

Original Paper

A Case Study of IELTS in Mainland China

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Abstract

This essay is a case study of IELTS use in mainland China, discussing the language assessment from three aspects: the purposes for testing, ethical problems of IELTS, and technologies applied in IELTS. It is worth noting that there are two types of IELTS: academic IELTS and general training IELTS, offered jointly by the British Council, Cambridge English Language Assessment, and other committees. This essay is confined to academic IELTS.

Key words

IELTS, high stake; purposes, ethical problems, technologies

1. Introduction

Globalization and the vital position of English in academic research and publication have stimulated the growing number of students studying academic content through English. To prepare students for those courses of study, universities worldwide set minimum language requirements for enrollment. There are international language assessments with high validity to help universities to select competent candidates. One of these well-established and world-widely accepted assessments is IELTS (International English Language Testing System), established in 1989. According to the official IELTS website in China, the test is offered in over 1600 regions in more than 140 countries. Additionally, over 3.5 million people take the IELTS test each year, and over ten thousand international institutions choose competent candidates by reference to their IELTS scores. In China, according to the official website of Chinese industry information, 519 thousand students went abroad to study in the year 2019, and 61% of them went to educational institutions, such as high schools and universities, accepting IELTS score reports as language ability proofs. Thus, it is worth discussing IELTS in mainland China because of the huge number of test-takers each year. Additionally, IELTS is regarded as one of the high-stake language tests drawing lots of attention in mainland China.

2. Purposes for IELTS

According to the official introduction of academic IELTS, it is used by people applying for “higher education or professional registration.” Commonly, universities believe that English language ability as proved by the worldwide accepted language assessment is essential for students’ future academic study. Tonkyn (as cited in Dooley & Oliver, 2002) argued that a great amount of evidence showed that English language proficiency had influence on for international students’ academic performance. Another research was conducted by Schoepp (2018). He surveyed 953 undergraduate students at a university in the United Arab Emirates. Results showed that students with higher IELTS scores performed better academically after they entered the university. Therefore, most universities around the world set the minimum IELTS scores as one of the entry requirements. For example, the University of Melbourne requires both the undergraduate and postgraduate applicants with a minimum overall IELTS score of 6.5 and 6.0 for sub-scores, while Cornell University requires a minimum overall IELTS score of 7.0. However, in reality, issues are more complicated within this topic, and the following discussion is unfolded from the following three perspectives: test-takers, tertiary institutions, and employers in mainland China.

Coleman et al. (2003) conducted on-site research at three universities located respectively in north Australia, New South Wales, and China. According to the report provided by Coleman et al., students take IELTS for different purposes. The top two reasons in the rank list are related to meeting universities’ entry requirements. Other reasons include improving English language skills, obtaining standard language qualifications, and following parents’ decisions. It is worth mentioning that test takers of academic IELTS in mainland China mainly include two cohorts: students and teachers. Most students take part in the IELTS test to study abroad or prove their English language ability, which resonates agrees with Coleman et al.’s report. For teachers, they participate in the IELTS for the chance to be a visiting scholar in foreign countries or to be an IELTS test trainer. Therefore, IELTS is a high-stakes assessment for both groups.

According to the author’s personal experience, some universities in mainland China adopt the policy of “grade transfer” for IELTS. For example, in a university’s pilot reform program in northern China, students can apply for transferring grades of English related courses’ assessments administered by their college, such as English listening, with their IELTS scores. One grade transfer form excerpt can be shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Grade Transfer Standard

Courses	IELTS	Transferred Grade
English reading and writing	6.5	80
English listening	6.5	80

Notes. The “grade transfer policy” can be explained by the following example: a student who got 75 in

the course *English reading and writing* final test can apply to change his or her grade to 80 if later he or she obtains 6.5 in the IELTS test.

However, teachers hold different stances for this policy of “grade transfer.” Some of them favor the policy as they believe that IELTS is more valid than courses’ final tests administered by the college, and this policy can encourage students to keep studying language and take part in international language assessments. Others hold the opposite position because they think that the scores of course tests reflect students’ language learning outcomes at particular stages, and they should not be replaced. Moreover, the transferring table lacks scientific and empirical support. Thus, students can improve their GPA by taking IELTS.

Recently, requirements for IELTS scores have appeared in many recruitment advertisements. For example, according to the Chinese personnel examination website’s public servant post lists, more than four hundred posts related to foreign countries’ business set the minimum IELTS scores as one of their requirements. Additionally, some universities’ teachers’ recruitments also include requirements for IELTS scores. However, it is arguable whether IELTS scores are valid when the assessment results are used for various purposes that deviate from their designed purposes. According to Bachman (as cited in Bachman, 2005), the most important factor that should be considered in assessment is its intended specific purposes. The test users should be aware that the test results are used properly by reference to their designed goals. As mentioned before, IELTS is designed to choose competent candidates for academic study rather than employment. Based on different public servant posts’ work content, English for specific purposes is needed instead of general academic English tested in IELTS. As for university English teachers, they should master multiple genres rather than the limited ones tested in IELTS. Thus, the scores of IELTS are not valid indicators for being competent teachers.

In summary, test users should consider IELTS’s designed purpose when they make decisions and selections. It would be better if they understand the test content and designated purposes of IELTS comprehensively.

3. Ethical problems of IELTS

According to the test results statistics released by the official IELTS website, Chinese mainland students’ average overall score is 5.8 while the average reading, listening, writing, and speaking scores are 6.2, 5.9, 5.5, and 5.4, respectively. Therefore, writing and speaking parts are the most difficult tasks for Chinese mainland students. Since IELTS’s ethical problems cover a wide range, the following discussion is confined to the writing and speaking parts of IELTS.

Based on Uysal’s (2010) discussion, ethical problems related to the IELTS writing test are divided into different perspectives, and in this essay, two of them will be discussed. One aspect is related to the written formats required by IELTS. Taylor (as cited in Uysal, 2010) asserted that people from different cultures were accustomed to different genres, and they had different logical reasoning patterns and

cohesive and coherence devices. However, currently, all test takers from different regions are expected to conform to the Western patterns of writing. The other aspect is about different criteria adopted by raters with different cultural backgrounds. Purves and Hawisher (as cited in Uysal, 2010) suggested that raters from different countries judged candidates' text organization and lexicon-grammatical problems differently and Raters with different backgrounds conceptualize rubrics of IELTS writing differently. These problems can influence students' scores.

For the IELTS speaking test, there are three phases. The first part relates to personal and familiar topics lasting four to five minutes, such as test-takers' study, work, and family. The first part aims to help candidates mitigate their sense of unease. In the second phase, candidates are given one minute to prepare the topic given on a card and talk about the topic based on their own understanding lasting three to four minutes. In the last phase, interlocutors and candidates have a conversation related to the previous topic lasting four to five minutes. According to Roshan (2013), it is common that when test-takers in speaking tests encounter familiar topics, they can retrieve their potential linguistic knowledge easily and respond with abundant information about the topic. However, if they meet unfamiliar topics or topics which are far from their local culture, they tend to achieve lower scores. Khan (2006) conducted a survey to reveal the IELTS speaking test's culture bias problems in Bangladesh. Data were collected through examiners' questionnaires and interviews. Examiners suggested that some vocabularies and topics in the speaking test were "alien to their cultures" (p. 71). For example, the topic of "travel" is common in Western cultures, while the average Bangladeshi did not have such experience as they cannot afford holiday travels. Examiners also pointed out that test takers of different genders, ages, careers, and social-economic backgrounds respond at different levels of competency to different topics.

For this essay, brief interviews with two university English teachers, two middle school teachers, and four university students in mainland China were conducted to explore their ideas related to the IELTS speaking test. There are three questions to be asked: 1. Do you think the speaking test in IELTS is difficult? 2. Do you think topics can influence test-takers' performance? 3. Do you have your own preferred topics? What are they? To avoid ambiguity, interviews were conducted in Chinese and translated into English by the author. Answers to the above questions are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview Excerpts

Interviewer	Response	Codes
University English teacher 1 (Tianjin city)	I do not think it is difficult, but according to my personal experience, the speaking test scores depend on the topic to some extent. I do believe that if	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speaking test is not difficult. ● Speaking test scores depends on the

	<p>test takers are given familiar topics, they will perform much better. As for myself, I am more interested in educational and language learning topics. As I have rich experience in language learning and teaching and how to communicate with students, I am more confident about these topics.</p>	<p>topics.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The teacher has her preferred topics, such as language learning and teaching.
<p>University English teacher 2 (Dongguan city, Guangdong province)</p>	<p>I think that the speaking test is moderately difficult. However, different topics can influence students' performance. For me, I prefer topics related to my life, work, and interest. Those topics such as history and geography are unfamiliar to me.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The difficulty of the speaking test is reasonable. ● Topics influence test-takers' performance. ● The teacher has her preferred topics, such as topics related to life and work. ● The teacher has unfamiliar topics, such as topics related to history and geography.
<p>Middle English teacher1 (Luoyang city, Henan Province)</p>	<p>I do not think it is difficult, but I think some topics are quite far from my life. In this way, the topics influence test-takers' performance. Personally, I think speaking tests should be like natural conversations between candidates and interlocutors in which they can talk about their own interesting areas. Some topics are unfamiliar to me. For example, if I'm asked to talk about a scientific topic, I'll feel puzzled and lost. Topics would be much easier if they are related to phatic conversations between strangers, asking for</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speaking test is not difficult ● Topics influence test-takers' performance ● The teacher has preferred topics, such as topics related to daily life. ● The teacher has unfamiliar topics, such as topics related to science.

	directions, and so on.	
Middle English teacher2 (Shanghai)	It is not difficult, and I do think unfamiliar topics influence performance. Of course, I am more familiar with educational topics. I have taken the IELTS four times, and I get 7.5 last time, which is 1.5 higher than my first score.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speaking test is not difficult ● Topics influence candidates' performance ● The teacher has preferred topics, such as topics related to education.
University student 1 (Tianjin, junior students)	I think that the speaking test in IELTS is rather difficult for me. I take the IELTS twice recently, and I have an obvious improvement in the reading and listening part. However, there is no change in my speaking and writing part. As for the speaking test, the most difficult thing for me is part 3. In this part, I am required to describe an interesting book. I do not read English books before, and I do not know how to describe Chinese books in English. It is challenging. Most of my classmates have to memorize some sentences for these unfamiliar topics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speaking test is difficult ● Topics influence candidates' performance ● The student cannot describe Chinese books in English.
University student 2 (Tianjin, senior students)	I use English to chat with my foreign friends a lot in my life, and I think that if the topic is related to daily life, it is easy. However, if you want to have a high score in the speaking test, you have to prepare deliberately for these unfamiliar topics. It often comes to me that when people ask me to talk about something I have never thought about, I do not know how to say that. For example, if you ask me to talk about my roommates, I can say a lot cause my	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The student has daily conversations with foreigners. ● Topics influence candidates' performance. ● The student cannot talk about unfamiliar topics in English.

	<p>roommates are funny and there are lots of interesting things between us. However, you know, several of my classmates do not have roommates, and they live at home. How can they talk about this topic?</p>	
<p>University student 3 (Australia, Chinese postgraduate)</p>	<p>I had to keep practicing various topics deliberately because I did not have daily conversations in English. Besides, it would be more difficult to describe something that I have never experienced if the examiner asked me. When I encounter unfamiliar topics, I cannot talk much. However, if the topics are related closely to my experience, it fine for me to talk fluently.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speaking test is difficult. ● The student does not use English in daily life. ● The student cannot talk much about unfamiliar topics in English. ● The student has her preferred topics, such as topics related to personal experience.
<p>University student 4 (Wuhai city, Hubei province, senior student)</p>	<p>Yes, it is not easy. I think that the examiners asked me some detailed questions based on the information I had provided. When I have to discuss something in detail, I can say a little about that cause I have never thought about those details! Of course, there are some unfamiliar topics to me. Once, the author asked me to talk about one of my favorite scientific areas. I have to pretend that I am interested in one of them. To tell the truth, I know little about science. I think students are lucky when they encounter familiar topics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Speaking test is difficult. ● The student has unfamiliar topics influence test performance. ● The student does not have interest in scientific topics.

Based on this brief survey, all of the interviewers agree that topics can influence test-takers' performance. Their different life experience, knowledge, background, and interests lead to various preferred topics.

4. Use of Technology in IELTS

One of the most important technological developments in IELTS is the computer-delivered IELTS. It has been offered in mainland China since August 2018. Compared with the traditional paper-based exam, the computer-delivered IELTS provides more exam seats for test-takers, which is vital to meet the Chinese market's need and a short waiting period for results. According to test-takers' opinions towards the computer-delivered IELTS, which are shared on the Zhihu forum, they think that the computer-delivered test can provide them with a better experience because they have earphones for listening tests, which help them to concentrate more. With the help of the highlighting function and the possibility of reading passages and related questions on one page, they can finish the reading task more efficiently. As for the writing part, they can correct what they have written easily, and the counting function provided by the computer really helps. However, some students who are accustomed to the paper-based version, have resisted the changes.

Conclusively, the computer-delivered exam is trendy, and it is important for test-takers becoming digital literacy. Overall, IELTS is one of the popular and high-stake exams internationally. However, there is still room to improve its validity continuously and avoid potential ethical problems.

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