



An Analytical Investigation of Listening Performance of Ielts Candidates

KEYWORDS

IELTS; listening; second language; performance

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ABSTRACT

Learning a second language is a long and complex undertaking. Learning to use a language freely and fully is a lengthy and effortful process. Listening comprehension is the process of understanding speech in a first, second or foreign language. The main goal of this study is to see if IELTS general and academic candidates did differently or similarly in IELTS listening comprehension. The results of this investigation indicated that there were some significant differences in their test scores i.e. their performance in the listening test.

Introduction

Language is inarguably, one of the most remarkable characteristics that humans have been endowed with, the one that most truly sets us apart from other species. Our faculty of language, which we usually take for granted, exhibits a number of features which are not just remarkable, but even astonishing. Without language, we could hardly have created the human world we now know. Our development of everything from music to warfare, from literature to technology could never have come about in the absence of language. More than any other single characteristic, then, language is what makes us human. And human language is unique (Trask, 1995).

Language offers something more valuable than mere information exchange because the meanings of words are not invariable and comprehension usually involves interpretation. Besides, the act of communicating is always a joint and creative endeavour. Language is also a unique and a completely different kind of communicative system because it is flexible, innovative and adaptable to the demands of changing circumstances. It enables people to create, share and consider new ideas and to reflect together on their actions (NematTabrizi, 2006).

IELTS (International English Language Testing System) 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 organisations 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.

Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension is the process of understanding speech in a first, second or foreign language. The study of listening comprehension processes in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units

(such as phonemes, words and grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic. It therefore includes both, top-down processing as well as bottom-up processing.

According to Brown (1994) the significance of listening in language acquisition can hardly be overlooked. There is no wonder that in recent years the language teaching profession has placed a concerted emphasis on listening comprehension. According to Brown (1994:247) listening as a main element in language acquisition and teaching first hit the spotlight in the late 1970s with James Asher's (1977) work on Total Physical Response, in which the role of listening comprehension was given prominence as learners were given great quantities of language to listen to before they were encouraged to respond orally. Similarly, the Natural Approach recommended a significant "silent period" during which learners were allowed the security of listening without being forced to go through the anxiety of speaking before they were "ready" to do so. He also added that such approaches were an outgrowth of a variety of research studies that showed evidence of the importance of input in second language acquisition.

The present study is an attempt to investigate the IELTS candidates' listening performance in the IELTS listening tests to find out the difference between their performance in the listening tests. In other words, in this investigation the difference in test scores i.e. the candidates' performance has been compared. Accordingly the following null hypothesis has been posed:

"There was no correlation between performance in the listening tests (test scores) of the two groups of the candidates."

Re-statement of the Problem

A number of factors affect listening comprehension including exposure, familiarity with content, attitude and tolerance of ambiguity, among others. According to Rivers (1981), fleeting and immaterial nature of spoken utterances can be the other peculiar problems affecting listening comprehension. Listening is viewed to be an active and complex process.

The data collected from the listening test and the listening comprehension strategies questionnaire was analyzed.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to see whether there was any significant difference in the listening comprehension (test scores or the performance) of the two groups. The results of this t-test are shown in tables 1 and 2. Also the Sig 0.000 in Table 1 reveals that the null hypothesis is rejected because the sig is below 0.05 which indicates that there is a significant difference in the performance of the two groups of the IELTS candidates. The mean score of the general IELTS candidates came out to be 29.22 whereas the mean score of the academic IELTS candidates turned out to be 20.90. As the values of 29.22 and 20.90 indicate the difference in performance is high. Tables 1 and 2 clearly highlight this finding.

Also chart No. 1 shows the difference in mean scores of the two groups of candidates, i.e. general and academic candidates. The chart is presented under table 1.

Table 1 : The mean difference in scores of the candidates in main study

Type of Candidate		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	General	50	29.22	4.072	0.576
	Academic	50	20.90	4.532	0.641

Chart No. 1: The mean difference in scores of the candidates

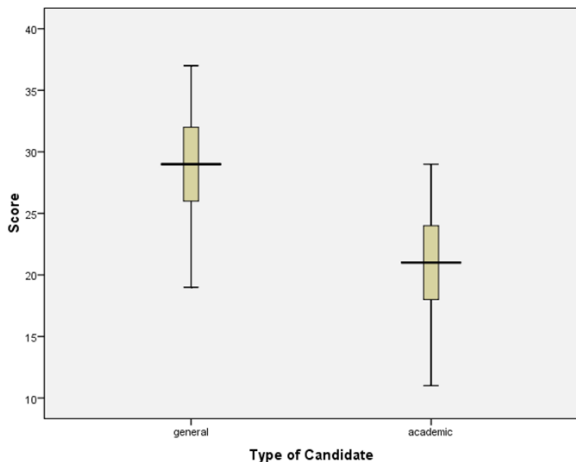


Table 2 : P – value or Sig of the mean scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
Score		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Score	Equal variances assumed	.418	.519	9.656	98	.000	8.320	.862	6.610	10.030
	Equal variances not assumed			9.656	96.899	.000	8.320	.862	6.610	10.030

The probable reasons behind the difference of the mean scores of the candidates' performance or in other words, the outperformance of the general IELTS candidates over the academic candidates can be justified as follows:

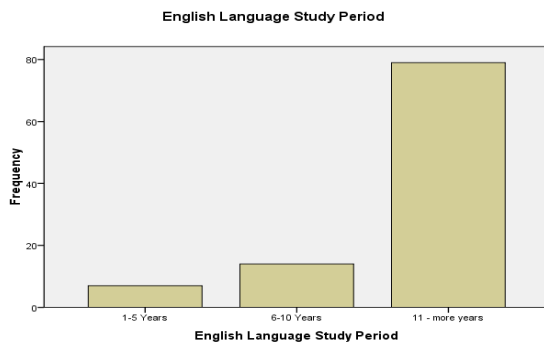
- The general IELTS candidates who plan to go abroad to get a job seem to already have a job in their home country, which, to some extent, equals having an adequate command of command English.
- Having a job in India indicates that the general IELTS candidates have some experience in their jobs, hence leading them to have a good knowledge of English language.
- As IELTS is not recommended for candidates under the age of 16, the general training module emphasises basic survival skills in a broad social and educational context so these candidates need to be above 16 and have a good command of English in order to survive and get by abroad.
- As the general IELTS candidates go to English-speaking countries to undertake work experience or training programmes or for immigration purposes, they need to be more competent in English.
- For some general IELTS candidates working abroad gives them a lot of motivation and enthusiasm so this may lead to a better performance compared to academic candidate groups.

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. The IELTS candidates' mother tongue in general and academic groups namely Hindi or Panjabi did not affect their performance in the listening tests. Table 3 highlights this finding. As presented in the table, the mean of the scores by Hindi speaking candidates was 25.91, and by Panjabi speaking candidate groups came out to be 20.08, which does not seem to indicate any meaningful and significant difference.

Table 3: First Language of the Candidates & Mean of the Scores

First Language	N	Mean	Std. Error Mean	
Score	Hindi	22	25.91	5.935
	Panjabi	77	20.08 scores	4.79

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 2 shows this point.

Chart 2: The Frequency & English Language Study Period

Concluding Remarks

Based on the data collected and analyzed, the results of the current study indicate that the IELTS general training candidates have outperformed and achieved better scores in comparison with the IELTS academic training candidates. The current research recommends the following guidelines for English language teachers in general and IELTS instructors in particular:

1. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should use audio visual aids for the development of listening comprehension strategies and should make their learners or candidates be aware of listening strategies in order to improve and enhance their listening comprehension. .
2. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should utilize movies, multimedia, CD's, use dialogues and conversation in English in the classrooms for the development of listening comprehension strategies.

3. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should place emphasis on proper pronunciation, use of appropriate grammar and phonetics during listening/speaking processes.

4. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should use dialogues, conversation, and discussion in English as activities in the class.

5. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should not bring any gap in the activities of listening strategies in order to obtain the best possible results of the activities.

6. Provision of listening comprehension strategies should be inculcated in the textbooks of English.

7. English language teachers or IELTS instructors should provide ample

listening practice for their language learners or candidates.

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