

# Competencies in the International Language Tests and the Language Education Curriculum: Navigating the Foundation of Prospective ESL Teachers for Certification

*Roxan T. Bayan, EdD and Boyet L. Batang, PhD  
Isabela State University, Philippines*

## Abstract

Higher education institutions have consistently prioritized pre-service preparation and training programs aimed at cultivating exceptional teachers since their role as teachers is significant in the academic achievement of pupils. Licensing and certification bodies such as Professional Regulations Commissions in the Philippines, and international language certification programs such as International English Language Test (IELTS) have been acknowledged for evaluating the competencies of teachers in their specific areas of expertise. The study sought to find out the congruence of the Language Education Program in the Philippines and IELTS competencies to determine the preparedness of ESL teachers to secure international certification in specific areas of the four Macroskills: Speaking, Listening, Reading, and Writing; and to form mechanisms for improving language education program in aiding IELTS Certification. The exploratory descriptive design of qualitative research was employed. The researcher concludes that the language education program addresses several competencies of the IELTS which can aid students under said program in gaining certification from the IELTS. However, the participants indicated that certain components need more focus as they related to the skills they found insufficient when taking the IELTS examination. They pointed out that certain areas in macro skills development are particularly useful since these areas are the concentration of the contents and tasks in IELTS. With this, mechanisms were identified so that professors could also address the development of the skills needed as they teach the courses under the language education program since the topics are also pertinent to the curriculum contents. Given this, it can be said that the success of students and ESL teachers in gaining language certification can be increased through the consolidated efforts of instruction and co-curricular programs such as training programs or institutional courses.

## Introduction

Among the various factors that influence the academic achievement of pupils, the role of teachers emerges as particularly significant. This assertion has been substantiated via extensive research and is widely acknowledged by experts and stakeholders on a global scale. As a result,

higher education institutions have consistently prioritized pre-service preparation and training programs aimed at cultivating exceptional teachers.

The 21st Century classroom has evolved from teacher-centered to learner-centered setup. As Gianchandani (2020) stated, the teacher's role has also evolved from being the sole fount of knowledge to being more of a facilitator of learning. Despite this transformation, the teacher remains a significant factor in the learning and achievement of students. Over other school-related factors, the teacher is estimated to have two to three times the effect on students' achievement. For this reason, national and international policies have been designed to promote and maintain teacher quality (Opper, 2021).

In addition to primary licensing bodies such as the Professional Regulations Commissions in the Philippines, alternative licensing and certification bodies have been acknowledged for evaluating teachers' competencies in their specific areas of expertise.

The International Language Test System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are widely recognized as the two predominant English language certification programs. In contrast, the IELTS is a more extensive assessment as it is employed for educational, immigration, and occupational purposes, whereas the TOEFL primarily emphasizes academic communication.

The study sought to find out the congruence of Language Education Program and IELTS competencies to determine the preparedness of ESL teachers in securing international certification in specific areas of the four Macroskills: Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing; and to form mechanisms for improving language education program in aiding IELTS Certification.

The scope of this study is restricted to examining the viewpoints of participants regarding the components of the language education program

that they perceive to be most aligned with their preparation for IELTS certification. These components include learning objectives, course content, learning experiences, and evaluation and assessment practices. Furthermore, the perspective of the participants regarding the impact of the language education program on the IELTS certification of ESL teachers in the four major language skills, namely speaking, listening, writing, and reading, is also given due consideration.

According to Chappell et al. (2019), IELTS is one of the most favored tests for government agencies, education providers, professional registration, accreditation agencies and other stakeholders requiring test scores in English proficiency. Merrifield (2007) also described IELTS as a benchmarking system for many professional associations all over the world and is specifically an established assessment system in the United Kingdom and Europe.

This study is restricted to English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers who have successfully completed the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, as they possess the highest level of expertise regarding the characteristics and requirements of the IELTS. Data saturation was employed, which determined the ten participants for the aforementioned investigation.

The training program intended for aspiring ESL Teachers in anticipation of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is structured to span an entire semester.

The purpose of this study was to gather relevant information to compare the competencies in the Language Education Program and IELTS, as a basis for the development of a program or alignment in the future.

For this study, the researcher aimed to develop an enhancement program design that is meant to meet the learning needs of prospective ESL teachers from a globalized perspective. This is achieved by an interview which determined the needs informed by the following data: the Participants' professional and personal information as well as the gaps in their language proficiency; the language information on the target situation; the Participants' needs from the course; and the language learning needs.

The certification of teachers and its impact on their performance and expertise has been

documented in various studies and reports with a vast majority of them identifying a significant relationship between said variables. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2009), certification programs allow teachers to go beyond their initial training, enriching their expertise in the field. Specifically, certification aids teachers in updating their knowledge in light of academic shifts and trends; improving their skills, attitudes, and approaches through newly-developed teaching techniques and objectives, new contexts, and new findings from educational research; and allows them to actuate changes in the curricula and other aspects of the teaching practice. Such is the impact on teachers that the education sector has come to view certification programs as a tool for professional enhancement.

Moreover, a commentary by Pugatch (2017) even stated that developing countries prioritize the certification of teachers with the belief that it improves teacher quality and qualifications.

The Isabela State University is a higher education institution duly recognized as one of the leading SUCs in Cagayan Valley. With the premise of this study, the researcher believes that ISU would see the fruition of its vision as the integration of an IELTS preparation and training program might be the first of its kind in the region and a great advantage for students taking language education courses therein.

With this, the researcher undertook this study to gain information pertinent to the possible design and development of a language teacher training program that would aid prospective teachers in preparing for IELTS certification.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The exploratory descriptive design of qualitative research was employed in this study, given its inherent characteristics. The selection of the design for this study was deliberate since the researcher is in the preliminary phases of investigating the subject matter. As the participants graduated from different universities and varied curricula, the use of a descriptive design was appropriate for this study as it facilitated the identification of specific details and patterns necessary for its completion. This design is particularly useful for answering "what" questions related to conditions within a given situation. The ultimate objective is to utilize

the results as a foundation for the development and implementation of an improvement program. As part of the triangulation process, a trainer-passer participant was included, and the researchers had to take the IELTS.

### **Participants of the Study**

The study's participants comprised 10 persons who specifically completed a language education program and successfully completed the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination. One of them is a trainer for IELTS. The participants in this study were purposefully selected due to their shown ability to provide sufficient saturation for the data. They possess extensive knowledge and expertise in the topic under investigation. Data saturation was employed, which led to a total of 10 participants. The researcher gathered the data necessary to draw conclusions and answers that were collected were already mentioned and emphasized by the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

To interpret the data gathered from the interview, the participants' transcribed statements were subjected to a coding process by Kathy Charmaz (Kenny and Fourie, 2015). The data was initially subjected to open coding in which the data are broken down into smaller analyses to identify core ideas and, in turn, develop codes for describing them.

### **Results and Discussion**

The present study involved conducting in-depth interviews with the Participants to gain insights into the key aspects of language education that are focused on IELTS preparation and certification. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the perceived contributions of the language education program in facilitating IELTS certification, as revealed by the Participants.

For the language education elements that are found attuned towards IELTS preparation and certification, the following competencies for speaking were identified: 1. Practicing conversational skills, 2. Exercising speaking skills by dialogue simulation, 3. Delivering speech, and 4. Instructional speaking through oral reporting.

This exhibits the elements derived from the participants regarding the skills within their language education program, specifically focused on preparing for the Speaking Test in the International English Language Testing System

(IELTS). Participant 1 (P1) felt that, overall, the learning objectives of the program were relevant to the subject matter covered in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Participant 6 asserts the alignment between the goals of the language education program they completed during their college studies and the evaluation tasks they encountered in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The participants further indicated that possessing a major in English conferred a distinct advantage.

According to the participants' statements, the existing language education program's learning objectives, which encompass subskills within the four macro skills and grammar acquisition, were considered to align with the requirements found in the IELTS examination. Significantly, the statements made by the participants also suggest that the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) placed emphasis on the practical implementation of abilities.

P2, for example, provided a detailed account of a task-based assessment that was administered during his speaking test. This indicates that the IELTS test has a focus on practical application, as supported by Nushi et al. (2021), who noted that the main components of the IELTS include test practice and activities aimed at developing specific skills. This observation suggests that the test places greater emphasis on assessing the results of learning, as individuals are evaluated based on their abilities and the manner in which they exhibit comprehension and proficiency in the subject matter. In the field of education, there has been a growing acceptance of a pedagogical approach commonly referred to as outcomes-based learning.

The Commission on Higher Education has implemented a providential directive to transition towards an outcomes-based curriculum. This directive necessitates the restructuring of the curriculum to align education with real-world employment opportunities. The alignment of desired results and competencies with the instructional aims and objectives of curriculum contents was accomplished (Sana et al., 2015). The incorporation of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) in higher education courses necessitates consideration of the participants' identification of commonalities between the learning objectives of the language program and the assessment tasks in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

It is evident, however, that the participants have found a rather narrow range of parallels. Furthermore, there are even participants who have said that the learning objectives of the language program were not applicable to the content encountered in the test. The majority of participants reported that the language education program they engaged in was most beneficial to them in terms of enhancing their speaking and writing skills.

P1 elaborates on the significance of the oral reporting tasks that the individual was obligated to undertake during their college years, wherein they communicated only in the English language. This experience proved to be highly advantageous in honing their speaking abilities, which subsequently facilitated their success in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination. Additionally, he made reference to the supplementary advantage of acquiring proficiency in conversing with the American English accent, a topic that was somewhat explored in one of his courses within the language curriculum.

Meanwhile, it was found that the contents of the language education program that were considered by the Participants as pertinent to them when they took the Listening Test in IELTS were: 1. taking down notes from listening information, and 2. listening attentively for important details. P10 also identified the following components he found in the IELTS which he learned in the language education program he took in college: *Sa* (In) listening part *kasi*, we were taught before to take down notes while listening to something and you answer some questions...the importance really of attentive listening which I think when we took up listening subject that was also a minimum requirement: *yung* (the) attentive listening.

The identified competencies that were found attuned towards IELTS preparation for Reading are: 1. interpreting messages, and 2. understanding vocabulary. Most of the participants mentioned that the assessment on Reading was on the Application level. P7 also indicated the following, which denoted that IELTS test-takers are also assessed for their analytic skills: *...so for example in the reading part, you need to use different types of strategies to grasp the meaning of the text or to comprehend what you are reading. Mostly were long passages and stories, understanding the main ideas, the attitude of the authors...and these were very similar to what I took in the undergrad—similar to the assessment.*

The domain of writing was identified as a significant component of the language education curriculum, which the majority of participants perceived as pertinent to their IELTS examination experience. The competencies that were identified as attuned to the IELTS Writing test are: 1. writing accurately, 2. using proper diction, 3. observing mechanics of writing in writing essays, 4. using grammatical structures, and 5. using idiomatic expressions.

Several participants, namely Participants 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 9 found themes related to the mechanics of writing to be particularly valuable.

P3 and P4 originally discussed their expertise in technical writing, which they thought to be very advantageous throughout the assessment due to the presence of technical writing tasks. It is important to acknowledge that Technical Writing is a course in the Bachelor of Science in English (BSE) Program. P6, on the other hand, identified spelling and writing for various purposes as subjects within the language education curriculum that proved advantageous to her in the context of the IELTS writing assignments.

P3 additionally identified essay-writing and letter-writing as subject domains that she found beneficial. P5, on the other hand, indicated that the multitude of writing assignments handed to them during their college years provided them with the necessary practice to proficiently organize their ideas in written discourse.

The IELTS has identified grammar as another relevant domain of content. Among all the participants, P3 exhibited the highest degree of emphasis on the significance of the subject matter. P1 and P2 both said that the criteria discussed can be categorized under the domain of writing mechanics. These criteria can be classed at the Application level, as the participants were required to apply their knowledge of writing mechanics.

P9 noted that the format of the assessment tasks in the language program differed significantly from those found in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Participant 1 also highlighted the components included in the IELTS that were covered in the language education program they completed throughout their college studies. The pedagogical approach to teaching English writing for specific objectives remains unchanged. Cohesion is a crucial aspect to consider in order to ensure effective communication. Equally important is the adherence to the core idea

and the provision of supporting facts. In writing, the fundamentals primarily encompass mechanics, particularly the usage of punctuation marks.

P7 expressed that she derived benefits from the grammar objectives of the language education program during her IELTS preparation. P5 shared a similar viewpoint to that of P4: *No, it is not specifically designed for the IELTS examination. In our major classes, like grammar and writing, there is also a concentration on literature, ma'am. Is the subject matter of our discussion mostly centered around literature, madam? The literature component of the subject is quite extensive, while there is also a focus on phonetics and related areas.* However, it appears that the content may not be directly applicable to the IELTS assessment. Regarding that matter, no.

The statements made by P4 and P5 can be explained by the fact that they completed their language education degrees prior to the introduction of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) in Philippine higher education institutions. Regarding P4, it was noted that he completed his undergraduate education in 2011, whilst P5 accomplished the same milestone in 2010. In 2012, the Commission on Higher Education enforced the adoption of Outcomes-Based Education in universities and colleges, as stipulated in Memorandum Order No. 46. Thus, the aforementioned insights from Participants 4 and 5 are accounted for.

### **Contributions of the Language Education Program in Aiding ESL Teachers' IELTS Certification**

In determining the significance of the language education program they undertook in their BSE Curriculum in aiding them for IELTS Certification, the following emerged from the responses from the participants as significant competencies.

### **Contributions of the Language Education Program in Aiding ESL Teachers in their IELTS Speaking Test:**

1. writing and delivering speeches
2. organizing thoughts
3. reciting
4. demonstration teaching
5. impromptu speaking

Numerous parallel observations may be discerned when examining the correlation between the IELTS speaking criteria and the activities deemed relevant by participants in their language education programs during their undergraduate

years. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) places significant emphasis on several key aspects, including fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. The participants in question failed to indicate lexical resource in their aforementioned statements. In addition to this, the learning experiences of the participants offered them relevant preparation for the IELTS speaking test. Significantly, the examination of the participants' responses indicated that the most relevant learning experiences identified by them primarily revolved around application. These experiences encompassed activities such as engaging in language use through speeches, recitation, and demonstration teaching. In relation to this matter, the IELTS examination also assessed their abilities through practical implementation.

### **Contributions of the Language Education Program in Aiding ESL Teachers in their IELTS Listening Test:**

1. listening for comprehension
2. note-taking
3. identifying main ideas

Listening comprehension refers to the cognitive capacity to understand spoken language across many forms of speech, including conversations, narratives, stories, and informational oral texts. The primary objective is to extract and create meaning from these auditory inputs (Kim & Pilcher, 2016). Given the aforementioned circumstances, the participants highlighted the various manners in which their language education program undertaken during their collegiate studies was beneficial for their performance in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), particularly in activities that necessitated listening comprehension.

### **Contributions of the Language Education Program in Aiding ESL Teachers in their IELTS Reading Test:**

1. skimming and scanning for information
2. reading extensively for comprehension
3. making generalizations
4. predicting outcomes
5. identifying main ideas

Rraku (2013) posits that reading approaches encompass deliberate reading behaviors. In general, these skills are related to the ability to skim and scan. During the interview, P1, P2, and P5 identified these as crucial qualities that facilitated their performance in the IELTS reading test. The

efficacy of reading techniques has been examined in multiple studies, including the research conducted by Rraku (2013). This study included experimental testing to establish a clear correlation between the employment of reading approaches and the accuracy of reading comprehension among student participants. In a study conducted by Amir (2019), it was found that reading approaches have a good and significant impact on reading comprehension among higher education students.

In addition to the reading strategies of skimming and scanning, P8 identified the capacity for lengthy reading as a relevant skill. She made this statement due to her limited engagement with reading, resulting in a lack of proficiency in this skill. From her standpoint, this had an impact on her performance during the IELTS reading examination. According to a study conducted by Rezaee et al. (2020), the implementation of experimental intense reading programs led to a significant improvement in the receptive abilities of university students. In a separate investigation, Ferdila (2014) discovered that the practice of extensive reading was associated with increased motivation to engage in reading, enhanced vocabulary acquisition, and improved reading comprehension skills. In the study conducted by Chien and Yu (2015), the researchers proposed that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers should promote extensive reading among their students as a means to cultivate enduring interest and reading habits. This suggestion aligns with the viewpoint expressed by P8.

The process of reading comprehension is a multifaceted task that requires the integration of various linguistic and cognitive processes. These processes encompass skills such as word reading ability, memory, inference generation, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and prior knowledge. These skills were identified by the participants as being utilized during their reading test in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination (Ellemen & Olsund, 2019). Reading comprehension is of significant importance in nearly all aspects of life, to the extent that it has emerged as a fundamental factor for success within the educational system (Capodiecici et al., 2020).

#### **Contributions of the Language Education Program in Aiding ESL Teachers in their IELTS Writing Test:**

1. using correct vocabulary

2. writing formal/informal letter
3. composing paragraph observing the elements of writing: coherence, conciseness, brevity
4. interpreting graphic organizers

The above list enumerates the writing subjects that participants experienced and developed within the language education program they undertook, which they also felt to be pertinent throughout their International English Language Testing System (IELTS) experience. These encompass aspects like as lexical selection and usage, syntactic accuracy and organization, substantive content, and targeted writing objectives.

Significantly, a considerable number of participants expressed that the writing test posed considerable challenges within the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). One example is provided by P1, who attributes his verbose writing style as a contributing cause. Consequently, he advocated for the utilization of brevity and conciseness as essential elements in written communication.

Similar to P8, the comment made by P4 suggests that the use of excessive words is not encouraged in the context of the IELTS assessment. In connection with this matter, P1 further elaborated on his misconceptions regarding lexical resource throughout his time as a student. The matter of verbosity or wordiness is a prevalent concern observed among students who are learning English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL).

Moreover, the phenomenon under investigation was explored in a research conducted by Elachachi (2015), wherein it was discovered that the verbosity exhibited by English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) learners can be attributed to culturally-specific disparities pertaining to linguistic characteristics and styles. The findings of the qualitative investigation indicate that a significant number of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) learners exhibit a lack of awareness regarding the direct nature of the English language. In contrast to the Arabic style, English is generally characterized by a greater degree of simplicity, as the latter relies less heavily on the use of allusions, analogies, proverbs, and figures of speech. In the study conducted by Kang and Chang (2014), it was shown that EFL students employ wordiness as a strategy to cope with the challenge of paraphrasing words that cannot be directly translated.

Demir (2019) conducted a study that elucidated the underlying factors contributing to the misuse of lexical resources among students.

Similar to the description provided by P8, it appears that students possess a misunderstanding wherein they believe that use of excessive verbiage contributes to a perception of being more 'scientific' or intelligent.

### **Mechanisms for Improving Language Education Program in Aiding IELTS Certification**

Aside from providing their insights about the objectives, content and assessment in the language program they found pertinent to their IELTS examination, they also shared their perspectives on what language education can improve on for its graduates to perform well in the IELTS. These may be included in the preparation of a training program, insertion, or an elective course that may be proposed in curriculum revisions.

Macro Skill	Specific Topic
Speaking	Conversational English, Pronunciation
Listening	Comprehending different English varieties
Reading	Extensive reading with emphasis on lexical resource and comprehension
Writing	Time-pressured writing, Writing conventions, Business writing

Table 1. Participants' Suggestions for IELTS-targeted Language Education Program

### **Emphasis on Macro Skills**

It is worth noting that all of the participants expressed the need for a more comprehensive teaching of the macro skills, as the tasks in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) primarily emphasized the practical application of these skills. The participants' remarks regarding their experiences in taking the IELTS suggest that the exercises included in the test primarily aim to evaluate their communicative competence.

It is important to note that the foundational concept of communicative competence was articulated by Dell Hymes, who posited that it encompasses not only grammatical competence

but also sociolinguistic competence. The rules of grammar would be rendered ineffective in the absence of standards of usage. According to Ahmed and Pawar (2018), communicative competence refers to the implicit understanding of a language and the proficiency to employ it effectively in communication. During the interview, several participants engaged in a discussion regarding the aforementioned concept of communicative competence.

Aydogan and Akbarov (2014) conducted a study that emphasized the interplay between macro skills and their equal significance in developing communicative competence. They advocated an integrated-skill strategy to enhance the authenticity of language training for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It was previously mentioned that language education should be guided by Rebecca Oxford's notion that language training is a composite of various interconnected abilities. Hence, it is advisable to instruct these skills in an integrated fashion rather than in isolation, as their application in real-world scenarios typically involves their simultaneous utilization. One illustrative instance is that reading constitutes a receptive ability within the framework of the writing process. Furthermore, it can also facilitate the development of vocabulary, hence influencing individuals' abilities in listening, speaking, and writing. One of the participants in the interview indicated the presence of this specific integration. P1 elucidated on his utilization of the principles of written journalism and English for Specific Purposes during his oral examination.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The Philippine language education program, as manifested in the data saturation from the participants, addresses several competencies of the IELTS which can aid students under said program in gaining certification from the IELTS. However, the Participants indicate that certain components need more focus as these are related to the skills they found insufficient when they took the IELTS examination. The Participants also pointed out that certain areas in macro skills development are particularly useful since these areas are the concentration of the contents and tasks in IELTS. With this, mechanisms were identified so that professors may also address the development of the needed skills as they teach the courses under the

language education program since the topics are also pertinent to the curriculum contents. Given this, it can be said that the success of students and ESL teachers in gaining language certification can be increased through the consolidated efforts of instruction and co-curricular programs such as the training program developed in this study.

It is recognized that there are still further developments that can be done and derived from this study. Language professors view the findings of this study as a reference for how they can enhance instruction, especially in terms of learning objectives, content, and assessment practices to make learning more effective for their students regardless of whether they take the IELTS or not.

Moreover, sub-programs concentrating on each of the four macro skills can also be developed by future researchers to provide more intensive preparation for future IELTS examinees.

With the findings, a training program or elective course for International Language Tests in the Language Education Curriculum is recommended.

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