



Causes of Unsatisfactory Performance in Academic IELTS Reading Module by Intermediate Students of Hyderabad Board

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Abstract

The statistics of past IELTS results divulge that Academic IELTS Reading Test (AIRT) has always been an arduous task for Pakistani candidates. Especially the candidates belonging to intermediate classes from government colleges face severe problems in AIRT. This study aims to find out the causes of unsatisfactory performance in AIRT by the students of intermediate level of Hyderabad Board and the impacts of teaching AIRT skills on their reading proficiencies. Seventy students from different groups of study enrolled at Government Muslim Science Degree College, Hyderabad, were given a part of AIRT from a standard Cambridge IELTS Book 6 as a pre-test. Majority of the students fell below the performance of 4.0 Band score. Resultantly, 37 students ranging from four to five Band scores were included in the study. Later the students were given training classes to provide effective skills required to attempt the AIRT. The post-test exhibited a significant improvement in the overall performance. For the feedback participants were given a questionnaire about their learning experience which was evaluated through SPSS version 22. It revealed that the students learned many new reading techniques to attempt AIRT which otherwise they had never learnt in their English language classes or preparations for their formative and summative assessments.

Keywords: Academic IELTS Reading Test (AIRT), Intermediate Students, Band score, Unsatisfactory Performance.

Background of the Study

Reading plays a pivotal role in the learning process. Students need to develop proficient reading skills to be successful in their academic voyage. In Academic IELTS (International English Language Testing System) reading poses a tough challenge for many of the candidates. Weir (1990) levels the test of IELTS as variety “communicative tests.” Reading module assesses the potential of a learner to understand the various language functions in diversity of topics and life situations. According to Krashen (1988) readers recreate the message while reading. Chastain (1988) believes,

“reading is a process involving the activation of relevant knowledge and related language skills to accomplish an exchange of information from one person to another.” Hence, the students need to be competent in reading comprehension before going abroad to study in an entirely different milieu and medium of learning.

The intermediate students from government colleges are eligible to take Academic IELTS test. But these students find enormous difficulty to score competitively in IELTS especially in their reading module. Nevertheless, a few researches, for instance Cotton & Conrow, (1998) and Doey,

(1999) found no link between the IELTS band score and educational performance of the students. Whereas, Ferguson & White (1993), Bellingham (1993) and Feast (2002) have found although inconsistent, yet a positive link between the IELTS scores and the CGPA of students. However, majority of the intermediate students from government colleges have to spend huge amounts of money to prepare for IELTS in private institutions for the sake of decent scores. It is owing to the fact that, the second language learners are required to read to communicate and to read a greater quantity of authentic reading material (Chastain, 1988). Such task of reading is hard for those students, moreover, the causes of their difficulty and unsatisfactory performance might lie in their way of being tested for reading comprehension.

Furthermore, the lack of practicing effective reading techniques which could be suitable to get them good IELTS score might also be insufficient. Consequently, their performance may be enhanced by giving them exposure to the AIRT (Academic IELTS Reading Test) and by teaching them the techniques to understand the AIRT questions and passages. The teachers by instructing how the students can properly synthesize, analyze, compare, judge, differentiate, assume, predict make inferences, evaluate arguments, explore implications and quickly extract the needed information in brief time, may help the students to improve their reading scores.

Table 1: Statistics of past Academic IELTS Scores in Reading Module by Pakistani Candidates

Year	Reading Band Score
2010 ¹	5.7
2011 ²	5.5
2012 ³	5.5
2013 ⁴	5.7
2017 ⁵	6.20
2018 ⁶	6.22

¹<http://ieltsielts.com/find-the-average-ielts-score-for-your-country>

²<https://www.examrace.com/IELTS/IELTS-Preparation-Tips/IELTS-Test-Performance-Report.html>

³<https://www.blc-english.com/assets/files/about/IELTS%20past%20results.pdf>

Not only do the intermediate students from Hyderabad board face difficulty in reading module of Academic IELTS but the overall candidates of IELTS from Pakistan too find it hard to score high in its reading module. Those candidates are all from diverse fields of study and from various levels of education. The previous table chart shows the statistics of the past Academic IELTS reading module results of six different years to depict the difficulty faced by the Pakistani Academic IELTS candidates.

Purpose of the Study

The cardinal objective of this study was to evaluate and discover the weaknesses in reading comprehension skills of intermediate students of Hyderabad at government colleges in accordance with the international tests like Academic IELTS. It aims to highlight the inappropriateness of the existing formative and summative assessments and exam paper setting in comparison with the international and standardized exams like AIRT. As according to the British scholar Weir (1990) the test of IELTS is a “readily available method” for evaluating the English language skills of a non-native learner who intends to study in an English-speaking country in the medium of English. Besides, “reading is probably the most important skill for a second language learner.” (Grabe, 1991). In reading the reader has to construct the meaning through words which may sometimes imply something else than the written words. The reader has to use his intellect, general knowledge and read between the lines to actually and fully grasp the meaning of the text. Looking at the weak reading comprehension skills of the intermediate students at government colleges in Hyderabad, this study presents a contrast between the current potential of the participants’ reading comprehension in AIRT and their post AIRT training performance. Having analyzed the reasons of unsatisfactory performance in the IELTS reading test, recommendations are given to improve reading comprehension. The strategies and skills essentially

⁴<http://www.bestieltsonline.com/ielts-test-takers-performance-in-2009/>

⁵<https://www.quora.com/What-is-an-individual-and-an-average-IELTS-score>

⁶<https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/test-taker-performance#sthash.xfqdWNzP.dpuf>

required in international exams are recommended to be taught and tested for the students' formative and summative assessments.

This study focuses also on the prospects of training of IELTS reading skills to the students of Intermediate level. It is to explore whether the students may improve their performance in Reading Module of IELTS, if they are instructed effectual ways to tackle the test, to understand the questions and the proficient techniques to find the correct answers using the analytical skills of reading. It measures how quickly an improvement may be visible in the performance of the students.

Methodology

This small-scale study is exploratory and comparative, it aims to understand participants' needs and goals without attempting to change them in any way. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Dornyei, 2007). Keeping in view the nature of the research, the mixed method design was followed which used qualitative and quantitative approaches. The tools of reading passages and questionnaire were used for data collection. The Likert scale responses were analyzed quantitatively, whereas, the reading passages assessed both in qualitative and quantitative approaches.

A total number of 70 students who intended to take IELTS test were selected from four different classes of Intermediate level. The participants were science students from Government Muslim Science Degree College, Hyderabad, which is ranked as the top government college of the city. The participants were firstly given proper guidance to attempt the AIRT. Later, keeping in view the limitations of the research, a passage of the AIRT containing thirteen diverse type questions from Cambridge IELTS Book 06 was given to them as a pre-test. The results were checked following the Answer-Keys given in the same book. Majority of students had correctly answered less than four out of thirteen questions, which measures to be less than approximately four bands score in the correlation of the complete test of 40 questions in IELTS reading module. Resultantly, the total number of 37 students were selected for the research study. These participants had given correct answers of four to

eight out of thirteen questions, meaning that a ratio of nearly 04 to 05 bands in the pre-test. Nevertheless, this score too is very low as compared to the entry requirements of admissions in any foreign native English, or English-speaking countries. Since, the minimum requirements in most of the foreign universities is 6.0 Bands for the undergraduate programs. Thus, the average performers were selected to be given AIRT training classes, so that, the change in their results may appropriately be evaluated. They might able to understand the given instructions in the preparatory classes and may likely improve their reading comprehension skills, if they attended the training classes and followed the reading skills taught in classes.

The selected students were given ten one and a half-hour classes for the training of AIRT and during the test training they were given five different AIRT tests for practice. The preparatory tests were from Cambridge IELTS Books 06 and 07 by the University of Cambridge and ESOL examinations. For the class observation the researchers and a few senior English teachers were present in the class during the pre-test, post-test and training. The ten preparatory classes were given to thoroughly teach the participants to be familiarized, comprehend and attempt the AIRT proficiently. Especially the required skills for Academic IELTS reading were focused in the preparation. Meanwhile, the AIRT were regularly given to increase the potential of participants to achieve better scores. The students were instructed to answer the various question types in AIRT, for instance; True, False and Not Given, Matching Headings, Multiple Choice, Filling the Blanks, Summary Completion, Sentence Completion, Choosing a Title for the Passage, Categorization Questions and Short Answers Questions. Later on, a questionnaire was given to the participants to evaluate their feedback about their learning experience during the training classes. The questionnaire compared the AIRT test with the usual reading tests that the students at government colleges at Hyderabad are normally given in their formative and summative assessments. Moreover, the reading techniques, test formats, types of questions, contents of passages and vocabulary

were contrasted in the questionnaire. The improvement in their reading skills, vocabulary and overall knowledge about the AIRT was meant to be comparatively measured by the responses of respondents in the given questionnaire.

Data Analysis

It was observed that there was a significant improvement which went up to a maximum ratio equivalent to additional 4.0 Band score in the performance of a few individual participants after the training classes. Whereas, there was an overall improvement of 1.0 Band score in participants' performance after the coaching in the post-test. The result of pre-test is illustrated in the Figure 1. While the result of post-test is presented in Figure 2. The comparison of the results demonstrates a significant improvement in the post test.

Figure 1 depicts the performance of the participants in the pre-test. It shows the minimum percentage of the selected participants was 30.77 which is four correct answers out of thirteen questions in the pre-test reading passage. Whereas, the maximum ratio was 61.40, which is eight correct answers out of 13 questions. However, the average of overall score of the participants in the pre-test was 40.748%. Figure 2 depicts the performance of the participants after the AIRT training classes in the post-test. It can be seen that the minimum percentage of the students was 30.77 meaning 04 correct answers out of 13 questions. Whereas, the highest was 100 percent, which means 13 correct answers out of 13 questions. Moreover, the improvement in the overall score is visible with 60.498 percentage. Thus,

there was an increase of 20% in the scores of the respondents. In this way a significant change of one band was obviously noticeable. This noteworthy change signifies that the AIRT training classes had a considerably positive impact on the performance of the students. It did help them score better because of better understanding of the test with sound knowledge and effective skills to deal with the given test.

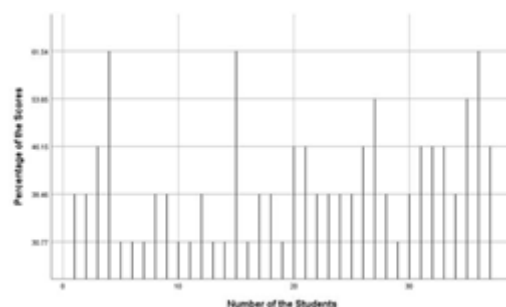


Figure 1. Bar Graph of Pre-Test

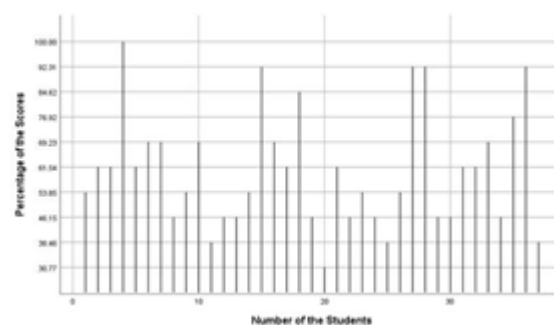


Figure 2. Bar Graph of Post-Test

The questionnaire for the feedback of learning experience of the participants was evaluated by SPSS version 22. The result of the questionnaire analysis is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Questionnaires' Data

S.No		N	Min	Max	Mean
1	Is academic IELTS reading test different from the usual English test used to test your skills in your textbooks?	37	4	5	4.38
2	Does A.I.R.T evaluate the same reading skills as the common English exam in Hyderabad Board?	37	1	3	1.19
3	Do you find the questions of A.I.R.T different from your English textbook questions and board exams?	37	1	5	4.62
4	Do you find the topics of A.I.R.T challenging?	37	2	5	4.16
5	Do you think the language in the reading passages of A.I.R.T is hard?	37	1	5	3.92
6	Are the answers of A.I.R.T the same type as the usual English test?	37	1	5	1.43

7	Are the topics of A.I.R.T the same type as you read in your English textbooks?	37	1	4	1.62
8	Did you find the training classes of A.I.R.T useful?	37	4	5	4.68
9	Do you think you have improved your reading skills after the A.I.R.T training classes?	37	4	5	4.24
10	Did you find the post-test to be easier than the pre-test?	37	3	5	4.35
11	Do you think you have learned more useful reading skills after the A.I.R.T training classes?	37	1	5	3.78
12	Were your reading skills before the A.I.R.T training classes able to comprehend the A.I.R.T reading easily?	37	1	5	2.38
13	Do you think you have learned useful vocabulary through A.I.R.T training classes?	37	2	5	4.14
14	Do you feel more confident to attempt the A.I.R.T after completion of the training classes?	37	4	5	4.43
15	Do you think attempting A.I.R.T was a completely different experience from attempting the usual English test?	37	2	5	4.59

The responses of the participants in the questionnaire illustrated that the students found the AIRT to be a wholly new experience, they found the passages challenging and the language too was difficult for most of them. They got appropriately acquainted with the format of the test, testing tools and tested skills in an AIRT. However, they learned many new reading skills, vocabulary and ideas which helped them answer the AIRT in the post-test more comprehensively. For majority of participants the post-test proved to be easier than the pre-test.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to find out the causes of low scores by the intermediate students in AIRT and to evaluate the impacts of teaching the reading skills in accordance with AIRT. It is seen that usually the students of government colleges in their English language classes are required to develop the reading skills to respond in short and long written answers. They do not get such lengthy reading passages in their formative and summative assessments with the questions testing their reading skills as thoroughly as in AIRT. They sometimes are given a very short passage of approximately 150-250 words with 3-4 questions to answer as a class test or mostly a part of some universities' entry test in the English section. On the other hand, even these short reading passages are very rarely a part of the summative assessments in

the Hyderabad board exams. The questions in these given reading tests test the ability of students to synthesize, compare, predict and extract the required information from the given text. They do not require from them proficient reading skills as in IELTS. Owing to the dearth of reading skill evaluations; the intermediate students from the government colleges are not motivated to enhance their reading skills to a proficient level. Subsequently, when they attempt an AIRT, majority of students find their reading skills insufficient to appropriately answer the given questions. It becomes an arduous challenge for them where they find their reading skills too weak to score competently. As a result, owing to the unsatisfactory performance many do not find themselves eligible for admission in a foreign reputable universities or colleges for their further studies.

When participants were given instructions to train for AIRT, it had a substantial impact on their reading skills which remarkably improved their performance and test scores. It is quite obvious through the analysis of the questionnaire that they found AIRT quite different from their routine reading tests. Whereas, the training classes significantly helped them comprehend and attempt the AIRT satisfactorily.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the participants' scores are marred in AIRT owing to the lack of their familiarity with the techniques required in AIRT. Their routine syllabus, formative and summative assessments do not evaluate the peculiar skills needed to comprehend and attempt AIRT satisfactorily. However, if they are given proper training to attempt AIRT, their performance can markedly be enhanced. Their lack of familiarity with the AIRT, dearth of proficient reading skills, very limited knowledge about topics of general interest, limited range of vocabulary and their weakness to read and comprehend the passages and answer the given questions in a brief time turn out to be grueling challenges for them.

Recommendations

It is profoundly important for the intermediate students of government colleges of Hyderabad to be prepared in accordance with the international standards of reading assessments. The textbooks of intermediate level must focus on the enhancement of effective reading skills. The exercises and drills must contain long passages of reading tests. Moreover, the formative and summative assessments too must focus on evaluating students' comprehensive reading skills. The teachers of English must emphasize the significance of reading skills and prepare the students in accordance with the international standards of reading comprehension. The students need to be proficient in reading long passages in a brief time and answer technical and witty questions proficiently.

A wide variety of general interest topics should be studied by students from authentic resources. The vocabulary needs to be strong and the pace of reading needs to be quick and comprehensive. The textbook setters, exam paper setters and the teachers must keep the international standards of reading tests in their mind and must plan for the achievement of such goals to equip the students with proficient reading skills.

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