



The impact of attitude on reading performance among IELTS test takers

Shahrbanoo Cheraghi and Amir Sadeghi

Department of English Language Teaching, Damavand Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Damavand, Iran.

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ABSTRACT

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) serves as one of the most effective assessment tools to evaluate candidates' overall English language proficiency being highly accepted by organizations and educational systems. Given that reading skills is believed to be a crucial skill for academic attainment (Cochran, 1993), test takers' attitudes on reading for such an internationally recognized test and its relationship with their reading proficiency have been rarely explored. The present study was an attempt to investigate the attitudes of candidates towards IELTS test and its impact on their reading performance. To this end, 149 Participants (76 male and 73 female) were given a standardized attitude questionnaire (Rasti, 2009) to investigate the participants' attitudes. The questionnaire was followed by two tests: A reading proficiency and a vocabulary test. The participants were also required to take a mock standard IELTS Academic Reading test to integrate statistical information. The results revealed that there is a significant positive correlation between the test takers' attitudes towards the IELTS test and their reading performance. Additionally, there is a significant positive correlation between attitudes in general and reading proficiency and vocabulary knowledge. The findings consistent with other research (e.g., Chemutai, 2015; Hosseini, Hosseini, & Roudbari, 2013; Malallaha, 2000; Petrides, 2006) suggest that attitude should be considered as a key element through the processes of reading acquisition which may lead to better performance in proficiency tests.

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Introduction

Scholarly research focused on the term "attitude" began about less than a century ago. At the beginning, attitude was used to describe a physical gesture that a person adopted (Baker, 1992). Later, during the second decade of the twentieth century, researchers and theorists started to consider that the term was related to a mental state rather than a physical gesture (Navarro-Villarroel, 2011).

A large number of studies have explored the relationship between attitude and performance in the context of language learning. On the importance of attitude, research findings seem to be mixed. On one hand, there are plenty of studies highlighting the positive relationship between attitudes and performance in second language learning. For example, Gardner (1985) noted that attitude is as important and affective as aptitude for language achievement. Brown (2000) also stated that second language learners have both positive and negative attitudes. He believes that positive attitudes may result development of motivation, and negative attitudes can be changed by exposure to reality (as cited in Hosseini & Pourmandnia, 2013). On the other hand, Kuhlemeier, Bergh, and Melse (1996) argued that attitudes have no influence on achievement. They reported that although students with positive attitudes were more successful than those with negative attitudes at the beginning of the educational year, they did not necessarily achieve higher levels at the end of the year compared to those with negative attitudes. In another study, Alsayed (2003) attitude seems not to be correlated with high levels of achievement in learning English as a foreign

language. Therefore, the current study is an attempt to further provide support whether attitude can influence reading performance among IELTS test takers.

Attitude

Attitude refers to the "psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 22). According to Allport (1935), from a psychological standpoint, attitude is described as preparation for mentally responding to a sign based on past experience affecting behavior toward a specific thing. Attitude also involves 'a set of beliefs' about whether something is either good or bad. To clarify, for example, people with favorable attitudes towards a language usually behave and perform well in it. Gardner (1985) noted that, attitudes are important factors in constructing motivation; however, they are not the sole factors in such construction.

In a foreign language learning context, there are a variety of factors that may affect learning, namely motivation, attitudes, anxiety, learning achievements, aptitudes, intelligence, age, personalities, etc. (Gardner, 1960; Lehmann, 2006). Among these, attitude is one of the most important factors that affect language learning processes (Fakeye, 2010). Gardner (1985) states that attitude is as important and affective as aptitude for language achievement. Holmes (1992) believes that in learning a foreign language, students can be motivated by the speakers of the language or the context in which the language is spoken. According to Chastain (1998), attitude is one of variables that contribute to second language learning. Having positive or negative attitudes towards the

target language or the people who speak the language is a common state. Accordingly, Bachman (1976) has discussed that high achievement results in positive attitudes and high motivation.

Motivation and attitudes are known as factors involving students' success in learning a foreign language. Alsayed (2003) investigated some factors that contribute to success in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). He investigated motivation, attitude, early first language acquisition, early exposure to English, and social background. He found that motivation can be considered as the most significant predictor of English performance followed by social background. Gardner (1985) remarked that learners' motivation may be affected by their attitudes towards the second language. In other words, if language learners have negative attitudes towards a language, they cannot be motivated at all (Çolak, 2008) which in turn may affect their learning attainment. Hence investigation into attitudes and whether it affects performance is necessary to help guarantee the IELTS test takers' performance. Then again, educational programs need to be zoomed in the relationship and consider the point in the content of the educational programming that will be needed to reach the desired outcomes.

IELTS

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), which is jointly conducted by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the British Council and the International Development Program (IDP) Education Australia, is considered as a high stake English proficiency test usually required for those who wish to go to an English speaking country for education, migration, or work.

IELTS, among a number of English language proficiency tests, is one of the most significant proficiency tests (Rea-Dickins & Scott, 2007). It is the world's most popular English language test accepted by over 9,000 organizations as a valid, reliable, and secure index of determining English proficiency worldwide. The test questions and its general format are arranged to form a systematic English test considering four skills: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. The test takes approximately 4 hours to complete.

IELTS, as one of the pioneers of four major skills of the English language offers two separate modules: Academic and General. IELTS Academic measures English language proficiency required for an academic environment where English is the medium of instruction. IELTS General measures English language proficiency in an everyday context. Both modules share the same Speaking and Listening (general subsets) to test general English, but Reading and Writing (specialized subsets) are intended to test skills based on academic needs (Charge & Taylor, 1997). The Academic module, as a measure of English language proficiency for entry to university courses, is considered through the current research.

One of the main advantages of IELTS, similar to any proficiency tests, is that it presents a standardized measure of English proficiency in admission process which is expressed in number and can be compared and benchmarked. Every year, many candidates take IELTS through more than 1,000 test centers in over 140 countries around the world (over 2.2 million tests were taken worldwide in 2014). Obviously, the number of IELTS test takers is increasing and the test's impact is considerable. All candidates need to complete speaking,

listening, reading, and writing modules to obtain an IELTS Test Report, ranging from 1 (the lowest) to 9 (the highest), and overall band score will be determined by computing the four skills' scores.

One of the modules of the IELTS is the reading subtest which measures candidates' proficiency in reading comprehension. As Alderson (2000) argued, three levels of understanding occur while reading. The lowest level is the bottom-up theory in which understanding is literal with meaning being received respectively through letters, words and sentences. The second level is inferential understanding which comes from reading between the lines with the reader understanding implicit message conveyed in the text. Finally, the third level is the critical evaluation which refers to the ability to go beyond a text to make critical thinking and evaluation. Davies (2008) also noted that reading comprehension tests not only assess general reading comprehension, but also inferential reading comprehension, known as "reasoning in reading". Hence test takers need to master the skills in order to perform well in reading comprehension test (Ying, 2011).

A large number of studies have been conducted worldwide to investigate issues related to IELTS (e.g., Coleman, Strafield, & Hagan, 2003; Dooley, 1999; Feast, 2002; Hawkey, 2006; Ingram & Bayliss, 2004; McDowell & Merrylees, 1998; Wallace, 1997; Woodrow, 2006). Read and Hayes (2003) investigated the effect of IELTS on the preparation of international students in New Zealand and reported that according to the teachers participated in their study the test was the most suitable test available for the purpose of admission. In another study, Merrylees (2003) argued that it is important to compare the performance of those who take general IELTS with that of those who take the academic one in terms of their nationality, age, gender, and other factors.

Attitude and Test

There is a remarkable amount of research on attitudes towards different varieties of the English language and other languages (Assaf, 2001; Balcazar, 2003; Benson, 1991; Birnie, 1998; Cooper & Fishman, 1977; Malallaha, 2000; Shaw, 1981; Villa, 2002; Zhou, 2002). This is also the case for learners' beliefs and perceptions about language learning (Sakui & Gaies, 1999; as cited in Karahan, 2007). Petrides (2006) investigated the performance of young EFL learners in listening and speaking skills. The results revealed that positive attitudes towards the English language may influence learning processes and willingness to use the language in future.

Malallaha (2000) investigated the relationship between attitude and proficiency among university students in Kuwait. He examined the attitudes of Arab learners towards English, and reported high levels of correlations between positive attitudes towards English and learners' proficiency in tests suggesting that positive attitudes towards tests can be considered as one of the reasons of better performance on the given test. This can be interpreted as positive or negative attitudes towards a given language which in general can significantly affect test-takers' performance on that particular language and the test.

Existing research on attitudes of candidates of high stakes English language tests such as IELTS suggests that IELTS candidates in various countries (e.g., Australia, Republic of China, and United Kingdom) tend to have a positive view of the test in predicting their success in entry in higher education

in UK (Coleman et al., 2003). In a similar vein, Rasti (2009) conducted a survey of the Iranian candidates' attitudes towards IELTS, and examined attitudes of 60 Iranian IELTS candidates. The findings indicated that almost 80% of the participants showed a positive attitude towards the test. There was no meaningful relationship between the candidates' sex, age, educational background, and IELTS scores with their attitudes towards the test.

In another study, Hosseini, Hosseini, and Roudbari (2013) investigated the attitudes of the Iranian candidates towards the IELTS test. A standardized attitudes questionnaire was administered to 40 homogeneous Iranian IELTS candidates after they finished the test. The findings indicated that most of the participants had a positive attitude towards the test. The results revealed that there is a highly significant relationship between IELTS candidates' attitudes towards the test and their performance.

Overall, it can be hypothesized that positive or negative attitudes towards a language can considerably affect test-takers' performance on a language test. Additionally, test-takers' attitudes towards a specific language proficiency test may affect their performance on that test (Hosseini, Hosseini, & Roudbari, 2013). However, whether the IELTS candidates' attitudes towards the test might affect their reading performance score controlling for language proficiency is of great interest. The present study investigated the association between test takers' attitudes towards the IELTS as a high stake English proficiency test and their performance in reading skill through the following research questions:

RQ1. Is there any significant correlation between IELTS candidates' attitudes towards the test and their reading performance?

RQ2. Is there any significant correlation between test takers' attitudes towards a test and their reading performance?

RQ3. Is there any significant correlation between test takers' attitudes towards a test and their vocabulary knowledge?

Method

Participants

Participants were 149 IELTS candidates attending English courses at advanced levels according to the language institutes placement from various educational backgrounds with 76 males (51%) and 73 females (49%), aged between 20 and 36 years with mean age 26.92 in years and standard deviation (SD) of 4.573.

Instruments

The measures used in the current study were a questionnaire, vocabulary test, reading comprehension test and reading module of a mock IELTS test. The attitude questionnaire was developed and validated by Rasti (2009) based on the framework developed by Bachman (1990). Participants were required to fill in the questionnaire before taking other measures of the study. The reading proficiency test comprises four passages followed by 10 comprehension questions. Participants were to read each passage and answer the questions. The vocabulary test, developed by Nation and Beglar (2007), was utilized to assess the participants' receptive knowledge of vocabulary size. Finally, a mock IELTS Academic Reading test (Greenwood, 2011) was given to all participants.

Procedures

The participants were first given the questionnaire (Rasti, 2009) and were asked to fill out carefully spending enough

time (about 10 minutes). Then, they were given the reading proficiency test which took about 40 minutes followed by the vocabulary test which took 15 minutes. After a short break, the participants were given an IELTS Academic Reading test which took about 60 minutes.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the current research was to investigate English language learners' attitudes towards a proficiency test such IELTS and its relation with their reading proficiency and performance. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics with mean and Standard Deviation (SD) for the measures of the study. The data presented in this table shows a reasonable variation among the participants indicating that the data were relatively normally distributed with no floor or ceiling effects being found in this sample for all the measures.

Table 1. Mean Score and Standard Deviation (SD) of All Variables

	Mean	SD
IELTS standard score	6.507	.79
Reading Proficiency (Maximum score: 50)	43.87	4.29
Vocabulary test (Maximum score: 50)	40.07	5.17
Self-image	39.70	4.29
Inhibition	37.99	5.17
Risk-taking	40.58	3.89
Ego-permeability	39.87	4.14
Ambiguity	38.64	3.75
Attitude total score	196.78	8.77

In order to find the associations between variables, correlational analyses were conducted and shown in Table 2. The data were analyzed to examine whether test takers' attitudes towards a test are related to their performance on either reading skill or vocabulary knowledge.

The correlation coefficient varies from -1 to +1; accordingly, correlation between two variables can be positive or negative. It should be clarified that the numbers represent intensity of relationship between two variables.

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Results for All Variables

	IELTS score	Reading Proficiency	Vocabulary	Attitude
Attitude	.437** .000	.282** .000	.379** .000	1
IELTS score	1	.643** .000	.664** .000	.437** .000
Reading Proficiency	.643** .000	1	.684** .000	.282** .000
Vocabulary test	.664** .000	.684** .000	1	.379** .000

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results indicate that there is a significant correlation between the test takers' attitudes towards IELTS test and their IELTS reading performance. The attitude questionnaire was in form of Likert scale with the participants being required to put their responses from 1 to 5. Accordingly, the alternatives were: Strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree and strongly disagree which the participants were required to insert in their selected blanks. All categories of the attitude questionnaire were considered as a total variable as well as the IELTS reading test, reading proficiency and vocabulary test used through the study. The table also shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the test takers'

attitudes and their reading proficiency scores, as it is for the test takers' attitudes and their vocabulary knowledge.

Discussion

This study focused on the relationship between IELTS candidates' attitudes towards the test and their performance on reading skills. The first finding of the study indicates that there is a significant correlation between the candidates' attitudes towards the test and their reading scores. It should be noted that like most research in this field, there is a strong relationship between attitude and performance. To confirm the findings, Hosseini, Hosseini, and Roudbari (2013) state that there is a highly significant correlation between IELTS candidates' attitudes towards the test and their performance.

Achieving significant relationships between attitude and performance, in the current study, on reading proficiency and vocabulary tests is a usual status considering most studies in the field. By 2015, Chemutai indicates that there is a correlation between attitude and performance and it should be attempted to enhance a positive feeling and improve performance. In 2000, Malallaha found that students have positive attitudes towards English and their proficiency in tests was positively related to their attitudes. Petrides (2006) argued that learning procedure may be influenced by positive attitudes towards the English language and also it affects the future use of the language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the main purpose of the current research was to elaborate correlations between IELTS candidates' attitudes towards the IELTS test and their reading performance. As remarked before, this dimension can be important for the realm of education, and also teaching and learning procedures. The results represented that there is a significant correlation between IELTS candidates' attitudes towards the test and their reading performance. In addition, there is a significant correlation between test takers' attitudes towards a test and their reading proficiency scores. The test takers' attitudes are also highly correlated with their vocabulary knowledge.

In the current research, the test takers' attitudes towards a test in general showed a significant correlation with their reading performance, and vocabulary knowledge. Relying upon these results, it seems necessary for teachers to focus on language learners' attitudes. As Malallaha (2000) states having positive or negative attitudes towards tests can affect test takers' performance. However, language learners should also be aware of the importance of attitude. Petrides (2006) claims that students can be influenced by their positive attitudes and willingness. According to Al Samadani and Ibnian (2015), students with high Grade Point Average (GPA) have the highest positive attitudes towards learning English. Hence educational programs which have the responsibility of determining learning progress also should focus on the results just as much as teachers focus. Consequently, Attitude should be considered as a controversial element throughout learning process and finally being recognized by results.

The term "attitude" and its relationship with performance have largely been investigated in most cases. The two variables correlate with each other with some variables possibly affecting them directly or indirectly. The current study was conducted on proficient candidates who were supposed to take the IELTS reading, reading proficiency and vocabulary tests. There are many attractive areas of related study. For example, conducting the same survey for non-

proficient learners or for other skills (e.g. writing, speaking and listening) may result in interesting consequences and also testing the generalizability of the reported findings. Furthermore, looking into categorization of learners in terms of their religion or economic status could extend the scope of the findings reported in this research. It is hoped the findings of this study can contribute to the aims.

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