

The Effect of Material Preparation on Iranian EFL Learners' IELTS Band Score: A Case of Interchange Series vs. Iran Language Institute books

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to investigate the effect of material preparation on the Iranian EFL learners' IELTS band scores. To this end, 60 EFL learners were randomly selected to participate in a standard sample of the IELTS exam. Based on the material preparation they had practiced, they were divided into two groups: one group had practiced Interchange series and the other group had practiced Iran Language Institute (ILI) books. Interchange books were considered as authentic materials developed by native English speaking experts and ILI books as materials developed by Iranian non-native English speaking experts. After analyzing the data, the findings indicated that those Iranian EFL Learners who had practiced English through ILI books surpassed their peers who had practiced English through interchange books in IELTS band scores. Therefore, it can be concluded that ILI books, designed and developed based on a variety of English authentic materials by Iranian language experts, can improve Iranian EFL learners' IELTS performance better than Interchange books.

Key term: IELTS, Iran Language Institute books, Interchange books, EFL learners

Introduction

IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is one of the most recognized and popular standardized English proficiency tests. IELTS, which is now jointly administered by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), The British Council,

and the IDP Education Australia, is required for anyone who wishes to pursue his education in an English speaking country, as part of the admission process, or anyone who desires to migrate to or work in such countries (Rasti, 2009). Hughes et al. (1988) believe that IELTS has an innovative format that reflects changes in language learning and teaching theory and developments in language testing. According to Read and Hays (2003), “a related phenomenon has been the development of courses specifically to prepare students to take the test. IELTS preparation has expanded rapidly as an important component of English programs not only in the language centers of the tertiary institutions but also in private language schools” (p. 155). The aim of this study is to gain insights into the nature of pedagogy, classroom practice and material development used to prepare candidates for IELTS Tests and explores the influence of material preparation on EFL Learners’ performance on the IELTS exam.

Methodology

Participants

Participants of the study were 60 Iranian EFL learners enrolled in IELTS preparation courses in language centers in Iran. Based on the materials taught in the course, they were divided into two groups: one group had practiced Interchange series and the other group had practiced Iran Language Institute (ILI) books. All of the learners were adult females. The proficiency level of learners was considered upper-intermediate, which included the learners who were studying the book 4 of Interchange series (i.e. green book) and the last book of ILI.

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Materials

ILI Series

The ILI Series, a three-level course, has primarily been designed to satisfy the needs of the ILI students and is closely linked to the ILI teaching procedure. The materials used in these books are selected from a variety of authentic sources, designed and developed by Iranian language experts, with the focus on higher levels is mostly on grammar and vocabulary. The different parts of the books are meant to meet the objectives of the course. The Student's Book is accompanied by a workbook to provide the learners with the opportunity to practice and use the materials they have learned in the classroom.

Interchange Series

The Interchange books are divided into 4 levels and the publisher is the University of Cambridge. These books are one of many successful English series for teaching adults. They follow a communicative method, including extra exercises and opportunities to improve listening and speaking. Accuracy and fluency are focused on in this series. They target American English and state that English is the main language for communication. The materials do not relate just to one country, culture or region.

IELTS test

IELTS, the International English Language Testing System, is designed to assess the language ability of candidates who need to study or work where English is the language of communication. IELTS is jointly managed by the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL), British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia. IELTS conforms to the highest international standards of language assessment. It covers the four language skills: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. IELTS is recognized by universities and employers in many countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA. It is also recognized by professional bodies, immigration authorities, and other government agencies.

IELTS is available in two formats: Academic and General Training. The Academic Reading and Writing Modules assess whether a candidate is ready to study or train in the medium of English at an undergraduate or postgraduate level. Admission to undergraduate and postgraduate courses is based on the results of these Modules. The General Training Reading and Writing Modules are not designed to test the full range of formal language skills required for academic purposes but emphasize basic Survival skills in a broad social and educational context. General Training is suitable for candidates who are going to English-speaking countries to complete their secondary education, to undertake Work experience or training programmes not at degree level, or for immigration purposes to Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

Research Design and Procedure

This research was implemented on the basis of an *ex post facto* design. The reasons for choosing such a design are as follows:

1. There was no control over the manipulation of the independent variables;

2. No treatment was given to the subjects;

3. The present researcher in this study required looking for some degree of relationship between the variables rather than a cause and effect relationship.

In IELTS exam, candidates were tested in listening, reading, writing and speaking. All candidates took the same Listening and Speaking Modules. There was a choice between Academic and General Training in the Reading and Writing Modules. The tests were designed to cover the full range of ability from non-user to expert user. The first three modules: Listening, Reading, and Writing – had to be completed in one day. There was no break between the modules. The Speaking Module might be taken, at the discretion of the test center, in the period seven days before or after the other modules. A computerized version of IELTS Listening, Reading and Writing Modules (CBIELTS) was available at the selected language centers, but all centers will continue to offer a paper-based version of IELTS and candidates were given the choice of the medium in which they wish to take the test.

In this step, we held the IELTS exam; it had 4 parts. Listening, Reading and Writing parts were held on the same day. The exam started with the Listening part, followed by Reading. It should be mentioned that the selected Reading was General training, with the allowed time being 1 hour and the number of questions 40. The answers were written on an answer sheet.

The last part was writing with a General training module. The allotted time was also 1 hour. It had two tasks. In task 1, the students were not allowed to spend more than 20 minutes on, they were asked to write a letter according to the instruction and the issue. In task 2, 40 minutes were deemed necessary.

In the speaking part, all 60 EFL learners were interviewed separately. The interview was recorded for evaluation afterward. In the speaking part, students were invited to the office of the institute, one by one. The researcher interviewed them and their voices were recorded. To observe ethical issues, learners were informed that their voices were being recorded for the purpose of both the test and the research study.

How was the IELTS evaluated?

To interpret the results, we first referred to the Listening and Reading parts. According to the IELTS instructions provided on its website, interpreting should be done based on the following tables:

Table 1.

Listening Test – Raw Score Conversion

Raw Score	Band Score	Raw Score	Band Score
39-40	9	18-22	5.5
37-38	8.5	16-17	5
35-36	8	13-15	4.5
32-34	7.5	11-12	4
30-31	7	8-10	3.5
26-29	6.5	6-7	3
23-25	6	4-5	2.5

Table 2.

Academic Reading Test – Raw Score Conversion

Raw Score	Band Score	Raw Score	Band Score
39-40	9	19-22	5.5
37-38	8.5	15-18	5
35-36	8	13-14	4.5
33-34	7.5	10-12	4
30-32	7	8-9	3.5
27-29	6.5	6-7	3
23-26	6	4-5	2.5

Table 3.

General Reading Test – Raw Score Conversion

Raw Score	Band Score	Raw Score	Band Score
40	9	27-29	5.5
39	8.5	23-26	5
37-38	8	19-22	4.5
36	7.5	15-18	4
34-35	7	12-14	3.5
32-33	6.5	9-11	3
30-31	6	6-8	2.5

For example, those who answered 8 to 10 questions were given 4 as a band score and so on. In the General Reading test, the conversion of the raw score into band score was done in

the same as the previous part. Evaluating writing and Reading is somewhat subjective; therefore, three raters cooperated to interpret the results. For the writing part, several criteria were selected, such as:

- Task Achievement
- Coherence and cohesion
- Lexical resource
- Grammatical Range and accuracy

All the 60 written exercises were corrected and scored by three raters. Each rater gave one score. Then, the band score was based on the means of the three raters' scores. Therefore, the achieved score was recognized as the score of each student in the Writing part.

Similar to Writing, the Speaking part also was scored by raters, in the same way we mentioned before, but the required criteria were:

- Fluency and coherence
- Lexical resource
- Grammatical range and accuracy
- Pronunciation

In speaking, the interview consisted of 3 parts. In part 1, the interviewer asked the candidate to introduce herself. Then, she asked her some questions, for which 4 to 5 minutes were acceptable to answer. In the second part, the candidate had 3-4 minutes to present a monolog and, in the third part, a two-way discussion was performed, the required time of which consisted of 4-5 minutes.

How was the overall band score calculated?

Band scores were given from 0-9. These IELTS scores were given for each section of the exam: Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Reading. These were then added together to give an overall band score. They can be given a half band score, as well, so scores were rounded up to whole or half bands. Scores ending in 0.25 were rounded up to the nearest half band, and scores of 0.75 were rounded up the nearest whole band. For example:

Table 4.
Overall band score calculation

Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall Band
6.5	6.0	5.5	7.0	6.5

Table 5.
Overall band score calculation

Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall Band
5.0	6.0	5.5	6.0	5.5

Band Descriptors

Table 6.

The overall IELTS scores and descriptors are illustrated below:

Band	Band Descriptors Descriptor
9	Expert user Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.
8	Very good user Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies. Misunderstandings occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation as well.
7	Good user Has fully operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriateness and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understandings detailed reasoning.
6	Competent user Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriateness and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
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.
4	Limited user Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has a frequent problem in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3	Extremely limited user Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2	Intermittent user No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formula in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty in understanding spoken and written English.
1	Non user Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0	Did not attempt the test No assessable information provided.

Data analysis

The hypothesis of this research

The study of ILI books comparing to Interchange books does not have meaningful impact on Iranian EFI learners' band scores on the IELTS exam.

Descriptive statistic of the first hypothesis

The following Table provides descriptive statistics on Mean, Median, Variance, std. Deviation, Minimum, and Maximum score, Range, Skewness and kurtosis of variables.

Table 7.
Descriptive Statistics

		Statistic	Std. Error
Overall	Mean	4.150	.1939
	Median	4.250	
	Variance	2.257	
	Std. Deviation	1.5023	
	Minimum	2.0	
	Maximum	6.5	
	Range	4.5	
	Skewness	-.063	.309
	Kurtosis	-1.651	.608

According to Table 7., Mean (4/15), Median (4/25), std. Deviation (1/502), Minimum score (2), Maximum score (6/5), Range (4/5), Skewness (-0/063) and the kurtosis of their overalls' variable is reported as (-1/651).

The normality test of hypothesis variable

At first to examine the assumption of Iranian EFI band score normality, we performed Kolmogorov, Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests and summarized the result in the following Table:

Table 8.
Normality Test

Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Overall	.216	60	.000	.862	60	.000
1						

The reported result in the chart of normality test shows that according to the small amount of meaningful level (sig= .000) for Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk the normality assumption of IELTS learners variable was rejected. Therefore, to examine the meaningful effect of ILI books and Interchange books on the learners' performance in IELTS exam, the researcher used Non-parametric Mann-Whitney test. The researcher also gave the histogram diagram to show the lack of normality of this variable intuitively. The following histogram chart shows the abnormality of this variable (IELTS exam).

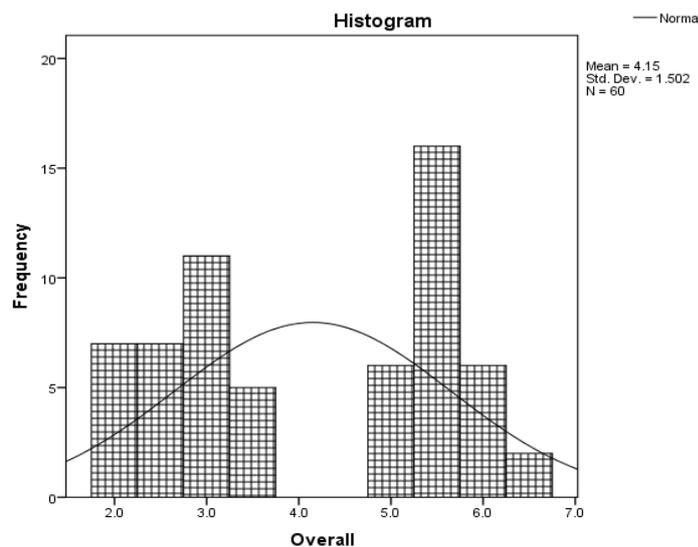


Figure 1. The Normality histogram chart of EFL learners' IELTS score

According to Figure 1, the vertical axis represents the frequency and horizontal axis represents the kind of test. It was observed that the histogram chart of IELTS is not compatible with drawing normal curve so this variable lacks Normal distribution; therefore, to analyze the first hypothesis of research, the Mann-Whitney test was used.

Mann-Whitney test of the hypothesis

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To examine the hypothesis of equality between IELTS mean scores of learners who were instructed by ILI books and those who were instructed by Interchange books and with regard to the lack of IELTS normality, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney test was used. The result of IELTS ranking was summarized in the following table:

Table 9.

Rank

	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Overall	Iran Language Institute	30	45.50	1365.00
	Interchange	30	15.50	465.00
	Total	60		

According to the reported amount in above table, it can be observed that the mean of IELTS score for 30 learners who were instructed by ILI books is 45/50 and the mean of IELTS score for 30 learners who were instructed by Interchange books is 15/50.

The result relating to Mann-Whitney test, which shows the assumption of equality between mean of IELTS scores for learners who were instructed by ILI books and Interchange books, is summarized in the following chart:

Table 10.

Test Statistics

	Overall
Mann-Whitney U	.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

According to the amount of (Mann-Whitney U=.000) and also the meaningful amount of sig=.000 in the above Table, it can be concluded that the null hypothesis of the study is rejected, It means the Iranian Learners' IELTS scores are related to the kind of books which they study. In the other word, there is a meaningful difference between the means of learners' IELTS scores who were instructed by ILI books and the ones who were instructed by Interchange books. According to the Table of ranking (Table 9.), it shows that means of learners' IELTS score who were instructed by ILI books are higher than the means of those who studied Interchange books. In fact, the effect of ILI books is more in comparing with Interchange books on Iranian

learners' IELTS score. As a result, the hypothesis of the study is rejected. Therefore, different materials, as preparation for IELTS exam, can influence the learners' performance differently. The following figure shows the graphic results.

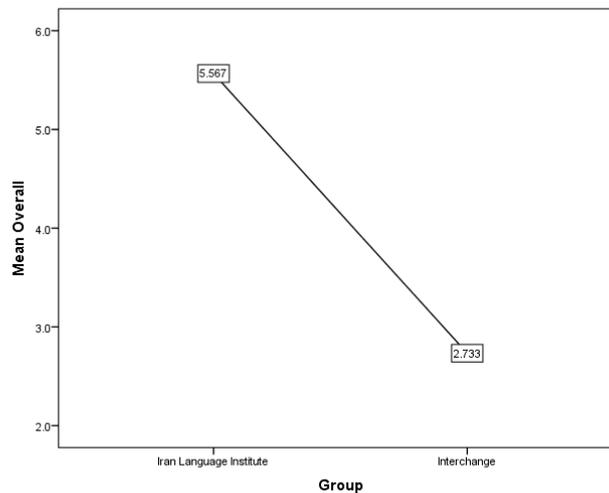


Figure 2. The learners' IELTS mean scores

The above line drawing chart, which in vertical axis shows the mean of learners score in IELTS exam and the horizontal axis represents kinds of books (ILI and Interchange books), indicates that ILI books have more influence on IELTS score in comparing with Interchange books among Iranian EFI learners. Therefore, the effect of ILI books is more than Interchange books on Iranian learners' band score in IELTS exam. Therefore, it can be concluded that the study of ILI books can improve the learners' performance on IELTS score in comparing with the Interchange books.

Conclusions and Implications

Conclusion

Literary revision of ILI books and the relation between them and achieving capability at four skills which are the aim of IELTS exam was the significance aspect of this research. The population of the study consisted of 60 learners including two groups. One of them was instructed by ILI book and the other one by Interchange. In this research, we used two types of materials: ILI series and Interchange books and one sample of IELTS tests. This project was implemented on the basis of an *ex post facto* design. Two groups participated in the IELTS

exam. The Reading, Writing, and Listening were held simultaneously and later the learners invited to an interview. After the exam, Listening and Reading part were evaluated according to the chart retrieved from IELTS instruction on its website. But for interpreting Writing and Speaking, 3 raters contributed to evaluating the results.

Each rater corrected the Writing part and scored it then we added each score and divided them by 3, therefore, the achieved result was considered as the band score on each candidate. For the Speaking part, the same procedure was held and the interviewer wasn't being involved in evaluating the interview. After the data analysis, the findings revealed that the material selection can influence on learners' performance on IELTS test. Therefore, the study hypothesis was rejected due to descriptive statistic, then the normality test of the variable and Mann-Whitney test were applied. Finally, the findings of the study is likely to be a factor in decisions about selecting materials for preparation courses for standard exams such as IELTS.

Implication for teachers

Learning is a significant process in human being life. It is self-evidence that human development cannot stand without a good learning. To reach that target, people always search the appropriate ways. Besides, the main important elements that help people to learn are books and experiences because of their unlimited benefits. The book is a valuable source of knowledge that consists of infinite benefits. It transports us to different worlds and cultures, as well as, it informs us about ancient civilizations and lore. In addition, it helps us to learn about new technologies and literature. It allows speaking the language fluently and to communicate spontaneously. Therefore, the book can be a faithful friend and the nearest into us which can guide us to how to behave in our practical life. In conclusion, learning is a strong challenge that requires patience and efforts. Books are the best manners of learning because of their vast importance and great advantages.

Implication for material developers

As we mentioned, material developers should consider some characteristics while providing them. Those which attract the learners and stimulates their curiosity, interest and attention of learners should be considered as another feature. Materials should be perceived relevant and useful by learners. Exposing the learners to authentic use makes them practical.

Materials developers shouldn't ignore linguistic features of the input. They should provide the

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learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes. Paying attention to differences between learners in affective attitudes give the learners positive feeling and finally choosing practice should be based on maximizing learning potential and emotional involvement which stimulates both right- and- left- brain activities.

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