

IELTS Preparation as an Undergraduate University Course: A Case Study

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Abstract: This case study investigates an accredited IELTS preparation course delivered to undergraduate students at a university in Japan. Using a range of contextual data, the paper highlights some of the challenges and possibilities of offering IELTS preparation courses in Japanese universities. It also examines how the IELTS test influences the way instructors teach preparation courses along with external factors that may shape the experience of students.

Keywords: *IELTS, test preparation, washback.*

Context

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a standardised English exam offered in either general or academic formats and assesses the four skills. Candidates receive a score from bands zero to nine on each skill module and an overall average. It is a high stakes test and IELTS scores are commonly used by universities overseas as part of their entry requirements for international students. In Japan, IELTS is administered through EIKEN, the British Council, and more recently the Japan Study Abroad Foundation (JSAF). Many undergraduate university students in Japan who take IELTS seek to obtain admission to study abroad programmes with a score of band 5.5 or 6 overall, allowing them to take undergraduate courses at an overseas university for a semester or a whole academic year. Due to the tremendous increase in demand for IELTS in Japan since 2009 (EIKEN, 2017), universities are responding by offering test preparation courses in exchange for credit.

This case study focuses on IELTS preparation courses offered to undergraduates at a Japanese university. This was the first time the university had run the course. Two separate programmes united only by loosely defined course objectives ran over a period of 14 weeks with each lesson being 90 minutes, amounting to 21 total contact hours. At this point it should be noted that the duration of the course in no way qualifies as ‘intensive’ test preparation study, defined in the literature as a minimum of 200 hours of full-contact teaching over 10-12 weeks (Elder, C., & O’Loughlin, 2003, p. 210).

In spite of the massive increase in the number of test-takers, very little research has been done on IELTS in the Japan context, especially in connection with preparation courses for university students. If universities are going to offer IELTS preparation as optional English modules on four-year degree courses, a better understanding of

approaches, and the effects of the test on teaching and learning is necessary. This study aims to contribute to this process of understanding. Hopefully it will be of use to those with or without prior knowledge of the IELTS test who are teaching preparation courses to undergraduates at universities.

Literature Review

A great deal of academic research on IELTS pertains to testing the effects of preparation courses on test-takers performance. Much of the debate surrounding their effectiveness originates from claims made in an early version of the official IELTS handbook stating that with 200 hours of test preparation candidates can improve their score by one band (IELTS, 2002, p. p.22). This formula has been tested in various studies across different modules and course durations. Research by Brown (1998) cautiously suggests that writing preparation courses with 70 hours of instruction over 10 weeks may increase writing test scores by one band. Similarly, Rao et al (2003) found that a mere 30 hours of intensive study significantly increased writing scores on the general test. In a longer course, Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) recorded significant links between the prescribed minimum of 200 hours over 10 to 12 weeks intensive academic English study and an increase of around half a band, although they found that IELTS specific study had no extra impact. These findings are rejected by Green, who points out the 200 hour formula cannot be proven for the writing module, and that overall more noticeable gains from preparation courses occur exclusively at the lower initial ability levels (2005, p. 58, 2007, p. 93). An experimental study at University of Hong Kong comparing a control group with a preparation course providing 15 hours of tuition over a period of 10 to 20 weeks found no significant difference in test scores (Zhengdong, 2009). Similarly, no improvement in test performance was found after 40 hours of intensive preparation study over eight weeks in a pre-/post-test study in Pakistan (Memon, 2015). Research on an IELTS listening preparation course of 15 hours duration over five weeks found no significant gains and furthermore that specific IELTS preparation advantaged candidates scores no more than a general four-skills English course (Coomber, 1998). The disappearance of the 200 hours formula in the 2007 edition of the IELTS Handbook is therefore not surprising. Nor is the way that this study does not attempt to measure the effects of our preparation courses of test performance given the low intensity of the tuition provided and the lack of conclusive evidence emanating from preparation courses of much longer duration.

More relevant to this case study is research related to issues of 'washback', broadly defined as "the influence of testing on teaching and learning" (Bailey, 1996, p. 259). According to Bailey, washback has several dimensions including washback to the learner, for instance applying test-taking strategies, and washback to the programme, for example in the form of teachers focusing heavily on tougher sections of the test in class (1996, pp. 264-266). The examples given here are positive, but washback could also have negative effects on learners and courses, for instance drops in confidence in repeated

test-takers receiving varied results (Mickan, P., & Motterham, 2006, p. 19). In a recent study on IELTS washback in the Japan context, Allen illustrates the way IELTS positively motivated students to focus on improving their weaker productive skills of speaking and writing, enhanced learner perceptions of their development in these skills, and encouraged them to develop better study habits (2017, p. 46). Washback research in IELTS is a more important focus in this case study due to the effects that can occur even in contexts with minimal exposure to test preparation tuition.

Method

This investigation centers on two IELTS preparation courses running simultaneously over a fourteen-week semester. Students enrolled were either second, third, or fourth-year undergraduates. Course A was taught by myself and had 27 students and course B was taught by a colleague (hereafter, teacher B) with 25 enrolled. Both instructors were mid-career professionals with experience of tutoring other test preparation courses at the university level.

A case study methodology was chosen since it uses diverse sources of data to probe into a recent episode in a real-life scenario in which both phenomenon and context are indistinct from one another (Yin, 2003, pp. 13-14). Data collection was multifaceted and involved a combination of classroom observations, in-formal discussions and emails between both course instructors, self-reflection on core course materials and syllabus design, and administration of an end-of-course questionnaire.

The questionnaire was conducted in the final lesson. It was completed by 41 respondents and contained 10 closed-ended questions (see Appendix 1). Consent forms were completed beforehand in respect of ethical considerations and all materials were provided in both English and Japanese. Various aspects of the course and washback factors were analysed together with questionnaire responses and extant literature in an attempt to explain and gain deeper understanding of the IELTS preparation course in the present context. More specifically, the case study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How can IELTS test preparation courses be conducted as accredited undergraduate courses at universities?
2. How do washback effects influence teaching decisions on undergraduate IELTS preparation courses?

One major limitation of this study was that qualitative data using interviews with students was not collected. As a result, individual perspectives on washback to the learner could not be included in the study.

Findings and Discussion

The questionnaire results provided some background on our students that could be compared with other evidence of test-takers. Of the students who completed our courses, 20 had taken the IELTS test before. Research indicates that preparation course students who had taken the test before taking courses would probably not improve beyond that, with initial test score of a student at the beginning of a course regarded as the best benchmark of how much a student will improve, even after 200 hours of intensive study (Elder & Loughlin, 2003, p. 226). Of those who had previous test experience, the mode test score was 5.5, which reflects the entry requirements for one-year study abroad programmes such as those organized by JSAF. From the sample, only seven students had participated in an IELTS preparation course before. That 13 students had previously taken the test without any preparation tuition correlates with other evidence suggesting that many do not prepare specifically for IELTS. A survey of 78 candidates at a test centre revealed that only 2% of candidates had taken test preparation courses (Mickhan and Motterham, 2006, p. 18).

Influenced by the modular design of IELTS, both course instructors employed a competency-based curriculum (Richards and Rogers, 2001) based on desired learning outcomes and the ways students had to apply skills and strategies learned during the course in the assessment stages, as they would have to in the actual IELTS test. Having time restrictions and attempting to cover all four modules requires the structure of a clear IELTS syllabus (John-Baptiste, 2010, p. 33). Syllabuses for both courses covered all four modules but did so using divergent approaches over the 14 lessons (see table 1). Course A covered the modules in order, spending two or three consecutive lessons on each whilst giving priority to speaking and writing skills. This course also included both mid-term and final exams. Although the test modules also influenced the syllabus design for course B, a different approach was taken in which the skills were alternated each week. Also, teacher B implemented a pre-/post-test strategy. This pattern was discussed between the instructors and teacher B rationalised the rotation of modules on a weekly basis through the desire to maintain students interest with variety. Teacher B observed that this was having a positive impact on the class as students seemed to be engaged throughout the course. My choice of allocating more lesson time to the productive than the passive skills did not bring about any directly observable gains. However, this prioritising is consistent with research which recognises the potency of washback from preparation for Japanese university entrance exams and the advantages gained in reading and listening modules, compared to English speaking and writing skills which are less developed (Allen 2017, p.46). Due to my course spending more time on assessment and introduction overall however, course B was able to spend more class time on the modules. In a discussion on the use of a pre-/post-test arrangement, teacher B reported a slight increase in results on the final exam. Although, it was conceded that this improvement could also have been affected by skills practice from other English university courses or extra-curricular language study, as was the case for Zhengdong (2009, p. 37).

Table 1. Allocation of lessons to the four modules and assessment

Course A (no of lessons allocated)	Course B (no of lessons allocated)
Introduction (1)	Introduction and pre-test (1)
Listening (2)	Speaking (1)
Speaking (3)	Reading (1)
Speaking and Listening mid-term tests (2)	Writing (1)
Reading (2)	Listening (1) [<i>sequence repeated 3 times</i>]
Writing (3)	Final Exam (1)
Reading and Writing Final Exams (1)	

When asked in the questionnaire whether sufficient class time had been spent preparing for each module, the highest levels of certainty were attached to the speaking (24 agreed, 14 strongly agreed) and writing modules (20 agreed, 11 strongly agreed). These findings ought to be accepted on the understanding that student perceptions of whether sufficient time is spent on particular areas is influenced by the emphasis teachers place on their importance (see Green, 2006, p. 131). In my course, more stress was put on importance of developing the productive skills. In regard to the listening module, students expressed slightly less certainty that enough time had been spent with eight answering ‘not sure’ and four disagreeing. This response may have been skewed by teacher B being absent for one of the listening module lessons. Although it is worth mentioning that similar results were found in relation to the reading module. This expression of insufficient focus on the reading and listening modules again brings us back to the needs of Japanese IELTS candidates and Allen’s (2017) point on the washback effects of entrance exams and the necessary development of the productive skills. Therefore, it is possible that because students are simply not used to spending so much time speaking and writing in a classroom when preparing for exams, the time spent on those skills in relation to passive skills which they are more familiar with practicing was perceived as being out of balance.

Syllabus design alternatives are possible but may be challenging in the university context. In her IELTS preparation case study, John-Baptiste (2010) draws upon and implements D’Andrea’s (1999) outcomes-based learning in which the course goals are designed around the competencies, abilities, and personal characteristics of individual learners. This was not possible in our case for several reasons. Firstly, no background information was available on the learners and class lists were only provided several days before the course started. Another barrier was that the syllabus had to be designed, produced, and handed out to students in the first lesson. On reflection of my experiences during the course however, employing an outcomes-based model however could have been useful. Both instructors mentioned in discussions that level differences between students were clearly apparent. Having prior knowledge of the abilities and test experience of individuals learners could have allowed us to make more informed choices on the types of teaching materials we selected and the arrangement of study groups within the class.

In both courses, lesson content and activities were largely determined by the core

textbook. The design of the syllabus ensured that the textbook was not a substitute for one, as had been a previous experience of mine when teaching IELTS preparation at language schools. My choice of *'New Insight into IELTS'* as a core text was based on my familiarity with the book after using it successfully for other preparation courses. Teacher B based his choice on reviews, ratings and sample chapters from online book retailers and opted for *'The Official Cambridge Guide to IELTS'*. Materials provoked a great deal of discussion between both instructors. Both texts are mainstream resources designed for the general international audience, and therefore are mainly targeted at upper-intermediate level learners. We both were pleased with the full coverage of helpful strategies for different question types across the various tasks of each module. There is a clear sense of guided washback evident here as a well-designed textbook immediately equips the instructor with IELTS specific strategies that can be practiced in class. Our positive evaluation of the chosen texts seemed to reflect the concerns of other IELTS teachers in that materials need to develop the four skills and provide strategies, not just simulate the test (Everett and Coleman, 1999, p. 35). However, the difficulty of the core textbook activities in comparison to average ability levels in our classes caused some issues. This was especially true in regard to the reading and listening materials that both classes struggled with, but also with instructions and rubrics within the text. Although both instructors agreed it was necessary to breakdown textbook activity instructions to aid understanding, much deliberation was had over the extent to which readings and listenings should be simplified bearing in mind they were supposed to emulate the actual standardised test materials. In this sense, there was some disagreement about the benefits of adapting materials to highlight and adequately practice the strategy, or maintain the authentic difficulty of the task.

A further challenge of implementing an IELTS preparation course as an undergraduate university programme relates to assessment and grading. As part of the overall student evaluation on both courses, 30% of the student's grade was allocated to assessment. This was a mandatory aspect of the syllabus design stipulated by the university. Because both instructors were using authentic IELTS practice test materials for assessments it was not feasible to moderate the difficulty of these materials to the ability of the students in the class. As mentioned earlier, IELTS is a standardized test and grades candidates from bands zero to nine, with the highest band signifying near-native level proficiency. For assessments on the speaking and writing modules, my approach was to give students an accurate IELTS grade using my abilities as a certified examiner in both of these modules. Since it became clear from observing my class' engagement with test-like materials that no student in the group was above the 6.5 band, grading fairly meant setting the pass threshold to ensure that students would not fail the mid-term or final assessment as a result of not being able to score above this band. Nonetheless, grading and assessment of IELTS preparation creates a dilemma based on whether to grade using the official bands and rubrics to provide students with an accurate read on their actual IELTS level, or to generate a bespoke grading system based on module-specific strategies covered during in the course.

The final four items on the questionnaire probed into the objectives of the IELTS

preparation course and contained questions about modifying the grand design of the programme. A positive response was given to the idea of separating the IELTS preparation course into two: with one course focusing on the speaking and writing modules, and the other on the reading and listening. A convincing 14 and 13 respondents agreed or strongly agreed respectively with this proposal indicating a preference for a separation of the passive and productive skill modules. Less enthusiasm was given to the idea to having a separate module for each of the four skills with 14 people disagreeing. Meanwhile, there was moderately warm reception to keeping the format of the course the same with 11 in agreement but 12 unsure. An alternative form of IELTS preparation course not included in the questionnaire but being used by another university in Japan is the option of flexible self-directed independent learning modules (Morrison 2011). This format operates on a completely voluntary basis allowing students to enroll on an eight week course and use an individual learning plan to work towards personalised IELTS exam goals through a series of learning modules and reflection journals. On top of this, students also have access to three 30-minute face-to-face supervisions with an advisor.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates some of the challenges posed to teachers attempting to implement a comprehensive IELTS preparation course as an undergraduate university course with limited in-class tuition time and various syllabus constraints. Given the lack of conclusive evidence proving relationships between preparation course completion and significant gains in test scores, with a course of this nature the best that can be hoped for is an introduction to the IELTS test covering selected aspects of each module and opportunities for students to gain experience with authentic test materials. However, there remain difficult choices to be made by instructors as they attempt to prioritise their teaching. Washback effects interact tremendously with these crucial decisions and heavily influence teacher choices concerning syllabus design, lesson content, materials, grading, and assessment. It is essential that instructors are familiar enough with the modules and task types to allow them to be aware of washback effects and ways in which the test is influencing their teaching. Further research in this context is necessary to investigate the washback effects of the IELTS test and other influences shaping the experience of Japanese learners taking preparation courses by drawing on larger samples of qualitative and quantitative data. Allen's study of Japanese undergraduate students experience with IELTS makes steps in this direction by finding positive washback effects from both the IELTS test and entrance exam preparation (Allen, 2017, p. 46). Future investigations into IELTS preparation courses at universities in Japan could shed more light on these and other potential washback effects together with best practice in teaching to complement these.

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Appendix 1

IELTS End-of-course Questionnaire

Instructions: Circle Yes or No Yes か No に○を付けてください

- a) Have you ever taken the IELTS test before? Yes / No
IELTS テストを受けたことがありますか。

If 'Yes', please circle your overall score below: 'Yes' の場合、下記の総合点に○を付けてください

3 3.5 4 4.5 5 5.5 6 6.5 7

- b) Have you ever taken an IELTS preparation course before? Yes / No
以前、IELTS 準備コースを受けたことがありますか

Instructions: Please use this scale to respond. 回答にはこのスケールを使用してください

Strongly disagree 全くそう思わない	Disagree そう思わない	Not sure どちらとも言えない	Agree そう思う	Strongly Agree とてもそう思う
1	2	3	4	5

Circle the number to select: 1 つだけ○を付けてください

e.g. 1 2 3 4 5

- c) In this course, I feel like we have spent enough time on the Listening module.

このコースで、私達はリスニングにおいて十分な時間を使ったように思う

1 2 3 4 5

- d) In this course, I feel like we have spent enough time on the Speaking module.

このコースで、私達はスピーキングにおいて十分な時間を使ったように思う

1 2 3 4 5

- e) In this course, I feel like we have spent enough time on the Reading module.

このコースで、私達はリーディングにおいて十分な時間を使ったように思う

1 2 3 4 5

- f) In this course, I feel like we have spent enough time on the Writing module.

このコースで、私達はライティングにおいて十分な時間を使ったように思う

1 2 3 4 5

- g) The IELTS course should be divided into two separate courses: IELTS のコースは2つのコースに分けられているべきだ

● IELTS Speaking & Writing ● IELTS Reading & Listening.

1 2 3 4 5

- h) The IELTS course should be divided into four separate courses: IELTS のコースは4つのコースに分けられているべきだ

● IELTS Listening ● IELTS Speaking ● IELTS Reading ● IELTS Writing.

1 2 3 4 5

- i) The IELTS course should remain the same, covering Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing modules all together in one course.

IELTS コースはリスニング、スピーキング、リーディング、ライティングの各モジュールを1つのコースにまとめ、今までと同様にすべきだ

1 2 3 4 5

- j) After completing this IELTS course, I feel prepared enough to take the IELTS examination.

この IELTS コースを修了後、私は IELTS の試験を受けるのに十分な準備が出来ていると感じる

1 2 3 4 5