READING COMPREHENSION OF GRADUATE STUDENTS IN IELTS

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Abstract

International Language Testing System (IELTS) is a prominent examination for the most of the youths in the world to pursue their study in the country where English is spoken as a native language. It has become the part of their career. As IELTS format consists testing of four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing, the researcher carried out to find the reading proficiency of the students studying in Bachelors level in relation to the scoring system. The researcher also aimed at exploring the difficulties faced by the students while attempting reading text. The sample size of the study consisted of 30 students studying in Humanities, Education and Management of Tikapur Multiple Campus. The informants were selected using purposive non random sampling in a proportionate way. A questionnaire consisting of five set of reading text based on IELTS examination was used as a data collection tool. The data were analyzed and interpreted descriptively and statistically. The result of the data obtained revealed that the reading proficiency of the students in IELTS text is extremely limited. The average band is three which indicates that the informants are categorized under extremely limited user. They convey and understand only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.

Keywords: IELTS, Proficiency, comprehension, band score

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Background

Reading comprehension is the act of understanding what we are reading. While the definition can be simply stated the act is not simple to teach, learn or practice. Reading comprehension is an intentional, active, interactive process that occurs before, during and after a person reads a particular piece of writing.

Reading comprehension is one of the pillars of the act of reading. When a person reads a text he engages in a complex array of cognitive processes. He is simultaneously using his awareness and understanding of phonemes (individual sound "pieces" in language), phonics (connection between letters and sounds and the relationship between sounds, letters and words) and ability to comprehend or construct meaning from the text. This last component of the act of reading is reading comprehension.

There are two elements that make up the process of reading comprehension: **vocabulary knowledge** and **text comprehension**. In order to understand a text the reader must be able to comprehend the vocabulary used in the piece of writing. If the individual words don't make the sense then the overall story will not either. Children can draw on their prior knowledge of vocabulary, but they also need to continually be taught new words. The best vocabulary instruction occurs at the point of need. Parents and teachers should pre-teach new words that a child will encounter in a text or aid in understanding unfamiliar words as s/he comes upon them in the writing.

Richard et al. (2003, p.277) opines "Reading for comprehension is the primary purpose for reading (through this I sometimes overlooked when students are asked to read overtly difficulty texts): raising student awareness of main ideas in a text is essential for good comprehension."
Rivers (1968, pp.51-52) states:

To comprehend the meaning means to extract from the printed patterns three levels of   meaning: lexical meaning (the semantic content of the words and expressions), structural or grammatical meaning (deriving from interrelationships among words or parts of words or from the other words) and social-cultural meaning (the evaluation which people of his own culture attach to the words and groups of words he is reading).

Thus, reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning from the text. The goal of all reading instruction is ultimately targeted at helping a reader comprehend a text. Reading comprehension involves at least two people: the reader and the writer using background knowledge to construct an approximate understanding of the writer's message.

According to Staiger (1973, p.45), "To derive full comprehension, a reader must first become the co-author, suspending judgment until he has absorbed the concepts presented and then scrutinizing and assessing the ideas in the light of his own knowledge and experiences." In the above lines, Rivers (1973, p.45) clearly presents that reading comprehension includes three things:

Construction of Meaning

This area is basic to all other aspects of comprehension. It includes the ability to recognize words and understand words or groups of words that are meaningful as units: to recognize ever increasing groups of words that are meaningful as units: this includes word meaning, meaning of continuous written discourse (prose and poetry), to detect figurative language and well turned phrases and interpret the effect upon meaning etc.

Interpretation of Meaning

In addition to understanding the direct meaning of a passage, comprehension must also include the ability to recognize implied and inferred meanings. This part of reading process necessities further mental activity and involves abilities to infer, deduce and construction the import, purport, and significance of a passage. This composite meaning will only be accomplished if the reader has been trained to interpret the passage in the light of the context and of his own previous knowledge and experience.

Evaluation of Meaning

The evaluation of the passage will result from the synthesis and integration of the two previous selections, constructing and interpreting meaning. Evaluation includes critical reaction to the material read, which may include many intellectual processes such as discriminating, imagining, analyzing, judging and problem-solving. It must be emphasized, however, that the function of criticism is not to be derogatory, but rather to establish principles for judging well.

Introduction to International English Language Testing System

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a test that measures the language proficiency of people who want to study or work in environments where English is used as a language of communication. An easy-to-use 9-band scale clearly identifies proficiency level, from non-user (band score 1) through to expert (band score 9)

IELTS Academic

IELTS Academic is for people planning to study in higher education or seeking professional registration. It assesses whether you are ready to begin studying or training in an environment where English is the language used. IELTS Academic doesn't assume that test takers have already mastered (or even partly have) the range of skills they are likely to need at college or university. For this reason, while the test reflects some of the features of academic language, it does not aim to simulate academic study tasks in their entirety. This approach is widely supported by the institutions that recognize IELTS.

IELTS General Training

IELTS General Training focuses on basic survival skills in broad social and workplace contexts. It is typically for those who are going to English-speaking countries to do secondary education, work experience or training programs. People migrating to Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK must take the General Training test. It should be noted that professional organizations normally require an Academic test result for registration and migration purposes.

History of IELTS Examination

The history of IELTS can be date back to 1976 when the test was about to evolve from ELTS (English Language Testing Services) and it was used to assess only post graduate student's English competency. In Australia, there seemed to be an urgent demand to introduce ELTS for undergraduate candidates for a decade up to 1988 when the British Council undertook initiatives to change the basic structure of ELTS and make it more globally acceptable legitimate test. From 1989 onward, IELTS (International English Language Testing System) starts its journey by replacing ELTS with two modules: Academic and General Training.

The academic module's reading and writing section were in three categories: A, B & C to justify skills of particular field of study named science & technology, life science & social science. Since the day of launching, the IELTS test gain popularity with about 200 test centers around the world with continuous supervision and maintenance from the International Development Program (IDP) of Australia, the British Council and the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate. This mentoring body later decided to make some further reform in April 1995. The 3 subsets are diminished with one academic reading & writing modules. The subject matter of this revised version was chosen to fit with candidates from different academic background. Moreover, the poor

performance in the reading section was compensate with introducing more universal content in those two sections in order to fit with students from different cultural contexts or tradition.

Before 1995, all four sections of IELTS were taken in the same day. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to accommodate students for speaking session. The problem was solved by introducing different date for speaking test followed by two days after writing, speaking & listening test. An additional web-based system was also developed later on to check the result online within one month of the results being published. Optical mark reader sheet also approached for routine data collection by UCLES for facilitating further research in order to ensure continuous development and worldwide monitoring of the test. The test materials are supplied to centers for use of maximum six months and then new versions are forwarded by withdrawing older versions.

The centers are not allowed to reuse same material in any test for security purpose. To maintain a general standard in IELTS centers all over the world, UCLES has developed a computer package to maintain registration, assigning band scores, delivering test report forms. All the data in different test centers can be sent to UCLES from this software alone. The data collected from this procedure so far shows that about three forth of IELTS test taker took their test at South-East Asia & Australia with age ranging from 21-25. IELTS remains a high stack test in today's world with these continuous supervision, monitoring & improvements in administrative, theoretical & technological issues. All these rigorous protocols are making it one of the most acceptable language aptitude test where number institutions in USA and Canada are adding IELTS every year with their previous TOEFL requirements.

ELTS Scores and Test Format

The IELTS test assesses your abilities in all four skills - listening, reading, writing and speaking - in less than three hours. The IELTS test format is tried and trusted by organizations and test takers worldwide, and has not changed significantly for over 20 years. You will take the Listening, Reading and Writing tests all on the same day one after the other, with no breaks in between them. They are always taken in this order. Your Speaking test will either be after a break on the same day as the other three tests, or up to seven days before or after that. This will depend on your test centre.

Statement of Problem

IELTS examination is very popular among the youths who want to pursue their higher studies in the countries where English is spoken as the native language and to those who wants to migrate to foreign country. As having Nepali language as the native language, candidates score insufficient

marks in IELTS examinations. Moreover, there is very few research studies carried out in this field. Therefore researcher thought it is essential to carry out the proper comprehension of the graduate students in reading item of IELTS examination. This study will try to explore the reading proficiency of students in reference to IELTS standard and pinpoint some problems faced by the learners.

Design of the Study

Research is essentially an intellectual and creative activity. Research is an obligatory phenomenon to find out the reality. It is systematic process of investigation. Research cannot be conducted haphazardly. To evaluate and analyze the reading comprehensive ability of Bachelor level students, the researcher followed mixed research design (i.e. qualitative and quantitative) in general and Survey based descriptive research design in particular.

Study Area

This study was carried out in Tikapur Multiple Campus. The study covered the area of bachelor level students of all streams.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The entire population of Bachelor level students of Tikapur Multiple Campus was the sample size. Each student was included as one sampling unit in this study. Judgmental/ purposive sampling technique was used to elicit the required information from primary sources.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Procedure

The collected data was coded and edited manually. The data was tabulated, and calculated by using SPSS. Moreover, descriptive and inferential statistics was used to draw the findings and conclusion. The researcher based his analysis on the scoring criteria of IELTS. The raw data elicited from thee informants compared with IELTS standard band scores and final descriptions have been made. The information is interpreted in the following titles along with band descriptor:

- Holistic Analysis
- Section wise Analysis.

Overall IELTS Scores and Descriptors

This descriptor table shows the explanation of the band score acquired by the informants and puts them in certain level of proficiency in reading.

Table no. 1 IELTS Scores and Descriptors

Band	Descriptor
9	**Expert user** Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.
8	**Very good user** Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies. Misunderstandings occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation as well.
7	**Good user** Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6	**Competent user** Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5	**Modest user** Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4	**Limited user** Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3	**Extremely limited user** Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2	**Intermittent user** No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty in understanding spoken and written English.
1	**Non user** Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0	**Did not attempt the test** No assessable information provided.

4.1.2 Raw Scores Conversion System

This conversion table assists the researcher to convert the raw score into band score and ultimately the descriptor helps to put the informants in certain level of proficiency.

Table No. 2 Raw Score Conversion System

Raw Score	Band Score	Raw Score	Band Score
40	9	23-26	5
39	8.5	19-22	4.5
37-38	8	15-18	4
36	7.5	12-14	3.5
34-35	7	9-11	3
32-33	6.5	5-8	2.5
30-31	6	2-4	2
27-29	5.5	1	1

Raw and Band Scores of Informants

IELTS reading (General Training) test consists of three sections having five comprehension passages. It comprises 40 (forty) questions of varying types. The examinees are bound to complete the test within one hour of time limitation. This given table presents the raw score obtained by the informants as a whole.

The analysis shows that the highest band score obtained is 5. Only 2 informants out of 30 have scored this score. The students who have scored 5 band score are termed as modest user. Modest user has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field. The band scores and frequency of informants is presented in the table below:

Band Scores and Frequency

Table No. 3 Band Scores and Frequency

Band Score	Frequency	Percentage
1	0	0
2	2	6.66
2.5	9	30
3	13	43.33
3.5	3	10
4	1	3.33
4.5	0	0
5	2	6.66
Total	30	100%

This table shows the highest frequency (13 students/43.33%) of students has scored 3 band score whereas only 6.66% students have scored band score 5, the highest band score among all in this research study. Likewise, 30% informants have scored band score 2.5. Only three percentage students i.e. one student has scored 4 band score. Moreover, this table also shows no one has scored above 5 in reading test. Majority of the students studying in bachelor level are categorized as extremely limited user in reading test of IELTS. This type of reader conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.

Section wise Analysis

IELTS test takers receive a Test Report Form setting out their overall band score and their scores on each of the four components: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. Each of the component scores is weighted equally. In case of reading band, the test comprises of three sections organized according to difficulty level and degree of complexities. The researcher analyses the comprehension item wise with the purpose of identifying the students' degree of difficulties and easiness in reading. He also aims at finding out areas of difficulties and errors committed by the informants.

Analysis of Section First

In the first section consists of two comprehension passages having eight and six questions respectively. Eight statements with three alternative answers: true, false, not given are asked in the first comprehension passage whereas six multiple choice items are asked in the second comprehension passage. There is no punishment system for wrong attempts.

The average marks obtained by the students in first comprehension is 2.96 i.e. 37% marks has been scored. Secondly, the average score obtained by informants in the second comprehension passage is 1.9 (31.6). It shows the marks scored in the second passage are comparatively lower than the first passage. The analysis shows that the informants have done better in true false items than in multiple choice items. True false item has three options whereas multiple choices item has four options (distracters). There are more mistakes in the second item than in the first.

Analysis of Section Second

Second comprehension passage consists of two comprehension passages with 13 questions. The comprehension passage has seven short questions with the rubrics of answering them in not more than two words. Likewise, the second comprehension passage consists of 6 questions with the instruction of choosing the correct word/ words from the text to fill in the blanks. The paragraph wise performance of the students has been presented in the table below:

The average score in the first comprehension passage is 1.03 out of 7. Similarly, the average score in the second passage is 1.06 out of 6. The students have obtained 14.71% and 16.15% scores in two comprehensive passages respectively. This data show that the students' comprehension is poorer than the first section. The following table shows the number of students attempting the questions and not attempting the questions.

Table No.4 Attempting and not Attempting Ration

Paragraphs	Attempting (%)	Not Attempting (%)
Paragraph I	63.33	36.66
Paragraph II	70	30

Though IELTS examination does not have negative marking system, 36.66% students have left the questions unsolved in the paragraph I of the second section and 30 % students i.e. nine students have not attempted the questions from the second paragraph. This section comprises of the questions with the instruction of writing answers choosing not more than two words and fill in the blanks. A large number of students dropped the questions because of relative complexity and lack of proper time management.

Analysis of Section Third

This section consists of one paragraph with 13 comprehension questions. Thirteen questions are categorized into three different sections. The first section consists of four questions (28-31) with true false and not given item which is familiar for most of the students. On the other hand, the second section consists of seven item (32- 38) matching the statements with the correct person in the passage. The item included in the second section is unfamiliar for the most of the students. The last part of this section consists of two multiple choice questions with the rubrics of choosing two best options. The paragraph wise performance of the students has been presented in the table below:

The average marks scored in the first section is 1.16 i.e. 29.17% whereas the score obtained in the second section is 1.8 and 25.7%.Similarly, the students have scored 0.06 average score and 3.3 average score percentage in the last item. It depicts that they have scored the lowest average score in the last item (39-40). Only two informants out of 30 have scored the marks. Five informants have rubrics problem and 11 informants haven't attempted the question in the last section. Time management, rubrics problem and complexity of the passage are found to be main causes behind not attempting the questions. The presented data also show that the number of RP and NA is remarkably low in the first section since it is the true false item familiar to most of the students.

Seven students i.e. 23.33% haven't attempted the question in the second section and only two students are found to have rubrics problem.

Section wise Comparison

This section presents comparison of students' scores in three different section reading comprehension test. As the test has three different sections, the average marks and average percentage scores obtained by the informants are presented and analyzed.

Table No. 5 Section wise Comparison of Scores

Section	Full Marks	Average Scores	Percentage
Section I	14	4.9	35
Section II	13	2.1	16.15
Section III	13	2.9	22.8

This table clearly shows the students' average scores with percentage figures in three different sections. The average marks in the first, second and third section is 4.9, 2.1and 2.9 respectively. The average score in the first section is remarkably higher than the second and the third section whereas the difference between the second and the third is slight. This shows that the examinees score better in the first two comprehension passages. Better score in the first section is also related with type of the question format. The true false items and multiple choice items are familiar types to the students which do not require much time to concentrate on rubrics. Moreover, the examinees do not have much time pressure in the first section.

The average score percentage in the second section is 16.15. The informants have scored the lowest scores in this section. The low score in the second section is because of relative complexity of the passage and the unfamiliar format of questions. That is why the number of not attempting (NA) is high in this section. The average score in the third section is slightly higher than the second and lower than the first section.

Summary of Findings

The major findings of this study are listed in the points below:
- The overall score of students in the reading band is found 10 that is 3 band score.
- The examinees scoring 3 band score are categorized under **extremely limited user.** They convey and understand only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.

- Only 6.66 % students have obtained the highest score i.e. 5 band score. There is item wise and passage wise variation in the score

- The average score obtained by the students in first comprehension is 2.96 out of 8 full marks. It is 37 in percentage whereas the average score obtained by informants in the second comprehension passage is 1.9 (31.6). The overall score touches the figure 4.9 (35).

- The students haven't missed any questions in the first section.

- The scores in the second section remarkably lower than the first section. They have scored average 2.1 i.e. 16.15% It is about a half the average scores of the students in the first section.

- The number of not attempting the questions is noticeable in the second section. Nine students (30%) have not attempted the questions though there is no negative marking system.

- Different question format, relative complexity of the nature of the passage, and comparatively greater time pressure are found to be the key reason behind comparatively poorer performance in the second section of the questionnaire.

- The scores in the last section lie in between the figures of the first and the second section. The average score is 2.9 and 22.8 %.

- The figure of not attempting and rubrics problem is same 23.33 %. Only two students have scored in the last part of the third section. The number of not attempting students has increased mainly because of lack of time and unfamiliarity of the test items.

- The most of the students are found to unfamiliar with the term IELTS and its usefulness.

- Moreover, they are found to be unfamiliar with the test format and items to be asked.

- The researcher also found that there is no much craze about IELTS and abroad study or migration among the graduate students.

Conclusions

This research began with the need to examine the proficiency of bachelor level students in IELTS reading. As there are limited researches in this field, it is thought to be an endeavor with greater significance. The researcher tried look for the actual comprehension of the students in reading band of IELTS examination. It was found that the average score of the students is 4 which is described as the proficiency below set standard for abroad study and migration to foreign countries. Though score in reading test is merely the determinant of abroad study and migration, it determines the band scores. The students of bachelor level are found to have poor performance in reading. They have been facing the problems of time management, unfamiliarity of test format, and miscomprehension of rubrics.

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