Teacher and Student Attitudes to IELTS writing tasks: positive or negative washback?

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Abstract

The aim of this small-scale exploratory survey was to find out from teachers and students their attitudes towards the usefulness of, and preparing for, the two IELTS writing tasks. ‘Usefulness’ and ‘impact/washback’ are components of test validity, thus eliciting responses (via questionnaires) from 2 major stakeholders (teachers n=17, students n=36) in this high-stakes benchmark exam would provide information about perceptions of validity. The results indicate that both IELTS task one and task two are perceived by teachers and students as having a positive effect on class-based writing skills and bearing a reasonable relationship with skills needed at faculty level. Lack of usefulness was reported mainly by students in the Sharia and Law and Business faculties.

Introduction

In 2004 the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) introduced the IELTS exam as the major benchmark examination for students proceeding to undergraduate level studies. The decision was made after long deliberation and with the understanding that any high stakes gate-keeping exam would have a wide impact (or washback) across the programmes. It was anticipated that the introduction and influence of such an exam would reach across many areas of the educational process - not only with teachers, teaching and learners but also with shaping curriculum design, material resources, staff resourcing, course delivery and the attitudes of various stakeholders. Such a wide and profound influence has - anecdotally at least - been the case. This exploratory study will focus on how the introduction of the IELTS writing exam has impacted on two of these areas, namely the attitudes of teachers and learners. In particular I will explore staff and student perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the usefulness of the IELTS writing exam not so much as a benchmark exam but in preparing candidates for university level studies in an English medium university.

For the purposes of this report, washback is simply defined as the impact or influence of testing on teaching and learning, especially in the classroom. Washback studies are a relatively new phenomenon and, as ever, researchers state that ‘more research is needed in the area’ (e.g. Spratt, 2005:27; IELTS Joint –Funded research program – call for proposals: 2006/2007; www.ielts.org). My own particular interest, and perhaps bias, comes from teaching IELTS-centred courses as well as being an IELTS Examiner Trainer.

The focus of the study is on the perceptions of teachers and students involved in the IELTS writing test. One reason for this is that studies indicate that the attitudes and perceptions of the candidates are highly influenced by the teacher (Spratt, 2005). It is natural, and in many cases appropriate, that students are somewhat apprehensive of a benchmark exam – but it is the teachers attitudes to a particular exam, and the range
of activities that they use to prepare for it, that will be a major determiner of the balance of positive and negative washback in the classroom.

**Social / Educational Context**

The nature of any benchmark exam at a state university must, of course, fulfil the general expectations and specific learning outcomes that the Ministry of Higher Education establish. The introduction of the IELTS exam itself can be seen in the context of the ministry’s aim to educate and prepare its university students for operating in an international environment with an international language and, with particular respect to the writing module, to be competent in written academic and professional communication – both of which require ‘critical thinking and expression’. Thus, in his UAEU commencement address (September, 2006), the minister of Higher Education, Sheik Nahyan, underlined the need to infuse critical thinking skills across the curriculum. All university courses, including writing courses, need to help students meet the requirements of an international knowledge economy. Similarly, other voices in the region have called for critical thinking, ‘not relying too much on references and authorities; rather authorities must be criticised, challenged and questioned” (Al Belehi, 2006) with writers encouraged to find their own voice.

If, broadly, ‘being critical’ entails perspective taking, then critical writing would entail the writer being able to generate and express multiple perspectives or, if taking one point of view, providing coherent reasons for doing so. To elicit appropriate perspective taking, test writing prompts (for any international exam such as IELTS) would need to ask candidates to respond to issues and changes in social and economic domains. Candidates who are able to respond adequately by describing, summarising, interpreting and justifying opinions on international social and economic events, ideas and trends are presumably on the way to becoming literate in English and ‘survivors’ in the university and wider world.

In this context, the IELTS writing examination prompts that invite discussion on global concerns (but which can be applied to the local scene) would have face validity and not only reflect society wide needs but also presumably have a positive influence on curriculum goals and content. Rubrics such as the pros and cons of multi-national / international business, the social and environmental impact of mass tourism, improving transportation systems and driving, assessing environmental quality, describing and evaluating the changing roles of men and women and the like, seem to address the macro-context of exam impact and, as such relate to exam validity. Writing courses and exams such as IELTS with prompts that require supporting personal opinions, and giving explanations or reasons for such, may be seen to play some part of pushing the critical educational practices as required by the ministry and useful preparation for university and modern society; but is this what teachers and students think?

**Literature Review**

(a) Positive and Negative Washback
Exam-driven ESL courses have often had a bad press. In some cases studies suggest that the curriculum is narrowed to those areas to be tested with often a loss of balanced integrated skills work (Read and Hayes, 2003) and a restriction in types of (usually teacher-prepared / authentic) materials to a heavy dependency on practice exams. In addition, the content areas of the exams, e.g. units on global warming, can also be emphasised at the expense on more basic language skills such as grammar. Some courses observed by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) were characterised by ‘teaching to the test’ and high dependence upon a given text-book (‘text-book’ slaves), with the result that teachers do not prepare and plan such classes as carefully as non-examination classes. They also found in an observational study that exam classes spend much less time on pair and group activities (e.g. jigsaw communicative work), that there was less turn-taking and that that teachers talk more than in non-exam classes. However the reasons for why there is less interaction in these classrooms is not clear – is it the exam per se, or is it because teachers believe this is the best way to prepare for exams?

At the same time the literature reveals a great diversity as to how teachers actually teach ESL exam-driven courses. Some exam classes were characterised by independent and inventive approaches and, in some at least, their use of pair work, turn taking, laughter and new approaches was at least as much as non-exam centred classes (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996). It can only be concluded that the nature and extent of washback on teaching methods seems to vary depending on the teacher and the context.

With regard to attitudes of teachers and students towards high stakes ESL exams, studies indicate a range of rather negative feelings arising from the exams. Cheng, (1998, cited in Spratt, 2005:17) reports that students show mixed feelings towards a high stakes exam recognising that it pushed them to work hard but that it wasn’t an accurate mirroring of their study or didn’t relate specifically to their future study needs. While students and teachers saw the benefits of having, in this case, an oral component to the exam, both felt high anxiety. In particular, most teachers strongly resented the time pressure they felt in teaching to the exam. A contrasting finding was that of Read and Hayes (2003) who report overall ‘positive attitudes about IELTS amongst teachers and strong motivation amongst learners’.

This brief survey of the literature suggests that there is no automatic relationship between the use of an exam in a programme and washback of either a positive or negative variety. As Spratt (2005:21) concludes in her survey of washback research, the various studies show that other factors, particularly the teacher, are more often what determine the kind of washback that exists in a classroom. The teacher is the most consistent agent of influence mentioned in all of the studies Spratt reports on; related factors include teacher beliefs, attitudes, educational level and experience, and personalities. “It can be concluded from the studies that washback is not inevitable and also that it is malleable. This conclusion puts the teacher in the driver’s seat in some important ways...” (p. 23). Finally, it is also suggested by Spratt that often both teachers and students see the necessity of having some international gatekeeping exam but feel the tension of having to deal with the time pressure in preparing for the exam and within the exam itself.
(b) Washback and validity

In this section I raise two points regarding exam validity. Firstly, an important part of washback and exam validity is whether the nature of the exam spawns a course and a skills focus that map onto the larger educational goals. Does the IELTS writing exam meet the espoused goals of expressing critical thinking? If teachers and students report the exam/course pushes critical and independent writing then it is assumed the washback is positive.

Another part of validity is whether the writing tasks, and more importantly the skills needed to produce them, are similar to those candidates will need at university. The validity/authenticity of writing task 2 was explored by Moore and Morton (1999) in comparing the task items with a range of undergraduate and post-graduate assignments. The tasks were compared using four dimensions of difference: genre, information source, rhetorical function and object of enquiry. Overall, while it was found that the genres were similar, the other categories were very different. IELTS tasks required more use of prior knowledge than did university tasks; they had more limited rhetorical functions (an emphasis on hortatory at the expense of other functions such as explanation, comparison, summarisation) and focused much more on ‘real world’ contexts compared with the greater emphasis on abstract ideas in university tasks. It was speculated by Moore and Morton that task 2 may be more akin to public non-academic genres (newspapers, magazines) than characteristic of university assignments. Balancing this finding was their survey of university staff who reported being favourable towards task 2 and to the nature of language teaching they imagined students would receive in preparing for it. Lecturers also noted a fundamental difference between university tasks which focus on the careful use and evaluation of many sources, and IELTS’s focus on opinionated styles. This difference also was noted by candidates, who nevertheless still could see its usefulness for university study (Merrylees, 2003). Having two different writing tasks was seen by lecturers and test-takers as a benefit as it increases the possible generalisability; if they have little background in one, they may be able to demonstrate greater competencies in the other.

Method of study

For this small-scale exploratory action-research I designed and sent out a questionnaire (see appendix 1) with 7 questions to teaching staff at UGRU English and ESP. Seventeen questionnaires were completed from the 20 sent out at the men’s campus, and information from an UGRU ‘focus-group’ discussion on exam washback (led by Mr Ryan Sundlie in November 2005) in which another 6 participated was also used. In other words, viewpoints were gleaned from around 75% of the English lecturers at the men’s campus. I also conducted ‘semi-formal’ interviews with 3 teachers from ESP. Further, an adapted form of the questionnaire was administered to 36 Level 3 writing students. Thus, a total of 53 questionnaires were returned from lecturers and students.
In the following section my discussion will follow the 7 questions of the questionnaire (shaded) and present the statistical results in a table. This is followed by a discussion of the findings.

Results and Discussion

In which ways does learning to write for IELTS writing task 1 help with writing skills needed at faculty level?

*Question 1:* The IELTS Task 1 question asks candidates to summarise a graphic (chart, table, flow chart etc). I agree /disagree that there is a reasonable correspondence between the skills needed for this and needed for writing requirements at faculty level.

**Table 1: Teachers’ Views on Task 1**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 Strongly agree</th>
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<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6 Strongly disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of teachers (n = 16)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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(a) Teachers views on Task 1

The great majority of both teachers and students stated they strongly agree that learning to write for task 1 is good preparation for university study. Teachers in the main noted that the exam required test-takers /students to engage in ‘higher-order thinking’, that is, to discriminate between the most important and less relevant data, to group and categorise similar trends or information, to synthesize or summarise statistics, numbers or graphic information and to use concise (and non-repetitive) language in doing so. It was assumed that this sort of task would be relevant whether studying in Engineering, the Sciences, Social Sciences and even Humanities. Some noted that it might not be directly relevant to those studying Sharia and Law and that more research was needed to explore particular writing needs of each faculty. Most agreed with one respondent’s comment that task 1 required the skill ‘to quickly identify and select appropriate information and was [generally] transferable to all future writing requirements’ and ‘understanding tables, charts and graphs in textbooks could prove useful in their presentations’ as well. Another added it would be a useful introduction to a type of academic register.

Even if some specific tasks seem outside students’ immediate interest and schemata – for example one teacher doubted that many students would need to describe a process such as making sugar beet (as in the class text) – it is likely that summarising a process is useful in a range of academic and daily contexts, whether in law, social sciences, medical science, or writing a family letter describing a move to new country.

It was mentioned that it would be fairer to give subject specific topics for candidates entering into different faculties. My comment here is that even though it is unlikely that such generic topics are given in most university subjects it does seem a
reasonable compromise (of authenticity) given that it would be unfair to give subject-specific topics. Clapham’s (1996) comprehensive study of IELTS Reading also found such to be impractical and unnecessary.

A couple of teachers mentioned the unrealistic time limit of (recommended) 20 minutes for the exam task. While it might reflect one type of university writing – writing exams under time constraints – it was unclear whether this was helpful to another major form of university writing, that of research activity. Notwithstanding some down-sides, the teachers attitudes towards Task 1 were overwhelmingly positive. What about the students’ views?

(b) Students views on Task 1

Question 1: Learning to write for IELTS task 1 will help you with your writing in the faculty. Agree / disagree?

Table 2: Students views on usefulness of Task 1

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<th>1 Strongly agree</th>
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<th>6 Strongly disagree</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
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Overall, students saw the benefit of learning task 1 writing skills and understood the reasons for it being part of the examination requirements, although the strength of usefulness depended the on their anticipated faculty. Typical comments include: ‘Strongly agree…because it helps me when I study or reading because it summarise the information…because in my faculty [Engineering / Business] I will face graphs and charts and it’s also useful for my career’. The ability to transfer the skills is suggested in the comment “Writing [task 1] help us to describing the pictures and help us to give an explanation for any issue’ and ‘very good all my life’. Others emphasised the useful vocabulary they learned. A lower ability student agreed ‘because this new words will help the student’, while some noted it was easier than task 2, possibly because ‘it help me to write fast’.

A strong exam washback effect is reflected in a handful who responded along the circular lines ‘I strongly agree because everyone wants to know how to write for IELTS, that means to pass and it will help us in the future and in faculty and in our jobs’. While a few students strongly disagreed saying ‘my major is Sharia and Law and we don’t need English in my faculty… we don’t need a chart or a table’, overall, it is striking that both teachers and students have a similar positive belief about the usefulness of task 1 type questions.

Question 2: In which ways does learning to write for IELTS writing task 2 help with writing skills needed at faculty level?

Question 2: Task 2 asks candidates to argue a point of view to develop an position (‘to what extent do you agree or disagree’) or outline advantages and disadvantages with some social, environmental, technological or other value position. I agree / disagree that there is a reasonable correspondence between the skills needed for
this and for faculty writing tasks. (Consider that IELTS candidates need to discuss issues, construct an argument with plentiful relevant ideas and evidence and use appropriate tone and register).

Table 3: Teachers’ views on correspondence of Task 2 skills to University Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of teachers (n = 16)</th>
<th>1 Strongly agree</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<th>6 Strongly disagree</th>
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Question 3: What similarities and/or differences can you see between the IELTS timed writing tasks (and preparation for) and writing tasks at faculty level?

(a) Differences (implicitly T2 not so useful)

A number of teachers identified that this task is ‘non-academic’ in the sense that a personal opinion was asked for and respondents are not able to, and not expected to, draw on empirical evidence, statistical data or the academic expertise of published material. One noted; ‘academic writing takes more time (weeks) for thorough reading, referencing etc’. Another recognised the need for the student to make parallel progress in research report writing; ‘prior knowledge may facilitate the speed of completing a task, but it is also important that any individual recognise their limitations in any subject area and research the information needed (a major goal of a college education)’. It was suggested that with so much emphasis on the IELTS timed writing exam, and with the demise of the portfolio assessment component – and with such portfolios likely to provide positive preparation for faculty study projects - a negative backwash effect was in play for this particular skill.

Various faculties would expect different styles and formats of reporting research and ideas. It was wondered how many universities and faculties nowadays have timed writing exams and the extent that writing assignments now utilise word processing rather than hand ‘This task is more similar to school exam writing’. One suggestion was that T2 writing would require the candidate to read / research a given booklet in order to answer the question.

Some teachers were not sure the extent that T2 required objectivity or at least presenting a balanced view, or the extent it was better to take a stand without reference to alternative points of view. It was felt by one that even if there were differences, the ‘development of a point of view and defence of it is vital to student intellectual development… students will benefit in the long run from the IELTS experience - regardless of differences they will experience within their faculties (in writing assignments)’.

Differences in genre were seen. One respondent in particular saw some sharp differences between global writing exams and college level writing. ‘University courses expect descriptive observation, analysis and explanation rather than the one-
sided approach of ‘agree/disagree’… the types and content of questions are different, the resources of information and the rhetorical expectations of the response are all a big contrast…”

However, even though it was wondered how common argumentative/opinion essays are at undergraduate level (except maybe for a creative writing course) the process of organising and expressing ideas in coherent ways on broad social and environmental topics was generally seen as useful.

(b) Similarities (implicitly T2 useful)

Similarities given between UGRU/IELTS/ Faculty writing included the need for logical progression of ideas, paragraphing, clear expression and suitably academic and/or topic related vocabulary

The majority of teachers agreed (some strongly) that this sort of writing would be both a useful discriminator between students who are likely to write well at university and also an indicator of those who had sufficient cognitive skills to survive at university. In this light it was suggested that 90 rather than the 60 minutes would allow time for more considered and edited responses and thus more accurate judgments about the suitability of a candidate for degree study to be made.

It was stated that this type of opinion task in ‘non-academic’ language seems realistic and appropriate as it’s an exam not only for those already inducted into the skills and language of academic research but rather for those [at least those requiring a band score of 5 or 6] just entering, suitable and accessible to those in between High School and University. The general feeling expressed was that unless IELTS or other exams were made for discipline specific modules such as Engineering sciences, Biological Sciences, Humanities and Law etc then it is hard to see any alternative to measuring writing skills apart from through some generic rubric that gives candidates from all sorts of backgrounds an equal writing field.

Further to this, task 2 responses were also seen as an indicator of those who would have the ability to cope with university social life in the first year. It was suggested that if someone couldn’t engage and express thoughtful responses to Task 2 questions then it would be unlikely they would benefit from most university environments. Because T2 questions seem to reflect current knowledge and life (issues in broad society, not so much the sharper focus on such topics in the academic disciplines) then it was assumed that those who had difficulty in generating related ideas in a social context would have even more difficulty in writing about them. Similarly, those who were able to write about such topics would have the base skills to research and write more on more specific discipline related topics. In other words, it is suggested that teachers felt that there was not only topic related validity to task 2 but also some predictive validity in the sense that those who produce a good answer to T2 under time pressure would be able to produce even better writing with the relative ‘leisure’ of a research assignment. Whether this is the case or not only longitudinal and other research can find out, but teachers’ positive attitude to task 2 is clear.
A strength of task 2 is, ideally, that it allows the writer, in writing ‘to the educated public’, to use local and global knowledge. While writing an opinion is not, maybe, common place in faculty writing it can nevertheless be an important element in the educational and personal growth of an individual by allowing the writer a voice – as some students mentioned - and to express their own preferences and to draw upon their own cultural and linguistic experiences as a resource. In the wider perspective, in this way, writing teachers can be seen as participating in the required educational changes.

A brief analysis of task 2 shows it is the nature and quality of ideas that is valued. The task 2 prompt itself values and elicits the writers ‘voice’ to the extent that they can draw on personal experiences and personal knowledge to exemplify and support a position or argument. In fact top marks can only be awarded if the writer has expressed a clearly identified and well-supported position. A clear example of this is seen in the awarding of an 8 (‘very good writer’) to a writer who has, according to the IELTS senior examiner, ‘maintained a clear position throughout, main ideas are presented and well-supported, apart from some over-generalisations’ (IELTS Scores Explained, 2006). It is evident from the criteria that to go to the next and highest level (‘Expert User’, a 9), the writer’s position would have to be even more ‘fully extended and supported’.

Students’ views

Table 4: Student views of the usefulness of Task 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number of students (n = 34)</th>
<th>1 Strongly agree</th>
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<th>3</th>
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<th>6 Strongly disagree</th>
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Again, overall, students had a favourable understanding of the rationale of Task 2. These types of question are seen as relevant and helpful to their growth as individuals and as students preparing for modern university life. Typically ‘because in the faculty we must discuss our opinions… because this task is aimed at the important things in our lives… we learn this type of writing how to express our opinions, we practice how to think about an issue… I like the different types of topics… writing about our opinions is good for our future… I like the 2 tasks as how to range [arrange?] our ideas… it gives us experience and information in new topics and to improve the writing skills for faculty … will help student in his academic life… and the almost inevitable ‘it gives us useful words’.

Some responses identified that such writing helps improve independent thinking abilities; ‘ I will improve my thinking and now I have a good brain to think’, Such brain expansion was associated with ‘I learn how to bring support sentence’, or, in other words perhaps, being able to elaborate and justify ideas in written form in another language gives the feeling of cognitive development. Other students specified similar areas; ‘writing tasks make me explain my opinion, give reasons and
support’. Another strongly agrees because ‘its helping me by thinkful [to be thoughtful?] and trust myself’. Other comments: ‘[it] help me solve some questions...It will help my reading and speaking’. In fact, over 80% of respondents signalled that this sort of writing task was beneficial because it helped them to ‘think about a topic and to express my own opinion’ and significantly ‘depend on my idea’. That the topics were not always relevant or interesting is seen in the following: “some topics I don’t have to know about that subject [therefore not interesting or relevant] …some topics are very bad and we can’t say our opinion…Sometimes when I write a report for business I need to use supports and reasons, sometimes no because for business I need special style, not some topics boring and difficult’.

What background knowledge do IELTS writing candidates need to have in order to pass the writing exam?

Question 4: Apart from issues with vocabulary and grammar, what other issues may be a problem for IELTS students?

It is expected that, because the IELTS exam is now taken by candidates from over 170 countries, the rubric be as culture free and as international as possible. It follows that to respond fully to the questions the main issues (apart from the language ones of grammar and vocabulary) candidates ideally should be sufficiently engaged with contemporary world-wide social and cultural knowledge. Further, with the nature of the question being a personal opinion, some (relatively mature) personal reflection on and prior assessment of various issues come into the fore of a good written response.

Some teachers mentioned the usefulness of in-house timed writing questions relating to social, economic and educational issues in the UAE, as these ‘situated’ contexts could probably be adapted to many IELTS rubrics as well. One teacher mentioned that some /many students would not have the necessary socio-cultural experience to argue for, say, the freedom of the press; it is likely that some would not be ready for such a question, or on what are the characteristics of good or inferior journalism. There is a big leap, said a teacher, between some critical thinking about personal or local driving practices and critical thinking and critical writing about the pros and cons of developing nuclear energy. At the same time these questions were seen as ‘common to L1 and L2 learners… becoming aware of the factors/issues is part of what we call education’ and whatever socio-cultural background one has, being 19 years of age generally means perspectives have yet to mature. In addition, the ‘pressure and push’ of posing IELTS type questions may help break the habits of lower candidates of avoiding committing to suggest improvements. In other words, even though writing under such time constraints seems to be unlike most writing at university and indeed in life, the value of having an international writing exam to modify inadequate writing behaviour and to sharpen existing strengths was acknowledged strongly.

Another issue raised was of ‘IELTS Anglo-centricity on occasions’; this may be a reference more to task 1 where, it seems, very few graphs reflect North American life.

Question 5: Does writing about IELTS Tasks 1 & 2 encourage students to think and read more?
Question 5: Writing about IELTS Tasks 1 & 2 topics (themes in the IELTS Foundation text book include, Studying Abroad, Environment / managing traffic pollution, Tourism, Law and Punishment, Globalisation, Alternative medicine, Technological changes) encourages students to think and read more books, magazines, on the internet etc.

Table 5: Teachers’ Views on IELTS writing topics and reading habits

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<tr>
<th>Teachers’ views</th>
<th>1 Strongly agree</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number of teachers (n = 16)</td>
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(a) Teachers’ views

Staff reactions ranged from the optimistic ‘I think that if students are exposed to some of these ideas which are outside their normal pattern of thought it just might stimulate them to further research, to the more pessimistic: ‘students are not motivated to read their own…there is no reading culture in the university…I’ve yet to see any evidence of serious reading…My students are only interested in cars, mobile phones and football… it would have to be a specific homework task to get them to look at anything else…I’ve only seen one young local reading a book outside of class once in 10 years…They might discuss topics more, or think of them or read articles they stumble on in newspapers maybe…Most of our students would rather not read at all, especially about things not related to their coursework’.

In brief, those who are really motivated and interested will read more widely, others not. It might not be that the exam ‘encourages’ such reading, but it might mediate it or at least facilitate it was another nuanced response. ‘Students appear to read little in English outside of their reading requirements (in class), therefore any and all stimulation in the direction of finding out what is topical and relevant is advantageous for them…By providing such a cut and dried benchmark student ‘will read around these topics if they want to pass bad enough’.

The variation of a student’s reading interest being influenced by a teachers’ interests is reflected in this comment ‘In general these topics are interesting to me and so I might motivate students to extend their reading outside of class more than another’.

Student views: Does the IELTS curriculum /exam result in more reading?

Question 6: Because I want to be prepared for the ‘IELTS topics’ I try to read more about them in newspapers, magazines, internet’ Agree / disagree?

Table 6: Do students read more?

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<th>1 Strongly agree</th>
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<th>6 Strongly disagree</th>
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<td>Number of</td>
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The high proportion of students reporting reading outside of the classroom is a contrast to the perceptions of teachers. While it is likely that some students have over-reported their reading habits it is also possible that teachers underestimate the powerful motivation a high-stakes exam has. At the very least it suggests that students know that to have an adequate vocabulary, grammar and background knowledge to write well they do need to read widely and thoughtfully: ‘I agree because…the IELTS topics is about a common and important issues in the society…because this helps you not only in your faculty studies but also in the IELTS exam…I think they will help me in my life more than my studies because they make me aware of a lot of things… it improves my English language… because it’s good to read of things outside my country…but we don’t have a lot of magazines or newspapers with English… to grow my vocabulary…it will help the students’ culture…I like to read newspapers and to get new topics and vocabulary for myself in my life and for my faculty [i.e. not necessarily because for IELTS]…yes I should know more about them”. The value of the habit of consolidating classroom reading at regular intervals is revealed in this comment: “when I see [these ideas again] they improve me more fastly…I remember class book ideas and words…it’s a good habit for all students”.

The disagree comments again came from those who saw no relationship with writing about such generic and global topics (‘why the faculty of sharia and law study English? We don’t need it’) or from resistant readers: ‘I don’t do extra reading because I don’t like to read a lot…no I never read English newspapers or magazines…’).

**Question 6: Will doing the IELTS preparation course and exam help me with faculty studies?**

**Table 7: Students views on whether IELTS/L3 writing topics will help at faculty**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students (n=36)</th>
<th>1 Strongly agree</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>

**Students’ Views**

The disagree comments seemed to arise from the desire to study their faculty subjects rather than write about these more general topics, perhaps indicating that research-
based writing is more relevant for this group: ‘I disagree because in the faculty there will be other topics and that depends on our major…in law I don’t use English…strongly disagree because everyone wants to study his faculty topics…because it’s boring and don’t help me about topics in business…’. It’s interesting to see that the clear majority held some value to writing about the given topics, not only for usefulness at faculty but also in their own lives: ‘I agree because sometimes it helps me…these topics help student to [come up with] ideas…yes these topics are important in university…because of wide range of topics and new knowledge…I think that they will help me in my life more than my studies because they make me aware of a lot of things…new words [from the topics] will help the student…will help in our life…I can show the chart in my work…they are good topics for us, they are necessary in our life…’.

Do teachers think that overall IELTS has a positive or negative impact on UGRU writing?

Table 8: Teachers’ views of IELTS"S impact on UGRU Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of teachers (n = 15)</th>
<th>1 Positive</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6 Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The few negative statements included that it may ‘restrict creativity’ for some students and it has narrowed the syllabus: ‘It’s made our curriculum more like ‘test preparation’ rather than academic preparation – many students who barely make it through still require intensive review and practice before meeting faculty level expectations’. One teacher saw it as overall negative because the types of skills, especially task 1 are most likely not used again outside of UGRU…the impact is significant, the [writing] course is starting to resemble an IELTS prep course. I would prefer to see some thematic test which places the student more in the expected context’.

Overall, though, the teachers in this small sampling saw IELTS as having a positive impact on the programme and student learning. Some staff were positive because of the opportunity if gives both our students and staff for international and university benchmarking. ‘It’s good as a benchmark and to help us aim for international standards…It’s the best exam of its kind, better than TOEFL…Just that exams are one way of sampling, therefore can’t be 100% accurate…students are motivated by having to pass IELTS…students are required to analyse more…IELTS is a confidence building experience as it’s an international exam…[where an education culture is still being built] students respond to the ‘need’ to study and IELTS forces many to take note, be aware, practice etc…provides a concrete goal…It introduces students to meaningful academic-like writing tasks…encourages students to hone their writing skills’.
Conclusion

Overall, this study found a strong overlap between what the IELTS writing tasks required and what students and staff thought was needed in a writing course. Invariably, some felt a tension between what was possible in an exam-driven course and what was ideal pedagogic practice. While differences between the IELTS and University writing tasks were commented upon, the IELTS tasks were seen to suitably guide teaching emphases and to push students’ writing output using the necessary skills. “While washback is almost invariably seen as negative…, learning for the test is only bad learning if the test is bad” (as cited by Davidson & Mandalios; from Biggs, 1999). None of the respondents felt the exam was bad. Conversely, because the IELTS focus is an integral part of the whole Level 3 learning experience, with plentiful material and teacher support, and not something ‘bolted on’, it is likely that this helps explain some of the positive reported attitudes towards the exam.

References:


IELTS Scores Explained (2006). WWW.IELTS.org


Appendix 1

Questionnaire: Impact of IELTS Writing preparation and Exam (teachers)

This questionnaire is aimed to get some comments on your views about the usefulness and impact of the two IELTS writing tasks (a) for assessing a student's readiness for English medium writing at faculty level (b) in promoting certain writing skills needed at university level.

Information about IELTS Writing Tasks 1 & 2 is available here:

I will ensure your anonymity / non-identifiability in any reported comments. The study is for an academic project only.

Thanks very much for your help
Malcolm Lewthwaite – UAEU – UGRU (Mobile 050 7331864)

Please respond to the following 7 questions / statements:

Q1: IELTS Task 1 asks candidates to summarise a graphic (chart, table, flow chart etc). I agree/disagree there is a reasonable correspondence between the skills needed for this, and needed for writing requirements at faculty level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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Comment:
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Q2: Task 2 asks candidates to argue a point of view (‘to what extent do you agree or disagree’) or outline advantages and disadvantages with some social, environmental, technological / value position...
I agree / disagree that there is a reasonable correspondence between the skills needed for this and for faculty writing tasks. (Consider that IELTS candidates need to discuss issues, construct an argument with plentiful ideas and evidence and use the appropriate tone and register).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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Comment:
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Q4: Apart from issues with vocabulary and grammar what other issues may be a problem for IELTS candidates (ie imagined audience, impact of socio-cultural experience on the interpretations of the prompts...):
___________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________
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Q5: What is the best way to assess a students’ readiness for managing writing tasks at faculty level? (a) IELTS based timed writing tests (b) a writing portfolio (c) a combination of both? (d) other
Why?
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___________________________________________________________________________________
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Q6: Writing about IELTS Task 1 & 2 topics encourages students to think and read more about them in books, newspapers, magazines, on the internet etc

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
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<th>Strongly disagree</th>
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Why?
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Q7: Overall, how would you describe the impact of IELTS writing tasks at UGRU level on students writing at faculty level?

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<th>Positive</th>
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<th>Negative</th>
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Why?
___________________________________________________________________________________
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Any other comments welcome:
___________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________________________________

*Thank you for taking the time to respond to this survey*

Malcolm Lewthwaite
UAEU-UGRU Communications/English
One consequence of test use in the English-language teaching community is the negative washback of tests on teaching and learning. Test preparation courses are often seen as part of the more general issue of washback. IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests, focusing on communicative competence, are anticipated to have positive washback effect on how English is taught and learned. This study was a triangulation research to compare the washback of IELTS and TOEFL iBT on teaching and learning activities in test preparation courses. IELTS Writing Task 2: In many developed countries, life expectancy is rising while birthrates are falling. Is this a positive or negative development? Positive or negative questions are becoming more common in IELTS Writing Task 2. Try this question about the rising elderly population. A sample answer is provided below. In many developed countries, life expectancy is rising while birthrates are falling. As a result, the elderly will make up a much larger proportion of the population in future. Is this a positive or negative development? IELTS Writing Task 2: Model Answer. How long do you expect to live? Until the age of 80? It is common in IELTS writing task 2 to be asked to choose either something is a positive or negative development or trend. Your task is to answer the question in the introduction and explain your answer in the body paragraphs. IELTS Positive Essay Question. Nowadays, more people are choosing to socialise online rather than face to face. Is this a positive or negative development? IELTS Model Essay: Positive or Negative Development? An increasing number of people meet and talk to their friends online instead of in person. In my opinion, this is a negative development which can lead to iso