

Four Studies on the University of Guam English Placement Test

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Abstract

The article reviews four empirical studies conducted on the University of Guam English Placement Test. The focus of the review ranges from updating the cloze test component and examining its relationship with writing proficiency, to applying an argument-based approach to investigate validity from the perspectives of raters. The intent of the article is to provide summaries of past studies, highlight their findings, and acknowledge their limitations, with the hope of serving as a reference for future researchers and assessment users.

Keywords: writing studies, writing assessment, assessment validity, college placement, college readiness

My academic journey has revolved around the University of Guam English Placement Test, now known as the English Preparedness Test. I have conducted four empirical studies of this assessment, with each study yielding unique discoveries and contributing to the subsequent and cumulative investigation.

The first study was undertaken during a graduate course titled “Second Language Testing and Evaluation” in 2013. This course’s primary objective was to update an outdated portion of the assessment, specifically one of the cloze forms, *also known as fill-in-the-blank tests*, which had served as a measure of the University of Guam English Placement Test. Building upon the initial study, the second study, part of my master's thesis study in the academic year 2014-2015, involved constructing another cloze test and establishing concurrent validity between the cloze test performance and writing proficiency (Lee, 2015). In the academic year 2018-2019, I was involved in a project with the Guam Department of Education as a co-principal investigator, working alongside Dr. Sharleen Santos-Bamba, who served as the principal

investigator. The project aimed to develop standard-based English assessments for high school students and achieve vertical alignment with the University of Guam English Placement Test. My role in this project included contributing to the research design and leading the development and validation of the cloze part of the test. In 2020, as part of my doctoral dissertation, I expanded upon my prior research on the University of Guam English Placement Test. At this point, the cloze forms were no longer part of the assessment. Instead, my research focused on developing a validity claim of the University of Guam English Preparedness Test practices (Lee, 2021).

In this article, I share these four empirical studies on the University of Guam English Placement Test. The goal is to provide concise summaries of previous studies' data and findings while acknowledging and reflecting on their limitations. This documentation aims to serve as a point of reference for future researchers and users of the assessment.

Brief and Relevant Background of the University of Guam English Preparedness Test

The University of Guam English Preparedness Test has undergone changes in its purpose and function throughout the years. Initially introduced as the English Placement Test in the 1990s by Dr. Daniel Robertson, a former English Professor at the University of Guam, the test served as an assessment tool to place incoming students into appropriate composition courses: EN085 and lab, EN100, and EN110 (Lee, 2021). The assessment consisted of two components: a 40-minute timed essay and a 30-minute timed one-word open cloze test; essay scores primarily determined course placements while the cloze test served as a supplemental measure.

However, the cloze test forms remained unchanged for almost two decades, and the content of some forms was considered outdated, lacking alignment with contemporary knowledge and local context. For these reasons, Dr. Sharleen Santos-Bamba, the former Director of Composition, initiated the update by suggesting the update be a project for students in her 2013 graduate seminar course (Lee, 2021). The second update on the cloze form was done as part of my master's thesis study in 2014-2015,

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which contributed to the development of a new cloze form that has become a part of the University of Guam English Placement Test (Lee, 2015). As the University of Guam English Placement Test continued to change, the composition program in 2018-19 combined two developmental courses, EN085 and EN100, into a single four-credit course, EN109, addressing the financial aid challenges of the students, and in the academic year 2019-2020, the composition program implemented another change: instead of placing students into different composition courses, all incoming students were directly placed into the freshmen-level composition class (Lee, 2021). This decision shifted the purpose of the assessment from a placement test to a diagnostic assessment of college preparedness according to Professor Terry Perez (personal communication, April 5, 2020), the current University of Guam English Preparedness Test coordinator.

This change in the University of Guam English Placement Test's purpose aligns with contemporary trends in Writing Studies, where the focus has shifted towards understanding validity as a contextualized decision, emphasizing fairness and ethics (Neal, 2011; Elliot, 2016; Poe & Cogan, 2016; Slomp, 2016a, 2016b). As the field moves away from rigid technical interpretations of validity, the University of Guam English Placement Test's transformation reflects an awareness of the importance of considering the individual students' needs and experiences.

In recent years, the discussions surrounding writing assessment have highlighted the need to address ethical concerns and social implications (Cushman, 2016; Poe & Inoue, 2016). The University of Guam English Placement Test has also undergone a transition, aligning with the broader context of fairness and ethics, by transforming from a placement tool to a diagnostic assessment. This change reflects the commitment to evaluate students with respect to their diverse backgrounds and unique circumstances.

Moreover, the evolution of writing assessment practices has led to a recognition that validity is not just about statistical measures but also about the meaningful application of assessments in specific contexts (Moss, 2016; Pruchnic et al., 2018). In response to this understanding, the University of Guam English Placement or Preparedness Test has

embraced a more nuanced approach, aiming to support students' academic success rather than merely placing them in courses.

This assessment's transition also resonates with discussions about the challenges of open admissions and underprepared students in writing placement testing (Brothen & Wambach, 2004; Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013; Payne & Lyman, 1996; Webb-Sunderhaus, 2010). By providing support based on diagnostic information, the University of Guam English Placement Test seeks to address these challenges effectively, reflecting the commitment of the university to offer equitable student learning experience.

In the upcoming sections, I will provide brief summaries of the previous empirical studies conducted on the University of Guam English Placement Test, along with reflections on their limitations. The aim is to offer insights as a reference for future researchers and users of the assessment, potentially contributing to the ongoing improvement of writing assessment practices.

Study on Cloze Form D - 2013-2014

During the academic year 2013-2014, a study on the University of Guam English Placement Test was initiated by three graduate students. As one of the test developers and co-principal investigators, I was responsible for constructing Form D while the other two students developed different forms. Under the guidance of Dr. Sharleen Santos-Bamba, the professor who also held the position of the Director of Composition at that time, the primary goal was to update the University of Guam English Placement Test's cloze forms. The study conducted initial sampling in public high schools, University of Guam classes, and other community settings.

The demographic data for Form D's initial sampling indicated a diverse group of participants. Among them, 41% were female and 59% were male. In terms of ethnicity, 61% were Pacific Islanders, 33% were Asian, 3% were Caucasian, and 3% were African American. The majority of participants (85%) reported English as their first language, while 15% identified English as not their first language. The education background varied, with 13% having some graduate work, 0% holding a 4-year

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degree, 3% having a 2-year degree, 10% attending some college, and 46% being high school students. The diverse demographic representation in the initial sampling of Form D offers a reflection of the local population, contributing to the assessment's relevance and contextual appropriateness.

The methodology adopted a systematic approach, drawing inspiration from the process used in creating the original forms A, B, and C. This is because these forms had been in use for almost 20 years, demonstrating their reliability. To achieve this, after text construction, the development of cloze items focused on embedding adequate contextual information within the sentences. The answer key was derived from the most common responses provided by test takers during each sampling.

Following the initial sampling, Form D was piloted during the University of Guam English Placement Test on multiple occasions: Apr. 19, 2014, May 17, 2014, June 4, 2014, July 10 and 11, 2014, and Aug. 9, 2014 (Lee, 2015). After each pilot, the responses were analyzed, and the test and answer key were updated accordingly. This iterative process aimed to mirror the successful development of the original forms, ensuring that Form D underwent refinements and improvements to uphold its reliability and relevance. By adopting this approach, the study sought to maintain the test's effectiveness and build upon the foundation laid by the previous forms.

The findings of the study emphasized the importance of maintaining an appropriate difficulty level for the text to ensure its suitability for the target population (Lee, 2015). However, one of the limitations of this study was that it relied only on answers provided by the participants, which focused solely on updating the cloze test forms. This approach overlooked other potential measures of language proficiency, calling for the need to explore more concrete validation systems in future research.

Study on Cloze Form E - 2014-2015

Transitioning from the Form D study, the Form E study addressed the previous limitations by exploring more than one measure of writing

proficiency. During the academic year 2014-2015, as part of my master's thesis research, I constructed a new cloze test, Form E, to replace the last outdated form of the University of Guam English Placement Test's cloze assessment (Lee, 2015). This effort was to contribute to continued improvement of the University of Guam English Placement Test, while my research sought to investigate the correlation between cloze test performance and overall writing proficiency.

The initial samplings included 56 adults and 117 high school students from three public schools on the island (Lee, 2015). For the adult participants, the study collected data from composition classes at the University of Guam as well as other community settings. Among the adult participants, 52% were female and 48% were male. In terms of ethnicity, 56% were Asian, 36% were Pacific Islanders, 4% were African American, 2% were Caucasian, and 2% were mixed. The majority of adult participants (68%) reported English as their first language, while 32% identified English is not their first language. The education background varied, with 7% were college graduates, 30% were current EN100 students, and 63% were current EN085 students.

For the high school students, the study collected data from three public schools in collaboration with school administrators (Lee, 2015). Among the 117 high school students who took part, 61% were female, and 39% were male. In terms of ethnicity, 64% were Pacific Islander, 28% were Asian, and 8% were of mixed ethnicity; 78% reported English as their first language, while 22% reported English is not their first language. After conducting the initial data analysis and making necessary revisions, the test was piloted on 169 incoming University of Guam students on two occasions, December 6, 2014, and January 3, 2015, as part of their English placement test.

The study aimed to find correlations between the cloze test performance and writing proficiency by assuming, among the 56 adults, their current placements as college graduates, EN100 developmental class students, and EN085 development class students, reflecting their writing proficiency (Lee, 2015). Meanwhile, for high school participants, their writing proficiency was assessed by collecting and grading writing samples, categorized as "proficient," "intermediate," and "not proficient," using a modified version of the

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University of Guam English Placement Test rubric. For the University of Guam English Placement Test pilots, the study assumed the students' placements, determined by the University of Guam English Placement Test committee based on their essay scores, as their writing proficiency.

The content of Form E focused on a common animal in the Pacific region, ensuring its relevance to the population (Lee, 2015). It was written at a 9.3 Flesch-Kincaid grade level; it employed a rational deletion method for cloze items, accepting only a few acceptable answers during scoring. The initial sampling results indicated a weak correlation between the cloze test scores and writing proficiency, as measured by the course placements of adult participants and the graded writing samples of high school students. However, after the test was revised and piloted twice with incoming University of Guam students, the subsequent results showed a moderate positive correlation between the cloze test scores and writing proficiency.

Through my master's thesis research, I aimed to make a meaningful contribution to the University of Guam English Placement Test by introducing a new cloze test form and investigating its concurrent validity with writing placement/proficiency (Lee, 2015). This investigation directly related to their current placement practice at that time. The study included a diverse group of adult participants and high school students, providing a good representation of the University of Guam population and offering insights into the effectiveness of the cloze test as a component of the University of Guam English Placement Test.

In retrospect, the study's oversight was interpreting the moderate positive correlation between the cloze test scores and writing proficiency as indicative of causation. However, correlation does not imply causation, and other factors may have contributed to the observed relationship.

Guam Department of Education Project - 2018-2019

In the 2018-2019 study, I was involved as a consultant researcher and co-principal investigator in an assessment development project initiated by the Guam Department of Education. Our team, comprising various members, was selected to undertake the project, which aimed to

develop a standard-based English Language Arts test for 11th and 12th grades, aligned with the Common Core State Standards. The test was intended to be ready for use within Guam Department of Education and aligned with the University of Guam English Placement Test, emphasizing vertical alignment of English language proficiency from high school to higher education levels. The participants consisted of students in first-year writing classes at the University of Guam.

During the test development process for the 2018-2019 study, I took an identical approach to the one I had used in my master's thesis research. This approach involved crafting text, coordinating the development of the cloze part of the test, conducting samplings, collecting and analyzing data, and generating and revising the answer key. One notable difference in the approach for the 2018-2019 study was the decision to allow a broader range of acceptable answers for the cloze items, which was a reflection of insights gained from my previous work. In contrast to the previous practice of accepting only commonly provided answers, this study considered responses that made sense both syntactically and semantically. This portion of the study resulted in the successful creation of a cloze form that was included in the deliverables.

Reflecting on the Past Studies

The past three studies described above did contribute to the improvement of the cloze test component in the University of Guam English Placement Test. Each study had its specific objectives, ranging from updating the cloze forms, exploring correlations with writing proficiency, to developing a standardized English Language Arts test aligned with the University of Guam English Placement Test.

In the 2013-2014 study, Cloze Form D, while the approach ensured reliability in constructing the cloze test, one limitation was the reliance on the assessment tool itself for validation. This focus on updating the cloze forms overlooked other potential measures of language proficiency, calling for the need to explore more concrete validation systems in future research.

In the 2014-2015 study, Cloze Form E, the primary aim was to establish correlations between cloze test performance and writing

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proficiency. To address the limitations of the previous study, this research incorporated multiple measures of writing proficiency, including the cloze test scores, course placements, and graded writing samples. By considering a broader range of indicators, the study aimed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between these measures.

This study also revealed certain limitations. Interpreting the moderate positive correlation as indicative of causation proved challenging, emphasizing the need for cautious interpretations. Additionally, the practice of accepting only commonly used answers as the answer key for the cloze test was identified as another constraint, potentially overlooking other valid responses.

In the 2013-2014 and the 2014-2015 studies, a systematic approach was used to create the assessment and answer key. After constructing the text, cloze items were crafted considering sufficient contextual information within the sentences. The answer key was then developed based on the most common responses from test takers during each sampling. However, relying solely on the most common answers as the answer key might not guarantee a high-quality assessment, as it does not consider the full spectrum of possible responses. Language is dynamic and ever-evolving, and a more comprehensive approach to validation should be considered to ensure the assessment remains valid and effective over time. Taking into account a broader range of answers and acknowledging language variations can strengthen the assessment's reliability and relevance, accommodating the ever-changing nature of language.

The 2018-2019 study successfully achieved vertical alignment by developing a standardized English Language Arts test aligned with the University of Guam English Placement Test. This project aimed to create a ready-to-use test that ensures consistency in language arts proficiency from high school to higher education.

As I continued to advance my academic journey, reflections from the past studies, including the approach taken in the 2014-2015 study, played a crucial role in shaping my research perspective. I recognized the limitations of my earlier focus on viewing writing proficiency as a technical matter, relying heavily on establishing concurrent validity

between the cloze test performance and writing proficiency. I have come to understand that while concurrent validity provides some insights into the relationship between the two measures, it does not fully encompass the complexity of writing proficiency, which cannot be entirely expressed through concrete numerical decisions (Moss, 2016; Neal, 2011; Pruchnic et al., 2018). These realizations guided my subsequent dissertation study, where I aimed to explore a different approach to assessment validation.

Study on the University of Guam English Preparedness Test Practices - 2020-2021

My dissertation, *Developing a Validity Argument Case for Locally Developed University English Preparedness Testing From an Ethical Perspective*, is an exploratory sequential mixed methods case study explored the raters' perspectives on the scoring procedures, college writing preparedness, and fair and ethical practices used in the assessment (Lee, 2021). Using an argument-based approach to validity, the study aimed to investigate the alignment between raters' claims and their actual testing practices. It adopted an argument-based approach to validity by Kane (1992; 2013). This study addresses two main research questions (Lee, 2021). In Phase 1, the study explores how the raters of the English Preparedness Test describe their specific scoring procedures, the preparedness of college writing, and their approach to fair and ethical practices. In this phase, survey responses from participants, who were raters of the University of Guam English Preparedness Test, were gathered to understand their descriptions of scoring procedures, college writing preparedness, and fair and ethical practices. The survey data were then coded, categorized, and analyzed to explore the raters' perspectives. Phase 2 investigates the extent to which the raters' scoring procedures, scoring criteria, and plans for fair and ethical practices align with their proposed testing practice. The actual, graded English Preparedness Test results, comprising 443 student essays, from Fall 2020, were collected and examined alongside the raters' comments and justifications for determining college writing preparedness or underpreparedness. This phase focused on cross-tabulation, competitive and comparative analyses

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to assess the alignment between the raters' claims and their actual practices in scoring procedures, college writing preparedness, and fair and ethical practices.

In terms of scoring procedures, all the participants of the survey reported utilizing a holistic method for the assessment (Lee, 2021). When examining the actual practice, it was found that 52.37% of the essays were graded holistically, with the majority of them being determined as "Prepared." This suggests that holistic scoring was primarily utilized for essays demonstrating competence in writing, mostly aligning with the raters' claims of employing this approach.

An analysis on scoring criteria came from a comparison between the survey results and the comments provided by raters for the graded essays (Lee, 2021). According to the survey responses, they placed emphasis on specific criteria, with 22.73% mentioning the importance of a clear thesis/topic, 36.36% emphasizing strong support of main ideas, 9.09% highlighting organization, development, and focus, and another 9.09% mentioning sentence structure and boundaries. When examining the actual comments made by the raters for the 443 student essays, the comments predominantly addressed organization, development, and focus, followed by support and thesis/topic. When combining the survey and comment data, the most frequently mentioned criteria were thesis/topic, support, and organization, development, and focus, which are considered macro-level writing concerns.

Beyond the primary areas identified in the survey and comments, raters also brought up other topics during the grading process (Lee, 2021). They referred to their Day One Assessment when they felt that the essays were not sufficient to determine college writing preparedness. Additionally, some comments were related to academic integrity, meaning possible plagiarism, which may have been affected by the transition to online testing due to COVID-19 in Fall 2020. The raters also discussed certain writing issues that were not explicitly mentioned in the rubric or survey responses, such as point of view switching, clichés, and the writers' awareness of their audience and expectations. These additional aspects reflected the raters' holistic approach to evaluating writing proficiency, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the complexity of writing assessment beyond the predefined criteria.

The third angle of the study, fair and ethical practices, focused on plans for unintentionally advantaged and disadvantaged populations (Lee, 2021). As the essays did not include demographic information, participants hypothetically responded to this part of the survey, and the hypothetical scenarios were categorized, such as, considerations for ESL populations, home cultures and situations, and testing conditions. Since the raters did not have access to test takers' backgrounds, I sought evidence supporting the hypothetical plans from the survey in the raters' comments.

The survey responses indicated that raters consider factors such as ESL populations, focusing on the writer's potentials, home cultures and situations, and testing conditions when grading essays in terms of fair and ethical testing practice (Lee, 2021). Evidence supporting the consideration of ESL populations and focusing on writers' potentials could be observed in their focus on "macro-level concerns" and their practice of deferring the preparedness decision to the Day One assessment. This assessment's implementation of an equal amount of asynchronous testing window aligns with the consideration for home cultures and situations, although this was due to COVID-19 during Fall 2020. However, specific evidence regarding the flexibility toward writers' approaches to the prompt, as indicated in the survey responses, was not clearly evident from the comments, likely due to the limited scope of data collection during one instance of the assessment.

Discussions

The findings of the study demonstrate that the participants consistently implemented the assessment, as evident in their aligned survey responses regarding scoring procedures, criteria, and plans (Lee, 2021). Notably, out of the 443 essays graded, only 15 essays required third readers due to initial scoring disagreements among raters. This indication of interrater reliability reflects internal consistency and reliability in the assessment process (Kane, 2013; Slomp, 2016b).

The raters' tendency to justify lower scores in the comments suggests a cautious and conscientious approach in evaluating student

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writing (Lee, 2021). This practice of providing justifications aligns with the literature on fair and ethical testing practices, as it enhances the transparency and accountability of the assessment process (Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2019).

The study also revealed evidence supporting the participants' hypothetical plans for fair and equitable testing practice, including a focus on macro-level writing concerns and recognizing students' potentials (Lee, 2021). This highlights the value of human raters in writing assessment, indirectly addressing concerns regarding automated essay scoring (Perelman, 2012, 2013). Human raters' ability to consider multiple aspects of writing proficiency and exercise professional judgment contributes to the assessment's overall integrity.

Moreover, the study reinforces the notion that validity is a contextualized decision, better made by the assessment users themselves, acknowledging the complexity and multifaceted nature of writing proficiency assessment (Moss, 2016; Neal, 2011; Pruchnic et al., 2018). The participants' consideration of the assessment's influences and consequences reflects an indication of ethical testing practice, wherein fairness, equity, and social considerations are taken into account in the assessment process (Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2019). Overall, the study emphasizes the significance of developing assessments that align with the specific needs and context of the educational institution, ultimately contributing to fair, valid, and ethical testing practices.

Reflections

Over the course of my work in assessment research, my approach to test development and validation has evolved. In the past, I focused primarily on technical aspects and statistical correlations, which aligned with prevailing practices in assessment research.

During my academic journey and assessment research experience, I drew insights from the 2013-2014, 2014-2015, and 2018-2019 studies. These experiences prompted a reevaluation of my approach in my dissertation. Unlike previous studies that heavily relied on technical aspects, I made a conscious shift towards prioritizing contextual factors and the needs of assessment users in this study.

Despite the progress made in the dissertation, certain limitations need to be acknowledged. First, my past involvement in the development of the University of Guam English Placement Test may have introduced biases and influenced the study design (Lee, 2021). While efforts were made to maintain objectivity, it remains essential to recognize the potential impact of my prior knowledge and experiences.

Another limitation is related to the data collection process, which was limited to a single semester's administration of the assessment. This restricted scope may not fully capture the broader variations in assessment practices over time (Lee, 2021). Additionally, the unexpected changes brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as the transition to online testing and grading, may have influenced the assessment environment and potentially affected the study outcomes (Slomp, 2016a).

Furthermore, the study primarily focused on the perspectives and practices of the raters, without direct input from the test-takers themselves (Lee, 2021). This limited perspective may not encompass the full range of experiences and perceptions of those being assessed, hindering a comprehensive understanding of the assessment's impact (Kelly-Riley & Whithaus, 2019). To address this limitation, future research could consider incorporating the test-takers' perspectives to gain a more holistic view of the assessment process.

Lastly, while the study explored ethical testing practices through the raters' responses and grading patterns, it represents only one aspect of ethical considerations in assessment (Lee, 2021). The broader implications of fairness and ethical testing practices in the larger educational context were not exhaustively examined (Cushman, 2016; Elliot, 2016). Future research may explore deeper into the ethical dimensions of assessment, considering various stakeholders' perspectives to ensure a comprehensive assessment of fairness and equity (Poe & Cogan, 2016; Poe & Inoue, 2016).

Recommendations

This dissertation study has yielded several directions for future research in writing assessment (Lee, 2021). One recommendation is

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exploring other stakeholders of the assessment, in addition to the raters, is recommended to gain a more profound understanding of the assessment process (Slomp, 2016a). Another recommendation is predetermining transferable writing constructs that inform college writing preparedness and underpreparedness can provide a defined research angle (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, as cited in Slomp, 2016b; Driscoll & Wells, 2012, as cited in Slomp, 2016b; Slomp, 2012, as cited in Slomp, 2016b). Lastly, there is a need to expand the understanding of the assessment's ethical and social impact and consequences, considering factors that could inadvertently undermine faculty-led placement processes and issues related to academic integrity during asynchronous testing (Broad, 2016; Elliot, 2016; Poe & Cogan, 2016; Miller et al., 2017). These directions hold potential for advancing the validity and fairness of locally-developed assessments, such as the University of Guam English Preparedness Test (Lee, 2021).

Conclusions

This article presented an overview of four empirical studies on the University of Guam English Placement Test, offering concise summaries of the data and findings as well as their limitations. Each study focused on a unique facet of the assessment, contributing valuable insights towards an understanding of its development, implementation, and impact.

The first two studies updated previous research and examined the relationship between cloze test performance, writing proficiency, and placements, thereby laying groundwork for further assessment investigation. The third study, part of a larger project not fully discussed in this article, demonstrated a vertical alignment between high school and higher education cloze. This alignment underscores the importance of consistency in assessment throughout different stages of education. The fourth study executed an argument-based validity inquiry, focusing on raters' views on scoring procedures, readiness for college writing, and ethical assessment practices. This investigation provided insights into local assessment evaluation based on context, drawing attention to important considerations for ethical and fair assessments.

Each of these studies has its limitations, which have been acknowledged. The recognition of these limitations provides a more comprehensive and realistic perspective on the topic, offering directions for future research.

The purpose of this article has been to offer a concise and useful summary of prior research on the University of Guam English Preparedness Test, with the hope that it will serve as a reference for future researchers and users of the assessment. Continuous reevaluation and updating of the assessment in response to changing contexts in teaching, learning, and assessment are crucial, and it is my hope that this work contributes to those ongoing efforts.

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