

IELTS as a Predictor of Academic Language Performance

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IELTS as a Predictor of Academic Language Performance

- Full report due to appear in IELTS Research Report, Volume 7
- Purpose of the study was to examine the predictive validity of IELTS
- Various previous studies that have taken differing forms and different results

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IELTS as a Predictor of Academic Language Performance

- Most predictive studies suffer from the intrusion of other variables that influence academic outcomes.
- This study sought to eliminate the variables and focus on the language
- i.e., the extent to which IELTS predicted the students' academic language behaviour when they were in their course and the adequacy of their language for course-related tasks

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IELTS as a Predictor of Academic Language Performance

The study aimed to investigate 3 key questions:

- Can IELTS scores predict language behaviour in the university context?
- Is that behaviour adequate for the course's linguistic demands?
- Are there implications for changing entry levels to different courses?

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Participants

- 28 NESB students from two campuses (University of Melbourne/Melbourne University Private) – first six months of study.
- 16 Female, 12 male.
- Broad age range: 19-35, average 25.5 years
- Varied backgrounds: China, Taiwan, Iran, Botswana, Malaysia, Japan, Indonesia, Korea & Thailand.
- Most of Asian origin

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Participants

- Course level from undergraduate Yr1 to PhD.
- 8 students in undergraduate programs, 10 in Graduate Certificates, 4 in Graduate Diplomas, 2 in Ph.D. programs
- Entry scores from 5.0 overall to 8.0 overall, mean 6.5
- Macroskills ranged from 4.5 to 9

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Methodology

Aim: to compare the students' IELTS scores (and their implied language behaviour) with the students' language behaviour in their academic activities as observed by the researchers, as self-evaluated, and as perceived by their lecturers/tutors.

A variety of instruments and procedures was used for this purpose.

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Methodology

IELTS Scores:

Scores used for entry purposes. Four students lacked these and were given "mock" IELTS tests by trained IELTS assessor.

Self-Evaluation:

Short behavioural scale mirroring IELTS levels 4 to 9, numbered a to f. Based on publicly available scale.

Each student self-rated their four skills.

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Self-evaluation comparison

| Self-Evaluation Questionnaire - Listening | IELTS Band Descriptors (public) |
|---|---|
| <p>b. I understand when I am participating in simple conversations with native speakers, both face-to-face and on the telephone, if they speak slowly. I have difficulty understanding when they talk about unfamiliar subjects. In class, I can normally get the main idea of what native speakers saying, but sometimes they speak too quickly. I have difficulty understanding lectures.</p> | <p>5 Modest User Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.</p> |
| <p>f. I understand spoken English just as well as similarly educated native speakers do. I can understand the details of lectures, jokes and complex abstract discussions and arguments. Unfamiliar accents do not present any more problem for me than they would for a native speaker.</p> | <p>9 Expert User Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.</p> |



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Methodology

- Semi-Structured Student Interviews:**
All students interviewed to elicit the extent to which they were coping.
- Semi-Structured Lecturer Interviews:**
Lecturers/tutors interviewed to elicit their views on how each student was coping.

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Methodology

Researcher Observations:

- The researchers observed all students in a variety of class types.
- Student language behaviour noted on observation charts, spoken language recorded for transcription and analysis, written materials (lecture notes, assignments etc) also collected for analysis.

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Methodology

- All the data collected was analysed and rated against language behaviour descriptors developed and based on publicly available IELTS Overall Bandscale and also informed by the individual Speaking & Writing scales.
- Focus on key features of academic language behaviour.
- Used as a rating scale to measure the students' academic language performance to compare with their IELTS scores
- 5 levels (IELTS 5.0 to 9.0)


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Procedures

- Recruitment and data collection in Semester 1, 2005
- Self evaluation completed early in the semester
- Observation in different class contexts included researcher note-taking, audio-recording of student language, videorecording of some classes
- All recordings were transcribed
- Written tasks and lecture notes were collected
- Interviews conducted in second half of semester
- Researchers unaware of student IELTS scores

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Data Analysis

- Data entered into 2 databanks – individual & collective.
- Self-evaluations were re-rated with an IELTS-equivalent score. 
- Interview responses were entered into both databanks.
- All transcripts were analysed individually and rated against the language proficiency descriptors for each macroskill.
- Information from observation notes was added to individual student databases.

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Results

Research Question 1: *To what extent is the language behaviour implied by IELTS scores reflected in language produced by students in academic context?*

Based on:

- Individual student self-evaluations
- Researcher evaluations of student language

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Results: Question 1

1. Individual student self-evaluations

- **Mean overall self-rating 6.43**
- **Mean overall IELTS scores 6.45**
- 25% equal to IELTS scores (overall)
- 36% higher than IELTS scores (overall)
- 39% lower than IELTS scores (overall)
- Variation: -2 bands to +2 bands (individual)

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Results: Question 1 Student self-evaluations

| Area of competency | Maximum variation below IELTS score | Maximum variation above IELTS score | Mean Difference (IELTS minus self rating) | Standard Deviation (IELTS minus self rating) |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Global | -1.0 | +1.5 | 0.04 | 0.74 |
| Reading | -2.0 | +2.0 | -0.23 | 1.14 |
| Writing | -2.0 | +2.0 | -0.05 | 0.95 |
| Listening | -2.0 | +1.5 | 0.23 | 1.02 |
| Speaking | -2.0 | +1.0 | 0.18 | 1.02 |

Student self-analysis of language proficiency in comparison to IELTS scores (N=28)

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Student self-analysis of language proficiency in comparison to IELTS scores (N=28)

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Results: Question 1

2. Researcher evaluations of student language

- 25 students of the 28 students (89.3%) were rated at a level equal to or exceeding their overall IELTS score.
- 3 students rated slightly lower than their overall IELTS score.
- **Mean researcher overall rating 6.46**
- **Mean overall IELTS score 6.45**
- Variation: -1.0 band to +0.5 band

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Researcher evaluations of student language

| Area of competency | Maximum variation below IELTS score | Maximum variation above IELTS score | Median Rating | Mean difference (IELTS minus Researcher Rating) | Standard Deviation (IELTS minus Researcher Rating) |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------|---|--|
| Global | -0.5 | 0.5 | 6.5 | 0.0 | 0.3 |
| Writing | -0.5 | 1.0 | 6.5 | -0.1 | 0.4 |
| Listening | -0.5 | 0 | 6.75 | 0.1 | 0.4 |
| Speaking | -0.5 | 1.0 | 6.5 | -0.2 | 0.5 |

Researcher analyses of language proficiency in comparison to IELTS scores (N=28)

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Findings: Question 1

Research Question 1: *To what extent is the language behaviour implied by IELTS scores reflected in language produced by students in academic context?*

- IELTS scores can quite accurately predict students' language behaviour in the first six months of their study program.
- Individuals might perceive their language levels quite differently to those implied by their IELTS test results.

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Results

Research question 2: *To what extent is the language behaviour observed adequate for the study program being undertaken by the student?*

Based on:

- Interviews with students
- Interviews with academic staff
- Researcher observations

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Results: Question 2

1. Interviews with Students

- No clear correlation between IELTS scores and reported experiences using English in an academic context.
- No clear relationship between course of study and perceptions of language adequacy.
- Most student respondents (71%) believed their language was either good enough or completely adequate for their studies.
- Greatest difficulties related to listening comprehension (speed, accent, colloquialisms), writing tasks, reading academic texts and interacting with native English-speaking peers.

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Results: Question 2

2. Interviews with academic staff

- Greatest difficulties related to comprehensibility, writing tasks, class participation, ability to seek clarification of meaning.
- Student confidence improving over time.
- 68% of students considered to be performing adequately or well; 32% having difficulties.
- 79% considered to have adequate language; 21% in doubt.
- Students considered to have adequate language also had highest IELTS scores.

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Results: Question 2

3. Researcher Observations

- Observations of each student added to individual profiles
- 71.4% considered to have language that was adequate; 14.3% not very adequate; 14.3% completely inadequate.

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Results: Question 2

| Source | Rating of adequacy | Number of students with each rating | % of group | Mean IELTS score | Standard deviation of IELTS score |
|------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Lecturer | Not very adequate | 7.5 | 26.8% | 5.8 | 0.6 |
| | Reasonably adequate | 14.5 | 51.8% | 6.5 | 0.6 |
| | Completely adequate | 6 | 21.4% | 7.1 | 0.6 |
| Researcher | Completely inadequate | 4 | 14.3% | 5.4 | 0.3 |
| | Not very adequate | 4 | 14.3% | 6.1 | 0.5 |
| | Reasonably adequate | 14 | 50% | 6.5 | 0.5 |
| | Completely adequate | 6 | 21.4% | 7.2 | 0.6 |
| Student | Not very adequate | 8 | 28.6% | 6.0 | 0.7 |
| | Reasonably adequate | 17 | 60.7% | 6.4 | 0.6 |
| | Completely adequate | 3 | 10.7% | 7.7 | 0.3 |

Mean (and standard deviation) of IELTS scores by Ratings of Adequacy of English from three different sources (Lecturers, Researcher/observers and Students).

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Findings: Question 2

| Faculty | Entry level | Inadequate Language | | Adequate Language | |
|--|-------------|--------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | | Participant | Proficiency level | Participant | Proficiency level |
| Architecture | 6.5 | | | 18 28 25 | 6.5 6.5 6.5 |
| Arts (Applied Language Studies) | 5.5 | 3 8 11 12 17 19 | 5.0 5.5 5.5 5.5 5.5 6.5 | 1 4 5 6 13 14 15 20 | 6.5 6.0 6.5 6.5 5.5 6.0 6.5 6.5 |
| Education | 7.0 | | | 21 23 24 | 7.0 7.0 7.5 |
| (Medical) Science | 6.5 | 22 27 | 6.5 6.0 | 2 7 9 10 16 26 | 7.5 7.5 7.5 8.0 6.5 6.5 |

Adequacy of student language for individual faculties

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Findings: Question 2

Research Question 2: *To what extent is the language behaviour observed adequate for the study program being undertaken by the student?*

- Most students' language was adequate for their course of study.
- Almost one-third of the group had a level of proficiency that was, in some respects, inadequate for their studies.
- All students considered to have inadequate language were enrolled in either Arts (Applied Language Studies) or Medical Science disciplines.
- Students whose language was inadequate all had proficiency levels below IELTS recommendations.

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IELTS Recommends:

| Band | Linguistically demanding academic courses, e.g. Medicine, Law, Linguistics, Journalism, Library Studies | Linguistically less demanding academic courses, e.g. Agriculture, Pure Mathematics, Technology, Computer-based work, Telecommunications |
|---------|---|---|
| 9.0-7.5 | Acceptable | Acceptable |
| 7.0 | Probably acceptable | Acceptable |
| 6.5 | English study needed | Probably acceptable |
| 6.0 | English study needed | English study needed |
| 5.5 | English study needed | English study needed |

IELTS guidance on acceptable language proficiency levels for different academic courses

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Results

Research question 3: *Are there any implications for raising or lowering the IELTS scores for particular courses?*

- Arts and Health Sciences (Physiotherapy, Dentistry, Medicine) provided greatest challenge;
- Entry level to both courses is below IELTS recommended level.
- Students in other courses were coping at set entry levels.
- Entry level to other courses is set at a level IELTS states is 'probably acceptable'.

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Summary of Findings

- IELTS test results can be relied on to broadly predict student language behaviour in an academic context;
- Different courses have different language demands;
- Confidence, cultural factors, academic skills and language preparation contribute to performance;
- On-going language support and language development is needed.

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The different assisted passage agreements has been signed then allow the Italy, west Germany, Austria and Greece to come and match the aim of increase Australia population. Allow to come is no means they well be treat as the same as the whites, there is a great example shows the British migrants well be welfare benefit for come to Australia and they will be take 6 month to become a permitted resident, and take 3 year to become Australia citizen, compare to the non-British or non- Europeans they have to take about 15 year residence at Australia and then are permitted to apply for citizenship. Also the Australians can bring non-European wife or husband, what in their mind is this kind of marriage will qualified the non-Europeans as well as this is a safe and fast way to admitted for permanent residence.

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Conclusion

- Desirable to replicate the study with larger numbers.
- IELTS scores can broadly predict student language behaviour in academic context.
- Validity of IELTS results seems to be relatively good.
- Students are aware of their language proficiency.
- Desirable for entry procedures to give more careful thought to the actual language demands of courses.
- Students with proficiency levels below those recommended by IELTS are likely to struggle in some situations.
- IELTS 6, commonly specified for entry to undergraduate courses, is not likely to be adequate.

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Conclusion

- On-going language development and support are essential, especially for students whose proficiency is below IELTS 7.
- There are implications for the raising of entry scores to some courses, especially those that are linguistically demanding.
- Further study needed of the link between entry paths and language difficulties
- A surprising number of students had entered without having their English proficiency assessed.
- Consequently, some students' potential language deficiencies are not addressed.
- Also, IELTS is sometimes blamed when the real problem has been the failure to test at all.

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