Omani Students' Familiarity with IELTS-based Reading Exam Format and Strategies: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi[1], Donald Domalon[1], Chokri Ayari[1]

[1] University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Preparatory Studies Centre, Oman

Correspondence: Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi. Address: PSC, University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Oman. E-mail: ckodhandaraman@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to investigate Omani students' familiarity with the IELTS-based reading exam's time limit, format, and reading strategies. It also aims to explore the extent to which Omani students adopt independent learning strategies and the challenges they face while taking the IELTS-based reading exams. Omani students need help with their reading skills, as is shown in their below-average scores in IELTS or IELTS-based reading exams conducted by the British Council and the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS-Ibra). Hence, this study seeks to answer the research questions of whether Omani students studying at level four are familiar with the IELTS-based reading exam's time limit, format, and reading strategies, and adopt independent learning strategies. The study employed a qualitative research method, and data was collected from eight students (N=8) studying at level four in the preparatory studies center of UTAS-Ibra. This study is significant because it has implications for the stakeholders. The study results show that participants generally possessed a positive comprehension of the time constraints and overall structure of the Level 4 IELTS-based reading exam. Nevertheless, a notable distinction emerged between high and moderate achievers in utilizing reading strategies, proficiency in comprehending complex vocabularies, and sustained engagement in independent learning. To address the challenges high and moderate achievers face, the study suggests implementing specific interventions tailored to their needs.

Keywords: reading strategies, IELTS format, Omani students, scores, reading comprehension

1. Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) was introduced to the Omani education system in 1970. Since then, English has gained international recognition, growing in status in Oman and worldwide (Al-Issa, 2020). Notably, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) serves as a doorway to tertiary education programs in English-speaking countries. In Oman, British Council and other private language schools regularly conduct teacher training courses (TTC) for IELTS instructors to enhance their teaching strategies and enable them to assist test-takers in achieving their objectives effectively. They give test-takers a general idea of their final performance by highlighting their strengths and weaknesses in different skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Test results and research indicate that Omani students struggle the most with reading skills among the four essential skills. Reading is a crucial ability for learners to comprehend text messages. It is also crucial for decision-making in personal and professional life. In IELTS and IELTS-based reading tests, reading comprehension plays a significant role in determining band scores.

Test-takers are required to read three passages of 1500-2500 words and answer 38-42 questions within 60 minutes (Cited in Holi et al. (2020), IELTS Handbook, 2007). The difficulty level of texts and tasks increases as the test progresses. Therefore, it is essential to understand the reading exam format, reading strategies, and independent learning strategies better to increase the chances of achieving the required band score in reading exams.

In Oman, the University of Technology and Applied Sciences conducts IELTS-based exams at level 4 in the preparatory studies center. The administration uses the test results to decide which students are eligible for admission to a bachelor's degree. According to the results, only a few students qualify for a bachelor's degree. This is because many students come from rural areas and have limited exposure to reading and few opportunities to use English in their daily lives (Chinnathambi et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2023). Few studies have been conducted on this issue in UTAS branches in Oman, so this study aims to fill the research gap. The results of this study are significant because they affect stakeholders and policymakers. The study aims to explore level 4 Omani students' familiarity with IELTS-based reading exam's time limit, format, reading strategies, independent learning, and challenges.

2. Literature Review

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) reading exam is integral to the overall test that assesses a candidate's ability to comprehend and analyze written texts. It is crucial to understand the format and structure of the IELTS reading exam to prepare effectively and perform well. The IELTS reading exam has three sections: Section 1 contains Multiple Choice Questions, Section 2

contains True/False/Not Given or Yes/No/Not Given Questions and Section 3 contains Matching Headings, Summary Completion, or Sentence Completion. The reading passages in the IELTS exam are diverse and include genres such as newspaper articles, magazine extracts, academic journals, and advertisements. There are different types of questions in the IELTS reading exam that require various cognitive skills, such as skimming, scanning, inference, and critical analysis. These question types emphasize the need for a comprehensive assessment of reading skills.

The reading exams at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) based on IELTS follow a similar pattern to the standard IELTS format with some slight modifications. These exams generally start with Matching Headings, followed by True/False/Not-given questions, Summary Completion tasks, Multiple Choice Questions, Sentence Completion exercises, and Answering Questions based on the text. UTAS may introduce slight variations in question types or order to align with specific assessment objectives or institutional requirements, while still adhering to the fundamental structure of the IELTS reading exam. These modifications ensure that the exam remains relevant and tailored to the needs of UTAS students while maintaining consistency with the broader IELTS framework.

Reading is a complex activity involving bottom-up and top-down processing skills and integrating various cognitive and non-cognitive processes (Kendeou et al., 2011.). To understand a text, the reader must connect it to their knowledge and experiences and use their recognition skills to comprehend the words and sentences (Meneghetti et al., 2006). Grabe (2009) and Koda (2007) suggest that to comprehend a text fully; one needs to have cultural and metacognitive awareness, knowledge of grammar and syntax, reading strategies, background knowledge, vocabulary knowledge, the ability to recognize words and phrases, and the ability to synchronize text information rapidly and efficiently. Understanding the text type and genre and having a range of strategic and cognitive skills is essential. The IELTS reading test assesses the candidate's ability to follow instructions, identify the main ideas and relationships between them, recognize underlying concepts, and draw logical inferences from the text.

A reader goes through several levels of understanding while reading a text. These levels include literal comprehension, interpretive or inferential comprehension, critical comprehension, and creative comprehension. According to Feng and Chen (2016), literal comprehension is when the reader understands what is explicitly stated in the text. Interpretive or inferential comprehension, on the other hand, focuses on the reader's ability to grasp the text's implicit meaning by utilizing their knowledge and understanding of the topic. Critical comprehension is the reader's ability to make personal judgments about the text using higher-level critical thinking skills—finally, creative comprehension deals with the reader's emotional engagement and response to what they are reading.

Good writing and reading skills are essential for effective communication. Reading comprehension is crucial to these skills and requires critical thinking and strategy choices (Marzban & Barati, 2016). However, even skilled readers face challenges as they read, striving to get the most out of their reading (Guntur & Rahimi, 2019). Moreover, an inadequate educational background is one factor that negatively affects students' reading comprehension (AliAlghail & AliMahfoodh, 2016).

Ahmadian et al. (2016) suggest that readers use four main reading strategies. These are cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and affective strategies. Cognitive reading strategies include highlighting and underlining, pausing to think, skimming, predicting, note-taking, reasoning deductively, re-reading, and paraphrasing. Metacognitive strategies involve self-monitoring, planning, self-questioning, self-evaluation, and paying attention. Compensation strategies use linguistic and non-linguistic clues to comprehend the text. Lastly, affective strategies include lowering anxiety levels to reduce the mental load of the reading task. (Ahmadian, Poulaki & Farahani, 2016).   The degree of help required for test takers varies based on their unique application and practice of these strategies.

Research studies have found that students often face difficulties when taking reading exams, particularly for Academic IELTS reading tests. As Chalmers and Walkinshaw (2014) pointed out, time constraints are a significant concern among these challenges. Chowdhury (2009) also highlights that time management and lack of practice are students' most prominent difficulties during Academic IELTS Reading tests. Moreover, unfamiliar texts increase time requirements due to cultural differences between test writers and takers. AliAlghail and AliMahfood (2016) conducted a study that discusses other obstacles, such as working out the meaning of difficult words, reading quickly to get the overall meaning, reading quickly to find information, understanding specialist Vocabulary, comprehending the organization of a text, identifying key ideas, reading carefully to understand a text, and identifying ideas/examples while managing time.

A study conducted by Khodabandehlou et al (2012) regarding self-directed learning confirms that "the strategic learners that were equipped with SDL strategies were able to identify their own learning needs, setting personal goals, making decisions and generally to take the responsibility of their own learning" (p 7).   The study reveals that self-directed learning had a positive effect on their reading comprehension proficiency. This implies that students who employ independent learning strategies are more successful than others.

The literature review presents a comprehensive reading comprehension overview, covering bottom-up and top-down processing skills, cognitive and non-cognitive processes, and various comprehension levels. The review emphasizes the importance of cultural and metacognitive awareness, grammar and syntax knowledge, reading strategies, background knowledge, Vocabulary, and the ability to recognize and synchronize information. It also discusses the significance of understanding text types and genres in the context of the IELTS reading test. However, despite the comprehensive coverage, there is a gap in the literature regarding specific challenges and strategies related to these tests. This gap mainly focuses on time constraints and the cultural gap between the test writer and the test-taker. While the literature does mention some challenges students face, such as time management and lack of practice, there is a need for a more in-depth exploration of reading strategies to address these challenges, especially in the context of unfamiliar texts and cultural differences.

Addressing this gap could provide valuable insights for educators and researchers who aim to improve students' performance in Academic IELTS reading tests.

2.1 Research Questions

1. Are Level Four Omani students familiar with the time limit and format of the IELTS-based reading exam?

2. Are Level Four Omani students familiar with reading strategies?

3. Are Level Four Omani students adopting independent learning strategies while preparing for the IELTS-based reading exam?

4. What challenges do Level Four Omani students encounter while attempting the IELTS-based reading exam?

3. Methodology

3.1 Qualitative Phenomenological Study

This study uses a phenomenological approach to investigate and comprehend students' real-life experiences with the IELTS reading section. The primary objective is to capture the core of their awareness, perceptions, and utilization of reading strategies within the IELTS context.

3.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives are as follows:

1. To assess the familiarity of Level Four Omani students with the time limit and format of the IELTS-based reading exam.

2. To examine the familiarity of Level Four Omani students with reading strategies.

3. To investigate the extent to which Level Four Omani students adopt independent learning strategies while preparing for the IELTS-based reading exam.

4. To identify the challenges encountered by Level Four Omani students while attempting the IELTS-based reading exam.

These objectives provide clear and measurable goals for the study. They focus on assessing the students' familiarity with the exam format and reading strategies and their ability to utilize independent learning approaches related to the IELTS-based reading exam.

3.3 Method

This study employed a qualitative research design, primarily focusing on conducting semi-structured interviews with Omani students enrolled at Level Four in the Preparatory Studies Centre of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences- Ibra. This approach enabled an in-depth investigation into students' familiarity with the format of IELTS-based reading exams and their utilization of reading strategies. To ensure the rigor of the interviews, the team meticulously designed questions covering all facets of the research inquiry, fostering open-ended responses to delve into individual experiences. The study used open-ended and closed-ended questions to assess participants' general and task-specific reading strategies. Open-ended questions allowed for detailed responses, while closed-ended questions provided quantifiable data on strategy usage. To evaluate the frequency of certain strategies, closed-ended questions were used with a Likert scale. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they use these strategies by selecting options ranging from "always" to "never". This approach provided structured insights into their approach.

Training was provided to interviewers to ensure consistent and structured data collection, supplemented by flexibility to explore emerging themes. Member checking was incorporated to validate the accuracy of collected data, alongside meticulous transcription to preserve integrity. Ultimately, thematic analysis was employed to uncover recurring patterns, providing profound insights into students' engagement with the exam format, reading strategies, and independent learning strategies. Before this study, no pilot study was conducted as the study was small and simple and had a well-defined research protocol based on established methodologies. The straightforward design and established protocols provide confidence in the study's execution, reducing the need for additional preliminary testing.

Nevertheless, the study adopted all the necessary ethical considerations. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, methods, potential risks, and benefits. Prior to their participation, participants' consent was obtained, and they were informed that their personal information would be kept confidential, and data would be anonymized to protect participant privacy.

3.4 Participants

The study included interviews with 8 Level Four students from the General Foundation Program (GFP) at the English Language Centre of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, located in the Sultanate of Oman. All participants came from the Sharqiyah region and had similar regional, cultural, and educational backgrounds. The sample size is small because interviewing a small sample size of 8 students in qualitative research enables in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives, facilitates data saturation quickly, accommodates resource constraints, and allows for effective data analysis. A smaller sample size is also appropriate for studies focusing on specific phenomena or populations, and researchers can develop a contextual understanding of individual experiences. Ultimately, the focus is on obtaining high-quality data rather than statistical representativeness.

The study participants were chosen based on their performance on the midterm exam's reading marks, which were used to determine two achievement levels: high achievement and moderate achievement. The group with high achievement included students who consistently scored at the upper end of the grading scale, demonstrating exceptional proficiency and success in the midterm exam reading component.

On the other hand, the average achievement group consisted of students who performed moderately well in the midterm exam reading section, with their scores falling within the middle range of the grading scale. The selection criteria ensured that the participant pool represented a diversity of academic abilities, allowing for a comprehensive exploration and comparison of reading strategies, approaches and challenges across different achievement levels.

3.5 Research Tools and Instruments

To conduct research, we used self-prepared open-ended questions and closed-ended questions, based on classroom experiences. These questions were designed to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives, opinions, and experiences, and no software was used for data interpretation. We used a stratified random sampling method to collect data to help answer the research questions. Common themes and patterns from interviews were identified by analyzing transcripts, recognizing important themes, and interpreting their meaning.

4. Results

This research presents findings from a qualitative study that employed a stratified random sampling method encompassing students: high-achievers and moderate achievers. The research focused on understanding students' experiences and challenges preparing for the Level 4 IELTS-based Reading Exam. The investigation delves into participants' awareness of time limit and exam format, reading strategies, practice and application of independent learning strategies, and challenges faced by them. Additionally, the study explores students' engagement with various reading materials, collaborative learning practices, and factors influencing their performance in the reading test.

4.1 Time Limit and Exam Format

One theme derived from the interview was the awareness of the time limit and exam pattern. All respondents are aware of these components as far as the Level 4 IELTS-based Reading Exam is concerned. An overwhelming 100% of respondents demonstrated a clear awareness of the time limit and exam patterns. For instance, Respondents 2 and 4, high-achieving students, stated: "I think the test is given 60 minutes." Further, Respondents 5 and 6, who are moderate achievers, provided insights into their experiences with the midterm exam format. Respondent 3 exclaimed: "The Midterm exam was about True False, Short Answer Questions, Multiple Choice, Summarization, Sentence completion, Matching type, and Summary Completion. "This result implies that both respondents have a basic understanding of the exam requirements, which is a positive sign for exam preparedness. The description also sheds light on the diverse question types in the midterm exam. While these participants did not elaborate on their feelings or experiences with the exam format, the enumeration of question types suggests a varied and comprehensive assessment approach employed in the course.

4.2 Reading Strategies

Practice and application of reading strategies (For questions: Matching Headings, True/False/Not-given questions, Summary Completion tasks, Multiple Choice Questions, Sentence Completion exercises, and Answering Questions based on the text) also emerged as a significant theme in this study. It becomes apparent that students, including high-achiever and moderate-achiever individuals, actively participate in the deliberate practice and application of various reading strategies such as cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, compensation strategies, and affective strategies, within classroom settings and examination contexts.

High-achiever students, embodied by Respondents 1 and 2, stand out for their exemplary commitment to consistently applying reading strategies. Specifically, the frequency of the use of strategies for matching heading to paragraph underscores the efficacy of dedicated practice. For instance, Respondent 1 was confident in stating, "In class, I always practice matching headings to paragraphs, True-False exercises, summary completion, and others all the time. What I learn in class, I apply in exams". The frequency of application demonstrated by these high-achiever students is a noteworthy example, emphasizing the intrinsic value of recurrent and purposeful application of task-specific reading strategies.

On the other hand, Respondent 8, a moderate-achiever student, disclosed, "I sometimes practice and apply the reading strategies in class and exams." Notably, this subgroup of moderate achievers displayed less enthusiasm or interest in class activities related to these strategies despite occasional practice and application, emphasizing the need for additional support to address challenges encountered during exams. Furthermore, the study found differences in the frequency of using various reading strategies, such as True or False, Multiple-Choice, Summary Completion, Sentence Completion, and Short Answer Questions, between students who achieved high grades and those who achieved moderate grades.

The implications of these findings extend to the education system, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach to reading strategy instructions. While high-achiever students demonstrate effective application through consistent practice, support mechanisms should be implemented to aid average students, who may need more frequent practice and challenges with specific strategies. Educators should consider personalized interventions, interactive workshops, and the provision of contextualized practice materials to enhance the frequency and proficiency of reading strategy application across diverse student groups. Additionally, fostering a more engaging and inclusive classroom environment that sparks interest in reading strategy activities can improve overall comprehension and performance outcomes, i.e., literature circles or book clubs where students can choose a book on their interest.

4.3 Independent Learning Strategies

Another theme that emerged in the interview was Independent Learning Strategies. The exploration of Independent Learning Strategies unveiled the commonalities and disparities in the practices of high-achiever and moderate-achiever students. While two of the high-achiever respondents consistently embraced independent learning, exemplified by Respondent 2's affirmation, "I always do independent learning like those given by the teachers in Moodle and MyELT," the remaining two high-achiever students showcased a spectrum of involvement in independent learning, with some reporting regular engagement. For example, Respondent 3 elaborated, "Apart from those given in Moodle and MyELT, I also do IELTS activities online. I also do enrichment activities uploaded in MS Teams by the teachers." Conversely, Respondent 5, a moderate-achiever student, conveyed, "I sometimes do independent learning because I need help from my teacher or an intelligent friend."

These observed distinctions underscore the nuanced approaches to independent learning between high-achiever and moderate-achiever students. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of self-reported data, as participants may have varying interpretations of the term 'independent learning,' and their self-disclosures might be influenced by social desirability bias. Therefore, this study should consider other sources of information to gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

The educational implication of this variability in engagement calls for targeted interventions to cultivate more consistent independent learning activities., particularly among high-achiever students who benefit from refining their self-directed learning habits. Motivational strategies, including presenting success stories and peer testimonials, emerge as potent tools for instilling a culture of continuous independent learning.

Integrating gamified elements into independent learning resources is recommended to bolster engagement. Gamified learning experiences, characterized by a point and reward system, visual progress representations, and friendly competition-based activities, possess the potential to render independent learning more interactive, motivating, and engaging for all students. Educators need to tailor these strategies to the diverse preferences and needs of high-achiever and moderate-achiever students, thereby creating a more inclusive and effective environment that propels advancements in reading skills and overall academic performance.

This implies that we must encourage more consistent independent learning activities such as showcasing success stories and peer testimonials and integrating gamified elements into independent learning resources to improve their reading skills. Gamified learning experiences promote interactive, motivating, and high engagement of students in class. This includes points and reward systems for completing learning tasks, providing visual representations of students' progress, and introducing friendly competition-based activities, among others.

Examining students' approaches to reviewing previous exam papers and engaging in practice tests has highlighted a notable theme in the interviews. Most respondents reported reviewing test papers provided by the teachers and participating in practice tests, albeit with some variations in the frequency of these activities. For instance, a moderate-achiever student, Respondent 6, expressed, "I review old test papers only when teachers give. I do not keep my test papers before." This implies that students need the guidance of the teachers through the so-called 'Teacher-led method. This inclination towards a "Teacher-led method" suggests reliance on guided materials, reflecting the need for structured support in the exam preparation.

Respondent 6's belief that retaining previous test papers is unnecessary due to the anticipation of encountering different themes and words in the current reading exam underscores profound curricular implications. It highlights the need for a dynamic and regularly updated curriculum that aligns with the evolving assessment content. This emphasizes the crucial role of teachers in guiding students through curated and reliable study materials. The perspective also underscores the significance of assessment transparency, urging educational institutions to communicate clear expectations to students.

Furthermore, if students perceive a lack of continuity of exam content, this suggests a potential need for structural improvements in resource accessibility to facilitate independent study and review. Addressing these curricular implications becomes pivotal in fostering an educational system that supports adequate preparation and equips students with the necessary skills in dynamic assessment landscapes. These landscapes refer to the ever-changing nature of assessment methods, content, and expectations within educational settings. It also implies that assessments are not static or fixed but are subject to continuous modifications based on the evolving needs of learners.

Similarly, Respondent 7, a moderate-achiever student, highlighted a challenge: "There are no resources related to this in the center. I know old papers are kept, and we cannot access them." In contrast, one of the high-achieving students represented by Respondent 4 expressed a proactive approach, stating, "I believe that it is helpful to study test papers before. I keep my old notes past and practice before the exam." These contrasting perspectives further emphasize the importance of resource accessibility and personal study habits, contributing to the nuanced understanding of students' diverse approaches to exam preparation.

The qualitative research findings shed light on the multifaceted aspect of student engagement with external reading materials articulated by the respondents during the interviews. Notably, respondents had mixed levels of involvement in reading newspapers, magazines, and IELTS materials. Among high-achiever students, three demonstrated sporadic engagements with these materials, while one abstained entirely from such practices. The rationale for this abstention was elucidated by Respondent 1, who cited time constraints and many competing activities as hindrances to her participation in external reading. Conversely, two average-performing students consistently practiced reading English newspapers, magazines, and IELTS materials. Respondents 6 and 7, moderate-achiever students, believed in the

potential enhancement of their overall reading skills through this endeavor. For instance, Respondent 6 emphasized the importance of increased reading for language improvement, stating, "For me, I think I need to read more to improve my English skills. With it, I can be good at reading."

In considering the educational implications of these findings, it becomes evident that fostering a culture of regular engagement with external reading materials can yield substantial benefits. Studies substantiate the positive outcomes associated with such practices, including heightened cultural awareness and improved contextual comprehension. Therefore, promoting habitual reading of newspapers, magazines, and IELTS materials is valuable for enhancing students' reading skills and contributing to their academic success.

Varying frequencies in discussing reading techniques and collaborating with peers were observed as notable subjects during the interviews. They revealed that time was an issue in discussing reading techniques and collaborating with friends. Respondents 2 and 3 articulated concerns about time constraints, trust, and cultural practice as impediments to discussing reading techniques with their peers. For instance, Respondent 2 preferred consulting teachers due to time constraints, saying, "I could only discuss with my teachers if I have doubts in class because he could be the best person to talk to about any problem I have in class. I also do not have enough time to discuss these things with my friends in class." Similarly, Respondent 3 highlighted discomfort with classmates and logistics constraints outside the classroom, stating, "I cannot discuss with my classmates because I do not feel comfortable with them. Outside the class, it is impossible, maybe because of the personal time and activities that I might disturb them."

It became evident that the predominant approach among respondents was seeking clarification from teachers when faced with uncertainties in-class reading activities. Notably, only Respondents 4 and 8 tended to occasionally or rarely seek clarification from teachers. Respondent 4, a high-achiever student, emphasized a desire for independence, stating, "I want to be independent as much as possible. I do not always ask the teacher for clarification because I understand her lessons." This sentiment was echoed by Respondent 8, a moderate-achiever student, who indicated sporadic requests for clarification and said, "I sometimes ask the teacher because I understand the class activities."

4.4 Challenges Faced by Level Four Omani Students.

All participants encountered vocabulary-related challenges during the examination, constituting another prominent theme. However, the average respondents reported a remarkably higher difficulty level than their high-achiever counterparts. Notably, Respondents 5 to 8 expressed considerable challenges with unfamiliar words encountered throughout the exams, a contrast observed to a lesser extent among high-achiever students. This discrepancy implies that individuals with average performance levels encountered more obstacles in comprehending certain questions or items, leading to misinterpretations and, subsequently, inaccuracies in their responses, ultimately impacting their overall performance compared to the high-achiever students. For example, both Respondents 5 and 7, moderate-achiever students, highlighted their struggles in grasping unfamiliar words within the reading texts and questions. Respondent 7 articulated, "Vocabulary is difficult in some reading lines and questions. So, I was not sure about my answers." This sentiment regarding specific vocabulary challenges, including difficulties with academic terminology and nuanced language, resonated among several respondents. Recognizing this prevalent issue underscores the need for targeted interventions such as specialized vocabulary workshops and the development of contextualized practice materials.

Some participants expressed anxiety regarding their application, revealing potential underlying challenges. Participant 3, a high-achiever student, candidly shared her apprehension during the exams, stating, "I always have this fear when I take whatever exam. I cannot control it." This feeling points to the pervasive issue of performance-related stressors such as fear of failure, excessive worry, and the pressure to meet certain expectations, which can significantly impact concentration and information recall. Addressing these challenges requires tailored interventions, including stress management strategies, targeted comprehension improvement, and vocabulary enhancement programs.

Moreover, a subset of respondents highlighted the impact of comprehension difficulties on their anxiety levels during examinations. Respondent 5, a moderate-achiever student, expressed, "There are words that are difficult to understand in all parts of the exam. That is why I was not sure all my answers were correct." This indicates that the lack of comprehension could lead to misinterpretations and incorrect answers, contributing to heightened stress levels.

Additionally, concerns about the length of the exam were voiced by respondents, exemplified by Respondent 6, a moderate-achiever student, who noted, 'The reading exam was too long. I was running after the time to finish a long reading text. I think my mark was affected because of this. I was stressed." This underscores the impact of exam duration on stress levels and performance outcomes, signaling the importance of considering the appropriateness of exam-length content. Considering these experiences, a comprehensive approach is imperative to address the multifaceted challenges related to exams. This approach should encompass the need for a holistic approach to address exam-related challenges, encompassing anxiety management interventions and adjusting exam formats. There is a need to create a supportive and adaptive learning environment that considers students' perspectives and addresses their concerns to enhance their academic performance.

In a nutshell, the respondents posited that several factors affected their performance in the reading test. They identified familiarity with the exam format as an edge in taking the reading exam and practicing frequently in the reading class. The respondents also revealed that awareness of reading strategies is a significant factor in doing well in the exam. Three respondents thought collaboration and study habits were positive factors in performing well in the exam. However, vocabulary issues and a lack of comprehension skills hindered their

overall performance on the reading test. To address these factors affecting performance, implement actionable recommendations, including targeted interventions for vocabulary enrichment, comprehension skill development programs, and collaborative study initiatives, ensuring a holistic approach to enhancing overall reading exam performance. For vocabulary engagement, the center could implement vocabulary workshops designed to address specific challenges identified in the reading exam. This workshop can focus on essential academic and test-related Vocabulary, providing interactive activities, flashcards, and context-using exercises.

Further, the curriculum may launch a structured comprehension skills development program with online modules, practical exercises, and guided reading sessions. This program could incorporate various reading strategies, such as summarization, inference, and critical analysis, to improve students' comprehension skills and ability to extract meaning from diverse reading passages. In addition, the program can introduce a collaborative study initiative where students participate in group reading sessions, discussion forums, and peer-review activities.

5. Discussion

This research investigates Omani students' familiarity with IELTS-based reading exam structure and reading strategies and seeks answers to the following research questions: Are Level Four Omani students familiar with the time limit and format of the IELTS based reading exam? Are Level Four Omani students familiar with reading strategies? Are Level Four Omani students adopting independent learning strategies? What challenges do Omani Level Four students encounter when taking the IELTS based reading exam? The results section of this study identifies four themes, which include awareness of time limits and the structure of the IELTS-based reading exam, familiarity with reading strategies, independent learning strategies, and challenges faced by Level Four Omani students. The findings show that these strategies had a considerable positive impact on the respondents.

Respondents generally have a positive awareness regarding the time limits and exam patterns of the Level 4 IELTS-based reading exam. This foundational understanding serves as a promising sign for overall exam preparedness. This answers the first research question: that the students are familiar with the time limits, enabling them to approach the test confidently and fully. However, many respondents expressed concern regarding time management while taking the reading exams. Omani students studying in Level Four need help regarding the time limits of the reading exam. This confirms the study findings of Chalmers and Walkinshaw (2014) and Chowdhury (2009) that among the many concerns, time constraints are a significant concern for test takers. Test takers need help with time management, especially when encountering unfamiliar texts due to the cultural gap between the test writer and test taker. Grabe (2009) and Koda (2002) point out the significance of cultural and metacognitive awareness in fully comprehending a text. Hence, it is essential to fill this void and empower the test takers to be successful. Interventions regarding varied themes that involve different cultures need to be introduced to reduce the difficulty level of time management.

The answer to the second research question, whether Level Four Omani students are familiar with reading strategies when taking the IELTS reading exam, is that most Omani students are aware and apply reading strategies while taking the reading exams. However, there is a difference between high achievers and moderate achievers in the frequency of applying these strategies while taking the exams. High achievers apply these reading strategies more frequently than moderate achievers and become successful in the reading exams. This confirms the study findings of Chinnathambi et al. (2024) that students who appy reading strategies more perform better in exams. They go through several levels of understanding of a text and apply reading strategies to score high. This confirms the study of Feng (2016), which states that a successful reader goes through several levels of understanding while reading a text.   However, most students agreed that they faced challenges in Vocabulary, which confirms the study findings of Alghail and Mahfood (2016), which showed that one of the obstacles most students faced was understanding specialist Vocabulary.   This also confirms the study findings of Marzban and Barati (2016) that even skilled readers face challenges as they read and strive to get the most out of their reading. This adversely affected respondents' ability to interpret questions accurately and respond effectively. Hence, a comprehensive approach to reading strategies in the classroom is needed to empower all test takers alike.

Most high achievers consistently practiced independent learning while preparing for the IELTS-based reading exams. However, moderate achievers applied only some independent reading strategies. Hence, there is a need to provide them with intervention to become independent in their learning. The answer to the research question of whether Omani students adopt independent learning strategies while preparing for the exam is that respondents adopt independent learning strategies in varying degrees, with a significant difference between high achievers and moderate achievers. This confirms the study findings of Khodabandehlou et al (2012) that students who employ self-directed learning had significant positive influence on their reading comprehension proficiency and were more successful. Therefore, this study identifies opportunities for improvement in independent learning activities (independent reading and self-study), review practices, and engagement with external reading materials. Motivational strategies, practical tips, and culturally sensitive approaches are recommended to encourage more consistent participation in these beneficial activities. Additionally, the research sheds light on mixed levels of engagement in collaborative learning practices, such as discussing reading techniques and sharing texts. The findings suggest the need for time-management strategies and culturally sensitive initiatives to promote a collaborative learning environment.

Regarding the last research question, the challenges faced, the study's results suggest that level-four Omani students encounter several difficulties during the IELTS-based reading exam. One of the most significant issues is related to Vocabulary, which affects the performance of moderate achiever students. Anxiety is another problem that arises due to the fear of failure and concerns about the exam duration. Addressing these issues requires stress management interventions and adjustments to the exam format. Practical strategies, as

suggested by Ahmadian et al. (2016), need to be introduced to lower the anxiety level of students. The lack of comprehension skills is also a hindrance, and targeted interventions are recommended to enhance vocabulary proficiency and reading comprehension. Collaborative study initiatives and tailored skill development programs can help comprehensively address these challenges and improve students' performance on the reading exam. Overall, the study's findings emphasize the importance of a holistic approach that integrates vocabulary enrichment, comprehension skill development, and anxiety management strategies to support Level Four Omani students in their exam preparation and performance.

In summary, while recognizing the positive aspects, the study underscores the importance of addressing specific challenges. It provides actionable recommendations for educators, policymakers, and students to enhance overall preparedness and reading skills in the Level 4 IELTS-based Reading Test context. The study has limitations with regard to sample size and context. Only eight participants participated in the study, which was conducted at UTAS-Ibra. Therefore, the study findings cannot be generalized.

6. Conclusion

This research provides valuable insights into the familiarity of Level Four Omani students with the structure of the IELTS-based reading exam and their utilization of reading strategies. The study's findings reveal important aspects regarding students' preparedness for the exam and the challenges they face. Level Four Omani students generally possess a positive awareness of the time limits and exam patterns of the IELTS-based reading exam. The research shows that the students have a foundational understanding of the exam format, which is promising for their overall exam preparedness. Respondents indicated their familiarity with the exam's time constraints, allowing them to approach the test confidently.

Most students are aware of reading strategies and apply them during the reading exams, but there is a difference in the frequency of applying these strategies between high achievers and moderate achievers. High achievers exhibit a higher frequency of applying reading strategies, contributing to their success in the reading exams.

The study has identified variations in adopting independent learning strategies among Level Four Omani students. The results show that high achievers consistently practice independent learning, while moderate achievers demonstrate varying degrees of application of these strategies. This finding highlights the need for appropriate interventions to support all students becoming independent learners. Collaborative study initiatives and tailored skill development programs are recommended to promote consistent participation in these beneficial activities.

Lastly, the research highlights the multifaceted challenges Level Four Omani students face during the IELTS-based reading exam. Despite the awareness of exam format and time limit, many respondents expressed concerns regarding time management during the reading exams, indicating a need for support. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensure students can effectively manage their time during the exam and optimize their performance. Vocabulary-related difficulties, anxiety, and lack of comprehension skills also emerged as significant obstacles that impact students' performance. These findings underscore the importance of comprehensive interventions to address these challenges effectively. Tailored programs focusing on vocabulary enrichment, comprehension skill development, and anxiety management are recommended to support students in exam preparation and performance.

In conclusion, this research contributes to understanding Level Four Omani students' familiarity with the IELTS-based reading exam structure and strategies. The evidence presented underscores the importance of addressing specific challenges to enhance overall exam preparedness and reading skills. The study's recommendations offer valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and students to improve reading skills and readiness for the Level Four IELTS-based Reading Test. However, it is vital to acknowledge the study's limitations, including the small sample size and specific research context, which may impact the generalizability of the findings. Further research with a more extensive and diverse sample is recommended to validate the findings and explore additional factors influencing students' performance on the reading exam.

7. Recommendations

To overcome time management challenges during the IELTS reading exam, the following strategies are recommended: Regular practice under timed conditions helps in developing pace and efficiency. Skimming and scanning techniques aid in quickly identifying key information. Prioritizing questions and allocating time based on difficulty and point value ensures efficient use of time. It is also beneficial to avoid spending too much time on one question and experimenting with different time management techniques during practice sessions. Maintaining a calm and focused mindset, along with deep breathing exercises, helps manage stress. Reviewing and reflecting on time management performance after practice exams enables adjustments for future sessions. By consistently implementing these strategies, students can enhance their time management skills and optimize their performance in the IELTS reading exam.

As anxiety and stress can significantly affect a student's focus and recall, it is essential to create a supportive and adaptive learning environment that considers the student's perspectives and addresses their concerns to enhance their academic performance. To keep anxiety and stress levels under control, workshops related to time and stress management are recommended.

To address specific vocabulary issues high and average achievers face, targeted interventions such as specialized vocabulary workshops and developing contextualized practice materials are recommended. Additionally, students should be encouraged to write down new words, create vocabulary notebooks, use word cards, revise new Vocabulary regularly, read in English, and practice new words.

There is a difference in the application of reading strategies while taking a reading exam between high achievers and moderate achievers.

Support mechanisms should be implemented to aid average students. Educators should consider personalized interventions, interactive workshops, and the provision of contextualized practice materials to enhance the frequency and proficiency of reading strategy application across diverse student groups. Fostering a more engaging and inclusive classroom environment that sparks interest in reading strategy activities can improve overall comprehension and performance outcomes.

To make high and moderate achievers perform similarly in independent learning strategies, it is recommended to provide students with a congenial academic environment that promotes habitual reading, encourages students to seek clarifications from teachers, helps solve previous years' question papers, encourages peer collaboration, structured discussion schedules, and virtual collaboration platforms.

Similar studies should be conducted in other higher educational institutions to inform policy decisions and generalize the findings.

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Authors bio-note

Dr. Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi is an English Lecturer at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra in Oman. He earned his PhD from the University of Madras in India and is a member of the Board of Directors of TESOL Oman. Additionally, he serves as the Editor of the Oman Journal of ELT. His research interests include ELT, literature, and theory. He has an ORCID ID with the number 0000-0002-1289-9290.

Donald Villahermosa Domalaon, Ph.D. in Education, is a Lecturer and PSC Coordinator at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra (UTAS), where he demonstrates outstanding teaching. He previously served as the university Head of Research and Consultancy and an Education Supervisor-designate in the Philippines. His significant contributions have earned him various awards.

Mr. Chokri Ayari is a Lecturer in English language at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Sultanate of Oman. He has been teaching English at UTAS-Ibra since 2012. Currently, he is teaching English to post-foundation students for academic purposes. He has an MA in English Language and is pursuing his PhD in Education studies. He is also a certified IELTS trainer and a translator (English/ Arabic/French). He participated in many conferences and seminars and presented workshops and research papers.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi is responsible for study design and revising

Donald Domalon is Data Collection

Chokri Ayari is responsible for revising

All authors read and approved the final manuscript. All authors contributed equally to the study.

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