

Gaining proficiency in the reading module in IELTS: A study on the efforts of Bangladeshi students

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Abstract

As the name implies, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a test for ascertaining an examinee's English language proficiency. This test is very important for students who want to get admitted to universities or training programmes in English speaking countries. IELTS has four modules including a module on reading. This module gives rise to a number of specific problems for Bangladeshi candidates. The present article attempts to identify the nature and extent of these problems with emphasis on why the examinees find reading module a tough one. The ways and means used by the trainers and teachers to assist Bangladeshi students to overcome these problems have been examined. The article concludes that even with limited resources, the teachers and trainers can follow a number of simple procedures to substantially improve readings skills of students leading to better scores.

Key words : IELTS, Language Proficiency, Language Skills

1. Introduction

With the increase of the number of students aspiring to study abroad, IELTS candidature is gradually rising in Bangladesh.

In our country, approximately 6000 to 8000 candidates take IELTS each year. IELTS has now become a widely participated examination affecting a significant number of our most promising students.

According to definition, IELTS, the International English Language Testing System is a test for students who must demonstrate English Language proficiency to gain entry to universities or training programs in English speaking countries (Bemmel, Eric van and Jenina Tucker, 2001:1). In our country, candidates who seek preparatory training for IELTS in private coaching and training centers are mostly students and they prepare and sit generally for the academic module and not for the general module.

IELTS tests the complete range of English language skills that will commonly be encountered by students when studying or training in the medium of English. IELTS is jointly managed by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the British Council and IDP Education Australia. The British Council administers over 500,000 examinations overseas on behalf of British Examination Boards.

IELTS is divided into four parts called modules or subtests. These are listening module, speaking module, reading module and writing module. For the purpose of the article, questionnaires were distributed randomly amongst students of eleven coaching and training centers to ascertain which module seems most difficult to the students. Out of the 106 responses that were received, 65% found the reading module most difficult. In accordance with difficulty, the other modules that followed were writing, speaking and listening.

Students find the reading section of IELTS a difficult exercise. This is in spite of the fact that our Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary Certificate examinations stress on reading and writing while listening and speaking are relatively

neglected components. IELTS is a type of testing system of language proficiency which is different from our school certificate examinations. Our students are familiar with essay type and multiple-choice questions. The analytical type of questions that this test uses to ascertain the level of comprehension is quite unfamiliar to our students.

What are the main difficulties faced by the students with regard to the reading module? What are the perceptions and findings of the teachers and trainers with respect to these problems? Do the teachers and trainers follow the modern reading techniques? What can be done to improve the training of the IELTS candidates by using limited resources?

The present article explores and examines the answers to these questions. It aims to find out the root cause of the difficulties. It plans to give suggestions to the teachers, the institutions involved in coaching and especially the students to substantially improve reading skills leading to better scores.

In accordance with the purpose stated above, interviews of 21 teachers were taken, who train students for the examination. The information was gathered not to establish a quantitative analysis but just to acquire some basic information upon which discussions may proceed. Through this qualitative effort, the problems which are not so explicit all the time surfaced gradually.

2. IELTS and our students

As IELTS is a difficult examination for most of the Bangladeshi examinees, students seek help from different local caching and training centers, apart from the assistance offered by the British Council Language Centre. In tune with their students, 45% of the trainers also identified reading as the most difficult part for their students. They also found that in order of difficulty, next comes writing, speaking and listening.

Harun Rashid, the IELTS Administrator of the Bangladesh branch of the British Council states -

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IELTS candidates usually get very low score in reading in comparison of their performance of other modules. In Bangladesh, most of the candidates get 5 (modest user) in reading, 6 (competent user) in other modules. This is a very general tendency here in Bangladesh. We have also seen that some candidates get better score if they know some reading techniques (scan, skim, quick reading ability etc.)

In order to familiarize themselves with these reading techniques, candidates go to different coaching and training centers. The courses offered by these centers are more economical which attracts a large number of students who otherwise could not afford to seek training from the British Council.

3. The reading task in IELTS

The aim of reading is comprehension. Reading is defined in *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* as “The process of extracting meaning from written or printed language...” (Ed. McArthur, Tom, 1992:847)

The meaning of a text does not rest in the reader, nor does it rest in the text. The reader's background knowledge integrates with the text to create the meaning. According to Neil Anderson (2003), the text, the reader, fluency and strategies combined together define the act of reading.

The students in the Reading test gets only 60 minutes to read, comprehend the articles and answer the accompanying questions. There are three reading passages, which may include pictures, graphs, tables or diagrams. The reading passages are of different length, from approximately 500 to 1000 words. The total for the three passages is between 1500 and 2500 words. Each reading passage has several questions of different types, which may be printed either before or after the passage. The three texts are placed in a sequence of heightened

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difficulty from passages 1 through 3.

A candidate may have to answer any of the following question types:

- (i) multiple choice questions
- (ii) gap-filling exercises
- (iii) matching paragraph headings with paragraphs in the reading passage
- (iv) short answers to open questions
- (v) Yes/No/Not given statements
- (vi) The completion of sentences, summaries, diagrams, tables, flow charts, notes. (McCarter, Easton and Ash, 2003:26)

The Reading Module in the test contains a combination of some of the listed types, but the combination changes from test to test. The types of skills the Reading Module assesses include:

- (i) identifying the gist of a passage
- (ii) finding detailed factual information in a passage
- (iii) identifying relationships between ideas or information items, such as:
 - cause and effect, order of events, comparison
- (iv) making inferences
- (v) distinguishing between fact, assumption or opinion
- (vi) understanding text organization
- (vii) summarizing information

It is apparent that the different types of questions used by IELTS to assess the skill of the candidates are new and thus difficult to the students. Our examination system does not familiarize the students with the reading techniques such as skimming, scanning, inference etc. As a result, students do not feel confident enough to take the examination where there is no one to help them. Most of the students take help from privately run coaching and training centers offering courses ranging from three to four months.

Some of these coaching centers train substantial number of students and frequently claim to follow the most efficient and successful methods of training. 'Mentors Education', for example, is one of the leading coaching centers training around 1000 IELTS examinees each year (Information provided by Mentors on January 7th 2008).

4. Findings on the task of reading and the difficulties

The students stated that they find the text given for reading difficult to understand. Sometimes there are problems with new words, sometimes the structure of the sentence, or at other times finding out the meaning of the paragraph poses the problem. Nuttall (1989) have found that even when the plain sense of every sentence is understood, the reader may still be unable to make sense of the text as a whole. Because there may be difficulties in both the syntactic and semantic levels at the same time. According to Crystal (1994),

Syntax is the way in which words are arranged to show relationships of meaning within (and sometimes between) sentences ... most syntactic studies have focused on sentence structure, for this is where the most important grammatical relationships are expressed. (Crystal, 1994:100)

The problems shared by our students in the syntactic level are - new words, grammar and punctuation, technical and sub-technical vocabulary etc. On the other hand, Mallmkjar (1996) points out that.

Semantics is the study of linguistic meaning, and is arguably the area of linguistics which is closest to the philosophy of language. (Mallmkjar (Ed.).1996:389)

Cultural differences between the writer and the Bangladeshi students, one of the major problems faced by the IELTS examinees, is in the semantic level. There are also other problems like time management, lack of proper practice etc.

4.1 New words

Students often complain that they find it difficult to comprehend a text because they do not know the meaning and use of certain words. These individual words do not stop the reader from understanding the text. In fact, focusing on the meaning and use of individual words draws attention away from gaining an understanding of the overall meaning. As Nuttall(1989) points out that one of the best ways of mastering a language is reading, as most often advised by teachers. The reason, of course, being enriching one's vocabulary.

If the reader's vocabulary is far smaller than the writer's, the text will be hard to understand. In foreign language reading, this problem is basic and familiar. (Nuttall, 1989: 6)

The students generally identify the lack of proper training in the Secondary School Certificate and the Higher Secondary Certificate level where they have not practiced extensive reading to enrich their vocabulary.

4.2. Grammar and Punctuation

Unfamiliarity with use of words, their meanings, the use of punctuation deters the reader from understanding the actual meaning of the sentence or paragraph. Often the meaning of the word changes depending on its use and again, the meaning of the sentence might be quite different from the literal meaning that may be apparent from the use of the words. Lack of understanding of grammatical use of words and construction of sentences – for example 'I know him' vis-à-vis 'I know of him' – often poses difficulty of comprehension.

4. 3. Technical and sub-technical vocabulary

A limited number of students sometimes have problems with technical vocabulary. Students need to master the English synonyms of the technical words they have learned in their own language. Even then they may have problems with certain Sub-technical words like average, approximate, effect, combination, determine etc.

4.4. Cultural difference

Sometimes, even after knowing the meaning of each word, the students do not understand what the writer is really trying to say. Students may have this difficulty because they share different cultural backgrounds from the writer. As Nuttall (1989) points out, students often have difficulties with the conceptual content of texts, particularly if the topic is unfamiliar or if writer and reader are from different cultures . . .

The reader and writer should share a common ground from where they perceive the world. There is always a culture gap and the reader fails to understand the writer when the means to communicate between the cultures is not available to the reader. What the writer thinks and presupposes may not match with what the reader believes and expects the writer to know. Students of IELTS termed this difficulty in the reading comprehension test as "unfamiliar and foreign" text. Nuttall (1989) has shown this with the help of a diagram.

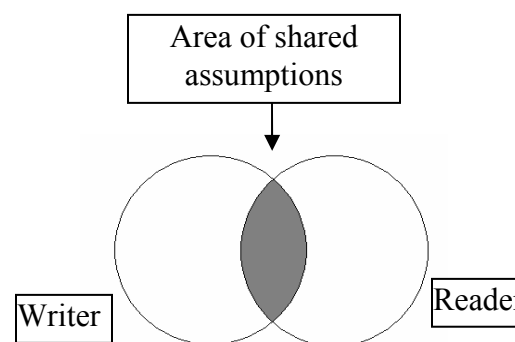


Figure 1 : Presupposition and communication (Source : Nuttall, 1989)

The shaded area in the diagram above stands for the common

assumptions of the writer and the reader. The more extensive are the shared assumptions, the easier it is for the reader to understand the writers. For the Bangladeshi students, the cultural gap is sometimes so wide that the shaded area is too small for them to understand the writer.

Another problem is that students often have difficulties with the conceptual content of texts, particularly if the topic is unfamiliar or if writer and reader are from different cultures. For example, a common English word like 'supper' is unfamiliar to our students whose introduction to English has been more formal.

4. 5. Time Management

The students emphasized on the problem of time management. Many of the examinees pointed out that they failed to attend to all questions within the time allotted. Without practice, time management in the examination is almost impossible. Even with higher than average expertise in English, often the examinee might get caught up in solving problems which they encounter first, rather than moving forward to questions that they can answer easily, in the process losing track of time.

4. 6. Lack of Practice

It goes without saying that practice not only familiarizes the examinee with the system, but also assists in increasing their vocabulary, their knowledge of grammar and in general enhances their ability in attaining a higher grade. Almost all private coaching centers offer courses of three to five months. Instead of treating these courses as guideline to their studies, the students depend on the instruction classes to practice their skills and fail to carry on with the practice in their own time.

5. Getting help: The teachers' view

Just understanding each word of what is written may not be sufficient. Kaplan (1966) has claimed that –

Each language and each culture has a paragraph order

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unique to itself, and ... part of the learning of a particular language is the mastery of its logical system.
(Kaplan, 1996 : 12)

It is generally assumed by students that they need to understand all the sentences and paragraphs. However, we can, in fact often understand a text adequately without grasping every part of it. This is generally known as extensive reading. Students have to be encouraged to develop this skill. This is one of the major differences between a general English course and a course in IELTS. In English courses, we concentrate on intensive reading. The aim is to arrive at an understanding, not only of what the text means but of how the meaning is produced. Most of the teachers interviewed suggested that extensive reading should be in conjunction with the training courses for IELTS. It familiarizes the students with all the aspects of the language at the same time. According to Nuttall (1989)-

An Extensive reading programme is the single most effective way of improving vocabulary. It is relatively easy to organize, enjoyable for the students and extremely cost-effective. (Nuttall, 1989 : 12)

Candidates sometimes find the idea strange that some parts of a text may be ignored or skipped, but efficient reading, and specially the techniques of scanning and skimming, requires it. The term 'scanning' is used here to mean glancing rapidly through a text either to search for a specific piece of information (e.g. a name, a date) or to get an initial impression of whether the text is suitable for a given purpose (whether a book on gardening deals with a particular plant disease). The teachers have to familiarize the students with the art of scanning within the limited time allotted for the course. As the teachers mostly work part time and are not language teaching professionals, they lack the skill and capacity to instruct the students to scan the reading material properly.

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'Skimming' is the skill of glancing rapidly through a text to determine its gist, for example in order to decide whether a research paper is relevant to our own work (not just to determine its field, which we can find out by scanning) or to keep ourselves superficially informed about matters that are not of great importance to us. Much of newspaper reading is skimming. Coaching centers do not stress on extensive reading which is the best way of developing skills of skimming. Coaching classes cannot accommodate sessions dedicated to teach skimming.

Teachers complained that the duration of the IELTS courses offered in our country are too short to sufficiently prepare the students to get a reasonable grade as their basic knowledge of English is rather poor.

One of the most important technique in teaching reading is learning through inference. This is the best way of dealing with new and unknown words. It is found that not enough emphasis is given on learning through inference. In many cases, the students are encouraged to learn the meaning of certain words they are going to encounter in their exercises. There is no system at all where the student himself is encouraged to learn by inference.

6. How to improve: Examining options

Private institutions offering coaching do not have enough resources to offer the best environment. Furthermore, being business oriented, they do not have any motivation to improve. There is also no monitoring or accrediting authority to assess their performances, the result being no pressure for continuous improvement. Thus it is very difficult for the students to find institutions and courses that are suited for their individual needs.

A monitoring authority must be formed which should include language teaching specialists, applied linguists and IELTS

examiners to help and monitor the environment and standard of the private institutions offering the courses.

Private institutions continuously advertise their services in the media. A negative result is that the students take it for granted that they need to enroll somewhere to improve. Most of the students interviewed clearly showed lack of confidence that they can themselves study and improve their skills. In other words, there is a disproportionate amount of dependence upon coaching centers. Reading skills like skimming, scanning and use of inference should be given importance in the syllabus of Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary Certificate examinations by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board. The twenty one teachers interviewed presented us with an interesting scenario. Only one of them received in-service training. Most of the teachers never received formal training on ELT. Their methods vary widely. Almost all of them see their role as teachers as temporary or part time vocation. So there is little motivation to continue improving their skills. To ensure improvement of skill and performance of the teachers, there is no better alternative than creating full time job opportunity and providing job security.

The experiences gained by the teachers and students of IELTS in Bangladesh are not recorded, transmitted, explored or examined. The result is that the same mistake is repeatedly done by successive batches of students and teachers and they have to go through the same process of exploration all over again. Difficulties that appear to be culture specific and related to Bangla speakers should be analyzed and more widely made known to the teachers and students. This will help them enormously and save valuable resources.

In reference to the IELTS courses, the job of the teacher is of vital importance. The teacher should have skills in counseling and inspiring the students to have faith in themselves and practice self development as a continuous process. Rossner

(1992) identified the characteristics of teacher development and concluded that,

TD is not just to do with language teaching or even teaching: It's also about language development (particularly for teachers whose native language isn't English), counseling skills, assertiveness training, confidence-building, computing, meditation, cultural-broadening – almost anything, in fact. (Rossner, 1992 : 4-5)

The training institutions of IELTS where these teachers work should concentrate on teacher development by in-service training programmes and workshops as a continuous process. This also entails motivating them to practice the language in any form and method. With extensive research on the topic Bolitho (1988) found out that –

Teachers need to convince both themselves and others that they are doing a job which is valued, and that they can take control of the direction of their own development. (Bolitho, 1988 : 8)

The Teachers' advice

The students are always looking for a shortcut to get an acceptable grade in IELTS hoping that their study material in the foreign university will miraculously seem easy. Unfortunately, it is a farfetched idea. IELTS is a proficiency test that does not have any set syllabus. That is why students, familiar with achievement tests, find it difficult to decide what to study in order to improve their language proficiency. The teachers interviewed gave the students some valuable advice to follow:

- (i) Students should try to make a reading habit from the day they decide to take the IELTS test. The time limit should not be less than six months. At least one year is suggested by most teachers.

- (ii) Students should practice regularly following the techniques like skimming, scanning etc. Learning to use inference in addition to learning new vocabulary should go side by side.
- (iii) Students can use easily available materials like newspapers and magazines, story- books, novels, comic books etc.
- (iv) They should make time to listen to BBC, watch English movies, write their diary and speak in English. Because we know that in order to improve, all the four skills of language, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing should go side by side.
- (v) Students can form study groups to practice the reading modules from different practice books where they can analyse phrases, learn grammar, practice time management and most of all keep up their motivation.

Conclusion

Students in Bangladesh generally have a very low quality English education in the Secondary and Higher Secondary Level. The role of IELTS lies in the fact that this examination causes a considerable number of young people to take improvement courses in English. However, when they seek assistance from institutions providing further training, the only major local source is the private coaching centers. This scenario is not likely to change in near future since further resource allocation by the Government seems unlikely. The students have no choice but to depend upon these coaching centers.

However, our findings show that the coaching centers are not run professionally and the courses they offer do not have in general the expected standards. Their only aim is to do business and they are not monitored, regulated or even accredited by any responsible agency. The result is that there is no incentive or motivation on the part of the coaching centers to develop teaching of English or to take any long term plan, let alone doing any research on the topic.

Even the teachers and trainers are all part timers or temporary instructors. They do not possess any academic or other qualification which can give them some expertise on the field. The coaching center for which they teach do not require them to compete with each other to attain continuous improvement.

Although this situation is prevailing for a long time, our findings further show that the experience gathered by the teachers can still be exploited to improve the situation. There is overwhelming suggestions that students should continue improving their proficiency in reading by following some simple procedures. These are, forming a regular reading habit, reading easily available materials like newspapers and magazines, practice reading techniques like skimming, scanning, inference etc. Examinees should ideally start preparing for the examination from a long time beforehand and can also help each other by forming study groups where they can set small goals and achieve them, use different self-access text books and also keep up their motivation. The main point is that the students should grow out of their dependency on coaching centers and have confidence that they themselves have the key to improve proficiency.

The students need to be made aware of these techniques. Awareness may start in the formal education sector when the students study for Secondary School Certificate and Higher Secondary Certificate examinations. The coaching centers may also coordinate their efforts to establish some sort of accrediting body. Such a body can identify good coaching centers from bad ones. The government, on its part, should recognize that private English coaching is a big sector involving hundreds of teachers, trainers and students. Once recognized, the coaching centers should not be allowed to do just business but should be compelled to follow certain guidelines. For example, the guidelines may be set on the qualification of the teacher, providing in service training etc.

This will be an inexpensive way for the government to ensure further and continuing language training for young people who are now often being cheated by these coaching centers.

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