

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

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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. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 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. The study recommends implementing specific interventions to alleviate the disparity between high achievers and moderate achievers.

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 and status in Oman and worldwide (Al-Issa, 2020). Notably, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a doorway to tertiary education programs in English-speaking countries. British Council and other private language institutes in Oman regularly conduct teacher training courses (TTC) for IELTS instructors to enhance their teaching strategies and help the test-takers achieve their objectives effectively. They also give the test-takers an overview 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, a student's reading comprehension skill significantly determines 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 the three passages and the tasks increases as the test progresses. To increase the chances of achieving the required band score in reading exams, the test-takers should better understand the reading exam format, reading strategies, and independent learning strategies.

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). The IELTS-based reading component is found to be one of the obstacles. Only a few research studies have been conducted concerning the based reading component, so this study is necessary. It aims to fill the research gap and provide input to the stakeholders and policymakers to make amendments. This study explores level 4 Omani students' familiarity with the IELTS-based reading exam's time limit, format, reading strategies, independent learning, and challenges.

2. Literature Review

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is important in assessing students' ability to read and understand a written text. These texts may be taken from formal or informal sources: a newspaper article, a magazine extract, an advertisement, or an academic

journal. Hence, familiarity with the test format and the type of questions is essential for students to improve their test performance. The IELTS has three sections: 1. Multiple choice questions, 2. True/False/Not Given or Yes/No/Not Given Questions, 3. Matching Headings, Summary Completion, or Sentence Completion, respectively. To answer all sections successfully, the test taker should possess many cognitive skills such as skimming, scanning, inference, and critical analysis. The IELTS reading test gives emphasis to a complete assessment of reading skills. Therefore, the IELTS-based reading exams conducted at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) follow a similar pattern with some slight modifications to meet the assessment requirements of UTAS. As a result, the reading exam is contextually relevant and, at the same time, consistent with the IELTS framework. Therefore, the reading exam starts 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.

Reading engages various cognitive and non-cognitive skills. It also involves a bottom-up approach and a top-down approach, which make explicit how we read and understand a text (Kendeou et al., 2011). So, the reader first has to focus on letters and sounds and then move on to make words, sentences, and paragraphs. Along this side, the reader should use prior knowledge to connect with the text. 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. It is clear that to comprehend a text fully, the reader must possess various strategic and cognitive skills. Hence, the IELTS-based reading exam checks whether the candidate can 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). Therefore, the help that the test takers seek from the teachers may vary based on their needs.

Of the many challenges the test takers face, the predominant one is time management (Chowdhury, 2009). Chalmers and Walkinshaw (2014) also confirm through their study that time constraints are the most significant concern for test takers. This is partly due to the reading passages that the test takers are unfamiliar with, so they need more time to comprehend the reading passage and answer various questions. This highlights the difference between the test takers and writers and their cultural backgrounds. Test takers also had challenges with making meaning out of specialist words, finding information by quick reading, identifying key ideas, and understanding the organization of a text (AliAlghail & AliMahfood, 2016). These challenges negatively affected their time management while taking the reading test.

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, set personal goals, make decisions and generally take the responsibility of their own learning" (p. 7). The study reveals that self-directed learning had a positive effect on students' reading comprehension proficiency. This implies that students who employ independent learning strategies are more successful than others.

A quantitative study by Kodhandaraman et al. (2024) at UTAS-Ibra found differences between male and female students in their application of reading strategies while taking a reading test. Female students applied reading strategies more frequently compared to male students and got high test scores. The study findings also confirmed that Omani students knew the exam format, general reading strategies, and task-based reading strategies.

The review of literature highlights that reading comprehension requires various cognitive and metacognitive skills and needs the test takers to include bottom-up and top-down approaches while trying to comprehend a reading text. The review also focuses on the significance of background knowledge, vocabulary, grammar, and understanding different reading passages. Nevertheless, there is a lack of comprehensive research work with regard to reading strategies. The research conducted by Kodhandaraman et al. (2024) adopted a quantitative method, which may not provide nuanced insights of test takers regarding their application of reading strategies and other challenges they face while taking a reading test. Hence, this study explores in-depth the application of reading strategies and other challenges that test-takers face while taking IELTS based reading exams, adopting a qualitative method. This study is significant because

it has implications for teachers and policymakers who aim to improve Omani students' performance in the IELTS based 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 Level Four Omani students, encounter 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

As this study adopted a qualitative method, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. They were level 4 students from the General Foundation Program of the Preparatory Studies Centre, University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra. The interview questions were based on the classroom experience to ensure rigorously and appropriate individual responses aligned closely with the research questions. There were open-ended questions and closed-ended questions to measure the test-taker's familiarity with time constraints, test format, and application of reading strategies. Quantifiable data collected via closed-ended questions and open-ended questions provided space for detailed responses. For quantifiable data collection, a 5 Likert scale ranging from "always (5) to never (1). Both data helped arrive at a comprehensive analysis of patterns and themes. In order to maintain consistency, the interviewers were given appropriate training.

Additionally, the members checked the data and validated its accuracy. The collected data was analyzed thematically, which provided recurring patterns and valuable insights regarding test-takers' familiarity with the exam format, reading strategies, and independent learning strategies. The study was small, so no pilot study was conducted. Before participating in the study, the participants' permissions were obtained, and they were informed of the study's benefits and potential risks. Also, they were informed that the collected data would be anonymized to ensure the participants' privacy.

3.4 Participants

About 8 students studying in level 4 from the General Foundation Program of the Preparatory Studies Centre, University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Ibra, Oman, participated in the study. The chosen students were from Sharqiyah region with similar cultural backgrounds. 8 students mean a small sample size, which, however, provided space for in-depth investigation of participants' perspectives and experiences, and facilitated a comprehensive data analysis. The sample size was appropriate for this study because it helped understand individual experiences in detail and get high-quality data. 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

We used self-prepared open-ended questions and closed-ended questions. We prepared them based on our classroom experiences with a view to acquire 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. Common themes and patterns from interviews were identified by analyzing transcripts.

4. Results

Below are the findings of the qualitative study which utilized stratified random sampling among the two classified respondents, namely: high and moderate achievers. The learning experiences and the challenges of these students were explored during the interview. Along with these two main aspects, the researchers thoroughly asked the respondents on the following sub-categories: awareness of time limit, exam format, reading strategies, application of independent learning activities, reading material usage, group dynamics and other relevant factors that affected their reading test performances.

4.1 Time Limit and Exam Format

The respondents' awareness of the time limit and exam format was one of the themes derived from the study. From the interview, 100% of the respondents revealed that they are aware of the time limit and exam format. For example, Respondents 2 and 4 who were classified as high achievers, stated the time allocation for the reading test was 60 minutes, while Respondent 3 exclaimed: "The Midterm exam was about True False, Short Answer Questions, Multiple Choice, Summarization, Sentence completion, Matching type, and Summary Completion." In addition, Respondents 5 and 6 who are moderate achievers shared their experiences with the format of the reading test. These results show that the respondents are aware of the diverse assessment methods in the midterm exam. However, the respondents did not elaborate their feelings with the exam time and format.

4.2 Reading Strategies

Another vital theme that emerged in the interview was the practice and application of reading strategies such as Matching Headings, Multiple Choice Questions, True/ False/Not Given, Summary Completion questions, Sentence Completion tasks and Answering Questions. The results confirm that the respondents actively participated in the reading strategies both in the classrooms and examination, namely: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, affective strategies and compensation strategies.

These results were confirmed by Respondents 1 and 2, high achievers, who were excellent in applying these strategies. Further, Respondent 1 exclaimed that he was consistently exemplary in practicing and applying Matching Heading to paragraphs, True-False activities, Summary Completion and other types of questions both in class and in the examination. These recurring results show that these respondents consistently practice and apply these various reading strategies both in class and in the midterm examination.

However, in line with the ideas of Respondent 8, a moderate-achiever student, he posits that he sometimes practices and applies these reading strategies in class and the exams. His claim was supported by all the moderate-achiever respondents which implies that they were less enthusiastic in practicing and applying these strategies in class and in the exam. Subsequently, differences of frequencies of using True or False, Multiple-Choice, Summary Completion, Sentence Completion, and Short Answer Questions were observed among the two categories of respondents.

These findings imply that the educational system must find an intervention where a comprehensive approach to reading strategies is designed to address the performance of students across dimensions. In addition, the approach used by high achievers may be used as model in improving the performance of moderate achievers. Furthermore, educators may employ personalized interventions, interactive workshops, and contextual practice materials to enhance the performance of various types of students. Students must be engaged in an inclusive classroom environment to arouse the interests of students in performing these reading strategies and thereby improve their performance, in general.

4.3 Independent Learning Strategies

Independent Learning Strategies was another theme that surfaced in the interview. The interview revealed that high-achievers and moderate achievers have common and varied responses. For instance, Respondent 2 consistently claimed, "I always do independent learning like those given by the teachers in Moodle and MyELT." Respondent 3 added that apart from Moodle and MyELT, he utilizes IELTS and MS Teams as tools of independent learning. In another spectrum, Respondent 5, a moderate achiever, exclaimed, "I sometimes do independent learning because I need help from my teacher or an intelligent friend."

Underscoring these observed differences acknowledges the limitations of a single tool used in this study. The respondents' varied interpretations of independent learning might have been influenced by social desirability bias. Thus, it is imperative that researchers explore other methods of data collection to reinforce the findings and come up with a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

It can be inferred from the results that educators must provide motivational strategies such as success story telling or testimonies, gamified strategies, and creating an inclusive and effective learning environment where teachers utilize point or rewarding system to encourage students and thereby improve their academic performance. Further, the respondents expressed varied approaches to reviewing test papers and participating in practice tests which was exemplified by Respondent 6 who said, "I review old test papers only when teachers give. I do not keep my test papers before." Such a response calls for proper guidance from the teachers by providing a structured support system. Further, Respondent 6 believes that keeping old test papers would be unnecessary since reading tests have different themes. From his reply, it can be inferred that the curriculum must be updated and that the content of assessment must be reviewed by educational experts. Furthermore, it is also crucial for educators to review the study materials and adopt an orientation program where respondents are well informed of the assessment scheme and the expectations. Educators must also foster an adequate preparation of curricular requirements in teaching and testing reading to attain a dynamic assessment landscape through frequent reviews and modifications of the assessment method, content and expectations based on the types of learners. Through this approach, the impression

cited by Respondent 7, a moderate achiever, who stated that there are no resources in the center, will be addressed.

On the contrary, Respondent 4 exclaimed, "I believe that it is helpful to study test papers before. I keep my old notes past and practice before the exam." These opposing stances call for a tailored program based on the various preferences of students. In addition, respondents also expressed various utilization of newspapers, magazines, and IELTS materials. Three of the high achievers conveyed occasional usage of these reading sources while one did not participate at all. As a proof, Respondent 1 highlighted limitations and constraints in her participation, while two average achievers exclaimed that they always practiced reading English newspapers, IELTS materials and magazines. Moderate achievers, Respondents 6 and 7 stated that reading more could enhance one's reading skills. For example, Respondent 6 was noted saying, "For me, I think I need to read more to improve my English skills. With it, I can be good at reading."

From the findings above, it can be concluded that fostering the habit of reading will improve the respondents' reading skills.

4.4 Challenges Faced by Level Four Omani Students.

After thoroughly digesting the responses provided by the participants, it was noted that challenges, as another significant theme, were encountered by all the participants during the examination. One of the challenges met by high and moderate achievers was vocabulary. Prominently, the moderate achievers had high level of vocabulary difficulty as compared to the high achievers. This finding was supported by Respondents 5 to 8 who expressed considerable vocabulary-related challenges across the reading examination. This limitation implies that average learners have not gained the expected language proficiency such that they have a limited range of vocabulary, comprehension and even language use as compared to the high achievers. This could also be attributed to the lack of cognitive strategies gained by the average achiever which means that they have less or not mastered at all the comprehension skills, the ability to remember and apply target words. For example, Respondents 5 and 7 who are moderate achievers expressed that they struggled in understanding some uncommon words in the reading exam. In fact, Respondent 7 revealed, "Vocabulary is difficult in some reading lines and questions. So, I was not sure about my answers."

Another underlying challenge was the anxiety expressed by several respondents while taking the reading examination. Fear was felt by Respondent 3, a high achiever who exclaimed, "I always have this fear when I take whatever exam. I cannot control it." Such stressor could refer to the fear of failing and pressure to pass the exam which could have affected the respondents' memory and focus. Such anxiety was also expressed by Respondent 5, a moderate achiever, who stated, "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 shows that the lack of comprehension experienced by these respondents could lead to a higher level of stress which may affect the overall performance of the respondents.

In addition, the respondents also complained about the length of the exam. As exemplified by Respondent 6, a moderate achiever, she expressed, "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 sentiment implies that Respondent 6 was overwhelmed with the length of the exam which could have increased her fear and subsequently affected her overall score. It is therefore imperative that educators address this experience by utilizing a holistic approach where anxiety management interventions and somehow adjusting the exam length are implemented across these types of learners to enhance their academic performance.

To summarize, the respondents revealed that several factors could affect their performance in the reading examination. One prominent factor is the familiarity of the exam format and the regular practice. Respondents stated that it is an edge for them to take the exam when they are familiar with the exam format, and they do regular practice in and outside the class. Another crucial factor that examiners should gain is the awareness of the reading strategies. Respondents believe that knowing these strategies will improve their overall examination performance. Further, three respondents support the idea that collaboration and study habits also impacted their performance in the reading test. Furthermore, vocabulary issues and lack of comprehension skills impeded their overall performance in the reading examination. With these factors affecting the respondents' performance, educators should implement concrete interventions such as providing vocabulary enrichment and comprehension skill program, various activities where students collaborate with each other and adopting a holistic approach to enhance the overall reading exam performance of these respondents. This program may include flashcards, context-using exercises and interactive activities. Further, this program can be provided through online modules, practical activities, and guided reading sessions. Still further, the following strategies may be used, namely: critical analysis, inference, summarization, and collaborative initiatives to improve the respondents' ability to comprehend various reading texts.

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 demonstrate that these strategies had a considerable positive impact on the respondents.

Respondents are generally positively aware of the time limits and exam patterns of the Level 4 IELTS-based reading exam. 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.

Respondents generally have an awareness of reading strategies, but there is a difference between high achievers and moderate achievers in applying these strategies. High achievers apply them more frequently than moderate achievers and get high test scores. This confirms the study findings of Chinnathambi et al. (2024) that students who apply reading strategies perform better in exams. This confirms the study of Feng (2016), which states that a successful reader goes through several levels of understanding while reading a text. Many students also expressed their concerns about complex words and how these words affected their comprehension of the reading passages. This confirms the study findings of Alghail and Mahfood (2016), that one of the obstacles most students face is understanding specialist vocabulary. Marzban and Barati (2016) also pointed out in their study that even skilled readers face challenges as they read and strive to get the most out of their reading. Such obstacles or challenges negatively affected students' understanding of the questions and answering them effectively. So, introducing a comprehensive approach to reading strategies is essential to enable all test takers alike to improve their performance in reading exams

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 a significant favorable influence on their reading comprehension proficiency and were more successful. This study identifies opportunities for improvement in independent learning activities (independent reading and self-study), review practices, and engagement with external reading materials. Furthermore, the participants need to be involved in activities that provide them with motivational strategies and practical tips. Participants approach reading techniques and sharing text differently, so collaborative learning practices should be encouraged among students. The findings suggest the need for time-management strategies and culturally sensitive initiatives to promote a collaborative learning environment.

The last research question is related to vocabulary. According to the study findings, Level 4 Omani students face a lot of challenges due to unknown and difficult words. More precisely, it is the moderate achievers who face a lot of difficulties due to vocabulary compared to high achievers. As a consequence, students get anxious about the test. Due to anxiety students fail to cope with the limited time which in turn negatively affects their test performance, and they fail to cope with the limited time. Addressing these issues requires stress management interventions and adjustments to the exam format. As a solution, Ahmadian et al. (2016) recommends incorporating functional strategies and effective procedures to lower students' anxiety. In addition to difficult vocabulary, students also face challenges in reading comprehension. Introducing targeted interventions such as collaborative study initiatives and tailored skill development programs may alleviate challenges related to vocabulary proficiency and reading comprehension. In general, it is evident that there is a need for a holistic approach that combines vocabulary enrichment, comprehension skill development, and anxiety management strategies. This holistic approach will 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 study on Level Four Omani students' familiarity with the IELTS-based exam's format, time limit, and the application of reading strategies indicates students' familiarity as well as challenges. Level Four Omani students generally possess a positive awareness of the time limits and exam patterns of the IELTS-based reading exam. From the study findings, it can be concluded that the students have a basic knowledge of the exam format and time limit, which ensures their preparedness to take exams. However, the study also reveals challenges that the students encounter regarding reading strategies. There is a significant difference between high achievers and moderate achievers in the frequency of application of reading strategies while taking the exam. High achievers perform better academically because they apply reading strategies more effectively and frequently than the moderate achievers.

Furthermore, the results also indicate that there are variations in adopting independent learning strategies among Level Four Omani students. High achievers regularly practice activities related to independent learning, but moderate achievers inconsistently practice those activities. Hence, there is a need to create awareness among moderate achievers regarding the importance of independent learning activities and how these activities will have a positive impact on academic performance. Similarly, Level 4 Omani students should

undergo tailored interventions to become independent learners.

In addition, many respondents expressed their concerns regarding time limits, and the difficulties they faced during the reading exams with regard to time management. So, it is essential to give a suitable intervention program on time management to ensure that students can effectively manage their time and improve their performance during the exam. Other concerns that emerged were vocabulary-related issues, lack of comprehension skills, and anxiety. These issues impacted students' performance significantly. These findings emphasize the need for inclusive interventions to address these challenges effectively.

To conclude, this study provides valuable insights into understanding Level Four Omani students' preparedness and challenges with regard to IELTS-based reading exams. The findings underscore the need for incorporating tailored programs to improve exam preparedness and reading skills. The study has implications for students, educators, and policymakers to make informed decisions to improve students' overall exam preparedness and performance in IELTS-based reading exams. Nevertheless, the study has limitations. The study only had a small sample size, and the data was collected from one higher education institute. Hence, the study findings cannot be generalized. It is recommended to conduct further research with a more extensive sample size, and data has to be collected from other higher educational institutions to validate the present findings and to arrive at findings that can be generalized. Such extensive research will also shed light on other factors that influence students' performance on IELTS-based reading exams.

7. Recommendations

Since time management was one of the major challenges students faced, it is recommended to expose students to consistent practices under timed conditions to develop speed and competence. Similarly, to overcome reading-related challenges, it is essential to create conditions in the classroom where students regularly apply skimming and scanning techniques to identify key information in one reading. Additionally, students should be taught how to allocate time based on difficulty and point value when prioritizing questions because spending a lot of time on one question without considering the point value may lead to ineffective management of time. Using different time management techniques should also be avoided during practice sessions to maintain consistency. After the sessions, students should be encouraged to share how they managed time in the classroom, which will be beneficial to teachers to design appropriate remedial measures. These strategies will be beneficial for students to manage time effectively and thereby get high test-scores in the IELTS-based reading exams. Similarly, techniques related to breathing should be introduced to maintain a calm mind, which will reduce stress levels. A supportive learning environment needs to be developed, which will not only reduce students' stress but will also improve students' focus. To keep anxiety and stress levels under control, workshops related to time and stress management are recommended. Regarding vocabulary-related issues, good practices such as writing down new words, creating vocabulary notebooks, revising new vocabulary regularly, reading in English, practicing new words in conversations should be incorporated. Tailored interventions such as workshops on specialized vocabulary and preparing appropriate practice materials will help reduce the gap between high-achievers and moderate-achievers.

There is a difference between high achievers and moderate achievers in the application of reading strategies. Personalized interventions and interactive workshops are recommended to bridge the gap between high achievers and moderate achievers. Appropriate reading materials and congenial classroom environments that focus on reading strategy activities can also improve students' understanding and application of reading strategies. Similarly, students should be encouraged to develop reading habits, get involved in discussions, collaborate with peers, seek help from teachers, and solve previous year's questions to alleviate the differences between high achievers and moderate achievers in applying independent learning strategies. In order to generalize the findings and make policy-related decisions, further research is recommended in other higher educational institutions.

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Authors contributions

Dr. Kodhandaraman Chinnathambi is responsible for study design and writing

Donald Domalon is responsible for Data Collection

Chokri Ayari is responsible for revising

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

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Were there any specific challenges or difficulties you faced while preparing for or taking the IELTS Reading Test?
2. How do you think your background (like previous schooling or exposure to English outside of class) influenced your performance on the test?
3. Did you experience any test anxiety or motivational challenges? If so, how did they impact your performance?
4. Which reading strategies did you find most helpful when preparing for the IELTS Reading Test?
5. How did you come to learn about these reading strategies? Were they introduced in class, or did you discover them on your own?
6. Were there any strategies that you found difficult to implement or understand?
7. Are you aware of time limit and exam pattern for Level 4 (IELTS based) Reading Exam?
8. Are you aware of General Reading Strategies?

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Remarks
How often you practice the strategies of “Matching Headings to the Correct Paragraphs”					
How often you apply the strategies of “Matching Headings to the Correct Paragraphs”					
How often you find the task of “Matching Headings to the Correct Paragraphs” difficult					
How do the strategies of “Matching Headings to the Correct Paragraphs” help you get more marks					

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Remarks
How often you practice the strategies of “True or False”					
How often you apply the strategies of “True or False”					
How often you find the task “True or False” difficult					
How do the strategies of “True or False” help you get more marks					

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Remarks
How often you practice the strategies of “Multiple-Choice Question”					
How often you apply the strategies of “Multiple-Choice Question”					
How often you find the task “Multiple-Choice Question” difficult					
How do the strategies of “Multiple-Choice Question” help you get more marks					

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Remarks
How often you practice the strategies of “Summary Completion”					
How often you apply the strategies of “Summary Completion”					
How often you find the task “Summary Completion” difficult					
How do the strategies of “Summary Completion” help you get more marks					

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Remarks
How often you practice the strategies of "Sentence Completion"					
How often you apply the strategies of "Sentence Completion"					
How often you find the task "Sentence Completion" difficult					
How do the strategies of "Sentence Completion" help you get more marks					

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Remarks
How often you practice the strategies of "Short Answer Question"					
How often you apply the strategies of "Short Answer Question"					
How often you find the task "Short Answer Question" difficult					
How do the strategies of "Short Answer Question" help you get more marks					

Questions	Always	Usually	Often	Sometimes	Remarks
How often you do independent learning activities?					
Do you go through previous final exam question papers?					
Do you solve some practice reading tests before taking the final exam?					
Do you read English newspapers and magazines?					
Do you go through IELTS reading materials?					
Do you read English newspapers and magazines?					
Do you go through IELTS reading materials?					
Do you discuss reading techniques with your friends?					
Do you ask your teacher questions for clarification?					
Do you discuss and solve problems related to IELTS reading with your friends?					
Do you share reading texts with your friends?					