

# Introduction

## ■ WHAT IS THE MELAB?

The English Language Institute at the University of Michigan (ELI-UM) has made its English language proficiency testing services available to institutions of higher education (universities) as well as to businesses and government agencies for more than 50 years. The ELI-UM oversees the administration of the Michigan English Language Assessment Battery (MELAB), an advanced-level English language proficiency test designed to measure the English language ability of adult nonnative speakers of English who will need to use the language for academic purposes at the university level. The MELAB has also been used for screening job training and fellowship applicants.

The official MELAB is a secure test. This means the actual tests are not for sale, but they may be administered through the ELI-UM's testing service. Official MELAB tests are arranged through the ELI-UM and administered by official MELAB examiners in the United States and Canada. The examiners send test papers back to ELI-UM for scoring and reporting of scores.

The official MELAB consists of three parts; subscores on these components (parts) are averaged to produce the final score. These are scaled scores, not a number of correct responses to questions, and not a percentage score. (Scoring is explained further in *Scoring and Interpreting Your Test* on pages 127–31.) The components of the MELAB are:

**Part 1: Composition**, a 30-minute impromptu essay

**Part 2: Listening**, an audio multiple choice test measuring comprehension of spoken English

**Part 3: Grammar, Cloze, Vocabulary, Reading (GCVR)**, an objective multiple choice test containing grammar, cloze reading, and vocabulary problems, and reading passages followed by comprehension questions.

An optional fourth part of the MELAB is a **speaking test** (oral interview) with the local examiner. The speaking test is required for some professional certification programs and for applicants to the University of Michigan. It is strongly recommended for applicants to graduate-level programs at U.S. universities who wish to be considered for graduate student teaching assistantships and for candidates for fellowships, grants, or job training programs.

The speaking test is not automatically included in every MELAB administration, but it cannot be taken separately from Parts 1, 2, and 3 of the MELAB. It is not offered at all MELAB test sites; contact the MELAB Office or go to the MELAB website ([www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/testing/melab/](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/testing/melab/)) for information about MELAB Test Centers that offer the speaking test.

## ■ WHAT IS THE TESTING PROCEDURE?

You can get much detailed information about the MELAB from the English Language Institute. This includes a MELAB Information Bulletin, which contains a registration form, instructions, sample test, and list of current MELAB test centers. You may also contact the MELAB Office directly at:

English Language Institute  
MELAB Office  
University of Michigan  
500 East Washington Street  
Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2028 U.S.A.

Telephone: 1-866-MYMELAB  
(Toll-free: 1-866-696.3522)  
Fax: 734-615-6586  
Email: [melabelium@umich.edu](mailto:melabelium@umich.edu)  
Website: [www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/testing/melab/](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/testing/melab/)

To register for the MELAB, contact the test center of your choice (contact information is shown on the MELAB website under “Registration”) to get information about test schedules, registration deadlines, and current test fees. You should mail your completed MELAB Official Identification Form, one passport photo, and test fee (see website or contact MELAB Office for current test fees) to the test center you have chosen. The test center will conduct the test, which takes about 2½ hours. The test center will send the completed test papers to ELI-UM for scoring and reporting.

**Eligibility:** you must wait a minimum of six weeks between each MELAB exam. You may take the MELAB only four times within any 12-month period.

**Special accommodations:** ELI-UM is committed to ensuring that every applicant be able to demonstrate his or her language ability under circumstances that are fair and that do not alter the construct (English language ability) being measured. For this reason, ELI-UM allows test applicants with disabilities to request special accommodations. This is to minimize the effect of the disability on test performance and to get the most accurate measure possible of the skill being tested. Contact the MELAB Office or see the website for information on types of disabilities that can be accommodated and on how to apply for special accommodations.

The MELAB Office will send you a copy of your score report. You may also authorize two official score reports at no extra charge. These score reports are for **schools** and/or **institutions only**. Your score report will show your separate scores on Parts 1, 2, 3, your speaking test score (if taken), and your final MELAB score (the average of Parts 1, 2, and 3). Your score report will also show descriptions and statistics of the different parts of the test.

## ■ HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

### Students

This book will help you in many ways:

1. The unknown is always a little frightening. By becoming familiar with the content and layout of the MELAB, you will gain confidence in your ability to do well on the test. Model tests, which you may take for practice, follow. Take plenty of time to look at the examples, and read the instructions carefully before you begin each practice test. This will help you to understand the test format and to practice some of the basics before you begin the practice test. The practice tests are not taken from the official MELAB. However, they were written and edited by the same people who write the MELAB. Some of the test items have appeared in other ELI tests.
2. You will get practice in following specific directions for taking this test. You should mark your answers to the Practice Test problems on one of the answer sheets in Appendix E.
3. The MELAB will not only test your ability to use and recall written and spoken English, it will also test your fluency or speed in performing these tasks. The practice tests in this book will help you determine your speed. Before you begin a practice test, estimate how much quiet, uninterrupted time you will need to finish it, and then time yourself. (Take a watch or digital timer that does not beep with you to the actual MELAB if possible. Cell phones must be turned off.) Keep a record of how much time it took you to do each practice test. How much time did it take you? If it had been a real test, would you have finished within the time limit?
4. Farther back in the book there is a scoring key for each practice test. For the listening tests, there is a script and a commentary about what you heard on the tape recording. For the GCVR practice tests, a commentary explains the answers to the problems. You will be able to score your practice test and review your answers to the problems to see why the correct answer is correct.
5. After you score your practice test, you should go to the score interpretation section. You will be able to evaluate your performance on the test to get some idea of how you might do on the official MELAB. You will see your strengths and weaknesses.

**Reminder:** The best way to prepare for any test is to know the subject thoroughly, not just to concentrate on the testing method. Just memorizing the sample tests in this book will not guarantee you success on the MELAB or any other English test. It takes years of study and practice to become highly proficient in a foreign language.

## Teachers

The best way for students to prepare for the MELAB is to study and use a full range of English by reading widely, speaking with and listening to native speakers of English, and writing in English. They must practice English, not just memorize rules. Rules exist as helpful guidelines to explain why the language works the way it does.

It is important that this book be used as practice and familiarization for a certain kind of test, not as a “cram” book to be memorized. Memorization of this book will not by itself guarantee improved English language ability, nor will it guarantee improved performance on the MELAB. This book should not be used as the primary text for an ESL test preparation course. Rather, it should be considered supplemental to other textbooks that concentrate on the various skill areas to be measured.

If students have prepared well, they can be confident in their abilities, and they will not panic when it comes time to take a test. Taking a test is always a challenge; studying this book will ease the fear of the unknown for students taking the MELAB.

Test writers use a term called *task effect*. This means that the test method may affect a student's performance on a test. Sometimes a proficient student will not do well on a test because she or he did not follow the directions or was unfamiliar with the test method and format. A test preparation book such as this one should eliminate negative task effect and produce an optimal and valid performance.

Most teachers prefer to work on one skill area at a time. Therefore, you might want to spend a week or two on each of the three mandatory parts of the MELAB.

### Part 1

You might begin with timed impromptu essay writing. Begin by having your students write a timed 30-minute essay on their choice of two topics given in this book or on other topics of your choosing. Then, review their essays.

1. Did they follow instructions? Did they write on only one of the topics? Did they write on both? Did the essay address the topic, or did it seem “off topic”?
2. Were they able to write at least 150–200 words?
3. Look at clarity and accuracy of expression and ability to develop a theme with supporting argument and details (examples). Is the meaning clear? Does the organization help make the thoughts clear and easy to follow? Are your students

able to use complex as well as simple grammatical structures with a minimum of error? Do they use only simple sentence structures? Do they use a wide range of vocabulary appropriately? You may find it helpful to refer to the official MELAB composition descriptions and codes in Appendix B (page 135).

You could have students repeat this process several times, getting feedback from you after each essay. Students can be trained to spend one or two minutes organizing their thoughts, and possibly writing an outline, 20 to 25 minutes writing, then three or four minutes reviewing what they have written and making corrections, additions, or other changes.

## Part 2

Practice interactive speaking in class. Listen to both conversational dialogue and lecture recordings (both audio and video). Review the examples and instructions for the listening test carefully. Then review:

1. Did they follow instructions? Did they mark their answers only on the answer sheets? Did they mark in the test booklets? Make sure they don't make mistakes in mechanics during the "real" test.
2. Were they able to keep up with the speed of the recording? Some students understand something the first time they hear it, others can understand if the aural stimuli is repeated, and still others have difficulty even with repetition.
3. Encourage them to make a guess if they aren't sure of what they heard. For the official test, they won't be able to review their responses and what they think they heard, but for these practice tests, you could have them write what they thought they heard and then discuss this when reviewing the correct answers.
4. Some students don't take any notes at all during the lecture and radio report parts of the listening test. Some just have very good aural memory and don't seem to need to take notes about details, while others don't understand what they hear if it is in the form of longer discourse. Encourage your students to take notes, in outline form if possible, with some details. They should not write *everything* they hear, but note only the important points or details. This practice will aid them not only on the MELAB, but also in university-level coursework.

Check to see if errors occur more frequently in short utterance sections or in questions about longer discourse (the lecture and radio reports). Your students may need work on comprehending "fast speech," contractions, and idiomatic expressions. At lower proficiency levels, they may not be able to follow longer discourse (more than 20 seconds of continuous speech). At intermediate proficiency levels, they may understand the main idea of longer discourse but be unable to comprehend some of the details and how they relate to the main idea. Following the scoring of your

students' tests, the audio recording can be replayed as they read the script so that the oral and written versions can be compared. You can help your students look for the main points of the lectures and radio reports as well as supporting details.

One useful source of different kinds of speech is the ELI-UM Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MiCASE). Sound files are available online, as are instructional materials for ESL/EAP teaching and for ESL self-study. The website is [www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/micase/](http://www.lsa.umich.edu/eli/micase/).

### *Part 3*

For Part 3, estimate percentages correct on each of the four sections. It may be that most of your students perform consistently on all sections of the test and just need general improvement and practice in all areas of the language. Others, however, may show relative strengths and weaknesses; for example, they may do well on reading but poorly on grammar, or vice versa. The commentaries following the answer keys can provide support for a review of the areas of weakness.

Before administering Practice Test 2, spend instructional time on each of the skill areas tested.

### *Speaking Test*

For the speaking test, students can practice interviewing each other, and taking part in classroom debates and discussions. They can be critiqued on intelligibility, interactiveness, and overall effectiveness by you, the teacher, as well as by each other (peer ratings).