IRANIAN STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE ON THE IELTS: A QUESTION OF ACHIEVEMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension has won much effort on the part of teachers, testers, and researchers in Iran due to the fact that the immediate need of Iranian students at different university levels is the ability to read in order to get new information on the topic they are studying. The question raised is how much reading practice can move learners along the horizontal axis of development predetermined by high stake tests like the IETLS. To this end, this study tried to investigate the relationship between Iranian students' reading ability varying in their level of education (sophomore, junior, and senior) and their IELTS band score. Data from 431 Iranian students taking the IETLS were collected and analyzed descriptively and inferentially. The results showed that there was no significant relation between learners' level of education and the IETLS band score within the present data; that is learners were not different in terms of their level of education. Surprisingly, the highest band scores of 7 and 8 on the IELTS belonged to students in the lower levels of education.

Keywords: IELTS, IETLS band score, Approaches to Teaching Reading Comprehension, High Stake Tests.

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension has become the center of attention for many teachers, testers, and researchers in Iran because the immediate need of Iranian students at different university levels is being able to get new information on the topic they are reading (Atai & Nazari, in press; Attarzadeh, 2011; Erfani, Iranmehr, & Davari, 2010). Due to this reason, reading comprehension has drawn many students' attention as the topic of their MA theses or PhD dissertations in comparison with other skills. For instance, from among 53 MA theses and PhD dissertation abstracts published in Farhady (2006), 26 abstracts were directly related to the reading comprehension ability or one aspect of reading comprehension.

By the same token, this ability has won material developers' and test makers' attention in Iran; more than 70 reading textbooks have been written on reading comprehension for different purposes such as General English, Pre-English, or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This ever increasing number alone is a proof for the degree of attention. Reading skill is receiving from material developers as well as teachers and learners in the Iranian context.

This fact has not been limited to Iran; the importance of reading seems to be universal. As Draper and Siebert (2004) mention "literacy educators have repeatedly issued calls for the teaching of reading and writing across the curriculum" (p. 927). This means that in countries where English is the instrument through which other subjects are studied, the goal is to help students learn to read and write in their fields. Elsewhere, Eskey (1986) refer to reading ability as one of the most vital skills in English speaking countries in general and EFL and ESL academic contexts in particular. The students in English speaking countries, as well as non-English speaking countries, have to learn such an ability in order to survive academically. Even in the nonacademic world, reading is the sign of literacy; people need to read for either intellectual profit or pleasure. Moreover, Lee (2005) states "more accomplished writers have read more than less accomplished writers and that those who participate in in-school free-reading programs, such as sustained silent reading, write better at the end of the program than comparison students" (p. 340).

This interest in reading comprehension ability has not been limited to the realm of teaching, however. In the realm of

testing, as reported by Mitchell (1985), there were 97 types of reading tests to that date; the number of which must have augmented by 2011.

Reading Comprehension

Although reading comprehension has a long and rich history (Duke & Pearson, 2001; Grabe, 2009), there has been no considerable agreement on what the nature of reading might be, how it should be measured, and in what way it should be taught (Alderson, 1984, 1990, 1991, 2000). What seems to be common among test designers and textbook writers, however, is that texts are usually followed by a couple of questions, each of which seems to measure one aspect of reading comprehension (Alderson, 1990). It does not matter how teachers approach reading textbooks in their classrooms, the textbooks usually consist of texts followed by several questions or tasks. This may certify the fact that mostly reading comprehension ability is associated with the ability to follow a reading task or answer a reading question. In this respect, much effort has been devoted to explain the nature of such tasks or questions made for each text (Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 1991, 1999; Nuttall, 1996; Rost, 1993, Swaffar, Arens, & Byrnes, 1991 to name but a few). The result of such endeavors has been the adoption of different strategies and approaches in developing reading materials for teaching purposes. Among these, one can name the most famous ones as content based approach or theme based approach (Alexander, Kulikowich, & Jetton, 1994), procedural based approach (Swaffar, Arens, & Byrnes, 1991), and task-based approach to teaching (Prabhu, 1987) and testing (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

In content based or theme based approaches, a series of related themes are used one following another. The purpose is to teach students how to communicate with authentic materials, and to expand their vocabulary knowledge on a specific topic or theme. This approach is mostly used for English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Content based approach to reading enjoys several advantages. Singer (1990), for example, believes that thematically organized materials are easier to remember and learn. Elsewhere, Anderson (1990) states that studying through the coherent and well-organized content-based curricula

leads to deeper learning. Moreover, Alexander, Kulikowich, and Jetton (1994) relate content based classes to students' motivation because they believe that in this way students would be able to elaborate and recall information better. Also, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) maintain that learning through content based curriculum would result in a progressively more knowledge gain in comparison with superficially developed and disparate short reading passages.

The second view is the procedural model proposed by Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991). Accordingly, unlike the previous views towards the reading process, the procedural model tends to ascribe both text and reader oriented factors in reading comprehension to the "macro level" processing as well. According to Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991), the previous researches on interactive models of reading, as well as the previous linear views towards reading process, tend to classify the "text-based" parts of reading into the "micro level" and the "reader-based" parts into the "macro level" processing. In the procedural model, however, the text factors have been ascribed to the macro level processing. Therefore, the reading process is still defined in terms of two levels of bottom-up and top-down processing, but this time the macro level (top-down) processing encompasses both text and reader factors not just reader oriented factors. It is speculated that a competent reader should be efficient in both levels meaning that any deficiencies at any levels (micro and macro) might lead to misunderstandings of text meaning. To decipher the meaning of a piece of discourse, the learner should go through six stages, starting with "lexical" and proceeding to "sentential" and "supersentential" understanding of language in the text (Swafffar, et al., 1991, p. 78).

The last one is the task based approach or skill based approach to teaching reading comprehension (mainly Prabhu, 1987) and to testing skills (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In this approach to language teaching in general (Prabhu, 1987), and reading comprehension teaching in particular (for example, Nuttall, 1996), several tasks are selected and mostly organized thematically. It is believed that because we cannot specify subskills from one another,

the best way to approach reading, speaking, writing and listening is through stimulation of target tasks within classroom (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

The IELTS

The International English Language Tests System (IELTS) is one of the high stake tests constructed with the purpose of assessing language abilities of those who intend to continue their academic study in English speaking countries (Alderson, 2000; Douglas, 2000). Recently, some universities in Iran announced their reliance on the IELTS test results, along with other national and international high stake tests, as partial criteria for acceptance of students in postgraduate programs. The importance and high standard of the test is further accentuated when the pervasive employment of the test score around the world is considered. This shows that the test enjoys the highest standards to become one of the world wide accepted testing methodology for assessing learners' capability of using English (IELTS Handbook, 2007).

The test was the result of raised attention to the importance of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) in 1980 (Clapham, 1993). The original form named ELTS aiming to assess learners' ability to use language in different academic areas of physical, medical and social science. Later, under the influence of Munby's (1978) taxonomy, the test has changed to IELTS to ensure authenticity of the target situation. The idea was that test should measure language ability not specific knowledge (Alderson, 2000).

Reading part in the IELTS includes a variety of questions aiming to measure reading comprehension skills (Alderson, 1990, 2000). The IELTS preparatory textbooks cover a large number reading skills such as scanning, skimming, transcoding information, reading for main idea and specific details, understanding paraphrases, distinguishing between facts and opinions, and understanding cause and effect relationship (Jakeman & McDowell, 1999; Weir & Porter, 1994). Although the nature of relationship between these skills is questioned by different scholars (Alderson, 1990; Weir, et al, 1994), what is agreed upon is that the higher raw score indicates a better position of the test taker in the band score. For example, those who intend to study linguistically demanding majors like medicine, law,

linguistics, journalism, and library studies are required to earn band scores of 7.5 to 9. On the other hand, for those who are to study linguistically less demanding majors like animal husbandry, catering, and fire services, a band score of 6 is acceptable.

The Study

As was stated, the importance of reading comprehension in the world (Alderson, 2000, Grabe, 2009) and in Iran (Atai & Nazari, in press; Attarzadeh, 2011) has been frequently emphasized in the literature. Now the question is whether or not, with such a globally and locally emphasis on reading comprehension, reading comprehension teaching been led to some prestigious point in Iran as far as universal standard achievement is concerned. In other words, does it meet any requirements established, stipulated, and co-agreed by some universal criteria like those stipulated by Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (2001)? To address this question, the present study aimed at examining the reading skill of Iranian undergraduates against the IELTS criteria which are based on CEFR. Specifically this study investigated the following questions:

- Is there any significant difference between learners' level of education (sophomore, junior, and senior) and the IELTS band score?

- Qualitatively speaking, what levels of education does the highest score on the IELTS band score belong?

In this study, Freshmen were not included due to ensure that learners have passed at least one of their reading compulsory courses.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were originally 600 English major students in Iran varying in their English proficiency and level of education. These participants were selected through convenient sampling from different universities in Iran (Azad University Central Branch, Roodehen University, Tehran University, Shahid Beheshtee University, IUT University, and Iran University of Science and Technology (UST).

Tables 1 & 2 present the number and the related frequency of participants in terms of their levels of education and major. As shown in Table 1, from among 460 students who

LEDU	Frequency	Percent
Sophomore	147	34.1
Junior	136	31.6
Senior	148	34.3
Total	431	100.0

Table 1. Frequency by the Levels of Education (LEDU)

Major	Frequency	Percent
Literature	113	26.2
Translation	313	72.6
Teaching	5	1.1
Total	431	100

Table 2. Frequency by Major

participated in this study, 147 were sophomores, 136 were juniors, and 148 were seniors. Also 29 students did not report their level of education so they were omitted from final analyses too. Moreover, the present study did not take freshmen's performance on the IELTS. The reason for excluding freshman students from sampling was to ensure that all participants have taken their first reading comprehension course as their credit course.

Table 2 shows the frequency of the participants by major. As it is signified, from among 431 remained data, 113 students studied Literature, 313 students studied translation, and 5 students studied TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) as their major.

Instrumentation

The instrument used in this study was the reading section of the IELTS sample test. The IELTS reading module consisted of three passages. Passage one included 13 short answer questions whose answers were exactly stated in the passage. Passage two encompassed eight matching questions and seven fill-in-the blank questions. Passage three included four multiple choice and four matching questions. The students were asked to read the passages and, for the first passage, write short answers to questions in the appropriate places on their answer sheets and, for the last two passages, answer the questions by writing the appropriate letter in the corresponding box on their answer sheets.

The first 13 items seemed to measure different abilities such as understanding the implied information, searching information, interpreting the attitudinal meaning abilities, paraphrasing, understanding the propositional meaning

and critical thinking. The second passage comprised 15 items, eight of which were assumed to measure the ability to understand the main idea of different paragraphs. The last seven items, related to the second passage, seemed to measure the ability of the readers to summarize the text. The third passage consisted of eight items; four of which were multiple-choice (MC) questions, and the rest were transcoding information items which required the readers to match text with graphs. The four MC items were intended to measure the ability to understand the cohesive ties, cause and effect relationships, the explicitly stated information, and inference based on the unstated information in the text successively.

According to IELTS homepage, the total IELTS score is reported on a scale starting from 0 which means no assessable information provided by the attendees to 9 which indicates the proficient user of language in the sense that the attendees have fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding. A look at the band scores provided on this homepage, one can see that the band score of 5 is the lowest acceptable band score which requires a raw score of at least 15 out of 40. Nevertheless, as the test used in this study was an IELTS sample test with 36 items, the researchers had to come up with a rough estimation of the raw score of every band out of 36 items. Table 3 bears both raw scores (out of 40 and out of 36).

As is shown in Table 4, English major students should get the band score of 7.5 to 9 which equals the raw score of 30 out of 40 or 24 and more out of 36. Therefore, according to what British Council reported (Table 4), English major students require gaining the raw score of 30 and above to be considered as competent and efficient readers within this context.

It can be further seen in Table 4 that the IELTS band score needed for non-English majors such as animal husbandry, catering, and fire services is 6 and a score of 5.5 is

Band Score	Raw Score out of 40	Raw Score out of 36
5	15	13.5
6	23	20.7
7*	30	27
8*	35	31.5

* Acceptable band Score for English Major Students

Table 3. Academic Reading Band score Raw score out of 40

Band	Linguistically demanding (a)	Linguistically less demanding (b)	Linguistically demanding training courses (c)	Linguistically less demanding training courses (d)
7.5-9.0	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
7.0	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.5	English study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.0	English study needed	English Study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable
5.5	English study needed	English study needed	English study needed	Probably acceptable

a. Medicine, Law, Linguistics, Journalism, Library Studies
b. Agriculture, Pure Mathematics, Technology, Computer-Based Work, Telecommunications
c. Air Traffic Control Engineering, Pure Applied Sciences, Industrial Safety
d. Animal Husbandry, Catering, Fire Services

Table 4. Interpretation of Results Based on Band Score for Different Majors

considered as "probably acceptable". Therefore, it can be concluded that a minimum band score of 5.5 is required for being considered for admission to any university with English as the medium of instruction. Therefore, applicants with a score of 5 or less are considered as inefficient readers and language users as a whole. According to the British Council specification, a learner with a band score of 4 is considered as "limited user", 3 as "extremely limited user" and 1 as "no user".

Data Collection

The data for the study were gathered from different universities as stated earlier in this article to see what percent of Iranian students at different levels of BA across different English majors of translation, teaching, and literature could observe the demand of the British council as far as the IELTS is considered. The screened data was subjected to SPSS. As is shown in Table 5, the test showed an acceptable reliability index of 0.81. Also, as signified in this table, the mean score and standard deviation indicates that the test was almost difficult for the majority of the participants as the mean of the test is lower than 18.

Results and Findings

Descriptive Statistics

Table 6 shows the frequency of students who have achieved different band scores of the IELTS from 4 to 8. As

	Mean	SD	No. of Items	No of Participants	Alpha
IELTS	12.89	6.11	36	431	.81

Table 5. Descriptive Analyses and Reliability Index of the IELTS exemplar

Band Score	Frequency	Percent
4	228	52.9
5	152	35.3
6	48	11.1
7	2	.5
8	1	.2
Total	431	100.0

Table 6. Frequency by Band Score

shown in Table 6 from among 431 students who participated in this study, the majority of the students, that is, 228 students, have got the band score of 4, 152 students have got the band score of 5, 48 ones have got the band score of 6 and only 2 and 1 students have got the band score of 7 and 8 respectively.

Inferential Statistics

To answer the first question of this study, that is, " is there any difference between Iranian students' performance on the IELTS across different levels of education (sophomore, junior, and senior), a one way ANOVA was run using SPSS. The results are shown in Tables 7, 8, 9 & 10. Table 7 shows the Levene Statistics for the Test of Homogeneity of Variances. From Table 7, the reported value of F is not significant; this indicates that there is no evidence for heterogeneity of variance.

Table 8 reports the results of the one way ANOVA. From this table, F (2, 428) is statistically significant. Based on these results it can be concluded that it seems that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the three levels of education on the band scores.

However, to locate the difference we need to look at the Tukey test which is less stringent than Scheffe test. The results are shown in Table 9. From this table, although F is significant, no two groups are identified as significantly different by the Tukey tests. According to Hatch and Lazarton (1991), this happens if the reported significant F is

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.590	2	428	.555

Table 7. Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.491	2	1.745	3.394	.034
Within Groups	220.068	428	.514		
Total	223.559	430			

Table 8. ANOVA of the Band Score by the Level of Education

		Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
(I) LEDU	(J) LEDU			
Sophomore	Junior	0.008	0.085	0.995
	Senior	0.185	0.083	0.069
Junior	Sophomore	0.008	0.085	0.995
	Senior	0.193	0.085	0.061
Senior	Sophomore	0.185	0.083	0.069
	Junior	0.193	0.085	0.061

Table 9. Tukey HSD Test of Band Score by the Levels of Education

the artifact of large sample used in the study not the real difference.

To find about the significance and importance of F value, the eta squared value which is calculated by dividing the sum of squares between by the sum of squares total is reported. The obtained eta square is 0.014 which is lower than eta critical which is 0.14. The result should be equal to or higher than 0.14 to conclude a significant and important F value. As Hatch and Lazarton (1991) state the eta-squared for ANOVA is like squaring the Pearson r for correlation. Accordingly, this is the distinction made between statistical significance and meaningfulness. Although the result of this study shows significant differences in Table 9, the difference is not meaningful.

Table 10 reports the Tukey subtest result. Since there is not any difference between the three groups (P = 0.059), they form a single group.

Qualitative Analysis

To answer the second question of this study, the data was probed carefully. The result is shown in Table 11. As shown in this table, from among those who have got the band score 7 (two students), one was studying at his or her English

	N	Subset for alpha = .05
LEDU		1
Junior	136	4.5294
Sophomore	147	4.5374
Senior	148	4.7230
Sig.		.059

Means for groups in homogeneous subsets are displayed.
a Uses Harmonic Mean Sample Size = 143.455.
b The group sizes are unequal. The harmonic mean of the group sizes is used. Type I error levels are not guaranteed.

Table 10. Tukey Test for Subset

LEDU	Raw Score	Band Score
sophomore	29.00	7.00
Senior	29.00	7.00
Junior	32.00	8.00

Table 11. The highest scores of the subjects

related major at the level of sophomore and one at the level of senior. Also the highest band score, which was 8, belonged to a student from junior level of education.

This indicates that gaining a high score on the IELTS is an idiosyncratic experience and not as the result of English education at university level.

Discussion

This study aimed at examining Iranian situation against the IELTS criteria which is made based on the Council of Europe framework. The question of this study was "is there any significant difference between Iranian students' level of education (sophomore, junior, and senior) and IELTS band score?" It was hoped to find a significant difference between the students' performance on the IELTS across different levels of education (sophomore, junior, and senior). To answer this question the data was subjected to univariate analysis (ANOVA). The result showed that although F turned out to be significant, no differences could be located in Tukey test. This shows that the significant difference is the size effect of data. That is no two groups were identified as significantly different from each other by the Tukey test. It can, therefore, be said that the participants of the study all formed one group. Further exploring the data indicates that the highest band scores of 7 and 8 belong to sophomore (7) , senior (7) and junior (8) students. This indicates that learners' private study could be alone the indicator of their success in gaining reading proficiency. This means that with regards to global criteria, teaching the reading skill has not been successful enough to change the reading ability of the students as they enter higher levels of education.

Conclusion

Reading comprehension has received a lot of attention in Iran because the ability to read is highly important for Iranian students at the levels of BA, BS, MA and MS. However, in Iran, it seems that the teaching of reading in English has not yielded the results commensurate with the considerable effort and time spent on it. Although more than 70 reading textbooks have been written in Iran varying in their approach to the topic, reading seems to be still a challenging topic.

The intent of the present study was to investigate whether

there was a significant relationship between English major Iranian students' levels of education and the band scores they obtained on the IELTS exam. The result did not show the expectation to be correct. The results of this study, along with the obviously vital role of reading ability, demand much more attention to this ability.

The result was disappointing with respect to two reasons. First Iranian students have studied English for at least five running years at high school (junior and senior). Moreover, with respect to students' major, the participants have studied reading comprehension for three running semesters at the senior levels of education.

The reason for such a finding might be due to several factors. First, from the optimistic point of view, we may accept Alderson's (1991) statement that the ability to read does not equal the ability to take the test. Therefore, a new research might follow the same pattern of study, along with considering students' performance in classes which require students to read like translation, literature and the like.

Another reason might be due to information on affective, cognitive, and social characteristics of students which have not been tapped in this study. Therefore, further research can address the students' motivation on the IETLS task. The findings might be different if we carry out a simulation of the study which takes into account learners' motivation in doing the reading task as well.

In this research, we have no information concerning the method through which learners had been trained. Another study might investigate the effects these methods might have in short run and long run on students' reading ability.

The last word is that the reading problem is not limited to this country. The vagueness of the topic has made it a little bit challenging in classrooms along the world. Maybe, the majority of students feel a lack of interest when reading is considered. This might lead to students' low confidence or even concentration to take the reading test. However, ESL teachers need to be aware of the important role of the reading ability for ESL learners and do their best in helping them to improve the ability.

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