Teachers Taking Tests: How Does Taking an IELTS Test Influence Teaching Practice and How Effective Is It as a Teacher Training Method?

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This piece of practitioner-led research explores how the experience of taking an IELTS test impacted four university teachers in Japan. Participants in the study completed a questionnaire and took part in a discussion before taking an IELTS test. A post-test questionnaire was then completed and discussed. The research analyses the participants' test experiences, the impact on their teaching practices and the effectiveness of taking IELTS as a form of teacher training. Participants with prior IELTS experience developed increased confidence in their existing teaching methods and filled gaps in their knowledge. On the other hand, the inexperienced participant found the experience to be overwhelming and her motivation to teach IELTS decreased as a result. All participants experienced greater empathy for students after taking the test. Taking IELTS was deemed to be potentially an effective method of teacher training, although mainly for teachers with IELTS experience.

Keywords: IELTS; Teacher Training; Empathy; Experience-based training; Teacher Education

Established in 1989, the IELTS test has a deserved reputation as a reliable and effective predictor of students' academic outcomes (Coleman et al., 2003). Having risen from around 500,000 test-takers in 2003 to 3 million in 2016 (Pearson, 2019), there are now over 3.5 million test takers of IELTS each year worldwide (IELTS-Eiken, n.d.). In Japan, where this research is situated, the number of IELTS test takers is increasing (IELTS-Eiken, n.d.).

It has been suggested that existing training opportunities for IELTS teachers may be insufficient and that "[there is] a perceived need for more professional learning opportunities for teachers engaged with, or interested in, teaching test preparation courses, such as those preparing students to take the IELTS test" (Badger & Yan, 2012, as cited in Chappell et al., 2015, p. 5). This observation is consistent with feedback from other IELTS teachers, who often tell us of a lack of IELTS training and teaching materials at the institutions where they work.

Equally, there is an experiential element to test-taking that is rarely covered in IELTS teacher training materials. This encompasses the psychological, physical, and practical challenges faced by an IELTS test candidate. In some respects, it is the answer to the question *"what is it like to take an IELTS test?"* It is our contention that there is an intangible *feel* one gets from this type of experiential learning, which cannot easily be replicated in other forms of training, such as watching a video, or listening to an explanation or testimonial.

Furthermore, we frequently hear from colleagues who teach IELTS that they would like to try the test. Some mention a frustration at spending time teaching something they have not experienced.

Others want to prepare students better, while others are simply curious about what score they might get. However, we have yet to encounter a native-speaker English teacher who has taken IELTS. While there are likely a number of plausible explanations for this, anecdotally, the relatively high cost of the test is a major factor.

If we accept the hypothesis that there is a willingness to take the test but barriers to doing so, it may be the case that shedding some light on the experience of IELTS test taking by teachers, both positive and negative, may be useful. Decisions about how to approach professional development, particularly where they involve financial outlay, are arguably best preceded by evidence and experience. It is for these reasons that this research project seeks to explore the experiences of teachers taking an IELTS test.

An Overview of IELTS Teacher Training in Japan

While the British Council does not have a monopoly on IELTS tuition, it is certainly a dominant force in Japan. This is perhaps understandable considering its co-ownership of the test with IDP and Cambridge English (IDP, n.d.-a) and its local role in its administration, alongside the Eiken Foundation of Japan.

At the British Council in Japan, a strong emphasis is placed on teacher training. IELTS teacher training is typically delivered in-house, with experienced practitioners holding workshops or demonstration lessons. These training opportunities are not typically open to those outside the British Council. Few other local IELTS training options exist, although a notable exception is the online interactive IELTS workshops run by IDP Education in Japan (IELTS, n.d.).

One option for teachers in Japan seeking IELTS training is the small body of globally available online IELTS teacher training resources. Some of this is paid

training, such as the *How to Teach IELTS* series offered by International House World Organisation, a global network of teacher training institutes and language schools (International House, n.d.). Free training is available, although options remain relatively limited. Arguably the most comprehensive is the online IELTS teacher training programme offered by IDP (IDP, n.d.-b).

Self-study options are limited by a lack of IELTS training materials aimed at teachers. Indeed, a search for "*IELTS*" on the Amazon Japan website reveals that almost all IELTS books available in Japan are aimed at test candidates rather than teachers. Though these books may provide some insight, they are arguably less useful than teacher-targeted training materials.

Literature Review

Since native teachers taking a language test predominantly designed for non-native language students is an uncommon training approach, it perhaps expectedly does not conform neatly to any single existing teacher training framework. It is therefore necessary to consider several different frameworks in the existing literature.

Widdowson (1997) draws a distinction between *teacher training* and *teacher education*. Where *teacher training* seeks to prepare teachers for specific (i.e., predictable) scenarios by giving them the tools and knowledge they need, *teacher education* is seen as an adaptable, skills-based approach that can be applicable to a range of different contexts. Both may be applicable when it comes to teachers taking IELTS - a trainee teacher with no experience of the test is more likely to perceive taking IELTS as *teacher training* as there is likely to be significant new knowledge acquired. A more experienced teacher might see it as *teacher education*, in that it contextualizes existing knowledge about the test and allows the teacher to test skills and approaches to the test that they have previously taught.

Richards (2008) also describes two conceptions of teacher development in a paper on second language teacher education. These are framed in terms of acquiring knowledge rather than as training, using the terms '*knowledge about*' and '*knowledge how*' (p. 4). The former refers predominantly to content knowledge while the latter involves making use of acquired knowledge (and also experience) in order to translate it into successful teaching practice. Once again, taking IELTS as training could be said to encapsulate both, with inexperienced teachers gaining more *knowledge about* and experienced IELTS teachers more *knowledge how*.

Crandall (2000) argues the importance of practical experiences or *"practica"* for training to be successful. Examples of *practica* are said to include "practical experiences such as observations, internships, apprenticeships, student teaching, or other teaching practice" (p. 41). In a sense, taking an IELTS test would seem to embody the very essence of *practica*, as the teacher is taking the same test as their students under very similar conditions.

The experiential elements of Wallace and Bao's (1991) *reflective model* of professional teacher education involve teachers reflecting on their own experiences and using them to improve individual practice. It can be argued that reflection is a key element of experience-based training, as teachers will need to reflect on their own test experiences when adapting their IELTS teaching in the classroom.

Given that this study involved teachers acting in a similar way to their students, empathy is also a relevant consideration. Although the overall body of research into empathy in teaching is limited (Wink et al., 2021), it has been suggested that teachers who empathise with their students are more effective at addressing student needs (Wink et al., 2021). There is also some evidence that empathy-led teacher training may be effective. Zhang and Pelttari (2014) found

that teachers without any second language learning experience developed more empathy for their students after being exposed to it. Mahboob (2004) found similarly when examining shared experiences of teachers and students, with one teacher stating, "[Students] realize that I went through the same process that they are going through now (which) creates and establishes trust and rapport with [them]." (p. 20).

Since this research project concerns language assessment, it is also perhaps useful to consider the literature pertaining to washback. Wall (1997) says that washback relates to "the effects of tests on teaching and learning" (p. 291). In our study, these teaching and learning components are effectively combined, since research participants are learning about the test to then teach it themselves. In other words, they are both the students and the teachers.

In fact, it may be that washback is too limiting a concept here. Green (2020) argues that most (but not all) writers consider washback to encapsulate "what occurs prior to and in preparation for [an] assessment"*,* whereas our study is interested predominantly in the after-effects of taking a test. Perhaps the broader term "impact", itself closely associated with washback, is more appropriate. Wall (1997) explains that impact encapsulates "any of the effects that a test may have on individuals, policies or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system or society as a whole" (p. 291).

There are numerous ways in which test impact can be observed. Those related to results and test scores are less relevant to our study, while impact such as increases in test knowledge, changes in motivation, changes in teaching approach, and the test experience itself are worthy of consideration. If one subscribes to the view, as we generally do, that test preparation courses should focus more on test-specific content than overall English proficiency, It is these forms

of impact that are likely to have bearing on future IELTS test preparation.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Individual Teaching Practice

What effect does teachers taking an IELTS test have on their empathy towards students and on their teaching practices?

Research Question 2: Teacher Training Policy

To what extent is teachers taking an IELTS test an effective approach to increasing their knowledge of the test and enabling them to prepare students?

Method

Participants

The participants in the research were four university teachers based in Japan. Three teachers were from the United Kingdom and one was from Australia. Two of the participants are the primary researchers (Thomas and Jaime) while the other two participants (Dave and Millie – both pseudonyms) volunteered to take part.

All four participants had varying degrees of IELTS knowledge. The most experienced was Jaime who had taught IELTS for over ten years and was an IELTS Speaking examiner. Thomas had eight years' experience teaching IELTS. Dave had two years of IELTS experience and Millie had no prior knowledge of IELTS, although she had taught TOEIC and TOEFL test preparation courses.

Ethics

Cohen et al. (2018) discuss several ethical issues that can apply when conducting research. Those deemed most relevant to this research are the following.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The two non-author participants were asked to choose pseudonyms (Dave and Millie). Very little information about them was disclosed, other than their nationality. These considerations are also discussed in the BERA ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA, 2011, p. 7)

Relationships and Differential Power Relations in Research

All participants were given equal opportunities to voice opinions. Since the authors of this report were the investigators, interviews focused on Dave and Millie to empower them. Discussions were conducted, as far as possible, as a group of equal, professional teachers rather than as researchers and non-researchers.

The Roles and Power of Research Sponsors and Commissioners

Although funded by IELTS Australia Pty Limited, authors were given complete freedom to work independently and without undue influence. Neither the researchers nor the non-researching participants had any interest or incentive, financial or otherwise, connected to the results of this study.

Consent and the Right to Withdraw

Prior informed written consent to take part in the research was obtained from participants. Each was also informed in writing of their right to withdraw at any time. These issues are also covered in the BERA guidelines (BERA, 2011, pp. 5-6).

Action Research

Our research can be broadly described as an exploratory piece of action research, designed to generate qualitative data, most notably the experiences and impressions of the four participants. It was not designed to be replicable in the sense of experimental research, nor to seek to argue cause and effect, but rather to explore a novel approach to training IELTS teachers.

Action research is practitioner-led, collaborative and change-driven (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). It enables the exploration of a perceived problem on a relatively small scale and an examination of the effect of approaching it in a different way, or after the

introduction of a new stimulus (Reason & Bradbury, 2007).

Although action research encompasses both problem solving and problem posing, it does not necessarily focus solely on problems (Cohen et al., 2018). It can be utilised to develop areas of interest (McNiff, 2010) or to introduce improvements in classroom teaching methods (Burns & Kurtoglu-Hooton, 2014) and to do so quickly (Allwright & Bailey, 1991).
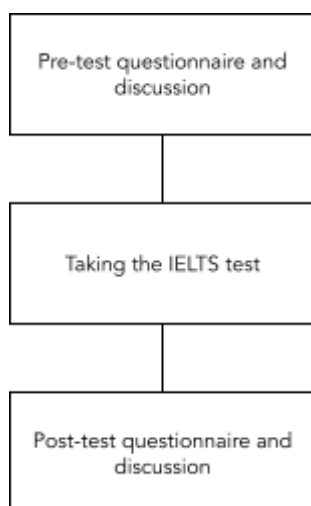
Study Design and Procedure
Basic Structure
There were three main stages in the research model - a pre-test questionnaire and discussion, taking the IELTS test, and a post-test questionnaire and discussion. These are outlined below in Figure 1. The stages were decided upon from the outset, so would be termed as fixed (Robson, 1993).

Figure 1
*Basic Research Design*

Pre-test
Qualitative data was collected from participants using an online questionnaire. Questions were chosen by the researchers in order to ascertain participants' knowledge, experience, and attitudes towards teaching IELTS and teacher training. A broad approach enabled the generation of multiple lines of enquiry and follow-up for the subsequent

discussion and helped to bracket assumptions.

All participants answered the same questions except for the third section which covered existing IELTS (or other test) preparation teaching. For this section, participants answered one of three sets of questions depending on their experience. The structure of the pre-test questionnaire is shown below (Figure 2).
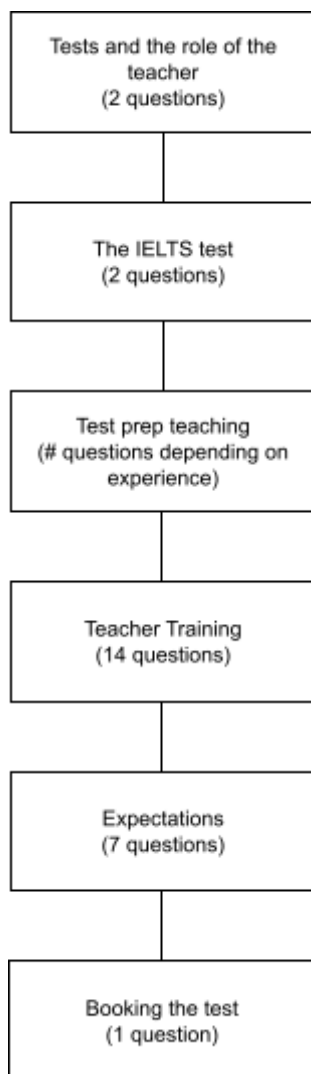
Figure 2
Structure of Pre-test Questionnaire
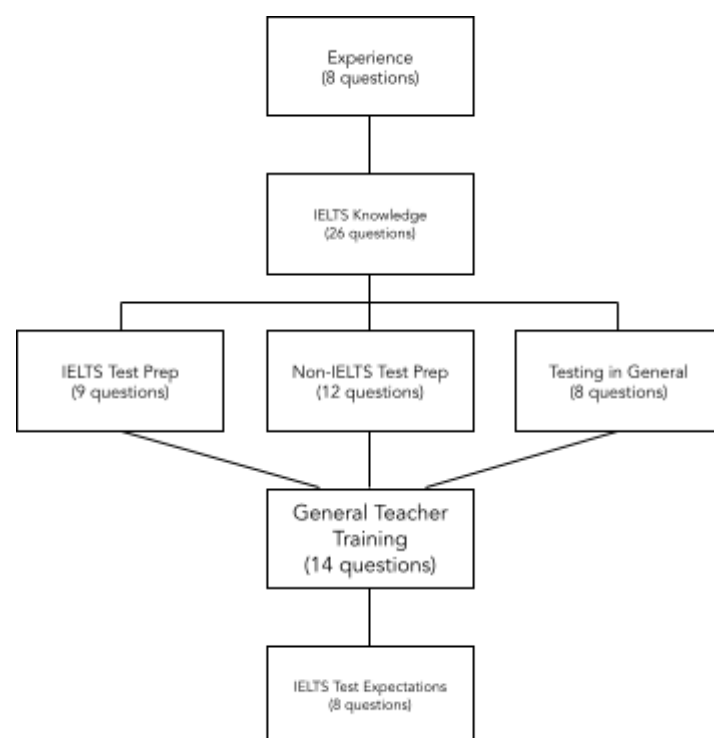
This questionnaire was followed by a semi-structured discussion using Zoom, recorded for analysis afterwards. The basic elements of the discussion are shown in Figure 3. Some questions were directed at individual respondents, in particular those related to individual teaching and IELTS experience. Other questions, typically those about teaching and training policies, were chosen for the whole group to discuss together. Discussion was open, collaborative, and professional, with little distinction between the roles of researchers and research participants.

Figure 3
Structure of Pre-test Discussion

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┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Tests and the role of the│
│         teacher          │
│      (2 questions)       │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
┌─────────────────────────┐
│     The IELTS test       │
│      (2 questions)       │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
┌─────────────────────────┐
│    Test prep teaching    │
│  (# questions depending  │
│      on experience)      │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
┌─────────────────────────┐
│     Teacher Training     │
│      (14 questions)      │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
┌─────────────────────────┐
│       Expectations       │
│      (7 questions)       │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
┌─────────────────────────┐
│     Booking the test     │
│      (1 question)        │
└─────────────────────────┘
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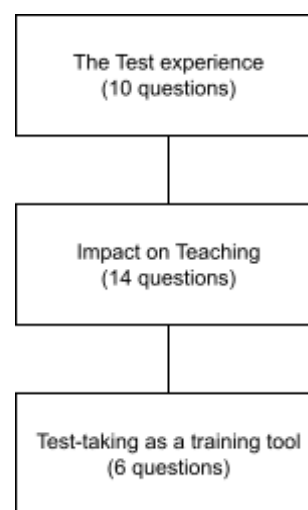
Taking the IELTS Test

All four participants took an IELTS Academic test within one month of the first online meeting. On the same day, Jaime took the computer-based test in one city, Thomas took the paper-based test in another, and Dave took the paper-based test in a third. Millie took the paper-based test three weeks later.

Post-test

A post-test questionnaire was created by the two researchers. Questions were chosen based upon answers given in pre-test questionnaires and discussions in consideration of the overall aims and emergent themes of the research. These focused on the test experience of the participants, perceptions on how the experience might impact their teaching, and opinions on taking IELTS as a form of teacher training. It was distributed to each participant immediately after their test. The general structure of the questionnaire is detailed below (Figure 4).

Figure 4
Structure of Post-test Questionnaire

```
┌─────────────────────────┐
│   The Test experience    │
│      (10 questions)      │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
┌─────────────────────────┐
│    Impact on Teaching    │
│      (14 questions)      │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Test-taking as a training│
│          tool            │
│      (6 questions)       │
└─────────────────────────┘
```

Answers to the post-test questionnaire were analysed by the two researchers and central themes and further lines of enquiry were identified for the post-test discussion. Questions were organised into five main sections, creating the basic framework for the post-test discussion (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Structure of Post-test Discussion
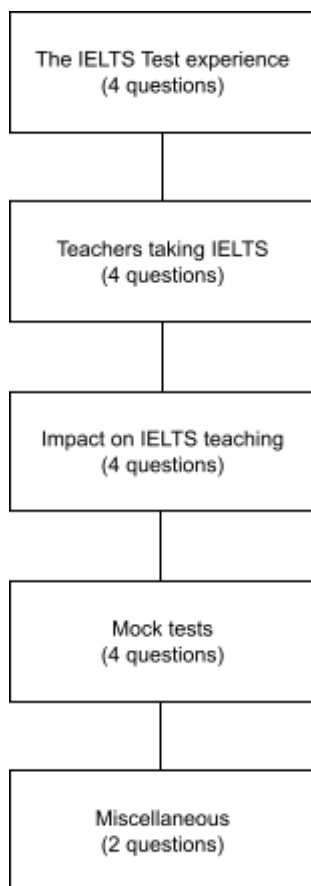
Data Analysis

Our dataset comprised four elements, each made up almost entirely of qualitative data. These were as follows (listed in chronological order of collection):

1. Pre-test questionnaire responses.
2. Pre-test discussion responses.
3. Post-test questionnaire responses.
4. Post-test discussion responses.

For the two questionnaires, each researcher examined all four responses (including his own) independently and highlighted the key ideas. General thematic analyses were carried out to identify recurring themes. Interesting answers and answers that warranted additional explanation were also highlighted. Both researchers then discussed and compared their analyses.

A similar approach was taken in analysing the two discussions. Each researcher independently reviewed the discussion recordings and transcribed answers and comments made by the four participants (including his own). As with the questionnaires, each researcher categorised these thematically. Both researchers then compared and consolidated their findings.

To present the data, heavy reliance was placed on quoting both the questionnaires and the discussions. Direct quotation was deemed to be the most effective and efficient way to portray the diversity and breadth of opinions expressed. Adams (2015) argues that direct quotation allows researchers to "make [the] issue vivid and explain it in more detail" and to "consolidate themes found in multiple answers" (p. 504).

The following notation was used to indicate the origin of quotations. Since "Pre" and "Post" begin with the same letter, "B" and "A" for "Before" and "After" were used.

Table 1

Notation System for Quotations

Section	Notation
Pre-Test Questionnaire	BQ
Pre-Test Discussion	BD
Post-Test Questionnaire	AQ
Post-Test Discussion	AD

Findings

The findings below are split into two sections. The first section consists of data from before participants took the IELTS test and the second represents data from after the IELTS test.

Pre-test Questionnaire and Discussion

Two main themes emerged in the pre-test questionnaires and discussion. These

related to IELTS teaching practice and perceptions of teachers taking tests.

IELTS Teaching Practice

The questionnaires and discussion highlighted how each participant taught or intended to teach IELTS.

Jaime's classes were typically interactive with student-centred learning a key pedagogical principle. He said, "*I try to give the students as much opportunity to work the answers out for themselves in small groups or pairs*" *(BQ)* and *"I try not to do any kind of lecture-based teaching." (BD)*

Jaime mentioned that he had students practice at least one Listening section every class. He *"rarely [did] reading in class" (BQ)* because he felt that Japanese students usually do well in the Reading section. For Writing practice, he would give students two tasks to answer in the classroom and they would sit in silence and write with feedback given in the next class. For Speaking, Jaime attempted to recreate the test experience as closely as possible, an endeavour facilitated by his experience working as an IELTS Speaking examiner. He explained, *"[I] call students into a different classroom and I…sit them down and I literally do it exactly as I do as an examiner…exactly as they have in the test… [I do an identification check] …literally as if I didn't know them." (BD)*

Dave framed his teaching not in terms of the test sections, but rather on three main areas. These were *"test strategies, getting familiar with the test layout, language (grammar, pronunciation, listening etc.)" (BD)*.

He tended to focus on the active skills of Speaking and Writing in class, arguing that Japanese students find these the most challenging. He argued that "*inadequacies in the Japanese education system" (BQ)* tend to leave students with poor speaking and writing ability. He felt that Listening and Reading practice could be undertaken by students independently outside of class. He did not carry out full mock tests but did occasionally give students individual test sections to do under exam conditions.

Thomas preferred to give relatively equal weight to all four sections of the test although the approach taken with individual sections was different. For the Writing and Speaking sections, there was more teacher-led input, while Listening and Reading involved mainly students doing practice questions.

He placed particular emphasis on giving students practice questions under test conditions. He argued that *"[Practice questions are] extremely important. [I conduct them] regularly. I try and replicate as (sic) formal test environment as much as possible. I use IELTS official questions." (BQ)*

He also conducted full IELTS mock tests incorporating all four sections. These tests were carried out on intensive courses with concurrent class periods or, very occasionally, outside of class time and were particularly aimed at students yet to take an IELTS test. His stated aim was to help *"students taking the test for the first time to not feel like it's their first time." (BD)*

Millie had no prior experience of the IELTS test. As a result, during the pre-test interview she gave her thoughts on test preparation more generally, based on her experience teaching TOEIC and TOEFL.

She suggested that test preparation course teachers need to have a deep understanding of how a test works, including elements such as layout, question types, and procedural formalities. She said that *"the teacher would need to know the test inside out to be able to teach it." (BD)*

Millie had used mock tests for other test preparation courses, explaining that *"I do [mock tests] when teaching Eiken and TOEIC…I usually just do mock tests in sections." (BQ)*

Perceptions of Teachers Taking Tests

All four participants perceived some potential value to teachers taking an IELTS test. Several reasons were given:

"An invaluable experience that not many teachers do." (BQ Millie)

"Logistical/practical advice on how to prepare." (BQ Thomas)

"The teacher can see just how challenging the test is." (BQ Dave)

"You will know what your students are going to go through." (BQ Jaime)

All participants stated that they would react positively to hearing that a teacher on a test preparation course they were attending had taken the test themselves.

"I would probably have more respect for their opinion towards the test" (BQ Dave)

"They would have greater authority perhaps...I would see them as more committed" (BQ Thomas)

"I would feel more at ease knowing they have gone through the same process" (BQ Jaime)

The reaction of test centre staff was also discussed. It was suggested that native speaker teachers taking the test may be seen as "different" from other test takers and that this might be embarrassing.

"I feel that the fact that the staff and examiner...will be thinking "what are you doing here?" will cause a bit of embarrassment for me" (BQ Dave)

It is worth mentioning the feelings that research participants had before taking the test. Despite being native speaker English teachers, all participants expressed some anxiety. Three specifically mentioned expecting to feel nervous, and reference was also made to the tiring and stressful nature of taking tests in general.

"The idea of sitting still for that length of time is troubling. It's not something I have done since a Japanese test about 15 years ago." (BQ Dave)

Post-test Questionnaire and Discussion

Data in this section is explored across three aspects, each representing a theme that emerged after the test. These are participants' test experiences, teachers' understanding of the student experience, and impact on participants' IELTS teaching.

Participants' Test Experiences
Authenticity

Despite taking different tests at different times and at different venues, the consensus was that participants' experiences were mostly authentic and were likely similar to those of a 'regular' test candidate. Dave explained that test centre staff *"spoke to him in English but apart from that they were very professional and uniform in how they treated everyone."* (AQ)

Confidence

The inexperienced participant, Millie, did not feel that the test gave her confidence, stating that, *"I have no experience in teaching IELTS and after this experience I am not sure I want to."* (AD)

It should be noted that Millie did not do any preparation before taking the test. She mentioned that the IELTS test came *"at the end of a really long and big week for me"* (AQ) and that it was *"really bad timing"* (AQ). Although she had intended to prepare, she was unable to do so.

"I had also planned to watch some YouTube videos and read some stuff online...but I didn't have to (sic) the time. This made me feel unprepared and a little apprehensive... [During the test] I felt like a failure...After I felt...that it was a waste of money and time." (AQ Millie)

Millie found the experience to be daunting and it is easy to see how taking the test with hardly any prior knowledge could be confusing and detrimental to a teacher's confidence. Taken in isolation, Millie's experience might suggest that taking an IELTS test may not be a suitable training

approach for a complete beginner, especially if they are not able to prepare beforehand.

The experienced participants suggested that taking the test made them feel more confident in their ability to prepare students. Many of the techniques they had been teaching in class were useful in tackling the test as candidates. In particular, experienced participants' confidence regarding the content and structure of the test increased. For example, Dave stated that *"the content of the test…panned out as [he] had imagined it" (AD)* and that this was *"quite reassuring." (AD)* and Thomas was *"really pleased the techniques [he taught his] students in class worked [in the test]" (AQ)*

Test Knowledge

All participants stated that taking IELTS increased their test knowledge. Thomas spoke about knowledge gained in relation to procedural aspects, and security.

> *"things like time warnings…toilet procedure, the coloured answer sheets, the fact that the Reading texts and questions are printed in the same booklet – small things like that." (AD Thomas)*

> *"the long and complicated process for registering, dropping bags off, security and ID checks…and how that makes the experience more stressful." (AQ Thomas)*

Millie was able to learn about the structure of the test, stating afterwards that she now *"know[s] what the structure is like and what's expected." (AD)*. Experienced participants also benefited in this way. Dave said that he had *"never [been] completely sure how the Speaking part was put together" (AD)*, adding that *"it was good to experience that." (AD)*

Teachers' Understanding of the Student Experience

All participants claimed to have developed a deeper understanding of candidates' likely emotional, psychological, or physical experiences of the test.

> *"[Students] are just naturally going to have [nerves]. I mean, we had it right? They are going to have it 100 times more than us." (AD Dave)*

> *"I learned what a tiring experience it is." (AQ Thomas)*

The stress of the Speaking test was particularly highlighted by the participants, with Thomas stating, *"I was petrified before the speaking test. I felt like I was sitting outside a job interview" (AD)*

All participants intimated that their empathy towards students increased. Empathy manifested partly through participants becoming reacquainted with test taking, not least because taking the test reminded participants of what it is like to be a student.

> *"If a teacher hasn't sat a test for a while, just going in there and getting an idea for what happens would give you a bit more empathy with what students will go through." (AD Dave)*

> *"I think it's very easy as teachers to forget what it's like to sit a test." (AD Millie)*

> *"I have definitely got a new found (sic) respect/admiration for students taking IELTS" (AQ Jaime)*

Impact on Participants' IELTS Teaching

All participants agreed that their test experience was likely to have an impact on their future IELTS teaching practice.

Jaime stated that he would spend more time on Listening and Reading in future IELTS preparation courses. He also intended to use more practice questions and to conduct more practice under test conditions, including listening and reading mock tests.

Although he had previously attempted to recreate the Speaking test experience quite closely, after the test Jaime planned to take this one step further. Rather than conducting practice Speaking tests himself, he planned to ask a different teacher to act as a Speaking examiner for his students. He argued that doing so would help students

"get used to the stress [of the test] so that when they do it for real, it won't be so stressful." (AQ)

Dave suggested that he would continue to avoid using class time for Listening but would *"focus on the Writing and Reading skills." (AD)* Previously he had spent little time on Reading but intimated that he would offer additional Reading practice as timed mock tests and practice questions, suggesting that these *"would definitely be beneficial." (AQ)*

Thomas expressed an intention to offer consultations to students prior to their first attempt at the test.

> *"I am going to try and teach my class students more about the test day itself so that they can prepare themselves for what it's like. I'll also do that one-on-one with students taking IELTS for the first time so I can try and reassure them and answer any questions they have." (AQ)*

He also explained that he planned to devote less time to the Listening test in future IELTS preparation classes.

> *"I used to [carry out] a reasonable amount of Listening because I thought that students needed the practice, but I feel now…it's the easiest [section] for students to recreate by themselves." (AD)*

Thomas planned to change the way he conducted Reading practice tests. He had previously undertaken 20-minute single-text Reading practice tests (one-third of a full Reading section), but he planned to replace these with less frequent full 60-minute tests containing all three texts. He hoped to increase focus on time management strategies, in particular the discipline to skip questions and move between sections when time is running out.

> *"I realised that time management and the stress associated with it is such a massive part of the Reading section that I don't think doing a single section is that good for preparation." (AD)*

As mentioned previously, Millie's IELTS test experience dissuaded her from wanting to teach it at all. She did, however, clarify this position, stating that *"if [she were] to teach it, [she] would just take on the most serious of students." (AQ)*, stating that *"the [IELTS] test is not for the light-hearted." (AQ)*

As far as other test preparation courses were concerned, Millie said she would *"spend more time on test taking skills." (AQ)* She felt that this would make students feel less nervous. She said, *"I think it's our job to counter [students' nerves] and make them feel as comfortable as possible for when they do go on and take the test." (AD)*

Discussion

The documented experiences of the research participants led to several themes emerging, which in turn helped to shed some light on our research questions. Through the framework of these research questions, these themes are discussed below.

Research Question 1: Individual Teaching Practice

What effect does teachers taking an IELTS test have on their empathy towards students and on their teaching practices?

Empathy Towards Students

Participants were unanimous in their assessment that taking the test increased empathy towards students. Participants noted the intimidating and serious nature of the test, which increased respect for students and understanding of their motivations to study abroad. Taking the test gave participants an insight into some of the psychological challenges that students face when taking IELTS, as well as an appreciation for how physically tiring the test can be.

For some participants, it was the first time taking a test in a long time, a reality which enabled them, in some respects, to reconnect with the notion of being a student. Since understanding and acting upon students' needs is an important aspect of

teaching test preparation courses, the likelihood is that empathetic IELTS teachers have an advantage when it comes to preparing their students for tests.

Teaching Practices

Confidence. In relation to confidence, a clear split emerged amongst the participants. The experienced teachers agreed that taking the test gave them confidence in their understanding of the test and approaches to teaching it. Taking the test acted as a reinforcement of what experienced participants already knew, or felt they knew, and techniques they had taught to students in class were effective when they tried the test themselves.

However, with no experience of the test, Millie found taking it to be traumatic, to the extent that it put her off being involved in IELTS teaching in the future (despite having expressed strong interest in teaching IELTS in the beginning). Millie's experience was, in many respects, contrary to what had been expected prior to commencing the research. Indeed, in the pre-test discussion, all participants, including Millie, spoke about the expected benefits of taking the test for novice IELTS teachers. In Millie's case, these benefits were not realised.

It seems likely that Millie's inability to prepare beforehand would have had a considerable impact on her confidence, since taking the test was effectively her first interaction with IELTS. One might reasonably imagine a different situation in which an inexperienced teacher is able to prepare alone beforehand or attend an online study course, and that taking the test under those circumstances would lead to a different experience of the test.

Reading. Jaime and Dave had previously devoted little class time to the Reading section, but both resolved to spend more time on Reading activities with students in future. The main reason was that both found time management for Reading to be

considerably more challenging than they had previously thought, especially under test conditions.

Thomas also found time management to be an important feature of the Reading test. However, unlike the other experienced teachers, Thomas had previously spent quite a lot of time on Reading in class. Nevertheless, he resolved to adapt Reading activities to give students more responsibility over time management in future test preparation courses.

Authentic Practice. All participants emphasised the importance of practice questions in test preparation, and it was acknowledged that the authentic nature of the experience made it easier to deliver more authentic practice. Several participants planned to devote more class time to practice questions in the future and to try to recreate elements of the test in class.

Research Question 2: Teacher Training Policy

To what extent is teachers taking an IELTS test an effective approach to increasing their knowledge of the test and enabling them to prepare students?

Knowledge of the IELTS Test

For more experienced teachers, new procedural and practical elements may be introduced and gaps in test knowledge may be addressed if teachers take the test themselves. Mainly this refers to procedural aspects of the test for students (the format and layout of the answer sheet, time announcements during the written papers, rules about what can and cannot be taken into the exam room, instructions given by Speaking examiners etc.). The ability to confirm prior knowledge seems to be another benefit of test taking.

The combination of acquired new knowledge and consolidated existing knowledge has the potential to positively impact experienced teachers' confidence. At the same time, for those with no prior experience of IELTS, taking the test could be quite daunting, or even overwhelming, as

was the case with Millie. Any knowledge gains made are redundant if the teacher then decides not to teach IELTS. As such, it is probably expedient for inexperienced teachers planning to take an IELTS test to spend some time preparing beforehand.

Preparing Students

Taking an IELTS test provided participants with a detailed understanding of the entire test process, from initial registration to receiving scores. IELTS teachers who have taken the test are in a better position to answer procedural questions from first-time candidates and to explain the overall test process in detail. This might involve elements such as providing a description of the exam hall, the luggage room procedure and the security check, the procedure for using the bathroom, the position of clocks etc. It is possible that providing more effective support and advice may increase students' confidence, especially for first-time test takers.

The knowledge and experience gained from taking the test would allow participants to offer more realistic practice to students. Practice exercises and tests that more closely resemble those in the real test give students a better insight into what to expect on test day, which may help them to overcome nerves or stress, particularly when taking IELTS for the first time.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale, practitioner-led project with four participants. It aimed to document the experience of teachers taking an IELTS test and the effect of doing so on teaching practice. At the same time, it sought to explore whether taking IELTS represents a useful approach to training IELTS teachers.

As a result of this research, participants were introduced to a number of new procedural and structural test elements, creating the potential for more realistic practice. Taking IELTS led to several teaching changes being envisaged.

The three participants with experience felt more confident after taking the test, although it had a detrimental impact on the confidence of the inexperienced participant and dissuaded her from further involvement in IELTS. All participants in the study felt that their empathy towards students increased.

Overall, taking IELTS proved to be a novel and unique experience for all the participants and one that will have lasting effects on their teaching practices. It allowed participants to step briefly into the shoes of their students and to see a different aspect of the English learning domain. It is hoped that this preliminary study might prompt further research into teachers taking tests and other innovative approaches to professional development.

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