

A STUDY ON THE PERCEPTION OF IRANIAN CANDIDATES TOWARDS THE GENERAL IELTS TEST

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ABSTRACT

IELTS, International English Language Testing System, is nowadays widely used as a certificating device and is claimed to be a reliable and strongly accountable measure of language proficiency by the organizations and educational centers that utilize it. Irrespective of the importance IELTS has gained in the present world, the beliefs and perceptions of those who take the test have rarely been explored. Therefore, the present study aimed at investigating the Iranian IELTS candidates' perceptions towards the IELTS test. Accordingly, a standardized perception questionnaire was administered to 40 homogeneous participants before and after taking the IELTS test. The collected data were then analyzed through a paired samples t-test to find out whether there was any significant difference between the candidates' perception before and after taking the test. The findings indicated that the participants had significantly higher perceptions after the test. Implications can also be drawn for all the stakeholders including candidates intending to sit the test, institutes running IELTS preparation programs, teachers wishing to teach such programs, and finally, IELTS test administrators.

Key Words: IELTS, Perception, Belief, Attitude, Higher education.

INTRODUCTION

To get an insight into the minds of language learners there is no more certain way than to study their beliefs. As in the area of language teaching, there has recently been an increasing emphasis on the styles and variables of learners. Additionally, learners' beliefs and perception are to join the growing body of research in the field. When learners step in a language classroom, they bring all their personality features and language styles to the learning environment. Almost all of the scholars admit that how successful people are in learning a language is exactly and directly influenced by what they think and how they evaluate the target language, the target language speakers, culture, and of course, the learning setting. Though merely investigating the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of learners may not guarantee any success, they, in turn, can be the guidelines for the next steps taken, as learners play the main role in any learning environment.

The concept of learners' attitude and perception has been the focus of attention in explanation and investigation of human behavior offered by social psychologists. Attitude is usually defined as a disposition or tendency to respond positively or negatively towards a certain thing such as an idea, object, person, or situation. Students have positive or negative attitudes towards the language they want to learn or the people who speak it. Having positive attitude towards tests is also claimed to be one of the reasons which make students perform better on the tests (Malallaha, 2000). A large number of studies have also investigated the relationships between attitude and proficiency in the language (Bachman, 1990; Malallaha, 2000; Coleman, Strafield, & Hagan, 2003). Additionally, Gardner (1985) believes that attitude and other affective variables are as important as aptitude for language achievement.

Perception is the process by which organisms interpret and organize sensation to produce a meaningful experience of the world. Sensation usually refers to the immediate, relatively unprocessed result of stimulation of sensory receptors in the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, or skin. Perception, on the other hand, better describes one's ultimate experience of the world and typically involves further processing of sensory input. In practice,

sensation and perception are virtually impossible to separate, because they are part of one continuous process. The perceptual process allows us to experience the world around us.

IELTS

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 their education in an English speaking country or anyone who desires to migrate to or work in such countries.

IELTS is taken by more than 25,000 candidates each year. The test is accepted for undergraduate or postgraduate entry by Australian and British universities, colleges, and professional and technical institutions. IELTS has been developed on the basis of new approaches to language teaching and testing. It may be claimed that IELTS is more content based, task oriented and authentic than TOEFL. The tasks in IELTS are closer to real life situations. IELTS continues to help change people's lives as they look for opportunities around the world whether that is in education, for migration, or employment. This is the reason why IELTS is a high stakes test and also why it is so critical that the test continues to be a robust and rigorous measure of English language proficiency.

IELTS, initially called ELTS (English Language Testing Service), is used to judge potential higher education (HE) students' language proficiency, the job which was previously carried out by EPTB (English Proficiency Test Battery) since the mid 1960s. It was in the late 1980s that some practical administrative issues, especially around the scope of the test, were questioned. Following a validation study (Criper & Davies, 1988; Hughes, Porter & Weir, 1988; Cited in Hyatt & Brooks, 2007), the ELTS Revision Project was set up to design a new test. Hyatt and Brooks document that to highlight the international aspect of the test the International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges (IDP), now known as IELTS Australia, joined British Council and UCLES to form an international partnership. The new test was simplified and shortened and also changed its name to reflect the new internationalization, becoming known as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and went into operation in the 1989. During the period between 1989–1994, the system was monitored through a host of research evaluations, and further modifications were introduced in the 1995, including the replacement of three subject-specific subtests with one Academic Reading and one Academic Writing modules, the removal of the thematic link between the Reading and Writing modules, the convergence of scoring on all modules to nine bands, the introduction of checks on marking consistency, an appeal procedure, new validation procedures, security procedures, and computerized administration procedures.

The change from three subject-specific subtests was based on feedback from IELTS administrators and examiners (Charge & Taylor, 1997) and from a significant body of research into ESP and second language conducted by Clapham (1993, 1995, 1996). Clapham concluded that a single test did not discriminate for or against candidates regardless of their disciplinary areas and that a single test would not hinder accessibility. More specific details of these innovations and the rationale behind them can be found in Charge and Taylor (1997). More recently, continued evaluation of the system led to the introduction of a new Speaking test in the years 2001 and 2005, the introduction of new assessment criteria for the Writing test and the introduction of computer-based testing. A recent and comprehensive overview of the history of the assessment of academic English can be found in Davies (2008). Along with such global popularity, a large number of studies have been conducted worldwide to investigate issues related to IELTS. Merrylees (2003) conducted a study to investigate two IELTS user groups: candidates who sit the test for immigration purposes and candidates who sit the test for secondary education purposes. He believed that with the increase in candidature of both user groups, there is an increasing need to investigate and analyze how each group is performing on the test in terms of nationality, age, gender and other factors.

Compared with such studies, however, it seems that fewer studies have been carried out to examine and identify the IELTS candidates' attitudes and views towards this test. The attitudes of IELTS stakeholders were once investigated in a study conducted by Coleman et al. (2003). In their study, respondents perceived the

IELTS test to have high validity in this study. Another study carried out by McDowell and Merrylees (1998) investigated the receiving institutions' attitudes to IELTS with positive results reported.

While there is a significant and growing literature on English language testing (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004) and on the credibility, reliability, and validity of IELTS in particular (Green, 2007), other more social and qualitative impacts also deserve consideration (Brown & Taylor, 2006; Barkhuizen & Cooper, 2004; Read & Hayes, 2003; Coleman et al., 2003). In light of this, a body of recent research has focused on impact studies on IELTS, including the consideration of stakeholder attitudes. A key overview of methodological and theoretical issues of such research is presented in Hawkey (2006) which focuses on one of its two case studies on IELTS impact testing. The stakeholders considered in this research include test-takers, teachers, textbook writers, testers and institutions. However, unlike the present study, there was no specific emphasis on admissions gatekeepers, a niche the present research aims to fill, while acknowledging that Hawkey (2006) provides an invaluable guide at both theoretical and practical levels to those engaging in impact studies. Smith and Haslett (2007) investigated the attitudes of HE decision-makers in New Zealand towards the English language tests used for admission purposes. They argued that the changing context and growing diversity were leading to the consideration of more flexible pathways to entry.

Coleman et al. (2003) contrasted stakeholder attitudes to IELTS in Australia, the people of the Republic of China and the United Kingdom. The researchers argued that students were, on the whole, more knowledgeable than staff on a wide range of themes related to the IELTS test. Students tended to have a positive view of IELTS as a predictive indicator of the future investigating stakeholders' perceptions of IELTS as an entry requirement for higher education in the UK success whereas staff were less satisfied with the predictive value of the test and wished to see minimum standards for entry set at a higher level.

The current study therefore sought to investigate if such perspectives were still reflected by institutional gatekeepers some four years after the publication of this key piece of research, though the nature of student perceptions was beyond the remit of this study. Read and Hayes (2003) also investigated the impact of IELTS on the preparation of international students for tertiary study in New Zealand. They found that even students who gained the minimum band score for tertiary admission were likely to struggle to meet the demands of English-medium study in a New Zealand university or polytechnic, though teachers generally recognized that IELTS was the most suitable test available for the purpose of admission to HE programs. The current study sought to ascertain whether the views of gatekeepers at HE institutions in the UK converged or diverged from those positions. Additionally, Kerstjens and Nery's (2000) research sought to determine the relationship between the IELTS test and students' subsequent academic performance. They reported that for students at the vocational level, IELTS was not found to be a significant predictor of academic performance, although staff and students were generally positive about students' capability to cope with the language demands of their first semester of study.

The correlation between English language proficiency and academic performance is an issue that has been researched frequently and an overview of this research theme can be found in Davies (2008). The present study therefore, examined this relationship and sought the perspectives of HE respondents as to the difficulties students encounter and whether or not IELTS fully meets their needs in terms of addressing language difficulties. Mok, Parr, Lee and Wylie (1998) compared IELTS with another examination used for purposes similar to the general IELTS paper. McDowell and Merrylees (1998) investigated the range of tests available in Australian tertiary education to establish to what extent IELTS was serving the needs of the receiving institutions. Similarly, Hill, Storch and Lynch (2000) explored the usefulness of IELTS and TOEFL as predictors of readiness for the Australian academic context. The current research project was intended to uncover whether IELTS was the dominant language testing system in UK and if stakeholders view it as meeting their needs, as well as those of their students.

Feast (2002) investigated the relationship between IELTS scores as a measure of language proficiency and performance at university. Her research revealed a significant and positive, but weak, relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance. Edwards, Ran, and Li (2007) also highlighted the

concerns of university teachers and administrators around the limitations of tests of English used in relation to university admissions, and expressed concerns around the degree to which acceptance of students with levels well below native-speaker competence represented a lowering of academic standards, or a pragmatic response to an increasingly globalised HE market. In the light of this changing context, the present study sought to elicit participants' perceptions regarding their performance on IELTS.

Perception and Belief

The recognition of the role of learners' epistemological beliefs across various disciplines contributed to a growing body of evidence which suggests that they play a central role in learning experience and achievements (Schommer, 1990) and have a deep influence on learning behavior and learning outcomes (Weinert & Kluwe, 1987). Interdisciplinary research shows how one's belief systems, social cognitions and metacognitions are a great force in intellectual performance (Schoenfeld, 1983), and that learners may be directly influenced by their perception of success in learning and levels of expectancy with realistically high expectations helping to build confidence, and low (or unrealistically high) expectations leading to de-motivation and disappointment (Puchta, 1999).

The study of beliefs in both second and foreign language acquisition is important, as it has been noted that successful learners develop insights into beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities, and the use of effective learning strategies in the classroom and the context beyond that (Oxford, 2003). It has been argued that while some beliefs may have a facilitative effect on learning, others can hinder it. Supportive and positive beliefs help to overcome problems and thus sustain motivation, while negative or unrealistic beliefs can lead to decreased motivation, frustration, and even anxiety (Puchta, 1999).

Therefore, it can be concluded that an awareness of learners' beliefs is central to EFL classroom pedagogy. In an attempt to better understand the nature and role of beliefs in EFL context, various studies have taken up different approaches to their investigations. These can be more generally categorized as 'cognitive' and 'sociocultural' approaches. The main goal of these research efforts has been to identify psychological characteristics of individuals, such as their valuing and expectation of success and their orientation to their goals, and to try to quantify the relationship of these identified qualities to academic achievement.

For example, Pintrich (2003) makes clear that as students move to higher levels of education, their motivation in study drops. Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez (1998) attribute these changes in motivation to the perceptions of the students about ability and intelligence. Students, in developmental stages, conceive that ability and intelligence are immutable. Therefore, they become less intrinsically motivated and they have lower expectation of success. There is also increasing consensus that these changes result from the interaction between developmental processes and institutional contexts, for example, the way that larger classes and fewer individual task-based lessons in schools conflict with young adolescents' felt need for more control over their lives, with negative consequences for their low academic motivation (Anderman & Maehr, 1994). Lamb (2004) carried out a study on the motivation of Indonesian adolescents toward learning English. His study aimed to track changes in students' reported motivation and learning activity and to identify internal and external factors which might be associated with the changes. It was found that the learners' initially very positive attitudes toward the language and expectations of success were maintained over the period, whereas their attitudes toward the experience of formal learning tended to deteriorate. He attributed the findings of the study to the cognitive and developmental perceptions of the students towards the concept of formal learning.

Yang (2002) carried out a study to investigate the relationship between college EFL students' beliefs about language learning and their use of learning strategies. The study found that language learners' self-efficacy beliefs about learning English were strongly related to their use of all types of learning strategies, especially functional practice strategies. Also, learners' beliefs about the value and nature of learning spoken English were closely linked to their use of formal oral-practice strategies. The results of this study suggested cyclical relationships between learners' beliefs and strategy use and their final success in learning English.

Horwitz (1988) conducted a study on the beliefs of a number of first semester foreign language learners in the University of Texas. Her learners appeared to somewhat underestimate the difficulty of language learning; 43 percent of them said that if you spent one hour a day learning a foreign language, you would become fluent within two years, and a further 35 percent that it would take three to five years. 50 percent believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude, and 35 percent said that they had that aptitude. Horwitz (1988) proposed that these gaps between teacher and learner beliefs probably result in “negative [language-learning] outcomes” (p. 292) for learners. She also suggested that a gap between teacher and learner beliefs can lead to reduced learner confidence in and satisfaction with the class and to unwillingness to participate in ‘communicative’ activities (p. 290). In her final conclusions, she asserted that “Teachers will likely encounter ... many unanticipated beliefs, some enabling and some truly detrimental to successful language learning ... foreign language teachers can ill afford to ignore those beliefs if they expect their students to be open to particular teaching methods and to receive the maximum benefit from them” (p. 293).

Mantle-Bromley (1995) investigated the beliefs of 208 seventh grade middle school students taking first-year French and Spanish in Kansas. Mantle-Bromley’s results indicated that some of her students’ beliefs about language learning differed from commonly held teacher beliefs. In her study, learners believed in the existence of foreign language aptitude. She stressed that teachers need to have a clear understanding of foreign language student beliefs, because learners with realistic and informed beliefs are more likely to behave productively in class, work harder outside class, and (crucially) persist longer with language study. Finally, she proposed that when student beliefs and performance do not match, they become frustrated and disappointed with the class and with themselves. Additionally, Bernat and Lioyd (2007) conducted a study to investigate the relationship between beliefs about language learning and gender. They explored 155 female and 107 male EFL students’ beliefs through The Belief About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). The study revealed that females and males hold generally similar beliefs about language learning; the result which, as they claim, deviates from those reported in a previous study conducted in the U.S.

With regard to the aforementioned studies and the significance of affective factors such as perception, attitude, belief etc., influencing language learners’ performance, IELTS Joint-funded research program (2006, 2007) states that one of the areas of interest for IELTS external research purposes is the investigation of attitudes and perception of IELTS test takers. Therefore, the present study sought to determine whether there is any relationship between the candidates’ perception before and after taking IELTS through the following research question:

RQ. Is there any significant difference between the candidates’ perception before and after taking the IELTS test?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study were 40 IELTS candidates (both male and female) taking part in the IELTS preparation courses in the TEFL research center, Tehran, Iran. They were selected based on the results of the homogeneity test and their performance on IELTS test. Sixty participants who were EFL learners received the test and according to the results, 40 learners whose scores fell 1 SD below and above the mean score met the requirements and were randomly selected for the purpose of the study. These participants were of various disciplines and they enjoyed different educational backgrounds.

Instruments

The present study enjoyed three instruments in the process of data collection as follows:

1. A language proficiency test of PET (2007), developed by Cambridge University Press, to homogenize the prospective candidates for the study.
2. A standard IELTS (general module, 2003) as the main test on which the candidates perform.

3. A questionnaire of perception developed and validated by Ransom, Larcombe, and Baik (2005) based on a survey of international ESL students' perceptions and expectations of English language learning needs and support at the University of Melbourne (see Appendix I).

Data Analysis

With regard to the analysis of the collected data, three levels of analysis were carried out including:

1. Descriptive statistics of the homogeneity test of PET
2. Normality tests for IELTS
3. A paired samples t-test comparing the IELTS candidates' perceptions before and after taking the test

Procedures

A group of 60 IELTS candidates taking part in the IELTS preparation courses in the TEFL research center, Tehran, Iran after completing their due course, were given a version of standardized IELTS which consisted of 25 listening comprehension items, 35 reading comprehension items, and 2 types of writing. The pilot study was also conducted before the experiment for the purpose of standardization and making sure of their homogeneity.

The participants who were EFL learners received the IELTS test and according to the results of the test 40 learners whose scores fell 1 SD below and above the mean were selected randomly for the purpose of the study. Prior to receiving the standard IELTS general module test, the questionnaires asking about the candidates' perceptions were distributed. After the test the candidates received the same questionnaires. The learners' responses to the items in the questionnaires both before and after the test were compared to see if there was any significant difference between the two situations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

In order to select a group of homogenous participants in terms of their general language proficiency, the PET test was administered to 60 students. 40 cases whose scores were 1 SD above and below the mean were selected to participate in the study. That is to say, those whose scores fall within the ranges of 35.74 (mean - 1SD) and 46.42 (mean + 1SD) were randomly selected to participate in this study. The following table represents the results of descriptive statistics of the homogeneity test of PET.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of PET

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
PET	60	41.0833	5.34026

Normality Tests

In order to analyze any sets of data through parametric tests, four assumptions of interval data, independence of subjects, normality, and homogeneity of variances should be met. The present data were measured on an interval scale and the subjects were independent, i.e., none of them participated in more than one group. The assumption of normality was empirically tested through the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors. As displayed in Table 2, these ratios were all within the ranges of +/- 1.96, thus the present data did not show any marked deviations from normal distribution.

Table 2: Normality tests

	N	Skewness			Kurtosis		
		Statistic	Std. Error	Normality	Statistic	Std. Error	Normality
PET	40	0.04	0.37	0.10	-0.78	0.73	-1.06
IELTS	40	-0.16	0.37	-0.43	-1.02	0.73	-1.38
Pretest of perception	40	-0.25	0.37	-0.67	0.33	0.73	0.45
Posttest of perception	40	0.34	0.37	0.90	-0.13	0.73	-0.17

Paired Samples T-test

In order to answer the following question, a paired samples t-test was run to probe any significant relationship between the candidates' perception before and after taking the IELTS test.

RQ. Is there any significant difference between the candidates' perception before and after taking the IELTS test?

As displayed in Table 3, the mean score of the students on the posttest of perception (M = 41.60) shows improvement over the mean score on the pretest (M = 37.72).

Table 3: Descriptive statistics pretest and posttest of IELTS perception

Perception	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest of perception	41.6000	40	2.81753	.44549
Pretest of perception	37.7250	40	2.96983	.46957

The results of the paired samples t-test indicated that there was a significant and meaningful difference between the mean scores of the candidates on the pretest and posttest of perception ($t(39) = 9.63, P = .000 < .05; R = .83$, it does represent a large effect size). Based on these results it was concluded that the candidates' perception significantly improved after taking the IELTS test.

Table 4: Paired samples t-test for pretest and posttest of perception

Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
3.87	2.54	.40	3.06	4.68	9.63	39	.000

The following figure shows the mean scores of the candidates' pretest and posttest perceptions.

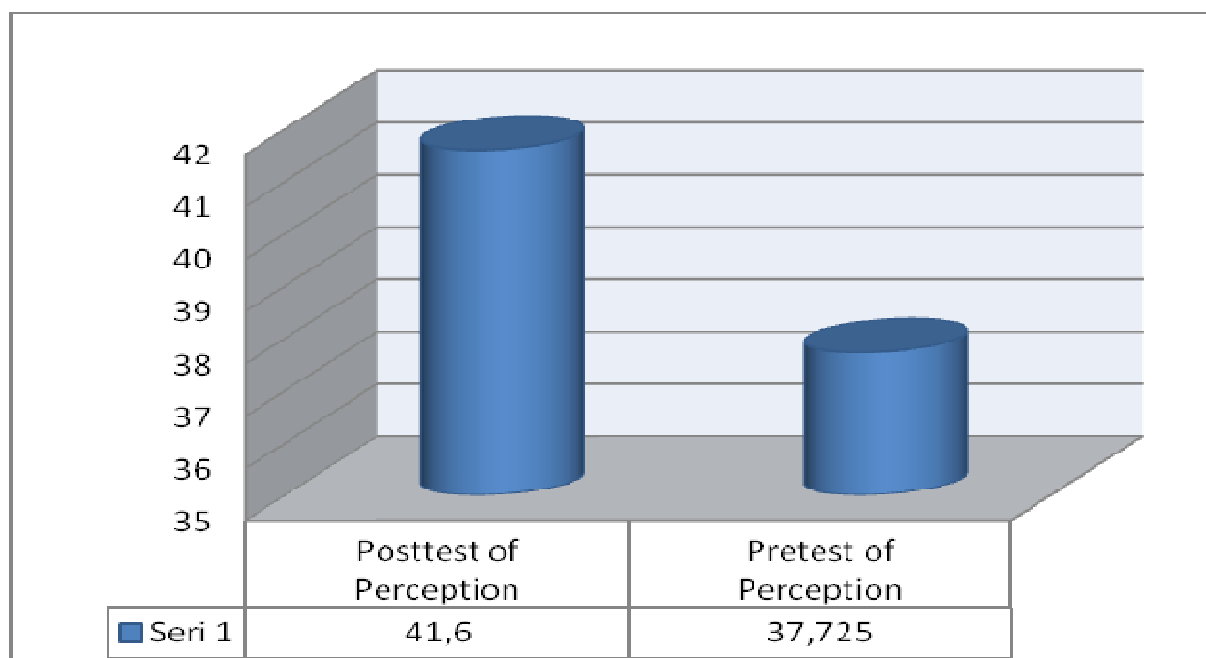


Figure 1: Mean scores on pretest and posttest of perception

DISCUSSION

The finding of the study emphasized that there was a statistically significant difference between IELTS candidates' perceptions before and after taking the IELTS test. It means that the real situation of test taking affects the test takers' perception towards the test. This finding is in line with some of the previous studies in this field (Cook, 1999; Griffith & Parr, 2001; Modiano, 2001; Sherry, Bhat, Beaver, & Ling, 2004). The overall agreement is that learners taking part in the high stake examinations might have a high degree of stress and anxiety. This might affect their performance on the test. As Skehan (1998) implies, learners' perception towards a test as well as their expectations from the test holds appositive correlation in case the assumption they have of and about their learning is true or real. Dornyei & Skehan (2003) also assert that individual differences highly affect one's assumption and perceptions towards the process of language learning and teaching.

Iranian learners mostly take part in the cramming courses aimed at preparing the learners or examinees for the high stake examinations such as IELTS and TOEFL. Such courses hold mock exams to provide the learners with an assumed status quo of their knowledge and the extent to which they would probably perform in the real exam session (Amiri, 2012). It seems that the learners taking part in the present study enjoy the same situation as their perceptions towards the IELTS exam before and after taking the test is highly different. The comparison of the mean scores of pre and post tests of perception revealed that learners taking part in the experiment enjoyed higher perception after taking the test. It might be concluded that the test itself has left a positive impact on the learners. This finding is also supported by some other investigations; for example Read and Hayes (2003), who investigated the relationship between IELTS preparation programs and candidates' performance on the actual IELTS test in New Zealand came up with the conclusion there were a number of substantial differences between the performance of the group which was undergone preparation programs and the group which was not.

The findings of the present study revealed that Iranians have a positive attitude towards IELTS. Increasingly significant growth in candidature in Iran shows how much popularity IELTS has gained among Iranians which is exactly in line with the findings of the present study. Coleman et al. (2003) also find IELTS a very popular test and according to their study, IELTS stakeholders in various countries have high positive attitudes and

perceptions towards IELTS. Such findings could be employed by IELTS administrators to do the modifications required.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed at investigating the relationship between the candidates' perception before and after taking the IELTS test. To conduct the study, out of 60 participants who received a standard PET test, 40 IELTS candidates were selected based on the results of the pilot study. Before and after taking the IELTS test, they were provided with questionnaires evaluating their perceptions. After collecting the required data, a paired samples t-test was run to investigate any significant difference between the IELTS candidates' perception before and after taking the test. The results of the analysis revealed that the candidates' perception significantly improved after taking the test. The present study can help all the IELTS stakeholders including candidates intending to sit the test, institutes running IELTS preparation programs, teachers wishing to teach such programs and the IELTS test administrators. Further studies are suggested to be carried out to investigate issues related to IELTS in Iran and internationally including:

1. Studies involving the IELTS Listening and Reading tests.
2. Further studies on the use of IELTS for professional purposes or for migration.
3. Studies intended to establish appropriate IELTS score levels for specific uses of the test (for access to a university department, for professional registration, for access to a vocational training course).
4. Studies of test preparation practices and investigation of the cognitive processes of IELTS test takers.
5. Finally, further studies must be carried out to investigate the process of writing IELTS test items.

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Appendix I

Language learning perception questionnaire

No.	Item	1	2	3	4	5
1	How do you rate your current English language skills?	Low	Inter- mediate	High	Very high	Native proficiency
2	How MANY HOURS PER WEEK do you plan to spend outside your classes further developing your English language skills this year (other than by social conversation)?	None	1-2	3-4	5-6	7+
3	Which ONE of the four key English language skills do you think is most important for getting high marks in your exam? (select only one)	Writing	Reading	Speaking	Listening	All skills
4	Which ONE of the four key English language skills do you think you need to improve most? (select only one)	Writing	Reading	Speaking	Listening	All skills
5	What is the lowest mark that you would be happy with for the test?	4-5	5 – 6	6 -7	7 -8	8 -9
6	How important was the opportunity to develop English skills in your decision to study in Iran?	Not	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very
7	How important is it for you to improve your CONVERSATIONAL English?	Not	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very
8	How important is it for you to improve your ACADEMIC English?	Not	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very

9	For your major, do you think English language proficiency will be important for getting a better admission overseas?	Not	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very
10	How much do you think the results of the exam will affect your future life?	Not	A little	Somewhat	Much	Very