A REVIEW OF IELTS WRITING TEST
NHẬN ĐỊNH VỀ BÀI THI VIẾT IELTS

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Abstract - IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is one of the international prestigious tests which aim to examine learners' language proficiency. The test includes four papers: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. Learners' proficiency levels are identified by a 9-band scale. Learners can choose to take the Academic Module or General Training Module, basing on the purpose of their language use (such as study, job application, immigration, etc.). In this paper, the author will analyze and evaluate the Writing paper of the Academic Module. In general, the IELTS Writing test achieves high practicality, although its reliability and validity are not absolute. Therefore, the test, on the whole, is still useful for individuals and society.

Key words - IELTS; writing skill; language testing; diagram; essay.

Tóm tắt - IELTS (International English Language Testing System) là một trong những kỳ thi quốc tế uy tín nhằm kiểm tra năng lực sử dụng tiếng Anh của người học. Bài thi bao gồm bốn kỹ năng: Nghe, Nói, Đọc, Viết và được đánh giá theo thang điểm từ 0 đến 9. Tuỳ vào mục đích sử dụng ngôn ngữ (du học, xin việc, nhập cư, v.v..), người học có thể lựa chọn hình thức thi Học thuật hoặc Đào tạo chung. Ở bài viết này, tác giả sẽ tập trung phân tích, nhận định về bài thi Viết thuộc hình thức thi Học thuật của kỳ thi IELTS. Nhìn chung, bài thi viết IELTS có tính thực tiễn cao dù độ tin cậy và tính chính xác chưa đạt mức độ tuyệt đối. Vì vậy, tổng thể bài thi vẫn có tính hữu ích đối với mục đích sử dụng của cá nhân và xã hội.

Từ khóa - IELTS; kỹ năng viết; đánh giá ngôn ngữ; biểu đồ; bài luận.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, English still plays an important role as an international language – a necessary tool for speakers of other languages to achieve their aims in a new environment. Whether a student wants to study abroad, or a person wants to immigrate into an English speaking country, they have to achieve a certain level of language proficiency. IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is considered as one of the high-stakes international tests to measure English language proficiency. It has been widely used as one of the requirements for admission to university or for immigration in many countries. In spite of its popularity, the qualities of an IELTS test still need more investigation. Of the four sections of the test, this paper focuses only on the Writing section of Academic module. This part of the IELTS test is believed to be especially important, as in the academic environment, writing is the most frequent form of assessment. This paper covers the IELTS Writing test in general and, at the same time, examines a specific test, Test 3 (see Appendix), which is also used as an example to assess its usefulness for the intended purpose. The test is taken from Official examination papers from University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations. Three main qualities of the test are investigated, namely reliability, validity and practicality. Overall, the Writing IELTS test can assess students' writing ability in general, but not exactly the academic writing because in fact the requirements of academic writing is much higher than the standard of IELTS writing.

2. The purpose of IELTS Writing test

The purpose of the IELTS academic test in general, and the Writing section in particular, is to assess the language ability of individuals who want to study in an environment where English is used as a means of communication. The test result is used to decide admission to university for international students. There are two tasks in the Writing test that students have to finish in 60 minutes. The first task involves describing a graph, table, chart or diagram in at least 150 words. The second task, which has more weight, requires students to write an argumentative essay of at least 250 words. The first task is assessed following four criteria, namely "task achievement", "coherence and cohesion", "lexical resource", and "grammatical range and accuracy". Similarly, the second task shares the last three criteria, with an additional criterion of "task response" (Official IELTS Practice Materials, 2009). The Writing test is scored by trained and certified examiners. Like other sections of the IELTS test, there is no pass or fail score. The band score ranges from 0 to 9. The appropriate cut-off score for admission to university is decided by institutions. All the needed information about the test content, format, and procedures is provided to the test-takers in a published booklet. Candidates can receive this booklet from the test centre before the test date, or it can also be downloaded directly from the website http://www.IELTS.org/.

3. Evaluation of IELTS Writing test

3.1. Reliability

Firstly, this paper will review reliability issues in terms of the test tasks and the ways they can vary by culture and knowledge background. The topics raised in the test tasks are claimed to be of "general interest to, suitable for and easily understood by candidates" (IELTS Handbook, 2007). However, topic diversity is really a big challenge for test designers to determine the common knowledge for candidates from different cultures all over the world (Uysal, 2010). Not only cultural diversity, but also varied knowledge background of candidates can make one topic more familiar with some candidates but not the others. For example, writing Task 1 in Test 3 (see Appendix) requires test-takers to summarize and report the process of cement-making and concrete production based on two diagrams. Obviously, engineering students will have more advantages in this task than those of social sciences or humanities. The former group of students are expected to be more familiar with the

topic, and have more background knowledge as well as needed vocabulary. It is likely that the writing skill test-takers perform may not be representative of the one they possess but they just can do it when writing on a familiar topic (Kroll & Reid, 1994). McNamara (2000) also lists topic as one of the factors that affect the test performance. In addition, the level of difficulty between two different versions of the IELTS test may not be equivalent. To some learners, a table or a pie chart may be easier for them to deal with than a diagram with complicated processes because of different interpretations. Format familiarity can influence a test taker's result. The same learner may score higher when he writes a report of a graph, and his performance becomes worse when the task is about describing a process with many hard technical words. Although completely eliminating inconsistencies is impossible, test design is among the sources of inconsistency that can be put under control (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

As well as the IELTS test tasks, there are also reliability issues relating to scoring procedures and raters of the test. The scoring procedures which are based on a series of research and reported by Shaw (2006) can ensure reliability at the accepted level. These procedures have gone into many stages of revising and piloting, and the result of the research provides evidence of the reliability of the assessment. Regarding raters, although the Writing test involves subjective judgments, all the raters are well trained and highly certified. In a published article, Develle (2009) describes in detail the certification process for examiners. The article also reveals that all the examiners have to be re-tested after two years for re-certification. Besides, raters are also provided with detailed IELTS band descriptors across four criteria, which are public to download from the IELTS' website http://www.IELTS.org/. Notably, there is only one single rater for each piece of writing. However, it is thought that multiple judgments may lead to a score which is closer to the true score (Hamp-Lyons, 1990). Ideally, there should be at least two independent raters for each paper. When there is a big difference (e.g., half of a band score) between the first two raters, a third rater could be invited.

3.2. Validity

To assess the validity, two aspects are concerned, namely content validity and construct validity.

3.2.1. Content validity

In terms of content validity, IELTS tries to match the test tasks with the target language use domain so that high representativeness and relevance can be achieved (Uysal, 2010); however, it cannot cover every aspect of academic writing. In the study of Moore and Morton (2005), comparing assignment writing in two Australia universities with IELTS writing tasks items, the result reveals that while task 1 is representative of target language use domain, task 2 does not exactly match academic genres. It can be said that task 2 of IELTS writing is close to academic essay writing; yet according to Paltridge (2004), in addition to essay, summaries, proposals and book reviews are also common writing tasks of university students. Moreover, writing in university is often related to "external sources" (Moore &

Morton, 2005, p.52); for example, reading an article and then writing a critical response. Meanwhile, IELTS writing requires personal knowledge and experience. Test takers' performance highly depends on their background knowledge of the topic rather than just the language knowledge itself. For instance, if a learner whose major is biology has to write an essay about policy changes, he will find it more difficult to come up with good arguments than a law student does.

3.2.2. Construct validity

Regarding construct validity, the test tasks correspond to the tasks in real-life use; however, the area of engagement of the test tasks is not only test-takers' language ability. Through task 1, students are assessed by their ability in using skills and strategies such as organizing, summarizing, or making comparisons. These skills and strategies are especially needed for the target language use in an academic environment irrespective of different majors. In the meantime, task 2 of the test helps to give evidence of test-takers' ability to show their position towards a controversial issue and use arguments to support their ideas. This type of writing is very common when students have to write assignments or essays to show their critical thinking. On the other hand, the score of the test does not only reflect test-takers' sub-skills and strategies in writing ability. In order to achieve a high score, a test-taker should also have to show their knowledge about the issues. As can be seen in Task 2 of Test 3 (see Appendix), one of the requirements of the task is to "include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience". In other words, the aim of the test is to assess students' writing ability, but their knowledge and experience also plays a role in the result. Similarly, Task 1 of Test 3 also tests students not only by their writing ability. For students whose majors are not engineering or architecture, they may be affected by the technical vocabulary in the two diagrams, which may make the diagrams look more complicated than they are. The test requires test-takers to have the skill of interpreting diagrams, which may not be directly related to the writing skill and which not all students may possess equally.

3.3. Practicality

With respect to practicality, the IELTS Writing test is easily administered since it requires nothing more than a room for candidates to produce their written texts. However, the scoring procedure may cost more time and money than the Listening and Reading tests. Along with the Speaking test, the Writing test has no one correct answer but involves subjective judgments. Therefore, it takes time and effort to train raters who must also be regularly re-tested, to ensure they continue to meet standards, as discussed earlier. On the other hand, while single raters mentioned above as one of the factors affecting reliability; in terms of practicality, it is more economical than having more than one rater for each piece of writing.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, as an international high-stakes test, IELTS is trusted and used as one of the requirements for admission to university in many countries. This means that IELTS to

some extent shows its usefulness with the purpose of assessing users' language ability. While practicality is not a big problem of IELTS, the usefulness of the test can be affected to some extent regarding reliability and validity. It can be said that IELTS writing test is still not perfectly reliable because of the variety of topics which are hard to control. The validity of the test results cannot exactly capture test-takers' academic writing ability. Nevertheless, fully replicating real world in language tests is impossible (Weir, 1995). Although IELTS does not have absolute reliability or validity, the overall usefulness of the test is more important than individual ultimate qualities of the test (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In order to maximize the usefulness of the IELTS test, researchers and test developers should pay more attention to how to decrease the interference of topical knowledge and modify the test in a way that focuses only on the writing skill rather than other additional aspects, such as the ability to read diagrams, which are not directly involved with written language ability.

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