

EXPLORING THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC DIMENSIONS OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTING: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF IELTS

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ABSTRACT

Language proficiency tests serve as gateways to various educational and professional opportunities, enabling individuals to communicate effectively and succeed in multilingual contexts. The IELTS is recognized globally as a benchmark for assessing English language proficiency. However, while the IELTS has been extensively researched for its reliability and validity, there is a growing recognition that language testing should not be viewed solely as a linguistic endeavour but also as a sociolinguistic one. Incorporating the voices of test candidates, this study employed an interpretation of the transformative-emancipatory research paradigm, as articulated by Johnson et al. (2016) based on Mertens' mixed methods approach. Due to the limited space provided, this empirical investigation compares performances on the same subject modules by eight candidates with different specialist backgrounds to find out the extent to which the sociolinguistic interface acknowledges the interplay between language use, social and cultural factors, and test performance and highlights the importance of understanding how these factors shape the outcomes of language assessments. Findings revealed that the utilization of the IELTS test primarily targeted individuals who are not predominantly White and Anglo-Saxon, those who are considered less favored within the evolving Australian society, and the government endorsed this in the 21st century.

Keywords: sociolinguistics. IELTS, proficiency test, diversity, inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency tests are crucial for individuals seeking educational and professional opportunities in multilingual environments. Among these tests, the IELTS holds global recognition as a standard for evaluating English language skills. Consequently, the IELTS test is considered high stakes by its providers, meaning that the results significantly impact a test taker's academic and career prospects (IELTS, 2019 a). This designation aligns with the definition of high-stakes tests, where a candidate's future depends on their performance (Davies, 1999). Furthermore, the IELTS test offers the advantage of a clear-cut score requirement, resulting in substantial savings in administration and time costs. Test users can avoid time-consuming judgments, regardless of expertise, by relying on the predefined cut-off score.

IELTS Sociolinguistic Interface

While the IELTS has been extensively researched for its reliability and validity, there is a growing recognition that language testing should not be viewed solely as a linguistic endeavor but also as a sociolinguistic one. By examining three significant points, namely test-taker identity, cultural context, and language variation, this study highlights the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to language testing.

One essential aspect often overlooked in language proficiency testing is the impact of testtaker identity (Khemanuwong, 2022). Language proficiency tests, including the IELTS, should consider the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities of individuals taking the test. Factors such as test-takers' first language, educational background, socioeconomic status, and cultural experiences can significantly influence their language use and comprehension. It is crucial to acknowledge these sociolinguistic factors to ensure a fair and unbiased language proficiency assessment.

Furthermore, language proficiency testing is inherently embedded within cultural contexts (Ursin et al., 2022). Despite its global recognition, the IELTS reflects a predominantly Western cultural perspective. The test content, question types, and assessment criteria may inadvertently favor certain cultural norms, language varieties, or discourse styles, disadvantaging test-takers from non-Western cultural backgrounds. Incorporating a sociolinguistic perspective in test design and evaluation can help identify and address potential cultural biases (Wang & Dong, 2022), making language testing more inclusive and representative of diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

Moreover, languages exhibit tremendous variation in dialects, accents, and registers. Traditional language proficiency tests like the IELTS often prioritize a particular standard variety of English, neglecting the rich tapestry of linguistic diversity. Such tests may penalize test-takers with non-native accents or dialectal variations, even if they possess excellent communication skills. Recognizing and valuing linguistic variation is essential in sociolinguistic language testing (Ursin et al., 2022), as it reflects the multilingual reality of our globalized world and supports the notion of linguistic equality and inclusivity.

Therefore, understanding language testing from a sociolinguistic perspective is essential for a more comprehensive and inclusive evaluation of language proficiency. By considering test taker identity, cultural context, and language variation, language tests can be developed and administered in a manner that acknowledges and respects the sociolinguistic complexities of multilingual environments. This research paper advocates for a shift in language testing paradigms toward a more sociolinguistically informed approach, promoting fairness, equity, and the recognition of diverse linguistic repertoires.

Problem Statement

The initial motivation for this study arose from the suggested implementation of the IELTS test for all re-registering Registered Migration Agents. This proposal was perceived by Registered Migration Agents as being influenced more by racial factors rather than practical concerns regarding their English language proficiency. Furthermore, some concerns were raised when it became known that the IELTS test provider was the main sponsor of the Migration Institute of Australia (MIA).

I actively opposed the introduction of the IELTS test for the re-registration of Registered Migration Agents and expressed my views through numerous published and unpublished articles (Suss, 2011, 2018). However, there was a prevailing sentiment that the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs aimed to reverse the reforms to Australia's immigration policy and revive the White Australia Policy, which historically imposed significant restrictions on non-European immigration.

To present a well-rounded perspective on the notion that the Department of Immigration and Border Protection consistently misleads the public, it is essential to acknowledge the progressive efforts of other Department secretaries, including Peter Heydon, who served as Secretary of the Immigration Department from 1961 to 1971 (Tavan, 2004). Additionally, it is

essential to consider that independent actions taken by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection could be influenced by their defensive measures to safeguard their role in implementing immigration policy against potential encroachment by other departments like the Department of External Affairs (Tavan, 2004).

According to Mary Jane Hogan, Chief Examiner of IELTS in Australia, many individuals still rely on translating from their native language to English while speaking, listening, or reading. Only at band 7, which indicates a higher level of proficiency, do they begin to think in English and comprehend the subtleties of written or spoken language when functioning professionally. This is why medical and nursing authorities in Australia require a minimum band score of 7 before allowing overseas students or individuals trained abroad to practice as doctors or nurses. Furthermore, compelling evidence indicates that former students who have not progressed beyond level 6 face significant challenges in securing professional positions, particularly in fields such as accounting.

The Birrell Report (Birrell et al., 2006a) reveals a convergence of perspectives from the IELTS test providers, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, and specific academic researchers, two of whom have previously expressed anti-migration views. Notably, there has been a longstanding close collaboration between the IELTS test providers and the immigration department. The central theoretical premise adopted by the IELTS test providers is that individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds possess inferior English language proficiency compared to English-speaking individuals. Consequently, the exempted cohort, predominantly white and Anglo-Saxon individuals, is not required to take the IELTS test. At the same time, people of brown or black backgrounds are mandated to sit for the test, regardless of their English language skills and qualifications. Current literature supports that all individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds exhibit lower English proficiency than native speakers. The IELTS test providers were aware of this during the early stages of test development, as the original pre-testing was conducted on British native speakers who were matriculation students, rather than university students (Clapham & Alderson, 1997).

The case of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) in the UK utilizing the IELTS test, despite the existing shortage of nurses and midwifery staff, exemplifies the concern raised by Messick regarding the potential impact on society if an assessment test is not valid for its intended purpose (Salehi, 2012). The absence of a thorough needs analysis and the subsequent adjustment of the minimum IELTS test band scores, particularly for the writing macro skill, reveals a situation where the initial requirements were wrongly implemented, and the higher scores demanded for the writing skill were exclusionary and unnecessary.

Hence, I took the initiative to write to the council members of the NMC, offering them valuable recommendations on how they could significantly expand the nursing workforce by seven times. Additionally, I proposed other modifications that would significantly enhance the recruitment of nurses and midwives, as outlined in Appendix A. Implementing these suggestions could have potentially mitigated the challenges faced in 2020, such as the need to recruit student nurses to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, as reported by Lintern (2020) and Norton (2020). Regrettably, I received no acknowledgment or response regarding the unsolicited advice I provided.

The uncertainty surrounding specific issues can have unintended repercussions, particularly in the case of nursing staff shortages, which have been linked to patient fatalities. Furthermore, the limited representation of doctors and teachers from non-English-speaking backgrounds in Australia may be attributed to the misapplication of English language assessment tests (Chalmers, 2018). Moreover, despite their full qualifications, various professions have imposed barriers on candidates from non-English-speaking backgrounds. However, the APS (2013, p.

4) recognized that expecting all applicants to "complete the exam or internship without a competent level of English language proficiency" would be unrealistic. Therefore, instead of rejecting professionally competent applicants, the APS suggested that the English Language Skills Standard should be considered in conjunction with other requirements for overseas-trained psychologists.

As a result, the APS adopted a balanced approach to upholding professional and English language standards by granting registration to applicants who may not have attained the minimum IELTS test band scores but possessed acceptable professional qualifications. Additionally, the APS (2013) introduced a provision that permits overseas-trained psychologists with English language proficiency below the minimum requirements to undertake a mandatory three-month supervised practice, alongside sitting the National Psychology Exam. This requirement is expected to guarantee that all applicants to the Psychology Board possess sufficient English language proficiency to ensure public safety. The APS (2013) has expressed doubts about the ability of overseas-trained psychologists to complete the exam or internship without demonstrating a proficient level of English language skills. While the APS continues to endorse an English Language Skills Standard, it must now be considered alongside other requirements for overseas-trained psychologists.

One of the reasons that prompted this study was the refusal by Cambridge Assessment (2018), one of the IELTS test providers, to share any test data or past tests with the research community. They said they would only provide "test scores and performance data" in exceptional and controlled situations. However, a thorough literature search uncovered no research studies that took advantage of this offer.

The motivation for this study was further strengthened by the frequent modifications introduced by the Department of Home Affairs, which continuously altered the English language proficiency criteria for migration purposes. Specifically, they transitioned from a previously attainable average of Band 7 in all four modules (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) of the IELTS test to requiring Band 7 in each module.

Hence, this study raises the following question: How effectively does the test measure candidates' communicative competence and adequately represent the linguistic diversity and sociocultural contexts of English language use worldwide?

LITERATURE REVIEW

IELTS research library

Before 2010, the IELTS test providers relied on established and experienced experts in test assessment, many of whom were academics. The providers acknowledged the valuable contribution of these leading experts who designed the IELTS test to be "fair, accurate, and relevant regardless of the time or place of administration" (IELTS, 2009a, p. 4). However, a noticeable shift occurred after 2010, with the three IELTS test providers referring to themselves as "language testing experts" (IELTS, 2013, p. 4; 2016 a, p. 4). These corporate entities began asserting that they possessed the expertise and knowledge equivalent to the combined expertise of the numerous authors they had previously commissioned over two decades. It is important to note that corporations employ individuals, and they are legal entities rather than individual people.

The IELTS Research Reports, housed in the IELTS research library, had two significant omissions. First, they failed to address the assumption of the reliability and validity of the IELTS test. Additionally, they did not provide access to the original raw test scores. By assuming the

test's reliability and validity, researchers were trapped in a fallacious circular argument, called *petitio principii* or "begging the question." This assumption was covertly present throughout the literature without being openly acknowledged as a research assumption. The lack of access to actual IELTS test data, past test copies, and the reasons behind IELTS research funding applications makes it challenging to explain why this issue remained unidentified.

Utilizing the IELTS research library offers several advantages for IELTS test providers, based on the existing evidence. These benefits encompass the credibility of the IELTS test in terms of reliability and validity, the provision of evidence-based research for the development of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses in universities, and the ability to communicate to other users of the IELTS test the minimum proficiency standards required in the four macro skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

Belleville (2010) supported this notion by asserting that their IELTS research library is the foundation for establishing the validity of the IELTS test (IDP: IELTS Australia, 2011). In terms of content, the IELTS research library comprises 116 completed IELTS Research Reports, 21 ongoing research reports, and two additional reports that were rejected but remain accessible on the IELTS website.

It is possible that the IELTS test providers expected that only a few researchers would read all or even some of the IELTS Research Reports available in the IELTS research library. Despite the claim by the IELTS test providers that these reports undergo peer review, certain studies within the IELTS Research Reports have been criticized for exhibiting bias or utilizing inadequate statistical methodologies. Notably, the research conducted by Brown (1998) and Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) lacked randomized controlled trials, which Smith (2005) argued to be the most reliable form of evidence. Consequently, these two reports were removed from the IELTS research library. However, they were not the only reports that received approval, funding, and peer review from the IELTS test providers but were later withdrawn.

Despite the withdrawal of specific IELTS Research Reports, one can still find current reports within the IELTS research library that cite these withdrawn titles. For instance, the IELTS research report by Rea-Dickins et al. (2007) references Rao et al. (2003), seemingly unaware that the latter study lacked support from its sponsor. It was expected to find references to canceled IELTS Research Reports within the library.

This study identified several other research reports, such as those by Archibald (2001), Hayes (2003), Rao et al. (2003), and Hayes (2003), which were withdrawn. However, despite their withdrawal, these research studies are still available for download from the IELTS research library (IELTS, 2016b, 2019b, 2020) without indicating their status.

The second benefit of the IELTS research library was to justify the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses offered by Australian universities. These universities had been grappling with funding constraints for a considerable period. Initially, the IELTS test was designed to provide remedial courses to international students who required additional support due to identified literacy issues in their IELTS results. However, Davies (2005) and Hirsh (2007) argued that the costs associated with administering remedial classes were unavailable due to government funding cutbacks faced by Australian universities (Wood, 2003).

This study proposes that developing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses at Australian universities provided a new funding source. International students could be charged up to \$11,000 for a 20-week EAP course, and some of the IELTS Research Reports available in the IELTS research library could serve as evidence-based research to justify the establishment of these courses.

Before 2002, the IELTS test providers endorsed the concept of the "200 hours: one band formula," which suggested that students would achieve a one-band increase in their IELTS test scores after completing 200 hours of English language training (IELTS, 2003b, 63). This formula relied on Brown's (1998) research, which involved only nine participants from IELTS preparation classes and five students studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It is important to note that this research had limitations regarding its small sample size.

Another IELTS research report also supported the idea of similar score improvements. Still, it attributed these gains to factors such as living in homestays where English was widely spoken, rather than solely relying on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes. O'Loughlin and Arkoudis (2009, 101) conducted this study, which included a sample with a wide age range of 19 to 36 years. The sample comprised individuals from diverse backgrounds, including six Malaysians and individuals who claimed to be native English speakers despite having non-English speaking backgrounds. Additionally, the participants had varied experiences in learning the English language.

Subsequently, the IELTS test providers withdrew the IELTS above Research Reports, although they continued to have an impact over an extended period. The same claim, however, resurfaced years later in the University of Ballarat's submission to the Ombudsman, where it was inaccurately stated that "ten weeks of study increases IELTS bands by 0.5," presenting it as a widely accepted principle (Ombudsman & Taylor, 2011, 27). However, other researchers have expressed doubts regarding these score improvements. In their study, Terraschke and Wahid (2011) concluded that students enrolled in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses did not perform better than those who directly entered the university. However, they did acquire valuable skills in academic writing.

The Impact of the IELTS Test on Society

Countries like Australia heavily rely on the immigration of skilled young workers to address labor shortages. However, many educated and qualified professionals are surprised to discover that they fail to pass the IELTS test, despite receiving an education in an English-speaking environment. In some cases, they are excluded by a margin as small as half a band in one of the four macro skills of the IELTS test. A significant example is the exclusion of nurses who could not attain Band 7 in the Writing macro skill. The severity of this issue led the NMC (Nursing and Midwifery Council) to reduce the required band score for the Writing skill from 7 to 6.5 (NMC of the U.K., 2018). The global demand for nurses has increased due to the globalization of nursing recruitment, as Tilley (2021) reported.

In another case highlighted by Okubasu (2022), trained Kenyan nurses were required to take the IELTS test before being employed in the UK. Out of the original 3329 applications, only 2685 were shortlisted, and after undergoing additional scrutiny by the Nursing Council of Kenya, only 14 nurses were offered employment. Passing the IELTS test posed a significant hurdle, despite English being the lingua franca of Kenya, alongside Bantu languages.

Despite the increasing demand for nurses worldwide, adequate education and support for nurses seeking employment in Canada has been lacking. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the need for nurses, raising concerns about establishing competency standards. The decision to lower English language assessment test standards, as exemplified by the NMC, raises questions about the evidence used to initially determine those standards. According to Leota (2021), the IELTS test was held responsible for the existing nursing workforce shortage, which is continuously growing. The author proposed that reviewing the necessary qualifications could potentially mitigate this shortage.

METHODOLOGY

When conducting research studies, it is crucial to prioritize the impartiality and integrity of the researcher, avoiding any personal bias or advocacy. By incorporating quantitative data analysis, Bellone et al. (2019) asserted that using mathematics allows for presenting rational and indisputable arguments devoid of "mythological and religious assumptions." In other words, research that undergoes quantitative analysis can be conducted independently of the researcher's personal views since mathematics is a universal language. The same cannot be said for researchers who adopt a qualitative approach and rely on their selection and interpretation of literature, as their motivations may remain concealed from the reader.

This study aimed to compare students' performance with different specialist backgrounds on the same subject modules through empirical investigation. The primary objective of this study was to amplify the voices of millions of test candidates who yearned for their stories to be acknowledged and understood. Rather than relying solely on assurances provided by test users and providers, this approach shed light on the experiences of test candidates who failed to meet the prescribed targets and encountered life-altering consequences. In some instances, their aspirations for future employment and opportunities were abruptly shattered, despite possessing the necessary academic qualifications and employability skills. Creswell and Creswell (2017) proposed that researchers should incorporate their theories, ideas, and intuitions into their research, suggesting that the mixed methods research (MMR) approach could be beneficial. The mixed methods research approach offers an alternative "third way" alongside the traditional qualitative and quantitative approaches, adding value to the research process.

Incorporating the voices of test candidates, this study employed an interpretation of the transformative-emancipatory research paradigm, as articulated by Onwuegbuzie and Tashakkori (2015) based on Mertens' mixed methods approach (Mertens, 2003). This interpretation, "quantitative dominant mixed methods research," emphasized data collection. The qualitative component of this research involved examining existing documentation to understand the perspectives and motivations of all stakeholders involved in adopting the assessment test.

Mertens (2003) characterized the transformative-emancipatory research paradigm as an effort to address the challenges faced by marginalized and disadvantaged minority groups and liberate them from social injustices. In this study, the discriminatory behavior observed was the targeting of individuals from non-English-speaking backgrounds, imposing disproportionately high English language proficiency requirements on them, while simultaneously granting blanket exemptions to individuals from English-speaking backgrounds, often originating from White, Anglo-Saxon nations, regardless of their literacy skills. Through this research, the voices of test candidates are given prominence, distinguishing it from other IELTS research that primarily focused on the needs of IELTS test providers and users.

Individual interviews with test candidates were not feasible due to time constraints. However, unsolicited letters were received from eight individuals seeking assistance or expressing their grievances, which provided valuable insights. Additionally, the final scaled test scores awarded to the candidates were collected and analyzed, allowing for a comparison with the public statements made by the IELTS test partners. The study's database, which contains the candidates' collective test results, represents their voices within the test design. This database is not publicly accessible, and the test scores were randomly collected from the internet without any specific sorting criteria. Geographic location, age, nationality, first language, and gender were not factors considered when choosing the IELTS test band scores for inclusion in the

analysis. Despite a search for publicly available databases containing this information, none were found. It should be noted that although the age of the test results may be dated, the lack of substantial changes to the IELTS test over the past three decades leaves them as the best available resource for analysis.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This research offers a unique opportunity to deepen our comprehension of the IELTS test and stimulate further inquiry among researchers. One notable aspect that has received limited research attention is the individual experiences of IELTS test candidates, highlighting the need to shed light on their challenges and circumstances. Surprisingly, there is a lack of awareness among the general population regarding the actual test outcomes, as private conversations revealed a common misconception that a significant proportion of IELTS test candidates successfully pass the test. However, this study challenges this prevailing belief by presenting evidence to the contrary.

Samples of Eight IELTS Test Candidates' Findings

The tables' findings provide new knowledge and contribute to our sociolinguistic understanding of language testing, benefiting both researchers and practitioners in the field. The subsequent tables illustrate the IELTS test band scores achieved by various test candidates.

IELTS Test Candidate M

Table 1 demonstrates the test outcomes for Candidate M, an individual who is a native speaker of English but failed to attain a minimum score of Band 6 in each of the four IELTS macro skills.

Table 01: IELTS test band scores for Candidate M from the USA

	DATE	LISTENING	READING	WRITING	SPEAKING	AVERAGE	RANGE
FIRST	UNKNOWN	5.5	5.0	7.5	8.5	6.5	2.0
SECOND	15 FEB 2014	6.0	5.5	7.5	8.0	6.5	2.5
THIRD	08 MAR 2014	4.5	6.0	7.0	8.0	6.5	3.5
FOURTH	05 APR 2014	7.0	5.5	7.0	7.0	6.5	1.5
FIFTH	17 MAY 2014	6.5	5.5	7.0	9.0	7.0	3.5
AVERAGE OF EACH TEST MACRO SKILL		6.0	5.5	7.0	8.0	6.5	2.5
VARIATION IN THREE MONTHS		2.5	1.0	0.5	2.0	0.5	2.0

Candidate M, a native English speaker, exhibited a wide range of results as shown in Table 1. The fluctuations in the IELTS test band scores awarded to Candidate M in this study may be attributed to the IELTS test providers' aim to maintain consistent percentages of scores among test candidates. Candidate M's test scores notably displayed variations of up to 2.5 IELTS test bands, as evident in the table. For instance, there was a decrease of 1.5 bands in the Listening macro skill scores over three weeks, followed by a subsequent increase of 2.5 bands a month later. These score discrepancies hold significance when considering the issue of test reliability, as consistent test scores are crucial for establishing reliability.

It is plausible that the IELTS test providers were aware of this inconsistency and treated such jagged scores regularly within assessment testing. This raises questions about the reliability of the IELTS test, which is essential for addressing the third research question in this study.

Within the sociolinguistic approach, observing numerous test candidates obtaining jagged scores and profiles raises essential questions about the underlying factors influencing these

fluctuations. The IELTS test providers' insufficient explanation of this phenomenon and the limited literature suggest its rarity. However, from a sociolinguistic perspective, it is plausible to consider that these jagged test results reflect an unequal weighting of the IELTS macro skills, which contradicts the claims made by the IELTS test providers. By exploring the sociolinguistic dimensions of the issue, one can question the reliability of the IELTS test. Candidate Y's example, as presented in Tables 2 and 3, serves as a relevant case for examination.

IELTS Test Candidate Y

Table 2 presents the IELTS test results for Candidate Y, a proficient English and French speaker from France. Candidate Y had a comprehensive education in Classical English, Latin, and Greek. The requirement for Candidate Y to pass the IELTS test was twofold: to secure permanent residency in Australia and to obtain teacher registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). The VIT mandates an English language average band score of 7.5, encompassing Band 7 in the Writing and Reading macro skills and Band 8 in the Listening and Speaking macro skills.

Table 2: IELTS test band scores for Candidate Y from different re-sittings

	<i>TEST DATE</i>	<i>LISTENING</i>	<i>READING</i>	<i>WRITING</i>	<i>SPEAKING</i>	<i>AVERAGE</i>	<i>RANGE</i>
<i>FIRST</i>	<i>6/09/2014</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>2.5</i>
<i>SECOND</i>	<i>11/10/2014</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5 (FLU)</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>2.5</i>
<i>THIRD</i>	<i>22/11/2014</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>3.0</i>
<i>FOURTH</i>	<i>9/05/2015</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>FIFTH</i>	<i>19/03/2016</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>AVERAGE OF EACH MACRO SKILL</i>		<i>8.5</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>2.0</i>
<i>VARIATION IN 1.5 YEARS</i>		<i>0.5</i>	<i>0.5</i>	<i>1.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>1.5</i>

Candidate Y's IELTS test band scores exhibited a considerable range, spanning as broad as 3 bands, thus presenting a jagged profile. Candidate Y's test results were exceptional compared to all other individuals in the database, as they attained unusually high scores. This unique performance highlights the distinctive nature of Candidate Y's language proficiency and underscores the significance of considering individual cases within the broader context of IELTS testing. Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 provided a comprehensive overview of Candidate Y's IELTS test band scores in relation to those of other test candidates within the database.

Table 3: The IELTS test band scores for Candidate Y when compared with other candidates' scores in the database

<i>CANDIDATE Y</i>						<i>POSITION OF 9351 SETS OF TEST RESULTS</i>	<i>CANDIDATES WITH THE SAME IELTS TEST RESULTS</i>	<i>CANDIDATES WITH HIGHER IELTS TEST RESULTS</i>
<i>TEST DATE</i>	<i>LISTENING</i>	<i>READING</i>	<i>WRITING</i>	<i>SPEAKING</i>	<i>AVERAGE</i>	<i>N=9351</i>	<i>N=9351</i>	<i>N=9351</i>
<i>6/09/2014</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>11/10/2014</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5 (FLU)</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>65</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>22/11/2014</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>50</i>
<i>9/05/2015</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>192</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>185</i>
<i>19/03/2016</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>115</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>107</i>

Candidate Y scores compared with Australian test centres' results excluding Monash University test Centre Academic test.

AUSTRALIA TEST CENTRES RESULTS EXCLUDING MONASH UNIVERSITY TEST CENTRE ACADEMIC TEST	POPULATION SIZE	POSITION NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
CANDIDATE Y SCORES BASED ON VIT MINIMUM	688	26	3.8%
BASED ON A MINIMUM OF 7 IN EACH BAND	688	50	7.3%
BASED ON THREE BAND 7 AND BAND 6.5 IN WRITING	688	66	9.6%

Table 5: Complete research database of Monash University test centre Academic test candidates

COMPLETE RESEARCH DATABASE MONASH UNIVERSITY TEST CENTRE ACADEMIC TEST	POPULATION SIZE	POSITION NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
CANDIDATE Y SCORES BASED ON VIT MINIMUM	4934	161	3.3%
BASED ON A MINIMUM OF 7 IN EACH BAND	4934	345	7.0%
BASED ON THREE BAND 7 AND BAND 6.5 IN WRITING	4934	571	11.6%

Table 6: Candidate Y's results compared to the study's database

CANDIDATE Y RESULTS COMPARED TO RESEARCH DATABASE OF THE IELTS ACADEMIC AND GENERAL TEST			
TOTAL RESEARCH DATABASE	POPULATION SIZE	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
CANDIDATES WHO MATCHED CANDIDATE Y'S IELTS TEST RESULTS	33508	1	TOP PLACE
CANDIDATE Y'S SCORE IS BASED ON THE VICTORIAN INSTITUTE OF TEACHING MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS	9351	249	2.7%
BASED ON A MINIMUM OF 7 IN EACH BAND	9351	565	6.0%
BASED ON THREE BAND 7 AND BAND 6.5 IN WRITING	9351	894	9.6%

Candidate Y exhibited inconsistent IELTS test band scores across multiple test sessions, deviating from their previous performance. Additionally, their IELTS test band score range of 3.5 Bands surpassed what is typically considered a "jagged profile" by IELTS standards. This broader range of test results exceeded the acceptable spread acknowledged by the IELTS test providers (IELTS, 2014). While there is an established policy by IELTS for handling test candidates with jagged profiles, it appears that no corrective measures were taken in the case of Candidate Y, as their final test scores reflected the jagged nature of their performance. Another test candidate, Candidate P, also demonstrated a jagged profile (refer to Table 7) and indicated that Candidate P's test results were adjusted (refer to Table 8) without explicit notification in every instance.

IELTS Test Candidate P

Table 7 displays the test results for Candidate P as initially communicated by IDP: IELTS Australia and recorded on Candidate P's official IELTS Test Report Forms. However, upon raising an issue with IDP: IELTS Australia, Candidate P received a revised list of their official IELTS test results (refer to Table 8) and an excerpt from the IELTS Test Report Form, indicating the changes made. Notably, the IELTS test band scores for Candidate P exhibit discrepancies between the official score reports provided by IDP: IELTS Australia for the 12th test.

Table7: Candidate P's IELTS test band scores for 16 test sittings

TEST TRIAL	TEST DATE	LISTENING	READING	WRITING	SPEAKING	AVERAGE	RANGE
FIRST	02-APR-05	6.0	6.5	6.0	7.0	6.5	1.0
SECOND	10-MAR-07	7.0	6.5	6.0	8.0	7.0	2.0
THIRD	29-MAR-08	7.5	6.0	7.0	6.5	7.0	1.5
FOURTH	12-JUL-08	6.5	6.0	6.5	8.0	7.0	2.0
FIFTH	08-NOV-08	7.0	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.5	1.0
SIXTH	20-NOV-08	8.5	6.5	6.5	7.0	7.0	2.0
SEVENTH	31-JAN-09	7.0	6.0	5.5	7.5	6.5	2.0
EIGHTH	23-JUL-09	6.5	7.0	7.0	8.0	7.0	1.5
NINTH	08-AUG-09	6.5	7.0	6.0	7.5	7.0	1.5
TENTH	07-NOV-09	7.0	6.5	6.5	8.0	7.0	1.5
ELEVENTH	21-NOV-09	8.5	7.0	6.5	8.0	7.5	2.0
TWELFTH	12-DEC-09	8.0	6.0	5.5	8.5	7.0	3.0
THIRTEENTH	09-JAN-10	8.5	6.0	6.0	7.0	7.0	2.5
FOURTEENTH	06-FEB-10	8.0	7.5	6.0	8.0	7.5	2.0
FIFTEENTH	06-MAR-10	6.5	6.5	6.5	7.5	7.0	1.0
SIXTEENTH	10-APR-10	8.5	7.0	7.0	7.5	7.5	1.5
AVERAGE OF EACH TEST MACRO SKILL		7.5	6.5	6.5	7.5	7.0	2.0
VARIATION IN 5 YEARS		2.5	1.5	1.5	2.5	1.0	1.5

Table 8: A Copy of the original test results recorded by IDP: IELTS Australia for Candidate P

CENTRE	CANDIDATE	TEST DATE	GIVEN	FAMILY	MODUAL	LISTENING	READING	WRITING	SPEAKING	OVERALL
IN122		2/04/2005			G	6	6.5	6	7	6.5
IN122		10-Mar-07			G	7	6.5	6	8	7
AU166		29-Mar-08			G	7.5	6	7	6.5	7
AU055		12-Jul-08			G	6.5	6	6.5	8	7
IN122		8-Nov-08			G	7	6	6	6	6.5
IN122		20-Nov-08			G	8.5	6.5	6.5	7	7
AU166		31-Jan-09			G	7	6	5.5	7.5	6.5
AU166		23-Jul-09			G	6.5	7	7	8	7
AU166		08-Aug-09			G	6.5	7	6	7.5	7
AU240		7-Nov-09			G	7	6.5	6.5	8	7
AU240		21-Nov-09			G	8.5	7	6.5	8	7.5
AU166		12-Dec-09			G	8	6.5	5	8.5	7
AU166		9-Jan-10			G	8.5	6	6	7	7
AU166		6-Feb-10			G	8	7.5	6.5	8	7.5
AU166		6-Mar-10			G	6.5	6.5	6.5	7.5	7
AU240		10-Apr-10			G	8.5	7	7	7.5	7.5

According to Bishop (1996), it is unlikely for any test to produce identical scores each time a person is retested, as all test measurements inherently involve some degree of error. This implies an inherent margin of error associated with every score received, even before rounding them up. Despite this, the IELTS test providers continue to assert that the IELTS test provides an accurate assessment of a test taker's language skills at a specific moment in time (IELTS, 2016a; 2019a). However, this assertion seems incongruent with the notion that assessment test results should be viewed as a range rather than a single number.

Gierlinski (2015) argues that presenting test scores without acknowledging the presence of measurement error renders those scores meaningless. Harvill (1991) also encourages test users to consult test manuals provided by test designers to assess the standard error of measurement and confidence levels associated with a particular test. However, such practices are rarely followed. A literature search revealed only one instance of an IELTS test user, the College of Nurses of Ontario, considering the standard measurement error when establishing its minimum IELTS test band score requirements (Merrifield, 2007). Additionally, IELTS (2015) acknowledged that their test is considered "high stakes" and should have a measurement error level of 0.9, which differs from the range of 0.8 to 0.9 utilized by the IELTS test providers (IDP: IELTS Australia, 2011).

In the context of this study, which focuses on a high-stakes test like the IELTS test, it is crucial to establish confidence levels as high as 95%. However, the IELTS test users must insist on this practice. Given the significant impact of the IELTS test on determining the future of test candidates and its reputation as a high-stakes test, it is imperative to set the confidence level at 95%. Furthermore, when reporting IELTS test band scores, including the standard error of measurement (SEM) is essential. The size of the SEM could potentially be one of the reasons why the IELTS test providers are reluctant to share their data to replicate the claims made by the IELTS test.

IELTS Test Candidate S

Candidate S, a non-native speaker of English born in China, aimed to achieve a minimum of Band 7 in each of the four IELTS macro skills in a single sitting to qualify for permanent residency in Australia and enroll in a University Foundation course. For immigration purposes, Candidate S needed to attain a Band 7.0 in all four IELTS macro skills. On the other hand, graduates of professional year programs only required to score a minimum of Band 6 in each of the four IELTS macro skills to enter a University Foundation course. These graduates needed a Band 6 in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Table 9 presents the IELTS test results of Candidate S, who is enrolled in a University Foundation course. It is important to note that graduates of this course must obtain a minimum IELTS test band score of Band 6 in each of the four IELTS macro skills, which include listening, reading, writing, and speaking.

Table 9: IELTS test results for Candidate S over 15 tests (Chinese Citizen – Male)

TEST TRIAL	DATE	LISTENING	READING	WRITING	SPEAKING	AVERAGE	RANGE
FIRST	03-NOV-07	5.0	6.0	5.0	6.0	5.5	1.0
SECOND	12-JAN-08	5.5	5.5	5.0	6.0	5.5	1.0
THIRD	16-FEB-08	5.5	6.0	5.0	5.5	5.5	1.0
FOURTH	10-MAY-08	6.0	5.5	6.0	5.5	6.0	0.5
FIFTH	28-JUN-08	4.5	6.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	2.0
SIXTH	27-SEP-08	5.5	6.0	5.5	5.5	5.5	0.5
SEVENTH	11-OCT-08	5.5	6.0	5.5	5.0	5.5	1.0
EIGHTH	15-NOV-08	6.0	6.0	5.5	5.0	5.5	1.0
NINTH	21-FEB-09	6.0	8.5	5.5	6.0	6.5	3.0
TENTH	04-APR-09	6.0	6.5	6.0	5.5	6.0	1.0
ELEVENTH	09-MAY-09	6.0	5.5	5.5	5.0	5.5	1.0
TWELFTH	13-JUN-09	5.5	6.5	6.0	5.0	6.0	1.5
THIRTEENTH	04-JUL-09	5.5	6.0	6.5	6.0	6.0	1.0
FOURTEENTH	11-JUL-09	6.5	7.0	6.0	5.5	6.5	1.5
FIFTEENTH	08-AUG-09	6.0	6.5	5.5	6.0	6.0	1.0
AVERAGE OF EACH TEST MACRO SKILL		5.5	6.5	5.5	6.0	6.0	1.0
VARIATION IN 2 YEARS		2.0	3.0	1.5	1.0	1.0	2.5

IELTS Test Candidate F

In a similar manner to the test scores of Subject Y, it is worth considering the IELTS test band scores of Subject F, a nurse of Greek origin (see Tables 10-11). Despite her advanced training, Subject F faced challenges being registered as a nurse due to her perceived insufficient English language proficiency skills, as indicated by her IELTS test band scores, which were required by the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia. While the board did not provide a specific explanation for the high IELTS Writing macro skill requirement, which Subject F could not achieve, her performance in the other three skills was notably high. Comparing her IELTS test band scores to other candidates in the research database revealed that Subject F would rank in the top 95% of IELTS test-takers. This situation raises concerns about the test's validity and the suitability of using the IELTS test to assess nurses' English language proficiency skills.

Table 10: IELTS test band scores for Subject F (A Greek nurse)

Test Date	Test Date	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Average	Range
First	Unknown	8.5	8.0	6.5	7.5	8.0	3.0

Frequently, organizations would mandate identical test score requirements for all four IELTS test macro skills, such as a minimum of Band 7.0 in each skill. However, the literature fails to explain why this uniform requirement exists or whether there is a specific occupational need for equal proficiency in all skills. This requirement implies that each macro skill holds equal importance and contributes equally to overall achievement. Nevertheless, the literature does not shed light on this particular aspect.

Table 11: Candidate F's results when compared to the database population

<i>CANDIDATE F</i>						<i>POSITION OF 9351 SETS OF TEST RESULTS</i>	<i>CANDIDATES WITH THE SAME IELTS TEST RESULTS</i>	<i>CANDIDATES WITH HIGHER IELTS TEST RESULTS</i>
<i>TEST DATE</i>	<i>LISTENING</i>	<i>READING</i>	<i>WRITING</i>	<i>SPEAKING</i>	<i>AVERAGE</i>	<i>N=9351</i>	<i>N=9351</i>	<i>N=9351</i>
<i>6/09/2014</i>	<i>9.0</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>48</i>

IELTS Test Candidate NF

Subject NF, a 64-year-old qualified solicitor from Sri Lanka, who completed the requirements for the Graduate Certificate in Australian Migration Law & Practice at the Australian National University, encountered a barrier within the sociolinguistic framework. Despite their academic accomplishment, Subject NF was required to obtain IELTS test band scores of 7 in each of the four IELTS macro skills to gain registration as a migration agent. This highlights the sociolinguistic implications of language proficiency as a criterion for professional recognition and raises questions about the influence of language assessments on individuals' access to certain occupations within specific sociolinguistic contexts.

Table 12: IELTS test band scores for Candidate NF from Sri Lanka.

<i>TEST TRIAL</i>	<i>TEST DATE</i>	<i>LISTENING</i>	<i>READING</i>	<i>WRITING</i>	<i>SPEAKING</i>	<i>AVERAGE</i>	<i>RANGE</i>
<i>FIRST</i>	<i>MAY 2010</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>SECOND</i>	<i>DEC 2010</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.0</i>
<i>THIRD</i>	<i>JAN 2011</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>1.0</i>
<i>FOURTH</i>	<i>MAR 2011</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>FIFTH</i>	<i>OCT 2011</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>2.0</i>
<i>SIXTH</i>	<i>DEC 2011</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>SEVENTH</i>	<i>FEB 2012</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>EIGHTH</i>	<i>MAR 2011</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>NINTH</i>	<i>APRIL 2012</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>3.0</i>
<i>TENTH</i>	<i>MAY 2012</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>ELEVENTH</i>	<i>JUNE 2012</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>
<i>AVERAGE OF EACH TEST MACRO SKILL</i>		<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>1.0</i>
<i>VARIATION IN 2 YEARS</i>		<i>2.5</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>2.0</i>	<i>1.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>

Subject NF's IELTS test results reflect his persistent attempts to attain Band 7 in the four IELTS macro skills between 2010 and 2012. Despite numerous test sittings, Subject NF faced significant challenges in achieving consistent scores, indicating notable fluctuations over time. Such score variations are unexpected in an assessment test that claims high reliability. These fluctuations could be attributed to the "practice effect," as described by Davies (1999), wherein individuals retaking the test may experience improved scores without an actual increase in their language proficiency or the skills being assessed.

The phenomenon of the practice effect, however, does not consistently result in improved test scores upon retesting, as evidenced by examples from this study and the works of Brown (1998), Catherine Elder, and O'Loughlin (2003), in addition to O'Loughlin and Arkoudis (2009). Many candidates experience lower scores on their subsequent attempts. This practice effect can serve as a form of conditioning, potentially influencing candidates' attitudes and promoting self-reflection (Glenn, 2005). Furthermore, the practice effect, regardless of whether it leads to higher or lower score improvements, can contribute to measurement error and consequently impact the validity of the test (Davies, 1999).

Notably, the explanations provided in the preceding paragraph solely attribute the test outcome to the test candidate, overlooking the impact of varying IELTS test band scores on test reliability. The test validity is questioned when a trained lawyer, such as Subject NF, is compelled to undertake a timed reading test utilizing the skimming and scanning method. This requirement contradicts the lawyer's training and professional experience, which emphasize careful and meticulous reading, recognizing the significance of every word for accurate interpretation (Meijer, 2015).

Understanding the underlying reasons for Subject NF's approach to the reading macro skill, it is justifiable to consider the band score awarded in April 2012 as an aberrant score resulting from the test candidate's deliberate use of a different test strategy (Meijer, 1996). Meijer and Sijtsma (1995) highlighted the challenge that outlier scores pose to the reliability of an assessment test. However, in the case of Subject NF, where the test candidate made a conscious choice based on his mindset, Meijer and Sijtsma (1995) suggested that the test result should be treated as an aberrant item score, which may not significantly impact the test's overall reliability.

Nevertheless, the requirement for lawyers to complete an English language assessment test for registration as migration agents, a requirement unrelated to the original design of the IELTS test, raises concerns about the test's validity (O'Loughlin, 2009). This highlights the sociolinguistic considerations surrounding the appropriateness of using a standardized

language test in professional contexts that may not align with the specific language demands of certain occupations.

IELTS Test Candidate A

Table 13 depicts the IELTS test band scores of Subject A, a Chinese Malaysian individual who aspired to become a registered migration agent after successfully completing an approved course recognized by the Migration Agents Registration Authority. Unfortunately, Subject A's application for registration was denied based on his IELTS test band scores. Despite demonstrating strong performance in the listening and speaking macro skills, Subject A struggled comparatively in the writing and reading macro skills. However, it is worth noting that Subject A later accomplished the remarkable feat of writing a novel in English.

Table 13: IELTS test results for Candidate A

<i>TEST TRIAL</i>	<i>TEST DATE</i>	<i>LISTENING</i>	<i>READING</i>	<i>WRITING</i>	<i>SPEAKING</i>	<i>AVERAGE</i>	<i>RANGE</i>
<i>FIRST</i>	<i>13/12/2013</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>2.0</i>
<i>SECOND</i>	<i>12/04/2014</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>5.0</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>3.0</i>
<i>THIRD</i>	<i>12/7/2014</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>5.0</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>2.5</i>
<i>FOURTH</i>	<i>16/8/2014</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>2.5</i>
<i>FIFTH</i>	<i>2/10/2014</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>2.5</i>
<i>SIXTH</i>	<i>22/11/2014</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>8.0</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>2.5</i>
<i>SEVENTH</i>	<i>31/01/2015</i>	<i>8.5</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>7.0</i>	<i>3.0</i>
<i>AVERAGE OF EACH TEST MACRO SKILL</i>		<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.0</i>	<i>5.5</i>	<i>7.5</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>2.0</i>
<i>VARIATION IN 1 YEARS</i>		<i>1.5</i>	<i>1.0</i>	<i>1.0</i>	<i>1.5</i>	<i>0.5</i>	<i>1.0</i>

The sociolinguistic perspective can be observed in the previous interpretation through its consideration of the cultural and linguistic background of Subject A, who is identified as a Chinese Malaysian individual. This perspective acknowledges the influence of sociocultural factors on language proficiency and performance. It recognizes that Subject A's performance in the IELTS test may be influenced by his specific linguistic background, which could impact his abilities in certain macro skills such as writing and reading.

Furthermore, the mention of Subject A's achievement in writing a novel in English highlights the sociolinguistic aspect of language use and creativity within a specific social context. It acknowledges that individuals can showcase their linguistic skills and abilities in various domains, such as creative writing, beyond the constraints of standardized language assessments. This aligns with the sociolinguistic notion that language is not solely a set of discrete skills, but a dynamic and multifaceted tool shaped by social and cultural factors.

IELTS Test Candidate H

Candidate H, enrolled in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Deakin University, had chosen to withdraw. As evidenced by the low IELTS test band scores in Table 14, Candidate H consistently achieved low scores. Therefore, It is unsurprising that Candidate H eventually decided to withdraw from the course. The test scores obtained by Candidate H were the lowest I had encountered thus far in my experience of handling tens of thousands of IELTS test band scores.

Candidate H's English language proficiency was notably inadequate, so an English/Chinese interpreter was necessary for effective communication. This further highlights the significant

challenges Candidate H faced regarding language skills. Despite enrolling in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Deakin University, Candidate H's proficiency level it remained considerably low.

Table 14: The IELTS test band scores for Candidate H

<i>TEST DATE</i>	<i>LISTENING</i>	<i>READING</i>	<i>WRITING</i>	<i>SPEAKING</i>	<i>AVERAGE</i>
26 NOVEMBER 2016	4.0	4.5	4.0	3.5	4.0

The sociolinguistic dimensions in this analysis can be identified through several factors:

(1) Language Variation: The analysis acknowledges Candidate H's struggle with English language proficiency, indicating language variation. Candidate H's low IELTS test band scores and the need for an English/Chinese interpreter highlight the variation in linguistic abilities and the impact it has on communication; (2) Language and Identity: The analysis recognizes Candidate H's enrollment in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Deakin University, indicating the importance of language in shaping one's identity as a student. Candidate H's decision to withdraw from the course suggests that language proficiency played a significant role in his educational experiences and self-perception; (3)

Language Barriers: The presence of an interpreter demonstrates the language barriers Candidate H faces. This aspect reflects the sociolinguistic challenges individuals may encounter when engaging in academic or social contexts where their language skills are limited in addition to (4) language attitudes and perception: The mention of Candidate H's shallow IELTS test scores emphasizes the societal perception and evaluation of language proficiency. The analysis suggests that Candidate H's scores were particularly notable due to their shallow level, indicating the societal importance placed on language skills and their impact on individuals' opportunities and perceptions.

Overall, the sociolinguistic dimensions in this analysis shed light on the relationship between language, identity, variation, barriers, and attitudes, underscoring the influence of language on individual experiences and societal contexts.

The Entry Requirements for Universities in Terms of Minimum IELTS Scores

The previous assertion that the IELTS test users lack understanding regarding the distribution of IELTS test band scores within each band highlights the impact of their usage on the test's validity. This raises questions about the appropriateness of the IELTS test, as it appears to be employed not solely to assess English language proficiency, but rather as a gatekeeper for university admissions, professional registration, and migration applications, potentially limiting opportunities for individuals from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The validity of the IELTS test for these purposes needs to be critically examined.

To investigate this further within the sociolinguistic framework, the availability of a comprehensive database allows for independent sensitivity analyses. These analyses can provide valuable insights into the potential consequences of IELTS test users adjusting the English language requirements for eligibility, specifically regarding admission criteria and the impact on applicants from non-English-speaking backgrounds. By considering the sociolinguistic factors at play, this research can shed light on the effects of such adjustments and contribute to a deeper understanding of the overall validity of the IELTS test in its current application.

Table 15 and Table 16 visually represent how various combinations of IELTS test band scores can impact the overall count of eligible test candidates. The findings from these tables indicate that adjusting the Writing macro skill has a particularly pronounced effect and proves to be the most demanding macro skill when aiming for higher scores (refer to Table 15, Table 16, and Table 16 for detailed comparisons).

Table 15: Sensitivity analysis of eligibility for enrolment based on IELTS test band scores

Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall	Eligibility enrol to	%
6.5	7.0	6.0	6.5	6.5	966 /1651	58
7.5	7.0	6.5	6.5	7.0	565/1651	34
7.5	7.5	7.0	7.5	7.5	204/1651	21
7.5	8.0	7.5	7.5	8.0	95/1651	9

Table 16: Sensitivity analysis of eligibility for enrolment based on IELTS test band scores

Overall	Eligibility to enrol
Not less than 6.5 with no band less than 6.0	1651/4830
Minimum of 6.0 in each band score	1706/4830
Average IELTS test band scores of 6.0 minimum	3164/4830
Average IELTS test band scores of 6.5 minimum	2194/4830
Average IELTS test band scores of 7.0 minimum	1346/4830
Average IELTS test band scores of 7.5 minimum	695/4830
Average IELTS test band scores of 8.0 minimum	299/4830
Average IELTS test band scores of 8.5 minimum	85/4830
Average IELTS test band scores of 9.0 minimum	5/4830

Table17: Frequency distribution for writing macro skill by percentage (General Training Module Test)

<i>ROW LABELS</i>	<i>COUNT OF 6-MAR</i>	<i>COUNT OF 24-OCT</i>	<i>COUNT OF 17-APR</i>	<i>COUNT OF 10-APR</i>	<i>COUNT OF 21-NOV</i>	<i>COUNT OF 12-DEC</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>953</i>	<i>608</i>	<i>550</i>	<i>331</i>	<i>1264</i>	<i>522</i>
<i>1.5</i>	<i>0.11%</i>	<i>0.00%</i>	<i>0.00%</i>	<i>0.00%</i>	<i>0.11%</i>	<i>0.00%</i>
<i>2</i>	<i>0.11%</i>	<i>0.18%</i>	<i>0.20%</i>	<i>0.33%</i>	<i>0.11%</i>	<i>0.21%</i>
<i>2.5</i>	<i>0.34%</i>	<i>0.53%</i>	<i>0.59%</i>	<i>0.66%</i>	<i>0.34%</i>	<i>0.62%</i>
<i>3.5</i>	<i>0.22%</i>	<i>0.18%</i>	<i>0.20%</i>	<i>0.00%</i>	<i>0.22%</i>	<i>0.21%</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>0.67%</i>	<i>0.89%</i>	<i>0.79%</i>	<i>0.66%</i>	<i>0.67%</i>	<i>0.83%</i>
<i>4.5</i>	<i>4.26%</i>	<i>3.72%</i>	<i>3.55%</i>	<i>3.95%</i>	<i>4.26%</i>	<i>3.53%</i>
<i>5</i>	<i>16.80%</i>	<i>17.20%</i>	<i>17.36%</i>	<i>17.43%</i>	<i>16.80%</i>	<i>17.43%</i>
<i>5.5</i>	<i>26.88%</i>	<i>25.89%</i>	<i>26.82%</i>	<i>25.00%</i>	<i>26.88%</i>	<i>26.97%</i>
<i>6</i>	<i>22.96%</i>	<i>23.40%</i>	<i>22.88%</i>	<i>22.37%</i>	<i>22.96%</i>	<i>22.61%</i>
<i>6.5</i>	<i>15.12%</i>	<i>15.60%</i>	<i>14.99%</i>	<i>15.13%</i>	<i>15.12%</i>	<i>14.73%</i>
<i>7</i>	<i>8.29%</i>	<i>8.69%</i>	<i>8.48%</i>	<i>10.20%</i>	<i>8.29%</i>	<i>8.92%</i>
<i>7.5</i>	<i>3.02%</i>	<i>2.48%</i>	<i>2.76%</i>	<i>2.63%</i>	<i>3.02%</i>	<i>2.49%</i>
<i>8</i>	<i>1.01%</i>	<i>1.06%</i>	<i>1.18%</i>	<i>1.32%</i>	<i>1.01%</i>	<i>1.24%</i>
<i>8.5</i>	<i>0.22%</i>	<i>0.18%</i>	<i>0.20%</i>	<i>0.33%</i>	<i>0.22%</i>	<i>0.21%</i>
<i>GRAND TOTAL</i>	<i>100.00%</i>	<i>100.00%</i>	<i>100.00%</i>	<i>100.00%</i>	<i>100.00%</i>	<i>100.00%</i>

Exploring the writing macro skill in greater detail through Tables 17 and 18 proves crucial for assessing the test validity of its utilization for other purposes. Interestingly, it is frequently observed that test candidates can meet their target test band scores in three macro skills while falling short in the writing module. The differential treatment of the writing macro skill compared to the other three remains unclear, and the lack of transparency regarding scoring methods enforced by the IELTS test providers hinders the identification of this discrepancy.

Table 18: Findings of the Academic IELTS Test Scores–Raw Scores

Test date	Mean	Median	Mode
Listening	6.5	6.5	6.0
Reading	6.0	6.0	5.5
Writing	5.5	6.0	5.5
Speaking	6.5	6.5	6.0
Overall Score	6.5	6.0	6.0

Yet, the sociolinguistic perspective sheds light on the broader sociocultural and sociopolitical factors that influence evaluating and scoring the writing macro skill in the IELTS test. It acknowledges that language is not solely a linguistic system but is deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and political contexts. In the case of writing macro skills, understanding their distinct treatment within the IELTS test requires an examination of the underlying factors that contribute to their evaluation and scoring.

One aspect to consider is the social and cultural expectations associated with writing in academic and professional contexts. Writing proficiency is often considered a crucial skill in academic settings, where clear communication and practical expression of ideas are highly valued. Similarly, in professional domains, such as migration agents or other occupations, strong writing skills may be necessary for successful performance.

However, the validity of the distinct treatment of the writing macro skill in the IELTS test comes into question when considering the sociolinguistic factors. It is essential to critically analyze whether the emphasis on the writing macro skill aligns with the specific language demands and requirements of various professional or academic contexts. The discrepancy observed, where test candidates often struggle to meet their target scores in the writing module while performing well in other macro skills, suggests a potential mismatch between the test's focus and the real-world language needs of individuals.

Moreover, the sociopolitical aspects of language assessment cannot be overlooked. The IELTS test, being widely used for purposes such as university admissions and professional registrations, significantly influences individuals' educational and career opportunities, particularly for non-native English speakers. The distinct treatment of the writing macro skill and its impact on test candidates' overall scores may have implications for limiting access to higher education or professional opportunities for individuals from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Therefore, this section presented new information through various tables, offering insights into the distribution of IELTS test band scores among test candidates. These tables provided valuable data on the performance of individuals who obtained different scores on the IELTS test, including those who have taken the test multiple times. Furthermore, including these tables allows for a comprehensive examination of the patterns and trends in test scores, shedding light on the distribution of proficiency levels among test candidates. This information provides a deeper understanding of the diversity of performance and the range of scores individuals achieve across the IELTS test. The tables also offer a glimpse into the experiences of test candidates who have taken the IELTS test repeatedly. By including their scores, the tables provide insights into individual performance variations and fluctuations over time. This information is valuable in understanding the dynamics of test-taking behavior and the potential factors influencing score outcomes.

By considering the sociolinguistic dimensions, including social expectations, cultural norms, and the broader implications of language assessment, one can raise important questions about the validity of the IELTS test's treatment of the writing macro skill. It highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of how language assessment aligns with real-world language needs and challenges the test's ability to accurately measure individuals' proficiency holistically and contextually relevantly.

The Faustian Bargain

In Killeen's study (2019), the author raised concerns about 20 Chinese students who lacked the necessary skills to complete a course successfully. Killeen questioned why these students had applied to the course despite having poor English language proficiency. However, a prior study by Petropoulos and Petropoulos (2000) introduced the "Faustian Bargain" concept to explain the relationship between international students and universities. It should be noted that this term is often misused to describe any unethical behavior aimed at personal advancement.

According to Petropoulos and Petropoulos (2000), the Faustian Bargain parallels Faust's agreement with Mephistopheles, which involved a pact with the devil in exchange for personal

greatness and knowledge. A similar dynamic is at play in the context of international students and universities. Students apply and enroll in prestigious universities in Australia, to utilize their education to secure high-paying jobs and attain social status upon their return to their home countries. Meanwhile, universities are eager to attract these students due to funding cutbacks, even though it may come at the cost of lowering educational standards.

Smit (2019) proposed an alternative perspective, suggesting that individuals from racial minority groups could potentially access the benefits of white privilege by conforming to established criteria and "playing the game." By meeting these predetermined expectations, individuals are promised certain privileges and advantages. However, a vital requirement of this arrangement is that they relinquish their indigenous ways of being in favor of foreign ideals, which necessitates constant self-monitoring to ensure conformity to the expected performance standards.

As part of this dynamic, additional monitoring may be imposed, such as regular test-taking for educational, professional registration, immigration purposes, or any other reasons deemed necessary by those utilizing tests like IELTS. It is presumed that a component of this arrangement involves people of color accepting their subordinate position and knowing their place within the established power structure. Occasionally, those affected by such discrimination may rebel against these expectations. For instance, evidence was presented during a parliamentary hearing where Dr. Dunn of the Royal Adelaide Hospital suggested that qualified doctors coming to Australia should be promptly brought back to reality and conform to the Australian way (Official Committee Hansard, 2011).

According to Burgess (2005), universities set low minimum IELTS test band scores to attract more students. Additionally, universities accepted international students with lower IELTS test results due to financial constraints and budgetary requirements. As an illustration, Burgess (2005) highlighted the case of two Ph.D. students under Professor David Ingram's supervision. Despite holding master's degrees, these students had limited proficiency in the English language. Ingram criticized Australian universities, accusing them of prioritizing monetary gains over maintaining high quality standards (Dale & Lubbers, 2005).

An illustrative case is that of Subject H, whose average IELTS test band scores across the four macro skills were 4.0 (as indicated in Table 14). Despite having poor English language skills, Subject H would not be obligated to retake the IELTS test if they completed an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course. It is worth noting that Killeen (2019) highlighted the mandatory requirement for a UK student visa, which necessitates a minimum IELTS test band score of 6.0 or above, with no less than 5.5 in each of the test's macro skills. Similarly, in Australia, for programs like a bachelor's degree in accounting at Monash University, a minimum IELTS test band score of 6.5, with no individual band score falling below 6.0, is expected (Monash University, 2019).

According to the findings reported by Cook (2019), the Victorian Government in Australia has expressed concerns regarding the enrollment of international students with poor English language proficiency skills. These students are considered a crucial part of the education system in Victoria. The government is worried that by enrolling these students in bridging courses, they may bypass the regular testing procedures and enter further education courses despite their limited English language abilities. Cook and Zhuang (2019) further discussed the impact of students with poor English language proficiency on academics. These students may be reluctant to fail, negatively affecting their self-perception. As a result, one academic, who was a native Chinese speaker, was compelled to deliver lectures in Chinese because they did not understand the English lectures. This situation caused the two native English-speaking

academics to feel isolated. Additionally, there was pressure on academics to pass these students, creating a moral and ethical dilemma.

The case of Subject H, as observed by Ingram and Bayliss (2007), aligns with the concerns raised by IELTS test providers regarding the interpretation and utilization of the test results by institutions and departments. The test providers explicitly advised these organizations to assess their English language proficiency requirements based on their understanding of the courses and international students' experiences. According to them, the IELTS test providers recommended considering both the overall IELTS test band scores and the individual band scores for the four macro skills (IELTS, 2005). Ingram and Bayliss (2007) also highlighted the challenge faced by test users in interpreting the meaning of the test ratings, as the band descriptors were considered too broad to provide specific and meaningful distinctions. For instance, the descriptors make use of terms like "many" and "some," leaving test users to determine the exact quantity that constitutes "many" or how "many" differs from "some." This lack of clarity in the descriptors adds complexity to the interpretation of test results.

In the sociolinguistic frame, the emphasis on English language proficiency in employability skills reflects the sociocultural importance attributed to English as a global language of communication and commerce. The variation in performance across the macro skills, particularly in writing, highlights the complex nature of language assessment and its potential impact on individuals' opportunities and mobility within educational and professional contexts. The tables depicting the frequency of IELTS test band scores provide insights into the requirements imposed by institutions and government bodies, shedding light on the sociolinguistic dynamics of language proficiency and its role in facilitating or hindering individuals' access to various opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

By adopting a sociolinguistic approach, this study provides a unique opportunity to advance our understanding of the IELTS test and sheds light on the sociolinguistic dynamics at play within language assessment. Examining the plight of individual IELTS test candidates within their specific socio-cultural contexts is a significant contribution of this research. Through this lens, it becomes evident that the experiences and outcomes of test candidates are influenced by various social factors, including their cultural backgrounds, language proficiencies, and socio-economic statuses. The sociolinguistic approach highlighted the importance of considering these contextual elements in language testing and assessment, challenging common misconceptions about the IELTS test results. Moreover, by exploring language assessment's social and linguistic implications, this research encourages further investigation into this under-explored area. This research not only advances one's understanding of the IELTS test but also encourages researchers to explore the pertinent questions that have thus far been overlooked.

It is worth noting that a significant constraint in researching the IELTS test was the restricted access to original data by the IELTS test providers. However, a substantial logical error outweighed this limitation, and the researchers' use of exemplary data led to the demonstration of the reliability and validity of the IELTS test. It is important to emphasize that any conclusions drawn by these researchers applied solely to their specific research study and should not be extrapolated beyond that scope.

Among the numerous findings of this study, one particularly significant discovery was that a considerable number of IELTS test takers were attaining high scores in three of the four macro skills. Yet, they were still rejected by test users who seemed to struggle to interpret the candidates' English language proficiency accurately. This level of incompetence, though

unacceptable in the business world, was observed to occur frequently despite the IELTS test providers' explicit warning that test users should interpret the results rather than solely focus on the test scores.

Additionally, the study noted that only a few test candidates could achieve the minimum IELTS test band scores prescribed by the test users, resulting in many candidates being rejected based on a single test result that fell slightly below the test user's requirements. These observations raised the question: "How can individuals with strong academic and employability skills still fall short in achieving high IELTS test band scores?" Another significant finding of this research was that IELTS test users tended to overestimate the English language proficiency skills necessary for their organizations and neglected to conduct a comprehensive needs analysis to determine the exact language skills required.

According to Chalhoub-Deville and Turner (2000), it is essential to understand that there is no universally superior test; organizations should select and utilize tests appropriately based on their specific needs. However, it is crucial to recognize that some tests are unsuitable for a given purpose, and the IELTS test, when utilized beyond its intended design, can be considered as such. In addressing skill shortages, test users must also assume responsibility for considering additional factors that may contribute to the success of test candidates. Specifically, they should consider the standard error of measurement of the test, mainly when test scores are near the pass/cut-off point. By incorporating these considerations, organizations can make more informed decisions regarding candidate selection and mitigate potential shortcomings of using the IELTS test.

With foresight, the initial versions of this study raised concerns in 2011 about an impending skills shortage that would affect Australia (Shah & Burke, 2003; Van Onselen, 2019; Baker et al., 2022; Pietsch, 2022;). The issue goes beyond immigration, subjecting academically qualified and professionally experienced individuals to the IELTS test. Consequently, a significant number of individuals, predominantly people of color, are excluded from practicing their professions, resulting in their underemployment and economic struggles. This situation contributes to the broader problem of skills shortages faced by Australia and numerous other countries.

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