IELTS FOR TEACHERS

The Predictive Validity of IELTS and Iranian Testees' Performance in Real Context

Sorayya Mozaffarzadeh[1]

Ahamd Pourgasem[2]∗

Elahm Gerami[3]

Summer 2019

[1] **Sorayya Mozaffarzadeh,** the Student of IELTS FOR TEACHERS Course, Amirkabir University of Technology (Tehran Polytechnic), International Language Center, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: sorayya.mozafarzadeh@yahoo.com

[2] **Ahmad Pourghasem (PhD),** Amirkabir University of Technology (Tehran Polytechnic), TESOL Trainer and Staff Member of International Language Center, Tehran, Iran (Corresponding Author). E-mail: a.pourghasem@aut.ac.ir

[3] **Elham Gerami**, Amirkabir University of Technology (Tehran Polytechnic), IELTS Trainer and Staff Member of International Language Center, Tehran, Iran. E-mail: elhamgr@aut.ac.ir

Abstract

As a widely accepted tool of assessing language proficiency, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), assesses candidates with non-English speaking backgrounds to determine their readiness to cope with the linguistic demands of communities using English as their means of communication or as an instruction medium. These tests whether general and academic IELTS or life skill IELTS consisting of four parts and two parts, respectively, assess candidates' reading, writing, speaking and listening requiring the candidates to obtain a definite band score depending on their situation as an entry criterion. Along with other studies having been done on different aspects of IELTS, the present paper was an attempt to study the predictive validity of this test regarding its prediction about candidates' academic and daily life linguistic success as determined by their band score. The participants of the study were three Iranian immigrants and four students living in Toronto. Through thematic analysis of interviews, participants' linguistic performance was considered in real situations. The findings indicated that the participants were not as successful as the test predicted and they faced communication problems with native and non-native speakers. The study implied that IELTS can predict candidates' linguistic successful more in communication with non-native speakers in terms of simple contact than native speakers and for native speakers, more than mere linguistic proficiency is needed.

Keywords: *IELTS, predictive validity, real-context performance*

Introduction

Given the reputation of IELTS as a reliable tool of assessing English language ability required immigrants to English speaking countries as well as international students who join Higher Education (HE) programs, research into appropriate test score use and the meanings attributed to them is vital (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003). IELTS consisting of four parts including listening, speaking, reading and writing with defined score bands (depending on a particular university or immigration office's policy) currently functions as an appropriate language entry essential. An overall band scores of 6 and 6.5 are indications of a competent user and a good user in English, respectively (Lia, Story, Hodgson, Lewenberg, & Balla, 2008). For example, Worcester Business School generally believes that certificate owners of an overall band score 6.0 in academic IELTS

have an acceptable level of English command with the ability to study in an English speaking context (Yen & Kuzma, 2009). On the other hand, most immigration offices like Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) requires overall band score 5.0 or 5.5 in general IELTS for immigrants or UK require A2 English in IELTS Life Skills for family route migrants who seek to extend their stay in the UK.

Considering the aim of these assessment equipment, Academic, General, and Life Skill IELTS, and meaning ascribed to the scores obtained, the defined score bands for each target group indicate whether the test taker has a sufficient English proficiency level to manage the linguistic demands of the context s/he supposed to work. In this regard, several predictive validity studies have done to identify the correlation between IELTS scores and academic performance, few with qualitative methods and most others using quantitative ones with inconsistency results. As Bayliss & Ingram (2006) discuss "Considering the many variables that influence academic success and the fact that IELTS measures only language proficiency, it is not surprising that attempts to correlate test scores with subsequent academic results have been inconsistent in their outcomes" (p. 1).

Most of the studied and results having been done in the literature (Read & Hayes, 2003; Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Bayliss & Ingram, 2006; Yen & Kuzma, 2009; Al-Malki, 2014 & Ata, 2015) have contribution to the debate of whether the prescribed cut-off scores having been set as an appropriate level in different academic contexts provides the testees' with the opportunity to cope with linguistic demands of the institutional context and protect them from failure. As mentioned most of these studies are related to academic context but few have conduct research about the predictive validity of IELTS regarding the test takers' linguistic demands in a social context and the academic situation. The present study aims to do that by finding an answer to the following research question:

1. How adequate is IELTS in predicting test takers' language behavior in academic and social contests?

2. What are the problem areas that Iranian test takers face?

Review of Literature

In the following paragraphs, firstly we will have a brief glance at the IELTS history and then address the predictive validity in general and in relation to IELTS.

IELTS

IELTS as one of the well-known international language proficiency tests designed during 1980s following the introduction of Communicative Language teaching and consequently and recognition of the need to design "communicative language-testing tasks" (Brown H. D., 2003, p. 10) by the cooperation of language testing professionals at British council, international development Program of Australian universities and Colleges (IDP) as well as Cambridge English Language Assessment to assess the English Language proficiency of international students and immigrants with non-English backgrounds. Today, being administered in over 140 countries and accepted by more than 10000 organizations worldwide as evidence of language proficiency is the world's most popular English exam. This test with three types, General, Academic, and Life Skills is designed by testing specialists in Canada, Australia, Us, UK and New Zealand (Council, 2019) with the aim of evaluating candidates' ability to use English in authentic situations.

Communicative language tests are employed to measure the language ability of learners to participate in communicative activities and real-life situations. Covering the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, communicative tests have been designed on the basis of the communicative competence model. Munby (1978 cited in Bachman, 1990) in the description of communicative competence of second language learners' language includes 'linguistic encoding', 'sociocultural orientation', and sociometric basis of linguistic knowledge'. Then in 1980, Canale and Swain distinguished 'grammatical competence from 'sociolinguistic competence' consisting of sociocultural and discourse rules (Bachman, 1990). Following the communicative model competence, several principles of describing communicative tests proposed. For example, Brown (2005) considers five requirements for establishing a communicative test including 'meaningful communication', 'authentic situation', 'unpredictable language use', 'creative output', and 'integrated skills' (p. 21). Emphasizing unpredictable language input" and "creative language output," Brown points to the fact that in reality, it is usually impossible to anticipate 'language input' i.e. what the speaker will say, to prepare 'language output' i.e. one's reply. So, this manner

of natural communication grounded on sociolinguistic and sociocultural components of communicative competence should be applied in communicative tests. Has it been really applied in IELTS as a typical example of communicative testing of language? We will consider it in the validity section. Before moving to that section, the format and content of IELTS in brief.

As mentioned above, IELTS administered in three types with different aims, although they are similar in listening and speaking sections. IELTS Academic is developed to measure the English proficiency of international university students. The IELTS General Training test is for immigrants and job employees. And finally, the IELTS for Life Skills test designed for UK visa application to live, study or work in the UK. Both IELTS Academic and The IELTS General evaluate candidates in terms of all four skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking but IELTS for Life Skills measure only speaking and listening skills. In terms of content, format, difficulty level and scoring, all three are similar and different in cutoff scores, however, in IELTS Academic and The IELTS General, the two modules of writing and reading are different. The General training reading and writing includes topics related to general issues while those of Academic test covers university topics (for more info. see Manhattan Review, 2019).

Predictive validity of IELTS

Validity in testing traditionally means "whether a test measures accurately what it is intended to measure" (Hughes, 1989, p. 22) or discovering the "appropriateness of given test or aims of its component parts as a measure of what it is proposed to measure" (Henning, 1987, p. 170). The concept of validity can be studied from a number of perspectives including predictive validity, concurrent validity, construct validity and content validity although in this paper we only consider the predictive validity which is considered as criterion-oriented validity along with concurrent validity. In this type of study, the test administer is primarily using some criterion to predict a special behavior sometime after the test is administered.

Reviewing the related literature, we face with questioning the eligibility of the criteria employed by higher education institutes to assess non-English international students' proficiency in English (Dooey & Oliver, 2002). Due to the use of IELTS as an entry criterion, as Woodrow (2006) states "to investigate the extent to which current IELTS level is predictive of academic performance in specific academic settings" (p. 52) is of paramount importance. Examples of recent studies

investigating the predictive validity of IELTS for academic performance include (Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Bayliss & Ingram, 2006; Woodrow, 2006; Yen & Kuzma, 2009; Al-Malki S. A., 2014). In these studies, a weak but significant relationship found between language proficiency and academic success. As IELTS is composed of four modules, it is better correlated with each of the modules for related academic courses; for example, writing a score with the result of courses that require writing capability. As the study by (Dooey & Oliver, 2002) showed in correlating between overall IELTS result and the academic performance of students no relationship was observed but "the reading module is the best predictor of academic success and it was the only subtest of the four macro-skills to achieve a significant correlation" (p.51).

In most of the research in the literature, the predictive validity of IELTS is usually defined considering the extent to which IELTS can predict candidates' academic and professional success using quantitative methodologies. The present study tries to use qualitative methodology to consider the predictive validity of IELTS in terms of academic performance and daily life linguistic success from the candidates' perspectives.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative research method including an open structure interview and was completed as the final project of the IELTS for Teachers Course held by the Language Department of Amir Kabir University. The present study grounded upon the following research questions:

1. How adequate is IELTS in predicting test takers' language behavior in academic and social contests?

2. What are the problem areas that Iranian test takers face?

Participants

The participants of the study were three Iranian immigrants - two male and one male - and four students – two female and 2 male - living in Toronto for less than three years. They were selected purposefully. The mean score of immigrants IELTS score was 6 and that of students was 7.5. Before the interview, the participants provided their demographics including gender, age range, educational background, and work experience and their score on IELTS. Due to ethical issues, all

the participants completed their informed consent and their information was kept anonymous. After selection, the participants took part in a semi-structured interview.

Data analysis

To answer the research questions above, a semi-structured interview was used which let the participants narrate their experiences about linguistic problems after entering Canada as immigrants and students. Along with answering targeted questions, these semi-structured questions at the end lead to a heuristic inquiry paradigm encouraging researchers to admit the importance of participants' voices. Examining participants' voices provided researchers with a deeper understanding of the IELTS candidates' perspectives, challenges in their academic setting and daily lives. Through analyzing the transcribed interviews, the researchers gain an in-depth insight into the participants' points of view. We used a constant comparison method and theme analysis to find the common key points and themes. This constant comparison strategy led to the emergence of recurring patterns and themes in the data.

Findings

The aim of the research questions was to prompt participants' reflection upon world-wild practiced language proficiency test, IELTS. The questions produced a range of responses. The intent of the first question was to examine to what extent the candidates' score on IELTS can predict their linguistic behavior in real contexts. In this regard, some of the important questions that we asked in the interview were about the manner of getting ready for IELTS (long-term or short-term) and their expectation of obtained the IELTS band score. All the participants mentioned that they expect that if they reach that band score, it will mean that they can communicate in their workplace and do daily affairs without ant problem or less problem but the reality is something else. For example, M (one of the participants - student) says:

After knowing my IELTS band score which was also higher than the required minimum by the university (7.5), I expected to use English in everyday communication very well and be able to contact people, speak well and convey my meaning completely. I mean I thought that if I could get the minimum score which is defined for them, it means that I can cope with all linguistic issues

completely, I can study my own major, get good marks and other activities… but it was not the same as I thought. I couldn't speak and convey my messages as I liked. I had a lot of grammatical problems. I forgot the words. In short, I don't think it was much helpful… I leaned most after locating in society and watching movies although I have problems, yet, but not like last year.

The other part of the interview questions focused on the areas of problems. As deduced from the participants' answer the most problematic areas are speaking and listening with the subsection of syntax, phrasal verbs, and idioms as well as accent and pace of speech. For example, A (an immigrant for 2 years) says:

A thing that annoys me is that sometimes when some of my friends or colleagues in the workplace talk fast or use expressions in their speech or refer to a cultural point, it is really difficult. I don't understand. Or misunderstand. It's really embarrassing when you think that they want to say something but then you understand that they have completed their speech.

The last part of the interview questions was about participants' recommendations about improving IELTS to eliminate their mentioned problems. They believed that the language used in IELTS is a standard language using formal vocabularies. It is acceptable for reading and writing. They don't have a problem in their reading and writing due to the strategies they learned and their formal language with a mostly fixed format. In this regard, F says:

My husband and I were studying for IELTS simultaneously, of course, I wanted academic and him general. My reading score was 7.5 and his 6. Both of us have had no problem with reading. The speed for my reading enhanced and I can read papers more and more conveniently and I have had no problem reading academic books. I can write my assignments and transcribe lectures with standard speed with fewer problems. …but I have a speaking problem. I see Iranian students who have been here for more than ehhhh four five years have got better… my husband, too. He has had no significant problem in his workplace for reading and writing but he also feels difficulty in speaking and listening.

Discussion and Conclusion

IELTS as a recognized international test has been employed with its cut-off band scores to predict the candidates' ability to meet the required English proficiency for education, immigration, and

employment in English-speaking countries. This study aims to investigate IELTS to what extent can meet the linguistic expectations of candidates in their daily life. To do this a qualitative study through the interview was carried out amongst Iranian international students and immigrants. The finding showed a little fulfillment of candidates' expectations. The most problematic areas include speaking and writing in general and syntax and idioms and pace of speech in particular. The results of this study are in accord with the findings of quantitative studies which show little evidence for the validity of IELTS as a predictor of academic success (Dooey & Oliver, 2002; Woodrow's, 2006; Wilson & Komba 2012).

In analyzing the participants' answer it became clear that in order to consider the usefulness of the test and its predictive validity, researchers should consider each module score individually and correlate them with the candidates' mark with its related area and not the overall band score as it is found by Dooey & Oliver (2002). Deep consideration of the answers makes it clear that the reasons for the existence of less problem in reading and writing or in other words, true prediction by IELTS is learning strategies and also comprehensive content sampling in these sections. For these two modules, candidates learn different strategies which are applicable in all area regardless of a specific field of study or work. Also, the outcomes of using the acquired strategies are tangible from the beginning of the learning process but are the same for speaking. For example, in reading you can apply a especial strategy and skip or guess the meaning of some unknown works (one of the strategies) to reach the target. Is it also applicable for listening and speaking in daily communications? As it is implied from the participants' answers, in academic situations and standard lectures it is possible to ignore unknown word(s) but it is misleading in daily and friendly conversations. In reading and writing, it is possible to stop, think and analyze or interpreted the discourse and control your pace of reading but is it possible in communications to ask somebody to rebound or wait for the speaker to find a special word to convey his or her meaning. This means that IELTS candidates need to be familiar with the daily language and as mentioned by the participants it is possible through being in the real context or at least watching movies and listening radio programs or podcasts before entering the real world. However, this is not on the part of the candidates and the IELTS stake-holders should alter the testing approach of speaking and listening or enhance sampling of the content because the candidates consider IELTS minimum as the warranty for their success but as S pointed out the world of IELTS is absolutely different from the linguistic context of society.

Additionally, talking with the participants lead us to ask some questions beyond the scope of our interview questions about communication with native and non-native people. The participants believed that when they talk with natives in short contacts, the natives are so patient and try to have simple language but in discussions, they speak at their real pace. However, ignoring the problem of accent which itself is a big problem, in communication with non-natives the participants didn't have much problem in speaking because both of the groups -participants and newcomer non-natives- are with narrow vocabulary and syntax so they use simple language and there is a little misunderstanding between them. This may imply that IELTS can predict candidates' linguistic successful more in communication with non-native speakers in terms of simple contact than native speakers and for native speakers, more than mere linguistic proficiency (a standard language with narrow vocabulary) is needed.

It is noteworthy that this research can be a leading study for the future ones. The future researches can address the problems of sampling the content and how to best to sample. Also it is possible to examine the significance and effects of content validity on predictive validity in IELTS.

References

Al-Malki, M. A. (2014). Testing the Predictive Validity of the IELTS Test on Omani English Candidates' Professional Competencies. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature, 3*(5), 166-163.

Al-Malki, S. A. (2014). Testing the predictive validity of the IELTS Test on Omani English candidates' professional competencies. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 166-171.

Ata, A. W. (2015). Knowledge, Education, and Attitudes of International Students to IELTS: A Case of Australia. *Journal of International Students, 5*(4), 488-500.

Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bayliss, A., & Ingram, D. E. (2006). IELTS as predictor of academic language performance. *Australian International Education Conference*, (pp. 1-12). Retrieved from www.idp.com/aiec

Brown, H. D. (2003). *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Brown, J. D. (2005). *Testing in language program.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Council, B. (2019). *Overview of the IELTS test.* Retrieved from https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/take-ielts/what-ielts

Dooey, P., & Oliver, R. (2002). An investigation into the predictive validity of the IELTS Test as an indicator of future academic success. *Prospect, 17*(1), 36-54.

Elder, c., & O'Loughlin, K. (2003). Investigating the relationship between intensive English language study and band score gain on IELTS. *International English Language Testing System (IELTS): Research Reports, 3*, 207-254.

Henning, G. (1987). *A guide to language testing: development - evaluation - research.* Rowley, Massachusètts: Newbury House.

Hughes, A. (1989). *Testing for Language teachers.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lia, K. N., Story, M., Hodgson, W., Lewenberg, M., & Balla, M. M. (2008). Providing transparency and credibility: the selection of international students for Australian universities. An examination of the relationship between scores in the International Student Admissions Test (ISAT), final year academic programs and ... *Higher Education Research , 27*(4), 331-344.

Manhattan Review. (2019). *Overview of the IELTS test.* Retrieved from https://www.manhattanreview.com/ielts-info/

Read, J., & Hayes, B. (2003). The impact of IELTS on preparation for academic study in New Zealand. *IELTS International English Language Testing System Research Reports, 4*, 153-205.

Trahar, S. (2009). Beyond the story itself: Narrative inquiry and autoethnography in intercultural research in higher education. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social research, 10*(1).

Woodrow, L. (2006). Academic success of international postgraduate education students and the role of English. *University of Sydney Papers in TESOL, 1*, 51-70.

Yen, D. A., & Kuzma, J. (2009). Higher IELTS score, higher academic performance? The validity of IELTS in predicting the academic performance of Chinese students. *Worcester Journal of Learning and Teaching*. Retrieved October 03, 2019, from www.eprints.worc.ac.uk