

Language Testing in The Age of Attention Deficits: Rethinking 3-Hour Assessments for Modern Learners

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Abstract: This article critically explores the growing challenges posed by traditional long-form standardized language tests such as the IELTS and TOEFL in the context of increasing diagnoses of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the shorter attention spans characteristic of Gen Z and Gen Alpha learners. Drawing on cognitive science, educational psychology, and recent innovations in assessment design, the article argues for a paradigm shift toward more inclusive, adaptive, and modular language testing formats. It concludes with a set of forward-looking recommendations, including the integration of AI-driven, focus-aware testing systems.

Keywords: ADHD, language testing, IELTS, TOEFL, cognitive load, digital distraction, Gen Z, adaptive assessment, educational equity.

Introduction:

In recent years, the global prevalence of ADHD among children and young adults has seen a notable rise. According to the World Health Organization (2023), the worldwide prevalence of ADHD is estimated at 5–7% in school-aged populations, with rising adult diagnosis rates. This trend coincides with a generational shift in cognitive behavior: Gen Z and Gen Alpha learners are growing up in fast-paced digital environments that influence their concentration, attention spans, and learning styles.

Despite these changes, many standardized language assessments, including the IELTS and TOEFL, have retained their traditional long-form structures. These exams, often lasting 3–4 hours, test not only language proficiency but also sustained attention and endurance. In this context, it is vital to question the fairness and accessibility of these assessments for neurodiverse populations.

Notably, in response to these challenges, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) recently shortened both the TOEFL iBT and GRE General Test durations from around 3 hours to approximately 1 hour and 55 minutes. This decision, implemented in 2023, reflects growing awareness of the cognitive demands such tests place on modern test takers. The change is widely regarded as beneficial, especially as many people today report difficulty maintaining prolonged concentration—a phenomenon that some experts attribute to the lingering cognitive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The rise of short-form digital media—particularly social media and one-minute video reels—has arguably exacerbated attention fragmentation. Ironically,

even one-minute videos are now perceived by some users as “too long,” signaling a troubling trend toward diminished sustained focus.

Literature Review

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) suggests that working memory has a limited capacity, and learning or performance decreases when cognitive demands exceed this threshold. For learners with ADHD or attention-related challenges, extended test durations significantly tax this limited capacity, leading to lower performance that may not accurately reflect their language abilities.

Research in educational psychology further underscores the role of digital distractions. Rosen et al. (2013) found that digital natives, especially those who use multiple devices simultaneously, are more prone to task-switching behaviors that undermine sustained focus. Furthermore, test anxiety—common in high-stakes assessments like IELTS and TOEFL—is heightened in neurodivergent individuals, creating a compounding barrier.

Critical Analysis of Current Testing Models

IELTS and TOEFL are widely recognized and structured around comprehensive four-skill assessment models: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. While they offer some accommodations for learners with disabilities, the default design assumes uniform attention capacity and testing stamina. The rigid format and fixed test length disadvantage neurodivergent test takers whose concentration may fluctuate.

Moreover, these exams are often administered in high-pressure testing environments, further exacerbating anxiety for individuals who struggle with focus and time constraints. The written components, particularly the essay and integrated tasks, require sustained mental effort and uninterrupted reasoning. For test takers with ADHD, this setup often results in cognitive fatigue and reduced performance unrelated to actual language ability.

In contrast, newer models like the Duolingo English Test offer shorter, adaptive, and modular testing formats that dynamically adjust to the test-taker's performance. These tests typically last under an hour and are optimized for online delivery. In addition to being more accessible, these platforms also employ item-level adaptability, which minimizes test length while maximizing precision.

Despite these advantages, such assessments are not without drawbacks. The primary concern is institutional recognition; many universities and immigration authorities still give preference to legacy tests like IELTS and TOEFL. There are also concerns around test security and whether these shorter tests can adequately measure complex productive skills like essay writing or spontaneous speech under real-world conditions.

Impacts on Learners and Teachers

For learners with ADHD or related attention challenges, long-form assessments can be exclusionary, misrepresenting true proficiency and limiting academic or migration opportunities. Equity concerns emerge when neurodivergent students must compete under assessment formats that do not reflect their learning realities. These barriers may also disproportionately affect students from underserved backgrounds who may lack access to diagnosis, accommodations, or strategies to self-advocate.

The emotional toll of such assessments cannot be underestimated. Repeated failure or poor performance on standardized exams can diminish self-esteem and create long-term aversion to language learning. This perpetuates a cycle of underachievement and exclusion, contradicting the inclusive aims of modern education.

Teachers, in turn, must navigate the tension between preparing students for traditional exams and adopting innovative pedagogies that reflect contemporary cognitive science. Many educators now integrate mindfulness practices, spaced repetition, gamified activities, and multimodal content to better support attention-limited learners. However, even the most innovative classroom strategies often collide with outdated assessment formats that prioritize endurance over equity.

The disconnect between teaching and testing further complicates the task of educators, placing them in a difficult position where they must reconcile inclusive classroom practice with exclusionary testing systems. This misalignment calls for a system-wide reevaluation of how language proficiency is measured and validated in a neurodiverse, fast-changing world.

Recommendations

To align assessment design with the cognitive profiles of

modern learners and create more equitable language testing practices, the following multi-tiered recommendations are proposed:

- **Modular Testing Formats:** Break down large exams into smaller, manageable components that can be completed independently or over staggered sessions. This would reduce cognitive fatigue and allow learners to perform each task at their peak focus level.
- **Adaptive Assessments:** Leverage AI and psychometric algorithms to tailor question difficulty and pacing to the test taker's ability in real-time. Adaptive testing not only personalizes the experience but also makes assessments shorter and more accurate in measuring actual proficiency.
- **Focus-Aware Testing Technologies:** Innovate with tools that detect signs of cognitive overload or inattention—such as eye-tracking, reaction times, or behavioral cues—and allow for automated breaks, reminders, or pacing adjustments. Such systems could also offer optional features for learners who self-identify with attention challenges.
- **Enhanced and Normalized Accommodations:** Accommodations like extended time, scheduled pauses, or distraction-free environments should be readily available—not only through formal diagnosis but also as part of universal design practices. Test platforms should include these features as standard options to encourage self-directed personalization.
- **Universal Design for Testing (UDT):** Adopt testing frameworks that inherently consider the needs of all learners, including those with attention and executive functioning difficulties. A UDT approach avoids retrofitting accommodations and instead ensures inclusivity from the ground up.
- **Institutional and Regulatory Reform:** Encourage universities, employers, and immigration bodies to recognize shorter and adaptive testing alternatives alongside legacy exams. This would widen access and reduce gatekeeping based on outdated testing models.
- **Teacher and Test Developer Training:** Provide continuous professional development on neurodiversity, inclusive assessment practices, and the use of emerging educational technologies. Teachers should be empowered to prepare students for assessments that reflect both modern cognition and future-facing standards.
- **Awareness and Attitude Shift:** Launch public education campaigns and policy dialogues that challenge the notion of longer tests as inherently superior. Stakeholders must begin to see flexibility, not duration, as the hallmark of rigor and fairness.

Together, these recommendations aim to redesign language testing with empathy, evidence, and equity at its core—serving not only learners with ADHD but all students navigating a complex, cognitively demanding digital world.

DISCUSSION

The proposed shift in language assessment design is not merely a technical upgrade but a deeply ethical and

pedagogical transformation. As educational systems increasingly embrace diversity and inclusion, language testing remains one of the last strongholds of outdated, one-size-fits-all practices. This contradiction undermines the broader goal of educational equity and calls for immediate attention.

The convergence of neurodiversity advocacy, post-COVID cognitive shifts, and digital media culture demands that educators, policymakers, and test developers reevaluate what fairness and validity mean in a contemporary context. Prolonged exposure to fast-paced digital stimuli—particularly among Gen Z and Gen Alpha—has made sustained focus an increasingly rare cognitive skill. Clinging to three-hour exam formats in this era not only disadvantages learners with diagnosed attention disorders but also fails to acknowledge the evolving learning behaviors of the general student population.

Moreover, a growing body of research supports the idea that shorter, adaptive tests can provide equally reliable—if not more precise—measures of language proficiency. The psychological toll of long, high-stakes tests is also well documented, especially among students from marginalized or neurodivergent backgrounds. The shift toward more inclusive testing models must therefore be driven by both data and compassion.

However, challenges remain. Standardization, global recognition, and test security are legitimate concerns for institutions and regulators. These must be addressed collaboratively, through rigorous pilot programs, data transparency, and multi-stakeholder dialogues that include neurodiverse learners themselves.

In sum, rethinking language testing is not a concession to convenience—it is an affirmation of educational justice. If we truly aim to assess what students know and can do, rather than how long they can sit still, then we must evolve our tools accordingly. The future of language assessment lies not in endurance, but in accessibility, innovation, and human-centered design.

CONCLUSION

As language educators and policymakers strive for equity and validity in assessment, it is essential to question the ethical foundation of long-form standardized testing in a neurodiverse, digitally-influenced world. Embracing flexible, inclusive, and evidence-based testing models not only serves learners with ADHD but also aligns language education with the realities of contemporary cognition and learning behavior. The future of language testing must prioritize inclusion without compromising rigor—an achievable balance through innovation and empathy.

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