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Global English Language Tests Review Series

IELTS Academic reading questions:

Pedagogical design flaws

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IELTS Review Series

This document is the fifth exposure draft in a series that conducts a critical review of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and other global language tests. The scope of this project discusses the pedagogical design and the administrative regime of global English language examinations such as the IELTS.

Historical context

The IELTS assessment is the most popular English language exam for higher education and migration purposes (Cambridge English, 2017a, NP). On its home page, the IELTS (2017b, NP) organization states that “IELTS is the high-stakes English test for study, migration or work.” In 2015, around 2.7 million people sat for this examination in more than 140 countries (Conestoga, 2017, NP).

IELTS (2017e, NP) reports that citizens of the following 40 countries were the top “country of origin” of its examinees in 2015:

Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, China (People's Republic of), Colombia, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Islamic Republic of, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Republic of, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam.

Most of IELTS’s fee paying clients are citizens of ‘developing economies’ or ‘economies in transition’ as defined by the United Nations (United Nations, 2016, p. 160). Business data for ‘country of origin’ is not yet available for 2016.

Business model

The IELTS organization is a collaborative joint venture that administers the IELTS exam.

Table 1 summarizes the service-delivery structure of these three entities.

Table 1:
IELTS consortium partners: business model

Member	Status	Source
British Council	“a public corporation (in accounting terms)”	British Council (2017f, NP)
Cambridge Assessment (Brand)	A “non-teaching department of the University of Cambridge”	Cambridge Assessment Group (2017a, NP)
IDP Education Limited	A for-profit corporation that is listed on the Australian Stock Exchange.	IDP Education Australia (2017, p. 6)

Revenue

The total annual revenue and financial surpluses/profits earned by members of the IELTS consortium for delivering IELTS goods and services is not disclosed in their Annual Financial Reports. Members of the IELTS consortium report their IELTS revenues as a component of a consolidated revenue item (British Council, 2017b, p. 60; Cambridge Assessment Group, 2015b, p. 7; IDP Education Australia, 2017, p. 17).

Members of the IELTS's consortium and their authorized agents charge registrants a commercial fee to sit the IELTS exam. IELTS charges a standard fee by test center location.

IELTS does not offer a fee waiver or a reduced fee schedule for those who live in a state of “income poverty” as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016, p. 160).

Table 2, overleaf, shows the fees schedule in six selected countries as at March, 2017. This data set contains a member nation from each continent, including the Indian subcontinent.

Table 2:**Selected IELTS registration fees by country****As at March 2017**

Country	(a) Commercial Fee	(b) USD	(c) GDP USD Per capita	(b)/(c) Cost Per capita
Ghana	GHS980	\$216	\$1,388	15.6%
India	Rupees 11,300	\$173	\$1,587	10.9%
China	RMB 1, 960	\$284	\$7,617	3.7%
Brazil	BRL800	\$277	\$11,387	2.4%
United Kingdom	GBP200 (Immigration)	\$247	\$46,461	0.5%
USA	USD\$235	\$235	\$54,306	0.4%

Sources:

British Council (2017c; 2017d; 2017e; 2017h; 2017i; IELTS, 2017c).

(b) Bank of Canada (2017); (c) United Nations (2017).

Impartiality

The Global English Language Tests Review (GELTR) aims to provide an objective review of the scholarly design and global administration of the IELTS examination and substitute global English language tests such as Pearson, TOEIC and TOEFL. This series aims to complement the IELTS “Research Report” series published by IELTS.

Independence

In contrast to IELTS’s Research Report series, the GELTR is not subject to editorial amendments imposed by IELTS’s employees or its affiliates. Furthermore, in contrast to IELTS’s Research Report series, none of the costs involved in preparing and disseminating the GELTR are funded by the IELTS organization or its member partners.

Myth

The IELTS organization explicitly claims that the IELTS is a global English language test. It does not recognize that this global English language exam aims to do more than test a person’s English language skills:

“The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is widely recognised as a reliable means of assessing the English language ability of

candidates who need to study or work where English is the language of communication.” (Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 1)

The IELTS organization implicitly claims that the IELTS exam is an international English language test. This argument is evident from the name of this examination, *i.e.*, the “International English Language Testing System”.

The IELTS examination contains a hidden curriculum that repeatedly tests examinee’s general knowledge. Moreover, it does so from the perspective of the cultural practices that are dominant in developed nations, in particular, Western developed nations (Jericho, 2017a).

Objective

This Exposure Draft reviews IELTS’s Academic reading test. I do this by conducting an in-depth analysis of reading test 1 extracted from the following official IELTS Academic test preparation publication:

Jakeman, V. and McDowell, C. (2015), *Cambridge IELTS 10*, Cambridgeshire, England: Cambridge University Press.

The quantity and nature of the pedagogical design flaws found in this practice test is representative of those contained in most of IELTS's official Academic test practice resources.

Format

IELTS describe the format of its Academic reading test as follows:

“Test format – Reading

60 minutes

The Reading component consists of 40 questions, designed to test a wide range of reading skills. These include reading for gist, reading for main ideas, reading for detail, skimming, understanding logical argument and recognising writers' opinions, attitudes and purpose.

IELTS Academic test - this includes three long texts which range from the descriptive and factual to the discursive and analytical. These are taken from books, journals, magazines and newspapers. They have been selected for a non-specialist audience but are appropriate for people entering university courses or seeking professional registration.” (IELTS, 2017d)

Extrapolating flaws

IELTS have stated publicly that their official exam practice resources aim to replicate the types of questions that appear in official exams (Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 4).

It is difficult to know if official IELTS exam practice materials are partial or complete replicas of prior IELTS exams as IELTS does not publicly disclose this information.

I speculate that multiple persons who have undertaken an IELTS exam have experienced exam testing bias for reasons that are not their fault. Put differently, on the balance of probabilities, the multiple design flaws that persist in IELTS's speaking exam are unfairly disadvantaging some, most or all test takers to varying degrees (*e.g.* Jericho 2017a; 2017b).

Data/evidence

Jakeman, V. and McDowell, C. (2015), *Cambridge IELTS 10*, Cambridgeshire, England: Cambridge University Press.

Questions 1 to 4: True, False, Not Given

Question 2: Subjectivity

“Some people have to borrow large amounts of money to go to college.”

The word ‘large’ is subjective. Perceptions of this word may vary depending on numerous factors such as the examinee’s socio-economic status, country of residence and accumulated private wealth.

This passage of the text refers to the words “thousands of dollars of debt” in the opening paragraph. The word ‘thousands’ may refer to a figure of anywhere between USD 2, 000 and USD 999, 000.

It is not necessary to refer to a subjective concept of relative quantity to test the readers’ understanding of the concepts of ‘debt’ and ‘borrowings’. An alternative question could state:

“Certain students must borrow funds in order to pay their tuition fees”.

Question 5: Ambiguity and grammatical errors

“Complete the Fact Sheet below.

Write no more than three words from the passage for each answer.”

“The average high school graduate makes a little more than one million dollars in _____”

(a) Problem 1: ambiguity and subjectivity

Question 5 refers to the reading passage that states “over an adult’s working life, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2M”. Reference to the words ‘a little more than’ refers to the figure USD 200,000.

As shown in Table 2, average annual earnings in China are USD 7, 617. A figure of USD 200, 000 equates to around 26 years of earnings in China for those who earn the average wage. This global analysis shows that the figure USD\$200,000 is not ‘little’.

An alternative question could state:

“The average earnings of a high school graduate exceeds one million dollars in _____”

(b) Problem 2: Incorrect grammar

“The average high school graduate makes a little more than one million dollars in _____”

The grammar in this question is awkward as it implicitly classifies high school graduates as being one of the following: below average, average or above average. The syntax

string ‘the average high school graduate’ suggests that it discusses the scholastic abilities of high school graduates as opposed to their average lifetime earnings.

An alternative question could state:

“The average earnings of high school graduates exceed one million dollars in _____”

(c) Problem 3: Grammatical errors in the instructions

“The average high school graduate makes a little more than one million dollars in _____”

The correct answer is “A lifetime”

“IELTS requests that examinees write no more than three words *from the passage* [emphasis added] for each answer.”

The string of words “A lifetime” does not appear in the reading passage.

The reading passage states:

“According to the Census Bureau, over an adult’s working life, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2 Million”.

Furthermore, this reading passage also provides the same information, using different words:

“These sizeable differences in lifetime earnings put the costs of college study in realistic perspective.” (p. 18)

(d) Problem 4: ‘Mindreading’ IELTS preferred rewording

“The average high school graduate makes a little more than one million dollars in _____”

The correct answer is “A lifetime”

This string of words does not appear in the reading passage. There are two reading passages that are relevant to this question:

“According to the Census Bureau, over an adult’s working life, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2 Million”. (p. 18)

and

“These sizeable differences in lifetime earnings put the costs of college study in realistic perspective.” (p. 18)

The official answer paraphrases text from the original reading passage. There is no obvious logic that explains why “a lifetime” is the only acceptable answer. An examinee may paraphrase their reference to “working life” and “in lifetime” using “no more than three words” and offer the following synonymous alternatives:

- Their lifetime
- Their life course
- Their life span
- Their working life
- *Etc.*

IELTS’s assessment system is not transparent (Jericho, 2017b). It is not clear if IELTS will accept other answers or award half-marks for answers that are imperfect but suggest that the candidate is able to comprehend the reading passage and most likely knows the correct response.

This question unfairly requires the examinee to have clairvoyant ‘powers’ and be able to mind-read one rigid answer selected by IELTS, among numerous competing alternatives

that are equally correct, convey the same meaning as the official answer and conform to the guidelines as stated in the question.

Questions 6, 7, 8, 9: Grammar

These questions repeat grammar violations discussed in question 5.

Referring to a student as ‘average’ is suggestive of a reference to their scholastic abilities and/or achievement.

	Assessment text	Alternative
Q6.	The average person with an Associate’s Degree	On average, a person who holds an Associate’s Degree earns ...
Q7.	The Average Bachelor’s Degree holder	On average, a person who holds a Bachelor’s Degree earns ...
Q8.	The average student	A student at a four year college spends on average ...
Q9.	The average student	A student at a two-year college spends on average ...

The spelling conventions used in this subsection are inconsistent. The hyphen is used in question nine for the word ‘two-year’. In question eight, the hyphen is not used and the words ‘four year’ are used to refer to a senior college. There is no obvious logic for this lack of consistency.

Inadequate proofreading is a recurring problem in IELTS’s official Cambridge series.

Questions 14-20: Inconsistency between practice test sets

“Complete the summary using words from the box below.

Write your answers in boxes 14-20 on your Answer Sheet”

IELTS need to be consistent with the format and structure of its reading section. Some IELTS exams clearly state that the examinee may select the same option twice (*e.g.* Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 63). It is not fair to assume that students will conclude that the absence of such an instruction means that they cannot use the same option twice.

Question 34 - mindreading the exact answer

“Complete the chart below.

Choose NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS tor [sic] each answer.”

Rockfish caught today is smaller than rockfish caught in the past.

The word “smaller” does not appear in this reading passage. The official answer is grammatically correct, and may be deduced from the sentence that states “The average

size of rockfish in the recreational catch has also declined by several inches since the 1970s, which is indicative of overfishing”.

Note that examinees may use up to three words to fill in the blank section in question 34, as shown above where the word “small” has been inserted.

Smaller is not the only correct answer that a candidate may insert. A candidate may insert other synonyms such as:

- Of lesser size
- Lesser in size

IELTS’s assessment system is not transparent (Jericho, 2017b). It is not clear if IELTS will accept other answers or award half-marks for answers that are imperfect but suggest that the candidate had understood the reading passage and seems to know the correct response.

Question 35 - mindreading the exact answer

“Complete the chart below.

Choose NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS for [sic] each answer.”

Pollution affects orcas more than it does other sea animals.

The word “pollution” does not appear in this reading passage. This answer is correct, and may be deduced from the sentence that states:

“Toxic substances accumulate in higher concentrations as they move up the food chain. Because orcas are the top predator in the ocean and are at the top of several different food chains in the environment, they tend to be more affected by pollutants than other sea creatures.”

Note that examinees may use up to three words to fill in the blank section in question 35, as shown above where the word “pollution” has been inserted.

Pollution is not the only correct answer that a candidate may insert. A candidate may insert other words with the same meaning that are found in the reading passage:

- “Pollutants”
- “Toxic substances”
- “marine toxic waste”

Given that the answer nominated by IELTS, ‘pollution’ does not appear in the reading passage, this suggests that candidates are able to nominate a synonym or another word that is a derivative of a word that is found in the reading passage. Using this logic, examinees may insert other synonyms such as:

- Hazardous substances
- Poisonous substances
- Environmental pollution

There is no obvious logic or rationale that justifies IELTS nominating the word “pollution” as the correct answer.

IELTS’s assessment system is not transparent (Jericho, 2017b). It is not clear if IELTS will accept other answers or award half-marks for answers that show are imperfect but suggest that the candidate understands the reading passage and seems to know the correct response.

Too many questions for 60 minutes

In my capacity as an IELTS tutor, I have taught dozens of candidates whose advanced English language skills have been independently verified by credible educational institutions. Examples of these candidates include adults who have spent their

entire lives living in a country where English is an official language or the official language. Furthermore, these persons have also completed high school and university studies that were conducted mostly or exclusively via the English language.

Several candidates who are members of the demographic described above have told me that they always struggle to finish more than three quarters of the Academic reading passages under exam conditions. This includes the completion of numerous official IELTS practice sets at home as well as multiple actual exams conducted by IELTS.

The author of this paper holds four university Degrees in addition to a Graduate Certificate in Education (Teaching English as a Second Language Teaching). This includes degrees in accounting, economics, education and a Doctorate in Sociology at English speaking universities. Furthermore, he has been speaking English since birth and has spent more than 40 years living in countries where English is the official language: Australia, New Zealand, England and Ireland.

I have never been able to complete more than three quarters of IELTS's Academic reading tests under exam conditions unless I make random guesses as a means to complete all 40 questions. A *major problem* with IELTS's Academic reading test is that it forces candidates to read passages that are sub-discipline specific and use technical jargon. They must navigate questions that used flawed grammatical syntax and they must do so under very strict exam conditions such as a tight time limit.

I propose that the Academic reading section be reduced from 40 questions to 30 questions. I suspect that IELTS's Academic reading passage in its current form is not designed for the majority of test-takers to be able to finish this section of the exam, with sufficient time to check their answers. I argue that this problem must be reformed as a matter of urgency. The design flaws inherent in this exam may undermine test-taker's confidence. This in turn may cause examinees to feel compelled to read each question and reading passage carefully and do so multiple times under strict test conditions.

For comment

I welcome members of the public to provide constructive feedback on this exposure draft. You may provide this feedback in confidence or request to have this uploaded on the School's website or GELTR's website.

Initial distribution list

IELTS instructors; IELTS stakeholders (global); Former IELTS test-takers; IELTS registrants; IELTS research academics; Former IELTS staff; IELTS staff; Education Minister, Canada; Education Minister, United Kingdom.

Primary evidence

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