

IMPACT OF TEST PREPARATION ON CANDIDATES' IELTS READING TEST SCORES

Saima Hassan*

Assistant Professor, Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Pakistan
shassan@numl.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of an hour's preparation on IELTS (International English Language Testing System) reading test scores. Preparation is sometimes neglected by candidates who consider themselves proficient users of English, despite the high stakes involved in IELTS testing. Participants in the experimental group were provided a one-hour session on reading strategies and test-taking skills, focusing on the IELTS reading test. They were tested before and after this session, alongside a control group who received no training. Statistical analysis revealed that training significantly increased reading scores, suggesting the importance of such training even for proficient users of the target language.

Keywords: IELTS, language proficiency tests, high-stakes test, test performance.

INTRODUCTION

Language assessment tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) aim to establish a candidate's ability in the target language. A question that naturally arises with such tests is whether candidates' performance can be influenced by preparation specifically for the demands of the test, or whether it is determined only by their language proficiency. Candidates for such tests often implicitly assume the latter answer, and consider that if they are proficient in the language they do not need to prepare for the test (according to informal interviews held with different IELTS test takers in Pakistan in July 2021). However, the influence of test preparation on IELTS scores is an under-researched area, so it is not clear whether this assumption is warranted.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze whether candidates' performance in language assessment tests can be influenced by a relatively brief intervention in which candidates are helped to prepare for the test. In particular, I examine whether candidates for IELTS in Pakistan would be helped by this kind of preparation. Little prior work has been conducted on this population, despite the importance of the IELTS test in this context, as described in the following subsection. A finding that candidates' performance was influenced by preparation of this kind would have substantial implications for assessment of English proficiency in a Pakistani context.

Significance of IELTS

In the present era, language tests are frequently considered high-stakes tests: as these tests lead to opportunities and open doors to diverse academic and professional pursuits or as means of educational advancement opportunities, enhancement of social mobility, and most significantly the economic prosperity (Fulcher, 2007). As a consequence of the importance of English in the globalized society, and the growing popularity of and demand for English study, new English language measurement instruments are constantly being devised to assess the candidates through critical screening for academic placements, certifications, employment and cross country immigration etc. The IELTS or other modes of examination such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) serve as a modern shibboleth, their mastery often being crucial to access to the developed world.

In Pakistan, visa rules now require almost everyone to take IELTS for job or immigration purposes in English-speaking countries. With the increase in the number of Pakistanis desiring to immigrate into the West, the demand to take IELTS has increased enormously over the past decades. Pakistan is currently one of the top 40 countries where IELTS is taken. As per the official notified

* Corresponding Author

statistics, Candidates from Pakistan were able to attain a 6.3 band for Academic and 6.7 for General Training, on a 9-band scale[†].

Preparation awareness

There is evidence of considerable variability in how prepared Pakistani candidates are to take IELTS. Throughout the year, in Pakistan, the preparation for IELTS is conducted by various private and government educational institute. However, a large majority of candidates come unprepared. Failing to achieve the required score risks the loss of academic or professional opportunities, while still incurring the considerable cost of the test itself (for the paper-based test Rs.43,260 (£173))[‡].

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

There is a body of research on IELTS preparation practices (e.g. Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Read & Hayes, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004; Mickan & Motteram, 2008; Mickan & Motteram, 2009 among others) but none could be found which focus on Pakistani IELTS candidature. Researchers have looked into pre- and post-preparation course scores and the time spent on individual tasks (Brown, 1998; Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999; Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004). Experiences of candidates in the IELTS preparation courses are addressed by Elder & O'Loughlin (2003). Experiences of individual candidates with the test are investigated by Templer (2004) and Green (2007). The influence of tests on individual learning is evaluated by Bailey (1999). Green (2006) investigated the washback of IELTS through a survey of IELTS candidates and teachers of English for Specific Purposes in the UK.

Hawkey's (2006) survey concluded that 96% of IELTS candidates prepared through IELTS preparation courses. With reference to impact of test preparation on the scores of the test takers, Celestine and Su Ming (1999) found no significant difference between the scores of the test takers who attended preparation courses and those who did not. They argued that this might reflect the status of IELTS as a proficiency test with results that should not be influenced by preparation, or that it might simply reflect the short duration of the preparation courses.

By contrast, Elder and O'Loughlin (2002, cited in Rao, McPherson, Chand and Khan, 2003) argue that IELTS preparation does have an impact on the test scores, based on an analysis of the score gains of 112 students after a 10-12 week period of intensive study. Rao, McPherson, Chand and Khan (2003) drew similar conclusions from their research on 62 students after exposing them to 30 hours of intensive IELTS preparation.

However, there seems to be scarce literature and research on impact of test preparation in a South Asian context. In particular, very little research appears to have been conducted on Pakistani IELTS candidates. For instance, there has recently been a few studies exploring IELTS preparation institutions (e.g. Coleman, 2010) and the impact of IELTS on the test preparation Industry in Pakistan (Memon & Umrani, 2016). This is an important omission given the importance of the test, taken in conjunction with the disinclination of many candidates to prepare for what they see as a test of a proficiency which they possess. This raises the possibility that even a small amount of test preparation might yield consequential results within a Pakistani context. Specifically, I explore whether a tailored one-hour test preparation session can affect the scores of candidates on the IELTS reading test.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were drawn from the student body of the National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan. The NUML is unique in the region as it offers 32 languages to students of varying proficiency levels. 30 students learning English in Diploma courses[§] participated in the study (ages 20-25 years, 15 male, 15 female). Participation in the study was purely on a voluntary basis. The minimum education level for qualification for the Diploma courses is Matric (secondary school leaving certificate), but the group included participants with Bachelor degrees and in some cases even postgraduate qualifications.

Materials and Procedures

[†] Information retrieved from www.ielts.org/en-us/for-researchers/test-statistics/demographic-data on July 3, 2022.

[‡] Information retrieved from <https://ielts.britishcouncil.org/pakistan> on July 9, 2022.

[§] Within NUML, Diploma is considered a high level and involves students with moderate to high proficiency in English.

The participants of the study were categorized and divided into experimental and control groups having 15 participants in each group. Each participant was administered a pre-test and a post-test, both of which were drawn from retired versions of IELTS. The pre-test was administered a day before the preparation session, and the post-test took place immediately after the preparation session. Tests were scored by a retired IELTS instructor who was unaware of whether each participant was assigned to the control or experimental group. The reading module only requires clerical marking but to avoid any bias special care was taken in this regard.

The experimental group participated in a preparation session on reading and test-taking strategies. The preparation material also included an expired version of the IELTS reading subtest (different version from the ones used as pre and post-test) to accustom the candidates with the format and content. The preparation session was conducted by a (different) qualified IELTS instructor who taught a few basic tips for the IELTS reading module followed by some practice exercises. The focus areas were how to attempt reading tests; wisely managing time; reading instructions carefully; and searching for clue words in the questions.

RESULTS

Mean scores at pre-test and the post-test for each group are shown in Figure 1. As there is no official calculator provided by IELTS for the reading test, this graph and the subsequent analysis uses raw scores on the 40 test items rather than IELTS bands.

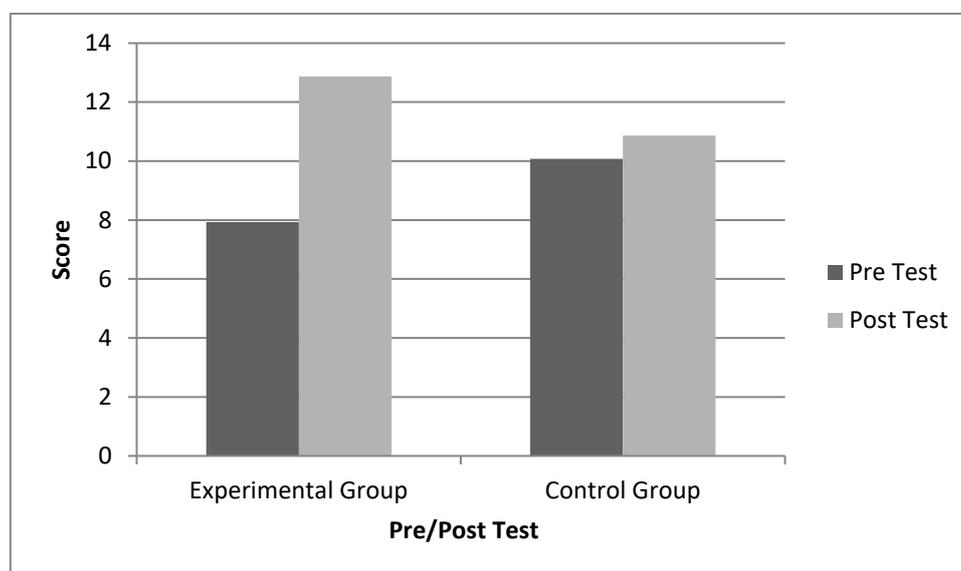


Figure 1: Mean scores at pre- and post-test for the experimental and control groups. For the experimental group, score changes from pre- to post-test ranged from -3 to +15; for the control group, score changes ranged from -1 to +5. Due to the sample size and distribution, I report non-parametric statistical analysis.

The experimental group showed a significant improvement from pre- to post-test (Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $W = 5$, $Z = 2.98$, $p = 0.0029$). The control group also showed a significant improvement (Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $W = 10.5$, $Z = 2.24$, $p = 0.025$). Comparing the magnitude of the changes in the two groups, there was a significant difference, with the experimental group demonstrating a greater improvement than the control group (Mann-Whitney U, $U = 49$, $Z = 2.61$, $p = 0.0091$).

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore whether candidates who received instruction on how to prepare for the test would demonstrate an improvement in performance on the reading component of IELTS. The results indicated that both the group who received instruction and the control group, who did not, showed a significant improvement in scores from pre-test to post-test. For the control group, this may be attributable to practice effects, or slight differences in the difficulty of the two tests. However, the experimental group exhibited a significantly greater improvement, suggesting the effectiveness of the intervention. The effects were particularly dramatic in the case of three participants whose scores

improved by more than 10 points (from 8 to 20, from 7 to 22 and from 3 to 18). Note that the inferential statistics reported above are non-parametric and consequently are not dependent upon these outlying results for their statistical significance.

The results suggest that even a relatively small amount of preparation can dramatically affect some candidates' performance in the IELTS reading test. The participants in this study were taught a few basic skills concerning reading tests, including time management, reading the instructions carefully and searching for clue words in the questions etc. The findings also imply that poor performance on the tests may not be because of poor linguistic skills or low achievement levels but because of a lack of test skills, unfamiliarity with the test format and test items, or poor time management, among other factors. The results from this study corroborate earlier research findings concerning how preparation affects scores on language assessments (Elder and O'Loughlin, 2003; Rao, McPherson, Chand & Khan, 2003). However, the previous research involved many hours of exposure: in the case of Elder and O'Loughlin's (2003), their participants attended classes for 10-12 weeks, while Rao, McPherson, Chand and Khan's (2003) participants received 30 hours of intensive IELTS preparation. This study, however, reach the similar conclusion after far less training. A possible interpretation of this is that appreciable gains can readily be achieved for some candidates who are especially unfamiliar with the test format – for instance, because they manage their time poorly when initially attempting the test – while marginal gains can be achieved for candidates who have greater familiarity with it. This has obvious implications in the context discussed earlier, in which many participants do not bother to familiarize themselves with the test, on the basis that their proficiency is adequate and they do not consider specialized preparation to be necessary.

The earlier studies also documented smaller gains in reading scores compared to writing scores (e.g. Elder and O'Loughlin, 2003; Rao, McPherson, Chand & Khan, 2003). However, this study demonstrated clear improvements in the reading scores. There is a clear need for a more extensive investigation of the role of preparation across the modules of IELTS, in order to benefit candidates who require IELTS scores in order to pursue their academic and professional goals, but are, in some cases, potentially failing for the want of a brief phase of targeted preparation.

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