

**AN INVESTIGATION OF IELTS PREPARATION COURSES FOR
UNIVERSITY STUDY: DEVELOPMENT OF WRITTEN AND
VERBAL ARGUMENTATIVE TEXTS**

Sharif Moghaddam & Peter Mickan, Saarbrücken, Scholars' Press, 2014 (636 pp) ISBN
978-3-639-66091-3

Reviewed by: Sharif Moghaddam, I. Azad University, Tehran, Iran

1. INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of students whose first language is not English, who usually come from diverse academic backgrounds which may differ from that of western academic conventions, apply to study in English-speaking universities. They are required to show evidence of an appropriate level of proficiency in the English language, for example by sitting for IELTS as a preferred test, for entry into English-speaking universities. Despite their real academic potentials, a number of such students with the required IELTS band scores experience communication problems in meeting academic requirements in their initial tertiary studies which lead to their underachievement. There has been little research in order to investigate into the underpinning reasons for such students' under-achievement and to provide insights into such problems. This book - *An Investigation of IELTS Preparation Courses for University Study: Development of Written and Verbal Argumentative Texts*, therefore, provides insights into literacies which the students experience as preparation for IELTS. The data discussed in this book contribute to the body of knowledge about an extent of opportunities provided for experiencing literacy in terms of producing both written and verbal argumentative texts as preparation for the IELTS academic examination. Also, the data have significant implications for IELTS stakeholders.

The book is based on an ethnographic case study of an academic preparation course for university study over a period of five months. It consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 - Introduction and Background - provides an outline of the whole book. It situates the study and is followed by background and rationale. It introduces aims and objectives, the focus and the research questions of the study. It also discusses some limitations and emergent issues. Chapter 2 provides information about the IELTS, its background and studies on its related issues in specific. The review of the literature provides readers with an opportunity to conceptualize the important IELTS related issues, and to gain the relevant insights needed to realize the knowledge gap which justifies the research. Chapter 3 is devoted to the theoretical conceptualization which forms the foundation of the study. It also assists readers in establishing a theoretical framework and a methodological focus. It considers different aspects of literacy and language learning and communities of practice. Chapter 4 outlines frameworks for data collection and data analysis. It discusses the reasons for adopting a qualitative approach with a classroom ethnographic method. This chapter also evaluates the suitability of discourse analysis, situated learning, IRF pattern, and the systemic functional paradigm of language to analyse the data.

Chapter 5 reviews the plans, programs, preliminary measures and logistics. The research method, site, participants, ethical issues and selection of theoretical frameworks for data analysis are discussed in detail. Chapters 6 and 7 provide analyses and interpretations of the data. In these chapters suggestions about selecting writing and speaking as the focus for a more detailed analysis are put forward. A detailed analysis of IELTS expected academic argumentative writing tasks and literacy events such as small group discussions, and verbal report is undertaken in these chapters. Finally, chapter 8 summarizes the study, discusses the findings of the investigation, responds to the research questions, puts forward suggestions for future research and concludes this book.

Insight has been provided about limitations of the study. For example, the aim of the study has been identification and analysis of aspects of literacy development relevant to IELTS argumentative (written and verbal) texts. Another limiting factor has been analysis of the data and interpretation which has considered small group discussions and verbal report as part of speaking skills, and writing task 2 as part of writing skills. A further factor has been investigation and assessment of the learning resources as part of the learning opportunities which has fallen beyond the scope of the study.

Importantly, the book provides IELTS stakeholders with consciousness raising about the extent of linguistic knowledge that the candidates experience in an IELTS academic preparation course in order to obtain their required IELTS band scores to enter an English-medium university. Also, it provides information about the instructions in the research which included consciousness raising about the IELTS, the way it works, its expectations and processes of preparing for the examination, and introducing and providing relevant discourses for engagement in written and verbal argumentative tasks.

Based on the findings of the study, evidence has been provided, and it has been argued that the design of the IELTS test may need change in a way that in addition to increasing English proficiency, candidates might practise adaptation and adoption of the academic culture before they commence their university study. It discusses that change in the IELTS would be influenced by a positive 'washback' effect. The design of the test and its descriptors must motivate candidates to prepare themselves in accordance with the expectations of English-medium university study, for example in terms of critical reading and writing, at least at commencement level.

Accordingly, it has been suggested that improving test types based on disciplinary studies rather than on a general academic model would be useful both for candidates and recruiting universities. In support, it points out that the benefit for candidates is their focused and informative preparation towards subject matter which faces them as part of their tertiary education. The usefulness for the receiving universities would lie in their awareness of the possible extent of the candidates' understanding, adaptation and adoption of the English-medium academic culture.

Possible changes to the IELTS as suggested are: (a) improving the design of the test in terms of the four macro skills based on the academic literacies expected of students in English-medium academic culture in order to attune the candidates to the conventions of this culture, (b) improving the test design in a way to encourage the candidates to prepare for the examination typically through collaborative learning based on research and critical thinking perspectives, and (c) altering the test types towards those that are more course specific, for example university courses can be categorized into four major strands; Agricultural, Medical, Industrial and Humanities related courses.

It concludes that, this shift in the design of the test and the descriptors could (a) assist English-medium universities achieve the desired literacy outcomes in their IELTS academic preparation programs, (b) address current criticisms about such programs, and (c) assist English language professionals and instructors to develop greater insights and understanding of IELTS.

Also, of significance is a talk about the challenges that non-native speaking students face when they commence their study at English-speaking universities. For example, it says that when such students commence their tertiary education at English-medium universities they encounter two complex and challenging circumstances. The first challenge is their adaptation to and adoption of the new academic culture and its requirements. Thus, such students are likely to encounter difficulties in producing different texts of varied nature in accordance with the academic requirements, with which they may be unfamiliar. Secondly, they struggle with their use of English language in trying to cope with the academic literacy practices as recognized by academic conventions. Technically, this means that candidates' repertoires of literacy practices for obtaining IELTS band scores as a language proficiency pre-requisite might seem insufficient, or in need of significant development.

Nevertheless, suggestions are provided for additional empirical studies to inquire into what underlies non-native speaking students' difficulty and possible failure in doing academic courses in English-speaking universities. Also, it suggests further research into literacy practices in preparation programs for IELTS which can effectively lead candidates to adaptation and adoption of English-medium academic culture.

Research in this area could result in identifying specific patterns of literacy which closely relate to expectations and requirements of English-medium academic culture. Such a study would address the question: "What is the extent of the association between literacy practices provided in IELTS academic preparation courses in terms of the four skills and current academic literacy practices in different disciplines in English-medium universities?"

This area of research could require researchers to identify and describe the extent of candidates' preparedness in using English authentically and meaningfully in academic contexts.

Finally, the book draws attentions to the importance of students' preparation for IELTS in formal classes which contribute significantly to successful achievement of the desired band scores for entry into English-speaking universities. From the data it has been evident that candidates obtained significant information about the nature and features of IELTS, and they acquired a range of linguistic resources in terms of composing argumentative texts, which are also useful for university study. Also, as evidence, some examples of the result papers of the participants in the research, who went through the preparation course and sat for the official IELTS examination, appear at the end of this valuable book.