Sino-US English Teaching, October 2023, Vol. 20, No. 10, 400-408
doi:10.17265/1539-8072/2023.10.004

Relationships Between Chinese EFL Learners' IELTS Band Score and Motivated Strategies for Learning

ZHANG Yue
University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

EFL learners, who study English as a foreign language, often use different learning strategies in the learning process, with positive and negative results in their academic performance. Whether these learning strategies are effective or not are questions to be explored. So, the author examined the relationship between Chinese EFL learners' test results and the use of motivated strategies for learning in English learning. Participants are students who have taken a high-stake standardized English proficiency test: IELTS (International English Language Testing System) with band score obtained. The results show that students' performance on high-stakes assessment is significantly associated with the use of motivated learning strategies like internal value in sharp contrast to test anxiety, which bears no relevance. Interviews are then implemented to candidates with different levels of English proficiency to figure out other related factors contributing to the test results.

Keywords: IELTS, learning strategies, test assessment, EFL learners

Introduction

Assessments on English proficiency tests have gained popularity among scholars and participants, as EFL learners are going great lengths to explore how to improve their performance in various tests these days, and this is especially true for Chinese EFL learners, test-takers, and test-designers. It is said that there must be some relationship between the candidates' performance and their internal or external factors (Baird, Andrich, Hopfenbeck, & Stobart, 2017). These factors are associated with students' learning outcomes in the forms of test-taking anxiety and course schedules (Ryan & Weinstein, 2009). Some studies have shown that students' beliefs on tests have a close bearing on their learning approaches, motivations, and outcomes (Brown & Hirschfeld, 2008). Also, gaining an insight into students' beliefs on test allows us to know how students prepare for exams and what they learn (Struyven, Dochy, & Janssens, 2005). Therefore, students' assessment and preparation on test are associated with their test results. Although much researches have focused on the validity of language test and instructions for teaching, little is known for the relationship between students' learning strategies and the resulting outcomes brought by them.

To further analyse the relationship between this, this paper employs the high-stake language test—IELTS (International English Language Testing System), and the well-established questionnaire—MSLQ (Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire) with revision, to explore the correlation between Chinese EFL learners' performance and their learning strategies. The IELTS is a high-stake English proficiency test acknowledged by many countries around the world to evaluate candidates' language ability both in academic environment and the

ZHANG Yue, postgraduate, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

real life. MSLQ has been used in various studies to measure participants' learning strategies (e.g., Ahmed, van der Werf, Kuyper, & Minnaert, 2013; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). Revised versions of MSLQ are distributed and the collected data are analyzed by Pearson correlation, followed by semi-structured interviews on some participants who have reached typical scores in the IELTS test. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1 Are there some correlations between students learning strategies and their IELTS band scores?

2 which factors are most influential ones in terms of different levels of IELTS band scores?

Literature Review

Language learners often hold a wide variety of beliefs towards language learning, such as expectation, commitment, learning strategies, and outcomes (Horwitz, 1988). To measure learners' learning strategies, Horwitz has done researches in language aptitude, learning difficulties, and motivations across different nationalities, gender, ages, and proficiency levels. Other researches have also found that students' motivations are related to proficiency in language learning (Tang & Tian, 2015). They all found that, however, learners tend to use some learning strategies in second language acquisition, regardless of their level of proficiency. These self-regulated learners take initiatives to use learning strategies reflecting personal and contextual components associated with their academic performance for further improvement (Pintrich, 2004).

To examine learners' learning strategies, Pintrich and his colleagues have developed the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ; Pintrich, Smith, Garc á, & McKeachie, 1993) to measure beliefs, including self-efficacy, internal values, test anxiety, cognitive strategy, and self-regulation. MSLQ consists of a total of 44 questions on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from "Very untrue" (1) to "Very true" (7), which can be classified into the five dimensions mentioned above.

The proficiency levels of participants are reflected in their IELTS band scores. IELTS is an instrument administered by UCLES and used for university admission purposes. This is a worldly well-accepted test to measure both academic and general English language proficiency. And this research focuses on the academic genre only. In IELTS test for academic purposes, there are four modules (listening, reading, writing, and speaking), with each part consisting 25% of overall band score. Four separate scores are averaged to get an overall band score, which is a valid indicator of candidates' English proficiency (IELTS, 2002).

Research Design

Method

To examine English learners' learning strategies, 155 Chinese learners who have taken the IELTS test are invited to report their overall band score. They then are required to complete a revised version of MSLQ. Basics and correlation between IELTS band score and different learning strategies are analyzed. Finally, two of them with different IELTS band scores are invited to do a semi-structured interview. Their responses are recorded, transcribed, and coded into five dimensions in accordance with MSLQ.

Data Collection

The identity of participants is students who are taking courses in secondary school or university, and others are adults with full-time jobs. They are chosen randomly from different faculties, genders, and age brackets (from 15-30). All of the subjects can be classified into five age brackets, including below 15, 15-18, 19-22, 23-25, and 26 above. Similarly, their IELTS band scores are also collected into five levels, including below 5.5, 6.0, 6.5, 7.0,

and 7.5+.

After that, the author invites them to complete a questionnaire known as MSLQ. However, some of the questions in MSLQ issued in 1993 are rather repetitive and cannot suit Chinese EFL learners' situations today. So, some modifications are made to curtail some questions, with five questions raised in every dimension. In this way, a revised version of MSLQ is done for further research. In this MSLQ questionnaire, 25 questions in terms of five dimensions (self-efficacy, internal value, test anxiety, cognitive strategy, and self-regulation) are listed. 186 copies of questionnaire were distributed, with 155 being qualified for the analysis of Pearson correlation.

As a complement, semi-structured interviews are conducted to get an in-depth analysis of participants' learning strategies. Two Chinese test-takers are invited whose scores are representative at different band levels (7.0 and 6.0, respectively) to share their learning experience in preparing for the IELTS. These questions include their assessment on the test, the difference between their expected score and the real one, their motivation, possible difficulties, and learning strategies, etc. All of these interviews were conducted face-to-face in Chinese, with subjects' consents on the recording about 10 minutes. Subsequently, their responses are translated into manuscripts with the help of computer. Except for the instructions, confidentiality agreement, and concluding remarks, basic questions are listed.

1. What are your expected score and the real one? (Overall and four separate ones)
2. How long have been prepared for IELTS test? And the estimated hours in total?
3. What methods have you adopted to revise for this? Self-study, or taking lessons? (If you took some lessons, which module and how many hours did you take?)
4. What are your learning strategies? Explain receptive and productive parts respectively.
5. Have you ever felt anxiety or other negative emotions during the test preparation? If it was true, then how did you manage to address it?

After that, some responses from five interviewees are collected and are categorized into five dimensions measured in the revised MSLQ according to content. The frequencies of the responses are counted in relation to their IELTS band scores to figure out if they are related or not.

Results

Results of MSLQ

Cronbach's Alpha	items
.831	33

Figure 1. Reliability of MSLQ.

Number of KMO sampling suitability quantities		.860
Bartlett spherical test	Approximate chi square	2108.811
	Freedom	378
	Significance	.000

Figure 2. KMO and the Bartlett test of MSLQ.

According to Figure 1 and Figure 2, 155 copies of revised MSLQ are collected for analysis, of which the value of reliability is 0.831, while the value the validity tested by KMO is 0.860. Both of these figures are above 0.8, which means this revised questionnaire is reliable and valid for research.

		Gender 1: Male 2: Female	Age 1: below15 2: 15-18 3: 19-22 4: 23-25 5: 26-30	Highest IELTS Band Score	Average Score of Dimension I: Self-efficiency	Average Score of Dimension II: Internal Value	Average Score of Dimension III: Test anxiety	Average Score of Dimension IV: Cognitive Strategy	Average Score of Dimension V: Self-regulation
Cases	Valid	155	155	155	155	155	155	155	155
Mean		1.48	3.65	6.371	4.2671	4.3406	2.8090	4.1626	4.0232
Medium		1.00	4.00	6.500	4.4000	4.6000	2.6000	4.2000	4.2000
Most		1	3	6.5	4.20	5.00	2.60	4.80	4.20
Standard		.501	.778	.4929	.79455	.77230	.92535	.78750	.87206
SD		.251	.605	.243	.631	.596	.856	.620	.760

Figure 3. Basic figures for MSLQ.

According to Figure 3, the basic descriptions of the gender, age groups, overall IELTS band score, and the average score of five categories are listed. As suggested in the Figure 3, 25 questions of MSLQ can be categorized into five dimensions, including self-efficiency, internal value, test anxiety, cognitive strategy, and self-regulation.

It is clear that 155 participants' response are recorded. The mean value of gender is 1.48, which means that nearly half of participants are men, while the rest of the half are mostly women. In terms of age brackets, the mean value is 3.65. From the overall five groups investigated, the first three groups can be defined as youngsters, while the last two are adults. So, this means that nearly half of participants are students in secondary schools, while the rest of them are university students or adults with full-time jobs. When it comes to the mean value of overall IELTS band score, 6.371 is revealed. However, according to the figures issued by the IELTS official in 2023, the average score of Chinese candidates is 6.10 (Retrieved from https://www.chinaielts.org/). The gap between these 155 participants' average score and the official average score is 0.271, which is acceptable given the scale of this research. Finally, with regard to average scores from five dimensions, the average scores from self-efficiency, internal value, cognitive strategy, and self-regulation are all above 4.0, while test-anxiety counterpart is only 2.8. This suggests that the higher level of self-efficiency/internal value/cognitive strategy/self-regulation a candidate has, the higher IELTS score he may achieve, but this does not work when it comes to test anxiety.

		Highest IELTS Band Score	Average Score of Dimension I: Self-efficiency
Highest IELTS Band Score	Pearson Relevance	1	.024
	Sig.（Double Tier）		.768
	Cases	155	155
Average Score of Dimension I: Self-efficiency	Pearson Relevance	.024	1
	Sig.（Double Tier）	.768	
	Cases	155	155

Figure 4. Correlation between IELTS band score and self-efficiency.

According to Figure 4, correlation between overall IELTS band score and the average of self-efficacy is listed at the 0.768 level (two-tailed), meaning that there is a strong correlation between these two factors. In other words, if a candidate has a strong level of self-efficiency, he would probably achieve a better performance in the IELTS test.

		Highest IELTS Band Score	Average Score of Dimension II: Internal Value
Highest IELTS Band Score	Pearson Relevance	1	-.056
	Sig.（Double Tier）		.488
	Cases	155	155
Average Score of Dimension II: Internal Value	Pearson Relevance	-.056	1
	Sig.（Double Tier）	.488	
	Cases	155	155

Figure 5. Correlation between IELTS band score and internal value.

According to Figure 5, correlation between overall IELTS band score and the average of internal value is listed at the 0.488 level (two-tailed), meaning that there is a moderate correlation between these two factors. In other words, internal value may or may not play a determinant role in ones' performance in the IELTS test.

		Highest IELTS Band Score	Average Score of Dimension III: test anxiety
Highest IELTS Band Score	Pearson Relevance	1	-.107
	Sig.（Double Tier）		.185
	Cases	155	155
Average Score of Dimension III: test anxiety	Pearson Relevance	-.107	1
	Sig.（Double Tier）	.185	
	Cases	155	155

Figure 6. Correlation between IELTS band score and test anxiety.

According to Figure 6, correlation between overall IELTS band score and the average of test anxiety is listed at the -0.107 level (two-tailed), meaning that there is a no correlation between these two factors. In other words, a candidate may achieve better IELTS scores with a high level of test anxiety or even with no test anxiety at all. This is probably due to their basics of English skills. A competent candidate with a good command of English may be not stressed before IELTS test and can achieve desirable scores, while a counterpart with weak command of English may be haunted by a high level of test anxiety and perform poorly in the IELTS test. This is mainly because English proficiency cannot be attained in a relatively short time. Some candidates are under great amount of anxiety due to their high expectation in contrast to their errors made in mock tests, while others are anxious due to their inability and the lack of confidence to complete the whole IELTS test. While both of them will experience more or less test anxiety, the reasons behind are quite different and will play different role in determining their performance. Some of the anxiety can be good motivators, and some can be obstacles, while others have nothing to do with candidates' performance. In summary, the two variables are not significantly related.

		Highest IELTS Band Score	Average Score of Dimension IV: cognitive strategy
Highest IELTS Band Score	Pearson Relevance	1	.141
	Sig.（Double Tier）		.079
	Cases	155	155
Average Score of Dimension IV: cognitive strategy	Pearson Relevance	.141	1
	Sig.（Double Tier）	.079	
	Cases	155	155

Figure 7. Correlation between IELTS band score and cognitive strategy.

According to Figure 7, correlation between overall IELTS band score and the average of cognitive strategy is listed at the 0.079 level (two-tailed), meaning that there is a weak correlation between these two factors. In other words, one's cognitive strategy almost has nothing to do with his performance in the IELTS test.

		Highest IELTS Band Score	Average Score of Dimension V: self-regulation
Highest IELTS Band Score	Pearson Relevance	1	.078
	Sig.（Double Tier）		.335
	Cases	155	155
Average Score of Dimension V: self-regulation	Pearson Relevance	.078	1
	Sig.（Double Tier）	.335	
	Cases	155	155

Figure 8. Correlation between IELTS band score and self-regulation.

According to Figure 8, correlation between overall IELTS band score and the average of cognitive strategy is listed at the 0.078 level (two-tailed), meaning that there is a weak correlation between these two factors. In other words, one's self-regulation almost has nothing to do with his performance in the IELTS test.

Results of Semi-Structured Interviews

Five dimensions	Relevant responses	Frequencies
Self-efficiency	efficient effective have made much progress	3
Internal value	confident, optimistic	2
Test anxiety	over-stressful	1
Cognitive strategy	Very common strategies	1
Self-regulation	self-study, taking lessons	2

Figure 9. Some responses given by a candidate with 7.0 IELTS band score.

Five dimensions	Relevant responses	Frequencies
Self-efficiency	no motivation	1
Internal value	little progress	1
Test anxiety	very anxious	1
Cognitive strategy	cannot say effective or not	1
Self-regulation	self-study, taking lessons cram for test at last	3

Figure 10. Some responses given by a candidate with 6.0 IELTS band score.

Two Chinese test takers, with 7.0 and 6.0 band score respectively, are invited to share their learning experience in preparing for the IELTS test, with two of the manuscripts recorded and transcribed, after which some key words of their responses are coded and classified into five dimensions with different frequencies. According to the Figure 9 and Figure 10, both of them have experienced some levels of test anxiety and taken some relevant measures to cope with them, yet there have little connection between their IELTS band score and the level of test anxiety. However, self-efficacy and internal values play more important role in the test preparation, which aligns with the results shown in the MSLQ.

Discussion

Beliefs About Test Assessment

This study aims to find out the relationships between Chinese EFL learners' IELTS band score and their motivated learning strategies. However, as IELTS is a high-stake language test with high cost for signing up, most of candidates are fully-prepared before taking the test. If it is not for the IELTS but other similar tests, Chinese EFL students might take different learning strategies. When students recognize the importance of the test, they are more likely to use utilize meta-cognitive strategies, such as monitoring, self-regulation, and planning (Duncan & McKeachie, 2005). Because of this, teachers are supposed to help students shape and adapt their assessment on high-stake language tests. Some rationale for test assessment can be provided to students, which helps them better understand the test and take more effective learning strategies. Moreover, there should be various forms of tasks, so that students can have equal access to complete these tasks (Dorman & Knightley, 2006). In this way, instructors can encourage students to develop learning strategies suitable for IELTS.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study which could be revised for future studies: Firstly, the author fails to consider other similar high-stakes language tests, like TOEFL and PTE, which might be more popular among learners. Secondly, only two candidates with 7.0 and 6.0 IELTS band score attend interviews, and it could include more varieties. And thirdly, other possible factors can serve as interference in students' learning strategies but have been ignored, such as the purpose of taking IELTS, the deadline of application for school, and past experiences of IELTS.

Conclusions

From the data collected in MSLQ, it is clear that there are strong correlations between IELTS band score and self-efficacy, while there are moderate correlations between IELTS band score and internal value, as well as self-regulation, with other two factors (test anxiety and cognitive strategy) being irrelevant. This means that candidates with high level of self-efficacy and internal value are more likely to reach higher score than those without. In contrast, test anxiety and cognitive strategy have nothing to do with the overall band score. In other words, a candidate can reach higher score under the great amount of text anxiety, but this might not work for another candidate, who can also be successful in the IELTS test with minimal level of test anxiety. Cognitive strategy, similarly, follows this same pattern and exerts little influence on the candidates' performance.

In semi-structured interviews, some candidates with different IELTS band score report similar experiences in their test-preparation. While these two candidates reach different levels of IELTS band (7.0 and 6.0, respectively), both have experienced different levels of test anxiety before taking the IELTS. For the 7.0 one, he has a high level of self-recognition and confidence to face the test and manage to address the corresponding stress, which means his self-efficacy and internal value can be great motivators for his high band score. In contrast, the 6.0 counterpart has a low level of confidence and motivation in the process of practicing, as she is very dependent on teachers' guidance and encouragement, which justifies the strong relations between IELTS band score and self-efficacy. This means self-efficacy and internal value are more influential factors of learning strategies for Chinese English learners.

References

Ahmed, W., van der Werf, G., Kuyper, H., & Minnaert, A. (2013). Emotions, self-regulated learning, and achievement in mathematics: A growth curve analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 105*(1), 150-161.

Baird, J., Andrich, D., Hopfenbeck, T. N., & Stobart, C. (2017). Assessment and learning: Fields apart? *Assessment in Education Principles Policy and Practice, 24*, 317-350.

Brown, G. T. L., & Hirschfeld, H. F. (2008). Students' conceptions of assessment: Links to outcomes. *Assessment in Education Principles Policy and Practice, 15*(1), 3-17.

Dorman, J. P., & Knightley, W. M. (2006). Development and validation of an instrument to assess secondary school students' perceptions of assessment tasks. *Educational Studies, 32*(1), 47-58.

Duncan, T. G., & McKeachie, W. J. (2005). The making of the motivated strategies for learning questionnaire. *Educational Psychologist, 40*(2), 117-128.

Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *Modern Language Journal, 72*(iii), 283-294.

International English Language Testing System (IELTS). (2002). *The IELTS handbook, 16*, 121-123. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, The British Council, IDP Australia.

Komarraju, M., & Nadler, D. (2013). Self-efficacy and academic achievement: Why do implicit beliefs, goals, and effort regulation matter? *Learning and Individual Differences, 25*, 67-72.

Pintrich, P. R. (2004). A conceptual framework for assessing motivation and self-regulated learning in college students. *Educational Psychology Review, 16*(4), 385-407.

Pintrich, P. R., Smith, D. A., Garc á, T., & McKeachie, W. J. (1993). Reliability and predictive validity of the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 53*(3), 801-813.

Ryan, R. M., & Weinstein, N. (2009). Undermining quality teaching and learning: A self-determination theory perspective on high-stakes testing. *School Field, 7*(2), 224-233.

Struyven, K., Dochy, F., & Janssens, S. (2005). Students' perceptions about evaluation and assessment in higher education: A review. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 30*(4), 325-341.

Tang, M., & Tian, J. (2015). Associations between Chinese EFL graduate students' beliefs and language learning strategies. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 18*(2), 131-152.