

IELTS washback on teaching methods and materials

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 <https://doi.org/10.54855/ijte.26634>

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Received: 29/04/2026

Revision: 14/08/2026

Accepted: 24/08/2026

Online: 26/08/2026

ABSTRACT

Keywords: washback, IELTS, course alignment, TESOL, communicative language teaching, language testing

International language proficiency tests have become increasingly important due to the requirements of academic institutions and immigration authorities worldwide. The influence of tests on teaching content, materials, and instructional practices is commonly referred to as washback or backwash. This paper presents a conceptual analysis of IELTS washback, drawing on previous research and theoretical discussions to examine its implications for teaching methods and instructional materials. It argues that certain forms of course alignment may enhance the efficiency of IELTS preparation. These proposed alignments, which may diverge from some dominant assumptions associated with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), are discussed across the four language skills of speaking, writing, reading, and listening, as well as in relation to vocabulary and grammar instruction. Based on this analysis, the paper offers pedagogical recommendations for IELTS preparation courses and contributes to ongoing discussions concerning the relationship between language testing and language teaching.

Introduction

One of the primary incentives for learning English globally is the pursuit of academic or professional opportunities abroad, both of which typically require validation via international English competence examinations. This demand has catalyzed significant growth in the commercial scale of high-stakes assessments, including TOEFL, PTE, Duolingo, CELPIP, and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). High-stakes tests are defined as those whose results serve as "the basis upon which important decisions are made that immediately and directly affect the student" (Cheng et al., 2004, p. 43). Among these, IELTS—established in 1989 and jointly managed by the British Council, IDP, and Cambridge English—is one of the world's most widely recognized English-language proficiency tests (International English Language Testing System, n.d.) and is accepted by organizations in more than 140 countries (International English Language Testing System, n.d.). The test comprises two modules: one (academic) evaluates English competence for formal education, while the other (general) assesses English competence in the labor market and everyday life. There is no

pass/fail, and the test uses a 1-9 band score. Academic institutions and immigration organizations have varying band score requirements, but typically, for academic admission, many universities require a band score of 6.5, with a minimum of 6 in each skill.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the implications of IELTS washback for course design, teaching methods, and instructional materials. Rather than offering an empirical description of classroom practices, this paper argues that specific forms of course alignment can improve the efficiency of IELTS preparation. Specifically, it posits that strategic, skill-specific departures from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies may enable learners to prepare more effectively for IELTS within limited instructional time. The pedagogical frameworks proposed herein are particularly significant for instructional designers and educators, especially in contexts where exam maximization rather than general linguistic acquisition is the primary driver of ESL enrollment.

Theoretical framework and background

This paper is informed by two theoretical perspectives: Washback Theory and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Washback Theory explains how high-stakes examinations shape teaching and learning, whereas CLT represents a dominant pedagogical approach in language education. The paper's conceptual framework emerges from examining the relationship between these perspectives and considering the extent to which IELTS demands may justify instructional practices that differ from conventional CLT approaches.

Research on course alignment in the context of high-stakes language testing is generally conducted within the framework of washback studies. The impact of tests on teaching and learning is called washback or backwash and has been studied in diverse ways over the past decades. According to Hughes (1989, p. 1), “the effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as backwash and can be harmful or beneficial.” While the term backwash is used by Hughes, in applied linguistics, washback is more common (Brown, 1995; Weir, 1993). It has also been called test impact (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and measurement-driven instruction (Popham, 1983). Washback studies are of critical importance because examinations not only assess learning outcomes but also actively shape the processes of teaching and learning within educational contexts. Understanding the mechanisms and effects of washback enables researchers and educators to evaluate the extent to which assessments support or undermine pedagogical objectives. As Eckstein and Noah (1992, 1993) contend, washback is an intrinsic property of any form of assessment, particularly when examination results have significant implications for individuals’ futures, irrespective of the quality of the examination itself. In fact, according to Cheng et al. (2004, p. 26), the influence of testing on instructional practices is predicated on the principle that assessments are intended to guide teaching and learning. Achieving this objective typically involves fostering curriculum alignment, in which the content and format of the assessment are closely matched to the curriculum. As noted earlier in this section, both washback and backwash have been used to refer to these effects. While washback cannot be found in dictionaries, backwash is defined as ‘the unwelcome repercussions of some social action’ by the New Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, and ‘unpleasant after-effects of an event or situation’ by Collin’s Cobuild Dictionary of English Language (Cheng et al., 2004, p. 27). Biggs (1995, p. 12) employs the term ‘backwash’ to describe the phenomenon whereby testing shapes not only the curriculum but also teaching methods and students’ approaches to learning (Crooks, 1988; Frederiksen, 1984). However, Spolsky (1994, p. 55), after citing definitions of backwash from the Collins Cobuild Dictionary of English Language, argued that the term is more appropriately used to

refer to unintended side effects of examinations rather than to the deliberate effects that arise when the primary purpose of an exam is to control the curriculum. Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 115) note that while the idea that testing affects teaching is commonly referred to as 'backwash' in general educational discourse, it has become known as 'washback' among British applied linguists, although they find no semantic or practical reason to prefer one term over the other.

Washback effects can be both positive and negative. Negative washback refers to the negative effects of tests on teaching and learning, and this is what language tests have often been criticized for (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p. 115). This is partly because teachers often ignore subjects and activities unrelated to the exam (Vernon, 1940). Alderson & Wall (1993, p. 5) define negative washback as the undesirable effect of a particular test on teaching and learning. For example, Davies et al. (1999, p. 225) mention the possibility of negative washback: "If, for example, the skill of writing is tested only by multiple choice items then there is great pressure to practice such items rather than to practice the skill of writing itself".

On the other hand, others see the possibility of "bringing about the beneficial change in language teaching by changing examinations. This is called positive washback. For instance, Hughes (1989, p. 2) discusses his experience developing an English language test that led to positive changes in the syllabus, the selection of new textbooks, and teaching methods. Also, Allen (2016) investigates the washback effect of IELTS on learners' performance in Japan. According to this survey, the test had a positive washback specifically regarding productive skills (speaking and writing). However, determining whether washback is positive or negative is highly complex and heavily context-dependent. For this reason, Cheng et al. (2004, p. 30) argue that the nature of the test should first be examined, followed by the washback effect itself and the conditions under which washback operates. Whether positive or negative washback, in the view of Pearson (1988, p. 107), the connection between testing and teaching is so strong that he considers a good test to be one that is more or less directly usable in teaching-learning activities. Similarly, good teaching-learning tasks will be more or less directly usable for testing purposes, even though practical or financial constraints limit the possibilities. Research on washback has generally been conducted in two broad directions. Many studies have examined the phenomenon from a theoretical perspective, whereas others have analyzed washback effects within certain educational contexts. In this paper, IELTS washback is examined irrespective of a specific educational context. This does not imply that I believe such effects function uniformly across all contexts. Rather, it suggests that the test's general framework influences teaching methods and content in this way, and that these changes can enhance efficiency and lead to better outcomes in less time, although in practice, each class and country may necessitate particular adjustments in applying these methodological changes.

There are several features that distinguish this paper from other washback studies. First, the majority of them do not address the IELTS test. In fact, some of them do not even discuss large-scale tests and instead focus on local programs or tests (Burrows, 2004; Stecher et al., 2004). Second, studies related to IELTS (Saville & Hawkey, 2004; Allen, 2016; Riswandi & Wahyudi, 2018; Lewthwaite, 2007; Nguyen, 2025) or other exams (Cheng et al., 2004; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2026) that examined the washback effect on teaching methodology and content mainly focused on reporting what actually occurred in classroom practice. In contrast, the purpose of this paper is to explore what kinds of changes can enhance classroom effectiveness in preparing students for the IELTS test. In other words, this study differs from previous research in that it does not examine changes that have already occurred in teaching and learning as a result of IELTS in a specific context. Instead, it focuses on identifying potential pedagogical adjustments that may improve the efficiency of IELTS preparation courses, as well as general English

courses at lower proficiency levels for learners intending to take the IELTS exam. Finally, some of them (Kunnan, 2000) that address the impact of IELTS and other large-scale tests discuss the kind of impact categorized as consequential validity in TESOL. They look at the broader impacts that language tests can have on students and society. For example, in part of their paper, Saville and Hawkey (2004) investigate the effects on other stakeholders, such as school owners and government agencies.

Taken together, washback theory and Communicative Language Teaching provide the conceptual foundation for the pedagogical recommendations developed in the following sections. Washback theory predicts that high-stakes assessments influence curriculum, instructional content, and classroom practices through the principle of curriculum alignment. Consequently, where the linguistic and cognitive demands of IELTS differ from the primary objectives of general communicative language instruction, preparation courses can benefit from strategically adjusting instructional priorities. The pedagogical recommendations presented in this paper should therefore not be interpreted as a rejection of CLT. Rather, they represent context-specific adaptations intended to improve instructional efficiency in intensive IELTS preparation courses while remaining consistent with the broader principle that teaching should align with assessment objectives.

IELTS and communicative language teaching

In recent decades, second language acquisition has seen significant changes, often aligned with developments in linguistics, psychology, and other human sciences, and it seems to share some characteristics. These changes were a kind of “search for more effective ways of teaching second or foreign languages” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 244). Despite having different subfields, CLT is considered the dominant approach in teaching English.

Mainstream language teaching on both sides of the Atlantic, however, opted for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the recommended basis for language teaching methodology in the 1980s, and it remains the most plausible basis for language teaching today. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 244)

Despite some differences, recent methods and approaches in SLA seem to share certain characteristics. One of these shared features of CLT is that teachers' talk time has declined. A teacher in the grammar-translation or direct method was expected to talk more than students. However, in approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT), students are expected to have more speaking time in the classroom. Another feature is that recent approaches tend to emphasize an inductive approach to teaching grammar, whereas in the past the deductive approach was more common. Jack C. Richards states that “grammar is not taught in isolation but often arises out of a communicative task, thus creating a need for specific items of grammar. Students might carry out a task and then reflect on some of the linguistic characteristics of their performance” (2006, p. 23).

There has also been a tendency towards creating real-world situations rather than idealized, abstract contexts. For example, according to Clarke and Silberstein, “Classroom activities should parallel the “real world” as closely as possible. Since language is a tool of communication, methods and materials should concentrate on the message and not the medium” (1977, p. 51). Similarly, teaching materials in reading and listening come from authentic sources. As Richards states:

Since the advent of CLT, textbooks and other teaching materials have taken on a much more “authentic” look; reading passages are designed to look like magazine articles (if they are not in fact adapted from magazine articles), and textbooks are designed to a

similar standard of production as real-world sources such as popular magazines. (2006, p. 21)

Also, though some recent approaches emphasize skill integration, in practice the priority in English classes has been speaking, and teachers use a reading or listening passage to elicit more speaking in class. For example, in TBI (Task-based Instruction), “the task is done by Ss (in pairs or groups) and gives Ss a chance to use whatever language they already have to express themselves and say whatever they want to say. This may be in response to reading a text or hearing a recording” (Richards, 2006, p. 33).

However, English language classes for students intending to take international exams such as the IELTS require changes to the principles and priorities of language teaching, as discussed in the previous section and further elaborated below. This is especially true in countries with a high demand for such tests. Several factors explain why these tests necessitate specialized instructional approaches. First, time plays a key role in test preparation courses. A person who aims to study abroad needs to consider university application deadlines. For those who need IELTS for non-academic purposes, time is also important, since they may want to apply quickly for a job opportunity or are worried about changes in immigration laws. Also, a considerable number of them are employed and have little free time. This contrasts with those who want to acquire a new language and have few time constraints. If time is an important consideration, the quality of learning matters insofar as learning takes place before the deadline. This time limitation has some important consequences.

Second, despite claims by IELTS organizations, none of the tasks in the exam resemble real situations. New methods of teaching a second language rely on the reflection of real, everyday situations, yet one can hardly find them in international tests. For example, a real conversation is different from a conversation between a test taker and the examiner, where the latter has a list of questions and merely asks the test taker one by one, whereas in real conversation both sides comment and reflect on the content of each other’s utterances.

For the reasons above, some changes to teaching methods are necessary. For instance, a more direct method of teaching grammar and vocabulary is required, and if teachers and students share a native language, greater use of L1 is recommended to improve performance and save time. In the following section, these effects are discussed in detail in relation to four skills in IELTS.

The washback impacts of IELTS on teaching methods and materials

The following analyses apply the theoretical framework developed earlier by examining how the principle of curriculum alignment provides a theoretical basis for context-specific adaptations to CLT in IELTS preparation courses.

READING

The reading section in IELTS includes 40 questions from three passages, which gradually become more sophisticated. It is the most difficult part for many IELTS test takers. Nevertheless, in many general English courses, classroom instruction places considerable emphasis on speaking activities designed to promote communicative competence, with the primary aim of enhancing learners' ability to speak in different contexts. Also, reading passages in many general English coursebooks are typically shorter and linguistically less demanding than those found in IELTS academic reading materials, and are used merely as topics for further conversation or to learn some vocabulary. This is why students need to read other kinds of books, such as *Focus on Vocabulary* (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2011) and *Active Skill for Reading* (Anderson, 2014), to be better prepared for exams such as the IELTS. In these books, the texts

are longer and possess greater semantic complexity, since they resemble an academic style more closely and cover subjects related to various fields such as psychology, economics, agriculture, geology, archaeology, and so on.

One of the most significant factors in test takers' reading competence is vocabulary knowledge and consequently has been widely investigated. Anderson and Freebody (1982) divided the knowledge into vocabulary breadth and depth. Many studies (Alavi & Akbarian, 2012; Laufer, 1992; Jun Zhang & Bin Anual, 2008) focused on the impact of vocabulary breadth on reading comprehension, but recently there has been an emphasis on the significance of vocabulary depth in reading comprehension (Cakir et al 2016; Li & Kirby, 2014). Also, Chen and Liu (2020) examine how these types of vocabulary knowledge can help IELTS test takers in answering different question types in the reading section. They claim that whereas there was a more significant correlation between vocabulary breadth and True/ False/ Not Given questions, vocabulary depth correlates more with multiple-choice, matching headings, and sentence-completion reading question types. Regardless of the type of vocabulary knowledge, one cannot ignore the importance of academic vocabulary in understanding reading passages in IELTS. While typical English learning books focus on vocabulary in themes such as sport, food, and clothes, succeeding in IELTS reading requires academic vocabulary like assumption, enhance, and consequence, which are not often found or emphasized in English language teaching books. A good example of these vocabularies can be found in AWL (Academic word List) by Coxhead (2000). Developing this type of vocabulary may require instructional practices that place greater emphasis on explicit vocabulary instruction than is typically associated with communicative language teaching (CLT), which often prioritizes authentic communication through everyday lexical items.

An analysis of IELTS reading question types reveals that two general types of questions can be identified: detail questions and main idea (content) questions. The first type evaluates test takers' abilities to comprehend the main ideas presented in the passage, while the second type assesses how well they can spot and comprehend details in a passage. The first one can be found more in question types such as Sentence Completion, True/ False/ Not given, Summary Completion, Table Completion, and Labeling a Diagram, whereas the latter can be found more in Matching Headings and Multiple-choice questions. Learning test-taking techniques such as identifying signal words and keywords can be extremely helpful, especially for answering detail questions. This means that a considerable percentage of reading questions can be answered correctly even though the test taker does not understand the main claims in the passage. For example, Test 1 in *Cambridge IELTS 7* (Cambridge ESOL, 2009, pp. 18–21) illustrates this point. Questions 12 and 13 can be answered alongside the final paragraph of the passage, which contains the relevant information. Although this example is taken from an earlier practice test, similar detail-oriented question formats continue to appear in more recent IELTS materials.

The Sonar and Radar pioneers didn't know it then, but all the world now knows that bats, or rather natural selection working on bats, had perfected the system tens of millions of years earlier, and their 'radar' achieves feats of detection and navigation that would strike an engineer dumb with admiration. It is technically incorrect to talk about bat 'radar', since they do not use radio waves. It is sonar. But the underlying mathematical theories of radar and sonar are very similar, and much of our scientific understanding of the details of what bats are doing has come from applying radar theory to them. The American zoologist Donald Griffin, who was largely responsible for the discovery of sonar in bats, coined the term 'echolocation' to cover both sonar and radar, whether used by animals or by human instruments.

12 Radar and sonar are based on similar

13 The word ‘echolocation’ was first used by someone working as a

In these two questions, the test-taker only needs to quickly scan the text to find the words radar and sonar, and echolocation. Then, for question 13, they look for a job title, and in that sentence, there is just one: zoologist, which is the correct answer. For question 12, they can quickly find radar and sonar in the passage and see what similar things radar and sonar are based on. In this passage, the answer is mathematical theories. The text is about why bats hunt at night and the mechanism that allows them to move in the dark. To answer questions 12 and 13 (and even almost half of the questions in this passage), understanding these main points in the text is not crucial; the questions can be answered without fully grasping them. Even paragraph-level understanding (for example, the last paragraph containing the sentences with the answers) or the sentences immediately before or after the answers is not very important. What matters is primarily the exact sentence where the answer is located. It should also be acknowledged that some questions heavily rely on reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, these examples suggest that familiarity with test-taking techniques can improve both accuracy and efficiency for certain question types.

Teaching these techniques has several pedagogical implications, one of which is that they may be taught more efficiently in L1 over a shorter period, since learning how to answer the questions is more significant. Also, in IELTS preparation courses, instructional time devoted to the explicit teaching of reading strategies is likely to contribute more directly to reading test performance than activities such as pair work, which are primarily designed to promote communicative interaction. Both effects conflict with contemporary CLT teaching methods.

WRITING

In IELTS, writing skill is assessed in two different tasks. In the academic module, task 1 asks the test takers to describe a diagram in 20 minutes using at least 150 words, while task 2 asks them to argue something in 40 minutes using at least 250 words, and is more effective in the writing score. The band score is determined by four criteria (Task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resources, and grammatical range and accuracy). Like the reading section, test awareness can play a significant role in gaining a better score. In academic task 1, students can practice and master specific vocabulary, which helps them get a better score for lexical resources. For instance, various trend collocations such as “show an upward/downward trend”, “a sharp rise/decline”, and “remain stable” can be systematically practiced by students. Also, in the general writing task 1, test-takers are expected to write a letter. In this case as well, learning the vocabulary and phrases used at the opening and closing of a letter, as well as expressions that can be used for making requests, asking for information, apologizing, thanking, etc., is important. This is why teachers can teach them more directly in the class, which departs from more recent indirect approaches to vocabulary teaching. This way of teaching also demands more teacher talk time, which contrasts with contemporary trends in communicative teaching approaches that encourage more student talk time in class.

Another important consideration is that in writing tasks, everyday vocabulary is not a primary focus of assessment. In both general and academic modules, writing task 2 is similar, and test takers are expected to develop and support an argument. The type of topic in the writing section does not allow test takers to use everyday vocabulary much, and knowing academic vocabulary can be much more influential. For example, words such as enhance, consequence, awareness, convince, and (beneficial/adverse) impacts can be much more effective than lexical items such

as the names of fruits or pieces of clothing. This can be illustrated by the following IELTS Writing Task 2 prompt:

Some people think that parents should teach children how to be a good member of society. Others, however, believe that school is the place to learn this. Discuss both these views and give your own opinion (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2011, p. 31).

In some cultures, children are often told that they can achieve anything if they try hard enough. What are the advantages and disadvantages of giving children this message? (IELTS Academic, 2021, p. 94)

As can be seen, the topics are abstract and different from everyday conversations. I understand that each writing question relates to one or two specific topics; however, the questions' level of abstraction means they mostly require general academic vocabulary, along with a smaller number of topic-related words. The time and word limit are also important. The expectation of using topic-related vocabulary can be met by using a limited number of topic-related words, which is not difficult for many test takers, and they can use general academic vocabulary in most parts of the writing. Unlike general English classes, which often emphasize communicative competence and everyday expressions, IELTS preparation demands a more focused and strategic use of language.

Also, since grammatical accuracy and range play a role in the evaluation of the Writing score, part of the IELTS writing class can focus on commonly used and effective grammar points. In this regard as well, the teaching method differs from that of typical English language classes. While teaching grammar, in CLT, language instruction should not be based on “controlled language practice”; instead, “learners must identify with their roles in the interaction more (Littlewood, 1981, p. 50). Nevertheless, in an IELTS preparation classroom, some useful grammar (e.g, adjective clauses) can be taught in a much more direct way, and if possible, with L1 explanations. Then, controlled practice questions can be given, accompanied by examples of how this grammar can be used to construct sentences in writing and how it can help them understand sentences in the reading and listening sections.

Additionally, in the writing section, rhetorical control is important in addition to lexical accuracy and range. Students must be able to organize their ideas logically, present clear arguments, and use appropriate register—all within a strict time constraint. These requirements necessitate that instructors prioritize skill-based practice, guided feedback, and exposure to model essays. Unlike typical English classes, these activities can also be explained in L1 to save more time and to help students understand them better. Overall, given the format of the IELTS writing test, recent teaching methods fail to provide an appropriate framework for teaching such English classes.

SPEAKING

The speaking test in IELTS includes an interview by an examiner, which normally takes around 13 minutes, and is divided into three parts. Although IELTS claims to insist on keeping this format to emphasize its resemblance to real conversation, in practice the interview is not similar to real conversations. The standardized interview format intentionally constrains examiner participation, limiting opportunities for spontaneous conversational negotiation. Consequently, activities designed primarily to simulate everyday conversational exchanges may be less directly aligned with the communicative demands of the IELTS speaking interview than activities targeting extended responses, argumentation, and opinion development. For instance, while there might be questions such as “What sorts of food do you like eating most?” or “In general, do you prefer eating out or eating at home?” (Cambridge English Language

Assessment, 2016, p. 32), they are not asked to role-play a customer/waiter conversation, which is practiced in typical language classes. In part 3 of the speaking test, the questions become much more general and abstract. Take this as an example about the topic of food: “Why do you think people go to restaurants when they want to celebrate something?” Or “Do you think there will be a greater choice of food available in shops in the future, or will there be less choice?” (University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2011, p. 55).

These examples suggest that answering these questions does not require the kind of language used in role-play conversations practiced in English classes. In most general English courses, speaking activities often focus on functional language, such as ordering food, asking for directions, or making small talk. These are useful for everyday communication but do not help students with the abstract, speculative, or opinion-based questions found in the IELTS speaking test. The speaking questions also demand a higher level of cognitive engagement. Candidates are expected to express opinions, justify their views, speculate about the future, and compare and contrast ideas. This requires not only a broad vocabulary but also the ability to structure responses coherently and fluently under time pressure. Therefore, IELTS preparation must focus on developing these academic and analytical speaking skills, which are often overlooked in communicative language teaching methods.

IELTS speaking instruction cannot rely solely on everyday topics and role-play conversations conducted through pair-work activities. This point can be illustrated by the following speaking questions drawn from the three parts of the IELTS Speaking test. The first group is taken from Part 3:

Why do many people today keep buying things which they do not need?

Do you believe the benefits of a consumer society outweigh the disadvantages?

How possible is it to avoid the culture of consumerism? (*IELTS 15 Academic*, 2020, p. 51)

As can be seen, these questions need a significant level of abstraction and strong critical thinking skills to answer. This is why, as in the reading and writing sections, the role of academic vocabulary for answering these questions cannot be denied. To answer such questions, a person relies much more on academic vocabulary than on everyday words, yet the teaching of this academic vocabulary is usually not emphasized in English language classes. Focusing on academic vocabulary requires changes in the teaching approach and in the selection of reading and listening materials, so that learners are exposed to these words more often. Although the first and second parts may involve less abstraction than the third part, they still demand a degree of abstract thinking that goes beyond what is typically found in real-life English conversation classes. The following is an example from part 2 (cue cards):

Describe a website that you bought something from.

You should say:

What the website is

What you bought from this website

How satisfied you were with what you bought

And explain what you liked or disliked about using this website. (IELTS 15 Academic, 2020, p. 51)

It could be argued that a good range of topic-related vocabulary is required to perform such speaking tasks, and, as a result, general academic lexical resources are insufficient. However, this can be handled with simple collocations such as user-friendly, simple design, and up-to-date information, unless one needs to achieve a band score of 7+, which is not the target score for most test takers. Possible examples of these academic lexical items can be “in terms of”, “convenient”, “reliable”, “meet my expectations”, “significantly enhance my satisfaction,” and so on. These phrases allow candidates to structure their ideas logically, express nuanced opinions, and transition smoothly between points. Therefore, while topic-specific words are useful, mastery of general academic vocabulary truly elevates performance in the IELTS Speaking section.

Another significant consideration is that current approaches place an emphasis on pair/group work. In fact, most of the classroom time is dedicated to pair work. After explaining some activity types in CLT, including task-competition activities and information-gathering activities, Richards (2006, p. 19) states that “most of the activities discussed above reflect an important aspect of classroom tasks in CLT, namely that they are designed to be carried out in pairs or small groups”. He also believes that “real communication is a defining characteristic of CLT” (p. 20). CLT is perceived to be heavily reliant on pair work as it can “help learners to link language forms with (a) communicative function and (b) specific functional meanings” (Littlewood, 1981, p. 12). Pair work tasks also help them “begin to interact as equal partners in an exchange rather than merely reacting to stimuli (Littlewood, 1981, p.12). Nevertheless, in the IELTS exam, there is not such interaction, and the examiner merely asks questions from a list. Therefore, while pair-work activities designed to simulate real-life communication remain valuable for developing communicative competence, IELTS preparation courses can place greater emphasis on exam-specific speaking skills. Such instructions can focus on idea generation and development, supporting responses with relevant examples and details, and developing the lexical and grammatical resources required for successful performance on the IELTS speaking test.

LISTENING

The listening section in the IELTS includes 40 questions, divided into four sections of 10 each. The questions tend to be more difficult in the final two sections, which have more academic content. The fact that test takers can listen only once and that it uses a read-listen-write format has made it challenging (Alavi et al., 2018; Field, 2012). However, statistics on the official IELTS website show that in many countries it is the highest score, or at least the second-highest. While there are different factors in raising the score in IELTS listening, many studies (Ha, 2021; Lange & Matthews, 2020; Cheng & Matthews, 2018; Stæhr, 2008, 2009; Van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013) have shown that the larger the knowledge of vocabulary, the better the score in this section. However, as discussed in previous sections, much of the vocabulary assessed extends beyond everyday communicative contexts. Phung and Ha (2022, p. 1) have shown that “3,000 most frequent word families in the British National Corpus/Corpus of Contemporary American English (BNC/COCA) word list were necessary to safely gain 95% coverage of all four sections in the test”. The study also emphasizes the importance of the Academic Word List (AWL). Therefore, instructional materials that primarily emphasize everyday conversational vocabulary, such as *Tactics for Listening* (Richards, 2010) and *Tune In* (Jones et al., 2006), may not fully reflect the lexical demands of the IELTS Listening test, particularly in Sections 3 and 4. Accordingly, IELTS preparation courses can supplement these materials with resources emphasizing academic vocabulary in listening contexts, such as *Open Forum* (Blackwell & Naber, 2007), to provide learners with greater exposure to the academic lexical items commonly encountered in lectures and discussions. One of the main concerns in language teaching is the

selection of appropriate content. In communicative language teaching (CLT), a strong emphasis is placed on the functional and situational use of language. This focus requires a more needs-based and context-sensitive approach to content selection. As Littlewood (1981, p. 4) points out, "It can therefore help us to match the content more closely with the actual communicative uses that the learners will have to make of the foreign language." In this view, language instruction becomes more meaningful and practical, as it aims to equip learners with the communicative competence necessary for real-life interaction. This includes the ability to use language for specific purposes such as requesting information, expressing opinions, or participating in social exchanges. However, in parts three and four of the IELTS listening section, academic listening comprehension is assessed. In part four, for example, candidates are exposed to an academic lecture. Consequently, instructional materials focusing exclusively on everyday conversational interactions may not provide sufficient preparation for the academic listening demands of the later sections of the IELTS Listening test. Another necessary change is that, rather than spending time before and after a listening in the classroom on speaking activities, the time can be spent raising students' awareness of the different question types and how to approach them on exam day. While speaking activities for listening can be done in pair work, raising test awareness is best done by the teacher and, if necessary, can be done in L1 to help with understanding and save time.

Conclusion

The sharp growth in large-scale English tests requires in-depth washback studies to identify changes in curriculum design and teaching methods, as well as to recognize potentially useful and necessary changes to be implemented in these two areas. Unlike most washback studies, which focus on how a specific test has altered course content and teaching methods, this paper explores which types of changes can actually make classroom instruction more effective in preparing students for the IELTS exam. The analysis suggests that the teaching methods proposed in this research are not aligned with recent approaches to CLT across all four skills. The main changes include a different selection of textbooks, greater emphasis on academic vocabulary, a more direct approach to teaching vocabulary and grammar, less reliance on typical classroom activities such as pair work, and, where appropriate, the use of L1 in instruction. While this paper establishes a conceptually grounded rationale for strategic curriculum alignment in IELTS preparation courses, one practical limitation warrants acknowledgment. Moving away from standard, generalized CLT models toward targeted, test-specific pedagogical interventions demands that instructors possess a deep, granular understanding of IELTS band descriptors and washback mechanisms. Without rigorous professional development, there is a distinct operational risk that teachers may misinterpret strategic, high-efficiency alignment as a license to default to low-quality "drill-and-kill" test preparation. Furthermore, while the proposed pedagogical modifications may contribute to more efficient IELTS preparation courses, the precise scale and type of these adjustments may vary based on contextual contingencies. For example, student demographics—such as whether learners share a homogeneous first language (L1) or operate in a multilingual classroom—alongside other context-specific variables, will dictate the extent to which these curricular alignments can be effectively implemented. Although the discussion in this paper is confined to IELTS, similar pedagogical considerations may also be relevant to other large-scale English proficiency tests such as TOEFL, PTE, Duolingo, and CELPIP, through comparative analyses of test constructs, preparation courses, and learner outcomes. Future studies may also investigate specific skill areas separately—for example, evaluating the impact of explicit grammar instruction on IELTS Writing and Speaking scores. Finally, the arguments advanced

in this paper should not be interpreted as suggesting weaknesses in the design or question types of the IELTS examination. Rather, they are intended to raise awareness among teachers and learners of pedagogical approaches that may contribute to more efficient test preparation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

This paper is based on published literature and does not involve human participants, animals, or personal data. Therefore, ethical approval and informed consent were not required.

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Biodata

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