

Original Paper

A Brief Discussion of the Social Impact of the IELTS in the Society of China

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Abstract

As one of the most commonly utilised assessment means of the English language, IELTS is attracting a sheer volume of test candidates in China, which unambiguously has social implications in China. This article briefly discussed the social impact of IELTS in China, including shift in profession, life-changing potential and test anxiety. At the end of this paper, there is a call for more body of knowledge on impacts of international examination such as IELTS towards social and economy in China as currently there is a dearth of studies in this topic.

Keywords

IELTS, Exams, Social impact, China

1. Introduction

In 2019, more than 660,000 people in China have taken IELTS. The number of Chinese IELTS test-takers has increased by 30% compared to that of the year 2018. Both of these two figures have reached a new record. In order to cater to the increasing great demand of IELTS in China, on 29th of July, 2019, the British Council, the organizer of the IELTS has decided to deploy six more new test sites in China, which are in the city of Wuxi, Guiyang, Chengdu, Nanchang, Suzhou, and Jinzhong respectively. What is this test? Why is it in such high demand? What social impact does it bring to the society of China?

1.1 Description of IELTS

IELTS, the acronym of the International English Language Testing System, is widely recognised as a reliable means of assessing whether test-takers are ready to study in the medium of English (Charge & Taylor, 1997). It is one of the large-scale proficiency tests which influences not only the lives of many students but also immigrants as the results of the test are used for making vital decisions about the test

takers (Ali & Samran, 2018). IELTS has two test versions: IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training. IELTS Academic is designed for those applying for higher education or professional registration, whilst the General Training aims at measuring the language ability of those migrating to Australia, Canada, the UK, or other English-speaking countries, or applying for working experience in an English-speaking country. Both these two versions include four parts: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The candidates take the first three parts of the test in the following order: listening, reading and writing with no breaks within these parts of the exam. The speaking test is given either on the same day or three days before or after that. The table below illustrates the format and content of each four parts of the Academic and General Training:

Table 1. Summary of IELTS

IELTS Academic			IELTS General Training		
Measures	English	language	Measures	English	language proficiency in a practical
					context. The test tasks reflect workplace or social
		advanced learning environment.			situations.
Listening (40 minutes)					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four recorded monologues and conversations 					
Reading (60 minutes)			Reading (60 minutes)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three long passages (2,000-2,750 words in total) • Texts range from descriptive and factual to discursive and analytical. • Includes non-verbal materials such as diagrams, graphs, and illustrations • Texts are taken from books, newspapers & journals 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three long passages (approximately 2,400 words in total) • Section 1 contains 2 or 3 short factual texts. • Section 2 contains two short, work-related factual texts. • Section 3 contains one long text on a general topic • Texts are taken from official documents, books and newspapers). 		
Writing (60 minutes)			Writing (60 minutes)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing task 1 of at least 150 words where the candidates must summarize, describe, or explain a table, chart, or diagram. • Short essay task 2 of at least 250 words. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letter writing task (at least 150 words). • Short essay task of at least 250 words. 		
Speaking (11 to 14 minutes)					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face interview • Part 1: short questions • Part 2: speaking at length about a given topic 					

- Part 3: a structured discussion.

The total score of IELTS is 9.0. Each part would be graded separately and an overall band score would be calculated. An overall band score of 6.0 indicates that the candidate is a competent user in English, while an overall score of band 6.5 is usually accepted as a good score (Lai, 2008).

1.2 Rationale

Several factors, ranging from the society, family and individuals co-exist and influence on the test-taker's choice, contribute to a sheer volume of candidates taking an exam (Gao, 2017). As for IELTS, nearly 95% of the candidates take it for further study or pursuing a career abroad, and among those who plan for study overseas, more than a half (62.7%) of the test-takers are applying for a Master's Degree according to the *IELTS White Paper of Mainland China released in 2019*.

Different from China, where student have to take an exam called *National Entrance Examination for Postgraduates (NEEP)* to become a postgraduate, pursuing a Master's Degree in the UK or any other English speaking countries needs to be realised by applying. And IELTS is one of the required application documents which prove the English proficiency of the applicant. Generally speaking, the higher IELTS score one has, the higher possibility he or she will be enrolled in a top-ranking university. For instance, the IELTS requirement for universities in the UK ranking from 100 to 200 (QS Ranking) is 6.5, whilst for the top 100 is 7.0 to 7.5.

Why there is such a large amount of students striving to receive a Master's Degree abroad? For one thing, in China at present the undergraduate students have a high job hunting pressure and the external reason of social atmosphere is outstanding (Yue *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, a large number of undergraduates seek further study as a way to avoid fierce competition and hope to be more competitive in the job market after receiving a master's degree (Yang, 2018; Li *et al.*, 2014). For another thing, the difficulty in passing NEEP is increasing every year. According to the figure released in *China Higher Education Student Information and Career Centre (2020)*, the number of students registered for NEEP increased by 11% to 2,644,300 whereas the intake rate has dropped from 30% to 25%. Consequently, most students would turn to apply for postgraduate abroad as an alternative option or a backup plan. This explains why IELTS is increasingly demanding in China in recent years. Moreover, it is noteworthy that top companies in China would prefer to hire applicants with overseas studying experience, and most of these companies would set an English requirement, such as *PWC* in China requires applicants to have an IELTS score of at least 6.5.

Assessment is never a neutral process and always has consequences (Stobart, 2003). The following part of this article describes the social impact brought by IELTS in China as well as a critical discussion of these impacts. At the end of this article, suggestions and recommendations for further study are proposed.

2. Social Impact of the IELTS

2.1 Offering New Life-Changing Opportunity

It is almost impossible to find a person who does not have a test story which is about how a single test, whether for good or bad, changed his or her life (Shohamy, 2001), and in China, a typical example is College Entrance Examination, or commonly known as *Gaokao*. Those who get a higher score will enter into a top university and thus will have a better career path after graduation since in the job market of China, employers would favour those who graduate from a top university. That is to say, *Gaokao* is a high-stakes assessment for Chinese students. Nevertheless, it is of great difficulty to earn a place in 211, 985 strata universities (similar to the Russel Groups in the UK) in China. Statistics show that the intake rate of these universities is only 6.4% (2019). For those who did not get an ideal score or failed in *Gaokao*, IELTS offers them a new life-changing opportunity. With a high IELTS score, they can be admitted into a top university in the English Speaking countries for undergraduate study or postgraduate study, thus upon graduation, they can have an equally decent or even better job than those who graduated in 211 or 985 universities since, under the trend of the globalisation at present, most corporations prefer to hire applicants with overseas study experience.

However, for those who are admitted to the 211, 985 universities, IELTS has little effect on them. Students from top universities like Peking University or Tsinghua University normally would not consider pursuing a higher degree abroad since the degree they possess already given them edges in the domestic job market, and they have more options and opportunities after graduating from college compared with those who are not graduating from 211 or 985 universities. Thus, they do not have the needs to take IELTS.

2.2 Shifting into a Profession

Shohamy (2001, p. 9) argued that a test may force the test-taker into a profession if he or she achieved a high score since there was a “superstition” that a high score equals high competence in the field where the test is related. However, in the case of IELTS, I would change the word “force” into “shift”. Nowadays, it is not surprising to see that some IELTS teachers in China were not major in English education, TESOL or other English or Education related programme and their former education background varies widely, ranging from STEM to Business or even music and architecture. In fact, this phenomenon is becoming ubiquitous in China.

For those who apply for a degree abroad, they have to submit a high IELTS score, usually above 6.5 or 7.0. A high IELTS band score not only gives them advantages when competing for a place at a top overseas university but also demonstrates their advanced level of English language since IELTS is one of the most popular and most widely-used tests of the standard of English language (Feast, 2002). Thus, IELTS offers them a new career option that differs from their major--IELTS teaching.

When working as an IELTS teacher in China, the author once talked to a colleague who studied Chemistry in Australia, and the author asked him why he chose to teach IELTS rather than working in a chemistry factory that cater to his major, he suggested that the salary of IELTS teacher is three times

higher than that of working in a chemistry factory or being a Chemistry teacher, and he was quite enjoying himself as an IELTS teacher. This is actually turning into a trend in China: those who receive a degree abroad may not seek a job that is relevant to their major but choose to teach IELTS or other English language tests such as TOEFL, which is preferred by some of them who have acquired a degree abroad. With the rising number of IELTS test-takers in China, the demand for IELTS teachers would undoubtedly increase. This will undoubtedly lead to more “profession shifting” like the above chemistry graduate.

2.3 Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is widely existed in China, not just for IELTS but for all different kinds of tests. In China, a recent study involving 327 participants from two medical universities found that 83.5% of them feel anxious for the test. Among these participants, almost a half (45.9%) feels highly anxious (Lin et al., 2018). In EFL learning, anxiety is one of the topics that has been researched continually (Dang, 2019). Since test anxiety was identified as one of the causes of language learning anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), a number of studies on anxiety investigated the association between anxiety and various dimensions of learners' test performance and types of language skills in IELTS were conducted. Golchi (2012) found a negative correlation between listening anxiety and listening comprehension. Serraj and Noordin (2013) discovered a moderate, negative association between anxiety and the participants' performance on the IELTS listening test. These findings are in line with the study conducted by Winke and Lim (2014) by using a test-taking anxiety questionnaire and two listening tests from the Cambridge IELTS 8 practice test to measure the anxiety and performance of 63 participants. In the reading part, Tsai and Li (2012) found that the reading proficiency of EFL learners was negatively correlated to their test anxiety level. Furthermore, different from the above studies, Dang (2019) investigated the association between test-taking anxiety and the IELTS test holistically by looking at the relation of test-taking anxiety to all four parts: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. The study found that a negative correlation existed in all four parts. Among which listening has the weakest negative correlation whilst speaking has the strongest.

However, test anxiety does not only affect the test performance but also affect the sleeping quality of the test takers. This is supported by a field study conducted by Guo *et al.* (2015). To some extent, poor sleeping quality is caused by test-anxiety, and in return test anxiety affects their sleeping quality. This is not uncommon to see in the society of China. Although IELTS is not as high-stakes as *Gaokao*, it still would lay pressure on students in fear of failing the test. Also, previous failure experiences may intensify the test anxiety especially for those who are preparing to take IELTS for a second or even third time.

3. Discussion

Personal experience with IELTS shows that IELTS does not only brought Chinese students a second chance to pursue higher or advanced education but also provided graduates who have high English

language skills with more job opportunities. Both of them have life-changing impacts and from my perspective, these impacts are positive. Before IELTS was introduced in China, *Gaokao* is the only way for students in China to earn a place in the top domestic universities. If they failed, they had to wait for one more year to do this test again and undoubtedly, this would bring more mental stress for them. Now with IELTS, students have a more option and higher chances to be admitted into the top universities. In another word, failing in *Gaokao* does not mean the end of the world. They can still catch up and have a better job or career in the future as those who received a high *Gaokao* test score and were enrolled in top domestic universities. What's more, IELTS provides more job opportunities for Chinese society, attracting a large number of young graduates, especially those with overseas study experience to work in the field of education. To the graduates, they have a more career options if they do not want to have a career that is related to their major. To the society of China, the thriving of the education industry will lead to domestic economic growth.

Nevertheless, test also has a detrimental effect on test-takers (Shohamy, 2001). In the case of IELTS, this detrimental effect is test anxiety. This may be triggered by previous failure experiences, or because they do not want to fail their parents' expectations and are eager to do better than peers. Therefore, pressure from both the test-takers themselves and their family cause test anxiety. The test anxiety will not only affect the candidates' performance during the test but also lead to a sleeping disorder, which would do more harm to the test-takers both mentally and physically. Furthermore, overemphasizing the exam could also make students attach too much focus on the exam skills rather than the English language itself. Blindly pursuing the exam skills while neglecting knowledge and language function is not beneficial to their further study as a high IELTS score may not mean that the students can use English at an advanced level. Dorothy and Joanne (2009) argued that some Chinese students, despite that they had high IELTS scores, had a poor academic performance at overseas universities. And they conducted research and proved that high IELTS score has little relation with high academic performance when studying abroad.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is unwise to focus on either the positive or negative impact solely of a test. While there is no denying that IELTS has a positive impact in the China society, the negative impact should not be neglected. To students, it is recommended that instead of focusing on IELTS skills only, they should see studying IELTS as a learning process to improve their English skills. This is important since most of them are planning to study abroad in English-speaking countries, and to them, passing IELTS is not an end but a start. Also, their families should give them less stress and more mental comfort in order to lower the chance of test anxiety. After all, failing in one single exam is not the end of the world compared to one's lifetime journey.

It is also noteworthy that although IELTS has a great influence on prospective students and the society in China, and the media usually spend a large amount of coverage reporting on this exam, the academic

researches on the social impacts of IELTS are rare. When searching for the relevant lines of literature online, whilst the author has found plenty of studies about test anxiety, only a little that investigated the social impacts of IELTS for test takers in China. Therefore, it is suggested that more academic research of IELTS's social impact in China are needed, especially the economic impact since at present the IELTS is booming in China. This, from the author's point of view, would be highly meaningful to study.

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