

An examination of cultural bias in IELTS Task 1 non-process writing prompts: a UAE perspective

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Abstract

This study analyzed 24 IELTS Task One (data explanation) prompts for task type, diagram type, subject matter, level of critical thought, and geographical references, in order to determine whether Emirati university students' anecdotal claims of cultural bias on the IELTS academic writing exam (as experienced by the researcher in the past decade of teaching IELTS in the United Arab Emirates) are valid. The analysis found that the majority of the task types (88%) were non-process in nature (i.e. required the description of data in the form of a chart or graph, rather than the description of a process); 40% of the non-process prompts consisted of more than one diagram. The analysis revealed that 33% of the non-process prompts included bar graphs and 29% included line graphs. Pie charts appeared in 25% of the prompts and tables in only 17%. An Emirati student English preparatory program survey indicated the pie chart as the easiest to understand – a finding that may highlight a difference between the most commonly used IELTS prompt and the students' prompt preference. A content analysis of topics found a high percentage (58%) of subject matter related to the social sciences, with 79% of the geographical references pertaining to Western contexts. An analysis of the amount of critical thought needed for graph interpretation revealed 52% of non-process prompts required some form of critical thought. The study therefore found that the cultural bias perceived by Emirati students has some validity, given the students' socio-cultural and educational background.

Introduction

The academic version of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is widely used in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a gatekeeper for entrance to higher education, especially in state institutions. The IELTS examination tests students' ability to understand and use academic English in four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In my thirteen years of teaching Emirati students IELTS in the UAE, I have heard repeated informal complaints of the exam harbouring a 'Western' focus. In the context of the UAE's impressive history of oral culture – as evidenced for example by the use of song and the human voice to facilitate work in Bedouin life (Al Samarrai & Souwed, 2006) – it is not surprising that reading and writing tend to be more difficult tasks for local students. With the reading and writing components making up half of the IELTS exam, any perception of cultural bias on the part of the learners warrants further investigation. With a thorough study already completed on the reading component of the exam (Freimuth, 2014a) and the writing component having received very little attention in the literature, it is important to turn one's attention to the writing tasks. On the IELTS writing exam, students are asked to complete two tasks: a report on visual information (Task 1) and an essay-type argument (Task 2). A recent case study (Freimuth, 2014b) exploring the cultural bias of the Task 2 writing prompts (essay-type arguments) has already addressed the influence of topic familiarity on intermediate level students in the UAE, finding little effect on band scores despite the fact that 17% of Task 2 prompts were highlighted as culturally sensitive. To the knowledge of the researcher, Task 1 types, however, have not yet undergone any bias analysis. The researcher, who has over ten years of

experience teaching in the UAE, has noticed that student complaints of Task 1 types tend to focus on two elements: the topics and the non-process task type. This study, therefore, grew out of the need to address this gap in the literature.

Since critical thought is needed to interpret the images (in the form of graphs, tables, and pie charts in the non-process prompts) and students from government high schools in the UAE generally lack skills to engage in this type of thought (Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2012a; Ridge, 2011), it is important to further investigate the prompts in detail to gain a better understanding of Task 1's average features. This analysis will assist in determining whether Emirati students' claims of perceived cultural bias are valid.

Literature review

Before addressing cultural bias on tests, it is important to identify what is meant by 'test bias'. Bias in testing can present itself in a number of areas: construct validity, predictive validity, and content validity, of which item selection is a part.

Firstly, a test is valid in construct when it accurately tests what it was created to test. Predictive validity refers to the accuracy of the test's prediction of future performance on similar tasks. Content validity, on the other hand, refers to the material on the test and whether it is suited to all the groups sitting the test. The suitability of individual items on the exam to all audiences taking part is an important factor here. If one cultural group has more familiarity with the test item (task) or its topic (content), then it is said to house cultural bias which impacts the exam's validity as a whole, but in particular its content validity (Sosa, 2012; Reynolds, 1998) – the phenomenon this paper investigates.

The term 'culture' itself does not have a universal definition. Kluckhohn and Kroeber (1952) reported over 157 varying definitions in a thirty-year time span in the twentieth century alone. Kuh and Witt (1988) believe there are as many definitions of culture as there are investigations into the phenomenon. This paper's definition of culture uses Tylor's widely accepted 1958 definition of culture as

that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (p. 1)

Geertz (1973) adds to this definition the element of culture as a societal guide and highlights the notion that humans are responsible for both creating and promoting culture at the same time. Although this study acknowledges the mutability of the nature of culture, it will nonetheless use Tylor's and Geertz's definitions as a guide, with a reminder that educational background and instructional backgrounds are influenced by culture. This study is written from the perspective of the New Literacy Studies which contend that the act of reading and writing are strongly influenced by both society and culture (Street, 1993) and not merely a set of neutral skills. Literacy, in fact, is a social act. The testing of literacy, then, is also viewed as a socio-cultural act with test-writers embedding, albeit unknowingly, their own sociocultural knowledge into the test items.

To locate this study in the literature, a review of research related to cultural bias in standardized language testing follows. Although research is scarce, a few examples exist. Chen and Henning (1985) investigated the ESLPE (English as a Second Language Placement Examination) used for university entrance in California. The study focused on whether the linguistic background or the first language of test-takers influenced their test scores. Findings showed that Chinese students outperformed their Spanish counterparts in all areas of the exam except vocabulary, which favoured Spanish speakers due to the morphological similarities between the English language and the Spanish language. The study

found the vocabulary part of the test “was the greatest single source of Chinese/Spanish bias for the ESLPE” (p. 159). This highlights how certain items on tests may favour certain cultural groups.

The TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) has also been found to harbor cultural bias. Traynor (1985) set out to investigate the notion that the exam was written to favour those who had intimate knowledge of America. Out of the 150 items investigated, Traynor found 30% were related to what he termed ‘Americana’, claiming the test showed “strong, even intense” cultural bias (1985, p. 45). Angoff (1989) later challenged the implication of these findings, suggesting that the American content had no influence on the performance of test-takers. Chihara, Sakurai and Oller’s study (1989), however, counters this claim with findings that indicate a significant increase in cloze scores when culturally unfamiliar items in reading passages are replaced with familiar ones.

Kunnan (1990) investigated the effect that the instructional background of test-takers had on their performance on the ESLPE. Results indicated that two groups of test-takers displayed differing performances from the others due to their instructional background. The study revealed that both the Chinese and Japanese students performed better on the grammar component of the exam than other ESL students due to the discrete grammar teaching and testing in their educational backgrounds. Similar findings were reported by Ryan and Bachmann (1992), who investigated the FCE (First Certificate of English) and the TOEFL.

The IELTS examination has also undergone various studies related to cultural bias. Khan (2006) conducted a study in Bangladesh on the cultural bias of the speaking exam and found the minimizing of test bias became the responsibility of the interviewer, not the exam itself. The examiners in the study, for example, claimed it was their responsibility to avoid question bias by fielding the questions beforehand for cultural appropriateness. For instance, most examiners avoided the discussion topic of animals, not because examinees were unfamiliar with animals but because the Bangladeshis rarely keep pets and thus have little interest in or knowledge of pet friendships. Hawkey (2005) found that 27% of the 572 surveyed IELTS test-takers perceived ‘unfairness’, with almost a third of the candidates surveyed post-test indicating concern with the cultural bias of topics and materials on the IELTS. In 2013, Freimuth conducted a detailed study on the cultural bias of the reading component of the IELTS exam. Freimuth found that each IELTS test held – on average – 14 cultural references. Amongst these were cultural objects such as ‘the Holy Grail’, political and historical settings such as ‘13th century China’, and proverbs and expressions such as ‘canary in the mine’ – all of which could be highly unfamiliar to Emirati students in particular. While investigating the effect of washback, Green (2007) voiced concern with the “cultural accessibility” of Task 2 argumentative writing prompts (p. 214), prompting a case study to further investigate the matter (Freimuth, 2014b). Findings indicated that although 17% of all Task 2 prompts were highlighted as a ‘cultural concern’ by both teachers and students in the study, no major difference in performance was found on familiar and unfamiliar topics of students with IELTS band scores of 5 to 6. Examples of items of ‘cultural concern’ for Emirati students included essay topics on the right to freedom of speech for artists, the notion that families no longer are what they used to be, and the importance of unpaid community service. These were tagged as ‘unfamiliar’ for cultural reasons. The last prompt relating to unpaid community service, for example, is deemed unfamiliar to Emirati students as volunteer work, although it exists, is not as prevalent in UAE society as in Western society. This could translate into students having less to say on the matter than examinees from the West.

Task 1 writing prompts, however, have been subjected to little or no investigation in terms of cultural bias, thereby prompting this study in the form of a content analysis. Before conducting a content analysis on Task 1 prompts from past examinations, however, it is important to give an overview of Task 1 and its grading rubric.

As mentioned earlier, the IELTS academic writing exam consists of two tasks: the report on visual information (Task 1) and the essay-type argument. Task 1 can be presented in two different ways: process and non-process, with student complaints focusing mainly on the non-process prompts. A process prompt is a prompt that requires the examinee to write about the process of something (usually portrayed with pictures and arrows). For example, examinees may be asked to write about the process of making chocolate. A non-process prompt also features visuals, in the form of a graph, chart, table, pie chart or any combination of these; the examinee is required to interpret the data presented and highlight the main trend, describing major fluctuations or differences in the data. Regardless of which Task 1 students receive, they have twenty minutes in total to write the report.

The non-process report is graded on four different criteria: task achievement; coherence and cohesion; lexical resource; and grammatical range and accuracy (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2014). In task achievement, the written discourse is assessed on how well key points are presented and whether an overall trend is highlighted. Coherence and cohesion focuses mainly on the progression of ideas and how well they are connected. The lexis category generally assesses the student's ability to use and spell high level vocabulary correctly, while the grammar evaluates the use of complex structures and number of error free sentences among other things.

The average score in writing for an Emirati student is a 4.7 band score (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2012). The only country to score lower in writing (on the IELTS list) is neighbouring Qatar. This band score is very low, indicating students in the UAE sitting the exam have a modest ability - at best - to write academically. If one compares the average UAE score to that of Germany (6.6) for example, the difference is quite significant.

Existing research points to possible reasons for this difference. Firstly, UAE university students have socio-cultural influences that have shaped their literacy abilities. Besides the fact that Emirati students come from a largely oral culture that does not value reading and writing in everyday life as much as aural literacy (Swan & Ahmed, 2011), various other social structures and discourses contribute to causing weaker literacy skills. A recent study on student perceptions of the IELTS reading exam (Freimuth, 2014a) highlighted the structures of the home, the school system (including its curriculum, history, teachers, and assessment) and various discourses (such as the unimportance of reading) as partially responsible. Studies such as ones conducted by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2012a) have shown that national students graduating from government high schools in the UAE tend to lack the ability to think critically – a higher order thinking skill needed for Task 1 graph analysis. Ridge (2011) confirms this finding. Wood (1968) states that the act of interpreting a graph requires students to sift and sort, while according to Galesic and Garcia-Retamero (2011), who developed a graph literacy scale, students need to be able to do three things with graphic images: read the data, read between the data, and read beyond the data. Although graph literacy is a set of skills in its own right, it is generally subsumed under math literacy. PISA (2012a) found that 15 year old Emirati high school students not only lacked critical thinking abilities but also lacked general mathematical competence – which includes reading graphs – ranking 48th on the PISA country chart overall. PISA measures critical thinking across the curriculum, focusing on having students apply problem-solving skills and background knowledge to answer questions (Asia Society, 2016). Although PISA treats critical thinking as a separate entity, the skill itself is closely linked to culture. Since critical thinking is largely developed in schools, education plays a significant role in its cultivation. With the education system a product of society – which is shaped in part by culture – it is regarded as a socio-cultural structure with enormous influence in society (Freimuth, 2014a). *The Economist's* 'Learning Curve' report, which examined worldwide rankings of educational attainment, confirmed the critical role of cultural context as one of the main reasons for differences in performance (Wursten & Jacobs, 2013). The report

highlighted the “deeply embedded cultural values” in educational policies (p. 5). School systems that do not promote problem-solving and critical thought similar to those found in the West or much of Asia, do not properly prepare students for international exams such as PISA. This lack of preparation can be traced back to socio-cultural influences which do not promote the importance of critical thought. This is the case for Emirati students whose education system is rooted in traditional rote learning (Ridge, 2011). If Emirati students are not well-versed in graph literacy and critical thought, it stands to reason that they would struggle with or – at the very least – complain about Task 1 IELTS writing prompts. Existing research into the matter indicates that the task type and the density of the information portrayed in the task type plays a role in the level of complex language used in the written discourse (O’Loughlin & Wigglesworth, 2003). The simpler the task type (graph) and the less information in the graph, the higher the level of vocabulary used in the student discourses. Yu, Rea-Dickins, and Kelly (2011) confirm the findings that *display* characteristics of task types (how data is visually portrayed) can impact student performance, noting different graph types require different types of synthesis. Moreover, the components that make up a ‘quality’ graph (meaning an appropriate graph – given the data – that is easy to read and understand with clear features) rest not only with its features but also with the readers’ interaction with said features (Bertin 1983; Tufte 1983), making each student’s experience slightly different.

Given this, students need to be prepared for the most common non-process task type in order to gain exposure and practice with the graph literacy involved with said task type. Upon further investigation, it appeared that there was no literature highlighting these details nor were there any studies conducted on the amount of critical thought needed to interpret non-process IELTS Task 1. This gap in the literature needs to be addressed along with whether or not the most common task types harbor potential cultural bias for Emirati students, prompting the four research questions outlined below.

Methods

Research questions:

1. What does the average IELTS Task 1 question type look like?
2. How much critical thought is needed to interpret non-process Task 1 prompts?
3. What subject matter and geographical locations are part of the non-process Task 1 prompts?
4. Do the non-process Task 1 features (mentioned in 1-3) allow for the experience of cultural bias on the part of Emirati students?

Historically, test bias was mainly investigated through quantitative statistical methodologies to determine if there was a significant test score difference among test-takers on particular items of an exam. This is referred to as ‘Differential Item Functioning’ and has been used by numerous researchers in the past, including Kunnan (1990) and Ryan and Bachmann (1992). More recently however, test bias in the realm of content validity is being examined through a variety of methods such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, and content analyses of test materials as is evidenced in the earlier literature review (see Hawkey 2005; Freimuth 2014a).

The researcher in this study chose the content analysis technique to investigate claims of cultural bias. A content analysis is the systematic identification of specific items in written documents or transcripts which are then placed into established categories and counted (Silverman, 2011). For example, in this study the raw data of the Task 1 writing prompts was analyzed to identify specific geographic locations, amongst other things. This technique was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, Bryman (2012) argues that content analysis is an ideal tool for objective and systematic analysis of printed texts and documents (p. 290) – which IELTS examination materials are. The objectivity of this technique is another reason for its

choice. When procedures for the analysis are consistently applied in the categorization of raw data, researcher bias is minimized.

Moreover, a content analysis also allows for the investigation of many different kinds of “units of analysis” (Bryman, 2012, p. 295), making it ideal for a study whose goal is to categorize three different elements of a writing prompt: graph type, subject matter, and geographical location. Furthermore, Scott (1990) claims a content analysis is valid if raw materials used are authentic, credible, and representative. Plenty of authentic materials were readily available to the researcher (in the form of authentic past papers published by Cambridge) for analysis, making this technique a good choice.

This study, therefore, examined 24 authentic past IELTS examination Task 1 prompts to determine the task types, topics, and geographical references found in each. To ensure validity of results, two researchers with similar qualifications and experience applied the rules of the task type analysis separately. Any discrepancies were taken by the initial researcher to another academic for a final decision.

The following is a summary of the steps followed in the content analysis, recording data at every step:

Step 1: Identify each exam prompt as process or non-process. Record the data.

Step 2: Place all non-process prompts into single or multiple diagram categories. Record data.

Step 3: Place all non-process multiple diagram graphs into same type or different type categories.

Step 4: Categorize each non-process prompt: table, bar graph, line graph, pie chart. Survey students who have taken or are taking the IELTS for graph difficulty.

Step 5: Examine each non-process prompt for task type content area, linking it to university subjects: social sciences, sciences etc. Record the data.

Step 6: Record all the locations mentioned in each non-process prompt and categorize according to the West (North America, Europe, New Zealand, and Australia) or Other.

Step 7: Analyze all non-process Task 1 prompts for level of critical thought needed for interpretation using the three identifiers from Galesic and Garcia-Retamero’s scale (2011). This entails reading the prompt, interpreting the graph or graphs and categorizing the entire process as: literal (read the data only) re-interpretative (read between the data) or evaluative (read beyond the data). The literal category does not entail a great deal of critical thought. Any task falling into this category is easy to interpret by the researcher as trends jump out without much effort. The re-interpretative category requires some form of critical thought as two or more graphs or features in one graph need more processing to establish the trend. The evaluative category requires thought processes beyond re-interpretation of the features.

The first step of the content analysis entailed categorizing each prompt as either a process or a non-process prompt. A process prompt (e.g. Figure 1) usually consists of a picture type diagram that shows how something is produced; it is markedly different from a non-process prompt (e.g. Figure 2).

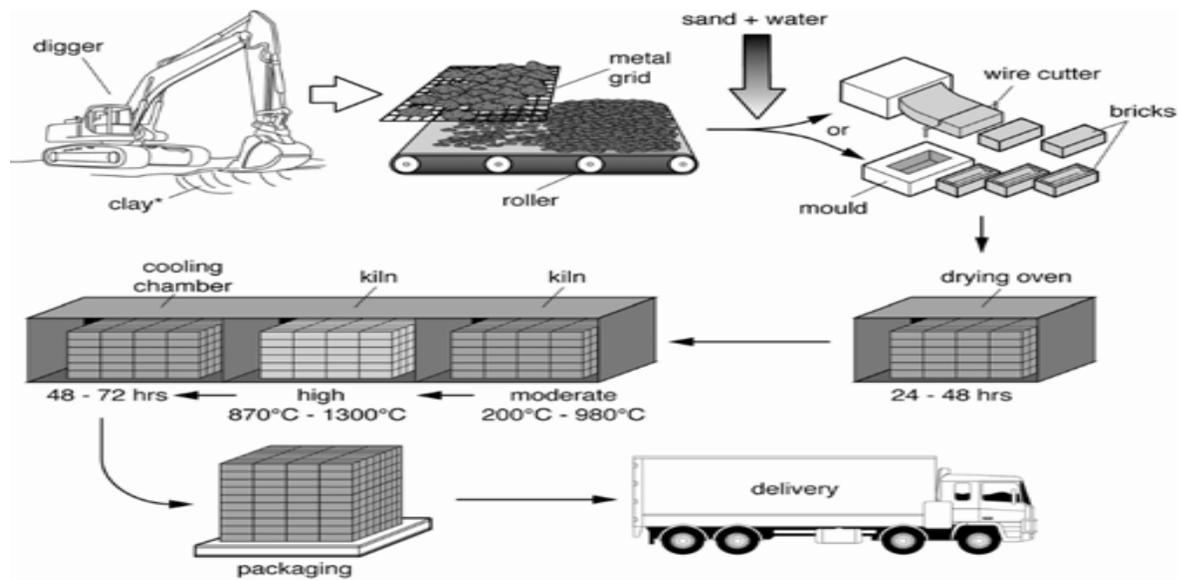


Figure 1: Process prompt: brick manufacturing (IELTS Writing, 2014a).

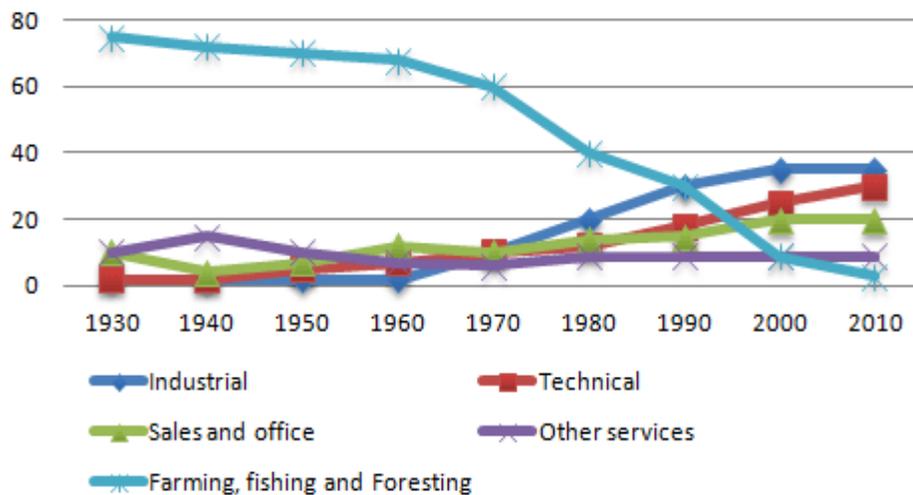


Figure 2: Non-process prompt: USA labour force employment (IELTS Writing, 2014b).

The second step of analysis involved placing all non-process prompts into one of two categories: single diagram (e.g. Figure 2) or multiple diagrams (see Figures 3 and 4). The latter was then further divided into multiple diagrams of the same kind and multiple diagrams of different kinds (see Figure 3, Figure 4).

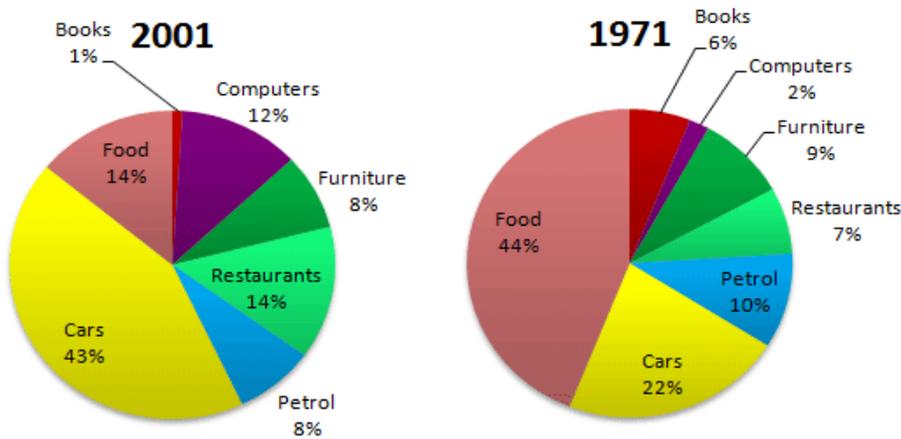


Figure 3: Multiple diagram (same diagram type): Spending habits of people in the UK (IELTS Writing, 2014c).

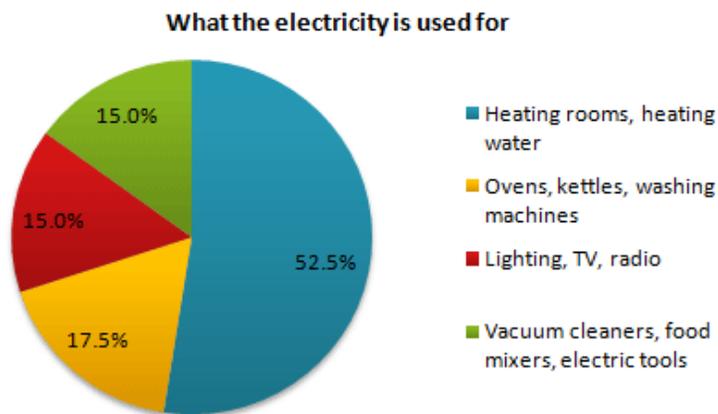
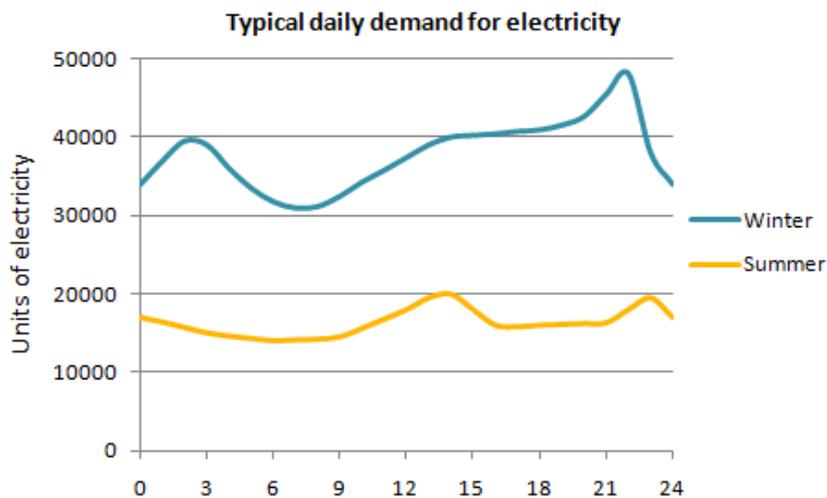


Figure 4: Multiple diagram (different diagram types): Electricity demand and uses (IELTsexam.net, 2014).

Then each prompt was analyzed for the type(s) of diagram(s) in the task: pie charts, line graphs, bar graphs, and tables. After this, the topics of the prompts were recorded and placed into major subject areas: sciences, social sciences, or travel and tourism. Then the prompts were scanned for references to different places around the world and put into the category of 'Western' (Europe, Australia, New Zealand, North America) or 'Other'.

The final analysis required the researcher to interpret the graph(s) of every non-process prompt and categorize the prompt into level of difficulty in relation to interpretation (read the data, read between the data, read beyond the data). This is linked to the amount of critical thought needed to interpret the trend of the graph(s), as identifying the main trend allows IELTS candidates to obtain a 6+ in task achievement.

Findings

The first content analysis conducted on the set of 24 exams was that of process vs. non-process. Results revealed that the majority (88%) of the task types were non-process and only 3/24 were process (see Figure 5).

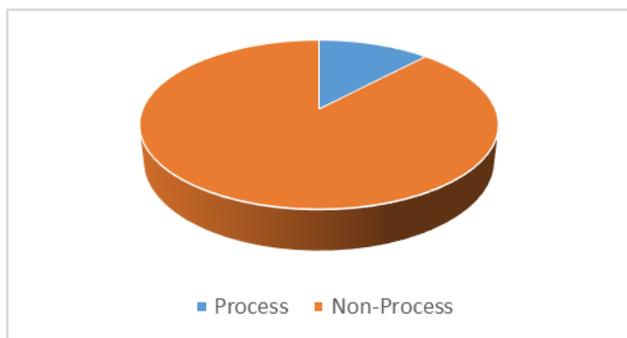


Figure 5: Process vs. non-process tasks.

The second analysis focused on single vs multiple diagrams in the task. The findings here identified just over half of the prompts as single with around 40% of prompts involving two or more diagrams (see Figure 6).

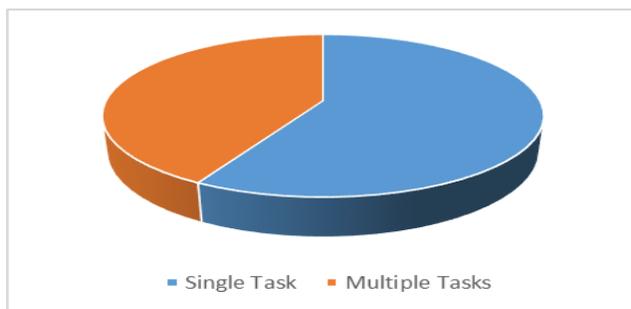


Figure 6: Single vs. multiple diagram tasks.

When the multiple diagram tasks were further analyzed, they were divided into two categories: prompts with the same type of diagram and prompts with different types of diagrams. The results showed that 60% of the multiple diagrams were of the same type with 40% consisting of a variety of 2 or more types (see Figure 7).

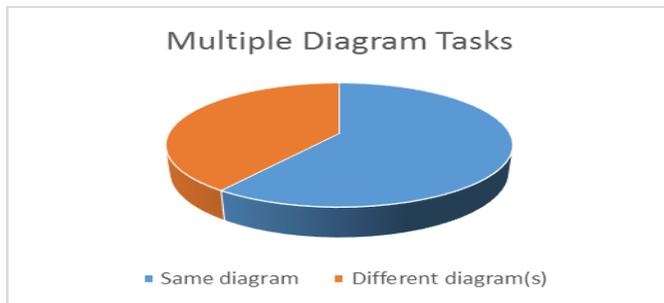


Figure 7: Same vs. different diagram types in multiple diagram tasks.

The fourth analysis of the 24 exams categorized the type of diagram found in each prompt – with some having two or more types. The categories included the pie chart, the line graph, the table, and the bar graph. The analysis showed the most commonly-found type of diagram for Task 1 was the bar graph, at 33%. The line graph was a close second, at 29%. Pie charts were used in 25% of the prompts whereas tables were the most uncommon ones (see Figure 8).

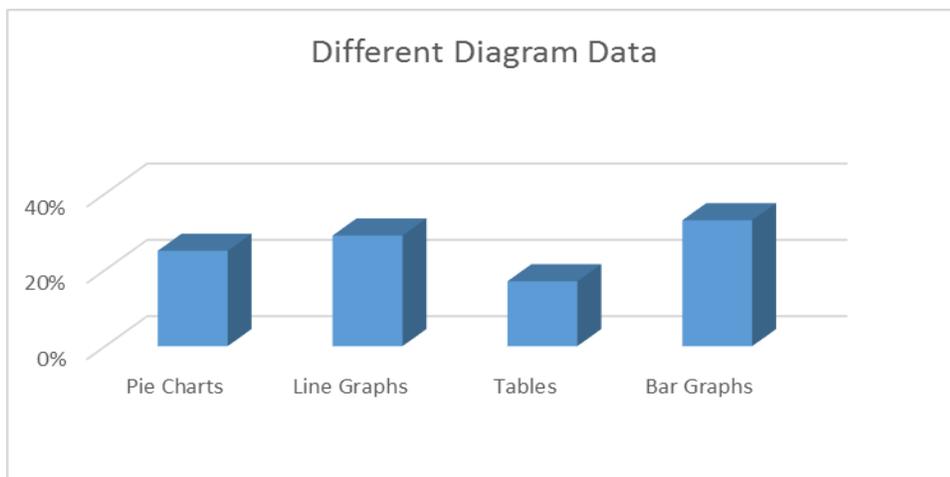


Figure 8: Types of diagram used.

When 49 out of the 92 preparatory students at Khalifa University were surveyed about which of the four visuals they found the easiest to understand, 41% said the pie chart. The line graph received 31% of the votes, with the bar graph at 18%. The table lagged behind at 10%. Although this sample does not allow for generalization, it does hint at the possibility that the IELTS preference for the bar graph may not match that of the Emirati students.

The analysis then moved on from task type to content. The first type of content analysis done on the 24 exams was that of topic matter. Each prompt was given a subject matter under which its topic fell. For example, the life cycle of the silk worm was placed into the sciences category; the prompt with data on marriages and divorces was categorized as social sciences; any prompts related to travel were placed into the category of travel and tourism. The analysis revealed that the most commonly referenced subject area was that of the social sciences, with 58% of the prompts falling into this category. The sciences category recorded half this amount (29%) with travel and tourism taking up a mere 13% (see Figure 9).

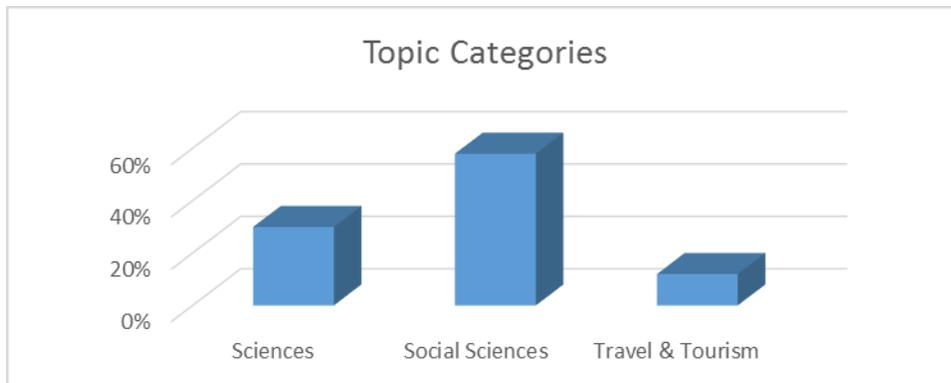


Figure 9: Subject area categories.

The second last analysis conducted on the examinations focused on geographical references. References were placed into one of two categories: the West and Other. The majority of the references (79%) were of places in the West (Europe, N. America, Australia, and New Zealand). Only a small number of references were to other places in the world, with only one mention of a country in the Arabian Gulf (see Figure 10).

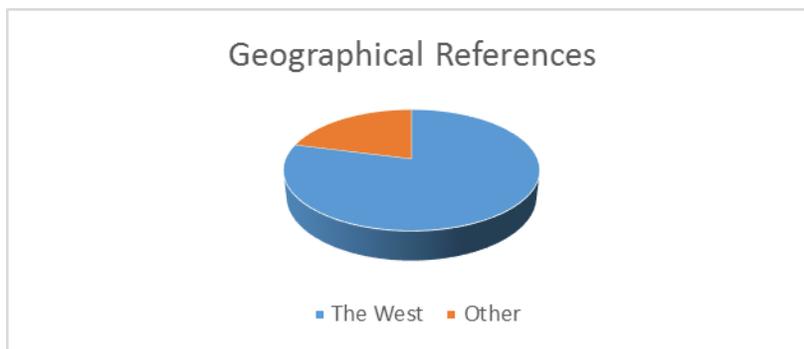


Figure 10: Geographical references.

The final analysis of non-process prompts determined the level of critical thought needed to interpret the diagram(s) in each prompt. As outlined in the methodology section, each prompt was analyzed by the researcher in terms of how much critical thought the interpretation required. This analysis was based on the three types of thought processes needed for interpretation according to Galesic and Garcia-Retamero (2011): read the data, read between the data, and read beyond the data (becoming respectively more difficult in critical thought).

Out of the 21 non-process prompts, ten prompts required students to read the data only (literal). The remainder of the prompts (11) all fell into the category of re-interpretive, meaning some critical thought was required to complete the interpretation of the task. None of the prompts were categorized as evaluative (see Figure 11) which would require a still higher level of critical thought.

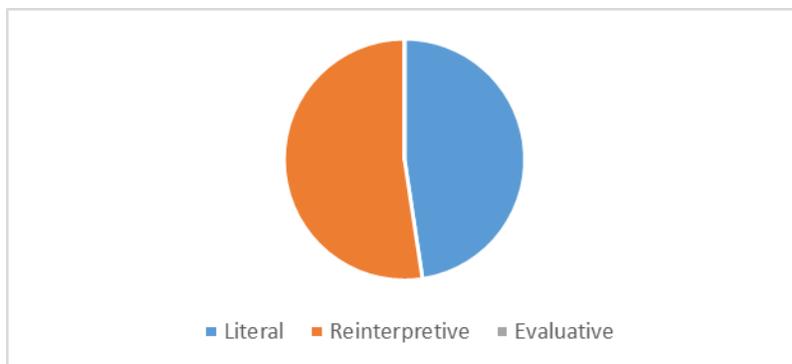


Figure 11: Critical thought analysis.

Conclusions

The conclusion section of this paper begins with a review of the research questions and findings before moving on to program recommendations.

Research Question 1: What does the average IELTS Task 1 question type look like?

The content analysis of the 24 IELTS Task 1 prompts revealed that the most common Task 1 prompt students face on the examination is a non-process task in the form of bar graphs or line graphs requiring some form of critical thought with the topic related to the social sciences and geographical references made primarily to the West.

Research Question 2: How much critical thought is needed to interpret non-process Task 1 prompts?

Given the criteria used for this analysis, over half (52%) of the non-process Task 1 prompts require the test-taker to apply some form of critical thought in order to read between the data and make connections between images. A high level of critical thought requiring the test-taker to read beyond the data and images, however, is not required.

Research Question 3: What subject matter and geographical locations are part of the Task 1 non-process prompts?

The content analysis of the non-process prompt topics revealed three major subject categories: social sciences, sciences, and travel and tourism. The majority of the topics fell into the social sciences category at 58% with sciences coming in at half that of the social sciences. The category of travel and tourism was less noticeable at 13%.

An analysis of geographical locations mentioned in the prompts revealed 79% of all non-process prompts related to the West. The remainder of the locations included only one mention of a location in the Arabian Gulf region.

Research Question 4: Do the non-process Task 1 features support an experience of cultural bias on the part of Emirati students?

As stated earlier in this section, test-takers are likely to face the following features on the non-process Task 1 type prompt: bar graphs or line graphs requiring some form of critical thought, a topic related to the social sciences, and geographical locations related to the West. These features along with Emirati students' preference (in terms of ease of interpretation) for the pie chart (as confirmed in this study) could easily lead to student perceptions of cultural bias.

To unpack this further, a closer look at the Emirati student profile more generally is needed. With math literacy/ graph literacy low in the country (PISA, 2012a) and with studies indicating students are graduating with limited critical thinking skills (Ridge, 2011), it is safe to say Emirati students from government high schools will have trouble interpreting the average non-process Task 1 – especially if there are multiple and varied graphs (as is the case 40% of the time). PISA (2012b) reports this is *not* the case for many other countries, including China, Japan, Switzerland, and Poland to name but a few. Students from these cultural backgrounds, therefore, would not struggle with the thought processes required to interpret non-process Task 1 prompts.

With regards to the topics presented in the tasks, the majority relate to the social sciences. Although no standard government high school curriculum document exists for the UAE (Farah & Ridge, 2009), students tend to take mainly Arabic and religious studies during the week (11 hours). The rest of the week is divided up into 6 hours of mathematics, 6 hours of English study, 4 hours of science instruction, and 1 hour of IT, art, and physical education respectively (Andere, 2009). The weekly schedule allows for little to no social studies, minimizing student exposure to the social sciences from which the majority of the IELTS Task 1 non-process prompts appear to be drawn.

Lack of exposure to graph literacy, critical thought, and task topics indicate that Emirati students taking the IELTS writing exam are ill-equipped to interpret and write about the average non-process Task 1. With geographical references reflecting mainly countries in the West, students are often faced with a three dimensional cultural conflict. In light of this, the study concludes – given Sosa’s (2012) and Reynold’s (1998) claim of cultural bias existing when one cultural group has less familiarity with a test item than another – that the cultural bias perceived by Emirati students is very real given their sociocultural and educational backgrounds.

Consequently, program recommendations for IELTS courses catering to Emirati students might include lessons and practice on the actual *interpretation* of different graphs and the practice of identifying major trends which allows for an IELTS 6 band in task achievement to occur. Although writing practice is also important, students come to the exam with little to no graph literacy. If the latter – along with the building of critical thought – can be thoroughly addressed before the language, then national students in the UAE might fare better on the IELTS exam and perceive less bias. If IELTS continues to be used as a benchmark in the UAE, the entire educational system – currently under reform into a more holistic model – will need to develop the world knowledge and critical thinking skills students need to feel comfortable with the contents and requirements of the exam.

At this point in time, however, further studies on the subject are needed and might give a clearer idea of the fairness of the use of a Task 1 prompt for UAE university entrance. A greater in-depth study on the students’ perceptions of Task 1 would also be useful for the literature. Other studies could focus on the authenticity of the graphs used by IELTS and whether they match ‘good graphing’ guidelines. Overall, the writing component of the IELTS examination remains largely uninvestigated, allowing for a plethora of research opportunities.

On the IELTS website, the following statement appears:

The IELTS approach is recognised as being fair, reliable and valid to all candidates, whatever their nationality, cultural background, gender or special needs. The test questions are developed by a network known as the IELTS item writers in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK and the US. They are based on real life sources (for example, advertisements, books, newspapers and company policies), so ensuring that they are always fit for purpose. (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2015)

From this message, one can conclude that the IELTS organization believes all its candidates – regardless of socio-cultural and educational background – should have the same test-taking experience. This research – as well as other educational studies previously mentioned in the literature review – exposes this claim to be simply untrue. Students with differing backgrounds – cultural, financial, educational, and so on – cannot have the same experience as they come to the test holding different life experiences and different background knowledge. Although more research is needed to fully highlight the cultural bias embedded in the IELTS – as well as other standardized exams – this case study, limited as it may be, is a step in the right direction.

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