

# International Education *and* Cultural-Linguistic Experiences *of* International Students in Australia

Edited by Abe Ata & Alex Kostogriz



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# Contributors

**Abe W. Ata** was born in Bethlehem. He graduated in social psychology at the American University of Beirut and was soon nominated as a delegate to the United Nations' World Youth Assembly in New York. He gained his doctorate at the University of Melbourne in 1980 and has since been teaching and researching at several Australian, American, Jordanian, West Bank (Al-Quds) and Danish universities. Abe's publications span 114 journal articles and 16 books including *Education Integration Challenges: The case of Australian Muslims* (2013); *Us and Them* (Australian Academic Press), nominated for the Prime Minister Book Awards in 2009; and *Christian-Muslim Intermarriage in Australia* (2003). Dr Ata contributed several articles to the *Encyclopaedia of Australian Religions* (2009); *Encyclopaedia of the Australian People* (2001) and *The Encyclopaedia of Melbourne* (2005). He was nominated as Australian of the Year in 2011 and in 2015. Dr Ata is currently an Honorary Fellow at Deakin University.

**Alex Kostogriz** is Professor of Education and Head of Education Victoria at Australian Catholic University. His research and publications focus on teacher education and professional ethics. Alex has been chief investigator on a number of projects funded by the Australian Research Council and other national and state-based funding schemes. These projects have explored the effectiveness of initial teacher education, mandated literacy assessment and reorganisation of teachers' work, professional practice and ethics of language teachers, and literacy practices in diasporic communities.

**Alistair Welsh** is a lecturer in Indonesian language at Deakin University. He teaches Indonesian language units across all levels and coordinates Deakin's in-country Indonesian language program, held biennially in Malang, East Java. With a background predominantly in language teaching, but also having worked as an interpreter in the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Alistair has enjoyed living and working in different Malay/Indonesian cultural environments. His experience in language education includes the teaching of English in Indonesia, where he worked as a teacher trainer in 2005 to 2006 on an AusAID-funded project. Alistair's doctoral research focused on cultural perceptions and intercultural experiences of Australian university students as language learners. He is interested in pursuing further research to explore what it means to act and interact inter-culturally, and the implications for language learners and educators.

**Bin Ai** is an English lecturer at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Wuhan, China. Dr Bin Ai has worked as

an English lecturer for more than ten years at several universities in Mainland China. He completed his doctoral degree at the School of Education, Deakin University, Australia in 2014. His main research interests include identity, TESOL, intercultural communication, and internationalised higher education.

**Cate Montes** is currently in the final stages of her PhD at the University of Queensland, in the School of Education. Her project is titled 'Navigating the waters of academic writing language shock: A case study of undergraduate Chinese students in Australia'. She has undergraduate degrees in Business Management and Languages and Applied Linguistics, as well as an MA in Applied Linguistics (TESOL). Cate has worked as an English language teacher in Japan, Spain, and Australia.

**Carol Reid** is an Associate Professor in the Centre for Educational Research, University of Western Sydney. Carol is a sociologist of education researching processes of globalisation on youth, ethnicity and race and the intersections of these social identities with the changing nature of teacher's work. Her most recent work uses cosmopolitan theory to analyse educational mobilities and to open up north-south and south-south dialogue. She is the International Sociological Association's Vice President for Oceania (2014–2018) and editor of a new series for Palgrave Macmillan titled *Education Dialogues with/in the Global South*.

**Edilson Arenas** has an extensive industry experience in the areas of Software Development, Internet Systems and Educational Technologies. From 1992 to February 2002, Edilson worked for Melbourne University, initially as a Multimedia Systems Specialist and then as an Educational Designer. Before Melbourne University, Edilson was the Head of the Division of Engineering of Discos Fuentes, South America. There, Edilson was in charge of the evaluation, research and development of engineering projects. In 2002, Edilson joined Central Queensland University, Australia, where he is currently the Discipline Leader of Networks and Information Security in the School of Engineering and Technology. Edilson holds a Bachelor of Electronics Engineering from the University of Antioquia and a Masters of Engineering in Information Technology from RMIT, Melbourne, Australia. Edilson also holds a PhD in Education from Deakin University, Australia.

**Hussain Alsaiani** is a PhD candidate, University of Western Sydney, School of Education, Bankstown Campus. His doctoral thesis is titled: 'The use of technology in teaching Arabic through communicative language approach informed by new understandings of literacy in primary schools in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia'. He holds a Bachelor in Primary Education, 2004 (Tabuk Teachers' College, Saudi Arabia) and a Masters in Education, 2009 (Griffith

University, Australia). He has been teaching as a lecturer at Aljouf University, Saudi Arabia since 2004 in the School of Education (Curriculum and Instruction Department) and extensive experience working at Aljouf University in the teaching, course delivery and assessment of student teachers in Saudi Arabia for more than three years. He was a voluntary advisor for new Saudi students in the Saudi association in the Gold Coast from July 2007 to December 2008.

**Ila Rosmilawati** is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Educational Research at the University of Western Sydney. Her doctoral work investigates Indonesian young people's re-engagement with alternative schooling. Her research is financially supported by the Directorate General of Higher Education (DGHE), Ministry of National Education of Indonesia. Ms Rosmilawati has been a lecturer at Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa University since 2004 in the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education Science (Non-formal Education Department).

**Joseph Zajda**, BA (Hons), MA, MEd, Ph.D, FACE, is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education and Arts at the Australian Catholic University (Melbourne Campus). He specialises in globalisation and education policy reforms, social justice, history education, and values education. He has written and edited 24 books and over 200 book chapters, and articles. Recent publications include *The Second International Handbook of Globalisation and Education Policy Research*; *Nation-Building and History Education in a Global Culture*; 'Globalisation and Neo-liberalism as Educational Policy in Australia' in H. Yolcu and D. Turner (Eds.), *Neoliberal Education Reforms: A Global Analysis*; 'The Russian Revolution' in G. Ritzer and J. M. Ryan (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization Online*; 'Values Education' in D. Phillips (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy*. His works are held in over 7,400 university libraries around the world.

**Kieran O'Loughlin** is an Honorary Senior Fellow in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne. He has worked as a teacher, manager, lecturer and researcher in international education for more than thirty years. His research has focused mainly on the assessment of English as an additional language for both higher education and immigration purposes. He has published widely in this area with a particular focus on the valid and ethical uses of standardised language proficiency testing in such high stakes contexts.

**Lachlan Doughney** is a Research Fellow in Higher Education at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne. His research interests include English language proficiency (ELP), the development of employability skills in the curriculum, international students, and

doctoral program design and development. He has been a contributor to a range of government-funded projects in these areas, and has co-authored several journal articles and research reports concerning these topics.

**Linda Li** has a PhD in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching from the University of Arizona. She is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, Australia. She has published extensively on academic writing in English as a second language. Her recent research has focused on academic language and skills development for international students and writing support for international research students. Her publications have appeared in journals such as *International Journal of Pedagogy and Learning*, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, and *Journal of Academic Language and Learning*.

**Mark Rahimi** a Research Fellow of international education at the Centre for Research in Educational Futures and Innovation at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. His past work has examined different practices in Australian transnational vocational education and training. He also has research interest and experience in international higher education and international graduates' employability in Australia. His current focus is on international secondary education and inter-culturality. Mark has extensive experience in quantitative and qualitative research in education.

**Megan Yucel** teaches at the Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education, The University of Queensland (ICTE-UQ). She has worked as a teacher, examiner and item writer in Turkey, the United Kingdom, and Australia. She has the Cambridge DELTA and an MA in Applied Linguistics (TESOL). Megan is currently doing a PhD at The University of Queensland, in the School of Languages and Comparative Cultural Studies. The project, which is in the area of English language assessment, is titled 'Living with IELTS: A Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of IELTS Candidates'.

**Michael Haugh** is an Associate professor in Linguistics and International English in the School of Languages and Linguistics at Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia. His areas of research interest include pragmatics, conversation analysis and sociolinguistics. He is the author of a number of books, including *Understanding Politeness* (2013, Cambridge University Press, with Dániel Z. Kádár), *Pragmatics and the English Language* (2014, Palgrave Macmillan, with Jonathan Culpeper), and *Im/politeness Implicatures* (2014, Mouton de Gruyter).

**Neil Murray** is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics (Reader) in the Centre for Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick, United

Kingdom, and adjunct member of the Research Centre for Languages & Cultures at the University of South Australia, where he was previously Head of Language and Literacy. He has over 30 years experience directing and lecturing on English language education and applied linguistics programmes in Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and Australia. He has published widely on language assessment, academic literacy, pragmatics and widening participation. His current research interests include English language policy and regulation in higher education and English as a lingua franca. His recently published *Writing Essays in English Language and Linguistics* (Cambridge University Press) and is currently completing a book on *Standards of English in Higher Education* (Cambridge University Press).

**Ruth Arber** is Senior Lecturer at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia, Co-Director of the Centre for Teaching and Learning Languages (CTaLL) and Director of Masters of Education (TESOL). Her research explores the theories and methodologies which frame identity and difference, particularly the study of race and ethnicity in education; the implications of this research for programs for language, mobility and cosmopolitanism; and the consequences of this thinking for critical and inclusive education. Arber's publications include *Race, Ethnicity and Education in Globalised Times*, (2008; Sole) and *Mobile Teachers, Teaching and International Schooling* (2014; co-editor), book chapters, journal articles and funded projects which investigate the manifestation of intercultural education, student and teacher mobility and language programs within and outside of Australia. Arber is co-editor for *TESOL in Context*.

**Sophie Arkoudis** is Deputy Director of the Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, Australia, and an Associate Professor in Higher Education. Sophie has published widely in the area of English language education. Sophie has led major national studies in recent years. In 2014, she led a project commissioned by federal Government Australian Education International on English language proficiency and international students' employability. Sophie recently completed an Office for Teaching and Learning National Senior Teaching Fellowship on integrating English language learning outcomes in higher education curricula. She directed a national project funded by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council on enhancing interaction between international and local students, which was awarded the International Education Association of Australia Award for Best Practice/Innovation in International Education in 2011.

**Yanyin Zhang** holds a PhD in Linguistics from the Australian National University (ANU). She is Senior Lecturer in the Department of East Asian Studies, College of Asia and the Pacific, ANU. Specialising in Applied

Linguistics, she has taught English, Chinese and TESOL at tertiary institutions in China, the United States, Vietnam, and Australia. Her research interests cover Second Language Acquisition (Chinese and English), second language pedagogy, cross-cultural pragmatics, and international education. Her recent research focuses on the second language development of Chinese syntax through the process ability approach.



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## Chapter 13

# An Investigation into the Knowledge, Education and Attitudes of Chinese, Arab (Gulf Region) and Indian Candidates to IELTS: The Case of Australia

Abe W. Ata

Although it is widely debated that students' attitudes towards a certain language proficiency test may affect their performance on that test, research on attitudes of these groups towards the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is still absent. And crucially, how such attitudes might affect their overall band score in a standardised test such as IELTS is lacking. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between Chinese, Indian and Arab IELTS candidates' knowledge, education and attitudes and their performance on IELTS and address significant gaps in this area of research study.

Much has been written about the IELTS methods of operations; validity of assessing the candidates readiness to move to higher education, and its contribution to the learning process in university environments (Coleman, Starfield, & Hagaen, 2003). The current study extends the research further to focus on the benefits and drawbacks as perceived by three national groups: Chinese, Indian and Arab (Gulf region) candidates.

Chinese and Gulf Arab learners are now the fastest growing group of international students in Australia (Marginson, 2011). Huge population, rapid economic growth and strong aspiration of studying have all contributed to such an upsurge in studying IELTS in preparation for enrolments at accredited universities in both countries. Other reasons such as flexibility, affordability, reputation and accessibility to courses clearly play additional roles in attracting them to Australia (Lo Bianco, 2005; Marginson, 2011).

Holmes (1992) states that if people feel positive toward those who use the language, they would be more successful and also more highly motivated toward learning it. Van Lier (1996) claims that working with interesting and

meaningful manifestations of language enhances motivation and positive attitudes to language and language learning

Subsequently, one could assume that if second language learners initiate their language learning while they have negative attitudes towards the target language and the people using that language, they are not expected to make considerable progress in their process of language learning. This assumption was held as far back as 1995 when Truitt (1995) hypothesised that students' beliefs and attitudes about language learning may vary based on cultural background and previous experiences. Thus, it can be argued that positive or negative attitudes do not develop accidentally but have some reasons for their emergence. Malallah (2000) investigated the attitudes of Arab learners towards English and discovered that they have positive attitudes toward the English language and their proficiency in tests was positively related to their positive attitude to English. Hence, it can be argued that having positive or negative attitudes towards a certain language can exert considerable effect on the learners' performance on a language test.

Other studies on the relationships of causality summarised below are equally crucial. One of these focuses on the relationship between IELTS preparation programs and candidates' performance on the actual IELTS test. Read and Hayes (2003) for instance, investigated the impact of IELTS preparation programs on international students' academic performance on tertiary study in New Zealand. Their study revealed that there were a number of substantial differences between the performance of the group which had undergone preparation programs and the group which had not. In 2007 Lewthwaite found among United Arab Emirates (UAE) IELTS candidates that the nature and type of activities used to prepare for their test was a major determinant of the balance of positive and negative attitudes. Others, like Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) investigated the relationship between intensive English language study and band score gain on IELTS. The results of their study revealed that students made variable progress in English during the three month period with an average gain of about half a band overall.

Attitudes that have been explored in relation to language learning range from anxiety about the language and the learning situation, through to attitudes to speakers of the second language the country in which it is spoken, the classroom, the teacher, other learners, the nature of language learning, particular elements in the learning activities, tests and beliefs about learning in general (Johnson and Johnson, 1998).

According to Brown (2000), second language learners of English benefit from positive attitudes; negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation. Nevertheless, he believes negative attitudes can be changed, often by exposure to reality — for example, by encounters with actual persons from other cultures.

Unlike the findings during the 1970s and the 1980s showing a positive relationship between attitude and linguistic abilities, Rasti (2009) found that candidates who have positive attitude towards IELTS, do not differ from other groups in their performance on the test. Rasti concludes that merely having a high attitude towards this test does not guarantee gaining a good score and no formal study has shown this either. She notes that candidates should go through learning effective strategies to approach the test and attending IELTS preparation programs can be a good and effective step.

While students saw the benefits of having a speaking component to the exam, both felt high anxiety. This finding contrasted with those of Read and Hayes (2003) who report overall 'positive attitudes about IELTS amongst teachers and strong motivation amongst learners'.

Merrylees (2003) conducted a study to investigate two IELTS user groups: candidates who sit the test for immigration purposes, and candidates who sit the test for secondary education purposes. He believed that with the increase in candidature of both user groups, there is an increasing need to investigate and analyse how each group is performing on the test in terms of nationality, age, gender and other factors, instead of making broad comparative analysis.

It is equally essential that consideration is directed at the broader issue of the role of the publications in preparing students for the IELTS and in the development of language skills in general, with particular reference to preparation for further study. Ata (2010), for example, found that poor lexical or specific cultural knowledge of English by Arab-speaking students can cause several negative interferences. His study produces a significant recommendation — one which implies that IELTS preparation materials should include more texts and tasks that would contribute to the social and academic acculturation of students.

And finally, Morgan Terry (2003) claims that the strong motivation and serious purposes of IELTS candidates is taken for granted. However, he believes that publishers need to respond more to the growing market for IELTS preparation and to start investing in colourful, attractive, motivating publications that can help promote learning for IELTS candidates in the way they have for students preparing for other exams.

### **Rationale and significance of this research**

The main premise underlying the literature reviewed earlier is this: students at large have positive or negative attitudes towards the language they want to learn and the people who speak it. Having positive attitudes towards tests is also claimed to be one of the reasons which make students perform better on the tests (Malallaha 2000). Studies which have investigated the relationships between attitudes and proficiency in the language clearly show that attitudes

and other affective variables are as important as aptitude for language achievement. (see for example, Bayliss and Ingram, 2006; Malallah 2000 & Coleman et al., 2003 ).

It is widely accepted amongst IELTS researchers that, because the IELTS exam is now taken by candidates from over 170 countries, the rubric should be as culture-free and as international as possible; and that where possible, culturally nuanced 'situated' contexts should be adapted to many IELTS rubrics. At a recent IELTS conference a participant noted that Task 1 in the academic writing test often reflects an Anglo-centricity because graphs often reflect aspects of North American or European life, and as such students would not have the necessary socio-cultural experience to argue for, for instance, the freedom of the press. Hence, it is likely that candidates from China and the UAE would not be ready for such a question, or others such as: what are the characteristics of good or inferior journalism?

Lethwaite (2007), for example, found a strong overlap between what the IELTS writing tasks required and what UAE students and staff thought was needed in a writing course and that those who are really motivated and interested will read more widely. It might not be that the exam 'encourages' such reading, he stressed, but it might mediate it or at least facilitate it. As regards the nature of the questions inviting personal opinion, some personal reflection on and prior assessment of various issues inevitably precede formulating a good written response.

This project will present relevant evidence to support or refute these premises and fill in much needed gaps in the overall discussion about students' attitudes to IELTS. One of these premises for example is that IELTS developers engage in a research agenda that explores a range of international English language issues such as specific lexical or cultural knowledge that might disadvantage test takers. Another premise is that IELTS is not only a proficiency test to evaluate linguistic competence but it is also a comprehensive test which measures other components such as communicative competence.

Implications from conducting this research can be drawn to benefit all the stakeholders including candidates intending to sit the test, centers running IELTS preparation programs, teachers wishing to teach such programs and IELTS test administrators.

## Objectives

The aims of this study are: to seek access to viewpoints of Chinese, Indian and Arab (Gulf) students in critically evaluating their attitudes, perception and knowledge of IELTS; and to reveal the effects of positive attitudes, or their lack of, on the overall test results. In examining whether a meaningful relationship exists between sex, age, nationality, educational background and

IELTS scores one is able then to identify differences and similarities amongst the three national groups and make appropriate recommendations to both teachers and policy makers.

The joint-funded IELTS research program in 2011 states that one of the areas of interest for IELTS external research purposes is *to investigate the attitudes and perceptions towards IELTS among users of test scores (test takers)*. The aims of this study squarely and fully reflect this objective.

This survey was not administered to IELTS educators as Coleman (2003) did years earlier. In his study Coleman (2003) then found that IELTS students in their sample were generally more knowledgeable than staff about the form and function of the IELTS and the meaning of test scores.

### Methodological procedure

The survey unit was pre test and post test IELTS candidates. A structured questionnaire was administered to 200 Chinese, Arab and Indian students at Monash University, and Deakin University language centres. (Access to these universities provides a compelling advantage as the researcher is an IELTS' examiner at these 3 language centres.) He has also held Research Honorary Fellowship positions at these universities including an Emeritus Professorship currently active at Deakin University).

A structured questionnaire was designed in a manner that would determine the differences and association between a wide range of variables, and to gauge the reliability of the candidates' response. It was devised primarily to collect data underpinning the following themes:

- appropriateness of taking the test
- demographic attributes of respondents
- areas of knowledge
- comparative effectiveness of IELTS versus other English tests
- attitudes to IELTS purpose and value
- perceptions of test demands and outcome.

The format of the questionnaire was largely, though not exclusively, adapted to Likert scale, as the candidates will be asked to indicate their attitudes by choosing one of the three alternatives: Agree, Undecided, Disagree.

A number of statistical methods were be adopted in making simultaneous comparisons of significance between two or more means; in measuring internal consistency; and, in determining whether a significant relationship exists between selected variables. These methods included factor analysis with Vairmax rotation, Anova: analysis of variance, *t* test, cross tabulation and Pearson's correlation.

Table 13.1 Demographic characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	134
Female	106
<b>Religion</b>	
Muslim	82
Hindu	4
Sikh	4
Buddhist	36
Christian	12
Other	74
N/A	28
<b>Birth place</b>	
Gulf/Middle East	76
China	88
Other	70
N/A	6
<b>Have you lived/studied in an English speaking country?</b>	
Yes	88
No	140
N/A	12
<b>Which country have you studied/lived in?</b>	
Home	22
English speaking country	70
N/A	148
<b>Language spoken at home</b>	
Arabic	56
Chinese	92
Other	80
N/A	12
<b>Language spoken with friends at language Centre</b>	
Arabic	4
Chinese	14
English	136
Arabic and English	22
Chinese and English	32
Other	12
N/A	20

**Findings and discussion**

It is widely proposed in social debate that international students in Australia and beyond bring a very different cultural, social and intellectual experience

from that which awaits them. The suggestion being that attitudes to knowledge, to styles of learning, and to study focus can lead to a shock for both students and educators alike.

A number of questions were presented to find out how the three national/regional candidates comprising Arab, Chinese and Indian students differ in the way they perceive of the IELTS tests at large (see Figure 13.1).

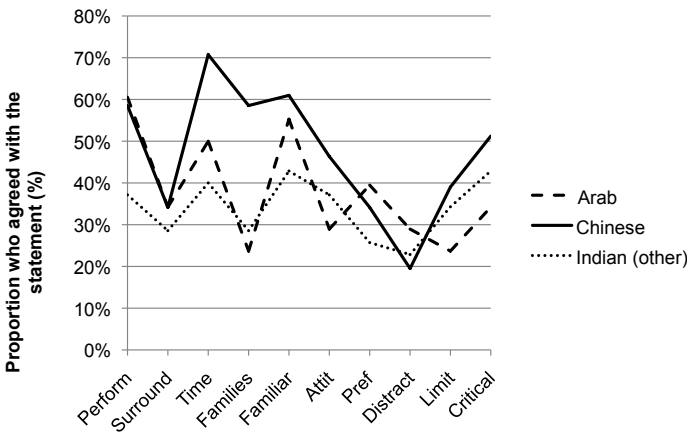


Figure 13.1 General attitudes to IELTS.

General attitudes to IELTS: statements and significance (computation includes Non response adjustment)

perform = Fear of taking the IELTS test affected my performance

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .024$

Surround = The surroundings such as lighting, temperature, floor, desks affected my performance

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .443$

time = The time of taking the IELTS test affected my performance

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .013$

Families = Being familiar with the place where I took the IELTS test helped my performance

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .00$

familiar = Being familiar with the design, structure and format of the test helped my performance

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .005$

Attit = My attitude to IELTS test is largely positive

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .004$

Pref = I prefer IELTS to other English Language tests

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .042$

Distract = I found the announcements and administration of the test itself distracting

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .026$

Limit = In my country our socio-cultural experience such as the freedom of the press, limits my ability in performing well in the IELTS tests.

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .018$

Critical = In my country students are not encouraged to develop critical thinking as in Australia.

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .016$

Overall, the findings show that with the exception of the variable 'the surroundings such as lighting, temperature, floor, desks that affected my performance' variation in the response by the three cohorts is highly significant. It is also shown that Chinese students exhibit the strongest expression on all the variables, except the following two for which Arabs students from the Gulf Region took the lead:

- I prefer IELTS to other English Language tests
- I found the announcements and administration of the text itself distracting.

It would appear that being familiar with the design and structure and venue of gave the Chinese cohort a positive feel in performing well. In the same instance they registered the highest response in not being encouraged to develop critical thinking in Australia, and their ability to perform well is hampered by the socio-cultural experience in their own country. These responses have a wider implication and interpretation which are communicated in the concluding section of this chapter.

Of the three groups the lowest response directed at the following items was communicated by Arab students:

- My attitude to IELTS test is largely positive
- Being familiar with the place where I took the IELTS test helped my performance
- In my country our socio-cultural experience such as the freedom of the press, limits my ability in performing well in the IELTS tests.
- In my country students are not encouraged to develop critical thinking as in Australia.

Of the three groups the Indian cohort participants indicated the lowest dislike on several items including the following:

- Fear of taking the IELTS test affected my performance.
- The surroundings such as lighting, temperature, floor, desks affected my performance.
- The time of taking the IELTS test affected my performance.
- Being familiar with the design, structure and format of the test helped my performance.
- I prefer IELTS to other English Language tests.
- In my country our socio-cultural experience such as the freedom of the press, limits my ability in performing well in the IELTS tests.
- In my country students are not encouraged to develop critical thinking as in Australia.

The latter two attitudinal statements listed from the Indian cohort participants arguably indicate an awareness, perhaps a subdued criticism of the reality that students in their country of origin were 'not encouraged to

develop critical thinking as in Australia'. Psycholinguists including Yeh and Inose (2003) found that social connectedness, liberal thinking, freedom of movement and social support satisfaction in Western countries are major factors behind it. The negative link between gender and the response to these two statements was not significant. The suggestion being that both male and female international students are equally impacted in terms of showing a better performance.

### **Listening Section**

Findings in Figure 13.2 present responses to what they disliked about the Listening section of IELTS with the Chinese group ranking highest on the following statements:

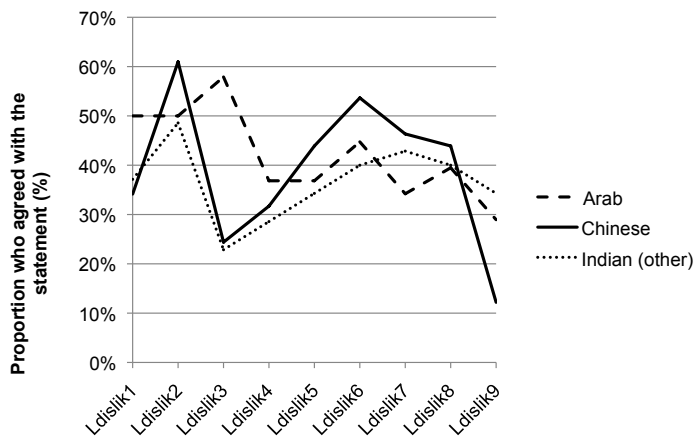
- Tempo or speed (60%)
- Responding at the same time whilst listening (44%)
- Performance deteriorated as the test moved forward (54%)
- Not enough time for the answers to be transferred to the answer sheet from the question booklet (47%)
- Test does not really evaluate listening comprehension (45%)
- But showing the lowest ranking towards 'the test being not useful for their future studies' (11%).

It is not possible to make a conclusive statement explaining this variation. One may reason that being socialised in a traditional society may have contributed to being more restrained in mixing with genders of other nationalities — English speaking or otherwise. Frequenting movies and other Australian cultural-social events, eateries and the like, particularly in evening hours provide a wider exposure and accessibility to spoken English. Another factor is related to international students from the same background to live together in preference to renting in family households where they are less likely to communicate in English.

### **Reading section**

Students showed a mixed feelings recognising that their reading section pushed them hard but it was not accurate in mirroring their study of being relevant to their study needs in the future (see Figure 13.3). The statement the 'Test is not useful for my future studies' drew the lowest response from the three cohort groups combined, with Chinese students scoring the lowest response at 11%, followed by the Arab group at 28% and Indians at 35%.

Whereas a higher percentage at 50% for the Chinese and Arab speaking and 70% 'Other' did not see any benefits in 'reading a lot of English texts



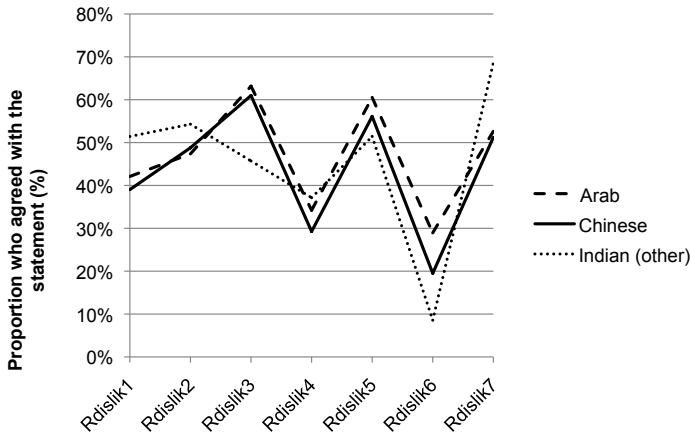
**Figure 13.2** Attitudes to the Listening Section  
*Attitudes to the Listening Section: Statements and significance (computation includes Non-response adjustment)*

Ldislike1 = Non-familiarity Australian accent  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .070$   
Ldislike2 = tempo or speed  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .038$   
Ldislike3 = lack of opportunity to wear headphones  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .000$   
Ldislike4 = poor quality of the voice  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .0379$   
Ldislike5 = Responding at the same time whilst listening.  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .726$   
Ldislike6 = Performance deteriorated as the test moved forward  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .357$   
Ldislike7 = Not enough time for the answers to be transferred to the answer sheet from the question booklet  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .226$   
Ldislike8 = Test does not really evaluate listening comprehension  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .640$   
Ldislike9 = Test is not useful for my future studies  $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = .003$

before the exam’. These largely mixed negative feelings arising from working hard but not accurate mirroring their study needs was also cited by Spratt (2005).

**Writing Section**

Several variables were introduced to assess the reasons and degree behind disliking the Writing Section (see Figure 13.4). The two main groups who recorded the highest dislike to the first 4 variables are the Chinese and Arabic speaking. The limitation or lack of knowledge of the world or information related to a given topic (variable Dislike4) clearly shows that different dimensions of assessment of literacy may need to be prioritised (a) for different disciplines, such as language testing, where knowledge of what it means to know and use a language is surely essential; (b) within particular academic and professional domains, where language requirements may vary; and (c) with particular users such as students, parents, school administra-



**Figure 13.3** Attitudes to the Reading Section

*Attitudes to the Reading Section: Statements and significance (computation includes Non response adjustment)*

*Rdislike1 = Reading is immediately after listening*

$X^2(9, N=240)=19.15, p=.0.111$

*Rdislike2 = Disliked the variety of question types*

$X^2(9, N=240)=19.15, p=.0.258$

*Rdislike3 = Lengthy passages*

$X^2(9, N=240)=19.15, p=.0.084$

*Rdislike4 = Test is not useful for my future studies*

$X^2(9, N=240)=19.15, p=.0.214$

*Rdislike5 = Texts became more difficult towards the end of the reading section*

$X^2(9, N=240)=19.15, p=.0.367$

*Rdislike6 = Knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is not important*

$X^2(9, N=240)=19.15, p=.0.016$

*Rdislike7 = Reading a lot of English texts before the exam*

$X^2(9, N=240)=19.15, p=.0.001$

tors, teachers, or test developers whose needs for and uses of information are highly diverse depending the nature and the level of their involvement in the assessment process (Taylor 2009).

None of the variables in this section were significant with the exception of Wdislike5 = being given more than one task (sig, .0013).

This greater focus on assessment brings with it the need for *assessment literacy*, defined variously as having the skills needed for test development and validation, the knowledge required to make informed an principled score-based decision-making, and the ability to read and make sense of assessment-related research data (Newfields, 2006).

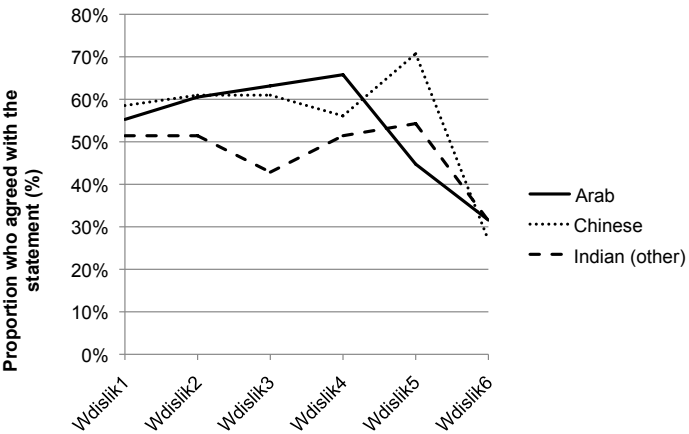


Figure 13.4 Attitudes to the Writing Section

*Attitudes to the Writing Section: Statements and significance (computation includes Non response adjustment)*

Wdislike1 = Tired in this section because of their performance on the first two sections

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.362$

Wdislike2 = lengthy topics cause difficulty in concentration

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.281$

Wdislike3 = knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is crucial in this section

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.077$

Wdislike4 = not enough knowledge of the world or information related to the given topic

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.056$

Wdislike5 = being given more than one task

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.013$

Wdislike6 = test is not useful for my future studies

$X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.288$

Other language educators like Lewthwaite believe that the writing task is ‘non-academic’ in the sense that a personal opinion was asked for and respondents are not able to, and not expected to, draw on empirical evidence, statistical data or the academic expertise of published material. (2007, p. 8). This would explain why Arabic speaking candidates in particular scored highest (65%) on the variable ‘Wdislike4’ that there was ‘not enough knowledge of the world or information related to the given topic’ — a common observation made about school curriculum and rote learning styles in schools in the Middle Eastern countries.

As an IELTS examiner and academic the writer has found that IELTS tasks required more use of prior knowledge than did university tasks. As Lewthwaite's (2007) experience in teaching IELTS to UAE students shows:

IELTS tests had more limited rhetorical functions (an emphasis on hortatory at the expense of other functions such as explanation, comparison, summarisation) and focused much more on 'real world' contexts compared with the greater emphasis on abstract ideas in university tasks.

Although written in 1999, an article by Moore and Morton suggested that Task 2 'may be more akin to public non-academic genres (newspapers, magazines) than characteristic of university assignments' (see also Lewthwaite, 2007).

Several students mentioned the unrealistic time limit of (recommended) 20 minutes for the exam task cause difficulty on concentrating on lengthy topics (Figure 13.4, variable Wdislike2). This reaction was corroborated by 60% of Arabic speaking and Chinese candidates and 50% 'Other'. The response of these groups to being given more than one task in a short time was almost the same (Figure 13.4, Wdislike5).

While it might reflect one type of university writing — writing exams under time constraints — it was unclear whether this was helpful to another major form of university writing, that of research activity.

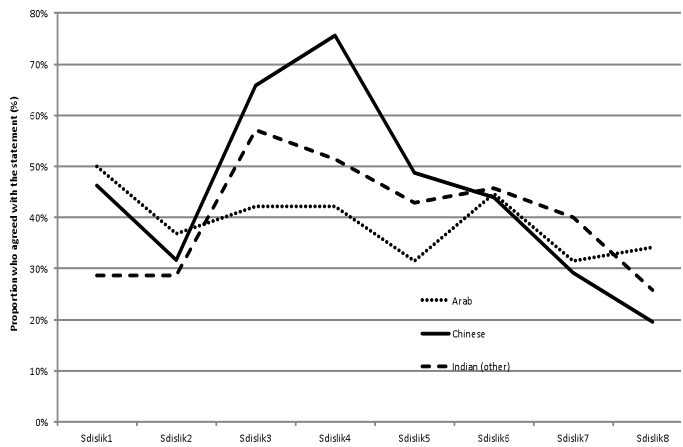
### **Speaking Section**

The direction of the results for the Speaking Section (see Figure 13.5) is more pronounced than the Writing part. That is, feedback about difficulties experience in the Speaking section was stronger, varied and more pronounced than the Writing Section. The Chinese cohort in particular ranked highest on the following three statements:

- (Sdislike4) Having stress or lacking confidence at the time of interview (75%)
- (Sdislike5) Being asked too many questions in rather a short time (48%)
- (Sdislike3) Interviewer's accent (67%).

The Indian group ranked lower and the Arab candidates ranked the lowest on these statements.

Another difference that affected performance amongst the 3 groups relates to the gender of the examiner with 50% Arabs, 48% Chinese and 29% Indians indicating agreement that the examiner's gender affected their performance. Such a relatively high response in an exam environment is not easy to explain notwithstanding calculation for a level of significance. One linguist surmised that the teacher, male and female alike 'is placed in the driver's seat — a position of primary influence in terms of the teacher beliefs, attitudes, educational level and experience, and personalities' (Spratt, 2005, pp. 17–23).



**Figure 13.5** Attitudes to the Speaking Section  
*Attitudes to the Speaking Section: Statements and significance (computation includes Non response adjustment)*

*Sdslik1 = The examiner's gender affected their performance*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.056$

*Sdslik2 = Test examines one's listening ability, not one's speaking ability*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.268$

*Sdslik3 = Interviewer's accent*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.005$

*Sdslik4 = Having stress or lacking confidence at the time of interview*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.000$

*Sdslik5 = Being asked too many questions in rather a short time*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.064$

*Sdslik6 = Being recorded would add to their test anxiety*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.228$

*Sdslik7 = The questions in this section were not related to each other*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.061$

*Sdslik8 = The test is not useful for my future studies*  
 $X^2(9, N = 240) = 19.15, p = 0.080$

Other factors that may contribute to this finding are lack of motivation, so if the learners do not want to interact, they will not; and insufficient language, so if the learners do not have enough English language, it will be difficult for them to interact (Howarth, 2006).

**Summary and conclusions**

While the above findings are preliminary, based as they are on a small sample of respondents drawn from a single institution, they suggest some lessons that

might be learned about the assessment literacy of test users in the higher education context (which may also be applicable to other language use domains). The fact that test users, savvy as they appear to be, are neither particularly knowledgeable nor interested in learning about language tests like the TOEFL, suggests that information provided to them by test developers should be both carefully targeted, limited in scope and accessible when needed.

There appears to be two broad attitudes underpinning these findings: the first is widespread acceptance of the quality of the language tests used for selection as well as satisfaction with and trust in the information provided.

Also, if we were to rank order the unfavourable attitudes for both sexes relating to the four IELTS sections the following primary patterns emerge:

Several variables were introduced to assess the reasons and degree behind disliking the Writing Section. The two main groups who recorded the highest dislike to the first 4 variables are the Chinese and Arabic speaking. The limitation or lack of knowledge of the world or information related to a given topic (variable Dislike4) clearly shows that different dimensions of assessment of literacy may need to be prioritised (a) for different disciplines, such as language testing, where knowledge of what it means to know and use a language is surely essential; (b) within particular academic and professional domains, where language requirements may vary; and (c) with particular users such as students, parents, school administrators, teachers

It has been proposed that Learning contexts and familiarity information and issues lead to a greater fluency and accuracy in performing English Language tests (Mehnert, 1998). If that premise holds true then writings task related to women's issues, questioning parental attitudes, organ donation, freedom of thinking and rote memory learning at school and the like would disadvantage students from traditional cultures. The constraints of how the spontaneity of addressing these task mirror task requirements later on in tertiary institutions requires further investigation.

The direction of the results for the Speaking part is more pronounced than the Writing part. That is, feedback about difficulties experienced in the Speaking section was stronger, varied and more pronounced than the Writing part.

Students showed a mixed feelings recognising that their Reading section pushed them hard but it was not accurate in mirroring their study of being relevant to their study needs in the future. The statement, 'Test is not useful for my future studies', drew the lowest response from the three cohort groups combined, with Chinese students scoring the lowest response at 11%, followed by the Arab group at 28% and Indian at 35%.

As regards the unfavourable attitudes to the Listening section, one may reason that being socialised in a traditional society may have contributed to being more restrained in mixing with genders of other nationalities —

English speaking or otherwise. Frequenting movies and other Australian cultural-social events, eateries and the like particularly in evening hours provide a wider exposure and accessibility to spoken English. Another factor is related to international students from the same background to live together in preference to renting in family households where they are less likely to communicate in English.

This survey has raised a number of questions aimed at areas that require further probing. Of significance are the following: Is there a principled basis for the setting of minimum entry standards and whether the current cut off scores are appropriate? Is there a need to address the lack of systematic data collection to evaluate their [entry standards] appropriateness and, by extension the rationale of determining that language test scores are the basis for selection decisions? Why do IELTS stakeholder continue to make little reference to other relevant factors which might have a bearing on students' chances of academic success? And, does achieving the specified minimum IELTS score imply that students' English proficiency is sufficient to successfully complete rather than commence their courses?

On the basis of the overall response for this section, one could safely surmise that the relative acceptance and trust in what benefits students will gain as a consequence are not to be underestimated. This however does not translate into a general understanding of or interest in language proficiency test content, scoring procedures, cut off scores and cross test equivalences or associated validity evidence, as perceived by the respondents to meet their needs.

The broader response to several questions relating to core issues surrounding IELTS remains inconclusive. Questions relating to bilingual and English language learning by international students have been raised by numerous researcher including Dooey (2010) and Lasagabasete (2008).

There is a deep division, for example, in the view as to whether current cut off scores are appropriate. Others raise questions behind the principled basis for the setting of minimum entry standards; and why is there an overemphasis on language test scores as the basis for selection decisions based on language test scores without reference to other relevant factors which might have a bearing on students' chances of academic success! And lastly — does achieving the specified minimum IELTS score imply that students' English proficiency is sufficient to successfully complete rather than commence their courses!

These conclusions are largely subject to a number of caveats. The findings, for example, apply to particular cohort groups in a particular learning social context – one where to extent of its applicability to other groups in other contexts is unknown. Another obvious limitation shows that self reporting almost always becomes embedded in the analysis of the data

itself. It also seems important to test for the degree to which the developers of language tests may communicate complacency about their own levels of expertise and understanding about the qualities of tests, the meaning of test scores and the informational needs in these contexts.

In order to test for a high predictive validity of the nature of IELTS test score in relation to university requirements of acceptable language proficiency, this study needs to be extended further to include perception of teachers themselves. How the two group, educators and students differ in their attitudes would accurately indicate the relationship between the language skills reflected in IELTS scores and abilities required by the universities to succeed.

The chasm as to how staff and students differed in their perception of predictive nature of IELTS test scores in determining the languages abilities at tertiary institutions was widely demonstrated in one of the IELTS Research Reports by Coleman and others (2003).

### Acknowledgement

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