

# The Predictive Validity of the IELTS Test and Contribution of IELTS Preparation Courses to International Students' Subsequent Academic Study: Insights from Vietnamese International Students in the UK

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## Abstract

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) scores have been widely used as the language entry requirements for international students in many English-medium universities. However, research on the predictive validity of IELTS on subsequent academic performance has been inconclusive. Additionally, despite the proliferation of IELTS preparation courses, very few attempts have been made to explore the extent to which these courses support course takers' development of knowledge and skills needed for their subsequent university study. This paper investigated (a) the predictive validity of IELTS results on the subsequent academic performance of Vietnamese international students at UK universities, and (b) the extent to which an IELTS preparation course in Vietnam supported its course takers in their subsequent academic study in the UK. Questionnaires with 80 Vietnamese international students from 31 universities across the UK showed that there was a positive significant correlation between these students' IELTS scores and their academic results. Follow-up interviews with two undergraduates and two postgraduates who had previously studied in the same IELTS preparation course, but were studying different academic disciplines at different institutions in the UK, and analysis of the materials used in their IELTS preparation course and university courses revealed that the course positively supported these students' subsequent academic study, but certain skills and knowledge needed in their academic study were not effectively covered in the IELTS preparation course.

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## Keywords

IELTS, predictive validity, IELTS preparation course, Vietnamese, international students

## Introduction

Predictive validity means the extent to which a test can predict test takers' future performance (Woodrow, 2006). The predictive validity of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has received a great deal of attention from researchers given that this test has been widely used to assess whether non-English background students are ready to study in English-medium courses (Green, 2007). Research on the predictive validity of IELTS has been inconclusive. While several studies found a positive relationship between students' IELTS scores and their university academic results (e.g. Hu and Trenkic, 2019; Thorpe et al., 2017), other studies (e.g. Cotton and Conrow, 1998; Dooy and Oliver, 2002) did not. This suggests that the predictive validity of IELTS on subsequent academic performance may vary according to context and group of participants. Moreover, previous studies have been conducted with students from a single institution, while the appropriate English proficiency entry levels may vary among institutions (Woodrow, 2006). Exploring opinions of students from different institutions would provide better insights into the predictive validity of IELTS on subsequent academic performance in English-medium university courses. Additionally, earlier research on the predictive validity of IELTS has mainly adopted a quantitative method by comparing language test scores to Grade Point Average (GPA). Some studies examined the effect of pre-sessional English programs (Thorpe et al., 2017) or other factors besides language proficiency on academic performance (Woodrow, 2006). Very few studies have investigated how IELTS preparation courses support the development of knowledge and skills needed for subsequent academic study. This is surprising given that IELTS preparation courses have become common worldwide and may have a significant effect on test takers' long-term linguistic and academic development.

To address these gaps, this study aims to (a) identify the relationship between the IELTS scores and academic performance of Vietnamese international university students in the UK, and (b) explore the extent to which skills gained in a particular IELTS preparation course in Vietnam supported its course takers' academic performance at universities in the UK. The study would provide further insights into the predictive validity of IELTS and the value of IELTS preparation courses in preparing non-English background students for their subsequent academic study at English-medium universities.

## Background

Research on the predictive validity of IELTS often adopts a quantitative approach by using Pearson's correlation coefficient  $r$  to examine the relationship between students' IELTS scores and their academic results, often measured by their GPA or Weighted Average Marks (WAM) in the first semester/year of their academic study. The findings of these studies are fairly mixed. Most studies found a positive, medium relationship between students' GPA/WAM and their IELTS overall scores (Al-Malki, 2014; Feast, 2002; Hu and Trenkic, 2019; Schoepp, 2018; Woodrow, 2006). Several studies reported

a significant but small correlation (Johnson and Tweedie, 2017; Oliver et al., 2012; Schoepp and Garinger, 2016), or no significant relationship (Cotton and Conrow, 1998) between the two variables. Several studies have investigated the relationship between GPA/WAM and IELTS sub-set scores. Their findings are inconclusive. Some studies reported that their participants' GPA significantly and positively correlated with their IELTS reading, listening, and writing scores but not with their IELTS speaking scores (Schoepp and Garinger, 2016). In contrast, other studies found positive, significant correlations between their participants' GPA and their IELTS listening and speaking scores, but insignificant correlations between their GPA and their IELTS reading scores (Woodrow, 2006) or IELTS writing scores (Oliver et al., 2012). It should be noted that previous research on the predictive validity of IELTS has mainly focused on universities in Australia (e.g. Woodrow, 2006) or the United Arab Emirates (Schoepp and Garinger, 2016), and students from China (e.g. Hu and Trenkic, 2019). Moreover, most earlier studies were conducted with students from a single institution and a specific major (e.g. business, education). As the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance may vary according to context and group of students investigated, research examining the predictive validity of IELTS on subsequent academic performance of students in other contexts is warranted.

The high-stakes nature of IELTS and the increasing demand to study in English-medium universities have facilitated an international industry in IELTS preparation courses. This raises the question of how well these courses support students academically in their future academic study. Studies investigating the contribution of IELTS preparation courses to students' subsequent academic performance, however, are fairly limited in number. Most of them have examined the relevance of a specific IELTS sub-skill to academic study at university. With respect to listening, Sabet and Babaei (2017) found that academic listening and IELTS listening tasks were different in terms of pragmatic understanding, the integration of skills, multiplicity of texts for listening, information literacy, and the concept of construct irrelevant variance. In terms of reading, Kovalenko (2018) reported that although preparing for the IELTS reading test could help to improve students' concentration, anxiety control, and decision-making speed when reading academic texts, it did not significantly contribute to success in academic reading tasks. Investigating speaking skills, Ducasse and Brown (2011) found that although speaking in both domains required students to provide information and express opinions, university study involved a much wider range of interactional features (e.g. negotiation of meaning, consensus-building in group discussions). In terms of writing, Moore and Morton (1999) and Cooper (2013) found little resemblance between IELTS Writing Task 2 essays and university written assignments. Only Yang and Badger (2015) investigated all four sub-skills. Their study revealed that the IELTS preparation course helped the students develop their vocabulary knowledge and confidence in speaking in their academic study but did not sufficiently cover other aspects needed for their academic study (e.g. source use and extensive reading). Together, previous studies indicated that the skills measured in IELTS and developed in IELTS preparation courses have both similarities and differences with the tasks students undertake in their subsequent academic studies. Among these studies, only Yang and Badger (2015) have investigated the contribution of IELTS preparation courses in all four language skills to

subsequent academic study, but their focus was solely on Chinese students studying A-level Economics courses in the UK. Studies with students from other first language (L1) backgrounds and from various university levels and academic majors would provide further insight into the effectiveness of IELTS preparation courses in preparing course takers for their study at English-medium universities.

### *The Present Study*

The literature review has revealed that research on the predictive validity of IELTS and the contribution of IELTS preparation courses to academic performance of non-English background students at English-medium universities has mainly focused on students studying in a specific institution in Australia or the United Arab Emirates, and students from China. There is a need to explore these issues with students in other contexts. To address this gap, this study aims to investigate the predictive validity of IELTS and the contribution of an IELTS preparation course to academic performance of Vietnamese international students in the UK. The UK is among the countries with the largest number of international students (Study International Staff, 2018), and IELTS has been widely used as the language entry requirement in most universities in the UK (Hu and Trenkic, 2019), but not much research on the predictive validity of IELTS and the contribution of an IELTS preparation course to academic performance has been conducted in this context.

The reason for focusing on Vietnamese international students is as follows. Researchers (e.g. Le and McKay, 2018) have pointed out that international students are often homogenized and treated as a single group and the voices of many national groups of international students are unheard. This indicates the need for investigating international students from a specific nation. IELTS research focusing on a specific group of international students has mainly paid attention to Chinese international students (e.g. Hu and Trenkic, 2019; Yen and Kuzma, 2009). However, because of political tensions and the COVID-19 travel restrictions, there is likely to be fewer students leaving China to study in the UK (Bothwell, 2020). That means English-medium universities in the UK and other countries may have to recruit international students from other countries, such as Vietnam, rather than solely relying on Chinese international students. The number of Vietnamese international students in English-medium universities in the UK and other countries has grown over the last decade (Ha, 2018). Investigating this specific group of students would provide institutions in these countries with useful information when recruiting a new and potential cohort to maintain a substantial number of international students during the pandemic crisis. Despite this need, little research on the predictive validity of IELTS has investigated Vietnamese international students.

Taken together, by investigating an under-researched context (the UK) and a new national group of international students (Vietnamese L1 students), this study will provide further insights into the predictive validity of IELTS and the contribution of IELTS preparation courses to international students' academic performance in higher education. Furthermore, it will provide universities with useful implications to improve student experiences in their English-medium programs.

## Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between the IELTS scores of Vietnamese international students and their academic performance, as measured by their GPA in the first semester at UK universities?
2. To what extent did an IELTS preparation course in Vietnam support the academic study of its course takers in their subsequent study at UK universities?

## Methodology

This study has two main phases. The quantitative phase investigated the correlations between the participants' IELTS scores and their academic performance, while the qualitative phase explored the extent to which the IELTS preparation course taken in their home country supported their subsequent academic study. In the quantitative phase, a short online questionnaire in the participants' L1 was created and posted on a Facebook page of Vietnamese students in the UK that has over 34,000 members. The questionnaire collected the participants' demographic information, IELTS scores, and GPA in the first semester studying in the UK (percentage score out of 100%) (online Appendix 1). Using online questionnaires would make it possible to recruit a large number of participants from various backgrounds (Dörnyei, 2007). Eighty respondents from 31 different universities across the UK met the criteria: (a) being a student at a UK university and (b) having taken the IELTS test before coming to the UK (online Appendix 2). Their data were used for the quantitative analysis.

In the qualitative phase, four students (online Appendix 3) were recruited from the 80 participants for follow-up one-to-one interviews to (a) achieve further insights into the relationship between IELTS scores and academic performance obtained from the questionnaire and (b) investigate the contribution of IELTS preparation courses to subsequent academic study. These interviewees had taken a four-month IELTS preparation course delivered by the ABC Academy, a private language school in Hanoi. Like many IELTS preparation courses, the ABC Academy courses aimed to help course takers achieve the IELTS scores required by their target university programs. Depending on their scores on the placement test designed by the academy, course takers were assigned to relevant courses. All four interviewees had studied an intermediate course (IELTS 5.0 or equivalent, targeting 6.0 or over), which included listening, reading, speaking, and writing classes (online Appendix 4).

The interviewees were chosen purposefully. First, all had previously studied all four IELTS language skills in the same IELTS preparation course, but were studying different academic disciplines at different institutions in the UK. This criterion allowed in-depth evaluation of the contribution of the IELTS preparation course to learners' subsequent academic study in different disciplines, institutions, and academic levels. Second, the interviewees had finished their first semester in the UK, ensuring that they would be able to reflect on their experience when studying at UK universities and that their GPA and university course materials were available for analysis. Third, the interviewees had attended the IELTS preparation course and taken IELTS no more than two years before participating in the present study to ensure accurate recollection of their experiences related to the IELTS course.

The interviews were conducted online via Skype in Vietnamese, the interviewer and interviewees' L1. All conversations were audio recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data. The conversation was intentionally made casual and began with small talk, helping to build trust and rapport with interviewees (Dörnyei, 2007). The interview focused on the participants' experience related to the IELTS preparation course (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) and how it contributed to their academic study in the UK (online Appendix 5). The semi-structured interview format was chosen to ensure that all necessary information was gathered while the interviewees were still allowed to flexibly develop their answers (Burns, 2010; Dörnyei, 2007). To elucidate the relevance of the IELTS preparation course to degree-level courses in the UK, following Yang and Badger (2015), the qualitative data gained from the interviews was supplemented by the analysis of (a) samples of materials from the participants' IELTS preparation course (learning materials, handouts, IELTS sample tests) and (b) samples of materials of university courses in their first semester in the UK (handouts, textbook extracts, PowerPoint, recommended web pages, assessment guides).

Questionnaire data were processed by Google Form and analyzed with SPSS (version 23.0). Pearson's correlation coefficient was employed to measure the correlation between the participants' IELTS scores (overall and sub-skills) and academic results (GPA in their first semester). Data from the interviews were first fully transcribed into Vietnamese, the original language. The relevant parts were then translated into English. Following Yang and Badger (2015), this study employed a deductive approach (Burns, 2010) in which the data were grouped according to whether they related to the programs in UK universities, the IELTS course, or the relationship between the two, and then coded as related to one of the four skills: listening, reading, speaking, or writing. The material data set was not systematically analyzed but acted as supplements for the analysis of the interview data. They were also classified as related to the IELTS or UK study programs and within the two categories, as to each language skill.

## Results

The descriptive statistics of the participants' IELTS scores and their GPA in the first semester studying at UK universities are presented in online Appendix 6. Pearson's correlation showed that no matter whether the overall or the sub-skill IELTS scores were examined, there were always statistically significant correlations between the participants' IELTS scores and their GPA. The correlation between the IELTS overall scores and the GPA was medium ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ). Similarly, there were significant correlations between the scores on each IELTS sub-skill and the GPA, but none of them were strong. Reading had the strongest correlation ( $r = .44, p < .001$ ), followed by listening ( $r = .39, p < .001$ ) and speaking ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ). Writing had the weakest correlation ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ).

The findings from the questionnaire were further supported by the interview data. All four IELTS skills were perceived by the interviewees as being important for their subsequent academic studies, but the relative contribution of each skill varied (see online Appendix 7). Writing was considered as the most important skill, rated as 'very important' (5 out of 5) by all interviewees. In fact, the written essay format was the main

method of assessment for the two postgraduate students in their first semester: 100% of the modules for Na and 70% for Peter. Tom and Justin, the undergraduate students, needed to write essays as well as sit written tests.

The importance of the other skills rated by the interviewees is fairly equal (Mean = 4.25). All interviewees considered that reading directly linked to their academic results. They all needed to read a large number of books, articles, or other materials for writing assignments, which made up a major share of their modules' assessment. Apart from reading for writing assignments, they were also required to read for other activities (e.g. pre-lecture reading, reading case studies to prepare for oral presentations). Though these activities may not have a direct influence on their grades, they still contributed to the final assessed work: 'I had to read a case study and prepare an individual presentation to address the problem in that case. I did not get a good mark on that presentation because I did not fully understand the requirement. . . .' (Justin). All interviewees agreed that listening was important for their academic study in the UK because they needed to listen to their tutors in lectures, tutorials, and office hours, and to their peers during group discussions. However, their opinions about the importance of listening for academic performance varied. Tom, the undergraduate student studying computer science, and Na, the postgraduate student studying public relations, considered listening as 'very important' (5 out of 5), because inadequate listening skills would likely affect their academic performance. However, Peter, the postgraduate student studying international business, and Justin, the undergraduate student studying hospitality and tourism management, only rated listening as 'important' (4 out of 5) and 'moderately important' (3 out of 5), respectively. They believed that although listening was important for their academic study and social life in the UK, it did not affect their academic grades. For Peter, course materials and slides helped him compensate for his poor listening comprehension, while for Justin, his tutors' adjustment of teaching styles to match the language proficiency of international students was the primary reason that listening was not a problem for him.

Tom and Justin considered speaking skills as 'very important' (5 out of 5) for their academic performance, Peter considered it as 'important' (4 out of 5), and Na considered it as 'moderately important' (3 out of 5). According to the interviewees, studying in the UK required them to speak during in-class discussions, debates, presentations, and meetings with their tutors. Justin and Peter stated that speaking skills directly affected their grades in the first semester because they had assessed presentations and debates. As for Na and Tom, who had no oral assessments in their first semester, speaking had an indirect influence on their academic results; it helped them to communicate with their tutors and receive relevant advice on their assignments, socialize with their classmates, and to improve their comprehension of lectures.

This study found that the knowledge and skills that the students accumulated from the IELTS preparation course facilitated their study in the UK in certain extents. Online Appendix 8 presents their ratings of the contribution of classes of each skill in the IELTS course to their subsequent academic study. Of the four skills, the writing classes received the highest opinions from the interviewees. For instance, according to Justin, the knowledge of paragraphing and signposting taught in the IELTS writing classes helped strengthen the coherence and cohesion of his university assignments. Similarly, Peter acknowledged that the grammatical knowledge developed through the feedback in the IELTS writing

classes significantly improved the quality of his university written works. The interviewees' opinions were supported by the material analysis, which showed similarities between the introduction–body–conclusion structure of IELTS Writing Task 2 introduced in the IELTS writing classes and the structure of the interviewees' university assignments.

The interviewees' attitudes toward the contribution of the IELTS speaking classes to their academic study were very positive. Peter and Justin, who had assessed presentations and debates, said that the frequent practice with various topics in the IELTS speaking classes helped to enhance their pronunciation and vocabulary, and boost their fluency and confidence when making university oral presentations. The material analysis showed that the monologue in IELTS Part 2 bears certain resemblance to university oral presentations. Although presentation topics at university require more specialised vocabulary, students may still benefit from transition words, phrases, and structures.

The interviewees also had positive attitudes toward the contribution of the IELTS reading classes to their subsequent academic study. The interviews and analysis of the materials in the interviewees' IELTS reading classes revealed that the interviewees agreed that the reading strategies that they learned in the IELTS reading classes (e.g. skimming, scanning) helped them better deal with the reading tasks in their academic study in the UK. However, there were certain variations in their viewpoints. The two undergraduates rated the contribution of the IELTS reading course to their study in the UK as 'above average' (4 out of 5) because it helped to improve their reading speed. The postgraduates (Peter and Na) agreed with the two undergraduates that the IELTS reading classes taught them skimming and scanning, which helped to improve their reading skill; however, they only rated the contribution as 'average' (3 out of 5). Peter pointed out that the IELTS reading classes helped him develop strategies to achieve high marks in the IELTS reading test rather than encouraging him to understand the content of the whole text, while comprehending the text was important for his academic study in the UK. Na further commented that the skimming and scanning strategies developed in the IELTS reading classes were not especially necessary for her to deal with the reading tasks in her study in the UK because the time to complete these tasks was not as restricted as it was in the IELTS reading tasks.

Among the four language skill classes, the contribution of the IELTS listening classes to academic performance in the UK received the lowest scores by the interviewees. This does not mean that the IELTS listening classes made no contribution to the students' success in academic listening. In fact, all interviewees acknowledged that auditory discrimination, which was taught in the IELTS listening classes, was a useful strategy to help them deal with listening in an academic context.

This study, however, also revealed a number of dissimilarities between skills students gained in the IELTS preparation course and skills needed in their subsequent academic study. The interviewees pointed out that writing a report in Task 1 was not particularly relevant to the writing tasks in their first semester. Additionally, all interviewees mentioned that critical thinking and synthesizing sources were essential for completing university assignments, but were not tested in IELTS writing tasks. They also expressed the larger amount of specialised vocabulary and greater amount of time required to prepare for the task as other factors that made writing assignments for their programs in the UK significantly more difficult than writing essays in Task 2. For instance:



University assignments are much harder than IELTS Writing Task 2 because I cannot just write what I think but have to read a lot and use specialised words in my writing. There are many terms that I do not understand so it just takes a lot of time for an assignment. (Peter)

The interviewees' opinions were supported by the material analysis, which showed that a university essay was three or four times longer than an IELTS Task 2 essay. Additionally, the ideas in IELTS essays were from test takers' previous knowledge and experiences, while university assignments required evaluating and synthesizing literature from different sources.

The interviewees also pointed out differences between speaking in IELTS tasks and university tasks. For examples, Peter stated that when preparing for the IELTS speaking test, he learned many idioms and slangs related to the topics of the IELTS test. However, he rarely used these in his academic study because most of his classmates were international students and many did not understand these lexical items. Similarly, Justin stated that in preparation for his presentations and debates, he was expected to use specialised vocabulary related to his major, which was not entirely relevant to the vocabulary he had learned in IELTS speaking. This is supported by the material analysis, which showed that academic speaking at university involved a wider range of interactional features (e.g. negotiation of meaning and consensus-building in group discussions), and more specialised vocabulary than IELTS speaking tasks, which only followed the interview format and general topic (e.g. birthdays) and non-specialised (e.g. *throw a party*).

With respect to reading, all interviewees considered university reading tasks more challenging than IELTS reading tasks due to longer texts. For example, before lectures, Na was required to read academic articles that were several pages long, while each IELTS passage was roughly one page long. University reading tasks were also believed to be more difficult due to more complicated vocabulary. This is supported by the analysis of samples of reading materials in the interviewees' academic programs. For example, the material that Tom, a computer science student, had to read contained a wide range of technical terms (e.g. *Java Project, checkbox*).

The interviewees had fairly differing opinions about the degree to which the IELTS reading classes helped them deal with specialised vocabulary in their academic reading. Na pointed out that the vocabulary that she learned in the IELTS reading classes was not especially relevant to her major, public relations. In contrast, Tom stated that although books and articles he had to read for his study of computer science in the UK contained many technical terms, the vocabulary he had accumulated from the IELTS reading classes still helped him gain a good grasp of the text content.

Compared to writing, speaking, and reading, the IELTS listening classes were perceived by the interviewees as making the least contribution to their academic performance in the UK. This may be due to the differences between listening in IELTS and in UK academic settings. The interviewees pointed out that certain factors needed for their success in academic listening were not covered in the IELTS listening classes. They emphasized that the more diverse accents in the real academic context caused greater difficulties for them than listening to recordings in the IELTS preparation classes. The interviewees also pointed out that specialised vocabulary was another factor that makes academic listening more challenging than IELTS listening. These opinions were supported by the

comparison of the samples of the interviewees' pre-lecture recordings in their academic study and the listening materials used in the interviewees' IELTS listening classes. The pre-lecture recordings contained many specialised words (e.g. *hostility*, *encompass*, *tactics*), while vocabulary in the IELTS listening practice materials was more general (e.g. words related to number and course names).

## Discussion

In answer to Research Question 1, there was a positive, medium correlation between the IELTS scores and academic performance of Vietnamese international university students in the UK. This means that the higher these students' IELTS scores, the more likely they performed well in their subsequent academic study in the UK. This supports several earlier studies (e.g. Al-Malki, 2014; Schoepp, 2018; Woodrow, 2006), which also found a positive relationship between the two variables. All four language skills had significant correlations with the GPA. This means that regardless of the sub-skills, the higher the participants' scores on the sub-skills, the better their academic performance was likely to be. This finding was slightly different from previous studies, which did not find all skills significantly correlated with the GPA (e.g. Dooley and Oliver, 2002; Schoepp and Garinger, 2016). This difference may be due to the context and group of students investigated. Previous studies mainly focused on either undergraduate or postgraduate students from a specific academic discipline at a specific institution in Australia or the United Arab Emirates. This study focused on Vietnamese international undergraduate and postgraduate students from various academic disciplines at different institutions across the UK. The difference in the findings highlights the importance of exploring underrepresented contexts and groups of test-takers when researching the predictive validity of IELTS on subsequent academic performance.

This study found that IELTS reading scores and IELTS listening scores had higher correlations with the students' GPA than IELTS speaking scores and IELTS writing scores. This indicates that reading and listening skills have a greater relation to their academic achievement than speaking and writing skills. This supports Schoepp and Garinger's (2016) finding that reading and listening were the two skills that had the highest correlations with the GPA. The correlation between IELTS scores and GPA was higher in the case of reading and listening than in the case of speaking and writing, probably because the relative value of each skill may depend on the relative value of academic tasks at universities. The interviews revealed that reading academic texts and listening to tutors in lectures, tutorials, and office hours, and listening to peers during group discussion, were key activities in all interviewees' programs. Therefore, it is understandable that the two skills had high correlations to the GPA. The lower correlation of the IELTS speaking score and the GPA may be because most assessments at a higher education level were written assignments rather than verbal presentations. However, it was quite surprising that writing, considered the most important skill among the four skills in higher education according to interviewees, had the lowest correlation with academic results. This might be because writing sections in IELTS have major differences from university written assignments, as shown in the interview and material analysis.

The moderate relationship between the IELTS scores and the GPA indicates that although the higher IELTS scores students have, the more likely they perform well in their subsequent academic study in English-medium universities, this trend does not always hold true. This suggests that IELTS is perhaps a useful language entry requirement when recruiting students into English-medium universities. However, students, language tutors, and content tutors should be aware that having high IELTS scores does not always mean that students would perform well in their academic study. These findings concur with earlier studies (e.g. Feast, 2002; Woodrow, 2006), confirming that language proficiency measured by a standardized test is not a major indicator of academic success in higher education. This also supports the claim that the relationship between language proficiency and academic success is complicated, and is not a one-to-one correlation.

In answer to Research Question 2, the interviews and material analysis indicated that the IELTS preparation course delivered by the ABC Academy positively supported interviewees' subsequent academic study. The IELTS writing classes helped the students to improve the coherence and cohesion in their university assignments. Meanwhile, the IELTS speaking classes enriched their vocabulary knowledge and developed their speaking fluency and confidence, which positively contributed to their performance in the university speaking tasks. Similarly, thanks to the IELTS reading classes, the students developed skills (e.g. skimming, scanning) that are important for dealing with reading tasks at universities. Likewise, the auditory discrimination taught in the IELTS listening classes enabled the students to deal with academic listening. The significant contribution of the IELTS preparation course delivered by the ABC Academy is meaningful given that the course aimed to help these students to pass the IELTS test rather than dealing with their subsequent academic studies. Previous research with international students in other contexts (e.g. Kovalenko, 2018; Yang and Badger, 2015) also reported a significant contribution of IELTS preparation courses to students' academic study. The current study expanded on previous research in several ways. First, it combined quantitative data from the analysis of the relationship between students' IELTS scores and GPA and qualitative data from the interviews with the students about the IELTS preparation course and their subsequent academic study. Second, it examined the relevance of each of the four specific sub-skills in IELTS to academic study, rather than focusing solely on one sub-skill. Third, it focused on an underrepresented group of international students. Therefore, it provides further insight into the relevance and contribution of IELTS preparation courses to subsequent academic studies.

The present study also revealed that the IELTS preparation courses delivered by the ABC Academy did not effectively cover certain skills and knowledge needed to successfully complete academic tasks at universities such as critical thinking, synthesizing sources (writing), dealing with diverse accents (listening), comprehending long and technical texts (reading), and engaging in highly interactive tasks (speaking). This finding supports previous studies, which found mismatches between IELTS tasks and the tasks that students undertake in their university studies (e.g. Cooper, 2013; Kovalenko, 2018). By investigating an underexplored group of international students and context and all four language skills, this study expanded on previous studies and provided further insights into the value of IELTS courses in preparing international students for their subsequent academic study.

One unanticipated finding was that of the four skills, writing and speaking were the two least successful predictors of academic performance, as shown in the correlation analysis, but IELTS writing and speaking classes were considered to be the most useful by the interviewees. This might be because, although writing and speaking are perceived as difficult skills, they do not receive significant attention in formal education in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2015; Nguyen and Pham, 2016). The English test in the national university entrance examination, the most important examination for high school seniors, is formatted as a written multiple-choice test and does not include essay writing or speaking. Vietnamese students, especially those studying in public schools, tend to focus on grammar and vocabulary learning in preparation for that test. Therefore, learning how to write a report or an essay in IELTS writing and how to engage in oral communication is often a new experience to many students.

Interesting, regardless of the skills, specialised vocabulary was frequently mentioned by the interviewees as one of the biggest challenges for them when performing university tasks. This echoes the idea of vocabulary researchers (e.g. Coxhead, 2020; Nation, 2013) that knowledge of specialised vocabulary is essential for students' success in English-medium universities.

This study has certain limitations. The interviews were conducted with a small number of international students who attended the same IELTS preparation course. Therefore, the finding related to the contribution of IELTS preparation courses to subsequent academic study is exploratory and should not be generalized. Moreover, the study only investigated the issues from students' perspectives. Future studies could recruit more participants for the interviews and could look at international students from other cohorts. Moreover, they could explore opinions of IELTS trainers regarding IELTS course design and class activities and university lecturers about language demands of university programs. Such research would provide further insights into the predictive validity of the IELTS test and the value of IELTS preparation courses in preparing non-English background students in their subsequent academic study at English-medium universities.

## **Pedagogical Implications**

While IELTS scores are good indicators of academic performance, this does not mean that students with good IELTS scores are always able to succeed in their academic study at English-medium universities. To help international students like the participants in the present study to smoothly transit to their academic study at English-medium universities, when recruiting international students, these universities could provide them with samples/taster lectures or courses so that these students can have a better idea of the similarities and differences between university tasks and IELTS tasks. Moreover, when students start their academic study at English-medium universities, these universities should offer in-session subject-specific courses, running alongside main degree courses, to bridge the gaps between IELTS preparation courses and degree courses at these universities. In-session tutors could highlight the similarities between the skills for IELTS tests and those needed for university tasks so that students can transform the skills and knowledge developed from IELTS preparation courses to their academic study. Meanwhile, tutors should point out the difference between the tasks in the two domains and help students

to develop other academic language skills and knowledge to fit their degree disciplines (e.g. critical thinking, synthesizing, using sources, specialised vocabulary).

Although the main purpose of IELTS preparation courses is to help students achieve their desirable band scores in IELTS, they could include supplementary activities to help learners develop essential skills for their subsequent academic study. For example, teachers could organize linked skilled activities (Coxhead, 2006) in which students read passages from IELTS reading tests, and use the information from these passages to write an essay or participate in a group discussion in which they critically respond to a question related to the content of the passages. Such activities would familiarize learners with the tasks that they are expected to perform in their future academic study and develop their knowledge of specialised vocabulary, but are still relevant to the content of IELTS preparation courses.

## Conclusion

Drawing on information from questionnaires, interviews, and material analyses, this study explored the predictive validity of the IELTS test and the contribution of an IELTS course in preparing Vietnamese international students for their subsequent academic study in the UK. These students' IELTS scores moderately correlated with their academic results. The IELTS preparation course taken by these students in their home country was considered to positively support their university studies; however, certain skills and knowledge needed for their academic tasks at universities were not effectively covered in the IELTS preparation course. By examining an underexplored group of participants, this study provides useful implications for language tutors and those working in English-medium universities that use IELTS scores as admission criteria to assess the language proficiency of non-English background students.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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