



McMaster University uses Linguaskill to tailor international student support



'As a university we understand that retention is vital – after all, it's not just about recruiting international students but ensuring that they thrive and succeed, and Linguaskill is a key part of our efforts in this area.'

Dr Anna Moro, Director, McMaster English Language Development Office

McMaster University in Canada prides itself on its strong international student community. Ensuring that these students develop and thrive is a priority, and it has put in place a range of programmes to help those who do not have English as a first language. To deliver tailored support, it has adopted Linguaskill within its MODEL programme, using the test to understand gaps in a student's language proficiency that can then be successfully addressed.

Encouraging international students with tailored language learning

International students are a key part of the McMaster University student community, which has alumni from 139 countries. Around 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students at the Canadian university are international. The institution is committed to supporting all its international students to ensure they get the most from their education.

As part of this, in 2014 it created the McMaster English Language Development Office, which runs three programmes (MELD, MERGE and MODEL) to help students who do not have English as a first language. For those who meet academic requirements but do not have a high enough level of English proficiency, measured using the IELTS test, the MELD bridging programme provides additional language teaching to improve their skills, enabling them to take up their place. MERGE is an intensive programme for graduate students looking to increase their proficiency, while MODEL is a free, pilot programme open to any current student wanting to enhance particular areas of their English proficiency.

'While all students meet overall English proficiency criteria to study at McMaster, this can mask gaps in particular areas, such as presenting or writing,' says Dr Anna Moro, Director, McMaster English Language Development Office. 'That means they can struggle to work effectively. Consequently we created the MODEL programme to offer individual support to students, tailored to their language needs.'

Creating MODEL students

A key part of MODEL is assessing a student's proficiency in the four language competencies of reading, writing, listening and speaking, in order to identify where support needs to be targeted. To quickly and flexibly assess proficiency, the university has adopted Linguaskill. An online, multilevel test, Linguaskill uses artificial intelligence to adapt the test to the user's level. Depending on the answers the candidate gives, the level of difficulty increases or decreases. Questions continue until the algorithm establishes the test taker's ability level.

About McMaster University

McMaster University is one of only four Canadian universities ranked among the top 100 in the world by the major global ranking systems. Home to over 70 research institutes and more than 31,000 students, it prides itself on being a hub for innovation, discovery and growth.

mcmaster.ca

About Linguaskill

Linguaskill is a quick and convenient online test to help higher education institutions and employers check the English levels of individuals and groups of candidates. Supported by artificial intelligence technology, it provides fast, accurate results and clear individual and group reports. Results are aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the international standard for describing language ability.

cambridgeenglish.org/linguaskill

About Cambridge Assessment English

Cambridge Assessment English is a not-for-profit department of the University of Cambridge. It produces the world's leading range of qualifications and tests for learners and teachers of English, including Cambridge English Qualifications, Linguaskill and IELTS. Taken by over 5 million people every year, these exams are backed by the work of the largest dedicated research team of any English language test provider.

cambridgeenglish.org

Linguaskill delivers results for some skills instantly, and others within 48 hours. It is the only in-house test graded against the internationally recognised Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). It has been mapped on the Cambridge English Scale, alongside other Cambridge English Qualifications, and the IELTS test, all of which are used extensively for university admissions and for immigration applications around the world.

'Since we adopted it, Linguaskill has become invaluable to the important assessment component of the MODEL programme,' says Anna. 'We chose it because of its flexibility and convenience – it is so fast and easy to test students, enabling us to quickly provide the tailored support that they need. We can use it internally and run tests at any time. Often people come to us with an idea of their weaknesses – Linguaskill allows us to either validate their assumptions or sometimes to highlight that they actually require help in a completely different language area.'

A student can be receiving support via MODEL within a week of walking through the programme's doors, thanks to Linguaskill. Anna explains: 'Our services are flexible – and Linguaskill is too. If a student comes in on a Monday, meets a consultant and then takes a Linguaskill test on Tuesday, we'll have the results and be able to put a plan in place by the end of the same week. It's amazing that we can move so quickly, and is really appreciated by students.'

Since Linguaskill was introduced to MODEL in 2018, it has been continually running within the programme. All Linguaskill tests are carried out in-house, without needing to go to an external test centre or to invest in expensive equipment. They are easy to administer, as well as straightforward for candidates to take.

Tailoring language learning with Linguaskill

The MODEL programme is now entering the third year of its pilot, and has seen students participate in hundreds of activities, tailored to their requirements. These include academic skills-based workshops, social and community activities, such as conversation practice and reading circles, and one-on-one consultations with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) language specialists.

Student feedback on Linguaskill has been extremely positive, and the programme has witnessed a significant uptake in requests for the assessment, with more than a 10-fold increase in the second year of MODEL.

There are also plans to use Linguaskill to measure improvements in the MERGE programme, with graduate students tested prior to beginning the programme, and then immediately afterwards. In particular, the programme looks forward to reliable and accurate results to show progress in proficiency for the critical productive skills, speaking and writing.

Future plans also include potentially working directly with departments to supplement other tests, using Linguaskill scores in cases where graduate students require a higher level (such as when they are applying to be teaching assistants), rather than asking them to retake the full department-set test.

'Linguaskill is a big part of MODEL and our vision to support international students, meaning it is making a positive contribution to our efforts in this key area,' concludes Anna.