Running Head: IELTS Recent Developments   1

IELTS Recent Developments Examined for their Impact and Effectiveness for Evaluating Language Proficiency of Candidates

Susmita Bhakat

Assistant Professor

Department of Basic Science and Humanities

Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata

University of Engineering and Management, Kolkata

Dr. Samapika Das Biswas

Assistant HOD & Associate Professor

Department of Basic Science and Humanities

Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata

University of Engineering and Management, Kolkata

Shreejeeta Kargupta

Junior Research Fellow

Department of Basic Science and Humanities

Institute of Engineering and Management, Kolkata

University of Engineering and Management, Kolkata

ABSTRACT

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is widely acknowledged as a reliable means of evaluating candidates' readiness to pursue studies or training in the English medium. Since its establishment in 1989, IELTS has gained recognition as a suitable language requirement for admission to further and higher education courses in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. More recently, professional bodies such as the General Medical Council in the UK and New Zealand, Australia have also embraced IELTS as a screening measure for international students. Presently, several institutions in the USA and Canada are contemplating the inclusion of IELTS in their roster of acceptable language screening tests. In April 1995, a series of noteworthy changes were implemented in the IELTS test. This article provides a detailed overview of these changes and offers a rationale for their introduction.

Keywords: IELTS, Evaluation, Language, Learning, Rationale for evaluation

Context

IELTS superseded the antecedent English Language Testing Service (ELTS), which was initially conceptualized in 1976 and introduced in 1980 by the British Council. Originally devised as an examination for prospective postgraduate students, the ELTS test witnessed an escalating demand from diverse student demographics and receiving institutions, particularly in Australia. In 1988, Criper and Davies conducted a comprehensive study evaluating the practicality, validity, and reliability of ELTS, recommending certain streamlining and truncation of the test. Attempt at compromise aimed for a balance "between practicality and maximum predictive power" (Alderson and Clapham 1992: 1). The subject-specific modules were decreased from six to four, and the Non-Academic test was substituted with the General Training Module.

Moreover, the adoption of the prefix 'International' acknowledged the engagement of the International Development Program Education Australia (IDPEA) beginning in 1989. This collaborative management not only prevented any perception of Eurocentric bias but also ensured a genuinely international perspective. Notably, teams of trained test writers in both Australia and the UK, along with regular material exchange between the UK and Australian Chief Examiners, facilitated the striking of a suitable balance between country-specific content and elements intrinsic to the non-country-specific culture underlying the English

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Running Head: IELTS Recent Developments   3

language. IELTS officially commenced in 1989, with candidates undertaking two general subtests, namely Listening and Speaking, and two specialized subtests, namely Reading and Writing.

The overall subtests measured competence in general English, whereas the specialized subtests (Modules A, B, and C) aimed to assess skills specific to the candidate's chosen field of study. The popularity of the test burgeoned due to its flexible scheduling, as opposed to fixed dates, and the expeditious issuance of results within two weeks of test completion. Routine monitoring and evaluation persisted from 1989 to 1994, with the International Editing Committee convening regularly to deliberate on the continuous development of IELTS. Following thorough consultation and research, it was determined that further enhancements to the test should be implemented in April 1995, encompassing improvements in seven key areas, detailed below.

General Training Scoring

Before April 1995, the IELTS examination comprised three subject-specific subtests known as Academic Modules A, B, and C, catering to the fields of physical sciences and technology, life and medical sciences, and arts and social sciences for both Reading and Writing components. Despite its apparent validity, this segmentation of the test into three distinct subtests raised administrative concerns, as test centers and receiving institutions often faced ambiguity regarding the appropriate subtests for various courses. Additionally, determining whether to match a candidate with a subject-specific subtest based on their past or intended discipline posed challenges. Feedback from IELTS administrators and examiners indicated a need to reduce the number of subject-specific subtests. Concurrently, usage monitoring revealed that approximately 75% of IELTS candidates were opting for Module C. In light of these findings, the International Editing Committee recommended conducting a research study to assess the viability of a one-module approach, ensuring that Academic candidates would not be disadvantaged if they were to take a single module for each of the Academic Reading and Writing subtests. The outcomes of this project, coupled with significant research on second language reading and ESP testing by Clapham (1993, 1995, 1996), demonstrated that a single test for all academic candidates did not exhibit bias towards or against candidates from any discipline. As a result, in April 1995, the three

subject-specific subtests in IELTS were substituted with one Academic Reading Module and one Academic Writing Module.

In addition, the elimination of the thematic connection between the Reading and Writing Modules, applicable to both Academic and General Training, was a deliberate revision driven by considerations of construct validation. It was acknowledged that the presence of a thematic link in the original test design, while advantageous in certain aspects, heightened the risk of conflating the assessment of reading proficiency with that of writing skills. Specifically, subpar performance in the reading subtest posed an unwarranted penalty on candidates in the associated writing task, which was deemed undesirable. Some have posited that the Reading Module texts afforded certain students indispensable background schemata, preventing unfair disadvantages compared to peers from diverse cultural contexts or traditions. Nevertheless, scrutiny of candidates' writing performances indicated significant variability in the extent to which they utilized the reading input. Some heavily relied on the written content of the reading texts, treating the writing task primarily as an evaluation of their reading prowess, inadvertently obscuring their own writing abilities. Conversely, others opted to articulate personal ideas on the topic with minimal reference to the texts or contrived connections solely for task completion. Instances were noted where candidates were uncertain whether expressing their personal viewpoint or aligning with the 'authoritative' stance presented in the reading text(s) would be more advantageous. This diversity in approaches to the linked writing task inherently complicated the fair assessment process at the marking stage. Consequently, a more equitable task design was sought, leading to the removal of any association between the IELTS Reading and Writing Modules for both Academic and General Training candidates. Despite this change, the initial task in the Writing Module still incorporates non-verbal input, such as diagrams or tables, and both tasks allow candidates to exhibit essential study skills like paraphrasing, synthesis, and summarization. All writing tasks undergo trials with a representative sample group of candidates and are assessed by IELTS Senior Examiners according to standard evaluation criteria. This ensures that each task can elicit the necessary linguistic depth and breadth for assessment purposes before its inclusion in a live test. Careful observation of performance during the trial phase and subsequent live test administrations has confirmed that candidates are not put at a disadvantage by the separation of the link between the Reading and Writing Modules. Moreover, this detachment facilitates the maintenance of task difficulty

comparability across different versions of each Reading or Writing Module.

Until April 1995, General Training assessment was limited to six Bands because the General Training Reading and Writing Modules lacked the distinguishing characteristics to operate across the same range as the Academic Modules. This disparity persisted even though General Training candidates underwent evaluation in the Listening and Speaking Modules, both of which were assessed across nine bands. General Training primarily served the Australian context for admission to Technical and Further Education colleges and secondary schools. There was a perceived necessity to align the General Training Reading and Writing Modules with the Academic Reading and Writing Modules, scoring them over nine Bands. This alignment was duly implemented in April 1995. Presently, all Reading and Writing Modules share the same administration time and are scored over nine Bands. Both Academic and General Training Writing necessitate candidates to compose two tasks of comparable length, one with a minimum of 150 words and the other with a minimum of 250 words. Both tasks must be completed within a 60-minute timeframe.

Timeframe allocated for the Speaking Module

Prior to April 1995, numerous test centres encountered challenges in scheduling both time and space to accommodate all candidates for the Speaking Modules on the same day as the rest of the test. This logistical issue led to an unwarranted increase in the number of test dates, primarily due to constraints associated with the Speaking Module. Consequently, this had implications for test security.

To mitigate this issue, the duration of the Speaking Module window has been extended to encompass two consecutive days following the test administration day. Consequently, enhanced control over the number of IELTS administrations is achieved, and increased flexibility is assured for test centers. This adjustment has proven particularly advantageous for larger centers in light of the rising number of overall IELTS candidates.

Equity and subjective evaluation

Ensuring adequate reliability in both the objectively and subjectively assessed modules of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has always been a paramount consideration. A careful test production process has resulted in Reading and Listening

versions with an average Cronbach Alpha of 0.88. This calculation is derived from the performance data of over 90,000 candidates across 13 Reading and Listening versions. Unlike the quantifiable reliability of Reading and Listening, the reliability of Speaking and Writing Modules cannot be assessed in a similar manner. However, their quality is guaranteed through an extensive program encompassing examiner training, certification, and ongoing monitoring.

In the Speaking Module, candidate performance is documented on cassette tapes. These recorded interviews, along with scripts from the Writing Module, are retained by the test center for a minimum duration of two months. Prior to the release of IELTS results, a routine verification process is conducted, and instances of inconsistent profile scores across the four skill areas necessitate automatic remarking. Furthermore, a formal procedure has been instituted, allowing candidates to dispute their results within one month of result issuance.

Fairness and data Collection

For certain candidates, the outcomes of the IELTS examination carry significant consequences; thus, decisions based on the test results must consider the comprehensive context of each individual candidate and how their linguistic proficiency aligns with the requirements of a specific course of study or training. Since April 1995, there has been a systematic collection of additional information pertaining to the nature of IELTS candidature, the efficiency and efficacy of every question in each module, and the potential correlations between candidate groups and the functionality of test items.

Candidates are now allocated time to transcribe their responses at the conclusion of the Listening Module onto an Optical Mark Reader Answer Sheet, resembling the one already utilized for the Reading Module. Moreover, all candidates are required to complete a Candidate Information Sheet (CIS), which concurrently serves as the test centre registration form. This routine data collection and analysis facilitate close monitoring of test utilization and users, ensuring the test's continuous and appropriate development. This is particularly crucial for an internationally accessible test, where sensitivity to the diverse cultural, social, and educational contexts of candidates is paramount.

An ongoing validation research initiative connected to IELTS is presently exploring the

correlations among candidates' demographics, affective attitudes, cognitive strategies, and test performance. The IELTS Annual Report incorporates a dedicated section on validation.

Sending out live materials

Ensuring the security of test materials is paramount, and the reuse of such materials must not compromise the integrity of the testing process. The correlation between security and the reuse of IELTS test material is contingent, in part, upon the availability of module versions. Since April 1995, an increased number of test versions have been provided for centres to select from within a six-month timeframe. The separation of Reading and Writing Modules has granted test centres greater flexibility in assembling various modules for each test administration, representing a significant advancement in bolstering the security of the test. Typically, test materials remain in use for a maximum duration of one year, after which they are removed from circulation. New iterations of the test modules are dispatched to test centres every six months, and likewise, versions are retired from use on a semi-annual basis. Centres are assigned versions based on their candidate volume and the frequency of their administrations. Consequently, a test centre concurrently holds multiple versions of each module.

Digitalized management

Maintaining the operational efficiency of IELTS test centres, characterized by flexible administrations expeditious result processing, and imposes a substantial administrative burden in terms of organization and information management. A surge in IELTS candidature indicates a proportional increase in administrative responsibilities, necessitating effective and efficient management to prevent any degradation in service quality. To tackle this challenge, British Council and IDPEA, has developed a comprehensive test centre administration package compatible with personal computers. Since 1995, all IELTS test centres have been equipped with this package, accompanied by requisite training.

The administration package serves to streamline various administrative tasks, including candidate registration, collection of centre fees with quarterly returns computation, allocation of candidate numbers, compilation of attendance registers, examiner assignment, monitoring

to ensure a three-month gap between retakes, overseeing test security, stock control, material , Band Score calculation, Test Report Form production, and record maintenance. Notably, the computer package is designed to optimize the time spent on each candidate registration. Furthermore, pertinent information required for central administration and validation can be conveniently downloaded onto disk and submitted in that format.

Test of IELTS

IELTS is currently available at a minimum of 210 accredited testing facilities situated in 105 different countries. While centrally administered, these approved centres oversee the local execution of the test and ensure the presence of adequately qualified and trained examiners. Typically, most centres conduct testing sessions at least once a month, with more frequent sessions during peak times. Additionally, special test sessions are often organized for specific sponsors or institutions.

All candidates are required to complete the same Listening and Speaking Modules. However, there is a choice of Reading and Writing Modules based on whether a candidate is opting for the Academic or General Training Modules. The Academic Reading and Writing Modules evaluate a candidate's readiness to study or train in English at an undergraduate or postgraduate level. Conversely, the General Training Reading and Writing Modules place emphasis on communication skills within a broader social and educational context. This is particularly suitable for candidates intending to pursue secondary education, work experience, or training programs at a pre-degree level in English-speaking countries.

Nomination

An examination of the Candidate Information data gathered from individuals who undertook the IELTS examination in 1995 reveals the subsequent demographic profile. The preponderance of candidates (69%) opts to undergo the IELTS examination in South East Asia, Australia, and New Zealand, while 21% of the candidature is situated in Europe. Just under half of the candidates (approximately 50%) emanate from the education sector. Concerning their intended area of study, slightly over 50% aspire to pursue disciplines falling under humanities, social sciences, and related fields. Notably, a substantial portion

(20%) express an intention to undergo general industrial or vocational training, or engage in secondary school programs. Approximately half of the candidates have attained a degree or its equivalent, and a majority of them have dedicated more than nine years to the study of English. The gender distribution among candidates undertaking the IELTS examination is relatively balanced, with a slightly higher representation of males than females. The predominant age bracket for most candidates falls within the range of 21 to 25 years.

Conclusion

The development and delivery of any high-quality test necessitate appropriate systems and procedures, not only for the initial creation of the test but also for its administration and ongoing evaluation. Vigilant monitoring of test performance over time, coupled with an awareness of theoretical and technological advancements in language testing, establishes a robust foundation for test revision. The revision of IELTS in 1995 was prompted by four equally significant factors: practical considerations, administrative challenges, technological progress, and theoretical issues. All modifications made in 1995 took into consideration recent research and development in applied linguistics and language testing. These changes were implemented only after extensive consultation with the international language testing community. Systems and procedures for producing, promoting, administering, and evaluating the test have undergone substantial refinement in recent years. The candidature for IELTS continues to experience steady growth worldwide; in 1996, for instance, there were over 60,000 candidates globally. It has been more than two decades since the original concept of IELTS (or ELTS) emerged from the communicative language teaching and testing movements of the 1970s. Despite several changes, IELTS remains true to its initial concept, providing a valid and reliable assessment instrument well-suited to guide us into the twenty-first century.

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