An Exploration of the Relationships Between Different Reading Strategies and IELTS Test Performance: IELTS Test Taking Strategies - Chinese Students

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ABSTRACT

This study explores which types of IELTS Academic Reading strategies are used, and the impact of these strategies on test outcomes. The study was a quantitative research, using descriptive-correlational design based on data collected from students at Sino-US University in China. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The method used in this study was a partial replication the work of a previous researcher’s exploration of the reading processes learners engage in when taking IELTS Reading tests. Participants first finished an IELTS reading test, and then completed a written retrospective protocol. The analysis reveals that there is a moderately positive relationship between the choice of text preview strategy (from 1 to 5) and the outcome. A pattern was identified that using expeditious reading strategies to initially locate information, and more careful reading strategies to identify answers to the question tasks was common among high-scoring participants.

KEYWORDS

China Education, English Learning, ESL, IELTS Reading Test, Learning Styles, Reading Pattern, Reading Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is the most widely used test of English for migration to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK. There is a considerable body of research on the validity of language tests in general, and on reading tests in particular, but for the most part, there is consensus on the relative effectiveness of the IELTS system (Williams, Ari, & Santamaria, 2011). It has gained recognition from over “10,000 universities, schools, employers and immigration bodies, including all universities in Australia and the UK and many of the leading institutions in the USA” (British Council, 2017a).

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According to the official IELTS data in 2016, test-takers took more than three million IELTS exams, which indicates the growing importance of the international English certification for graduate education and migration (British Council, 2017a). More importantly, it was estimated that there were 600,000 IELTS takers in China alone in 2017, most of whom were college students who wanted to go abroad for further education.

To get acceptance to a graduate program at a high ranking university, usually in the US or UK, Chinese undergraduates are expected to demonstrate a certain level of English skill reflected by their IELTS band scores, usually an overall score of 6.5 or higher with no sub-score (Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing) below 6.0. However, this requirement is not easy for many Chinese test-takers. There are several strategies used to prepare for and take the IELTS exam, Lin (2019), but despite extensive preparation, IELTS test scores are frequently unsatisfactory (Yu, 2014). Readers must, according to Katalayi and Sivasubramaniam (2013):

Deploy strategies that reflect the fact that they have been actually actively working to understand the text, to understand the expectations of the questions, to understand the meaning and implications of the different item options in light of the text, and to select and discard options based on the way they understand the text. (p. 883)

Time limitations are also often a concern for Reading Test takers (Sireci, 2004). For example, in the reading test, one of the major concerns is the time limit because they only have 1 hour to process around 3000 words and answer 40 questions. To overcome it, students may employ reading strategies to increase their reading speed and potentially their test scores (Everett & Colman, 2003; Mickan & Motteram, 2009). Therefore, finding the optimal strategy to obtain the highest possible score within the allocated time is of importance to IELTS test-takers, their parents, and educational institutions in China. This paper seeks to explore which strategies are useful and which are not.

Definition of Terms

- **IELTS**: International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is the most widely used test of English for study, work, and migration to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK;
- **Careful reading**: Weir et al.’s (2009) define Careful reading as being characterized by identifying lexis of understanding syntax, seeking an accurate comprehension of the explicit meaning and making propositional inferences;
- **Expeditious reading**: Urquhart and Weir (1998) use the term “expeditious reading” to describe “how readers process texts quickly and selectively, i.e., expeditiously, to extract important information in line with intended purposes”;
- **Descriptive Correlational Design**: According to Lappe (2000): this method aims “to describe the relationship among variables rather than to infer cause and effect relationships” (p. 81) and is “useful for describing how one phenomenon is related to another in situations where the researcher has no control over the independent variables, the variables that are believed to cause or influence the dependent or outcome variable” (p. 81).

Significance of the Problem

According to the statistics showed on the IELTS official website, though there were about 600,000 IELTS takers in China in 2017, only 30% met the requirement of the British Council (2017b), and the registration fee for one examination was ¥2020 (approximately USD300), in 2017 and is expected to keep increasing in the future.

There is a consensus regarding the link between English language proficiency, as measured by the IELTS test, and academic performance (Feast, 2002; Green, 2005). Nation (2008) explains that
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