneath it, ensuring compliance with security protocols.

3.6 Exam security

To ensure exam security, candidates must download and install the Measure Learning® Guardian Browser before the test. During the check-in process, they are required to use either a mobile phone or a hand-held mirror to assist in the security verification process. However, once the test begins, all mobile devices must be removed and remain out of reach.

Candidates must take the test alone in a quiet room with a clear tabletop and surrounding area. No unapproved items are allowed on the desk, and test-takers' ears and faces must remain visible throughout the exam. Additionally, a photo of the candidate is taken during the test and is included in the score report shared with institutions.

For note-taking, test takers may use either a small whiteboard or a sheet of paper inside a transparent sheet protector, both of which must be used with an erasable marker. Regular pen and paper are not permitted. At the end of the test, candidates must erase their notes and show the blank surface to the invigilator for verification, ensuring compliance with test security measures (ETS, n.d.-d).

4 PTE Academic Online

The Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE Academic) is part of a suite of language examinations offered by Pearson Language Tests. It is a computer-assisted test designed primarily for academic purposes. It assesses all four core language skills and can be taken either in person at a test centre or online. The content and duration of the two variants are identical, and in both cases, the test is taken via computer. PTE Academic Online is an online version with remote invigilation of the PTE Academic centre-based exam. There is currently no paper-based version available.

PTE Academic is the newest test among the ones described in this article. It was launched in 2009 as a computer-based test (Pearson Education Ltd, 2019). The online format, which can be taken from home, has been available since 2021 (Pearson, 2021).

4.1 Online exam format

The PTE Academic Online test is available in selected locations and takes approximately two hours to complete. It is divided into three main sections: Speaking and Writing, Reading, and Listening.

The first section, Speaking and Writing, lasts between 54 and 67 minutes and is the longest part of the test. It evaluates the candidate's ability to communicate effectively in spoken and written English in an academic context. This section includes seven different question types, such as reading aloud, repeating a sentence, describing an image, answering short questions, and writing an essay. Additionally, some tasks integrate multiple language skills. For example, retelling a lecture requires both listening and speaking, while summarising a written text combines reading and writing. Speaking tasks require candidates to speak into a microphone, with their responses recorded for assessment.

The Reading section, which takes 29 to 30 minutes, assesses a candidate's ability to comprehend and interpret written texts commonly encountered in academic settings. It includes five different question types, such as fill-in-the-blanks items, multiple-choice questions with single and multiple answers, and reordering paragraphs. One specific task, Reading and Writing: Fill in the blanks, is categorised as an integrated skills task. However, since it only requires candidates to select words from a drop-down menu to complete a text, it primarily assesses vocabulary recognition rather than active writing skills.

The final section, Listening, lasts between 30 and 43 minutes and evaluates the test taker's ability to understand spoken English in various academic contexts. It consists of eight different question types based on audio or video clips, which are played only once. Candidates can take notes on the computer while listening. The section includes multiple-choice tasks with single and multiple answers, choosing the correct summary of a recording, selecting the missing word, identifying incorrect words in a transcript, and writing from dictation. Some tasks also test integrated skills, such as filling in blanks based on a listening passage and summarising a spoken text in 50 to 70 words.

4.2 Scoring

The PTE Academic Online test consists of 20 different question types. Selection-based tasks, such as multiple-choice questions, are automatically scored as either correct or incorrect. More complex, open-ended responses, particularly in the Speaking and Writing sections, are evaluated based on multiple criteria.

PTE tests are entirely machine-scored, but the scoring system is designed using human expertise. According to Pearson Education Ltd (2023), 'human expert scorers are used to train the scoring engine on speaking and writing tasks, by rating test taker responses on every single speaking and writing item. The system then works by replicating the standards established through these human ratings' (p. 8). This means that while AI handles the assessment process, the scoring engine has been calibrated using human-expert evaluations to ensure accuracy and fairness. For open-ended responses, the scoring system considers multiple factors, including grammar, fluency, vocabulary range, and task achievement.

4.3 Results and certificates

Results for PTE Academic Online are typically available within 48 hours, though in some cases, processing can take up to five working days. Candidates receive a personalised score report along with a skills profile.

The score report includes an overall score ranging from 10 to 90, based on the Global Scale of English (GSE). Additionally, it provides separate scores for each of the four communicative skills – speaking, listening, reading, and writing – which are assessed both individually and through integrated tasks. The skills profile offers detailed insights into the test taker’s strengths and weaknesses across eight language skill categories. It also provides personalised recommendations for improvement, guiding candidates on how to enhance their English proficiency. Candidates can view their official score report through their PTE account, and institutions can verify results electronically using a score report code and the Pearson score verification system. Downloaded reports are for informational purposes only. Scores remain valid for two years from the test date.

PTE Academic Online scores are aligned the CEFR for Languages, but also with TOEFL iBT and IELTS. These equivalencies can be accessed on the PTE website (Pearson PTE, n.d.-a).

4.4 Prices

The cost of taking the PTE Academic Online test varies depending on the country. As of the time of writing, the average test fee is approximately USD 250, but there may be significant discrepancies between some countries. For a detailed breakdown of PTE Academic Online fees in different regions, refer to Table 1.

4.5 Technical requirements

Candidates taking the PTE Academic Online test must ensure they have a desktop or laptop computer running Windows or macOS, with a stable and reliable internet connection. A webcam is required for identity verification and monitoring during the test. For audio, test takers must use a wired headset with an overhead band and a microphone. Bluetooth headsets, in-ear headphones, earphones, or earbuds with an in-line microphone are not permitted.

Additionally, candidates need a mobile phone for a pre-test security check. The exam must be taken in a quiet and private location, free from disturbances, to ensure a smooth testing experience.

4.6 Exam security

PTE Academic Online implements multiple security measures to ensure the integrity of the test. The testing software includes secure encryption protocols, preventing tampering and unauthorised access. Candidate identity verification involves a multilayered process that combines facial recognition technology with live online invigilation.

Before the test starts, candidates may be asked to pan their cameras around their testing environment to confirm there are no prohibited materials or unauthorised individuals

present. Throughout the test, live proctors continuously monitor candidates via webcam to detect any suspicious activity. To prevent cheating, PTE Academic uses OnVUE, specialised testing software designed to block unauthorised applications and detect unusual behaviour. Any violations of test regulations – such as attempting to use external resources or communicating with others – may result in the cancellation of the exam and invalidation of scores.

In the PTE Academic online test, handwritten notes are not allowed. Instead, test takers can use the keyboard and the built-in Notes feature, available on every screen of the test, to jot down information. These notes are not evaluated as part of the final score.

5 Discussion

‘Once a luxurious commodity only available in technologically well-resourced contexts and to those who could afford it, technology has now become an integral aspect of educational life everywhere’ (Sadeghi & Douglas, 2023, p. 4). There is no doubt that technology is already a mainstay of all education, including assessment.

The language proficiency exams described here are all internet-based or online exams. Internet-based, as opposed to computer-based tests, are delivered through a web browser or specialised software or applications that connect to the internet. This mode of assessment has no location restrictions. On the other hand, computer-based tests are administered on standalone computers or through a local network, meaning that they do not require an internet connection during the test (Suvorov & Hegelheimer, 2014). Both types of exams are considered computer-assisted tests, as they rely on computers for administration.

Most modern certification exams follow the internet-based format, even when conducted at a test centre. The transition towards online testing is evident in exams like TOEFL, which previously offered a computer-based version (TOEFL cBT) but now operates exclusively as an internet-based test (TOEFL iBT). Online tests can be taken on a computer at an exam centre or remotely, as is the case with the at-home exams.

The advantages of online remote testing are clear. Firstly, it provides greater accessibility and convenience, enabling candidates to take exams from their own homes. This is particularly beneficial for those residing in remote locations or individuals who face mobility challenges. Eliminating the need for travel reduces logistical burdens, lowers costs, and minimises time commitments. Additionally, online testing accelerates the scoring process, providing immediate or significantly faster score reporting compared to traditional paper-based exams.

Moreover, digital assessments enhance accessibility and inclusion. Features such as adjustable text sizes, contrast settings, volume controls, and screen reader compatibility cater to candidates with visual, hearing, or motor impairments (Silver, 2024). The at-home format also benefits individuals with mobility impairments, as it allows them to access physical supports as needed without the constraints of travelling to a test centre (Tai et al., 2023).

Thus, internet-based remote exams are not just an innovation in assessment but also a step toward greater accessibility, efficiency, and inclusivity in language testing.

5.1 Similarities of the exams

IELTS Online, TOEFL iBT Home Edition, and PTE Academic are all designed to assess proficiency in English for Academic Purposes. They operate on a multilevel testing structure, encompassing a comprehensive range of language abilities within a single examination. Multilevel assessments are not intended to be strictly pass-or-fail evaluations; instead, they serve as a scale enabling the measurement of candidates' language proficiency. This stands in contrast to level-based tests that focus on specific proficiency levels.

Despite being administered by different organisations, these three exams share several common characteristics. Regardless of whether they are taken at a test centre or remotely from home, all three exams maintain a consistent structure, duration, and scoring system. Each test evaluates the four core language skills – listening, reading, speaking, and writing – which are compulsory for all candidates. This is significant, as not all language certification exams require testing all four skills (see García Laborda & Fernández Álvarez, 2021; Sendur, 2023, 2025b; Shin, 2022). The exams are offered on multiple days each week, ranging from approximately two hours to two hours and 45 minutes. They are widely accepted by universities, institutions, and employers worldwide and remain valid for two years.

To take the test remotely, candidates must meet specific technical requirements. Depending on the test provider, these typically include a stable internet connection, a desktop or laptop computer with a single screen, a web camera and microphone, and either speakers or wired headphones. Additionally, candidates must ensure they are in a quiet, private space with a clear desk setup. The exams are administered under strict remote invigilation conditions, ensuring compliance with anti-cheating protocols. Institutions can verify candidate results online through secure portals.

Another shared aspect among these tests is their pricing. The average test fee for all three exams falls within the USD 250–255 range at the time of writing, meaning cost alone is unlikely to be a decisive factor for test takers when choosing between them. Overall, IELTS Online, TOEFL iBT Home Edition, and PTE Academic Online follow a fundamentally similar approach to language assessment, making them interchangeable options for many candidates. The primary differences lie in scoring methodology, task formats, and personal preferences regarding the test experience.

5.2 Key differences and approaches

Despite the similarities between IELTS Online, TOEFL iBT Home Edition, and PTE Academic, key differences distinguish these exams in terms of scoring, task types, and approaches to assessment.

One significant distinction lies in how results are presented. Each test utilises a unique scoring scale, and while their certificates do not explicitly state a CEFR for Languages level, all three exams claim alignment with the CEFR and provide mapping scales on their official websites. This alignment is important because, although CEFR is not a scoring system itself,

this reference scale is widely recognised by academic institutions and employers. Many organisations use CEFR levels as part of their admission and hiring criteria.

Another notable difference is in the structure of the tasks. IELTS combines both closed- and open-ended questions in its reading section, while TOEFL and PTE predominantly rely on closed-ended multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank tasks. This variation impacts the grading process, with IELTS utilising a combination of automated and human scoring for reading responses, whereas TOEFL and PTE rely entirely on automated scoring systems. Differences in listening tasks further highlight the unique approaches of these exams. Both IELTS and PTE include open-ended questions in their listening sections, but their scoring mechanisms differ. IELTS depends on trained human examiners to evaluate responses, while PTE uses machine scoring exclusively, ensuring a consistent and objective evaluation process.

The most pronounced differences, however, appear in the assessment of productive skills – speaking and writing. PTE combines both skills into a single integrated section, whereas IELTS and TOEFL treat them as separate components. IELTS assesses writing exclusively through human examiners, ensuring a qualitative evaluation based on expert judgment. TOEFL and PTE, on the other hand, use a hybrid scoring approach that incorporates both artificial intelligence (AI) and human raters.

In terms of speaking, PTE and TOEFL employ a fully automated approach, in which candidates record their spoken responses to prompts displayed on the screen. These responses are then evaluated using AI-based scoring. In contrast, IELTS follows a fully interactive format, where candidates engage in a live conversation with a human examiner via video call. This face-to-face interaction is designed to assess real-time communication skills, a factor that some test takers may find preferable. While TOEFL incorporates both AI and human scoring in the speaking section, PTE relies solely on AI to evaluate pronunciation, fluency, and content.

Overall, these differences influence the test-taking experience and may impact candidates' preferences depending on their comfort with human interaction, automated scoring, and specific task formats.

5.3 The debate on scoring approaches

The validity and reliability of a test are fundamental concepts in language assessment, shaping discussions on scoring methodologies. Validity refers to the extent to which a test measures what it claims to measure, ensuring that its results are meaningful and applicable. Reliability, on the other hand, concerns the consistency of test scores across different administrations, raters, or scoring methods. A reliable test produces stable and replicable results, free from random errors or inconsistencies.

In the context of scoring approaches, the debate centres around whether automated scoring, human evaluation, or a combination of both yields the most valid and reliable results. PTE and TOEFL, which employ AI-driven or hybrid models of AI and human scoring for productive skills and open-ended tasks, argue that their approaches ensure full validity, reliability, and objectivity (ETS, 2020b, 2020c; Pearson, 2019). IELTS, by contrast, positions itself as a test 'delivered by humans for humans' (IELTS, n.d.), emphasising its reliance on

certified human examiners and implicitly questioning the trustworthiness of AI scoring (IELTS IDP, n.d.).

This debate extends beyond testing organisations and is widely discussed in academic research. Studies supporting AI scoring highlight its analytical precision and objectivity (Pearson Education Ltd, 2019; Van Moere & Downey, 2016; Zhao et al., 2022). Machine scoring eliminates potential human biases, such as being influenced by a candidate's appearance, personality, or body language, thereby ensuring that evaluation focuses solely on linguistic proficiency. Furthermore, AI can independently assess specific language features in written or spoken responses, preventing a weakness in one area from unduly affecting overall performance. Human raters, in contrast, may unconsciously allow their judgment of one skill or feature to influence their evaluation of another. They may also be susceptible to fatigue, mood fluctuations, and implicit biases, all of which can impact the reliability of scores.

Validation studies further reinforce the credibility of AI scoring, showing strong alignment between machine-generated and human-generated ratings (Pearson Education Ltd, 2019; Van Moere & Downey, 2016; Zhao et al., 2022). These findings suggest that AI-based assessment is not only viable but also comparable to human grading in its accuracy.

However, some scholars remain critical of the widespread adoption of AI scoring, arguing that many testing organisations fail to provide sufficient validation evidence for their machine scoring systems (O'Sullivan, Breakspear & Baylisset, 2023). Concerns have also been raised about the ability of AI to evaluate nuanced aspects of language use, such as creativity, argumentation, and contextual appropriateness – elements that human raters are arguably better equipped to assess. This scepticism highlights the ongoing need for transparency and further research to ensure that AI-driven assessment maintains the highest standards of validity and reliability.

5.4 Security considerations

Exam security is a critical concern in language certification, as it is directly tied to the issue of cheating, which can take various forms (Sendur, 2022; Shon, 2006). Whether administered on-site or remotely, certification exams must ensure that test results accurately reflect a candidate's proficiency. However, different testing environments introduce different vulnerabilities to academic dishonesty.

One of the most significant threats to the credibility of on-site exams is impersonation, where an individual takes the test on behalf of the registered candidate. This malpractice has been documented in high-profile cases, raising concerns about the legitimacy of prestigious language certificates (National Audit Office, 2019; Xuandi, 2020; Yuhas, 2015). Another, albeit less frequently reported, issue is collusion between candidates and test administrators, which can lead to manipulated results (Cizek, 2001; Denisova-Schmidt, 2016; Kellaghan & Greaney, 2019).

Remote exams pose even greater security challenges. Impersonation remains a concern, but additional risks include the use of prohibited materials such as handwritten notes, textbooks, digital devices, online resources, and AI tools. Candidates may also receive assistance from

someone physically present or communicating remotely, or even attempt to hack into the exam system (Dadashzadeh, 2020; Dawson, 2021; Newton & Essex, 2024).

Since cheating fundamentally undermines the validity of an assessment, preventing illicit assistance is paramount. An exam is only valid if it measures a candidate's actual knowledge, skills, and abilities. If security breaches allow candidates to receive unauthorised help, test scores become unreliable (Dawson et al., 2024). As a result, certification providers implement multilayered security measures to safeguard exam integrity (Sendur, in press; Sendur, 2025a).

One key component of exam security is the set of regulations and agreements that candidates must accept upon registration. These agreements outline strict rules governing the exam process and the consequences of non-compliance. Another crucial safeguard is the check-in and authentication process, where candidates must present official identification, and some systems use facial recognition technology to compare their appearance with their ID photo. In addition, remote testing platforms often require a 360-degree room scan using a webcam or mobile device to ensure no unauthorised individuals or materials are present.

During the exam, remote invigilation systems closely monitor candidates through a combination of live invigilators and AI-driven supervision. These systems detect suspicious behaviour, such as looking away from the screen, leaving the camera's view, or engaging in conversation. Any irregularities may result in immediate exam termination or invalidation of results.

Another key security measure is the browser-locking mechanism, which restricts access to external websites, applications, or communication tools. Once the exam begins, all other browser tabs and programs are disabled, ensuring that candidates remain confined to the exam platform.

To prevent unauthorised note-taking or content leakage, certification providers enforce strict policies on handwritten notes. While two of the reviewed exams provide digital note-taking tools, TOEFL iBT allows candidates to use a small whiteboard or a transparent sheet protector with erasable markers. The choice between typing and handwriting notes can impact performance, particularly for candidates who prefer writing by hand (Lestari, 2024). However, since online home-based exams require computer proficiency, test takers are generally expected to have adequate typing skills. At lower proficiency levels, online exams may be discouraged due to potential difficulties in the check-in process and compliance with security protocols.

With the rise of counterfeit certificates, certification providers have introduced online result verification systems. Organisations that require proof of language proficiency can verify candidate results directly through secure platforms, ensuring that presented certificates are genuine.

Maintaining security in high-stakes certification exams is paramount, as any breach can compromise the validity of test scores and the credibility of the certification itself

(International Test Commission & Association of Test Publishers, 2022, p. 92). The transition to online testing during the pandemic intensified concerns about exam integrity (Sendur & Kościńska, 2021), but modern remote proctoring systems now incorporate multilayered security measures to deter, detect, and prevent cheating (Sendur, in press; Sendur, 2025a; Voss, 2023). Through reliable authentication procedures, strict exam protocols, and real-time monitoring, certification providers continue to uphold the trustworthiness and validity of their assessments.

5.5 Acceptance and recognition of online exams

The three major English certification exams – TOEFL iBT, IELTS, and PTE Academic – are widely accepted by universities, immigration authorities, and multinational corporations. According to information given by test providers, TOEFL iBT is recognised by over 13,000 universities and institutions in more than 160 countries (ETS, n.d.-c). IELTS (Academic and General Training) is accepted by over 12,500 organisations worldwide (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.), while PTE Academic, the most recent of the three, is currently recognised by over 3,500 institutions globally (Pearson PTE, n.d.-c).

The difference in acceptance figures is mainly due to the longevity of the exams. TOEFL has been in existence for over 60 years, IELTS for approximately 45 years, whereas PTE Academic is relatively new, having been introduced only 14 years ago. Naturally, this has influenced the number of institutions recognising each test.

Despite the increasing popularity of online test versions and the security measures implemented by exam providers, home-based versions of these exams are not yet universally accepted on the same basis as centre-based tests. A review of institutional recognition lists on the exam providers' websites reveals that significantly fewer universities and organisations accept the online version compared to the traditional in-person format.

Moreover, online versions of these tests are currently not recognised for high-stakes purposes, such as visa and immigration applications. For example, in the United Kingdom, Secure English Language Tests (SELTs) for UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) must be taken at an official, Home Office-approved test centre (GOV.UK, n.d.). This restriction underscores the preference for controlled, in-person testing environments when language proficiency assessments are used for critical purposes.

Thus, while online exams provide greater convenience and accessibility, candidates should be aware of potential limitations in acceptance, particularly for visa applications and specific educational institutions. It remains to be seen whether increased security measures and continued validation studies will lead to wider recognition of home-based exams.

6 Conclusion

With the growing availability of foreign language certification exams and the relatively new landscape of online testing, it is essential to equip stakeholders – candidates, educators, and institutions – with clear, comprehensive, and up-to-date information about available assessments. Test-takers need to understand what to expect, while universities and organisations must have reliable data to guide their decisions regarding exam recognition. This article aimed to bridge that gap by comparing three major EAP online exams: IELTS Online, TOEFL iBT Home Edition, and PTE Academic.

Despite their differences, the three exams share core similarities: they assess the four primary language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), follow a multilevel structure, and are increasingly accepted for admission purposes. However, notable distinctions exist in areas such as scoring methods, task formats, and result presentation. A key point of debate is AI-based scoring, which TOEFL and PTE integrate, while IELTS remains reliant on human examiners. Research has both supported and questioned the validity of automated assessment, adding complexity to the discussion.

Additionally, security concerns surrounding online testing persist. While remote exams implement stringent security protocols, scepticism remains about their susceptibility to fraud compared to in-person exams. Nonetheless, modern proctoring techniques, AI-driven monitoring, and identity verification systems make online testing increasingly robust and, in some cases, even more secure than traditional formats.

The benefits of online testing include greater accessibility for test takers, convenience, cost-effectiveness due to reduced travel and administrative costs, and faster score reporting. However, challenges remain, such as technical issues, institutional scepticism, varying levels of recognition and a lingering preference for traditional in-centre exams. While online testing has gained traction, its full acceptance across all domains (including immigration and visas) is still limited.

As technology and security frameworks continue to advance, online testing is poised to play an increasingly prominent role in language assessment. However, stakeholders must carefully weigh the advantages and limitations when making exam-related decisions. The future of English proficiency testing will likely see a balance between digital innovation and traditional assessment principles, shaping a more flexible and inclusive language certification landscape.

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Appendix

Table 1. Overview of at-home EAP certification examinations

EXAM	IELTS Online	TOEFL iBT Home Edition	PTE Academic
Minimum age of candidate	18+	No minimum age required for candidates	16+
Prices (as of 5 July 2024; selected countries only)	<p>Fees retrieved from British Council. IELTS. (n.d.-a) on 5 July 2024:</p> <p>Austria – EUR 262 (EUR 268 from 1/10/2024) (ca. USD 284/290) Estonia – not available France – EUR 252 (ca. USD 273) Germany – EUR 249 (ca. USD 270) Greece – EUR 218 (ca. USD 236) Italy – not available Poland – PLN 885 (ca. USD 225) Slovakia – EUR 230 (EUR 236 from 1/10/2024) (ca. USD 250/255) Spain – EUR 235 (EUR 242 from 1/10/2024) (ca. USD 255/262) Sri Lanka – not available Sweden – not available UK – not available USA – not available</p>	<p>Fees retrieved from ETS (n.d.-b) on 5 July 2024:</p> <p>Austria – USD 280 Estonia – USD 240 France – USD 270 Germany – USD 265 Greece – USD 245 Italy – USD 280 Poland – USD 215 Slovakia – USD 245 Spain – USD 255 Sri Lanka – USD 190 Sweden – USD 320 UK – USD 250 USA – USD 255</p>	<p>Fees retrieved from Pearson PTE (n.d.-b) on 5 July 2024:</p> <p>Austria – EUR 250 (ca. USD 270) Estonia – USD 235 France – USD 270 Germany – USD 260 Greece – USD 230 Italy – USD 270 Poland – USD 215 Slovakia – USD 220 Spain – USD 255 Sri Lanka – USD 198 Sweden – USD 300 UK – GBP 200 (ca. USD 257) USA – USD 245</p>
Exam software	Inspira Exam Portal	Meazure Learning® Guardian Browser	OnVUE
Results – scales	The IELTS band score scale: 1–9	TOEFL iBT scale: 0–120 total score and 0–30 for each section	Global Scale of English: 10–90
Results – waiting time	6–8 days after the test	4–8 days after the test	48 hours after the test
Estimated timing	2 hours 45 min.	Under 2 hours	2 hours

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