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## **We Will Learn Better Only if Some Things Were Different: Arab Student Voices about Their Performance in IELTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Although quantitative studies of educational research usually suggest some links between conditions of learning and student learning outcome, behavior and performance, the idea of engaging students in discussions on teaching and learning has not had as much attention in the United Arab Emirates as in some other countries. This paper presents student feedback on existing conditions of learning the English skills required for IELTS, the International English Language Testing System, in the United Arab Emirates University, and examines possible reasons causing the poor performance of Arab college students in the test. Students' perspectives on IELTS exam were collected by means of a self-report feedback instrument. This was supported by open Blackboard discussion forums where participants discussed their feedback and argued for various suggested patterns of reform. Students' feedback is presented here to illustrate the important insights that can be gained through listening to the student voice. Such feedback can give valuable information for the process of improving student IELTS test performance.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a result of increased interest in the student voice movement (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004), educational researchers and professionals involved in student academic performance have progressively focused on listening to what young learners say about conditions of learning they experience in colleges and classrooms. Various initiatives can be adopted to gather perspectives of student voice. Reflecting Fielding's (2001) typology, students could be consulted as data sources, active respondents, co-researchers, or researchers. One advantage of adopting student consultation is that an understanding of conditions affecting learners' academic performance can be enhanced through consulting students' perspectives on performance and having them engage in the process of improvement (Fanning Howey Associates, 1995). Consultation also has the potential for redefining the learning status, as well as for creating a more collaborative teacher–student relationship where learning is accepted as a joint responsibility (Rudduck, 2006). Being consulted about things that matter can positively affect students' learning in providing a practical agenda for reform and building students' self-respect—both of which are factors that strengthen students' commitment to learning, increase their attainment, and raise their learning standards (Fielding, 2004).

In this paper, I consult and report on the students' opinions on existing conditions of learning IELTS, the International English Language Testing System, at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), and highlight their feedback on how to improve student performance in the test.

IELTS, an international benchmark exam, assesses the language ability of students who need to study in the medium of English at an undergraduate or postgraduate level. It covers the four language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking), and it is statistically designed to genuinely reflect students' abilities in each of those skills. If they fail, students can retake the test, and there are no restrictions on the number of retakes. At the UAEU, 30% of students sitting IELTS for the first time fail the test, and 99% of those fail it on marginal points. Although the UAEU administrators and teachers realize the importance of the English language in higher education, surprisingly little is known about the reasons why the UAEU IELTS is often associated with either poor student performance or failure. Equally important, while some efforts by UAEU teachers have been made to assess the linguistic strengths and weaknesses of students sitting for the IELTS, it is still unknown how students perceive their difficulties and what reasons students have for their underachievement.

### **THE IELTS INSTITUTIONAL SETTING AT UAEU**

At UAEU English is the language of instruction in undergraduate and postgraduate college courses. Students applying for study at UAEU are required to take the IELTS, and admission to courses is restricted to students with an IELTS score of 4.5 (deemed equivalent to a TOEFL 450). In line with UAEU college requirements, the University General Requirement Unit (UGRU), which is a first-year program, offers the IELTS preparation courses. Each preparation course lasts 17 weeks, has 12 contact hours per week, and specifically focuses on helping students achieve the best possible score in the test.

UGRU's general mission in offering IELTS preparatory courses is to enable students to become successful in entering college life through participation in a developmental program guided by four core values: (1) A continuously improving *learning environment* that balances innovation with tradition in an ongoing cycle of evaluation, (2) *effective communication* which promotes a free flow of information and ideas in an atmosphere of trust and respect within and beyond the university, (3) *community participation* which encourages students, staff, and instructors to take an active, responsible role in university and community life, and (4) *student focus* which places students at the center of college activity, emphasizing their academic and social development while also respecting the country's cultural environment.

### **Student Participation in Understanding Student Underperformance in IELTS**

An effective way to gain an insight into factors that impede or enhance student performance is to investigate factors that can have an influence on their attitudes to learning (Earthman & Lemasters, 1996; Lackney, 2000), and performance (Frazier, 1993; Ayers, 1999; Edwards, 1996; Clark, 2002). Similarly, consulting learners and extending opportunities for their participation impacts levels of achievement and academic performance (Rudduck, 2006). In compliance with placing students at the center of the learning activity, and emphasizing their academic and social development while also respecting the country's cultural environment, the UAEU strives to enable its students to become successful through participation in reflections on their educational conditions. From a personal belief that learning conditions can be enhanced

through listening to students' perspectives, this study has enlisted student voices about how an improvement in student IELTS performance could be achieved. My inspiration is that students' views can give valuable information for the refreshing of IELTS learning conditions at UAEU.

To this end, over a period of 3 years, I carried out a series of projects focusing on reasons behind the underperformance of UAEU students in the IELTS test. A key procedure in those projects was to seek students' views on learning conditions and to give them some degree of involvement in proposing change. Two hundred and fifty students in IELTS preparation courses who have (or had) to sit IELTS as a university requirement were asked for their feedback on existing conditions of IELTS teaching and learning in UGRU. In appreciation of their efforts, they were offered opportunities to take part in suggesting solutions and designing remedial strategies for the problem. This way, students were not only consulted for data as sources, but were also given some degree of active involvement in the anticipated process of change. Surveys and discussions were conducted with the IELTS learners (Fielding's student involvement as data source), and reflective log journals of their ideas on how to help them achieve better test performance were collected (Fielding's student involvement as active participants). Transcripts of students' responses were then generated. Students' open suggestions for reform were also acquired through Blackboard discussion forums which served both as an additional layer of data, and to which students aired their frustrations and brought back their emerging ideas and developing insights.

### **The UAEU Student Perspective**

Gathering students' reflections, comments, and proposed changes for improvement provided a useful way to identify possible cognitive problems associated with their underperforming in IELTS. The findings also showed a number of suggestions that students say would help them to perform better in IELTS. The short time allowed for learning IELTS skills was the most frequently mentioned problem, and many students said they would like a longer span of time to enable them to practice more effectively on IELTS requirements. One IELTS candidate preparing for the first retake went further to make an explicit link between time and depth of learning: "[T]oo much to do... too many homework... we need more time. I think if we have more time, we relax, and if we relax, we understand better."

Many students had said that there was a need for UAEU to provide a better scheduling of classes in the preparation courses. Gathered reflective log books offered evidence that students are concerned about evening classes. An IELTS candidate, preparing for his second retake stated, "Classes in the evenings are bad. Classes should be in mornings and then students would have energy to be there and work." An IELTS ex-candidate who was successful on the second retake commented, "[The u]niversity could improve class time and classes during days. No classes in weekends. No classes in evenings." "The university should change the time of classes because in evenings students are tired after long days of classes," said an IELTS ex-candidate who was successful on the third retake.

Another important factor that UAEU students seem acutely affected by emerged as the number of students in classes. A freshman IELTS candidate preparing for the third retake had this to say:

There are 25 people in my class. How can I have [a] turn to say anything? Teacher goes from one person to another, but gives only short time for each. Please give more time for me in class. 27 students in my class is too large. I need more time. I am very afraid I will fail.

There were also calls for teaching techniques to be more “modern” and “exciting.” Rationale for such a change included arguments that new teaching strategies ought to include ‘inspiring’ pedagogical approaches which, in order to have effect, ought to be discussed with the students concerned. An IELTS ex-candidate who was successful on the third retake lamented as follows:

We want something interesting... that will make us interested. We do not need the teacher to stand and speak and speak. Maybe we want to be the teacher one day, or we want to just learn by speaking as a group... you know what I mean – something new in the way of learning.

An additional shortcoming was the poorly maintained and under-resourced English language clubs. A Freshman IELTS candidate said, “The clubs are closed or have no staff. I go to one, no one is there. I go to another, secretary says closed, I go to third, one student is waiting, no one cares. All is not working.”

Other suggestions for improvement brought along some highly personal and imaginative ideas. Individual entries mentioned: “[I]ntroducing music into classroom teaching,” “studying in nature, like in a park or garden so that we see the colors of sand and grass,” “making all classrooms like clubs for drawing, art [hand-made ornaments or decorative items], henna [a reddish brown dye used especially on hair].” One highly imaginative concept was the use of “relaxing” chairs and desks, and dramatic color schemes on walls of classrooms. Clearly, students making those comments surpassed the track of discussion on effective ways to improve student academic performance, and extended suggestions of un-academic innovations far from possible in the Arab culturally-restricted academic atmosphere.

## CONCLUSION

Driven by concerns about students’ underperformance in the IELTS, UAEU students preparing to take the test were consulted in a series of projects to give their opinions on existing conditions of IELTS teaching and to document their participation in suggesting strategies for improvement. The principle objectives of the project were to ensure a reflection of the aspirations of students, give students a voice in contributing to their education, understand students’ responses to learning conditions (and how they can hinder their learning), foster students’ awareness and interest in change, and encourage a sense of feelings heard and valued, and being treated like responsible students.

As a symbol of commitment to their education and in an effort to highlight reasons behind their underperformance in IELTS, 250 students highlighted a number of shortcomings in their IELTS learning conditions and suggested different initiatives for change. The cognitive impact of shortcomings highlighted by these students is not measured here, but it is clear that students feel that factors such as scheduling of classes, poor resources, student numbers in classes, and traditional teacher-centered teaching approaches run counter to successful test performance.

Now that UAEU students provided some useful insights into what needs to be different in the learning of language skills required by IELTS, the next step would be to investigate possible links between what was highlighted in these students’ perspectives and the actual test performance at UAEU. My concern here would not only be to use learner consultation to get a closer view of how test performance could be improved from the learners’ perspective, but also

to signal respect for learners' involvement, and strike a balance between existing conditions of learning and the 'what could work' criterion.

Feedback from students who have had a direct involvement in taking and retaking IELTS suggests a number of pedagogical suggestions, which can positively influence their attitudes and test performance. Of course, whether their suggestions are objectified, or if there is an explanation as to why some cannot be objectified, students will at least feel that they have a stake in their learning, and may therefore increase their learning commitment. Either way, it will take time to adopt some of the suggestions students made, but at the very least, adopting such a student participatory approach inspires students to experience and discover creative life skills such as problem-solving, team working, communication, and negotiation, all of which can stimulate self-belief and confidence—the very characteristics that administrators at UAEU seek to empower their students with.

*Rima Aboudan published in English Language Teaching, Education for General Practice, Academic Leadership Journal, International Journal of Arts and Sciences, The Reading Matrix, and Semiotica, and presented her findings in international conferences at Harvard, London, New York, Santa Barbara, Austria, Germany, and Turkey, and Switzerland. Dr. Aboudan is a Principal Investigator, together with the David McNeill Labs, working on gestures, and is also a collaborator with Willibald Ruch on Gelotophobia. Aboudan's professional distinction won her a research fellowship from NASA when she worked with Aberdeen University on the psychological aftermath of aviation accidents. In 1996-1999, she was the psycholinguistic evaluator of patient-doctor consultations as required by the GP Registrars Summative Assessment Scheme in Scotland and the British Medical Association. Dr. Aboudan is on the editorial board of a number of prestigious journals including International Journal of English Linguistics, International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, English for Specific Purposes World, English Language Teaching, ATINER, GLOSSA, and Comparative Education Review.*

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