

# The Impact of the IELTS Writing Test on Postgraduate Students in Kuwait

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**ABSTRACT:** *International students seeking to further their education in foreign countries require high English language test scores on IELTS or other language assessments to gain admission into a university. These tests have direct impacts, referred to as washback effects, whether positive or negative, on learning and English acquisition, particularly on learning new vocabulary, grammar, and creative writing skills by postgraduate students. While washback concepts have been studied over the years, there is little research regarding the IELTS writing assessment's washback effects, especially on international students. In this study we adopted a qualitative research technique with interviews and a sample of 10 postgraduate students to analyze the impact of the writing assessment task on English language learning, especially on acquisition of new vocabulary, grammar, and creative writing skills. The study reveals the writing test's washback effect on the way students learn their second language, showing that it impacts their writing skills, creativity, and new vocabulary acquisition.*

**KEYWORDS:** IELTS, writing test, postgraduate, students, Kuwait

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## INTRODUCTION

The demand for international education has led to a surge in English language learning. Individuals across the world apply to international universities, particularly those in English-speaking countries, to further their education. They are expected to achieve a specific score in English tests such as IELTS and TOEFL to gain entry (Green, 2007). According to Pan (2014), these language tests have washback effects on test takers' acquisition of English language skills. Washback refers to the "effect of testing learning and teaching" (Hughes, 2002, p. 1). Washback is often perceived as positive or negative, affecting the manner in which students acquire writing skills, vocabulary, and grammar (Alsagofia, 2018). This raises a research

question about how washback influences language learning among students, with a focus on vocabulary, grammar, and creative writing skills.

Examining the effects of washback on test takers is essential to facilitate clarity on the negative and positive impact they have on students' learning. Therefore, we focused on examining the impact of the washback effect of the writing task on students' learning practices and language acquisition, including learning strategies. There is a lack of studies on this area of acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and creative writing skills among students in Kuwait. Using a qualitative research approach with a sample of 10 postgraduate students, we seek to enhance the understanding of the washback effect of the writing assessment of IELTS and its impact on acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, and creative writing skills. By offering insights into language instruction and learning, we seek to close a gap in washback research and produce more comprehensive test results. Our research model was based on a review of earlier studies, and we adopted a qualitative technique and interviews to explore the research question effectively. Based on observable trends, we discuss washback effects on students, focusing on the writing task, and we make recommendations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Language tests are critical; they determine the future education of students. Language exams are designed to achieve the most desirable results from the learning process (Shohamy et al., 1996). The washback effect is the impact of test administration on language learning environments, either positive or negative (Messick, 1996). Depending on the kind of test, the precise consequences of washback may change. Alderson and Wall (1993) claimed that positive washback has beneficial impacts, including encouraging a positive attitude and enhancing motivation, while negative washback refers to aspects that deter performance, including anxiety and fear of the tests.

Shih (2007) developed a different approach that placed more emphasis on the pupils. That model examined several exams that influenced learning, psychology, and other internal and external elements. The model highlighted some of the critical washback elements important to students, including learning strategies, contact learning hours, motivation, and exam anxiety (Shih, 2007). Since that model is student-focused, we adopted it for our current study. That approach focuses on factors that affect test features and everyday learning. Its evaluation of washback effects relies on exam data, providing an unbiased basis for elucidating how washback affects students.

In their study of washback effects of testing on English language acquisition among Arabic students, Shohamy et al. (1996) established that washback effects influence different aspects of learning, including time allocation, instruction, and learning activities. Pan (2014) investigated the effects of washback on both departing and non-exiting students, finding that because leaving required excellence, departing students performed better on the proficiency level than non-exiting students. Damankseh and Babii (2015) found that exams had a direct influence on students' learning behaviors, leading them to adopt study and test practices. But

they found detrimental consequences for pupils' creativity. Research consistently indicates that behavioral and attitude problems are the primary features of washback that significantly impact pupils, regardless of the situation or individual involved (Pan, 2014).

IELTS is a primary measure of the language learning process, manifested in the extent to which learning goals are achieved. Students' advancement in the four language acquisition components—speaking, writing, listening, and reading—is frequently used to gauge performance (Todorova, 2012). Although 2007 research by Green demonstrated that test preparation did not improve a learner's score, a 1993 study by Anderson and Wall found that TOEFL had an impact on learning. Depending on the practical implications of different learning skills, there are differences in the washback effect on the learning domains.

Analyzing the positive and negative washback of exams is the only approach to enhancing and optimizing the potential of English language learners in Kuwait. According to Anderson and Wall (1993) washback model, to improve competency, the IELTS exam system has to account for washback across all subject areas. Anderson and Wall (1993) introduced the "washback hypothesis" factoring possible hypotheses on what and how students learn, as well as the degree, and rate of learning, where they established different aspects of learning including intensity and efforts is significantly influenced by testing. Alderson and Wall (1993) describe washback as examining factors influencing learning or teaching. In their theory, Alderson and Wall (1993) argue that testing directly impacts learning. They assume learners often do things they cannot necessarily do because they must prepare for the tests. The model demonstrates that when learners consider testing challenging and essential, it will generate more intense positive and negative washback (Anderson & Wall, 1993).

IELTS has several positive washback effects linked to a better understanding of the English language. It motivates students, decreases anxiety, offers a universal framework for examining students' language proficiency, improves awareness of the English language among students, and results in a better understanding of the language (Saudelli, 2015).

Nevertheless, washback effects depend on the teaching approaches used. Many learners' main concern is university admission. For them, the proficiency exam minimally improves the four language skills (Estaji, 2013). The positive washback of the test is that it reduces students' anxiety and allows them to adequately prepare for the test, leading to an improvement in learning areas over time (Ellis, 2015). However, Allen (2016) highlighted that the washback of IELTS is highly dependent on local factors and differs from case to case. Students may prioritize getting higher scores above comprehending the language. And fewer resources are allocated to writing compared to the other elements (Ahmed, 2015). Hence, it is important to motivate learners to enhance understanding of the language, as opposed to only passing the exams.

IELTS takes a broad and scholarly approach to writing. While students must finish their academic writing in a semiformal manner, their general writing assignments require them to write discursive essays and letters that are based on predetermined cases or scenarios (Ye &

Ren, 2019). Writing, therefore, always gets the greatest focus in IELTS among the four components of learning English. According to Green (2007), the negative washback of the writing task lessens the importance of academic writing. Estaji (2013) argued that learners put more effort into learning when the testing motivates them to do so. Hence, the current imbalance undermines the maximization of the learning process as students prepare for IELTS, making the test an insufficient measure of examining writing proficiency.

English learning has received attention in the Middle East, although resources to facilitate it are inadequate. Other challenges characterizing English learning in the Middle East include poor assessment approaches, poor teaching, and inadequate resources (Alharbi, 2015). Therefore, students often complete high school with low English proficiency levels. IELTS has gained more significance in the Middle East because it is viewed as the primary measure of efficiency and value. Good results reflect well on the student's proficiency and learning input (Ahmed, 2015). Unfortunately, the greatest challenge associated with the test is its high cost in the Middle East (Alsagofia, 2018). In this view, students tend to use all means possible to avoid retakes, making them concentrate more on passing than on understanding the language (Zafarghandi & Nemati, 2015). In our study we aim to investigate whether students' views of the exam are affected favorably or negatively, as well as the impact of IELTS on students' learning capacities at universities and colleges.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In our research we adopted a qualitative approach because it is an investigative technique that seeks to answer questions on meaning, experiences, and personal viewpoints (Hollstein, 2011). Indeed, we seek to understand the experiences and views of postgraduate students regarding the IELTS writing task's washback effects, making the selected approach appropriate. Lyons and Coyle (2021) claimed that the qualitative approach is a significant instrument in educational research because it helps address questions that cannot be represented numerically to create a deeper understanding of the context and experiences of the research issue.

For data collection, we preferred using semi-structured interviews because they allowed participants to communicate their perspectives in a way that best suited them (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Busetto et al. (2020) demonstrated that semi-structured interviews are practical tools for generating reliable and comparable results in a one-on-one interview to ensure that a wide range of issues are covered and all critical information is included. We conducted face-to-face interviews lasting between 20 and 30 minutes, utilizing a set of 10 interview guide questions, addressing different washback issues as identified from the literature review. The questions covered how the students studied for the IELTS writing task and its effect on their learning styles. The interview sought to understand how the students' writing skills changed due to preparation for the IELTS writing task. It examined how that task had helped develop their abilities, including writing accuracy, fluency structure, complexity, organization of ideas, vocabulary use, and logical expression.

To choose the specific sample for the study, we used a non-probability sampling technique called snowballing (Etikan et al., 2016). We chose that method because of its purposeful selection benefit, which involves selecting individuals who have finished the exam within the previous three years and can recall its contents (Etikan et al., 2016). The target population were postgraduate students from Kuwait whose first language was Arabic. The students must have taken the IELTS test within the previous three years. Postgraduate students were selected because their courses include many writing assignments. In their study of writing at the graduate level, Cooper and Bikowski (2007) found that social science, humanities, and arts students engaged in a range of writing assignments, more than engineering and math students. Phakiti and Li (2011) established that Asian students had difficulties with academic writing, particularly synthesizing information, due to English proficiency challenges. Hence, studying would offer an important basis for understanding washback effect on learning and English acquisition in relation to writing skills.

Participants were aged between 25 and 35 years and originated from Kuwait. After factoring in the inclusion and exclusion criteria, we selected 10 postgraduates to participate in the study. Focusing on the themes emerging from the students' responses, we shed light on three axes—creativity in writing, vocabulary, and grammar—topics that are essential in academic writing. We classified participants' answers based on these axes, and we coded the answers as detailed in Table 1 in the results section.

The researchers analyzed the data using the coding process to identify observable trends related to English Language acquisition. The coding focused on critical themes, including vocabulary, creativity, and grammar. These areas are significant because they are central to writing. During the coding process, the participants' responses were transcribed, classified, and coded using the three themes as a guide. The results showed that the IELTS writing task promoted writing creativity, the first theme. In the student responses, the codes such as logical writing, clarity in expression, use of sources, and generation of new Ideas were observed to support the theme (Table 1). Besides the second theme, the IELTS writing task equips learners with new vocabulary supported by codes observed from participants' responses, including new words, language, and reading (Table 1). Lastly, the analysis showed that IELTS promotes grammar as reflected in student responses characterized by codes such as proper sentences, paragraph structure, and organization of ideas (Table 1).

## RESULTS

Our study examined the impact of the IELTS writing task's washback on a sample of 10 postgraduate students through semi-structured interviews. Three key themes emerged from the collected data, indicating the test's influence on students' learning process and English language acquisition regarding learning vocabulary, creative writing, and grammar.

**Table 1** Results of the themes identified from the data

Theme	Codes
IELTS writing task promotes writing creativity.	Logical writing Clarity in expression New ideas generation Writing accuracy Use of sources Linking ideas
IELTS writing task equips learners with new vocabulary.	New words Vocabulary Reading Writing clearly
IELTS promote grammar skills.	Proper sentence Organization of ideas Paragraph structure

### **IELTS Writing Task Directly Impacts Creativity**

On this theme participant differed, particularly on the low significance attached to various sources in IELTS writing tests. Participant 4 observed that the IELTS test did not require that writers provide sources, unlike academic writing, which requires many sources to be well-used in explaining concepts. Many participants indicated that a lack of these requirements afforded them the freedom to express themselves creatively during writing exercises. Participant 1 stated that with fewer reference requirements, participants could be more creative because they were not required to replicate or exploit ideas from academic sources.

Nevertheless, Participant 7 claimed that the lack of a citation requirement affected the ability to express oneself creatively, particularly in the academic writing that is a key component of university assignments. The same was echoed by Participant 9, who believed that the lack of a citation requirement derailed students' ability to expand their ideas and express them creatively. However, Participant 6 argued that the lack of citations improved one's imaginative experience, which improved creativity because students must represent their ideas in writing without copying another's work.

### **IELTS Significantly Improves English Vocabularies**

Our study reflected a consensus among participants concerning the significance of the writing task in aiding English vocabulary acquisition as they prepared for the test. For instance, Participant 5 opined that the writing task required one to learn and understand a lot of vocabulary to effectively develop a paragraph. Similarly, Participant 9 noted that he learned several new words that enriched his vocabulary during the test preparation period. As a result, the writing task created a positive washback on the acquisition of new vocabulary.

According to participants, the writing task required one to understand and effectively use different words to create coherent and clear sentences that readers can easily follow. For

instance, Participant 10 indicated that if one does not use the correct word in a sentence, that may generate a different meaning from what the writer intended, causing a misunderstanding. Therefore, participants learn more and new terminologies in English as they prepare to handle the writing task effectively. Overall, participants noted that the writing test has helped them in their communication and school assignment at the university.

### **IELTS Improves Grammar**

According to the participants, the necessity of passing the IELTS writing task ensures that learners improve their writing. Participant 1 argued that he dedicated significant time to learn various elements of writing, which improved her grammar. Participant 3 indicated that she put effort and time into learning proper sentence structure, construction, and use of linking words. Similarly, Participant 6 claimed that the test improves one's grammar because writing requires coherence and clarity, which helps in completing writing assignments. Participant 7 claimed that due to intense preparation with the help of videos and other resources, he gained fluency in writing, something that has been important in his assignments, where written work carries great weight in grading performance. Participant 10 reported that the task improved his grammar, which was worse before taking the test. He gave examples of grammar issues, such as differentiating between passive and active voice, which he overcame while preparing for writing task. In this view, the IELTS writing task had a positive washback on participants in improving their grammar.

### **DISCUSSION**

Regardless of their performance, all participants believed the exam to be important for their English language learning process and in equipping them with new vocabulary, creative writing, and grammar skills. For instance, they opined that they acquired significant writing skills and a broad vocabulary throughout test preparation. The vocabulary that English language learners acquire during a course, according to Rao (2016), is a reliable predictor of how well the exam went. Therefore, the acquisition of vocabulary, improvement of grammar, and acquisition of creative writing skills among learners while preparing for the writing task demonstrate the positive washback effect of IELTS on international students.

IELTS improved the ability of participants to learn and acquire more vocabulary. All participants argued that IELTS writing-task preparation equipped them with many new vocabulary words because it was necessary to learn them to facilitate the expression of their ideas in writing. A majority argued that understanding vocabulary is essential to developing coherent and clear writing. This supports Saudelli's (2016) claim that IELTS improves the ability of students to learn and understand the English language, including new vocabulary and creative writing skills. This consensus confirms Alsagofia's (2018) claim that IELTS mandates participants to adequately prepare for the test, including acquiring sufficient vocabulary and creative writing skills to get the best scores. Therefore, IELTS has a positive effect on international students' capability to learn and acquire English vocabulary, which also helps them improve their writing abilities.

The consensus among participants on the impact of IELTS on creativity to place a limited focus on the writing task's usage of sources. Creativity is always considered the hallmark of second language acquisition, necessitating exploration on how IELTS impacts students' creativity (Ellis, 2015). Participants agreed that the writing task exercise did not require them to provide citations for their work, giving them room to exercise and show their creativity in writing. While the use of sources is an important aspect of academic writing, which improves the students' credibility in making arguments, IELTS does not require it (Rao, 2016). Therefore, a majority of participants indicated that they could develop their ideas and show their ability to express themselves creatively when doing the IELTS writing test because sources are not required. Participants reported that the lack of citation requirements allowed them to share their opinions on a given topic, enhancing their creativity and requiring them to organize imaginative ideas and link them to provide logical discussions. However, some participants indicated that lack of sources did not help improve creativity because the inclusion of citations would help enrich their arguments, improving their creativity and innovation over time. Our study shows that the writing task is an important tool that influences learning and improves postgraduate participants' capabilities to express themselves freely, logically, and creatively.

Again, the difficulty associated with the writing task is a key ingredient that ensures that learners actively participate in acquiring various skills associated with English. These results are consistent with Shih's (2007) washback model, which emphasizes the importance of test parameters in affecting test results. The stakes attached to the task and its immediate importance make the test preparation process impactful (Shih, 2007). Participants indicated that they always studied hard for the writing test to ensure that they did not fail. Therefore, our study indicates that when the test is difficult, test takers dedicate more time than when it is easier, leading to learning more vocabulary, writing, and grammar skills. According to Pan (2014), the assessment of second languages should concentrate on how much it forces participants to work harder to become more proficient in the language. In this case, the results demonstrate that IELTS is often perceived as a challenging test, making international students put more work into its preparation, leading to increased fluency in the English language with focus on grammar, vocabulary, and creative writing skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our study reveals that the IELTS writing task has positive effects on participants' acquisition of English vocabulary, creative writing, and grammar skills. The positive effects include encouraging independent learning that promotes vocabulary acquisition and improving creativity, grammar, and creative writing skills over time. We also found minimal negative effects, mainly due to a lack of resources to boost creativity. We recommend adjustments to the requirement of sources in IELTS to help build the academic writing skills of test takers, which are critical to their success in their postgraduate courses.

## **Limitations**

The study's limitations include relying on Shih's model and focusing on personal characteristics, test results, and perceptions of the test. Other critical aspects may influence



second language acquisition, such as cultural transmission, participants' prior knowledge, and educational strategies. Further research on washback is necessary to show the influence of the writing task on postgraduates' creativity and grammar. Researchers should also examine the role that cultural transmission and barriers may have in the acquisition of a second language and completion of the writing task. Finally, future studies should focus on how the washback effect influences self-learning skills among postgraduates and on its impact on creativity and on learning new writing skills, vocabulary, and grammar skills.

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