Assessing the Impact of IELTS Preparation Programmes on Candidates’ Performance in Pakistan

Natasha Memon *

ABSTRACT: This study examines the efficacy of IELTS preparation courses in improving the IELTS performance of their students. In Pakistan, as elsewhere, IELTS has assumed great significance on account of its gate-keeping function in emigration, higher education abroad and professional registration. There is a growth in IELTS candidature, resulting in an expansion of IELTS preparation courses. The current impact study employed a concurrent mixed methods design. An in-depth study of two IELTS preparation centres (one local, and one international) was carried out employing classroom observations, and pre- and post-study testing of the IELTS test-preparers (n=20) at the two centres to assess the efficacy of IELTS preparation. The results of the study showed that the courses are not effective in improving the scores of students. Courses, although relatively expensive, are very short and most test-preparers enter them with lower English proficiency than is appropriate for IELTS. Furthermore, it appears that public education is not meeting the demand for learning English language; therefore IELTS is now perceived as a route of English education and general certification, and a badge of middle class status if not actual material gain. These findings have implications for both providers of state education in Pakistan, and providers of the IELTS test (Cambridge ESOL).

Keywords: Efficacy, proficiency, gate-keeping, high-stakes tests, private industry

Introduction

The IELTS is an international standardised test of English language proficiency for non-native English language speakers (IELTS, 2001, p.2). IELTS measures both academic and general English language proficiency, and therefore consists of both an ‘Academic’ and a ‘General Training’ module, each with four components: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. Students who take the IELTS are scored in bands from 0-9 (non-user to expert user). Of all the internationally acclaimed English language proficiency tests (such as Test Of English as a Foreign Language, Test Of English for International Communication and so on) IELTS enjoys a high status as one of the most widely taken international English language proficiency tests as it is accepted by tertiary institutions, immigration

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authorities and professional associations around the world (Coley, 1999; Davies, 2008; Green, 2006; Hyatt & Brooks, 2009; Merrifield, 2012; Merrylees, 2003; & O’Loughlin, 2011). There is heightened awareness of IELTS, as a consequence of its gate-keeping function in these areas, and the test has assumed enormous significance in Pakistan.

The increasing demand for IELTS has led to proliferation of IELTS preparation courses in Pakistan. The IELTS preparation courses offered by private English language centres in Pakistan are part of a broader privatisation of English Language Teaching in South Asia (Billah, 2010; Hawkey, 2006; & Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2012). Memon (2015) surveyed a range of private institutes and suggests that there are two broad categories of private institutes in Pakistan (local and international institutes). The majority of the private institutes in Pakistan are locally owned, whereas only a few are international chains. Within the broad category of locally owned institutes, there are a number of different types. First of all there are centres which are owned by a single individual who is commonly known as a neighbourhood tutor. The second type of private institutes are established in an office/commercial space and a third type has more than one branch. Figure 1 below shows the range of private institutes in Pakistan.

![Diagram of Private Institutes in Pakistan](source: Memon, 2015, p.173)

Coleman (2010) estimates that there are 256 English language institutes for IELTS preparation throughout Pakistan. Memon (2015) contradicts Coleman (2010) and argues that there are about 1,250 private institutes in the country, preparing almost 78,000 students for the IELTS exam per year. No research to date has been conducted in Pakistan to assess the efficacy of these IELTS preparation courses offered by private English
language institutes which has been on the increase for more than two decades. Rahman (2001) records only one locally-owned private institute, called the Pakistan American Cultural Centre (PACC), functioning in Karachi before 1990s. The impact of IELTS preparation courses on the performance of their IELTS test-preparers is an important area to be researched in Pakistan, where a range of private institutes have opened up for economic and commercial interests. There is a gap in the existing body of IELTS literature which this study aims to fill from a South Asian context.

The aim of the present study is to assess the efficacy of IELTS preparation courses in improving the IELTS performance of their students. Based on this broad aim, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How effective are private institutes in improving the IELTS performance of their students?

RQ2: What are the differences between private local and international institutes?

The present study offers insights into the IELTS preparation courses offered by private local as well as international providers. The growth of IELTS candidature in Pakistan, as elsewhere, has introduced economic opportunities for private English language institutes in Pakistan (typically for IELTS preparation courses). This may be where IELTS is having the greatest impact financially, both on test-preparers and the test preparation providers. This study can provide important information for researchers, teachers, administrators and people involved in the validation and development of IELTS at Cambridge ESOL. Furthermore, this study will make an important contribution to the literature on education in Pakistan where the growth of the private English language teaching sector has been completely neglected by the government as well as individual scholars.

Literature Review

This section reviews some of the major empirical studies such as Brown (1998), Elder and O’Loughlin (2003); Green (2007); Rao, McPherson and Chandand Khan (2003) and Read and Hayes (2003) which have investigated the impact of preparation programmes on score gains of English proficiency exams such as IELTS within different contexts. Brown (1998) compared IELTS preparation and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses offered for ten weeks in Melbourne, Australia. Brown (1998) used pre- and post- (preparation course) tests (focusing on the writing component only) to examine which was the more effective form of test preparation. Nine students from the IELTS group and five students from EAP took part in the study. He found that the IELTS preparation programmes were more successful in preparing students, as students on these courses improved their...
scores statistically more significantly than the students on the general EAP programme.

Elder and O’Loughlin (2003) examined the relationship between intensive English language study and IELTS band score gains. They investigated the progress of 112 students (from non-English speaking backgrounds) enrolled in intensive English language courses offered for 10-12 weeks at four different institutions; two in Australia and two in New Zealand. They found that the 10-12 weeks of intensive study did not make a significant difference to performance, except in the listening module, which could be attributable to the amount of listening practice in the course.

Green (2007) investigated the influences of test preparation courses on improving the students’ IELTS writing scores in the United Kingdom. He made comparisons of score gains among learners in three types of courses offered for 14 weeks: a) a test preparation programme with a specific focus on the IELTS test, b) pre-sessional courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and c) courses that combined features of both, to determine whether dedicated test preparation was successful in making short term gains in writing test scores over a period of time. He administered IELTS writing tests at course entry and exit (pre- and post-tests). In total, 476 students took part in the study (85 students in the IELTS preparation course, 331 students in the pre-sessional EAP programme, and 60 students in the combination course). Green (2007) used t-tests, and found that a significant score gain in writing occurred in all three course types. Green (2007) concluded that the dedicated IELTS preparation courses were not necessarily more effective than the courses with no IELTS preparation content. This contrasts with the results of Brown (1998) where students attending IELTS preparation courses were more successful compared to those in English for Academic Purposes courses.

Rao et al. (2003) examined the impact of pre-test preparation (30-hour programme) on IELTS performance at three different centres in Fiji. They compared score gains by conducting pre- and post-tests in the reading and writing components of the IELTS General Training module among 48 candidates in an experimental group (receiving intensive IELTS preparation) and nine students in the control group (who did not take any preparation). Rao et al. (2003) found that the students in the experimental group made a significant gain in the writing sub-test, but showed no significant improvement in the reading sub-test. The students in the control group slightly improved in the reading skill test but showed no change in the writing sub-test. Rao et al. (2003) concluded that the preparation programme made a positive difference to the students’ writing skills but their reading scores did not improve significantly. Studies like Elder and O’Loughlin
Assessing the Impact of IELTS Preparation Programmes on Candidates’ Performance in Pakistan

(2003) and Rao et al. (2003) have been based on data such as pre- and post-test performance scores, but were not designed to provide descriptions of classroom practices. However, to capture the complexity of factors associated with IELTS score gains, the use of classroom observations can also be beneficial, in addition to the use of pre- and post-tests. Read and Hayes (2003) compared the pre- and post-test performance of the students (n=17) at two different institutes (referred to as Course A and B), to ascertain whether there was any evidence of student progress in their English proficiency for academic study during the four week course. The students were tested on three sub-tests, omitting the speaking component, using a now obsolete version of IELTS. They compared the pre- and post-test mean scores for each class by using a paired t-test and found that, except for the listening scores in Course A (the stand-alone IELTS preparation course). They argued that the study showed a significant improvement only in the listening test, at one institute, which was due to the large amount of practice devoted specifically to listening in Course A, similar to the findings by Elder and O’Loughlin (2003). According to Read and Hayes (2003) the short duration of the courses was the main factor in showing no significant difference in the students’ IELTS scores in other sub-tests. Read and Hayes conclude that IELTS preparation does not focus on improving the scores but ‘has developed into big business, not only for the language centres associated with the universities and polytechnics, but also for a large number of private language schools which offer IELTS preparation courses as part of their programme’ (2003, p.189).

The courses examined in the studies discussed above considered the effects of test preparation courses of varying lengths typically either provided by tertiary institutions or IDP Education owned centres in English speaking countries. This suggests that there was a need to conduct a study in non-native English speaking context, focusing on the IELTS preparation courses offered by private IELTS preparation centres. Most of the studies discussed above have compared an IELTS preparation course to an English for Academic Purposes course and have obtained conflicting results with no consistency in the IELTS score achieved. This might possibly be due to the variation in sample size and course duration. These studies have examined aspects of preparation programmes but their scope has been restricted, for example, to particular skills (Brown 1998; Green, 2007 & Rao et al., 2003) or to a particular methodology (such as Brown 1998; Read and Hayes, 2003). Therefore in the present study, as opposed to these others, I have attempted to compare two IELTS-specific preparation courses and have assessed the proficiency of IELTS candidates in the four language skills (i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking) by undertaking pre- and post-tests and
conducting classroom observations of complete IELTS preparation courses to understand the factors impacting on score gains.

**Research Methodology**

To recapitulate from the introduction of this study, the overarching aim was to assess the efficacy of IELTS preparation courses in improving the IELTS performance of their clients. Based on this broad aim, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How effective are private institutes in improving the IELTS performance of their students?

RQ2: What are the differences between private local and international institutes?

The present study employed the ‘concurrent mixed methods design’ (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Concurrent mixed methods design collects both qualitative and quantitative data at the same time (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007). Using different tools involves using the approach of ‘methodological triangulation’ which ensures the credibility of the research findings. I chose two private institutes through ‘purposive sampling’. ‘Pakistani institute’ represents locally owned private centres which attracts people from middle or lower middle class families. ‘British institute’ represents private internationally owned institutes in Pakistan and caters for elite section of society. Both centres are located in Karachi. The two institutes are comparable as they both aim to prepare students for the IELTS exam and provide preparation over an eight week period (40 hours). The two centres agreed to participate in the study and signed the consent form.

Pakistani institute had eight and British institute had twelve students enrolled on their IELTS preparation course. Their whole cohorts volunteered to take part and signed the consent form to participate in the study. At the two centres, I conducted classroom observations of their IELTS preparation classes and carried out a small scale quantitative pre- and post-course mock IELTS test to assess their efficacy. Table 1 outlines the data collection instruments, stakeholders and targeted number of participants. Each of the data collection instruments will be discussed further individually, along with the ways of analysing the data.

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1Pseudonyms are used for both the institutes.
Table 1
Data Collection Instruments, Key Stakeholders and Number of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Key stakeholders</th>
<th>Targeted number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Classroom observations</td>
<td>IELTS test preparation providers,</td>
<td>2 private institutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IELTS preparation teachers, IELTS test-preparers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Pre- and post-testing</td>
<td>IELTS test-preparers</td>
<td>20 test-preparers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Classroom Observations of IELTS Preparation Classes

The use of classroom observations in this study were particularly helpful to investigate the content and nature of IELTS preparation classes, the nature of teaching methods and materials and the difference in the teaching between a local and an international IELTS preparation course. It also helped to make connections between the students’ performance and the teaching methods and materials used in the classrooms. I observed the entire block of eight weeks at the two centres by adopting a non-participant, semi-structured observation technique. Both the centres held IELTS preparation classes three days a week for 2 hours each day, British institute from 7-9 in the evening and Pakistani institute from 3-5 in the afternoon. All the lessons were documented through detailed field notes.

In order to compare the features of the two courses in terms of classroom organisation, instructional focus and student modality, I used the classroom observation instrument called ‘Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT)’. COLT is a validated observation scheme which consists of two parts (A and B). I only adapted Part A and used in this study as I was interested to find the differences in organisational patterns and interactions in classroom activities between the two IELTS preparation courses, at British institute and Pakistani institute (Allen, Fröhlich, and Spada, 1984). I included the following categories: time, participant organisation, components, and materials used. The adapted COLT instrument therefore consists of four categories and these were coded as shown in table 2 below.
Table 2
Sample Sheet of Adapted Classroom Observation Scheme (COLT, Part A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Participant Organisation</th>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Materials used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whole</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4:30</td>
<td>T to S/C</td>
<td>S to S/C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:05</td>
<td>T to S/C</td>
<td>S to S/C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7:30</td>
<td>√</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T to S/C = teacher to students or class as a whole, S/C = student to students or class as a whole.
R=Reading W=Writing L=Listening S=Speaking
W=Written, A=Audio, V=Visual

In the first category, the starting time of each episode/activity is entered. The next category of ‘participant organisation’ refers to the way in which students are organised. The patterns of organisation in this category are: teacher to student or class. The second organisation is student to student, or student to class. In the next category, students work in groups or pairs. In the third pattern, students work on their own, either on the same or different tasks. The category ‘components’ identifies the different skills practised in a classroom activity. This helps to indicate whether students are listening, speaking, reading or writing, or whether these skills occur in combination. The final category of the classroom observation scheme, ‘materials used’, includes discussion of the various types of materials used in the IELTS preparation classrooms (such as textbooks, audio and visual resources).

I started analysing the data from classroom observations through our detailed notes made on the coding sheets (COLT). I started with the components (i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking) and participant organisation categories. These were ticked during the observation, so I first tried to find out how frequently each of the components was practised in the eight weeks’ programme. I calculated the percentage of time spent on each component and the participant organisation to see what components of IELTS were practised most and the ways participants were organised in the classroom (Spada and Fröhlich, 1995). I then focused on the materials used in both the IELTS preparation classes to identify any differences between the two courses.
Assessing the Impact of IELTS Preparation Programmes on Candidates' Performance in Pakistan

63

Pre- and Post-testing

Many private institutes make exaggerated claims about improving the proficiency of their clients in a short period of time (i.e. in six to eight weeks). In order to understand their effectiveness in making a difference to the performance of the students, I measured progress in IELTS performance objectively by testing students on IELTS material on all the four skills upon entering the programme (pre-test) and upon departing the programme (post-test) at the two chosen institutes, to assess whether the courses had a measurable effect on the IELTS performance of their students. This is a quantitative process which supplemented the main qualitative part of the study. Pre- and post-testing helps to measure the initial proficiency level of the learner and compare it to the knowledge the learner gained from the programme (Gray, 2009). Through testing the students at the two centres, it was possible to investigate whether the progress for each cohort at the two institutes differed. Both pre- and post-tests were conducted under normal examination conditions, fully invigilated, and with strict control of timing.

In order to achieve a comparable performance assessment across both institutes, all twenty students were tested using the same format and using material from the ‘Official IELTS Practice Materials’ (IELTS, 2009) which contains sample questions for all four components and comes with a CD for listening practice. It was ensured that the pre- and post-testing materials met the validity and reliability criteria in various ways. First of all it was confirmed that the book was not available at any of the bookshops in Pakistan. Furthermore, the Official IELTS Practice Materials (2009) is a publication from Cambridge ESOL that specializes in producing and publishing the practice material for international examinations like IELTS, which further ensured the validity of the pre- and post-testing material used in this study.

I shortened the actual test length to make it convenient for everyone to take the test, so each test took 1 hour 20 minutes. I used the same testing material at both the institutes for the pre- and post-tests. The questions for each component used in the pre-test were different from the post-test and both the institutes received the same pattern and material. The majority of students at both the institutes were taking the ‘Academic’ module of IELTS, therefore the material for all the students was chosen from the ‘Academic’ module. Each of the pre- and post-tests was conducted using two listening sections, one reading passage, one writing task (task 2 of the real test) and one speaking part (second part of the real test). The speaking test for the pre-and post-test was conducted with the help of the tutors at the two centres.

To analyse the pre- and post-testing data, I started marking with the
listening and reading parts of the test as all the answers were given at the end of the Official IELTS Practice Materials (2009). Each question of the reading and listening parts was worth one mark. The listening section in the pre- and post-test contained 20 questions each, whereas reading passage contained 13 questions each, so there was a total raw score of 13 for reading and 20 in the listening section.

To mark the speaking and writing sub-tests of the study, I employed a postgraduate student (native speaker of English) who had official training to prepare students for IELTS. All the essays were handwritten by the students and then typed for the examiner and given a code name so they would be marked anonymously and fairly. All the pre- and post-tests were actually randomised, so that the examiner could assess them without knowing which stage of the process any one test belonged to. The examiner marked the speaking and writing sections according to the criteria mentioned in Official IELTS Practice Materials (2009) and assigned a particular band score. In order to establish whether there was any significant improvement for each cohort in each module, I used the ‘Wilcoxon signed-rank test’ to compare the scores in the two conditions, i.e. pre- and post-test (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007).

Data Analysis

Classroom Observations of IELTS Preparation Courses

I discussed earlier in the methodology that I took detailed field notes and adapted classroom observation scheme (COLT, Part A) to compare what materials teachers used in their teaching such as non-pedagogical materials, commercially written textbooks, exam practice workbooks, components focused on during the lessons (reading, writing, speaking or listening) and whether the lessons were student-centred or teacher-centred. The data was analysed in terms of the above categories of the classroom observation scheme. The time teachers and students spent on each of the categories were calculated as a percentage of the total lesson time (length of lessons minus breaks). In the section below, I compare the individual categories of the classroom observation scheme of the two courses.

Participant Organisation

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutes</th>
<th>Participant organisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher-student/class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British institute</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani institute</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first category of the classroom observation instrument looks at the type of interaction. The table above shows that the most common type of interaction was teacher to students/class in both the preparation courses. Both the teachers spent the majority of class time talking to the whole class which is typical of education in Pakistan in general. At British institute, activities involving students working individually was more common than the students interacting as a class or working in a group. From the detailed discussion of the classroom observation at British institute, it was noticed that students received many tasks to complete individually, related to reading, writing, speaking and listening. Similarly, the students at Pakistani institute did not interact much with their fellow students or in the group. Unlike the students at British institute, they were not given many tasks to complete individually. The tutor at Pakistani institute talked to the whole class for the majority of the lesson time (93%).

**IELTS Components Practised in Class**

The next category of the classroom observation scheme focuses on all four language skills practised by students in class, either separately or in combination. The percentage of time spent practising each of these, at British institute and Pakistani institute, are provided in table 4 below.

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Listening</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British institute</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani institute</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the table above it can be noticed that students at both the institutes received more practice for the ‘Reading’ component which may be because the reading component is generally considered to be the most difficult section of the IELTS test. British institute spent comparatively more time on the reading component of IELTS than Pakistani institute. ‘Speaking’ was the second most practised component at both centres. For the ‘Listening’ and ‘Writing’ parts of the test, students at Pakistani institute received almost equal practice, but British institute students received more practice in ‘Writing’ compared to ‘Listening’. It is interesting to note that I did not find significant differences between the two institutes in terms of practising the four components of the test. However, detailed classroom observations revealed that the way they practised these four modules differed considerably.

British institute used many different activities (such as, vocabulary,
speed reading, skimming, web designing) which were completely absent at Pakistani institute. The tutor at British institute used cue cards for speaking practice, along with one-to-one interview with every student, so all three sections of speaking were covered evenly. Unlike the test-preparers at British institute, the Pakistani institute students only practised part 2 and were therefore not familiar with parts 1 and 3 of the speaking test. The British institute tutor always took note of students’ mistakes during the speaking practice and these were then discussed at the end of every speaking session with the whole class. This way all students received feedback on their speaking. The tutor specifically addressed past tense marking, copula omission, pronunciation, sentence structure, third person singular marking, prepositions, and the use of Urdu words. Similarly, the students’ essays were routinely checked and feedback provided by the tutor. In contrast, the Pakistani institute tutor did not make a note of any errors. The lack of formal feedback on speaking and writing sub-tests suggests that students were unlikely to improve significantly, or even at all, in the post-speaking test.

**Materials**

The last category of the classroom observation scheme covers the teaching materials used in the class. Table 5 below summarises the use of materials by the tutors at British institute and Pakistani institute.

**Table 5**

Materials Used for IELTS Preparation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Materials used</th>
<th>Textbook</th>
<th>Audio</th>
<th>Video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British institute</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistani institute</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both the tutors relied mainly on textbooks for practising all four language skills. The Pakistani institute tutor relied only on one local IELTS practice book called ‘Cambridge IELTS’. In comparison, the materials used for IELTS preparation at British institute were taken from various books provided by the British Council in Karachi, as well as some foreign editions. These books are expensive and not readily available at local bookstores. The tutor at British institute also encouraged her students to read newspapers to help improve their vocabulary for reading sub-test. In comparison to the use of audio and video facilities at British institute, the Pakistani institute tutor only occasionally used these as they were not available in the IELTS preparation classroom at Pakistani institute.

Overall, comparing the two IELTS preparation courses through the use of the adapted classroom observation instrument (COLT, Part A) and detailed field notes, it emerged that the British institute tutor arranged different activities for practising all four components. She taught to the
IELTS format; outlining test-taking strategies (e.g. time management); and administering practice tests. She used materials other than the main textbooks including the internet, and BBC and CNN talk shows to improve her students’ listening; and skimming and speed reading techniques to help them cope with the reading component. Furthermore, British institute also conducted a mock-test at the end of their IELTS preparation courses, an activity which is rare to find at local institutes like Pakistani institute.

**IELTS Pre- and Post-test Results**

To recapitulate from the research methodology, I assigned raw scores for both the listening and reading components. The speaking and writing sub-tests were given a band score. Table 6 below shows the scores of each individual on every component of the test. This gives a comprehensive picture of the pre- and post-test scores of every individual at both institutes.

**Table 6**
British and Pakistani Institute Students’ Scores for all Four Modules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT NAME</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>R</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARTICIPANTS</strong></td>
<td><strong>STUDENT NAME</strong></td>
<td><strong>BRITISH INSTITUTE</strong></td>
<td><strong>PAKISTANI INSTITUTE</strong></td>
<td><strong>STUDENT NAME</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PRE-TEST</strong></td>
<td><strong>POST-TEST</strong></td>
<td><strong>PRE-TEST</strong></td>
<td><strong>POST-TEST</strong></td>
<td><strong>PRE-TEST</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>W</strong></td>
<td><strong>S</strong></td>
<td><strong>L</strong></td>
<td><strong>R</strong></td>
<td><strong>W</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARTICIPANTS</strong></td>
<td><strong>AT BRITISH INSTITUTE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AMIR</strong></td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ABBASS</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ABDUL QAYYUM</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASSAD</strong></td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DANIYAL</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIBA</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KANWAL</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MASOOM</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NIKHAT</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SUMERA</strong></td>
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In the table above, the first column on the left gives the names of each student (all pseudonyms) under each institute. Other columns show the scores for the modules of writing, speaking, listening, and reading denoted by W, S, L, and R respectively. There is a score for each student in the pre- and post-tests which gives a comparison of the difference between the scores and indicates the score gain or loss achieved by each student during their course of instruction.

As previously stated, the two institutes typically cater for two different social classes, so it is useful to see the difference in the relative performance of the students at both. IELTS preparers at Pakistani institute usually attend state schools and public universities, and given such institutions’ tendency towards Urdu- rather than English-medium instruction, they come to the private institute with a low level of English proficiency. British institute on the other hand caters for people from an elite or upper middle class background and most of their clients attend English-medium, private universities, or at least have some background education in English (secondary schooling or a graduate degree), therefore they have a better English proficiency level than the Pakistani institute cohort. In the next section, I will discuss the average results at both the institutes for each module. Due to the raw score and band score division, the results for listening and reading will be shown separately from those for speaking and writing.

**Comparison of Average Scores at British and Pakistani Institute**

In this section, the pre- and post-test scores were averaged across students in order to obtain the overall result for each institute and for each participant at both the pre- and post-test stages. Sometimes an institute showed no score gain and sometimes it showed a slight variation (positive or negative) from pre-test to post-test. The average results are shown on the graphs below.
Figure 2: British institute and Pakistani Institute Writing and Speaking Sub-Tests Average Scores

Figure 2 above shows the average band scores from British institute and Pakistani institute in the writing (W) and speaking (S) components for both the pre- and post-tests. I will firstly consider the average pre-test scores of both institutes. In the pre-test writing component, British institute secured a 6.2 band score, whereas Pakistani institute secured 4.6. In the pre-test speaking module, British institute secured a 6.2 band score and Pakistani institute 5.6. It was estimated above that British institute students started with better proficiency, and this is confirmed by these pre-test results.

Turning to the average post-test results, Pakistani institute students on average made a slight improvement in the writing component of the post-test. The British institute improvement level in writing is not remarkable. British institute’s pre-test writing average score is 6.2, higher than Pakistani institute’s 4.6. British institute scored 6.04 in the post-test which is again higher than Pakistani institute’s 5.3. British institute's average band in the pre-test speaking component is 6.2, whereas Pakistani institute’s is 5.6. In the post-test speaking British institute averaged 6.6, which is again higher than the 5.6 average at Pakistani institute. Pakistani institute’s average score of 4.6 in the writing pre-test slightly increased to 5.3 in the post-test, indicating a slight improvement in performance at Pakistani institute. Whereas, Pakistani institute's average speaking score in the pre- and post-tests remained constant, showing no improvement. British institute's average writing score dropped very slightly from 6.2 to 6.04 in the post-test. The speaking scores for British institute, however, showed a slight improvement in the post-test,
with the average rising from 6.2 to 6.6, indicating some positive effects from the speaking practice gained at the institute.

In order to be certain whether the pre- and post-test score differences at both institutes are significant or not, I used the ‘Wilcoxon signed-rank test’ to compare the scores in the two conditions. By testing British institute’s writing and speaking results, it was found that the differences in the pre- and post-test values are not significant, showing $p=0.238$ for speaking and $p=0.632$ for writing. For Pakistani institute, the test values are $p=0.932$ for speaking and $p=0.078$ for writing. The differences in the results are not statistically significant, although the Pakistani institute writing module comes close.

![Figure 3: British Institute and Pakistani Institute Listening and Reading Sub-Tests Average Scores](image)

Figure 3 above shows the average scores of the listening (L) and reading (R) components. In the pre-test listening module, British institute secured an average score of 11.4, whereas Pakistani institute secured 9.7. In the pre-test reading module, British institute secured an average of 5.0 and Pakistani institute secured 3.3. Again British institute starts off with a better score in both components compared to Pakistani institute.

Both the institutes improved their scores overall in the post-test in both these components. British institute’s average score in the listening sub-test slightly improved from 11.4 to 12.5. In the reading section also, there was an improvement from 5.0 to 6.5. Pakistani institute’s listening sub-test average increased from 9.7 to 10.8. The reading scores also increased from 3.3 to 4.6 in the post-test. Comparing the performance of British institute and Pakistani institute, there is not much difference from the previous modules in which British institute performed better than Pakistani institute.
To sum up, the average scores of all four modules in British institute are higher than those of Pakistani institute. However, the improvement made by British institute is not much different from that made by Pakistani institute. Using the ‘Wilcoxon signed-rank test’ for the two sub-tests, I found that the p-values for British institute are p=0.224 for listening and p=0.027 for reading, which constitutes a significant improvement (p<.05). For Pakistani institute, the test values are p=0.527 for the listening and p=0.085 for the reading sections. This shows that the only significant improvement among all four is seen in the reading component for British institute. Thus, the large amount of class time devoted to reading tests and exercises seemed to pay off for the students at British institute. Yet the results for the Pakistani institute writing and reading components are close to significant.

Findings

The classroom observations at both institutes suggest that overall the IELTS training received by students at British institute was apparently much better than at Pakistani institute. It was, therefore, expected that the students at British institute would improve more than their Pakistani institute counterparts, but in actual fact the only significant improvement was shown in the reading section. The results are in line with the studies conducted by Elder and O’Loughlin (2003), Green (2007), Rao et al. (2003), and Read and Hayes (2003) where students on the IELTS preparation courses made variable progress on these courses and did not show significant improvement on all the four modules. Green (2007) and Read and Hayes (2003) explain that an extended period of study is required to gain any substantial increase in the IELTS scores.

British institute attracts better English speakers due to their screening; they admit more proficient speakers from the outset than Pakistani institute, and this can be seen from the pre-test results. The students at British institute started with a better score compared to those at Pakistani institute. Unfortunately the pre- and post-test results revealed that the two institutes are not very effective in raising the proficiency level of the students.

Conclusion

The present study has taken account of the typical IELTS preparation courses (private enterprises) found in a number of South Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. In a developing country like Pakistan, the demand for IELTS has stimulated the private English Language Teaching market, a market which goes largely unregulated. Due to the lack of regulation in the private English language teaching sector in Pakistan, more fraudulent institutes have appeared on the scene. The private (both local and international) institutes attract substantial numbers of clients.
The claims of many low profile institutes are clearly fraudulent, but most of their clients cannot make judgments about these local private institutes because the big promises of guaranteed IELTS results, in a short time.

Despite the more dynamic quality of the IELTS preparation lessons at international institutes like British institute, the results of pre- and post-tests revealed that neither of the two cohorts improved considerably. The rate of improvement that was observed is almost similar in both institutes. It seems that people at British institute come from elite backgrounds, and they do better in IELTS because of the amount of prior exposure to English which is typical for such individuals. The Pakistani institute in take does not tend to include good English speakers and they do not make major improvements in their level of proficiency during the course. The only statistically significant improvement is made by British institute in the 'reading' component of the test. This can be attributed to the maximum time spent there on practising the reading section of the test. Students are very challenged by the reading module which is considered to be the most difficult section of IELTS (Hawkey, 2006, p.122). The lack of improvement on both the IELTS preparation courses could be attributed to factors such as short duration of these courses, and the uneven practice of all four components. It is acknowledged, however, that the small sample in this study limits the generalisability of the findings.

The findings of the study suggest that the IELTS preparation providers (local as well as international) are benefitting economically from preparing a large number of students for the test. It is obvious that the lower end courses do not offer participants anything for their money; but the students attending the top end (expensive) preparation courses are also not getting much for their money. This implies that clients at all levels are being short-changed. The majority of the test-preparers are thus negatively impacted, as they fail to achieve their desired results.
References


