

IELTS in Pakistan: Preparation Practices, Activities & Test-Taking Strategies

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Abstract

This paper investigates test preparation strategies among IELTS test-takers in Pakistan: their knowledge of the test, the activities they undertake to improve the required language skills, the test-taking strategies they know or apply, and possible reasons why many of them usually score lower than their target band score. The study involved an online questionnaire administered to 118 candidates from eight important regions of Pakistan i.e. Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan, Islamabad, Gilgit Baltistan, and Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The non-probability sampling technique was used to select the participants. The study discusses how IELTS candidates can avoid potentially negative attitudes, and better prepare for the IELTS test. Furthermore, the study also discusses various factors in relation with IELTS test preparation and their impact on the test results. These factors include test-takers' prior perceptions of the test, and their test taking strategies for the test they are planning to take. The study concludes with some implications for test-takers, test-preparation centers, and IELTS tutors to consider while preparing/planning/tutoring for the English language proficiency test.

Keywords: IELTS test-takers, IELTS test format, IELTS test preparation activities, IELTS test-taking strategies.

Introduction

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the most popular large-scale high-stakes English proficiency tests, on which candidates spend a great deal of time, energy, and money.

Understandably, it is important for IELTS candidates to score high on the test (Pearson, 2019), especially for immigration and study-abroad purposes (Green, 2007). Due to specific conditions, mainly political instability, IELTS demand and candidature is growing rapidly in Pakistan. IELTS is designed to help the test-takers work, study or migrate to countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA where English is the first language. The test takes place at regular intervals

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round the year and can be attempted multiple times without any restriction until the test-takers achieve their desired band score. However, most test-takers find the price of even one attempt unaffordable. The test is jointly owned by the British Council, Cambridge University Assessment, and IDP Australia (IELTS, 2022b).

English is the third most widely spoken language across the globe having 379 million users worldwide, and IELTS, as a test of English proficiency, is recognized by more than 11,000 international bodies including employers and educational institutions (IELTS, 2022b). It is graded on a scale of 1-9 band score 1: Non-user - *The test-taker has no ability to use the language except a few isolated words*; while band score 9: Expert user - *The test-taker has fully operational command of the language; their use of English is appropriate, accurate and fluent, and shows complete understanding* (IELTS, 2022b). The most desirable score, however, is band 7; the higher the score the better ability to communicate in English. Also, much brighter chances of getting admission in international universities, scholarships, and speedy immigration - all are linked to IELTS score.

Since its inception in 1989, IELTS has experienced significant growth in its candidature from 500,000 in 2003 to 3.5 million in 2018 (Davies, 2008). The data for 2022 candidature has not been released yet, but it must have crossed 4 million considering the previous growth rate. There were 709 IELTS test centers worldwide in 2019, and it may not have grown further due to COVID-19 impact. However, the quantities of test centers and fee range for Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are provided in table 1 below for a quick reference and comparison:

Table 1:
Test Centers and Test Fee (Pearson, 2021).

Country	Test Centers	Fee (in USD)
Bangladesh	10	197
India	92	185
Pakistan	24	222

As reported on the IELTS official website, the test is split into two categories: Academic (for studies), and General Training (for work and immigration). Three out of four (80.31%) candidates take IELTS Academic (A) whereas only 19.69% need to take IELTS General Training

(GT). Similarly, female candidates outnumber males, and also score higher (IELTS, 2022a) as provided in table 2 below:

Table 2:
Mean Performance (MP) by Gender Split

Demographics	Test Takers	MP(A)	MP (GT)
Female	(51.78%),	6.28	6.38
Male	(48.22%)	6.22	6.26

Research has revealed that an overall score of bands 6.0 is a minimum standard frequently used for admission screening at an international level (Oliver et al., 2012; Thorpe et al., 2017). As regards the average score by nationality, among top 40 nationalities, France has the highest average score (7 bands), and Saudi Arabia has the lowest score (4.9). Interestingly, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are close to each other as indicated in table 3 below:

Table 3:
Mean Performance (MP) by Nationality

Demographics	MP by Nationality (A)	MP by Nationality (GT)
Bangladesh	6.1	5.7
India	6.4	6.2
Pakistan	6.2	6.3

Indian candidates seem to be scoring better at IELTS Academic, Pakistanis score higher in IELTS General Training. Nevertheless, Memon (2015) argues that the private English language industry in Pakistan is not effective in improving the scores of IELTS test-takers despite being quite expensive.

Literature Review

Knowledge of Test Format: It is the obligation of test companies such as IELTS to ensure that information on test format and preparation materials are readily available so that test-takers can properly prepare for a particular test. (AERA, APA & NCME, 2014). Needless to say, test-takers may not be able to perform to their genuine proficiency level if they do not have access to the information about the test format, the questions

type, the assessment criteria, and a pool of strategies to successfully take the test. IELTS test-takers come from a diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds – 40 languages (IELTS, 2022a). They come to take the test with varying levels of experiences in relation with learning a language or taking a test. Along with varied expectations. This diverse background and experience may sometimes result in a lack of confidence, anxiety, doubt, and confusion (Winke & Lim, 2014). Similarly, these discouraging factors, on the test day, can affect test performance quite adversely (Suryaningsih, 2014), and the test performance can be improved through reasonable number of test-taking practices after the test-takers have been sufficiently familiarized with the format of the test format beforehand (Stankov, Lee, Luo & Hogan, 2012).

IELTS Test strategies may aim to improve two key areas: 1) proficiency in English; and 2) knowledge of exam techniques. For the present study, we view language proficiency from three different perspectives: (1) social interaction, (2) professional communication, and (3) academic outputs. Obviously, the nature of everyday communication is distinct from academic studies. Also, professional communication for business purposes is different from the earlier mentioned two categories.

Depending upon the module taken, Academic or General Training, IELTS test-takers are required to demonstrate knowledge and awareness of the aforementioned genres. Moreover, it is also important that test-takers are able to organize their responses in the required format, choose the most appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure (Chappell & Moore, 2012). Similarly, other test strategies may include self-management, time management and keeping calm. No matter how prepared the test-takers are from content view point, if they lose confidence or do not manage the available time effectively, the result may not be in their favor. As a matter of fact, strategies that help the candidates produce meaningful responses to given test items, are as important as the proficiency of language itself. This can be concluded that unpreparedness in these areas may result in poor test performance. Under such circumstances, candidates might need to take the test again without desired improvement in score. These are the main reasons for anxiety, stress, and other negative psychological outcomes directly impacting future test performance.

Practices, Activities and Strategies: Test practices are those activities that test-takers undertake in the entire test preparation process, whereas activities mean steps undertaken to improve their language

proficiency. On the other hand, strategies refer to specific exam techniques to deal with a given test item.

Investigating test preparation activities, Mickan and Motteram (2006) in their mixed-methods longitudinal study reported that IELTS test-takers engaged in multiple activities to prepare for the test, such as enrollment in an English language or test-preparation courses, involvement in self-directed English language learning, interaction with successful test-takers, use of test preparation materials available online, practice of focused listening, reading, and much more. Interestingly, this study revealed that 80% of test-takers did not attend formal English lessons to prepare for the test. Instead, they relied on self-directed activities which included reading newspapers, practicing with sample tests, using IELTS preparation websites and apps, hiring a private tutor, watching TV, and listening to radio. More than a decade later, an international study on IELTS candidates' preferred test preparation activities found similarities in their preferences (O'Sullivan, Dunn & Berry, 2019)

Turning to the impact of test preparation coaching, the evidence is contradicting. While some studies found them to be quite beneficial (e.g. Brown, 1998; Chappell, Bodis & Jackson, 2015), others argue that there is little or no benefit (Celestine & Ming, 1999; Ngyuen, 2008). On the other hand, busy test-takers may not find the required amount of time, have task awareness, and budgetary provisions to attend such courses. As regards test preparation in an informal way staying outside of formal classroom coaching, there is a lack of data as to what extent these test-takers involve themselves in self-initiated test preparation activities. This situation needs further investigation involving the test-takers' efforts for the test preparation, their knowledge of the test format, and cognition and beliefs associated with the test preparation.

There is strong evidence to suggest that test-takers with highly developed test-taking strategies score better than those who do not (Amer, 1993; Cohen, 2013). With regards to test tasks and items, test-management strategies are useful in providing meaningful responses (Cohen, 2014). Such as controlling one's behavior on the test day (Winke & Lim, 2014), or preparing outline for an essay before writing the full-length response (Cohen, 2014). Those candidates who do not have a pool of such useful strategies are at a clear disadvantage compared to those who have developed the required skills (Yang, 2000; Winke & Lim, 2014). Moreover, test-wiseness is also very crucial. It refers to effective test-

taking strategies pertinent to the test format. For instance, the ability to recognize grammatical clues that may be embedded in MCQs (multiple-choice questions) in order to identify the correct choice.

IELTS in Pakistan: Being the third largest country in South Asia, Pakistan is the home of 18 million users of English, especially in the field of education and profession (Kachru, 1992). Neither public education is meeting the demand of English nor the growing number of private English language institutes have been able to bridge this gap adequately (Memon, & Umrani, 2016).

A quick search on Google Scholar shows that there have been less than 35 studies on IELTS in Pakistan since 2010 with an exception of one doctoral project though most of the studies were conducted after 2016. IELTS test administering agencies do not release statistics about the number of test-takers at a specific test center or in a certain country. Nevertheless, it can be estimated that more than eighty thousand candidates take IELTS in Pakistan every year. There are 24 test centers (Pearson, 2021) supported by 221 recognized IELTS Preparation partners (British Council, n.d.). Each center registers a minimum of 30 candidates monthly on average i.e. around 80 thousand candidatures annually which also includes test re-takes.

Despite such a huge candidature, very little research seems to have been conducted on IELTS candidates in Pakistan. For example, 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); assessment of speaking test (Karim and Haq, 2014), relationship between vocabulary size and depth (Aman, Shakir, & Tazeen, 2022) grammar knowledge and essay writing (Sattar, Shakir & Amjad 2023), and the Challenges Pakistani Students Faced in Getting Prepared for IELTS (Rehman, 2021).

This study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of Pakistani test-takers preparation practices, activities and strategies so that improvements in preparation can be suggested to reduce the risk of low score.

Methodology

An online survey was administered to collect data from Pakistani IELTS test-takers in a systematic manner. This online survey was adapted from previous questionnaires (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Mickan & Motteram, 2006; Wall & Horák, 2006) with an aim to obtain information about students' English learning experiences for the IELTS test

preparation in various regions of Pakistan. Participants for the online survey were recruited with the assistance of IELTS teachers and institutions administering IELTS preparatory programs in partnership with the British Council (BC) and Australian Education Office (AEO) in various regions of Pakistan. A total number of 650 invitation emails were sent to prospective test-takers to take part in the survey. The population for the study was 650 participants. The researchers used a non-probability sampling technique to send the emails. And, through convenience sampling technique 118 responded to the survey between 30/06/2023 and 15/07/2023. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively whereas responses to the open-ended items were analyzed by means of content analysis strategy.

The survey had five main sections. Section A sought general information. In this section, IELTS candidates were asked to report on their gender, age, and the region they belonged to. Section B focused on test-takers' education. Candidates were asked about their highest educational qualification, how they learnt English, how many years they studied English prior to the test preparation, where they learnt English, and what kind of courses they had taken before deciding to take IELTS test. Section C investigated test-takers' IELTS experience. This section explored candidates experience with IELTS such as if they ever experienced IELTS test, if yes, how many times, what band score they achieved, their preferred test administration agency i.e. BC or AEO, what test type they were planning to take, and their preferred test administration agency for this upcoming attempt. Section D was about planning & preparation.

This section included four open ended items that provided qualitative data. These four items sought to explore if the candidate's thought preparation before the test was important, their knowledge of those preparation strategies, if they tried those strategies, and how differently they are planning to prepare this time. Other five questions provided them with a range of options about preparation strategies and available resources to see how, if at all, they used those strategies and resources. Section E explored the nature of test planning in the test takers daily lives. This section included three questions. First question provided a host of activities that candidates could do and they were asked which ones they did in their daily lives. The second question was about the constraints i.e. what stopped them from learning English or practicing before the test if applicable. Finally, the survey ends with an open-ended

item to allow them to provide their input in the area that might not have been covered in the survey.

Findings

Participants' Background: The majority (72.9 %) of the respondents were identified as male, and the remaining (27.1 %) as female. The highest number of test-takers (55.9 %) belonged to 21-30 age range, while the lowest number of test takers (6.8%) was aged from 41 and above. The respondents stated that they belonged to Sindh (33.9%), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (32.2%), Punjab (25.4%), Islamabad (3.4%), Baluchistan (3.4%), Gilgit Baltistan (1.7%) while there was no response from Azad Kashmir region. Overall, more than two-thirds of the respondents were university graduates with (32.2%) holding a bachelor's degree, and (37.3 %) a master's degree. Majority of the respondents (64.4%) studied English as a school subject, the remaining (35.6%) studied in schools where English was a medium of instruction.

IELTS Test Experience: The majority of the participants (56.7%) were attempting IELTS tests for the first time while a sizable number (43.3%) was repeating it. Among the repeater candidates, 57.7% had attempted the test once only. Whereas, 30.8% attempted twice, and a relatively a small number of test-takers i.e. 11.5% had undergone this experience three times or more. Overwhelming majority of test-takers (73.3%) registered at the British Council (BC) for their last test. However, this preference changed and comparatively a smaller number of test-takers (55%) is planning to register at the BC for their next exam. So, candidates showed more inclinations towards AEO. Regarding their score on the most recent IELTS exam, majority (42.2%) of test-takers scored 6 or 6.5, still a significant number (26.9%) received 7 or 7.5, and only (1.9%) scored 8 bands. On the other hand, 26.9% of the candidates scored 5.5 or below. Finally, more than three times test-takers were preparing for Academic (78.3%) than general training (21.7%).

Education and English Language Learning Experience: Overall, the respondents turned out to be highly educated, nearly two-thirds (70 %) university graduates or even post graduates while, the remaining (30%) were high school graduates. Majority of the respondents i.e. three quarters (76.7 %) had studied English at school and still a significant number (61.7%) had further studied English at college or university level. Of the

remaining participants, 28.3 % studied at language institutes, whereas 11.7% took private lesson.

Importance of Planning & Preparation: The vast majority of respondents realized the importance of test preparation being crucial (77%), to get better results (75%), to know the test format (58%). There were very few test-takers who wanted to know about the grading criteria (6%).

Preparation Activities: responding to the question (What things should test-takers do for test preparation?), respondents appeared to be involved in various activities such as watching movies (40%), reading books (50%), speaking with fluent speakers (51%), but the most favored activity was practicing with sample tests (86%).

Knowledge of Specific Strategies: Although familiarization with test-taking strategies is immensely important, the majority of the survey participants appear to be focused on practice with previously exam papers (77%). Of those who reported knowledge of other aspects, just 02 % said they knew paraphrasing, and 0.8% reported that they knew that listening and reading tests challenged their critical thinking skills. The nature of exam and its rubric is critical thinking based, but most students seem to follow rote learning strategies. They believe that if their English is improved and they practice a lot, they can score very high. In reality, they need to understand its rubric, and train in a way that their higher order thinking skills are improved. Those who were repeating the test for the second and third time did not report any significant change in their knowledge of the test and test-taking strategies. They depended on more intensive practice (70%), repeated practice with past papers (87%), watching YouTube videos (65%), and IELTS websites and apps (50%).

Constraints: Most of the participants reported that they had very limited opportunities to use English in their daily lives. For example, 33% reported that they were too busy to practice. Other constraints included, no one to speak English with (50%), and no chance to use English at workplace (40%).

Discussion

Attitudes towards the Test and Test Preparation: It will not be realistic to expect that all IELTS candidates will have deeper understanding of the nature of IELTS test, and its assessment criteria. Irrespective of their perceptions of the test, a significant number realized the importance of test preparation, confirming the findings of Cohen

(2013). Test-takers reported that practice and mock tests were particularly useful though they also explored a variety of other ways in which they tried to develop their understanding of test structure, and the language proficiency they needed to achieve their desired band score. There was a lot of variation in how far the participants understood exactly what was required for different aspects of the test. The data show, most participants were not clear about test requirements or the strategies how their required band score could be achieved.

Test-taking Strategies: Despite their knowledge and enthusiasm for test preparation in general, survey respondents appear to be greatly unaware of adequate test-taking strategies. Some aspects of IELTS test require higher order critical thinking skills, whereas other aspects demand lower order critical thinking skills, but rote learning and memorization skills cannot be benefitted from. Pakistani IELTS test takers appear to be trying to familiarize themselves with the past papers by means of mock tests or practice tests. This exercise could help them identify their level, but it can hardly help them improve their language proficiency or exam taking strategies. IELTS test involves skills set related to paraphrasing, reading between the lines, dealing with distractors, higher order skimming and scanning skills to be able to deal with long unread passages etc. Therefore, this could be a key component in which test-takers could be informed in a better way, and more research can help fill this gap. Those who did report knowing certain strategies remained stuck with repeating the same thing over and over again i.e. reliance on practicing with past papers, rather than improving their English and learning the required specific test-taking strategies.

Test-Takers' Activities: Probably because of busy lifestyle, most participants did not have time to attend formal English language classes or test preparation coaching, and mostly relied on self-directed learning and test preparation. It appears that they could use the IELTS preparation materials available online for free if they sought guidance and dug deep into the available pool of resources, but this opportunity seems to be underutilized. Successful English language learning can take place in two ways. On the one hand, the availability and accessibility of resources in a particular location and, on the other hand, the utilization of these resources (Kashiwa & Benson, 2018). However, the data suggests that survey participants accessed only a fraction of these resources. As a matter of fact, it mainly depends upon their motivation to learn a language and their ability to utilize language resources in their given environment.

Conclusion

The findings show that preparing for the IELTS test in Pakistan is not a straightforward affair. There is a lack of assessment literacy training which, if provided in a timely manner, can help candidates make use of available opportunities and resources for language improvement and better test preparation.

Some test-takers can speak and write well in English in a given workplace environment or varying social encounters. They seem to rely on their linguistic abilities without trying to understand the language demands of the Test. IELTS test-takers and those involved in teaching/coaching test-takers to prepare for the test, should help raise awareness of the test format, and focus on activities that can not only help improve the language level but also test-taking strategies. This is true, as evident from the data that most test-takers do not enroll onto formal preparation courses. On the contrary, those who do join such courses are pedagogically in a much better position (e.g. Chappell, Bodis & Jackson, 2015).

The range of IELTS resources that are available in Pakistan largely aim at communicating to test-takers the knowledge of the test format and test-taking strategies. That data suggests that these resources are not being utilized to the fuller advantage of the test-takers. According to the findings of the present study, nearly 46,000 test-takers repeat the test, whereas above 24,000 candidates go for third or fourth attempt every year. Notwithstanding the lowest GDP is the region, IELTS exam price in Pakistan is the highest especially in comparison with India and Bangladesh. If such a huge number of candidates are repeating their IELTS test again and again, it is a waste of not only their crucial time but also funds - both can be saved with better planning and preparation strategies.

Recommendations

If candidates cannot enroll onto preparation courses, they can still score better and save their time, energy and funds by paying attention to suggested test-taking strategies available online, and avoiding hit and trail methods. A wide range of open resources are available to be used. Further, it would be useful to study how these test-takers engage with these resources, if at all, and how this strategy could lead to better test scores.

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