

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

## **The Correlation between IELTS Scores and International Students' Academic Success: A Literature Review**

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### **Abstract**

This review synthesizes the findings of research compiled between the relationship on international student success and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Increasingly, within higher education, IELTS test scores have become not only a benchmark for testing the language proficiency of international students who speak English as an additional language, and subsequently their entry into higher education institutions, but also a presumption of student academic learning success. A growing concern for many higher education institutions is that proficiency in English does not necessarily equate to international students' preparedness to study at the higher education level with regards to their academic learning success. Amidst growing ambivalence related to the use of IELTS as a placement tool, this literature review outlines three main themes found in connection to the correlation between IELTS and international students' academic learning success at the undergraduate level. The first two themes focus on the positive and negative correlations between IELTS scores and international students' academic learning success. The third theme is related to a social dimension which focuses on the fact that, for international students, linguistic proficiency is linked to how they adapt to their new learning and living environments. Here the relationship between IELTS as an indicator of students' preparedness for the rigours of academic study is being explored. The review ends with a short examination of published documents by IELTS. Overall, this literature review suggests that a common theme found in the published research is that even with a high IELTS score, international students do need academic support when studying at the higher education level.

### **Introduction**

The internationalization of higher education (HE) has been growing steadily over the last couple of decades. Within the British Columbian educational system there are more than 152,000 international students studying at all levels of education (BCCIE, n.d.), while across Canada there are over 572,400 international students (CBIE, 2019). At the HE level there are over 370,000 international students (CBIE, 2018). Between 2010 and 2018 the numbers of international students studying in Canada increased by more than 150% (CBIE, 2019). This increase of international students studying within Canada is representative of worldwide trends in the increase of movement of students within the internationalization of HE (Börjesson, 2017; Stigger 2018).

A growing concern within the internationalization of HE is the language proficiency of students who speak English as an additional language (hence forward referred to as international students). Within this concern, growing attention is focusing on the accuracy of international

student placement in first year studies at HE institutions with regards to their presumed language proficiency. As the number of international students continues to grow, the validity of placement tests, particularly the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), to predict these students' academic learning success has increasingly been under discussion in many English-speaking countries (Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Bayliss & Ingram 2006; Pilcher & Richards, 2017). Within these articles, academic learning success is typically correlated with students' grade point average (GPA). Understanding the correlation between language proficiency tests and international students' academic learning success is important, as it would enable HE institutions to better develop systems of academic support for these students. Many Canadian HE institutions require international students to have a minimum score of IELTS 6.5 to gain entry to undergraduate programs (IELTS, 2019). While larger universities might be attracting international students with higher English and academic learning proficiency, the sheer number of international students in Canada means that smaller universities and colleges must be cognizant of the correlation between the minimum IELTS scores of 6.5 and international students' academic learning readiness to study in English.

### Methods

This literature review aims to examine the relationship between language proficiency scores and international students' academic learning success within higher education. As IELTS is a popular and widely recognized test of international students' English proficiency (English Testing Canada, n.d.; IELTS, 2019), this relationship became the focus of this research. With the hopes of allowing easy access to the articles reviewed, Google Scholar was initially used. The keywords for the search were: IELTS + academic success + Canada and IELTS + academic prepare + Canada. This search found a range of articles, of which most were not freely accessible and "Canada" was missing from the search results. The search for articles then expanded to the ERIC database, where access to the full article again remained limited, and these articles did not specifically relate to Canada. Most articles found were based on research compiled in Australia or the United Kingdom, or on students studying at English as a medium of instruction (EMI) institutions.

To understand the relationship between IELTS and international students' academic success, qualitative methods informed the literature review. These methods entailed a descriptive-constructivist approach from which the perspectives of various research articles on IELTS and academic learning success could be understood (Cresswell, 2013). The articles found were first quickly read and notes were compiled in relation to the keywords IELTS + academic success/ academic preparedness. This method enabled a comparison of the common themes to emerge between the different articles. From the comparison, three predominate themes were found. The articles were then re-read to ensure the accuracy of the themes and detailed notes were taken. The review presented here is drawn directly from these articles.

### Findings and Discussion

Research on the correlation between placement tests, such as IELTS, and international students' academic learning success is ambivalent. However, in the analysis of the articles, three main themes related to the correlation of student academic learning success and IELTS score were

found. Traditionally, studies have focused on either the positive or the negative correlations between international students' language proficiency test scores and their academic learning success. Recently, another branch of research contends that international students' linguistic abilities are not only connected to their success within their academic studies, but also to their success in acculturating within society. Within this third branch, academic study is more than just what a student can produce, it involves the study process. Accordingly, the social dimension addresses concern for international students' preparedness with regards to daily life and the rigours of studying within HE. The discussion below will expand on these three main themes.

### **Positive Correlations**

Positive correlations between IELTS and international student success vary. Dooey and Oliver (2002) isolated a positive correlation between international students' reading scores and their GPA in Australia. However, this positive correlation did not expand to other skillsets. Yen and Kuzma (2009) linked a moderate positive correlation to Chinese students' first semester of studying abroad at a university in the United Kingdom in all skill sets except for speaking. However, they found that any link beyond the first semester was negligible. They attributed the weaker correlation between IELTS score and GPA in students' subsequent semesters of study to students' development of their English skills whilst studying during their first semester. In particular, they found that those students with low listening and writing results on IELTS typically had lower grades. Likewise, Daller and Phelan (2013), in their research at a university in the United Kingdom, supported the notion that international students with higher scores on the listening and writing sections of IELTS are more likely to be academically successful within HE. Additionally, they contended that prior content knowledge of the discipline in which the students are studying is also a determinant in the students' success. While Feast (2002) also found a slight positive correlation between international students' IELTS scores and academic learning success in Australia, she is the only author to warn that raising minimum IELTS scores for entry to HE could negatively influence the number of international student applicants. Overall, these researchers found that the success of international students in their academic studies seems to not only be connected to a higher IELTS score, but it appears that students with higher IELTS scores are more likely to achieve a higher GPA.

Recently, studies focusing on international student academic learning success while studying at EMI institutions have been increasing. In a study of Hungarian English majors who took the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), which correlates with IELTS, Doró (2011) has found that students with lower scores are more likely to fail than students with higher scores. However, Doró (2011) cautioned that higher scores do not guarantee that students will be successful in their academic studies. Similarly, Ghenghesh (2015) has found that Egyptian students with a higher OPT scores are more likely to achieve higher academic learning success. However, Ghenghesh (2015) noted that educational background, particularly whether students previously studied using EMI at high school, positively influenced their subsequent success in HE. Schoepp and Garinger (2016) have found that students in the United Arab Emirates with a band score of at least 7.0 on the IELTS are much more likely to succeed academically than students with lower scores. In fact, they specifically suggested that the link between IELTS and academic learning success for students with a band score of 6.0–6.5 diminishes, and at the 5.5–6.5 range this link is negligible. Overall, a higher score on language proficiency tests, such as IELTS, is linked to

students' abilities to cope with the academic rigors of HE at EMI institutions. However, Dooley and Oliver (2002), Yen and Kuzma (2009), and Sawir et al. (2012) were careful to suggest that while high IELTS scores might correlate with students' academic achievement, students' ability to be proactive in their studies, their motivation, as well as their financial stability, study skills, and adaptation to the host culture also influence student success. Thus, international students' English language proficiency is but one factor in a multitude of factors which might influence international student success.

### Negative Correlations

The negative correlation between IELTS scores and student academic learning success seem to be directly linked to these students' knowledge of academic expectations. Some of the studies, mentioned above, report a positive correlation between IELTS score and academic learning success, which appears to be linked to students' prior exposure to an international academic educational background. However, it has to be questioned, if students did not have prior exposure to another academic educational system, would the positive correlation have been found? The validity of IELTS with regards to whether or not students' results can be compared to academic setting is widely reported. There is concern that IELTS has essentially become an international business, with many test preparation centres worldwide designed to help prospective students achieve high scores on this test (Yu, 2014). Essentially, these test preparation centres assist students to develop IELTS specific test-taking strategies.

If students are being coached for success on IELTS, a major concern would focus around the issue of construct validity. Construct validity is the degree to which a test is representative of what is being tested (Brown, 2000). Daller and Wang (2017) and Pilcher and Richards (2017) noted that while the essay writing sections on IELTS might have some similarities to university writing with regards to language use, the differences outweigh the similarities. The vocabulary used on IELTS is generalized and decontextualized, and thus does not necessarily align with academic learning expectations and standards within HE. Moore and Morton (2005) found that while writing tasks within HE typically focus on a combination of summarization, prediction, explanation and recommendation, the IELTS writing components typically focus on advice giving or opinion based topics ("hortation") and evaluation (p. 60). They argued that the reason for this is that advice giving and evaluation require less background knowledge, and thus are easier to test. This reasoning would suggest that the writing section of the IELTS test is not examining students' proficiency for academic writing at the HE level. In fact, Daller and Wang (2017), who researched international student success in the UK, noted that IELTS has recently altered the writing sections to imitate writing within HE. However, they contend that as the writing tasks on IELTS remain focused on generalized and decontextualized language use, the changes are inadequate to be used as a predictor of international students' academic learning success within HE. As students are aware that the focus of the language proficiency tests is on generalized and decontextualized language use, in preparing for these tests, students are developing test taking strategies rather than their cognitive language proficiency. This practice is in essence is not preparing these students for studying within HE. This suggests that in the development of language proficiency tests, a deeper issue with regards to the construct validity of the written section of placements is in assessing the placement of international students' written competencies within an academic environment.

In the review of these articles, another concern found is in how students are interpreting their test scores. Students often fail to acknowledge that an IELTS score of 6.5 is generally the minimum score needed to gain entrance to most Canadian HE institution (IELTS, 2019). Dooley (2010), who conducted a two-pronged study on international student success in Australia, stressed that students who gain entry to HE with a minimum IELTS score often fail to recognize that this score is not an indicator of their linguistic ability to succeed academically. Rather, this score is merely an indicator that they have the basic linguistic requirements from which they can begin to study within an English academic environment. Students must understand that once they are studying within HE, in addition to continuing to develop their additional language skills, they will also need to learn discipline related terminology and writing standards (Dooley, 2010). Accordingly, language ability cannot be defined within a generalized global proficiency. To develop their cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) international students need exposure to language use within an academic setting (Cummins, 2008). This understanding of CALP suggests that international students' interpretation of language proficiency scores, on tests such as IELTS, and how they are applied in academia are not necessarily the same, and that students will need support in their academic pursuits.

While a language proficiency test might indicate that international students have the generalized language knowledge to succeed within HE, different disciplines within HE require specific language knowledge. Bayliss and Ingram (2006) in particular, and Sawir et al. (2012) to a lesser extent, claimed that the academic discipline that international students hope to enter should determine the minimum IELTS band at Australian HE institutions. Bayliss and Ingram (2006) suggested that some disciplines already require international students to have a higher base score so that they can actively participate in their studies; yet they also contend that student success is connected to their level of confidence. Content and context influence language use. As the IELTS examines English proficiency in terms of generalized vocabulary and/or decontextualized language use, both Bayliss and Ingram (2006) and Sawir et al. (2012) stated that the scores students receive are not adequately representative of their ability in specific subjects. This analysis suggests that while language placement tests might indicate the language proficiency of international students, within the realm of HE, international students need specific academic learning support.

### **The Third Theme: The Social Dimension**

Recent research has explored more unique approaches to addressing the issue of language proficiency and international student academic learning success. Sawir et al. (2012) addressed the issue from the vantage of human security, which they define as the “maintenance of a stable capacity for self-determining human agency” (Marginson et al. 2010, in Sawir et al. 2012, p.3). From this stance, international students' language proficiency is deemed as a fundamental aspect of human security, as it affects all domains of their daily lives whilst studying abroad. When international students study in a new country, their ability to communicate influences not only their studies but also their daily life. Students' abilities to communicate influences their rate of acculturation (Sawir et al. 2012). Additionally, students' linguistic abilities might also challenge their academic life as they will need to make adjustments to their time management and research skills, as well as understand the influence of culturally specific knowledge related to their area of

specialty (Phakiti, Hirsh, & Woodrow, 2013). A common problem for many students is time management. However, for international students, according to Yeoh and Terry (2013), time management develops into a whole different realm as the amount of time it can take to prepare academic papers in English, the students' additional language, increases directly according to their language and academic proficiency. While their research suggested students felt that IELTS prepares them to function in their daily lives, Sawir et al. (2012) found that students did not feel that their test results were adequately reflective of the language they would need to be successful academic learners. Thus, in Sawir et al.'s (2012) terms, human security translates into the ease of comfort that international students have in their English linguistic knowledge, and this in turn impacts the proficiency in which they adapt to different learning environments.

In addition to studying in a different language, international students have to develop skills to cope with new academic expectations. Similar to other language proficiency tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), IELTS does not focus on language situations that students will face within HE, such as group work, presentations, and short answers (Dunworth, 2008). When studying in English speaking countries, students must develop study skills that support a student-centred approach to learning as opposed to a teacher-centred approach, where students are typically dependent on their instructors to provide them with the information they need to learn (Yeoh & Terry, 2013). Furthermore, IELTS is criticized as a test where students employ problem-solving strategies rather than language comprehension strategies (Rupp, Ferne, & Choi, 2006). Accordingly, while IELTS might be an accurate indicator of language proficiency, the rigours of academic studying are not confined only to linguistic abilities.

Within the challenges of adapting to both new linguistic uses and culturally different academic environments, students' motivation and self-efficacy to succeed in their studies also become significant factors in contributing to their academic learning success (Phakiti, Hirsh, & Woodrow, 2013). Studying in a different language and culture can be difficult, however, Phakiti, Hirsh, and Woodrow (2013) found that students' motivation and self-efficacy to succeed minimizes the negative influence that the perceived difficulty of studying in another language and culture have on international students. This finding suggests that students who are studying in an academic setting that is different from their cultural background need support beyond linguistic support. Thus, IELTS must be recognized as being designed as a predictor of language ability, which is just one cog in international students' academic learning success.

### **The Need for Academic Support**

Language use is contextual. In academics, subject content is intricately linked to thought and meaning; accordingly, language usage is connected to specific content within a subject. From this stance, the English used in any program of study will have unique subject terms and concepts which subsequently imply that international students may require language specific support within their subjects of study (Pilcher & Richards, 2017; Sawir et al., 2012). The argument is that within specific academic disciplines, language use requires more than just the practical ability to communicate. Language use also requires the ability to cope with the theoretical knowledge of a subject. Students must make use of both their practical and their theoretical knowledge of language to complete subject related tasks and assessments. The focus

of the marking criteria on the IELTS test is in part on grammar and spelling accuracy, spontaneity, and flexibility (Short, 2012). However, within an academic course of study the focus of assessment might range from the visual, empathetic, or conceptual to the material (Pilcher & Richards, 2017). As IELTS is a measure of language proficiency, the contextualized uses of language within academic disciplines may suggest the reason the correlation between IELTS scores and academic learning success is inconsistent.

A concern for HE institutions should be students' perception of the support that they are receiving from their institution. Pilcher and Richards (2017), researching international student success in the United Kingdom, suggested that many students who gained access to HE based on their IELTS scores might feel that they have been misled. When a HE institution bases admission on a test that examines students' English proficiency related to grammatical accuracy within a decontextualized and neutralized usage of English, students often struggle when faced with program specific usages of English and ideologies (Pilcher & Richards, 2017). This mismatch additionally leads to the impression by instructors and institutions that current minimum IELTS scores for HE admission are not set high enough. Accordingly, the discord between IELTS as an indicator of language proficiency and subsequently international students' readiness to engage in academic studies could lie in minimum IELTS scores seemingly being set too low for entry into HE. At this point it is important to note that IELTS (IELTS USA, n.d.) itself states that the scores students receive on the test are a measure of students' linguistic proficiency only, suggesting that these scores are not a determinate of academic learning success.

In their publications, IELTS states that students with a score of 6.5 are most likely to succeed. However, IELTS also states that students will require additional support as the language proficiency required is dictated by the context of study (IELTS USA). As is seen in Figure 1, IELTS recommends that students with a band score of 6.5 will most likely need additional study support if they are entering linguistically challenging programs. Bayliss and Ingram (2006) defined linguistically challenging programs as studies in the sciences or medical fields. However, Moore and Morton (2005) suggested that the type of task, such as a theoretical or research-orientated essay, influences the linguistic challenge no matter the subject. Thus, it has to be questioned what IELTS' definition of a linguistically challenging and less linguistically challenging program is. Nevertheless, as seen in Figure 2, these band scores have recently been revised (IELTS, 2019). As of May 2019, students with a band score of 6.5 studying in linguistically less demanding academic courses have been downgraded to "probably acceptable" (IELTS, 2019). Additionally, IELTS (IELTS USA; IELTS, 2019) explains that HE institutions should be cognizant that English language proficiency is only one of the many contributing factors in students' academic learning success, and accordingly institutions should be aware of other factors which might affect student success. This statement from IELTS thus suggests that while students might have the language proficiency to gain entry to HE, once admitted students will need support to develop their contextual English knowledge within an academic setting.

Band	Linguistically demanding academic curriculum	Linguistically less demanding academic curriculum
7.5 – 9.0	Optimal	Optimal
7.0	Acceptable	Optimal
6.5	May be acceptable; ESL study may be needed	Acceptable
6.0	ESL study needed	ESL study needed
5.5	ESL study needed	ESL study needed

Figure 1. IELTS Bands and Need of Support (n.d., n.p.)

Band score	Linguistically demanding academic courses	Linguistically less demanding academic courses	Linguistically demanding training courses	Linguistically less demanding training courses
7.5 – 9.0	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
7.0	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.5	English study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable	Acceptable
6.0	English study needed	English study needed	Probably acceptable	Acceptable
5.5	English study needed	English study needed	English study needed	Probably acceptable

Figure 2. IELTS Bands and Need of Support (2019, May, p. 15)

### Conclusion

The result of international students’ scores on the IELTS test seem to have become equated with student academic learning success. While it was initially suggested that research regarding the correlation between student academic learning success and their IELTS score was ambivalent, closer examination reveals that students with higher proficiency bands tend to be more successful in their academic studies. However, in the studies that found a positive correlation to IELTS and GPA, it was not unanimous whether or not this correlation was to the reading and writing sections or the listening and writing sections. In the studies that found a negative correlation, the idea of academic knowledge was of importance. These studies suggest that as IELTS is a test of language proficiency, not a test of academic skills, any correlation between IELTS and academic learning success should be interpreted with caution. Recent research on international students’ success is increasingly focusing on the fact that language use is contextual. As different disciplines within HE have unique usage of key terms that are not tested in generalized language knowledge tests, IELTS is not necessarily an indicator of the possible

success of students. These studies further suggest that other factors such as the motivation to study, financial stability, and study skills are also determinants in international students' academic learning success. Lastly, as IELTS is used to test the language proficiency level of potential students, this can only be understood as an indicator of their possible success. IELTS even notes that students with a band score of 6.5 will most likely need academic support from their institution (2019, May). This understanding then indicates that international students' willingness to be proactive in their studies is also a factor in their academic learning success. Thus, while IELTS is an indicator of students' English language proficiencies, it should be acknowledged that this representation of English language proficiency is not equated with the academic skills international students need to be successful. The studies in this review suggest that if to gain entrance to HE institutions an international student must have a minimum band score of 6.5 on IELTS, then programs to support international students to develop their academic skills along with their language proficiency must be more robustly developed. Current trends indicate that the number of international students studying in Canada, and provinces such as British Columbia, continues to increase. Developing robust programs of support for their international student body is one way that Canadian HE institutions can remain attractive to these students and competitive within the internationalized HE sector.

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