Prestige: The hidden factor in motivating Iranian IELTS Candidates

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ABSTRACT

IELTS, International English Language Testing System, is designed to assess the language ability of candidates who intend to study, work, or live where English is used as the language of communication. Highly significant growth in candidature particularly in South Asia and the Middle East clearly illustrates how globally IELTS is recognized currently. Statistics demonstrate that Iran was among the top 25 locations in which candidates took IELTS in 2003 (IELTS Annual Review, 2003). Surprisingly, there seems to be a deviation from the communicative into prestigious purposes. The aim of the present study is to investigate the underlying hidden factor motivating Iranian IELTS candidates to prepare for the test. The target population of this study consisted of 300 IELTS candidates and 20 IELTS teachers. They were given a questionnaire and subsequently 30 of the participants underwent a semi-structured interview to elicit more information on what motivated them to go for IELTS. After the qualitative analysis of the data, the findings indicated that the hidden factor underlying all the motivating factors for the majority of Iranian IELTS candidates is prestige.

Introduction

In this chapter first the English Language Testing System (IELTS) will be introduced, then the concept of motivation will be defined and motives behind language learning and taking Language tests will be investigated briefly. Further, the objectives of the study will be given. Lastly, the reasons why his study gains significance will be discussed.

Perliminaries

IELTS (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 or anyone who desires to migrate to or work in such countries (Rasti, 2009). Hughes et al. (1998) believe that IELTS has an innovative format that reflects changes in language learning and teaching theory and developments in language testing. Statistics clearly demonstrate that IELTS is growing more popular worldwide day in day out. Just as IELTS candidature is growing significantly, so is the number of organizations, universities, professional bodies and governments that recognize IELTS results. Almost half a million people took the IELTS test in the year 2003. As was mentioned in the abstract ; statistics demonstrate that Iran was among the top 25 locations in terms of the number of candidates who took the IELTS test in 2003 (IELTS annual review , 2003) . In the last five years a great number of young Iranians have travelled to other countries and they have been required to take the IELTS test – or other proficiency exams - for the assessment of their communicative abilities in English. This might justify the high number of IELTS candidates in Iran.

However simple and easy the word "motivation" might appear, it is in fact very difficult to define. Here we will first try to give a simple explanation. The success of any action usually depends on the extent to which individuals strive to attain their purpose, along with their desire to do so. In general, people have come to refer to this psychological factor – the impulse that generates the action- as motivation. It is a "motive force", something that prompts, incites or stimulates action (Simona Veronica, 2000). Motivation involves four aspects: a goal, an effect, a desire to attain the goal, favorable attitude toward the activity in question (Gardner, 1985). It can be considered the state of having encouragement to do something. Motivational techniques have been experienced by every person from birth - it's our motivation that decides our behavior. The fact given above makes motivation the focus of attention when it comes to the explanation of human behavior by social psychologists.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study is to determine the hidden motivation underlying Iranian candidates' motivations for taking the IELTS test, and to see if prestige or social acceptance plays any significant role in the process.

Types of motivation in IELTS

Different types of motivation and sources of motivation needs are:

• Positive motivation: This is a response which includes enjoyment and optimism about the tasks that one is involved in.

• Negative motivation: Involves undertaking tasks for fear that there should be undesirable outcomes, e.g. failing the test if one is unprepared.

• Extrinsic motivation: These are the motivating factors existing outside of the person and don't belong to him or her originally. This type of motivation is divided into five categories: operant conditioning, social cognition, classical conditioning, modeling, and vicarious learning.

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• Intrinsic motivation: This describes the factors existing in one self. Physical situation, mental and spiritual or transpersonal conditions are the factors influencing intrinsic motivation.

The table below is a detailed illustration of sources of motivation needs, authorized by many researchers (Oxford & Shearin, 1994- p.15). A comparison between the results of our research and the facts shown in the table reveals that almost all the factors motivating IELTS candidates in Iran are, as follows:

According to the results of the current research there are several different factors motivating candidates towards taking the IELTS test. These highly depend to candidates themselves and fluctuate from one to the other. However, there is a fixed, hidden factor underlying the rest. This factor, prestige, is considered as a subcategory of extrinsic motivation, which has been explained above.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is test method facets presented by Bachman (1990). The motivation questionnaire administered in this study was developed based on the theoretical framework of the study.

Method

Participants

This study was conducted with 300 Iranian IELTS candidates who were to take the test and 20 teachers. The sampling procedure used in this study was purposive sampling, since it is believed that the participants in such studies must be typical informants of the population. All the participants sat for the actual IELTS test held in Tehran city during the year 2011. In fact, all the candidates taking that test were selected for this study. The participants were divided into two age groups: 20 to 30 and above 30. There were 220 participants aged between 20 to 30 and 80 participants above 30. All participants, both males and females, were from Iran and spoke Farsi as their first language. Participants were from 6 different cities of Iran. There were 145 males and 155 females. Candidates were of different educational background ranging from individuals having their high school diploma to those holding PhD. There were 200 candidates holding high school diploma or BA/S and only 100 participants holding MA/S or PhD.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study to collect the required data. A motivation questionnaire was developed by the researchers addressing the overall motivation of the candidates and teachers towards the IELTS test based on the theoretical framework adopted for this study (test method facets: Bachman 1990, p: 119). The format of the questionnaire items was Likert. The respondents were asked to indicate their attitude by choosing one of the five alternatives: Strongly agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and strongly disagree. To check the reliability of the fifty-nine item questionnaire, which is to measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire, Cronbach Alpha was used. Also, to check the validity of the questionnaire, factor analysis was run. Exploratory factor analysis with Vaimax rotation was run to find the underlying factors. The questionnaire intended to measure the candidates' motives for taking the IELTS test, factor analysis led to the validity of the questionnaire by yielding five main factors. The loadings above 0.30 were considered.

A small portion of the candidates, 30, were selected randomly to take part in semi-structured interviews conducted by the researchers. The interviews were recorded by permission and then transcribed for analysis. Transcribed protocols were segmented for finding recurring patterns emerging from them and then codified again by the researcher for key concepts and then by another coder. 30 participants were selected and invited randomly to produce vignettes in the form of written self-reports of their motivation(s). The written protocols were, then, codified for key concepts by the researcher. Since the key points stated by the participants in the interview and those who had produced written self- reports were quite similar, the researchers designed one coding scheme for the analysis of both of them. To calculate the inter- and intra- coder reliability indices the percentage of similarity between 10% of the qualitative data was calculated. The inter-coder reliability was proven to be 0.8 and the intra-coder reliability was 0.79.

Vignettes (Written self-reports) and Interviews

The qualitative data including the written self-reports and interviews were analyzed and codified and key concepts were extracted.

Almost 30 % of the respondents chose migration (for work , further study , living) as their major motive behind sitting the IELTS test , 60% for prestigious reasons − peer pressure - and the other 10% for no particular reason − they just wanted to have the certificate- just in case . Candidates maintained that at the first glance you may think that one takes the IELTS test to migrate, or to just tape the certificate above their desks. Yet, whether it had been for migration or the other reasons mentioned earlier, the main motive underlying the motivations brought above - for almost all the participants − quite shockingly was to just show off – either directly or indirectly .

Discussion and Conclusion

Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly highlights that Iranians' motives behind taking the IELTS test is clearly prestige. The overall assessment would be that Almost 80% of the respondents (60% to the motivation(s) questionnaire + 10% to the interview +10% to the vignette) sat the test either under peer pressure or other prestigious reasons.

To investigate whether there was a significant relationship between testees' characteristics including their gender, age, and educational background and their motives for taking the IELTS test, independent t-tests were run and no significant relationship was found.

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Sources of Motivational Needs	
Behavioral/External	- elicited by stimulus associated/ connected to innately connected stimulus - obtain desired, pleasant consequences (rewards) or escape/avoid undesired, unpleasant consequences - imitate positive models
Biological	- increase/decrease stimulation - activate senses (taste, touch, smell, etc.) - decrease hunger, thirst, discomfort, etc. - maintain homeostasis, balance
Affective	- increase/decrease affective dissonance (inconsistency) - increase feeling good - decrease feeling bad - increase security of or decrease threats to self-esteem - maintain levels of optimism and enthusiasm
Cognitive	- maintain attention to something interesting or threatening - develop meaning or understanding - increase/decrease cognitive disequilibrium; uncertainty - solve a problem or make a decision - figure something out - eliminate threat or risk
Co-native	- meet individually developed/selected goal - obtain personal dream - take control of one's life - eliminate threats to meeting goal, obtaining dream - reduce others' control of one's life
Spiritual	- understand purpose of one's life - connect self to ultimate unknowns