

## Research Notes

# Evaluating the effect of a new extensive reading syllabus on Japanese university students' IELTS scores through an action research project

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### Abstract

An action research project was carried out to evaluate the effect of a new academic reading syllabus on Japanese university students' IELTS scores. Seven Japanese first-year students participated in the study and enrolled in an academic reading course which had been taught by the author for 3 years prior to this project. The overall goal of the course was to improve students' academic reading proficiency in preparation for studying abroad. However, in the past students enrolled in the course struggled to achieve the minimum IELTS scores required to enter English medium universities abroad. To address this problem, a new extensive reading syllabus was introduced, with the goal of improving the IELTS scores of the students taking the course. An evaluation of the new syllabus showed that the majority of the participants, four of the seven, managed to achieve the minimum IELTS scores required for studying abroad following completion of the course. Although the new syllabus appeared to have a positive effect on students' IELTS scores, this effect was dependent on participants doing a large amount of extensive reading outside of class.

## Background

The author had been teaching academic reading at Seijo University for 3

years at the time this action research project was undertaken. During this time a better understanding of students' needs and goals had gradually developed, which prompted the author to introduce several changes to the syllabus, course content and assessment criteria in the 4th year of teaching the course. These changes were adopted in order to improve the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test reading scores of the students enrolled in the course. The objective of the academic reading course has always been to improve students' English academic reading skills in preparation for studying abroad. Initially, the course focused on general reading skills as well as skills such as critical thinking which are required for academic study. However, it became apparent that students taking the academic reading course were struggling to meet the minimum IELTS score requirements for studying abroad. Based on this observation, the course syllabus and content were changed to address students' immediate need for higher IELTS scores. The new syllabus focused on specific question types found in the IELTS test which students found difficult or tricky, as well as on test-taking skills and reading skills. This paper evaluates how effective these changes appear to have been and offers suggestions for future improvements for both this and similar tertiary-level academic reading courses focused on passing English proficiency test such as the IELTS test.

### **Designing the new syllabus**

A review of the literature on the difficulties students from Asia encounter when taking tests such as IELTS, as well as a review of the literature on academic reading was conducted during the first stage of syllabus design. In addition, previous students' performance scores during the course and their comments from course evaluations were reflected upon. During the second stage of syllabus design, a new syllabus was created with the explicit intention of focusing on skills and content which would increase students' chances of getting high IELTS test scores, and which took into account salient issues raised in the

literature.

### *The IELTS test*

“The IELTS is a high-stakes gate keeping test used by universities to screen applicants for language ability” (Drummond, 2018, p. 113 - 114). There are two types of IELTS test, the academic module and the general module. The academic module is used to gauge test-takers readiness to study through the medium of English at the university level. The IELTS test is a four skills test, which means that speaking, writing, reading and listening skills are all tested. IELTS test-takers receive a score of between 1 and 9 in each of the four sections (speaking, writing, reading and listening), as well as an overall score. A student's IELTS test result is commonly used by universities in which the language of instruction is English, to determine whether or not that student is capable of studying through the medium of English. Universities require potential students to achieve a minimum overall score in order to be admitted. At the lower end of the spectrum, universities require an overall score of 5.5, but a minimum requirement of 6.0 is also common especially at universities outside of the USA. Additionally, some universities have minimum score requirements for each section of the test, for example requiring applicants to get a score of 5.5 for speaking, writing, reading and listening. As such, IELTS test results can have a big impact on students' ability to study overseas at English medium universities, as well as affect the range of options open to them for studying abroad.

In the Japanese context, IELTS test-takers seem to have struggled to obtain high IELTS test scores. From 2003 to 2018, Japanese test-takers mean overall score in the IELTS test rose from 5.65 to around 5.80. While this might sound positive, it is important to bear in mind that the minimum score required by many universities for exchange students is 5.5. Increasingly, universities require a score of 6.0 for admission. This means that a large proportion of Japanese test takers are barely achieving the minimum requirements for studying abroad. In

comparison, Korean test-takers overall scores have risen from 5.60 to 6.0 in the same time period, an increase which is more in line with global university entrance requirements (Pearson, 2021). From the data it appears that Japanese university students in particular may need a large amount of support to increase their IELTS scores.

There are, however, hopeful signs as well. The same study showed that Japanese test-takers seem to do best in the reading section of the IELTS test, getting a mean score of 6.06 in 2018, but seem to struggle in the writing section (mean of 5.43) and the speaking section (mean of 5.56). In fact, the mean speaking score of Japanese test-takers has fallen by 0.16 since 2003 (Pearson, 2021). It might seem strange then, to focus on reading skills in this particular project. It should be pointed out that these mean figures only give a broad overview of the situation, and are often not reflective of local realities. For example, from observation of student scores since 2019 at Seijo University, students who do not achieve a score of 5.5 in the reading section are less likely to achieve an overall score of 5.5. This is because, as stated previously, Japanese students tend to struggle with the writing and speaking sections the most. If the student cannot achieve a score of 5.5 in the relatively easy reading section, the likelihood of them achieving a score of 5.5 in the comparatively difficult writing and speaking sections is low. It is these students, who need to develop a strong foundation in academic reading in order to have a hope of getting an overall IELTS score of 5.5 which this study hoped to assist.

In terms of the reading component of the IELTS test, this section of the test is 60 minutes long and requires the test taker to read 3 long passages, each of which is over 2000 words long, and answer a total of 40 questions relating to the texts. Generally, each reading passage will have 13 to 14 questions relating to the text. Because each reading passage is fairly long, time management and the ability to read quickly and find information in the passage quickly are important skills necessary for achieving a high reading score. In addition, the types of

questions that are asked in the reading section are extremely varied. The official IELTS exam preparation practice test book published by Cambridge lists 14 different question types that may appear in the reading test, but states that the list is not exhaustive (Cambridge Assessment English, 2021, p. 5). As there is such a wide variety of questions used in the reading section, test-takers wanting to achieve a high score need to be familiar with how best to answer a variety of questions. One particular question type that is unique to the IELTS test is the True, False, Not Given and Yes, No, Not Given question type. In this type of question, test-takers are asked to choose whether a given statement is true, false or not given according to the information in the reading passage. The addition of the third 'not given' option can cause difficulty for test-takers when trying to determine whether a statement clearly contradicts information in the reading passage (false), or whether the statement merely contains information that is not included in the reading passage (not given).

Another difficulty that past students have had in completing IELTS-type tests, is that some questions require the number of words in the answer to fall within a set range. For example, IELTS reading questions may ask the test-taker to fill-in a blank using no more than 3 words. Test takers who are unfamiliar with phrases such as 'no more than', can easily fall into the trap of supplying too many words. In order to perform as well as possible in the IELTS test, practice with answering these types of questions is necessary.

### *Academic Reading*

Whilst test-taking skills and familiarity with question types can give students an advantage in a reading test, the ability to read quickly and accurately is the foundation on which success in both reading tests and academic study is built. In order to improve in speed and accuracy of reading, a large vocabulary knowledge is required. Somewhat paradoxically, one way in which vocabulary can be acquired is through reading a large quantity in the chosen language over

an extended period of time. This type of reading is referred to as extensive reading in the literature and research has shown that reading extensively in another language results in a certain amount of new vocabulary being acquired without the need for any outside explicit teaching of the vocabulary (Brown, Waring & Donkaewbua, 2008; Pellicer-Sanchez & Schmitt, 2010; Waring & Takaki, 2003). It has been estimated that second-language learners need to know about 9000 word families in order to be able to easily read most English texts (Grabe, 2009). Because in-class teaching time is limited, students need a way to acquire vocabulary on their own outside of class time if they want to become fluent English readers, and extensive reading offers them this opportunity.

Extensive reading appears to have other benefits too. Gains in listening comprehension and oral communication have also been reported (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Lightbown et al., 2002; Spada & Lightbown, 1989). While the extent of these gains remains unclear due to some uncertainty of the methods of implementing extensive reading (Grabe & Stroller, 2020), most researchers agree that extensive reading is beneficial for students. Indeed, a meta-analysis of extensive reading studies concluded that extensive reading clearly led to improvements in students' reading speed and comprehension (Nakanishi, 2015).

Importantly, true extensive reading, which involves reading for pleasure rather than to answer comprehension or test questions, is only possible if 95% or more of the vocabulary in a text is known to the reader (Leather & Uden, 2021). This can be an issue in academic reading where low-frequency words are common. If readers know less than 95% of the vocabulary in the text, their reading speed and comprehension will decrease to the point that continuing to read will become extremely frustrating (Nation & Waring, 2020). Therefore, extensive reading programs generally suggest directing students to texts that match their reading level and offer a pleasant reading experience. Graded readers are one way that this can be done. Unfortunately, there are very few graded readers that specifically cater to academic English. Even non-fiction graded

readers which do not explicitly use academic language are vastly outnumbered by fiction graded readers. However, limiting student selection to specific sets of graded readers or texts can have a negative impact on student motivation.

In fact, 'learners seldom find books in school libraries to be interesting' which creates a problem for teachers hoping to encourage reading in a second language (Leather & Uden, 2021, p. 7). In recent years, publishers of graded readers have tried to make them more appealing by providing supplementary online materials and publishing graded readers in electronic format. While these new formats may appeal to some readers, teachers themselves can encourage student motivation to read by increasing the level of autonomy that students have to choose the material they wish to read (Guthrie et. al, 2007; Leather & Uden, 2021; Nation & Waring, 2020). This sense of autonomy has been shown to have a positive impact on motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, in an academic extensive reading program it seems that a balance will have to be found between providing students with texts that are easy to read, providing students with texts that contain academic vocabulary, and allowing students the autonomy to choose texts themselves.

### *The New Syllabus*

Based on the above literature review, as well as on students' past performance in the course. A new 15-week syllabus was designed. The first step was to replace most of the classes in the old syllabus dealing with general academic reading skills with classes focusing on specific IELTS question types. A comparison of the old and new syllabus can be found in Table 1. A screening test which was held during the first week of the old syllabus was no longer required in the new syllabus due to a change in course policy.

**Table 1***A Comparison of the Old and the New Academic Reading Course Syllabus*

Old Syllabus		New Syllabus	
Week	Topic	Week	Topic
1	Screening Test	1	Skimming
2	Skimming	2	Scanning
3	Scanning	3	Synonyms & Vocabulary
4	Synonyms & Vocabulary	4	IELTS Questions: True, False, Not Given
5	Making Predictions	5	Student Presentations 1
6	Student Presentations 1	6	IELTS Questions: Word Limit Types
7	Unfamiliar Concepts	7	IELTS Questions: Sentence Endings
8	Text Organization	8	Review of IELTS Questions
9	Test 1	9	Test 1
10	Student Presentations 2	10	IELTS Questions: Yes, No, Not Given
11	Facts vs Opinions	11	IELTS Questions: Matching Headings
12	Thinking Critically	12	IELTS Questions: Choosing from a List
13	Inferring Meaning	13	Review of IELTS Questions
14	Test 2	14	Test 2
15	Student Presentations 3	15	Student Presentations 2
Old Assessment		New Assessment	
Participation 15%		Participation 20%	
Journal 15%		Journal 30%	
Presentations 10%X3 = 30%		Presentations 12.5%X2 = 25%	
Tests 20%X2 = 40%		Tests 12.5%X2 = 25%	

As can be seen in Table 1, the old syllabus focused on global reading and academic skills such as skimming, dealing with unfamiliar concepts and thinking critically. The new syllabus also introduced useful reading skills during the initial 3 weeks of the course, but then followed a pattern of focusing on how to answer one type of IELTS reading question each week. It should be noted that issues such as how to deal with unfamiliar concepts and how to think critically were touched on whenever these issues related to the method of answering a specific

IELTS question-type, but were not the focus of lessons.

In terms of assessment, students were assessed in four categories in both the old and the new syllabus, namely, participation, journal submission, presentation and test results. However, the weighting of these categories was changed in the new syllabus to ensure a better balance between formative and summative assessment. In the new syllabus, 50% of the students' assessment was formative (participation and journal submission) and 50% was summative (presentations and tests). The journal was a daily, written log of the texts that students had read in English each week, along with short comments or reactions to the texts. Formative assessment refers to assessment that is ongoing and provides both teachers and students with feedback about their progress. Summative assessment is used at the end of a course or section of a course to determine how much the student has learned or developed in a particular area (Richards, 2017, p. 283). As both the old and the new syllabus required students to read extensively in English every weekday, it was felt that the students' relative effort in this ongoing process of daily reading should count as much as (or even slightly more than) their summative test results.

In terms of the type of texts that students were exposed to, students were granted the autonomy to choose anything they liked to read at home. They were also provided with an online subscription to the XReading graded reader database for the duration of the course (<https://www.xreading.com>). Academic texts, of a similar length and difficulty level to those found in the IELTS reading test, were introduced in each class and students were encouraged to re-read these texts at home to review what they had learned. In this way, the author tried to achieve a balance between autonomy, access to reading texts at or below the students' reading ability, and access to academic texts. The new syllabus was implemented during the 2022 spring semester with the hope that it would result in an increase in students' IELTS reading scores. An evaluation of this implementation follows.

## Method

Action research offered an ideal framework for carrying out this study because of its focus on “the improvement of some aspect of professional practice”, in this case the course syllabus and student outcomes of the academic reading course (Wallace, 1998, p. 1). The following research question guided the study.

### **Research Question**

1. Can the students achieve the minimum IELTS score requirements for study abroad on completion of the new academic reading course?

In order to answer this research question, the seven students enrolled in the course were asked to register for the IELTS test during the summer vacation immediately following the end of the spring reading course. The results from their IELTS tests, as well as their results in the various class assessments, were used to gauge the relative success of the new syllabus.

## Results

Of the seven students enrolled in the academic reading course, IELTS test results for five were obtained. These five students all took the IELTS test during the summer vacation immediately following the end of the academic reading course. The remaining two students took the IELTS test one month later than the other students due to scheduling conflicts, and unfortunately, their results were not released in time for inclusion in this publication. The IELTS test scores of the five students for which IELTS scores were available are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2***IELTS Test Results for Japanese University Students After an Academic Reading Course*

Participant number	Overall Score	Reading Score	Listening Score	Writing Score	Speaking Score
P1F	5.0	5.0	5.0	5.5	5.0
P3F	5.5	5.5	5.0	5.5	5.0
P4F	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5
P7F	5.5	6.0	5.0	5.5	5.0
P8M	6.0	6.5	6.0	6.5	5.5

All of the students, except one, Participant P1F, were able to achieve the minimum IELTS test score of 5.5 or higher which is required for studying abroad. In addition, all of the students, except one, Participant P1F, were able to achieve scores of 5.5 or higher in the reading section of the IELTS test.

In terms of in-class performance, students' in-class performance on the reading tests were not markedly different from students' results the previous year. A comparison of the average test scores can be found in Table 3. Although the average scores in Test 1 were only 1% higher in 2022 than in 2021, the average score for Test 2 was 5.7% higher. The same tests were used in both 2021 and 2022 to allow for comparison.

**Table 3***A Comparison of the Average Scores Obtained For Two Reading Tests in 2021 and 2022*

2021 Reading Tests		2022 Reading Tests	
Test 1	Test 2	Test 1	Test 2
62.5%	52.5%	63.5%	58.2%

## Discussion

Overall, the new syllabus appears to have successfully resulted in students achieving IELTS scores which enable them to study abroad. The one participant who could only achieve an overall IELTS score of 5.0 and a reading score of 5.0 (Participant P1F) was also the only participant who did not use the XReading online graded reader database at all during the spring semester reading course. Although, Participant P1F regularly submitted the reading journal, they read on average only two short news stories every week. It appears reading short texts twice a week, rather than longer ones daily was not sufficient exposure to ensure a 5.5 score in the reading section of the IELTS test. Like many Japanese university students, Participant P1F is just below the required level for studying abroad. It seems that students who fall into this category will need to dedicate regular time daily, or at least every weekday, to reading English if they want to improve their IELTS score. It should be noted that this participant's attendance during the spring semester was exemplary, so their lower IELTS test score does not seem to be a result of being unfamiliar with IELTS reading test questions.

On the other hand, four of the participants managed to achieve IELTS scores that would enable them to study abroad. Participant P8M obtained a particularly high reading (6.5) and overall (6.0) IELTS score and was also the participant who most regularly used the XReading online database. Although it is impossible to draw firm conclusions from such a small-scale study, it appears that there is a tendency for those who regularly and extensively made use of online graded readers to obtain high reading and overall scores in the IELTS test.

## Conclusion

Overall, an evaluation of the new academic reading syllabus showed that students who completed this course were able to achieve high IELTS reading

and overall scores, provided that the students committed to reading extensively in English outside of class.

## Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the Seijo University President's Discretionary Fund Grant.

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