An Investigation into the Construct Validity of an Academic Writing Test in English with Special Reference to the Academic Writing Module of the IELTS Test

Submitted by
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Abstract

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is the world’s leading high stakes test that assesses the English Language Proficiency of candidates who speak languages other than English and wish to gain entry into universities where English is the language of instruction. Recently, over 3000 institutions in the United States accepted the IELTS test to be an indicator of language proficiency (IELTS, 2012a). Because of this preference for the IELTS test, and its worldwide recognition, there has been an increase in the number of students who are taking the test every year. According to the IELTS website, more than 7000 institutions around the world trust the test results and, not surprisingly, more than 1.7 million candidates take the test every year in one of the 800 recognised test centres across 135 countries (IELTS, 2012a). These candidates include people who seek not only to obtain admission to universities, but also for immigration authorities, employers of certain companies and government agencies.

Acknowledging this popularity and importance to learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), this qualitative study has investigated the construct validity of the academic writing module in the IELTS test from the perspectives of the stakeholders (i.e. candidates, lecturers and markers). The aim was to understand why some Saudi students fail to cope with demands of the university despite the fact that they have achieved the minimum requirements in IELTS. In this study, data was collected in two phases in two different settings through open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured observations and semi-structured interviews. Phase I was carried out in the Department of English Language (DEL) at King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia, while Phase II was conducted in one university in the UK. The sample of the study included: 8 students, 6
university lecturers and one marker. In this study, data were analysed and coded into themes by using NVivo 9.

The results of this case study have shown that the stakeholders were doubtful about the issue of readiness of students, which is claimed by IELTS, and they wanted the test to be clearer about how the students were going to cope with university demands upon gaining entry. In addition, with respect to the content validity of the test, this study found that the tasks in the academic writing test to a large extent do not reflect the kind of tasks candidates are likely to encounter at university. Furthermore, this study pointed out that response validity, on the part of students who may not have understood the rubric of the tasks, is another important factor affecting the students’ performance. Also, the findings of this study suggested that scoring validity could have a significant effect on the students’ scores because of the inconsistency of markers during the scoring process as they may have sometimes failed to assign the students to their corresponding level of proficiency. Consequently, the study provided a set of implications as well as recommendations for future research.
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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................................. 4
Abbreviations .......................................................................................................................... 15

Chapter I ................................................................................................................................. 20

Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 20
1.1 Overview of the chapter .................................................................................................... 20
1.2 A Brief background to the IELTS Test ............................................................................ 20
1.2.1 The development of IELTS ....................................................................................... 23
1.2.1.1 The content and the format of the test .................................................................. 24
(a) The listening test ........................................................................................................... 25
(b) The reading test ............................................................................................................ 25
(c) The writing test ............................................................................................................. 26
(d) The speaking test ......................................................................................................... 27
1.2.1.2 Marking and assessment ...................................................................................... 27
1.3 Rationale for the study .................................................................................................... 29
1.4 Aim ................................................................................................................................ 32
1.5 Objectives ........................................................................................................................ 32
1.6 An overview of the whole dissertation .......................................................................... 33

Chapter II ................................................................................................................................. 36

Context of the study ............................................................................................................... 36
2.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 36
2.2 Brief background of the educational system in Saudi Arabia ........................................ 36
   a- Pre-School level (2 years) ............................................................................................. 37
   b- Elementary level (6 years) .......................................................................................... 37
   c- Intermediate level (3 years) ......................................................................................... 38
   d- Secondary level (3 years) ............................................................................................ 38
   - Regular secondary education ..................................................................................... 38
   - Vocational and technical secondary education ........................................................... 39
   e- Higher education ....................................................................................................... 39
2.2.1 The role of assessment in the Saudi Arabian educational system ................................ 41
   2.2.1.1 The General Aptitude Test .................................................................................. 42
   2.2.1.2 The General Aptitude Test for University Graduates ......................................... 42
   2.2.1.3 The General Aptitude Test in English ................................................................. 42
   2.2.1.4 The Achievement Test for Science Colleges (For Men) ..................................... 43
   2.2.1.5 The Aptitude and Achievement Test for Art Students (For Women) ................. 43
   2.2.1.6 The Aptitude and Achievement Test for Science Students .................................. 43
   2.2.1.7 The Standardised Test of English Proficiency .................................................... 44
2.3 Testing/assessment and/or Educational Organisations Offering Tests in Saudi Arabia ... 44
   2.3.1 The British Council in Saudi Arabia ....................................................................... 44
   2.3.2 The Educational Testing Service (ETS) tests in Saudi Arabia ............................... 45
   2.3.3 The Pearson English Tests in Saudi Arabia ............................................................. 45
   2.3.4 The Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) Test ............................... 45
2.4 The College of Arts ................................................................. 46
2.5 A brief description of IELTS candidates in Saudi Arabia .......................... 46
2.6 Conclusion ........................................................................... 48

Chapter III .................................................................................. 50

Literature Review ........................................................................ 50

3.1 Introduction ........................................................................... 50
3.2 Theoretical framework .......................................................... 51
  3.2.1 Writing as a cognitive practice .......................................... 53
    3.2.1.1 Models of L1 writing .................................................. 53
      (a) Hayes and Flower Model (1980) ..................................... 53
      (b) Bereiter and Scardamalia Model (1987) ......................... 55
    3.2.1.2 Composing processes of second language candidates ..... 57
    3.2.2 Writing as a social construction practice ....................... 61
    3.2.3 Writing as a social interaction activity ............................ 64
    3.2.4 Writing as a socio-cultural practice ............................... 66
3.3 A brief introduction to language testing .................................... 70
  3.3.1 Types of tests ................................................................. 71
    3.3.1.1 Placement tests ....................................................... 71
    3.3.1.2 Progress tests ......................................................... 72
    3.3.1.3 Achievement tests ................................................ 72
    3.3.1.4 Proficiency tests .................................................... 72
    3.3.1.5 Diagnostic tests .................................................... 73
3.4 Essential qualities in language tests ....................................... 74
  3.4.1 Validity ........................................................................... 74
    3.4.1.1 Types of validity ..................................................... 76
      3.4.1.1.1 Content validity ................................................ 79
        - Authenticity ............................................................ 80
      3.4.1.1.2 Response validity ............................................ 85
        (a) Macro-planning ...................................................... 86
        (b) Organisation ........................................................ 86
        (c) Micro-planning ..................................................... 87
        (d) Translation .......................................................... 87
        (e) Monitoring .......................................................... 87
        (f) Revising .............................................................. 88
      3.4.1.1.3 Scoring validity ................................................ 89
        (a) Criteria/rating scale ................................................. 90
          (1) Primary trait scoring ............................................ 90
          (2) Holistic scoring .................................................. 92
          (3) Analytic scoring ............................................... 93
        - Empirical studies on the application of rating scales ........ 96
          (b) Rater training ....................................................... 99
3.5 Empirical studies on IELTS ...................................................... 102
  3.5.1 Predictive studies on IELTS as a preparation to academic study .......... 102
  3.5.2 Studies on tasks design for IELTS academic writing ................. 104
  3.5.3 Studies on assessment of IELTS academic writing tasks ............ 109
  3.5.4 Impact and washback studies on IELTS and IELTS preparation courses .. 110
3.6 Research Questions .............................................................. 116
Chapter IV
Methodology

3.7 Summary and Conclusion

Chapter V
Findings

5.1 Introduction

5.2 Response validity question

5.2.1 Pre-writing Test Questionnaire

5.2.2 Post-writing Test Questionnaire

5.2.2.1 Time allotment
Chapter VI

Discussion

6.1 Introduction

6.2 The key findings of the study

6.2.1 Phase I

6.2.1.1 Key findings for response validity question

6.2.1.2 Key findings for scoring validity question

6.2.2 Phase II

6.2.2.1 Key findings for content validity question

6.3 The stakeholders’ perceptions about the test

6.3.1 The students’ perceptions of the value of the test

6.3.2 The stakeholders’ perceptions of their test awareness
6.3.3 Stakeholders’ doubts about IELTS correspondence to university tasks .... 250
6.3.4 Stakeholders’ doubts about IELTS as a measure ........................................ 255
6.4 The students’ engagement with the IELTS writing test .................................... 263
  6.4.1 The students’ perceptions of test difficulty and duration ............................ 263
  6.4.2 The students’ perceptions of test prompts and instructions ......................... 266
  6.4.3 The perceived test taking (Students) and scoring strategies (Markers) ........ 268
  6.4.4 Expertise in second language (L2) writing .............................................. 273
6.5 The connection between perceptions and engagement ..................................... 274
  6.5.1 Change of perspectives ............................................................................ 274
6.6 Summary of the chapter ................................................................................. 277

Chapter VII ............................................................................................................ 281

Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 281

  7.1 Introduction .................................................................................................... 281
  7.2 Summary of the study .................................................................................... 281
    7.2.1 The stakeholders’ perceptions about the mismatch between IELTS tasks and university tasks .............................................................. 282
    7.2.2 Stakeholders’ doubts about IELTS as a measure ..................................... 284
    7.2.3 Tracking the change of perspectives ......................................................... 287
    7.3 Significance of the study ............................................................................. 288
    7.4 Limitations of the study .............................................................................. 290
    7.5 Implications of the study ............................................................................. 291
    7.5.1 Stakeholders ............................................................................................ 291
    7.5.2 Test providers .......................................................................................... 293
    7.5.3 Methodological implications of the study ................................................. 295
    7.6 Recommendations for future research ....................................................... 296
    7.7 Final conclusion to the study .................................................................... 298

References ............................................................................................................ 300

Appendices ........................................................................................................... 335

Appendix I ............................................................................................................ 336

Data Collection Tools & Key Findings Of The Study ........................................... 336

  Phase I ................................................................................................................ 336
    IELTS Awareness Form for Candidates (Pre-Writing Test Phase I ) ............... 336
    IELTS Awareness Form for Candidates (Post-Writing Test Phase I ) ............. 338
    IELTS Post-Writing Test Interview (Candidates) ............................................. 340
    IELTS Questionnaire for Markers .................................................................. 342
  Phase II ............................................................................................................... 344
    IELTS Tasks and University Tasks Form for Candidates (Phase II)............... 344
    Interview Questions for Candidates .............................................................. 345
    Interview Questions for Lecturers ................................................................. 346
    Sample of a transcription of one interview .................................................... 347
    Key Findings (according to data collection tools) ......................................... 352
    Timeframe of Research ................................................................................. 361
    Consent Form .................................................................................................. 362

Appendix II .......................................................................................................... 363

IELTS Tasks & Scoring Guides ............................................................................ 363

  Sample of IELTS Writing Task 1 .................................................................... 363
List of Tables

Table 1: History of the IELTS Test ................................................................. 22
Table 2: IELTS Band Scores ........................................................................ 28
Table 3: The educational ladder in Saudi Arabia ......................................... 40
Table 4: Summary of empirical research on writing processes of L2 learners........ 61
Table 5: Task Characteristics .................................................................... 82
Table 6: A comparison of holistic & analytic scales on 6 qualities of test usefulness .... 94
Table 7: Tasks and Skills in IELTS versus those in Research Degrees ............ 106
Table 8: Summary of research paradigm (ontology, epistemology & methodology), design & methods ................................................................. 134
Table 9: Participants, context of the study, time and duration ....................... 138
Table 10: Framework of the study ................................................................ 154
Table 11: An overview of questions, participants and methods ...................... 156
Table 12: Personal information, prospective course and place of study ............ 165
Table 13: Students’ knowledge of the test .................................................... 169
Table 14: Advantages and Disadvantages of the IELTS test ......................... 181
Table 15: Summary of the students’ views on the similarities and differences between IELTS tasks and University tasks ............................................. 216
List of Figures

Figure 1: Cognitive validity parameters in writing .....................................................86
Figure 2: Interactions in performance assessment of speaking skills .........................99

List of Diagrams

Diagram 1: Test Structure ..........................................................................................24
Diagram 2: Theoretical Framework of the Study .......................................................52