

THE REASONS BEHIND THE POOR PERFORMANCE OF SAUDI STUDENTS IN IELTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate the challenges and barriers that Saudi graduate students experience with the English entrance exam, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The sample of this study consisted of six Saudi graduate students and two English teachers from two different English schools in Denver, Colorado, United State of America. Qualitative methodology and analysis were used in the study to collect and analyze the data. Two major themes emerged from the data: "Inadequate preparation for IELTS test" and "Limited access to academic English". Under these main themes, the sub- themes are reported. These findings could lead to implications and future research on the phenomena.

Keywords: IELTS, English Requirements, Studying Abroad.

INTRODUCTION

The United States of America is one of the most desired countries for international students to pursue undergraduate and graduate school. According to the Institute of International Education (Lefdahl-Daris & Perrone-McGovern, 2015), in 2013, the recorded number of international students who study in the U.S. increased about 36% from a decade ago. The fastest growing population of international students in the United States of America is from Saudi Arabia. In fact, the number of Saudi students studying in the USA has increased from 5,000 students in the 2001-2002 academic year to just more than 34,000 students during the 2011-2012 academic year (p. 406).

For many students, studying in the USA is a dream. There are many reasons that make international students leave their homes to enroll in the American universities. One reason is that receiving a degree from America means that they have advanced English level. Another reason is that they studied in one of the most prestigious universities in the world, as American universities have a great reputation around the world. Therefore, international students prefer American universities over Universities elsewhere. According to BBC (2010), US rank on top of countries with

the most Nobel Prize winners. This sets American universities apart from other universities across the world. Graham and Diamond (1997) mentioned that "the Nobel Prize can provide a "visible barometer" regarding the rise of academic prestige that would eventually funnel students to the United States" (García & de Lourdes Villarreal, 2014, p. 128).

Another aspect of studying in the U.S. relates to employment opportunities in students' home countries. Having an American degree on your resume provides students more opportunities to get higher paying, professional class employment. According to Lombard (2014), there are many factors behind the increasing number of international students, and one of these reasons is the demand for English speaking professionals in international labor markets. This corresponds with what Lee, Maldonado, and Rhoades (2006) believe that one of the most important reasons to study in the US is gaining more job benefits either in the government or the private sectors (García & de Lourdes Villarreal, 2014, p. 130).

Given the predominance of Saudi students studying in the USA and struggling on the IELTS, this study is designed to investigate the phenomenon. The focus is on students who

fail to meet the English requirement within the allotted year. According to the IELTS score website, band score 6 is considered to be competent user, so this study will focus on the Saudi graduate students who fail in achieving this band in their ESL year.

1. Research Question

What are the reasons causing the bad performance of Saudi graduate students in IELTS?

2. Literature Review

International students in general may encounter some potential academic challenges in the American universities, even before they start studying. They must meet many admission requirements before they can start their academic programs in the universities. One of the most important conditions is meeting the English proficiency requirements. American universities require international students from non-English speaking countries to demonstrate their English proficiency prior to fully enrolling in the university. In fact, universities want to ensure that students are not only prepared for their academic program, but also that the language of instruction will not be an obstacle on their way to success. Therefore, an English Language Assessment is a standard requirement for admission. To study at a college or university in the United States of America, a student must demonstrate that his or her English meets the minimum admission requirements. Each year, thousands of US colleges and universities accept hundreds of thousands of international students from around the world. Those students have to meet US universities English proficiency requirements. Therefore, students take IELTS as a proof of English language proficiency. In fact, IELTS is accepted by more than 3,300 institutions in the USA (IELTS, 2015). For example, Colorado School of Mine, University of Denver, and University of Colorado (Denver) accepts IELTS as a form of English language proficiency test and require international students to have a score at least 6.5 out of 9.

There are several forms of English proficiency assessments. However, the focus of this study will be on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for two reasons. First, IELTS is considered the most popular standardized test that

measures the English language competency. Arcuino (2013) points out that IELTS test is used internationally, over 135 countries administer the test, and over 7000 educational institutions accept its scores. Besides that, from the researcher's experience, IELTS appears to be preferred among Saudi students.

2.1 What is IELTS?

IELTS is an abbreviation of the International English Language Testing System. It is a standardized English language proficiency test for non-native English language speakers. IELTS is jointly managed by three different organizations, British Council, the International Development Program (IDP), and IELTS Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment.

2.2 IELTS Score and Bands

IELTS is accepted by over 9,000 organizations worldwide, including but not limited to schools and universities. IELTS measures all the four English language domains; reading, writing, listening, and speaking using a grade scale from 1 to 9. Each skill is graded separately, and then the final results from the four sections produce the overall band score. The overall band score will be the average of these four scores. There is no pass or fail in IELTS, rather the test measures all different levels of English proficiency. Test takers can score whole (e.g., 5.0, 6.0, 7.0) or half (e.g., 5.5, 6.5, 7.5) bands in each part of the test as well as the overall band (IELTS, 2015).

2.3 IELTS and Saudi Graduate Student in the US

The Saudi Arabian government subsidizes Saudi students to attend international universities because it recognizes the importance of education as a means of growth, both economically and socially. According to Saudi Arabian Culture Mission (SACM) (2012), today Saudi is one of the leading countries in annual expenditure on education with about a quarter of its Gross Domestic Product going to education. The Saudi government encourages exchanging knowledge and education between nations. In one of SACM's brochure issued in 2012, referencing a speech by Lydon B. Johnson, "International education cannot be the work of one country. It is the responsibility and promise of all nations. It calls for free exchange and collaboration." Lyndon.

B. Johnson, message to congress in February 1966, on international education (SACM. 2012, p.1).

In 2005, King Abdullah started the largest scholarship program in Saudi's history. The scholarship program is named in his honor, the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). The main goal of this program is to help Saudi students gain the required skills and knowledge to lead their country in the future. The program also has other objectives such as culture exchange and mutual development (SACM, 2012).

Students must have high test scores either in high school to get a bachelor's degree scholarship, or high grade point average (GPA) to get master's or PhD scholarships. English proficiency is not a requirement for the scholarship.

KASP provides students with all financial means necessary to pursue their education in the international universities. One important skill that is required to succeed in the US universities is mastering academic English. Therefore, Saudi students are required by SACM to enroll in English schools prior to their academic degrees in order to improve their English and consequently have a higher chance to get high scores in the English proficiency assessments.

Students can demonstrate their English Language Proficiency in many ways such as TOEFL and IELTS. However, from the researcher's experience, as a Saudi student, IELTS is the most popular and preferable standardized test among Saudi students. Saudi graduate students prefer IELTS for many reasons such as: having face to face interaction in the speaking section as well as hand writing in the writing section. They try to avoid typing tasks in the other tests such as TOEFL because the majority of Saudi students have not mastered the English keyboard and thus lack the requisite typing skill to perform well on the TOEFL.

According to Saudi Education Ministry (2015), students enrolling in KASP have one year to meet the English Language Proficiency that is required by American Universities. In some cases, if students could not achieve the English requirement during that year, they might apply for three or six months extension. As a Saudi graduate student, the researcher believes the number of failing students is large. From the researcher's experience, many

graduate students do not achieve 6 band in IELTS consequently they lose their scholarship from KASP. Even though SACM does not offer accurate information about this issue, the researcher believes almost all Saudi graduate students apply for extension for one reason or another, and the main reason for extension is failing in achieving a high score in IELTS. The only way for those students to keep their scholarship is by finding a university which offers admissions without requiring English proficiency tests. Some universities provide students with an alternative way to demonstrate their English competency such as completing the university's English school level test. Upon the completion of most advanced level, students may be admitted to the university. However, this alternative is mainly for undergraduate students, and is only considered by small number of universities. Thus, graduate students have no choice but to demonstrate the English competency by taking English standardized tests such as IELTS.

2.4 How English Schools in the US help Students in IELTS

From the researcher's experience, as an international student who has studied in three different English Schools in the US, the English schools focus on developing students' academic English skills. The schools prepare students for their academic lives. Preparing students for IELTS or TOEFL is not a goal for these schools. However, students can find some centers such as Kaplan that provide preparation courses for these specific tests. Examining the materials and website of ESL Academy, there was no mention of IELTS. In an email with the school's director, the researcher was told that preparing students for IELTS is not part of their agenda. The director then referred the researcher to the website to learn more about their curriculum and programs. According to ESL Academy's website, the ESL Academy has a contract with many departments at University of Colorado, Denver. This contract states that upon completing the ESL Academy's English program, students will be eligible to get admission to the university without providing an IELTS score. Therefore, ESL Academy not only assists students in their English skills, but it also builds necessary academic skills needed for any successful student at University of Colorado, Denver. The ESL academy develops students research skills, as well as, helping

students to build presentations skills such making PowerPoint slides and using body language and eye contact to engage the audience. The ESL Academy's program is 45 weeks long. It consists of separate classes to increase the proficiency of a low intermediate student to advanced university proficiency in one year. The ESL Academy offers five levels of instruction per term. Each term lasts 8 weeks with a total of 40 instructional weeks per year. During each term students practice and refine their academic language skills in grammar, reading, writing, listening and speaking (ESL Academy, 2016).

At Spring International Language Center (SILC), the director informed the researcher that the school provides IELTS preparation class as an elective class or as the SILC refers, the "module classes". Students who are interested in IELTS can enroll in this class in addition to the core classes. According to SILC's website, the school has six different levels 1-6. Students take core classes, plus twice-a-week enrichment "module" classes. In some levels, reading and writing are taught together. Modules vary from term to term to meet student needs, allowing students to practice the skills learned in the core classes. Some module classes include:

- Advanced Discussion
- Books and Movies
- Business English
- Conversation
- Test Prep - IELTS and TOEFL

In summary, the schools focus on preparing students for their academic lives. Even though SILC helps students in preparation for IELTS, it may not be sufficient for many students taking this exam. According to students who participated in the study, IELTS Prep class does not provide them with any technique to answer the test rather they are always asked to work on old papers. As a matter of fact, IELTS is different from the English exams of the English School. According to the participants of this study, students need special skills such as time management during the test to do well in IELTS test.

2.5 Research Studies on International Student Performance on the IELTS

Unfortunately, few studies discuss about international

students' performance in IELTS. In a search on two databases in November 2015 the search results are tabulated in Table 1.

As evident in Table 1, the searches yielded only four studies relevant to the present study. One of these studies was a small qualitative study about Chinese students; Yang and Badger (2015) studied the impact of IELTS preparation courses on Chinese students' academic progress. This study aimed to investigate how an IELTS preparation course helped Chinese students taking an Economics A-level course to achieve a similar level of academic socialization to local students. The study focused on six students in the program, their Economics teacher, and their English teacher. Findings from the study suggested that the IELTS classes helped expand the students' vocabulary and developed students' confidence in speaking.

Two of the four studies focused on Iranian IELTS takers. Green (2007) investigated whether dedicated test preparation classes gave learners an advantage in improving their writing test scores. This study found that there is no clear advantage for focused test preparation. The other study by Golchi (2012) aimed to investigate the listening anxiety and its relationship with listening strategy used and listening comprehension among Iranian IELTS learners. The results of this study showed that listening anxiety had a negative correlation with listening comprehension and listening strategy use. Golchi found that learners who had low anxiety used metacognitive strategies more than learners who had high anxiety.

Finally, one of the studies returned by the search focused

Key Terms Used	Number of Studies Found	Database Used	Number of Studies Relevant to the Topic
IELTS preparation	Three studies and one book	EBESCO	One study
Student performance in IELTS	Zero studies	EBESCO	Zero studies
International students and IELTS	Two studies about IELTS	EBESCO	Two studies
Arab students' performance in IELTS	Zero studies	EBESCO	Zero studies
All terms above	One study	Google Scholar	One study

Table 1. Terms Used in the Search

on Arab from United Arab Emirates. The study entitled, "We Will Learn Better Only if Some Things Were Different: Arab Student Voices about Their Performance in IELTS" by Aboudan (2011), investigated the student feedback on existing conditions of learning the English skills required for IELTS and examined possible reasons behind the poor performance of Arab college students on the test. The researcher used self-report feedback instrument to collect the students' feedback and opinions about the issue. The students highlighted a number of shortcomings in their IELTS learning conditions and suggested different initiatives for change. Students believe factors such as scheduling of classes, poor resources, student numbers in classes, and traditional teacher-centered teaching approaches run counter to successful test performance. Since this study is the only study that has been conducted on Arab student, the finding of this study will influence the interview's questions and the class room observation protocol that the researcher would use in the present study.

By taking into account the increasing number of Saudi students who study in the US and the lack of research addressing their issues on IELTS performance, this study aims to bridge the gap and investigate the reason for the poor performance of Saudi Graduate students in IELTS. The method that will be used for conducting this study is the qualitative method, the phenomenological approach in particular. This study will try to answer the question about the shared experience of Saudi graduate students who had poor performance in IELTS as well as the shared reasons behind this poor performance.

3. Methods

3.1 Choosing a Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach used to better understand and describe individual's experience with a phenomenon (Cresswell, 2013). Langsdorf (1994) points out that "the phenomenological question is always, how are entities present as meaningful for participants, rather than, what are entities in themselves, outside of communicative interactivity" (p. 7). Thus, phenomenology was a reasonable approach to investigate the central question for this study: What are the shared factors behind

the poor performance of Saudi graduate students in IELTS?

3.2 Setting and Participant Selection

This study took place in two English schools in Denver, Colorado. The first school was the Spring International Language Center (SILC). It offers a college environment for students. It is located across the street from Arapahoe Community College. It gives students access to the library, recreation facilities, bookstore, special events, and other activities. The school has about 70 students from across the world. Approximately 50 % of students are from Saudi (Spring International Language Center (SILC), 2016). The other school was the English as a Second Language Academy (ESL) at the University of Colorado- Denver. Approximately 40-50% of students are from Saudi during any given term. The school prepares students for English language fluency and supports them to be successful University of Colorado Denver students. The school's curriculum integrates English fluency, accuracy in written and oral expression, and content studies with the scholarly and interpersonal skills. The students at the school come from more than 130 countries (ESL, 2016).

The criteria for selecting the sample included the following: graduate student status, from Saudi Arabia, living in Colorado, studying English for more than a year, had not scored sufficient IELTS score to get enrolled in graduate school in the USA (most graduate school in the USA require at least 6 in IELTS). The sample consisted of six students and two English teachers. All students and teachers were interviewed and observed in the class room. The contact information of the students who were eligible to participate in the study were collected from their schools. Then, the researcher sent an email to each student that described the study, the purpose, and the importance of this study. The student would provide their contact information in the same email and reply if they would like to participate in the research. After receiving the responses, the researcher would randomly select six students, three students from each school to be the participants of this study (see Table 2 for students' demographic Information). The teachers were selected by the administration at the participating English schools. As for the teachers, they were the classroom

Student	Gender	Age	Marital Status
A	Male	30	Single
B	Female	28	Married
C	Male	28	Married
D	Female	27	Single
E	Female	30	Single
F	Male	30	Married

Table 2. The Student Participants' Demographic Information

teachers where the researcher did the observation. One teacher had been teaching English for non-English speakers for 20 years. The teacher taught both at the USA and abroad in countries such China and Japan. When the researcher interviewed, the teacher was teaching and working as admissions advisor for the school's students. The teacher helped them in applying to universities and following up with them regarding their application. The other teacher has considerable teaching experience and was the co-founder of ESL Academy five years ago. The researcher interviewed and found that the second teacher was teaching research course for advanced class at the academy. As for their knowledge regarding IELTS, neither teacher was very familiar with IELTS test techniques and skills.

3.3 Procedures

First, the researcher set up appointments with the two English schools' directors with whom the researcher wanted to conduct the study. After meeting each school's director, both agreed and allowed to conduct the research at their schools and referred the researcher to the classroom' teachers with whom the researcher would be working. Next, the researcher met the teachers and explained to them the research's procedures. Each teacher nominated three

students to be the research participants. Then, the researcher contacted the students and emailed them the recruitment emails, as well as, consent forms. The students replied and signed the consents forms. Up to this point, everything was set up and the researcher was ready to collect the data. The researcher started working with ESL Academy. The research began with an informal classroom observation to get a sense of the classroom and learn about the classroom environment. The teacher introduced the class, and the researcher explained the research objective to the class. Then, the researcher sat at the back of the classroom and observed what was happening. After the class, the researcher interviewed the classroom teacher for about 20 minutes. Two days later, the researcher started the official classroom observation. After having done the observations, the researcher contacted the students separately to determine a place and time for interviews. Each student replied with their availability.

3.4 Collecting the Data

The data consisted of semi-structured interviews with students and teachers as well as classroom observation. In terms of the interviews, each interview lasted about 45 minutes. In order to develop the interview questions, the researcher worked with the research advisor to develop and validate the interview questions. Then, the pilot study was conducted to determine the best phrasing and order for the questions. In this pilot study, the researcher interviewed five Saudi graduate students and got their feedback about the way the questions were framed. The questions were refined with the help of the research advisor based on students' feedback and the notes on the adequacy of each question to reach the target information. Questions were designed to gather

Research Questions	Data Sources	How Each Source Answers Rqs?	Interview's Questions and Observation Guidelines
What are the shared reasons behind the bad performance of Saudi graduate students in IELTS?	Interview Classroom observation	The interview will help to obtain detailed information about the students' experiences about learning English and IELTS exam Observation will help to learn about the classroom environment and the teaching style that is implemented in the class	-How was your English level when you came to us? -How is your experience in studying English? -How often do you practice English outside the school? -How is your IELTS exam experience? -What is your IELTS target score? And what are the factors that push you back from achieving it? The researcher would be looking for the classroom environment and instruction language. Also, he would be observing the teaching methods that have been used by the teacher. Finally, he would be looking for the number of Arabic students in the classroom

Table 3. Data Matrix

information related to the research question (see Table 3 for specific questions). The classroom observations were designed to observe the classroom environment and teaching methods. Moreover, the researcher was looking at the number of Arabic students in the classroom and the language they use to communicate with each other.

3.5 Data Analysis and Report

To analyze the data, the information from the observations and the interviews was gathered. Utilizing the method outlined by Moustakas (1994), data were coded with attention to identify statements that addressed the research questions. Thereafter, the researcher transcribed the interviews and look for the significant sentences that describe students' experiences. Based on the significant sentences, the researcher developed a list of significant statements. Then, the researcher clustered the list of significant statements into themes that indicate the common experiences across all students. Upon solidifying themes within the data via the gathering of closely connected ideas, words, concepts, and abstract principles (Grbich, 2007), textural and structural descriptions were developed, culminating in an overall description of the essence of the experience of Saudi students with IELTS (Creswell, 2013).

3.6 Researcher's Role

The researcher is a Saudi graduate student studying a Ph.D. of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at University of Denver, Colorado. The researcher was born and grew in Saudi Arabia. The researcher has a bachelor's degree in computer science. As an international student studying in the USA, familiar with this research problem, the researcher has been through this situation. The researcher shared some experiences on the research topic with the participants. Being a part of this experience, the researcher has own interpretations and biases that influenced the study with such as students being lazy and not having an adequate preparation for the test. Therefore, the past experiences in IELTS could have affected the interpretation of the data, so, in order to ensure the validity of the findings, the researcher tried to put away the biases and thoughts when analyzing and interpreting the data, and instead look

at all possible interpretations.

3.7 Validation

In order to strengthen and check the accuracy of the research findings, the researcher employed three validation strategies. First, the researcher used the member checking strategy by asking students to read the interpretation of their experiences and providing feedback. Second, the researcher employed the peer review strategy by asking individuals having experiences in qualitative research to review the procedure carried out in collecting and analyzing the data. Finally, the researcher clarified the personal bias as a Saudi graduate student that had influenced the interpretation of the participants' experiences. Creswell (2013) points out that "in this strategy, the researcher comments on past experience, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study" (p. 251).

4. Findings

Two major themes emerged from the data: "Inadequate preparation for IELTS test" and "Limited access to academic English" (see Table 4). Under these main themes the sub-themes are reported.

4.1 Inadequate Preparation for IELTS

Inadequate preparation for IELTS test refers to students' preparation before the IELTS test. Emergent themes included Test taking skills, Language, and Time spent on preparing for the test.

Four students out of six mentioned that they did not take preparation courses at all. Only two of them had preparation class in their school, but according to them and their teachers this course was not sufficient. This can be seen in the following teacher's quote: "Our IELTS class preparation is only four hours a week, so it is not an intensive class that can help students score well in IELTS". According to the two students, the IELTS preparation course at their

Main Theme	Inadequate Preparation for IELTS Test	Limited Access to Academic English
Sub-themes	Test taking skills	In school
	Language	Out of school
	Time spent on preparing for the test	

Table 4. Summary Themes

school does not focus on the test techniques and skills rather it only provides students to practice with old exams papers as modules.

Most of them spent less time to prepare, a week in an average. They had little training on test taking strategies for the IELTS. Three students pointed out that they took the test only to explore and learn about the exam. This means they did not have the required skill to score high in the exam. This can be inferred from the following quote: "I did not prepare for the exam seriously since I still have about six months in my English scholarship". This corresponds with the researcher experience as a Saudi graduate student. Students start to feel the pressure during the six months extension period because they know it is their last chance to get required score in IELTS.

Both teachers supported the view that their schools do not offer sufficient preparation for IELTS. One of the teachers when asked about IELTS preparation in their school stated that: "Our school offers an IELTS waiver for students who finish our academic program and wants to enroll at CU, Denver. Thus, students do not need to worry about IELTS".

4.2 Limited Access to Academic English

Limited access to academic English refers to sources of practicing English in school and out of school. Both teachers pointed out that the majority of students in their classrooms are Arab student, which makes it hard to force students to practice English while in the school. This is supported by the classroom observation; both classes have more than 50% Arab students. Also, it was noticed that students congregate in same national groups which limits their exposures to English and allowed them to continue to use their native language.

All participants described their practices of academic English language out of school as limited by doing their assignments. Most of them watch English movies as a part of practicing academic English. While English movies may help with some aspects of academic English such as pronunciations and casual language structures, they would do little to support students acquisition of cognitive academic language (Cummins, 1999). One of the students described that, "I spend one hour a day practicing

English outside the school. I am married, and I do not have time to go and interact with native speakers. I spend whole my day with my husband who does not speak English".

5. Assertions

5.1 Assertion 1: Inadequate Preparation for IELTS Test

5.1.1 Test Taking Skills

IELTS applicants need to train on special skills and take practice tests under timed conditions in order to score well in IELTS. They also need to familiarize themselves with the test papers and answers' sheet. According to British Council website (2016), IELTS applicants should understand the IELTS test format so that they know what to expect and what different kinds of questions that they may encounter. For example in listening section, students listen to two ways conversation for about 10 minutes. After that, they listen to a long academic lecture for about 15 minutes. While they are listening, students have to answer questions that have been given to them on the sheet. In this section, students are not only evaluated for their listening skills, but also for their spelling abilities. Students will be graded low if they make spelling mistakes. In some cases, native English speakers receive lower scores than English language learners because they do not prepare for the test. Out of six students participated in this study, only two students took that IELTS preparation course to help them in the test. The rest think IELTS preparation courses are not important. One student said, "I do not see any point for the IELTS preparation courses". Those students believe they can understand the test through self-learning. In addition, based on the teachers' interviews, it was revealed that neither teacher has expertise with IELTS. Neither has taken courses for teaching IELTS which are necessary to understand the strategies and techniques of IELTS. According to Cambridge English Center (2016), teachers need to equip themselves with special skills to help their students approach the IELTS exam with confidence. Therefore, Cambridge offers a course on how to teach IELTS. This course is about preparing others for IELTS, not taking it yourself. The aim of this course is to help IELTS applicants earn higher scores by improving teachers' instruction. The course involves several components such as how the test

works and is assessed; strategies and activities to assist students achieve results and dealing with common problems that students encounter during the exam or while preparing. These skills are essential for IELTS teachers to help their students score well on IELTS. This corresponds with Sanavi and Nemati (2014) study's findings that shows that Iranian students' writing skills improved in IELTS as a result of the employment of writing feedback strategies. Thus, students having inadequate preparation and little opportunity to receive meaningful preparation may contribute to low scores on IELTS.

5.1.2 Language

Possessing communication skills in English is the key to success in IELTS test. Part of IELTS is techniques and strategies, but a big part of it is language. In order to score well, the students need to improve their English language skills by daily practice, as well as exposure to different situations. As graduate students plan to study in US, Saudi students are required to score high in IELTS. However, the opinion after researcher's interaction with the students, their English level is still not adequate enough to score well on IELTS. During the interview, the researcher noticed all students make grammar mistakes such as choosing the wrong tense and using the wrong preposition. According to Cambridge English Center (2016), the higher the academic English level students higher the IELTS score they achieve.

5.1.3 Time Spent on Preparing for the Test

IELTS is not an easy test. It requires a lot of effort and time to prepare. According to IELTS (2015), IELTS candidates must take more time to practice their English skills prior to the test. For example, to prepare for the speaking section, applicants need to make sure they have sufficient time to practice their speaking skills with friends or classmates before they head of their test. In this study, 5 out 6 students said they spend only two weeks to prepare for the test (Figure 1). Only two students had an IELTS preparation course, the rest did only self-preparation. Moreover, the two teachers believe students take the IELTS without spending sufficient time in advance on preparation. This short time preparation might affect their score, negatively.

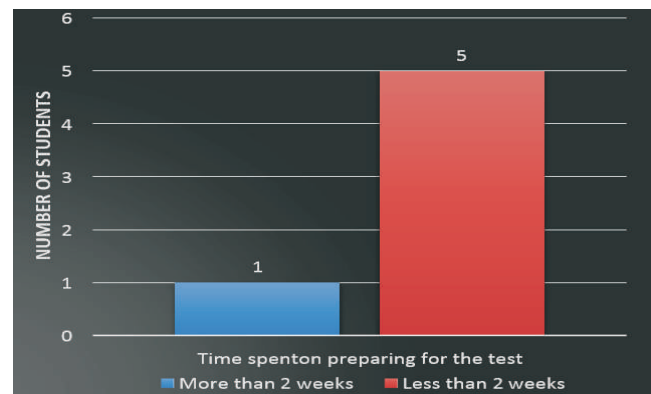


Figure 1. Time Spent on Preparing for the Test

5.2 Assertion 2: Limited Access to Academic English

5.2.1 In School

Even though English schools are meant to develop academic English for students, international students in English classes congregate in same national groups. In the two English schools that were observed, there were high concentrations of Arab students.

These students hailed from a variety of countries such as Saudi, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates. According to teachers and the observations, about 70% of the students in each school were Arabs. This gives little or no chance for Arab students to practice English. During both classrooms observations, the researcher noticed Arab students engaged in open conversations on different topics such as universities' applications and IELTS in Arabic whenever they can. They also used Arabic to explain to each other when someone is stuck.

5.2.2 Out of School

Practice out of school focuses on social interaction and, other than homework, there is no additional work that facilitates academic English language development.

Students spend an average of 1 to 2 hours a day watching TV to practice their general English, listening in particular. In term of speaking, they all agreed that being Arabic speakers all day long has a negative effect on their English speaking skills, as they see little opportunity to engage with the larger English speaking community. This can be inferred from the following quote "I am married and I have a son, so I spend most of my time with them". As for writing, one of the

students write in English unless they have to do so for the school. None of students read in English unless the school requires them to do so. One student said "I like reading but when I read in English I do not understand everything. Therefore, I prefer to read in Arabic"

None of the participants have access to academic English outside their schools, so they do not practice their academic English except at school.

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the shared experience of participating Saudi graduate students, face during their journey with IELTS exam and the potential reasons to score low in IELTS. In this study, the researcher conducted a qualitative phenomenological method to analyze the data and answer the research question which was: what are the reasons causing the bad performance of Saudi graduate students in IELTS? As for collecting the data, semi-structured interviews as well as classroom observation were utilized to gain rich data that would help understand the phenomena. The study concluded with two main reasons for this phenomenon. First finding is the inadequate preparation for IELTS test. The second finding is the limited access to academic English. Under each finding, sub-themes are reported.

Implications

Whilst the findings in this study cannot be generalized and applied to other populations of Saudi students who take IELTS test, this study only investigates the shared experience of Saudi graduate students in Colorado English Schools who take the IELTS test. Therefore, the results of this study can be seen as a contribution to an ongoing discourse in the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia about the barriers students face as they seek to meet the language requirement of graduate schools in the USA. Also, the results indicate that it is very important to prepare students in terms both English language and IELTS before sending them to the USA by offering academic English and IELTS classes, workshops, and training. Thus, student will be equipped with skills needed to meet the desired IELTS scores. Moreover, the finding of this study can help English schools in the USA to accommodate their students' needs and help them

overcome the IELTS challenge. American English schools and centers can provide IELTS training to help prepare for the test. The schools also, can provide activities and programs to help students to engage with native English speakers to develop their communication skills.

Limitations

One challenge that the researcher faced in this study was language. The phenomenological approach investigates the feelings, ideas, and beliefs about specific phenomenon. By taking into account that the Arabic language is the native language for Saudi students, using Arabic in collecting the information during the interviews helped them to express their feelings and ideas more clearly than using English. However, this made the data analysis and peer debriefing aspects of this study challenging in a monolingual English setting. Another challenge encountered during this study was the type of classes observed by the researchers, In both classrooms visited by the researchers there were little observable interactions between students and their teachers. Another limitation is that the students at one of the two schools have IELTS waivers, consequently the other see IELTS as their only way to enroll at universities.

Future Research

Future research might investigate the characteristics, strategies, plans, and previous experience of Saudi students who successfully achieved high scores on IELTS and compare them with those who did not score well. Also, researchers could investigate the same phenomenon with a large sample size that examines Saudi students in different countries or different regions of the United States. Moreover, researchers could conduct a mixed method design to see if they can generalize the finding.

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