



## The Effects of English Language Study Period and Age of The Ielts Candidates on Their Listening Performance

### KEYWORDS

communicative; ELSP; listening comprehension; IELTS candidates

**Maghsoud Alizad Farrokhi**

Ph.D. research scholar in ELT Panjab University, Chandigarh

### ABSTRACT

*As per the communicative view on language, it is necessary to help language learners in general, and the IELTS candidates in particular, use the language communicatively and intelligibly according to their communication needs. Listening plays a pivotal role in learning a language. The process of learning a language normally commences with listening and terminates in the production of writing. In the overall scheme of things, listening comprehension has had a relatively short but trying story that has been subject to internal and external influences such as teacher and student opinions and motivation strategies, the design and presentation of aural material, and the technologies available, all of which can affect a student's ability to process listening comprehension texts. In this regard, the present study endeavours to investigate the IELTS candidates' listening comprehension test contents so as to find out the effects of English language study period (ELSP) and age on listening performance of IELTS candidates.*

### Introduction

The main goals of this study were to see whether English language study period and age of IELTS (International English Language Testing System) candidates had any effects on their test scores i.e. their performance in the listening test. The findings of this investigation indicated that English language study period and age of the IELTS candidates had some significant effects on their listening performance. In order to carry out the data collection, the researcher contacted a number of sources including British Council listening exam coordinators in different Sectors of Chandigarh, India. Some coordinators seemed to be busy to help out. After a lot of efforts, only two promised to assist. The details of which are as follows. The researcher asked the coordinator of British Council in Sector 35 of Chandigarh if there would be sufficient general and academic candidate groups in only one session. The coordinator of IELTS exams including listening test assured that the number of academic candidates would suffice, whereas the number of general candidates would not be sufficient in one exam session. Therefore, general candidate participants from three listening exam sessions were selected. That is to say, twenty candidates in one session, fifteen in another and the remaining fifteen candidates took part in the third session of listening comprehension test. The research design of this study was descriptive. 'Descriptive research includes surveys and fact-finding enquiries of different kinds. The major purpose of descriptive research is description of the state of affairs as it exists at present. The main characteristic of this method is that the researcher has no control over the variables; he can only report what has happened or what is happening (Kothari, 2012).' The main sample of the study was 100 IELTS candidates, selected on the basis of simple random sampling technique. 'In brief, the implications of simple random sampling are:

1. It gives each element [ candidate in our case] in the population an equal probability of getting into the sample; and all choices are independent of one other.
2. It gives each IELTS candidate an equal probability of being chosen.

### IELTS and British Council

'The international English language testing system (IELTS) is the world's most popular English language proficiency test for higher education and global migration, with over 2 million tests taken in the last year.' IELTS is accepted by more than 8,000 organizations worldwide. These include universities, immigration departments, government agencies, professional bodies and multinational companies. International teams of writers contribute to IELTS test materials. Ongoing research ensures that IELTS remains fair and unbiased. Test writers from different English-speaking countries develop IELTS content so it reflects real-life situations. "IELTS has two versions – Academic and General Training. The Academic test is for those who want to study at a tertiary level in an English-speaking country. The General Training test is for those who want to do work experience or training programmes, secondary school or migrate to an English-speaking country. All candidates take the same Listening and Speaking tests but different Reading and Writing tests." IELTS candidates must know which version to take when they complete the online application form." IELTS has four parts – Listening (30 minutes), Reading (60 minutes), Writing (60 minutes) and Speaking (11–14 minutes). The total test time is 2 hours and 45 minutes. The Listening, Reading and Writing tests are done in one sitting. The Speaking test may be on the same day or up to seven days before or after the other tests."

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organization for educational opportunities and cultural relations. The British Council creates international opportunities for the people of the UK and other countries and builds trust between them worldwide. The British Council IELTS Partnership Programme is a membership scheme for organizations that register and prepare candidates for IELTS. It's been designed to show appreciation for the support that the institution offers.

### Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is an important gateway to successful communication and interaction, lack of which may lead to communicative failure. During the past two decades there have been important innovations and variations involved within the field of language learning and teaching, resulting in more emphasis on learners and

learning rather than teachers and teaching. While learning a second/foreign language, listening becomes more important as learners need to understand what is said to them for successful communication. Rivers (1981) stated that the necessity of developing listening skill for a SL/FL learner as aural comprehension is the essential element in an act of communication. However, this skill is usually anxiety provoking. Christenberry (2003) underlined the problematic nature of listening and stressed that it is an incredibly difficult area to teach properly; thus, it is likely to cause anxiety. Furthermore, Vogely (1999) clearly emphasized that one of the most ignored but potentially one of the most debilitating type of anxiety is the anxiety accompanying listening comprehension. MacIntyre (1995) believed that listeners in L2 worry about misunderstanding or non-understanding, and they fear embarrassing outcomes. Chastain (1979) also stated that since listening is a complex skill, students have the fear of understanding the message and interpreting it correctly. Chang (2010) examined the second language listening anxiety before and after one year intervention in extensive listening compared to standard foreign language instruction. The result indicated that extensive listening group improved more compared to the formal instruction group in listening competence.

### Listening Strategies

In order to understand the meaning of listening strategies, at first, it is better to know the meaning of language learning strategies. Language learning strategies are "the techniques or devices that a learner may use to acquire knowledge" (Rubin, 1975, p. 43). Oxford and Crookall (1989) stated that language learning strategies are steps taken by learner to enhance the acquisition, storage and retention.

"Listening strategies refer to skills or methods for listeners to directly or indirectly achieve the purpose of listening comprehension of the spoken input" (Ho, 2006, p. 25). According to Gonen (2009), "As for listening, employment of listening strategy use is of crucial importance due to the online processing that takes place during listening. That is, learners have to decode the message, understand and interpret it in the course of listening."

Such strategies are divided into three main groups. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) and Vandergrift (1997) believed that listeners use metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies to facilitate comprehension and to make their learning more effective. Metacognitive strategies are important because they oversee, regulate or direct the language learning process. Cognitive strategies manipulate the material to be learned or apply a specific technique to a listening task. Socio-affective strategies describe the techniques listeners use to collaborate with others, to verify understanding and to lower anxiety.

In relation to meta-cognitive strategies, Vandergrift (1999) stated that metacognitive strategy is a kind of self-regulated learning. It includes the attempt to plan, check, monitor, select, revise, and evaluate, etc. It can be discussed through pre-listening planning strategies, while-listening monitoring strategies, and post-listening evaluation strategies.

Cognitive strategies are problem-solving that learners employ to manipulate their learning tasks and facilitate acquisition of knowledge or skills (Derry & Murphy, 1986). Examples of cognitive strategies in the field of listening include

predicting, inferencing, elaborating, and visualizing. Moreover, cognitive strategies are related to comprehending and storing input in working memory or long-term memory for later retrieval. They are investigated from the aspects of bottom-up strategies and top-down strategies.

### Methodology

In this empirical investigation the IELTS candidates (both in the pilot and main study) listened to a listening comprehension test and then answered a 30-item Likert-type questionnaire on listening strategies. The items are thirty statements which are related to listening comprehension strategies. The items measure the perceived use of the strategies and processes underlying factors related to cognitive, metacognitive, compensation, memory-related, affective and social macro strategies selected and used by the IELTS candidates. A five-point Likert-Scale ranging from (strongly disagree) to (strongly agree) was used to indicate students' preferences. A small-scale pilot study was conducted to test and confirm the procedures to be used in the main study. The purpose of the pilot study was basically to make sure that the level of the texts difficulty is not too far beyond or below the comprehension level of the listeners and to address the reliability of the listening questionnaire accordingly. The pilot study was conducted in British Council, Sector 17, Chandigarh, India. In order to clear any opacity which candidates might encounter in replying the questionnaire, the 30-item questionnaire was piloted to a group of twenty of the IELTS candidates, 10 of whom were general candidates and the other ten were academic candidates who were randomly selected. This group of IELTS candidates was asked to participate in the pilot study.

In the main study, a total of 100 IELTS candidates was randomly selected, fifty of whom were general candidates and the other fifty were academic candidates. One-way anova in dealing with English Language Study Period (ELSP) was employed. The results of the data analyses indicated that two null hypotheses were rejected. In other words, the correlation between test scores and English Language Study Period (ELSP) and age of the IELTS candidates had meaningful match or relationship.

Furthermore, correlation coefficient between different age groups and the scores the IELTS candidates have obtained indicates that the correlation is about 0.31. In other words, the higher the age, the higher the score. Also the P-value=0.01 indicates that there is a relationship between the age group and the scores. Generally, the results obtained from this investigation showed that there was a significant match between the age of the IELTS candidates and the scores obtained by them. Tables 1& 2 highlight this finding.

### Re-statement of the Problem

A number of factors affect listening comprehension including exposure, familiarity with content, attitude, tolerance of ambiguity, patience, motivation, amount of listening practice, listening comprehension complexities, immateriality of the message to be negotiated, acoustical conditions of listening test venues, among others. Young (1992, cited in Mohammadi Golchi, 2012) stated that poor listening ability results from many factors, such as insufficient emphasis on listening, immature teaching methodologies, ineffective listening strategies, and students' lack of vocabulary, but the increasingly important one is anxiety. It plays a very important role because the anticipation of second/foreign language use in receiving information can provoke anxiety.

ety. According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992, cited *ibid*), listening anxiety occurs when students face a task they feel is too difficult or unfamiliar. Young (1992, cited *ibid*) also stated that listening comprehension is highly anxiety-provoking if the discourse is incomprehensible. Learners may feel anxious while listening in the target language due to some difficulties associated with SL/FL listening.

Generally, as defined by Oxford (1993) listening is a complex, problem-solving skill and it is more than just perception of the sounds. Listening includes comprehension of meaning-bearing words, phrases, clauses, sentences and connected discourse. It is usually a hard skill to master in one's own language, let alone in another language.

**Re-statement of the Research Questions**

Considering the above-mentioned problems, the following research questions have been posed:

1. Does English language study period have any effects on IELTS candidates' listening performance?
2. Does age have any effects on IELTS candidates' listening performance?

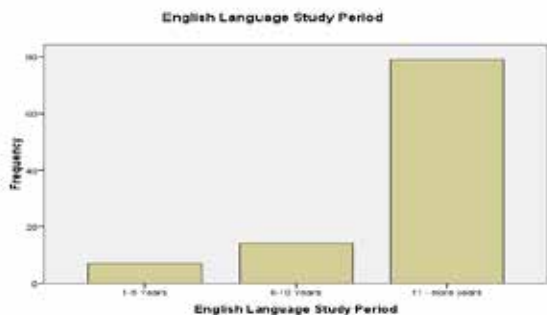
**Re-statement of the Null Hypotheses**

1. English language study period does not have any effects on IELTS candidates' listening performance.
2. Age does not have any effects on IELTS candidates' listening performance.

In order to find legitimate answers to the above-mentioned research questions and to see whether the null hypotheses are rejected or confirmed, meticulous statistical analyses were conducted on the data obtained from the listening tests taken by the IELTS general and academic candidate groups. The results of this finding indicate that English language study period has some effects on IELTS candidates' listening performance. Furthermore, the research results show that age also has some effects on IELTS candidates' listening performance. Tables 1,2&3 and charts 1&2 highlight these findings.

Moreover, out of 100 candidates in the main study, 79 candidates indicated that they had studied English for 11 years or more, 14 candidates said that they had studied English for six years or more. Only seven of them stated that they had been exposed to English language between one and five years. Chart 1 highlights this finding.

**Chart 1: Frequency & English Language Study Period**



Correlation Coefficient between English Language Study Period and the scores obtained by the IELTS candidate groups indicates that the correlation is about 0.30. In other words, the longer the study period, the higher the score. Also the p-value=0.02 indicates that there is a relationship

between English Language Study Period and the scores. Generally, the results obtained from this investigation showed that there was a significant match between English language study length of the IELTS candidates and the scores obtained by them. Table 4.7 shows this point:

**Table 1: Correlations between Scores & English Language Study Period**

Correlations			
		Score	English Language Study Period
Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.301**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	100	100
English Language Study Period	Pearson Correlation	.301**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	100	100

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Correlation Coefficient between different age groups and the scores the IELTS candidates have obtained indicates that the correlation is about 0.31. In other words, the higher the age, the higher the score. Also the P-value=0.01 indicates that there is a relationship between the age group and the scores. Generally, the results obtained from this investigation showed that there was a significant match between the age of the IELTS candidates and the scores obtained by them. Table 2 highlights this finding.

**Table 2: Correlation between Age Group& Scores**

		Age Group	Score
Age Group	Pearson Correlation	1	.319**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	100	100
Score	Pearson Correlation	.319**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	100	100

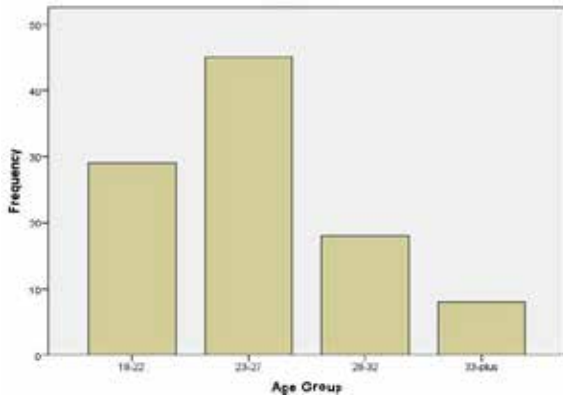
\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table of frequency on age group shows that the maximum number of the IELTS candidates lies in the second Age Group i.e. (23-27) which consists of %45 of the IELTS candidates. The other frequencies of age groups are indicated in Table 3.

**Table 3: Frequency of the Age Group of the Candidates**

		Fre- quency	Percent	Valid Per- cent	Cumu- lative Percent
Valid	18-22	29	29.0	29.0	29.0
	23-27	45	45.0	45.0	74.0
	28-32	18	18.0	18.0	92.0
	33-plus	8	8.0	8.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Chart 2: Frequency of Age Group of the Candidates



Also the above chart of frequency on age group indicates that the maximum number of the IELTS candidates lies in the second age group i.e. (23-27) which consists of %45 of the IELTS candidates. The minimum number of the IELTS candidates lies in the fourth age group i.e. (33-plus) which consists of %8 of the candidates. The medium number of the IELTS candidates is seen in the third age group i.e. (28-32) which consists of %18 of the IELTS candidates. The number much nearest to the maximum number of the IELTS candidates lies in the first age group i.e. (18-22) which is composed of %29 of the IELTS candidates.

Investigation on different age groups indicated that almost young candidates in our case those candidate groups who were twenty-three upto twenty-seven years of age were willing to go abroad, pursue their studies or do a job, whereas rather old candidates who were thirty-three years of age or more did not show so much zeal or enthusiasm to leave their own countries to work or study abroad. This interesting finding can yield useful hints for planners, teachers, educators and syllabus designers to be aware of their learners' needs because learners such as IELTS candidates need listening strategies and skills for life too.

### Concluding Remarks

On the basis of data collection, analysis and conclusions of the study, this empirical investigation offers a number of implications for ESL/EFL teachers in general and IELTS instructors in particular as follows:

1. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should focus not only on the product of listening but also on the process. To this end, a new methodology for teaching listening needs to be designed.
2. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should always encourage learners or candidates to actively participate in the listening texts and make proper inferences from those texts.
3. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should become aware of the importance of providing, self-confidence, motivation and a focus for listening.
4. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should pay due attention to five types of knowledge under the headings of phonology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics and kinesics in various communicative situations.
5. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should increase their learners' or candidates' language proficiency to the extent that they can manage the listening task without them.
6. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should encourage their learners to use background knowl-

edge to facilitate their listening comprehension and teach them to guess word meanings.

7. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should ask their learners to use diary-keeping strategy to increase their L2 learners' awareness and encourage them to use checklists so that they can reflect on how they do in their listening comprehension.
8. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should expand both the 'pre-and post-listening discussions to 'deal with strategies and beliefs in relation to the specific listening task the learners are presented with.' (Goh, 1997)
9. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should use audio visual aids for the development of listening comprehension strategies and should make their learners 'be aware of their own beliefs and knowledge.' ( O'Malley and Chamot, 1990) so they suggest consciousnessraising activities.
10. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should advise their learners or candidates to always expose themselves or interact with native speakers or writers through English mass media.

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