

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE IELTS IMPACT ON ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, THE CASE OF ASIAN STUDENTS AT ENGLISH SPEAKING UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT:

In recent years, IELTS test, being internationally recognized testing system of English proficiency has been integrated into university enrolment procedures in almost all English-speaking countries where people use English as a main means of communication. The paper will provide an analysis of IELTS (International English Language Testing System), its validity towards the academic performance and success of students from Asian countries. The review of both pros and cons in validity of IELTS has been designed by using works of Dooley and Oliver (2002), Wu and Lee (2017) and Yen and Kuzma (2009) whose qualitative research of Asian students with

IELTS scores has shown biased results. The findings of this review shed a light in positive correlation between high IELTS scores in speaking and writing and students' academic performance while reading and listening modules do not have any strong impact on academic performance at the university. The deviation was seen between teaching IELTS and at university level that lead to successful IELTS students to be disoriented for course selection and successful performance at university.

KEYWORDS: IELTS, component, academic, performance, validity, university.

OVERVIEW OF IELTS:

The entire English-speaking countries, where English is an official means of communication namely Australia, the United Kingdom, The United States etc. has now recognized IELTS examination for testing students' proficiency in four components: reading, listening, writing and speaking (Appendix 1). IELTS is serving now as the main bridge that connects both students and even workers willing to study and seek job opportunities in English speaking environment. With more than 200 test centers approved by British Council and IDP, IELTS is now widely practiced in developing Asian students who want to enhance their four competencies and enroll on a degree course (Hayes & Read, 2004). Al-Malki (2014) points out that even in non-English speaking countries, courses taught in English still require IELTS test score that evidences student's ability to comprehend course material. Originally, IELTS was designated for humanitarian and business courses that require a more complex linguistic acrobatics. However, recent in university language assessment trend shows that no fixed IELTS score has been demanded for BA and Postgraduate courses regardless of specification of major and its necessity in excellent English. For example, investigation of British council of graduate Asian students in the UK, depicts significant correlation between high score in all components of IELTS and recession of band score by graduation in engineering classes. At the same time, those involved in IT and science showed a remarkable drop in listening and speaking components (Pearson, 2020). This might serve as a solid ground for criticizing IELTS test for being too standardized for all students because required language proficiency at university entry deviates massively from their chosen field of study. Meanwhile, the paper has focused on findings by Yen and Kuzma (2009)

who proved that teaching and admissions methodology have a profound impact on academic performance and overall student "wellbeing" at the university other than IELTS score success. Therefore, it can be assumed that academic success and further employability of Asian students can depend on adequate study skills, specific knowledge of major and teaching methodology compared to IELTS success score.

The paper will critically review IELTS test components and their correlation with academic performance of Asian students studying in western universities.

ADVANTAGES OF IELTS VALIDITY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS:

IELTS is designed to test a person for being comprehensive and confident in English speaking environment. Hu Trenkic (2019)in research of 241 Chinese students, has established that Chinese students with relatively good IELTS scores (6.0-7.0) felt that they were more prepared for studies and real-life situations abroad . This is achieved due to accurate writing and speaking assessment criteria's. The former includes who writing sections – description of business related graph (mostly) and discussion essay that demands critical viewpoint on selected topic (IELTS, 2020). During the IELTS test, students whiteness great amount of deadline and stress to extent that not every students is capable of handling it. Findings from meta-analysis by Dooley and Oliver (2002) argue that tough environment makes candidates think fast and apply cumulative knowledge on a paper within a short period of time. Decision making on writing strategy and brainstorming during the second phase of the speaking test positively shapes skillsets of students for meeting assignment and dissertation deadlines (Thorpe et al.,2017). Predictive validity of IELTS format on academic performance was has always been

biased and most of the research included qualitative methodology. However, Thorpe et al., (2017) showed strong and yet positive impact of IELTS preparation onto student's KPI during the master's course in AU university. When $R=0.15$ and coefficient of probability achieved almost -0.7 between student's final marks and their IELTS test score. The higher writing and speaking score was the more prospective student achieved higher marks. At the same time, it can be argued that listening and reading components have minimum effect on student's prospects at the university, since contemporary teaching provide online lectures and notes on every course. For this reason, reading and listening can be sub developed right at the university. In the analysis of Taiwanese students, Wu and Lee (2017) found that there wasn't remarkable difference between students who has high marks and high reading and listening score and those who had lower scores in both components but achieved higher graduation marks. This paved a way for a argument against empirical findings in favor of positive impact of each IELTS component on academic performance.

In the third core study selected for review, Yen and Kuzma (2009) investigate the correlation between GPA per semester and score of each component of IELTS. Interestingly, speaking score was not strongly correlated to the first semester. Authors explained this by revealing written assignments on business related courses that made up the majority of course tasks compared to non-written tasks. On the contrary, scoring more than 35 correct answers on listening (Appendix 2) showed a strong R square for GPA by constituting that listening helps students a lot in comprehending oral lectures and workshops. Therefore, the collision of three fundamental articles conflict each other with varied results on IELTS validity on academic success of students. While IELTS test

is a ground basis for selecting students for university, it does not necessarily mean that low IELTS score leads to failure at university level.

DISADVANTAGES OF IELTS VALIDITY:

When it comes to drawbacks of IELTS test, it is always hard to pinpoint any sufficient drawback due to the scarce of empirical findings. However, several aspects has been highlighted by literature review. Allen (2016) proposed the term "washback effect" that is defined as the mirror of a test result on teaching. Investigation of international students in Singapore illustrate that 25 of 56 students said other factors than IELTS teaching and final score have contributed to their academic success. Among these factors Allen has highlighted difference in teaching; IELTS teachers guide students to the test format, result for entry pass and stress management methods, while university teaching is more complex, widescale leading students to real-life issues. Therefore, washback effect is vivid in IELTS preparation when students are only test-oriented that leads to disorientation of students who face completely different learning environment at the university. Finally, Hu (2018) recommends to avoid using numeric assessment criteria for writing and speaking to eliminate subjective nature of the test. Language proficiency does help students to achieve better understanding of their major, but language should be tested with a more holistic approach by use of three or four examiners at speaking test.

IELTS cannot be reliable and valid for enrolling students according to their choice of major and university pass score only hinders academic performance because students perceive high IELTS results as an indicator for future academic success. Farley et. al., (2019) explains that 65 per cent of undergraduate students regret about their choice of major

because they have been selected based on their motivation letter, IELTS score and transcripts. The study argued that university entry standards have now increased from 5.5 to 6.0 in most universities; thus, this discriminates non-English demanding majors such as Engineering, IT and architecture. Students with low IELTS score yet high Reading proficiency showed greater academic progress in final year compared to high scorers in each component and those who entered the course with 7.0-8.0 band score did not show good semester marks simple due to a lack of knowledge in field-related skills. This explains that reason why IELTS test format does not provide a chance for most talented students with low English level, whereas academic performance depends on study skills, presentation, soft and interpersonal skills (Pearson, 2019). The third of respondents with moderate IELTS score studying in UK university complained about IELTS speaking test format for being too straightforward. Candidates are not given a chance to speak up about different topic in case the cue card they have is too complicated to make up a story in 2 minutes. This is commonly argued by many IELTS specialist to such extent that The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages is seeking a plan for establishing university entry test based on the competencies and interests of a student (Pearson., 2019). For instance, if a student wants to reach success in chosen major, field-related speaking questions are to be asked so that candidate will feel comfy in front of the examiner and get higher IELTS score for passing entry requirements. Although the impact of IELTS score on academic performance is relatively strong in many publications, its straightforwardness and one-fit-for-all format does not mean that high scorers can be successful in their chosen major.

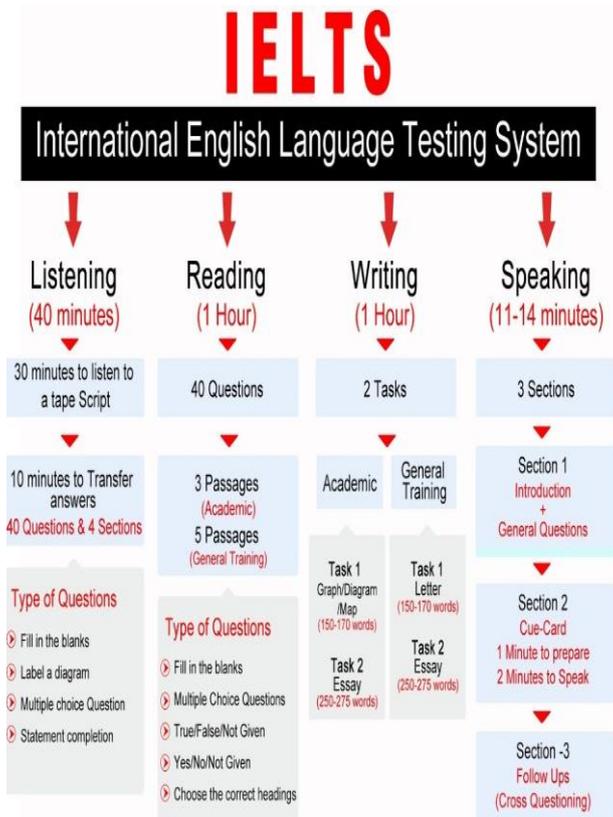
EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION:

IELTS test as the international assessment of English proficiency is still dominant step that separates candidates from undergraduate degree. Review of both camps for IELTS validity reveals that IELTS test preparation and examination has many advantages for students' fast decision making and brainstorming skills. Language as a form of communication and networking help students make necessary connection in and out the campus while studying abroad. However, critical review show that campus facilities teaching, field-related knowledge and skills are more necessary rather than trivial IELTS score. This discrepancy is not counted by British Council and IDP that provide IELTS certificates worldwide increasing market campaigns for taking IELTS. The correlation between IELTS components and academic performance is still contradictive since business students usually do not need writing and listening high scores in IELTS for reaching their potential in business course. Presentation, knowledge of the market, mathematics, marketing skills are more powerful in impacting strong academic achievement rather than simply knowing English at high level. This is proved by Yen and Kuzma (2009) in their extensive research; however numerous works indicated positive outcomes from gaining IELTS test in context of critical writing and speaking about various topics. This was evidenced by strong R-square in meta-analysis, but quantitative research still shows that listening and reading test do not have any positive effect on academic performance. Certainly, candidates are taught to reach at least 35 correct answers to pass entry requirements and attention on IELTS examination is critical for students rather than post-analysis of reading and listening material. This creates a huge gap between IELTS and university level teaching meaning that non-English speaking talents are discriminated but

can show a far progressing academic results, whereas IELTS geeks can regret about spending too much time on sharpening their English proficiency rather than focusing on other study skills.

In a nutshell, the review has generated recommendation for universities to integrate their own English assessment more than IELTS though it may be time-consuming process, but in the long run their may increase research quality by recruiting the right candidate for appropriate courses. British Council and IDP should implement objectivity in speaking and wiring by evaluating the candidate using three or four examiners so that candidates could be more confident in transparency of the test.

**APPENDIX 1
 IELTS TEST STRUCTURE**



**APPENDIX 2
 IELTS LISTENING ANSWER SHEET**

Please write your full name in CAPITAL letters on the line below:

Please write your Candidate number on the line below:

Please write your three digit language code in the boxes and shade the numbers in the grid on the right.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Are you: Female? Male?

Reading Reading Reading Reading Reading Reading

Module taken (shade one box): Academic General Training

	Materials only		Materials only
1	/ 1 X	21	/ 21 X
2	/ 2 X	22	/ 22 X
3	/ 3 X	23	/ 23 X
4	/ 4 X	24	/ 24 X
5	/ 5 X	25	/ 25 X
6	/ 6 X	26	/ 26 X
7	/ 7 X	27	/ 27 X
8	/ 8 X	28	/ 28 X
9	/ 9 X	29	/ 29 X
10	/ 10 X	30	/ 30 X
11	/ 11 X	31	/ 31 X
12	/ 12 X	32	/ 32 X
13	/ 13 X	33	/ 33 X
14	/ 14 X	34	/ 34 X
15	/ 15 X	35	/ 35 X
16	/ 16 X	36	/ 36 X
17	/ 17 X	37	/ 37 X
18	/ 18 X	38	/ 38 X
19	/ 19 X	39	/ 39 X
20	/ 20 X	40	/ 40 X

Marker 2 Initials Marker 1 Initials Band Score Reading Total

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