

Ethics in Language Testing: A Study on Authenticity and Language Biasness in IELTS Listening Component

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Abstract

This paper discusses pertinent issues of ethics in language testing that focuses on authenticity and language biasness in the IELTS listening component. The main aim of this paper is to identify if there are any language biasness present in the IELTS Listening component. A total of 3 sample test modules containing 4 listening recordings each were analysed in a qualitative manner. Based on the findings, it is clear that language biasness is not present in the Listening component. As for cultural biasness, there were no bias existed as the construction of the questions were based on general understandings of the test takers.

Keywords: IELTS, authenticity, language biasness, listening component

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The accomplishment of academic achievement is affected by the measurement of students' performance and competencies in a certain subject towards the end of a course or a program. The term 'assessment' is generally used to cover all methods of testing and assessment although some educators apply 'testing' to formal or standardised tests (Byram, 2004). It is to give a general impression of how the subjects learned impact the students' understanding of the lessons and identify the skills they are strong in. However the scores do not necessarily reflect students' actual knowledge and skills in reality. In some cases, proficiency tests which are used to determine students' level of certain skills have become an important aspect in measuring ability. It also has become an important requirement in fulfilling certain criteria to pursue higher education. Arshad Abd. Samad (2010), stated that test and assessments as part and parcel of education. It is also mentioned that a test should be well organised so it would not lose much of its credibility as a test.

Most top universities in the world require the students to obtain a score in an established English language assessment as part of the university's entry requirement. An example would be IELTS or International English Language Testing System that is conducted to test English Language skills among students of non-English speaking countries. IELTS is available in two test formats – Academic and General Training. The results of the test would determine students' proficiency level in the English Language four main skills which are reading, writing, speaking and listening. This study focuses on the Academic format specifically on listening component. IELTS scoring is measured between band 1 and band 9, where band 1 is an indicator for non-user and 9 indicates an expert user. Each institution has its own policy and minimum band score for students' admission. In view of the impact of the bands have on students, it is important to study the ethical issue in the language testing system which in this study is looking at the language biasness in IELTS Listening component. This is to be done by analysing the set of listening questions from the Cambridge English IELTS 9, 10, 11 trial modules. The objective of this study is to look at any issues on authenticity of the listening component and language biasness.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review consists of several fragments which are : IELTS Preparation, Ethics and Fairness, Ethical Standards, IELTS Academic Listening Section, Authenticity of IELTS Listening Test and Speech Rate.

2.1 IELTS Preparation, Ethics and Fairness

IELTS is a standardized test which is managed by University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, British Council and IDP Education Pty. Ltd. IELTS was established in the year 1989 to maintain a standardized test for all the students (IELTS – Malaysia, 2016). The standard of the test is high as it tests on students' level of English language proficiency to be used internationally. As cited by Freimuth (2013), Green & Hawkey

(2012) stated that the test production process is complex in nature and draws on a network of over 115 item writers. Texts are sorted from different sources, from different countries, and it can be adapted to suit the needs and appropriateness for the test takers. The texts are later being reviewed by the team writers and representatives of Cambridge ESOL and will be given feedback for the new version and again being checked by another committee for further approval. Once approved, the pre-testing process will be conducted on a group of students and analysed later to determine whether the test construction is accepted or rejected. Test preparation might be a rigid process in order to ensure the quality and appropriateness of the tests' items. A good test will influence students' ability to score on the test and fulfill the intended learning outcome.

There are also some issues on ethics and accountability of a test or assessment. The issue is concerning the fairness in test construction and test results. In order to do so, language testing ethics need to be followed to ensure the right judgment and fairness to the test takers. Unethical and inappropriate activities are those aimed only at increasing short-term learning and test scores. Attempting to target specific items challenges the purpose of the assessment and affected student scores into question (Washington Educational Research Association, 2001). Codes of ethics in language testing are also designed by several organizations and one of it would be International Language Testing Association (ILTA) which serves as a guideline for language test makers to follow certain fundamental principles related to language testing. As language testers, the code of ethics would assist in understanding societal need and cultural values across the world (ILTA Code of Ethics, 2000).

Fairness and biasness of a test construct could influence the validity and reliability of the test. According to Hassan Basri Awang Mat Dahan (2012), validity is also important as a characteristic of a good language testing. If the test is not valid for the purpose it was designed, the scores generated might affect the entire test's results. It is generally known that in the context of sociolinguistics, language differ in the society in term of the social class, social context, age and gender. Gender differentiation in particular shows that in the society language is used by both male and female can be understood in term of the styles, the features and the structures. In research done by sociolinguists, spoken and written language in a way shows some distinctive features of how language is use between both genders which can be seen through the formality and the structure of the language. Cultural aspect also influenced the language structure. The word culture is complex in terms of defining it. Culture can be defined and represent as a multifaceted system of ideas, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviours, practices, rituals and lifestyles of the people who make up a certain group, as well as the work of art they produce and the foundations they create. Language and culture are interrelated and language shows a certain culture (Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler, 2003).

2.2 Ethical Standards

The issue on fairness and biasness is part of ethical standard issues that seem to be a significant issue in the world of testing and evaluation. In the past few decades, the term *test fairness* has been appearing with increasing frequency in the field of language and testing. Tests should give an accurate picture of students' knowledge and skills in the subject area or domain being tested which means, it should be testing what it intends to test and should be culturally relevant to the test takers as well. Accurate achievement data are very important for planning curriculum and instruction and for program evaluation but this could not be executed if the questions set were prone to biasness as test takers would not be able to comprehend the questions which would alter result to inaccurate score, results and data. It could result to test scores that overestimate or underestimate students' actual knowledge and skills due to the biasness of the questions. According to Macnamara (2011), there is a fair distinction between *fairness* and *justice* in relation to language tests. Fairness, broadly speaking, is often referred to as the technical quality of the test; justice encompasses the values implicit in test constructs, and the social uses to which language tests may be put. Kunnan (2013) in

his article “*Fairness and Justice in Language Assessment*” justifies fairness as “unbiased,” “equal opportunity,” “equitable treatment,” and “similar outcomes in terms of scores.”

Glenn (2013) claims that ethical standards in tests in its preparation as well as in its administration denotes the highest level of educational quality, something that truly represents the capacity, skills competencies and ability of pupils and students in the educational sector. Absence of these standards results in poor academic performance among students primarily because they were assessed wrongly by teachers prior to their present educational level or status. These ethical standards should always be conformed to individuals who set examination questions to ensure that the results the tests yield is more lawful.

2.3 IELTS Academic Listening Section

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic paper is a test that measures test-takers’ English language proficiency specifically necessary for an academic, higher learning setting (IDP Education, 2016). According to the British Council (2016), the IELTS Listening Test has four audio recordings of Native English speakers which a test taker needs to listen to in order to answer the questions. East & Chris (2012) stated that IELTS Listening Test is specially designed for the test-taker’s listening ability in order to measure: how well one understands the main ideas and specific factual information; recognises the opinions, attitudes and purpose of a speaker; and follows the development of an argument (British Council, 2016).

2.4 Authenticity of IELTS Listening Test

IELTS is highly regarded as world's most popular English language test for higher education and global migration. This is evident when there were 2.5 million IELTS tests taken in the last year in over 500 locations worldwide. (British Council, 2016). These go to show that IELTS examination is an authentic test due to the large amount of candidates per year and the ever growing test centres.

IELTS is considered as an authentic test, especially for the case of Listening Test because this test is designed with such integrity in avoiding cultural bias and by accepting all standard varieties of native-speaker of English, including North American, British, Australian and New Zealand English.(British Council, 2016; Huang & Finn, 2009).

2.5 Speech Rate

Speech rate is the term given to the speed at which you speak. It is calculated in the number of words spoken in a minute. A normal number of words per minute (wpm) can be varied differently. According to Stucky (2015), a good rate of speech rate (SR) ranges between 140 -160 words per minute (wpm). A rate higher than 160 words per minute can be difficult for the listener to absorb the material. There may be some areas of the country that speak at faster rates but a slower rate is preferable. A rate that is too slow may give the listener the perception of slow thinking and incompetence. If someone has a foreign accent, speaking slowly is crucial since pronunciation may be a challenge for the listener. A speed that is closer to 140 words per minute is recommended and advisable. Generally, people are not conscious of their habitual speaking speed and if they are understood by those listening there is little reason to change. Their speech could be considered too slow or too fast by people outside of their normal environment but if they are not routinely communicating with them it does not matter (Dugdale, 2016)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study aims to look at any issues on authenticity of the listening component and language biasness. The method used in the current research is qualitative in nature. The procedures involved audio and

document analysis by analyzing the content and questions biasness towards test takers. The data gathered through this research is used to answer the research questions and this in turn will help the researchers to generate reasonable conclusions. The analysis was made based on the set of listening questions from the Cambridge English IELTS 9, 10, 11 trial modules which are similar to the real IELTS.

In obtaining the importance of ethics in testing, the following research questions are used:

1. How authentic are the contexts use in IELTS Listening component?
2. Are there any language biasness in the IELTS Listening component?

4.0 FINDINGS

An analysis of the listening recording materials was conducted. A total of 3 listening tests were analysed to identify if there were any biasness present. Each test consists of 4 recordings. A total of 12 recordings (of different sets) were used instead of just one to ensure that the results yield through the analysis would be more reliable.

Recording 1 from Test 1 that was analysed was a conversation between two people set in an everyday social context. This recording was taken from Cambridge English IELTS 11 that was published in May 2016. The test compiled in this edition targeted test takers who are of higher intermediate to advanced proficiency level. It was a conversation between 2 individuals on hiring a public room where one was trying to make a room reservation. It is evident throughout the recording that British accent was used. Though British accent was used, the pace of the conversation was slow and understandable. The speakers also used basic and common vocabulary that was easily understood by test takers.

The second recording from test 1 was somewhat different as it was a monologue set in an everyday social context. It was also extracted from the Cambridge English IELTS 11 edition published in May 2016. The monologue was about a man who was talking to a group of visitors on the farm. The accent used here was also British accent which was similar to the first recording. The pace of the monologue was of moderate yet of an understandable pace. The content was relevant to the test takers as the topic was a general and universal topic.

Similarly to the first and second recording, the third recording was also taken from IELTS 11 (Test1). It was a discussion between two students, a man and a woman on the assignments they were required to complete. The accent used in this recording was also British. The topic is relevant to all test takers as it was about assignments discussion, something any learner could relate to. The speech rate here was seen to be of a moderate conversational rate. Correspondingly to the rest, the fourth recording (Test1) was of the British accent and it was a monologue on students' presentation. The topic in this recording was very general and relatable to all test takers as it was about species found in the ocean and such topic has been learned through Science lessons in class. The pace of speech here was also moderate.

The second set of the test that was analysed was taken from Cambridge IELTS 10 published in June 2015. The targeted level was B1 to C1 Advanced. This test consists of four different recordings. The first recording was on a conversation between two individuals about a survey on transportation. The pace of this recording was moderate and vocabulary used was also common words used in general conversations. The accent heard throughout this recording was of British accent. The topic was common as it was about transportation.

The second recording was about a woman talking on the radio about ways to protect dolphins. The topic here would be relevant to the test takers as they may be familiar with threats faced by marine life through Science lessons in class. The accent used here was of British accent. The rate of speech and pace was moderate and vocabulary used was common. Pronunciation of words was very clear as the woman pronounced the words clearly at a normal speech rate.

The third recording of this test was similar to the first recording as it was a conversation between two students on presentation of a particular ethnic. This recording was not gender biased as it used both male and female individuals. Both the individuals spoke in British accent. The rate of speech of the woman was heard to be faster than the man in the recording. The accent of the woman was also slightly thicker than the man. Despite the rate of speech, the content and topic was still relatable to test takers as it is about presentations.

The final recording of this second set of test was a monologue of a business student on how management in general might change in the future. Unlike the other recordings, the accent of this speaker was of North American accent. However, the rate of speech was moderate in this recording. The vocabulary used in this final recording was widespread and common to test takers. This would make the test more understandable for the test takers despite the moderate rate of speech.

The final set of recordings analysed were taken from Cambridge English IELTS 9 that was published in July 2013. The first recording that was analysed from this set was on a telephone conversation between a customer and travel company employee. The rate of speech here was slow as the speakers said one word at time. The accent used was British. Common vocabularies were used by the two speakers which made it more comprehensible for test takers to comprehend and digest.

The second recording was different as it was about a talk on local radio on children's team park. This conversation was between two individuals. Similarly to the first, the accent here was also of British accent. The rate and pace of speech in this recording was moderate. The man in the recording spoke slightly faster than the female. However, the woman had a thicker accent than the man throughout the conversation.

The third recording was about a Geography student name Caroline talking about her dissertation to her professor. The accent used throughout the recording was British accent but the topic which was about fishing may not be relevant to all test takers. The discussion was not technically about fishing but instead it was more on preparation of the dissertation the progress. Such discussion could closely be relatable to any student. The rate and pace of speech in this recording was moderate.

The fourth recording was of the third set of listening test. This recording was part of a lecture about an experimental design of a house as part of an architecture subject. The rate of speech was slow and speaker uttered one word at a time using British accent. The architecture terms used in this recording could be a reason to why the content of the lecture was uttered in a slower pace compared to the other recordings. The topic may be irrelevant to most learners but the way the speaker presented the lecture in such a slow manner could make it more comprehensible for all learners to understand.

The findings of the overall analysis can be summarized in table 1.

RECORDINGS/TEST	IELTS 11 (2016)	IELTS 10 (2015)	IELTS 9 (2013)
RECORDING 1	<p>CONTEXT: conversation between 2 individuals on hiring a public room where one was trying to make a room reservation</p> <p>ACCENT: British accent</p> <p>PACE: slow and understandable</p>	<p>CONTEXT: conversation between two individuals about a survey on transportation</p> <p>ACCENT: British accent</p> <p>PACE: moderate</p>	<p>CONTEXT: telephone conversation between a customer and travel company employee</p> <p>ACCENT: British accent</p> <p>PACE: slow</p>

RECORDING 2	CONTEXT: A monologue about a man who was talking to a group of visitors on the farm. ACCENT: British accent PACE: moderate	CONTEXT: Talking on the radio about ways to protect dolphins ACCENT: British accent PACE: normal	CONTEXT: A talk on local radio on children’s team park ACCENT: British accent PACE: moderate
RECORDING 3	CONTEXT: A discussion between two students, a man and a woman on the assignments they were required to complete. ACCENT: British accent PACE: moderate	CONTEXT: A conversation between two students on presentation of a particular ethnic ACCENT: British accent PACE: fast	CONTEXT: A Geography student name Caroline talking about her dissertation to her professor ACCENT: British accent PACE: moderate
RECORDING 4	CONTEXT: Monologue on students’ presentation about species found in the ocean ACCENT: British accent PACE: moderate	CONTEXT: Monologue of a business student on how management in general might change in the future ACCENT: North American accent PACE: moderate	CONTEXT: Lecture about an experimental design of a house as part of an architecture subject ACCENT: British accent PACE: slower

Table 4.1 : Analysis of Findings on IELTS Listening Test

5.0 DISCUSSION

In IELTS Listening Component, candidates will be listening to a variety of accents i.e. British, New Zealand, North American or Australian. The IELTS Listening test is designed to assess a wide range of listening skills including how well the test takers understand the main ideas, recognizing opinions, attitudes and purpose of a speaker and also follow the development of a conversation. The listening recordings consist of four sections. Section 1 is a conversation between two people set in an everyday social situation, Section 2, a monologue set in an everyday social situation, Section 3, a conversation between up to four people set in an educational or training context, and Section 4, a monologue on an academic subject, e.g. a university lecture (Understand the Listening test, n.d). The authenticity of the listening component can be generalized as the link between the recordings and the questions meet the test takers needs and suitability. It can be specified that based on the first research question, the context used in the listening component is authentic and could be easily understood.

In answering the second research question, it can be found that, the analysis obtained was related to the accent, speech rate, pace and content. The accents used in the audio recordings are mainly British accent since IELTS are originally from British Council. Candidates who applied to sit for IELTS have in their mind to pursue their studies in English speaking countries such as Australia, UK, New Zealand or US. Therefore, accent wise, the recordings were clear and understandable as it is not too thick and it is fair to use varieties of English accent from the said countries to look at student’s language capacity to survive in English medium

countries. It is noticeable that most of the accents used in the recordings are based on the Received Pronunciation. Received Pronunciation (RP) is the instantly distinguishable as the standard British pronunciation. RP is an accent, not a dialect, since all RP speakers speak Standard English with avoidance of non-standard grammatical constructions and localised vocabulary characteristic of regional dialects that is it does not contain any signs on speaker's background but more to educational background (Received Pronunciation, British Library). Hence, it is clear that language biasness is not present in the Listening component. As for cultural biasness, there were no bias existed as the construction of the questions were based on general understandings of the test takers.

6.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be concluded that based on the analysis of findings for IELTS Listening test there are not much of biasness in term of the topics tested as most of them are related to universal topics which highlighted real life conversations.

The speech rate or the pace differs from one recording to another. Some of the recordings could be very fast and some at a moderate understandable rate. Assessors will be looking for evidence of the ability to understand the main ideas and detailed factual information, the opinions and attitudes of speakers, the purpose of an utterance and evidence of the ability to follow the development of ideas. Despite the fact that most of the accent used would be of British, Australian, New Zealand or North American accent, it can be concluded that British accent dominate the most part of the listening component as it is constructed by Cambridge and British Council as well as IDP Education.

Another finding that was found was about the need of repeating the audio recording to test-takers. The audio for IELTS Listening component is only played once to test-takers which could be insufficient for test-takers from non-English speaking countries. Consequently, the listening section tests how well you retain the information, so the purpose is lost if it can be played repeatedly.

Listening component is an important aspect as Rivers (1981) stated that we listen twice as much as we speak, four times as much as we read and five times as much as we write. The more familiar a listener is with a certain variety of accent, regional words and phrases used, the easier it would be for listening input. There were some parts of American accent which might be more familiar for the test takers. On the other hand, British accent might be more difficult to understand, however in the tests that have been analyzed most of the accent are not too thick and it is still comprehensible. However the results were only based on random IELTS Listening questions so the findings could not be over-generalized since results may vary from different test modules. It is hoped that the findings of this research could be improved in a further research. The researchers would suggest that extensive research on other components of IELTS such as writing, speaking as well as reading to be conducted to look further into the language biasness and authenticity of the test.

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