

TEST PREPARATION RESEARCH



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TEST PREPARATION IN IRAN: THE CASE OF IELTS

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IELTS in Iran

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a globally recognized test of English proficiency, jointly owned by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. IELTS is administered in two forms; Academic and General Training, each comprising 4 modules to assess the 4 major language skills separately. It screens candidates who need to provide a 'proof' of their ability to communicate in English mainly for the purposes of pursuing higher education, work or immigration. The test has enjoyed increasing popularity in recent years, being presently given in 135 countries across the globe including the EFL contexts of Iran. In the past, other standardized tests of English (e.g., TOEFL--Test of English as a Foreign Language, MTELP--Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency) were given in this country to serve almost the same screening purposes. However, political frictions gradually rendered their use intermittent, culminating in their complete elimination around mid-2000s. As a result, Iranian test-takers would often have to travel to the neighbouring countries to take one such US-based test, a luxury that was not economically or legally accessible to every candidate. It was therefore very much to their convenience that the country was added in the last decade to the list of locations where IELTS

was administered. Having secured its place as the *only* standardized test of English that can now be officially taken in Iran, IELTS is currently given in test centres within 3 major cities of the country with an average frequency of two times a month. The privileged status of the test, coupled with the increasing number of Iranians leaving the country in pursuit of work or higher education, has led to an unprecedented rise in candidacy for the test. This has in its turn paved the way for a burgeoning state-wide industry of offering courses under the title of 'IELTS Preparation'. What the real nature of such courses is, however, has barely been fully or systematically explored.

The need for a washback study

In theory, the high stakes associated with the gate-keeping role IELTS plays are expected to be inducing intense washback (Cheng, 2005) into various test-related areas including preparation courses. At the same time, the owners of the test have strong claims to its international positive impact based on the results of a large-scale impact study (Hawkey, 2006) that partly addressed IELTS preparation courses. These claims, however, need further in-depth investigation. For one thing, washback has been time and again proved a highly complex phenomenon influenced by far more variables than mere valid test design (Alderson, 2004; Wall, 2000 among others).

UPDATES

- An interim report of this study will be presented in the 2013 Conference of AAAL to be held in Dallas, Texas.
- Findings from the case study on TOEFL iBT in China will be presented in the 2013 annual TESOL convention to be held in Dallas Texas.
- Dr. Lynette May (Co-investigator) received Queen's Principal's Development Fund International Visitors Program to visit Queen's University in Jan-Feb. 2013.
- Jia Ma received the 2012 SSHRC Canadian Graduate Scholarship Michael Smith Travel Award to support her data collection in China.

Context-bound factors, for instance, including those related to the teacher, have been shown to play an equally decisive role in shaping washback (Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010; Qi, 2005; Watanabe, 2004). This calls for washback studies in as many contexts as possible, especially in case of standardized tests used with populations with diverse backgrounds. Secondly, the results of the global impact study (Hawkey, 2006) were based on data mainly collected from a distance (i.e., through questionnaires and interviews) rather than first-hand information gathered through direct classroom observation.

The research proper

Along these lines, a mixed-type research method was recently designed to study IELTS preparation courses within the context of Iran. The study will investigate the presence and quality of washback on teaching/learning activities, teaching methodology, course materials, teachers' views of their courses, and learners' expectations of and experiences with the courses. Two centrally-managed branches of a large language institute in a major city that attracts a high candidacy for these courses, and which can therefore be taken to reasonably represent IELTS courses offered across the country, have been selected as the context of the study. Apart from IELTS courses, general English (non-IELTS) courses given by the same teachers will also be investigated as control groups. Starting in January 2013, and following a carefully worked-out plan, teachers, learners and course administrators will be approached through questionnaires and interviews to collect qualitative data over a 10-week-long semester. In addition, select sessions from both IELTS and non-IELTS courses will be observed and voice-recorded. Triangulation and quantitative analyses of the data are expected to produce a clearer understanding of the nature of IELTS preparation courses, while at the same time providing the possibility of judging the presence and quality of washback. Results can be revealing in

other ways as well. They will have implications for the validity of the use of IELTS in that specific context (Messick, 1990). As such, they could provide input for the design of subsequent versions of IELTS. In addition, they can shed light on how the complex phenomenon of washback interacts with other forces operating in this specific context. Finally, the findings might contribute to making IELTS preparation courses in Iran more efficient.

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