

IELTS Teachers and Test Takers' Attitudes towards IELTS Writing Tasks

Rentauli Mariah Silalahi

Institut Teknologi Del

rentaulisilalahi@gmail.com

Jl. Sisingamangaraja, Sitoluama, Laguboti, Toba Samosir, 22381

Abstract

This study is conducted to explore the attitudes of teachers actively involved in preparing student candidates to sit for an IELTS test and IELTS test takers who have experienced doing the test towards the usefulness of the IELTS writing exam in preparing candidates for university level studies in an English speaking country. It is also carried out in order to find out if the IELTS writing exams, task one and task two, meet the espoused goals of expressing critical thinking. Accordingly, a questionnaire was administered to 2 IELTS teachers and 16 IELTS test takers in an Indonesian private university, followed with an interview. The results indicated that both tasks of the IELTS writing test were perceived by the teachers and students as having positive effect on training the test takers to think critically and logically yet bearing a slight relationship with skills needed at faculty level because the writing assignments at university would be very much different in criteria of assessment and constraints for completion than those tested at IELTS test. However, both teachers and students mostly have positive attitudes towards the test as a reliable tool to assess their level of English proficiency. This study will mostly be very useful for teacher practitioners who have responsibilities in preparing students to sit for an IELTS test.

Key words: Attitudes, IELTS, writing test, critical thinking, assessment

Introduction

Before admitted as a student in any overseas universities, especially in English speaking countries, one has to submit a proof of English proficiency level. The most popular tests used are TOEFL and IELTS. However, since the current type of TOEFL test held is an Internet based-with all its' downsides-most people in North Sumatera, especially the participants of this study, preferred sitting an IELTS test which is carried out on paper based. In addition, more student candidates for overseas studies are in favor of IELTS test because the test is considered more content based, task oriented and more authentic than TOEFL, moreover, it provides context which is much closer to what students might find in their real life (Hosseini et al., 2013). All of the participants ever took an IELTS test at ACM (Australia Center Medan) in Medan, the province of North Sumatera. ACM is the official IELTS center published in cooperation with Australia under the name of IDP Education Australia and it is actually the nearest IELTS center to the participants' residencies.

For this study only, the concern is paid on the writing tasks of the IELTS test. The writing tasks require the test takers to complete two tasks; writing task 1 and writing task 2, within 60 minutes. Writing task 1 usually presents data on a table, diagram, or chart and requires the test takers to write a 150 word essay at minimum by only describing the data given without inserting any personal ideas or comments. The data that students should describe or explain are varied from a chart, a diagram, a graphic, or a table that students most possibly encounter at universities (Veerappan, V. & Sulaiman, T., 2012). Meanwhile, writing task 2 gives the test takers wide chances to bring in their thoughts, comments, and evaluation for the question asked which commonly raises the issue of a controversial topic (Veerappan, V. & Sulaiman, T., 2012). For this second task, the test takers are suggested to bring in their own

experiences and samples. However, for both tasks, the students are expected to be critical and logical in thinking and wrap in their essays coherently.

Ability to write an essay is the essential skill to be competent in producing academically written writings that need critical and logical thinking. Lewthwaite, M. (2007, p. 2) mentioned "If, broadly, 'being critical' entails perspective taking, then critical writing would entail the writer being able to generate and express multiple perspectives or, if taking one point of view, providing coherent reasons for doing so." However, the fact that Indonesian students are not accustomed to writing essays, make them at a disadvantaged circumstance for their lacks of familiarity and exposures to the format.

Because of the demand for acceptance in Western universities where most of them require the student candidates to produce an IELTS score of minimum 6, many of the IELTS teachers who need to prepare the students in quite a short time feel under pressure and take a short cut in order to succeed their students. These teachers tend to teach the students by only practicing to answer the IELTS questions. That was in congruence with Alderson and Hamp-Lyons' (1996) research saying that most teachers already practiced teaching to the test and had high dependence to the published text-book.

Those teachers' feelings and their varied experiences based on their findings during their practices of giving IELTS preparation classes influence their attitudes to the IELTS test, as Erfani, S.S. (2014, p. 89) said 'attitudes strongly connected to feelings, rooted in cognitive and social psychology.' Therefore, this study will try to explore those feelings which is not well explored moreover in context of Indonesian whose government still positions English as a foreign language. Yet, the study will not be limited to the IELTS teachers only, but also to the IELTS test takers.

Discussion

Erfani (2014) stated that understanding the teachers' attitudes helped to predict the teachers' teaching behaviors and they were the most significant participants to study. It was interesting to know that Erfani's research could reveal both the positive and negative attitudes of IELTS teachers. Therefore, this study will use most of the teachers' attitudes items questions used in Erfani's research in order to find out the IELTS teachers' attitudes towards IELTS test with some additional items from the author's own perspectives. However, for ease of understanding, the author grouped the items for the IELTS teachers in 2 categories: in relation to the teachers themselves and in relation to the students. The items questions were given to the two IELTS teachers who participated on this study to get their confirmation for approval or disapproval whether the items applied to them. Whereas for understanding the IELTS test takers' attitudes, the author used some of the items for the teachers and developed more items to enable the author to answer the questions raised on this study.

The participants involved in this study are categorized into two: 2 IELTS teachers and 16 IELTS test takers. The author collected data by giving a questionnaire to the participants and developed the data by conducting open ended interview to all participants. The teachers were those who also ever experienced sitting the IELTS test while the test takers were those who ever took the test for at least one time. All of these participants were lecturers and students at one of the Universities in North Sumatera, Indonesia. All of the test-taker participants had been student candidates who needed an IELTS band score of at least 6.0 to apply for an advance study degree in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Netherland, German, and America. Nine of them had finished studying for either Master or Doctor Degrees overseas, while two of them are currently students in the UK and Australia, and the rest are planning to study to UK this year.

A. Discussion from the questionnaire given to the IELTS teachers

Table 1 shows the item questions given to the English teachers to confirm for their approval or disapproval. Interestingly, the two teachers participating on this study gave the same

answers to 15 questions out of 17 asked. They had different opinions for items no. 4 and no. 9 only.

Table 1. The IELTS teachers' attitudes towards IELTS test

No	Teacher's attitudes items in relation to the teacher him/herself	IELTS Teacher 1	IELTS teacher 2
1	The test provides positive motivation for me to teach.	Y	Y
2	The test brings about fear of the test results for me.	Y	Y
3	I feel guilty if I do not familiarize my students with the test format.	Y	Y
4	I feel I am under pressure to cover the materials for the test.	N	Y
5	I feel that the success or failure of my students reflect on me.	Y	Y
6	I believe teaching to the test helps to raise test scores.	Y	Y
7	I feel I am under time pressure when teaching towards the test.	Y	Y
8	The test motivates me through its international credibility.	Y	Y
Teacher's attitudes items in relation to the students			
9	The test provides positive motivation for my students to learn.	Y	N
10	The test causes unhelpful stress for my students.	N	N
11	I feel my students learn by studying for the test.	Y	Y
12	I believe that the test improve test taking strategies of the student rather than their language proficiency.	Y	Y
13	I think that the test measures students' language proficiency effectively.	Y	Y
14	I perceive the test as fair for Indonesian students.	Y	Y
15	I perceive the test as compatible in terms of difficulty level to the Indonesian test takers' language ability.	Y	Y
16	I think if a student has high proficiency of English, he or she will be able to get high score without a test preparation course.	N	N
17	The IELTS writing test helps my students to express their critical and logical thinking.	Y	Y

After collecting the data from the two teachers to the directed items, the author interviewed both teachers for more detailed explanation for some points. In the interview, the author found out that none of the teachers ever received any training in teaching IELTS preparation before their involvement in preparing their students to sit IELTS test. The two teachers similarly mentioned that they learned IELTS from text books and IELTS eBooks downloaded from the Internet and used those sources to teach their students. However, both of them had also ever experienced sitting the IELTS test for advanced study purposes.

The author interviewed teacher 2 for her disapproval to question 4 and found out that teacher 2 felt the pressure when she was firstly asked to prepare some students to sit an IELTS test back in 2008 where she was not familiar with the test at all and never learned about it nor got any training to teach the test. Currently, she still gets the pressure but not significantly because she feels the pressure only when she gets very limited time preparation before teaching her classes. It was quite the same as Cheng's findings in which Cheng (1998, cited in Lewthwaite, M. 2007) also raised the comments from the English teachers who felt desperate in preparing students with a very limited time and therefore made them teach to the test.

Meanwhile, for the other question that this same teacher gave disapproval to, the teacher explained that from her observation in her classes, not all of the students were motivated to learn by practicing to answer the IELTS practice test. She mentioned that some of her students felt nervous and lost motivation to learn because they thought the IELTS test was very difficult to do. Yet, she added that those type of students were those who had low English level of proficiency.

Point 13-15 of the item questions above clearly asked for the teachers' confirmation whether they thought the IELTS test was a reliable tool in order to assess their English proficiency. It was obvious that the two teachers agreed upon the statements and therefore implied that they positively saw IELTS as a fair assessment tool to assess Indonesian's English proficiency. Moreover, their positive attitudes towards the test were even more clearly shown by their agreement to question no. 17 in which they approved the statement saying that the IELTS writing test helped their students to express their critical and logical thinking. In the interview to the question asking the teachers' opinion about the IELTS writing tasks, they sounded similar in saying that the writing tasks tested the students for their analytical, logical and critical thinking. These teachers' positive attitudes towards the IELTS test are very important because a teacher has a strong influence to their students' attitudes as Spratt (2005) claimed that the teacher was the initial motor of all attitudes and that the teacher held the wheel and got power to influence the students to have the positive or negative attitudes towards the test.

B. Discussion from the questionnaire given to the IELTS test takers

Table 2 shows the test takers' responses to 12 item questions given in order to find out their attitudes towards the IELTS test. From the data shown on the following table, it is obvious that most of the test takers have positive attitudes towards IELTS test in which more than 69 percent of the test takers positively responded to 10 questions and more than 90 percent of them agreed upon 4 statements confirming that, they believed that learning to the test helped raise their test score and that there was a reasonable correspondence between the skills needed for the IELTS writing test and the writing requirements at university level, perceived the test as compatible in terms of difficulty level to the Indonesian test takers' language ability, and believed that IELTS writing test helped them express their critical and logical thinking.

However, it was also very obvious that only very few of the students considered the test for not giving them pressure during the preparation until getting the score as shown on the table that almost 70 percent of them approved the statement demanding that the IELTS test caused unhelpful stress for them. This kind of test taking anxiety was a very common feeling as Estaji, M. & Tajeddin, Z. (2012) found that all IELTS test takers, regardless of their level of English proficiency and motivation to sit the test, had anxiety and around 37 % of their research participants felt worry about not being able to get good scores on the test. There was also another interesting finding in which the test takers equally responded positively and negatively to the question asking their opinion about whether a person with good English proficiency would do well at IELTS test without any preparation before sitting the test.

Table 2. The IELTS test takers' attitudes towards IELTS test

No	Test taker's attitudes items	IELTS Test Takers															
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	The test provides positive motivation for me to learn.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
2	The test brings about fear of the test results for me.	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N
3	The test causes unhelpful stress for	Y	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N

No	Test taker's attitudes items	IELTS Test Takers															
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
	me.																
4	I believe that the test improve my test taking strategies rather than my language proficiency.	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
5	I believe learning to the test helps to raise my test score.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
6	The test motivates me through its international credibility.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
7	I think that the test measures my language proficiency effectively.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
8	I perceive the test as fair for Indonesian students.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
9	I perceive the test as compatible in terms of difficulty level to the Indonesian test takers' language ability.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
10	I think if a student has high proficiency of English, he or she will be able to get high score without a test preparation course.	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	N	Y
11	I believe there is a reasonable correspondence between the skills needed for the IELTS writing test and the writing requirements at university level.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
12	The IELTS writing test helps me express my critical and logical thinking.	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Table 3. The percentages for the IELTS test takers' positive and negative attitudes towards IELTS test

No	Positive Attitudes	Negative Attitudes	Total test takers	Percentage for Positive Attitudes	Percentage for Negative Attitudes
1	14	2	16	87.5	12.5
2	5	11	16	31.25	68.75
3	12	4	16	75	25
4	11	5	16	68.75	31.25
5	15	1	16	93.75	6.25
6	14	2	16	87.5	12.5
7	13	3	16	81.25	18.75
8	14	2	16	87.5	12.5
9	15	1	16	93.75	6.25
10	8	8	16	50	50
11	15	1	16	93.75	6.25
12	15	1	16	93.75	6.25

In order to understand more of the test takers' perceptions towards the IELTS writing test, the author interviewed each of those test taker participants. The author asked them their opinion particularly for the writing tasks in an open ended questions.

The first questions were about the test takers' opinion about the writing tasks and their difficulties in doing the tasks. All participants, explicitly and implicitly, mentioned that the writing tasks were the most difficult part of the IELTS test, although they still considered the writing tasks were still relevant to assess their writing ability because the tasks themselves were complex in assessment components in which the test takers should bring in their critical, logical, and analytical thinking and knowledge of grammar as well. Some of the participants admitted that they found difficulties in doing the writing tasks because they were not familiar with the questions and test format, and considered that the 60 minute time was not enough to write two essays for the two writing tasks, while some others mentioned that they found difficulties in grammatical issues such as to choose the right Tenses, to make complex sentences, and to choose conjunction, and the rest mentioned about the issue of their having very limited vocabulary. Estaji, M. & Tajeddin, Z. (2012) also found that some of the students participating on their research mentioned how they had been disadvantaged by their very limited knowledge of the questions asked on the writing tasks. Despite the fact that the participants complained for their weaknesses in doing the writing tasks, they still valued the IELTS test as a very reliable tool for their language proficiency assessment. Similarly, in his research, Lewthwaite, M. (2007) found that none of the IELTS test takers felt that the exam was bad.

The author's second question was about the test takers' opinion for the knowledge, skill, or ability needed to answer the writing tasks excellently. All participants gave quite interesting answers and some were quite similar. Most of them mentioned that they should firstly be able to think critically towards the writing task questions and then organize their thoughts and ideas to give the best answer to the questions. Even some mentioned that they needed to make a mind map before starting writing. Ability to write effectively and grammatically correct came later after they already had clear and organized thoughts and ideas. The writing ability was referred to ability to present and argue creatively and critically. Last but not least, they also mentioned that they should have got a wide knowledge of many issues happening around the world as the writing questions were not predictable. From these opinions, the author understood that the test

takers' answers implied that all of them understood the assessment criteria applied to the writing tasks and the preparation they should have taken before sitting the test.

Further, the author asked about the impacts the test brought to them. The participants, again, mentioned some variety of answers yet quite similar one to the other. Most of them mentioned that the IELTS test made them more confident with their English abilities and so felt even more confident to study overseas. Some mentioned that the test motivated them to study English grammar more and more as it was their first fatal weakness and eventually their effort made their grammar much better. Some other also mentioned that taking the test encouraged them to practice their English as often as possible, especially practicing speaking English with their colleagues. Interestingly, almost all of them mentioned that the test trained them to think critically even in real life aside from doing IELTS writing practice tests.

Malallaha (2000) was convinced from his research that students with positive attitudes towards the test were usually those who achieved good scores at English test and they would perform better in IELTS test by the positive attitudes (Hosseini et al., 2013). All of these test takers were very successful in their IELTS test because they all could get the minimum score requirement to study overseas. It could be true that their positive attitudes towards the test trigger them to study seriously and in the final run enabled them to achieve good score. Yet, there was some downsides from this learning to test method because as Hosseini et al. (2013) mentioned that students who were motivated to learn to get good grades, would tend to learn only those materials that were presented on the text books practiced and they would be disadvantaged after the test because the materials they learned would not stay longer in their mind.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was found that the IELTS writing test promoted learning because the test takers were encouraged to read variety of books from grammar and writing books to common issues happening around the world. Interestingly, the writing test introduced the test takers to the essential skill needed for writing assignments at universities overseas though they were not exactly the same. Since almost all of the participants considered the IELTS test as a fair and reliable assessment to assess their English proficiency and that its writing test stimulated them to think critically, logically, and analytically, it could be concluded that there were more positive attitudes than negative towards the IELTS test.

Brown (cited in Hosseini et al., 2013) claimed that negative attitudes might discourage learners and therefore had less or no motivation in doing the test while positive attitudes facilitated learning progress and Hosseini et al. (2013) found that the Iranian students had positive attitudes towards the IELTS test and those who had positive attitudes usually got good IELTS test scores. In other words, preparation to sit a test will be much better if someone firstly possessed positive attitudes towards the test.

Lewthwaite, M. (2007) stated that the characteristics of an IELTS writing test that met the espoused goals of expressing critical thinking was when "the teachers and the students report the exam/course pushes critical and independent writing" (p. 4). Both parties of this study's participants; the IELTS teachers and test takers, similarly mentioned that the writing tasks tested them to think critically, logically, and analytically, therefore it could be concluded that the IELTS writing tasks really met the espoused goals of expressing critical thinking which would be very necessary in an academic environment where these test takers would badly need while studying overseas.

Therefore, it is highly recommended that anyone planning to sit an IELTS test to have firstly positive attitudes towards the test and practice thinking critically, logically, and coherently. These kinds of thinking will eventually succeed the test taker candidates in the productive skills tested; the IELTS speaking and writing tests.

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