

International High School Development in Chongqing: Test Preparation vs. University Preparation

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Abstract - This study concentrates on international high school development and trends in Chongqing, China. It was discovered that the number of students who are studying abroad has been growing significantly and the majority of students struggled because of the language barrier during their first semester. Although students who took language proficiency assessments were accepted to college/universities, many still struggled in a foreign academic environment. This study contains data from urban and suburban areas of China. Specifically, students' Internet Based Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-Based Test® (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System™ (IELTS) scores from urban schools have been collected from the test preparation program, Apluz International Language Center (Apluz). The academic performance of students who were accepted into universities abroad were monitored during their first semester. TOEFL and GAC Entry Data has been collected from two Global Assessment Certificate™ (GAC) centers including: Chongqing Bachuan International High School (CBIHS) located in Tongliang, Chongqing, and a center in Jiangsu Province (Center A). ACT Education Solutions, Limited also offered data from a case study which included 30 students' GAC and university final GPAs. The scores were used to compare English competencies from a test preparation program with the holistic approach offered in the GAC Program, which promotes language acquisition as the the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment™ (WIDA) standards suggest. Although many students choose to study examinations, it was determined that students tend to perform better when they are in an international setting and the pedagogical focus is based on skills & competencies.

Index Terms - International High School, Test Preparation, University Preparation, TOEFL, IELTS

1. Purpose of the Study

1. Comparing an international test preparation system with an international university preparation system.
2. Comparing the effectiveness of international high schools/departments versus traditional Chinese high schools in regards to success rates in international higher education.

2. Curriculum Comparison

Apluz was in operation from July 2011 to January 2014 to make observations, and to collect data for the purposes of this study. At Apluz, the courses were taught in Chinese. Students were expected to create and memorize writing outlines for all of the published question pools. Each week students were asked to memorize sample essays which received high scores while following a specific writing structure. For speaking, students only reviewed actual test questions while no additional speaking materials were permitted. While studying reading, students first learned essential vocabulary and they were trained to identify answers

to the questions instead of understanding the meaning of the passage. For the listening examples, they were trained to take notes to answer questions without comprehending the dialogue or lecture. This instructional program taught students to use English to pass a test in an effort to gain acceptance to the college or university of their choice. The methods from Apluz are drastically different from the GAC approach.

In the GAC program, students have opportunities to take modules in reading & writing, listening & speaking, mathematics, technology, study skills, science, business, communication skills, etc. All of the courses are designed to be delivered in English by native English speakers. The assessments for each module are kept secure to ensure that the students are not studying tests, and instead they are studying skills needed to succeed in the university level. The types of assessments offered in these modules vary according to what is expected in western learning environments. Some examples of the assessments are: role plays, research essays, marketing plans, database creation, Power Point Presentations, scientific case studies, etc. The students may elect to study TOEFL or IELTS as an elective, however this is not the focus of the program. Before being admitted into the program, students must pass the GAC entry test (which assesses reading, writing, listening and speaking) with at least a 60% with no less than a 40% in each of the 4 sections.

3. Research Methodology

This study was designed based on process theory in an effort to analyze the effectiveness of different international education systems. Quantitative analysis is based on the data cited from China Education On-line census [2], Apluz and two GAC centers. (All the internal data was gathered under Institutional Review Board protocol.) The data from Apluz was collected via questionnaires (see Table I).

At Apluz, 854 students were asked to participate in the study and 566 (66.27%) of the students responded. The participants were asked to include information about their high schools including: the amount of students in each grade level, curriculum (international school/department or traditional Chinese high school), teaching challenges, standardized test scores, university attended, and academic performance during the first semester of university study (which was collected by email). GAC Entry Test and TOEFL scores for 6 students were offered by CBIHS for the 2013-2014 academic year, while the 53 students' scores from Center A were offered by ACT Education Solutions, Ltd. from 2012-2014 as well as a

case study comparing GAC and university GPAs. By studying this data it was possible to compare the effectiveness of each curriculum.

TABLE 1 Apluz International Language Center Questionnaire

Email:		School:
Grade:		TOEFL/IELTS scores:
10th grade students in school:		
11th grade students in school:		
12th grade students in school:		
Main Curriculum:		
Teaching Challenges:		
THE FOLLOWING INFO IS COLLECTED VIA EMAIL		
School attended:		
First semester overall GPA:		
Highest grade:		
Lowest grade:		
Overall credit hours:		
Overall credit hours earned:		

5. Discussion

In Figures 2 and 3, TOEFL and IELTS score reports from the Apluz participant pool are displayed. Students' scores range from 40 to 115 in TOEFL (see figure 2), with the majority of students scoring between 80 and 88. The IELTS score report displays that the majority of students scored between 5 and 6. Figure 4 shows that of the 566 students who responded to the survey, 100% successfully received an admission offer and went abroad for further education. 420 of the students went to the top 300 universities in the world based on The Times' Education Ranking. Universities ranking around 80 received the largest proportion of the 566 students. Measured by western College Undergraduate admissions standards, it appears that the majority of the students scored well on the language assessments, however; it is possible that the 288 students opted out of the questionnaire because they did not score favorably and were not accepted to institutions abroad. With this in mind, it must be considered that up to 33.72% of the students may not have achieved their goal at Apluz. Aside from college admissions and test scores, the questionnaires revealed valuable information about the students' high schools.

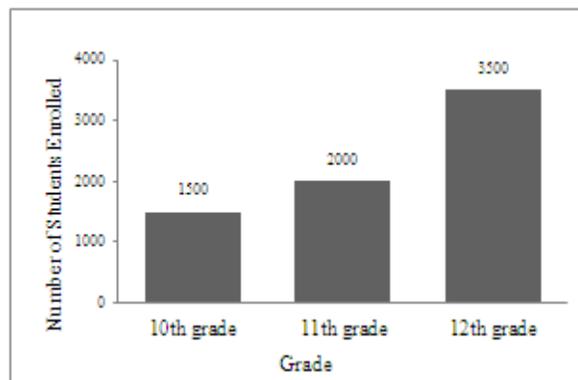


Fig.1 Population of Students Enrolled in Different Grade.

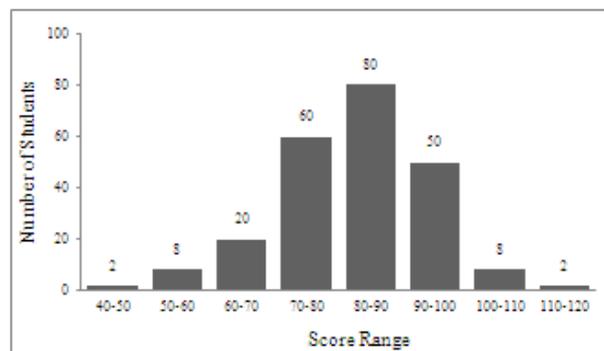


Fig. 2 TOEFL Score Distribution

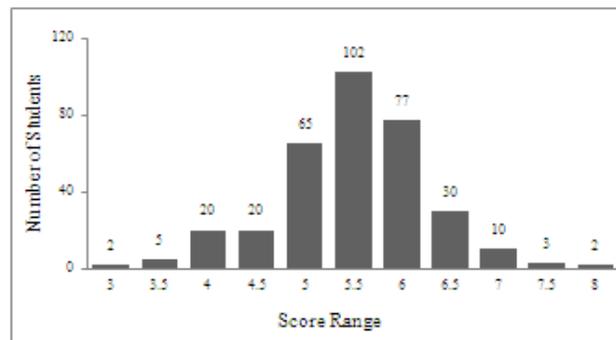


Fig.3 IELTS Score Distribution

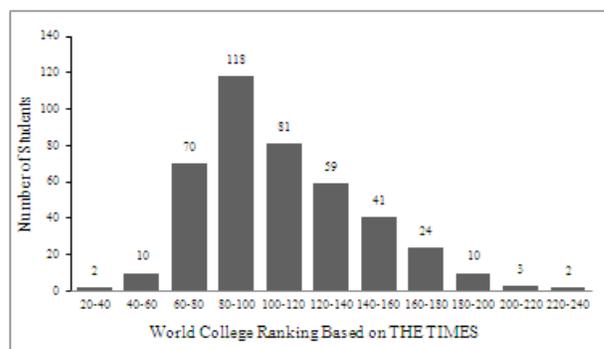


Fig.4 Students Distribution in Different School Ranking

In the study, the questionnaires presented three major issues within their high schools in regards to preparation for international studies:

A. There is a lack of comprehensive ESL programs.

All the schools represented in the questionnaire offered English speaking, listening, reading and writing. The students felt that this was an incomplete course system which did not prepare them for overseas education. The WIDA standards supports this notion, because the standards focus on social/instructional language as well as learning the language of science, social studies, mathematics, and language arts [1]. If an ESL program focuses on only on social/instructional language or language arts, student language proficiencies may be insufficient for many university liberal arts and science courses.

B. Teachers are unable to serve students effectively.

Students reported that there is a lack of individualized attention from their teachers inside and outside of the classroom due to large class sizes. Another issue is the teachers' lack of ability to deliver western instructional methods because the teachers themselves were trained in the Chinese education system. The students also reported that their teachers used Chinese too often in class which hindered English acquisition. The English teachers who were educated in China, may have had difficulty adapting to teaching in a western education system. Teachers delivered much of the instruction in Chinese while focusing on memorizing, pronouncing, & spelling vocabulary words in addition to reciting reading passages. It is important to integrate individual professional development goals with group and school wide goals to improve teacher effectiveness [3]. Some teachers may need support designing lessons where more English is used while other teachers may need benefit from training to improve students' speaking abilities

C. Many students scored poorly after their first semester abroad.

The questionnaires revealed that the average overall GPA is approximately 3.1 with 45.8% of the students scoring below 3.0 (see Figure 5). Although the students had an overall passing GPA, a concerning 27.8% of students has at least one F in their transcript and 45.76% of students achieved less than a 3.0.

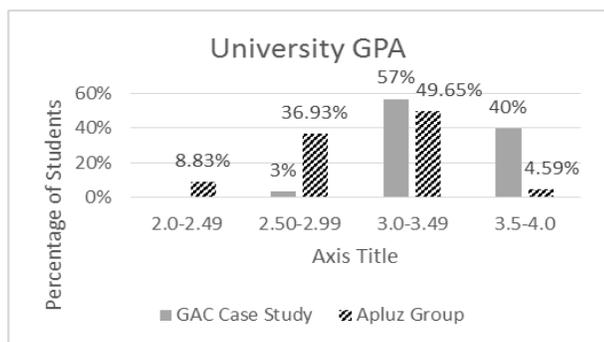


Fig.5 GPA Report

The test strategies offered at Apluz may have contributed to higher test scores and admissions rates, but the instruction seems to have underprepared students as they lacked the essential skills which were needed to succeed during their first semester. Had the students entered a university preparation program, they may have performed better during their first year of university studies. CBIHS has encountered similar obstacles that were revealed by the student questionnaires and continuously strives to meet the needs of the students.

When CBIHS was first established in August 2012, the students came from traditional Chinese school, and it was necessary to develop a comprehensive ESL program and a western course system to guarantee that students will succeed at the university level. To meet the needs of students who wish to study abroad after a short period of time, CBIHS adopted the GAC program in September 2013. Currently, CBIHS is the only school in Chongqing which offers the GAC program [4].

Entry test data was collected for 6 students who decided to opt into taking the TOEFL test (see figure 6). For reference, a GAC Entry Test score of 60 is equal to a 62 on the TOEFL [5]. Students 1-5 studied in a pre GAC program called GAC Foundation English for 6 weeks. After 6 weeks, students 1-5 decided to temporarily focus exclusively on test preparation for 3 months, and their schedule was adjusted to include 6, 40 minute periods per day of test preparation. Student 6 decided to begin the GAC program which included 6 GAC modules per day and the student had 2 periods of test prep each day.

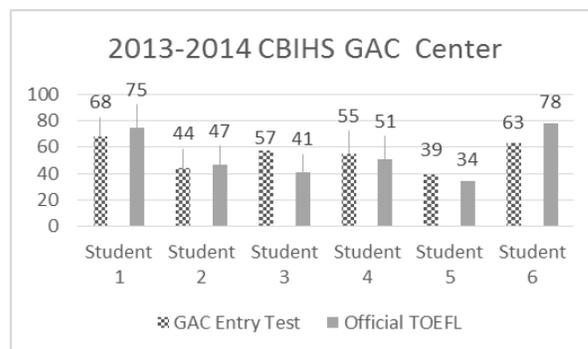


Fig.6 Entry Test & TOEFL Comparison

Student 6 took a practice TOEFL test 2 months after entering the program and scored an 80, which is a 17 point increase from the Entry Test (this is not included in Figure 6). Student 6 had the most improvement between the Entry Test and the official TOEFL test at 15 points. This significant growth in approximately 3 months is likely due to the GAC program and the 1 to 1 instruction. Student 1 had the second highest improvement of 7 points, while student 2 only increased by 3 points. Students 3, 4 and 5 actually decreased in score. Even though the student to teacher ratio is 5:1, the students did not perform well overall. This lack of progress is likely due to the focus on test strategies with little application of skills. Students 1-5 will resume their GAC foundation English studies which will most likely prepare them to successfully enter the GAC program, and eventually transition

to college. It must be noted that students 1-5 took the Official TOEFL test after 2 months of instruction, while student 6 took the Official TOEFL test after 3 months. The practice TOEFL test given to Student 6 after 2 months suggests that a score range higher or lower than 80 could have been reasonably expected due to variations in test versions. As the GAC program is new to Chongqing and students have not completed the program as of yet, more research needs to be conducted in this region. GAC has had 3 years of success in the Jiangsu province.

From 2012-2014, 53 students enrolled in Center A and took the TOEFL test after studying in the GAC program. The students from Center A generally scored higher than the students from Apluz (see Figure 7). 41.51% of the students from Center A scored at least a 90, while only 26.09% of the Apluz students scored in this range. The majority of Apluz students scored in the 80-89 range. Ongoing research must be conducted to determine if the 53 GAC students were successful in college. According to Assistant Director Ying Xu, from the University of Iowa, “GAC students have demonstrated strong academic capabilities with higher overall GPA’s, seem more prepared for college, and are better equipped to immerse themselves in American culture. GAC courses provide our students seamless transition from foreign school to US classroom” [6]. Although ongoing research must be conducted to determine the success rate of CBIHS and Center A students once they graduate, there is evidence that the GAC program is effective for university preparation.

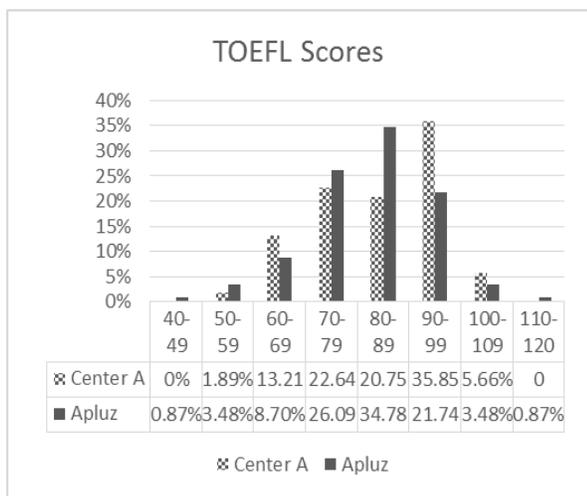


Fig.7 TOEFL Comparison

ACT Education Solutions, Limited, conducted a case study where 30 students’ final GAC GPAs were compared with their final university GPAs. Not only did student perform better on average than the Apluz group (see figure 5), the students actually earned higher scores in their universities than in the GAC program (see Figure 8). 48.76% of Apluz students scored below a 3.0 GPA while 97% of students from the case study score above a 3.0 GPA. The Apluz survey statistics also indicated that students who attended international schools/departments had a higher average first

semester GPA than traditional Chinese high schools (see Figure 9).

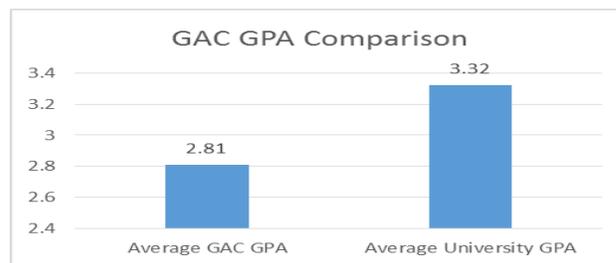


Fig.8 GPA Comparison

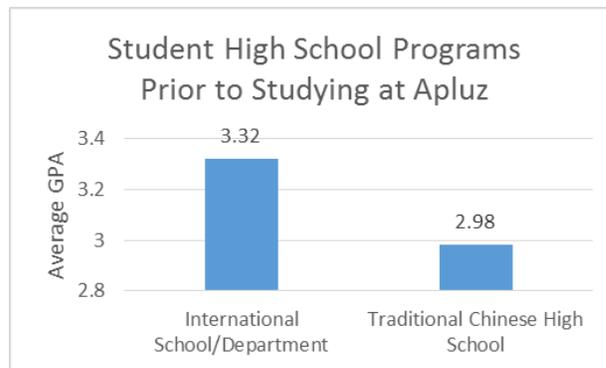


Fig.9 TOEFL Comparison

6. Conclusion

Test preparation may lead to high scores and college admissions, however without studying in an international education program, students are more likely to underperform in college when compared to their internationally educated peers. Apluz, CBIHS, Center A, and the GAC Case Study provide data which suggests that university preparation, or even an international department is superior to test preparation for students who wish to study abroad. All international schools and test centers should communicate with their graduates to determine their success rates. With this information, schools can evaluate their success by admission rates, retention rates, graduation rates, overall GPA, and success in the workforce. As educators we must not only ensure students are admitted to universities, rather we must prepare them with the foundation to succeed.

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