

The Diversity of Learning Materials in Enhancing English Proficiency: A Review on Cambridge IELTS Test Papers

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Received: November 6, 2022

Accepted: December 23, 2022

Online Published: December 24, 2022

doi: 10.5539/elt.v16n1p70

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v16n1p70>

Abstract

The study aims to explore the diversity of learning materials in enhancing English proficiency by evaluating Cambridge IELTS Test Papers. This study thoroughly evaluates the Cambridge IELTS test papers ranging from volume one (1996) to volume seventeen (June 2022). While analyzing study results using the cognitive ability of the authors, this study also uses secondary data collected from videos, journal articles, Cambridge IELTS test papers, and organization websites. This study finds 1082 categories of various topics under 22 different areas related to art, academic, agriculture, archaeology, business, culture, economics, education, entertainment, environment, health issues, history, human resources, information technology (IT), language, media, psychology, science, social issues, sports, transportation, tourism, and miscellaneous. Science and academic areas cover most topics; eventually, business overtook all. In addition to the diversity of learning materials, this study also critically defines the diversity of range, length, source, and test format assessment criteria. Finally, this study presents a set of guidelines for improving language skills among learners. Within the guidelines, we argue that English language learners should start learning with preferred topics and proceed to learn with enough variety of learning materials daily. They can make a plan for one week with enough variety and must stick to that study plan. Listening is an excellent start to becoming a master of a foreign language. This set of guidelines is a complete guide to learning English, from which IELTS test takers would benefit. However, this study needs more evidence from empirical research about *to what extent the diversity of learning materials influences learning levels among learners worldwide*, which future research could cover.

Keywords: diversity of learning materials, enhancing English proficiency, review, Cambridge IELTS test papers

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance of the Study

As an international language, English learning materials have demand from learners from all over the world. A diverse set of English learning materials covers a diversity of lengths and ranges of materials. First, a learner could try a shorter-length and then longer-length or advanced materials; shorter-length materials are better for repeating over and over. Learners could learn the topics that motivate them and fit within readers' interests. When they are ready for a challenge, they could try materials that a learner would not naturally be drawn to, something in a different field or topic than the learner would usually choose, that would keep things fresh and challenge the learner. For example, if someone is an artist, s/he could try to learn science, technology, business, and sports materials that readers could explore to discover a diverse range of materials. Why should learners learn a diverse set of materials? It is because of vocabulary and knowing the world's creatures (Wallace, 2018). In reading, learners are visual; they look at the text on a page in a book and associate the letters, words, and shapes that they see on the page, which is letters; they associate those with meaning. However, listening to English is a unique process of hearing sounds, words, and phrases; we need to associate those sounds with

meaning. During listening, translating is a waste of time. It involves double tasks: converting the definition of a word into our native language and then converting our thoughts back to English. At that time, we do not hear the words from the person we are communicating with while translating. So, please cut out the middleman and the translator. Therefore, listening to English and understanding what you hear will become more accessible (Wallace, 2021). Teachers and learners might consider this and follow the guidelines stated in the study for creating effective materials for teaching and learning English, specifically through listening and reading the diverse set of materials (Howard & Major, 2022). A study by Badger & Yan (2009) argues that the strategies and learning approaches adopted by native and non-native speakers in the IELTS listening module are not significantly different (Badger & Yan, 2009). Another study investigates how communication problems influence listening proficiency highlighting the differences between Part 2 and Part 3 of the IELTS examination (Nakatsuhara, 2011). A recent study examines how the IELTS scores established by American Universities for admission completion and offering a placement into English language courses are suitable (Arrigoni & Clark, 2015). Another study investigates how the performance of IELTS Speaking Part-2 is affected by the learner's learning pedagogy. These performance features were used with the IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors (Iwashita & Vasquez, 2015). Moore et al. (2012) investigated how the IELTS test scores support the stakeholders, such as test takers, existing learners, English teachers, IELTS examiners, and university admission committee actors who use IELTS scores for admission decisions in Cambodia. Another exciting past research focuses on how language proficiency works as a requirement in the profession, investigating the implications for stakeholders and challenges, such as workplace discrimination (Gribble et al., 2016).

Past studies give ideas about the strategies and tactics adopted by folks in different countries to enhance listening proficiency and how IELTS test scores influence graduate admissions among diversified stakeholders, but nothing about how various other categories of English learning materials can motivate them to learn foreign languages like English. None of the past literature focuses on the evaluation of Cambridge IELTS test papers, covering materials for listening, reading, writing, and speaking modules.

1.2 Purpose and Research Questions with Specific Objectives

Therefore, the purpose of our study is to explore the diversity of learning materials in enhancing English proficiency by evaluating the Cambridge IELTS Test Papers. In response to this purpose, we study the following specific objectives:

- 1) to critically examine how many types of learning materials in how many areas are available in Cambridge IELTS test papers of a total of seventeen volumes published from 1996 to 2022;
- 2) to find out the most exciting and common areas of learning materials from a wide variety of materials;
- 3) to study the diversity of learning materials in the contexts of range, length, source, test format, and assessment criteria;
- 4) To propose guidelines for enhancing English proficiency using the diversity of learning materials.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1 Research Method

This is an evaluation study. Secondary data about the diversity of English learning materials have been collected from videos, journals, test papers, and websites of the British Council, Cambridge University, Cambridge English Language Assessment, IDP Australia, Cambridge University Press, and other relevant websites, such as YouTube and Google.

2.2 Description of Books Reviewed

This study thoroughly evaluates 17 practice test papers that Cambridge University Press published. These Cambridge IELTS practice test papers range from volume one (1996) to volume seventeen (June 2022). These 17 books contain practice materials for the candidates (test takers) within the International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS). Each book has four complete practice tests of listening, reading, writing, and speaking modules for academic and GT candidates. Experienced IELTS examiners wrote these books under Cambridge English Language Assessment. Cambridge University Press published these books. The tests confirm precisely the revised format of the examination, introduced in 1995 and have continued to date (Cambridge, 2022). These self-study books explain the IELTS question types, passages, listening audio transcriptions, and audio files (Jakeman & McDowell, 1996).

2.3 Data Analysis

Data have been analyzed based on the cognitive ability of the authors. The authors examine the secondary data by reflecting on it to answer the research questions. The qualitative and limited quantitative data have been tabulated to make the analysis understandable. A great effort has been made to avoid data errors.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1 The Diverse Set of Learning Materials that the Cambridge IELTS Practice Test Papers Cover

This study evaluates the IELTS practice test papers by studying and observing each topic of four areas of English skills, such as listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Our study also finds different types of topics in various categories of sizes under the head areas of learning, which table 1 presents below.

Table 1. Number of topics in different areas of learning within Cambridge IELTS Test Papers

Different Categories of Areas	Frequency of diverse set of topics	
	No. of Topics	No. of Topics in percentage
Art	10	0.94%
Academic	120	11.07%
Agriculture	12	1.08%
Archaeology	4	0.40%
Business	165	15.25%
Culture	32	2.97%
Economics	15	1.35%
Education	69	6.34%
Entertainment	92	8.50%
Environment	60	5.53%
Health issue	20	1.89%
History	19	1.75%
Human Resource	67	6.21%
IT	25	2.29%
Language	19	1.75%
Media	10	0.94%
Psychology	12	1.08%
Science	123	11.34%
Social issue	66	6.07%
Sports	12	1.08%
Transportation	28	2.56%
Tourism	70	6.48%
Miscellaneous	34	3.10%
Total	1082	100%

Source: Data analysis through reviewing the Cambridge IELTS practice test papers by the authors

Data interpretation: After evaluating the Cambridge IELTS practice test papers, this study finds 1082 types of topics under the 22 areas related to art, academics, agriculture, archaeology, business, culture, economics, education, entertainment, environment, health issues, history, human resource, information technology (IT), language, media, psychology, science, social issues, sports, transportation, tourism, and all other different kinds of topics in the category of miscellaneous. Science and academic areas cover 11.34% and 11.07% of the total learning materials. Interestingly, business topics eventually overtook all topics, including science and academic

topics, although business still represented only 15.25% (162 out of 1082) of the diverse topics. However, archaeology covers the lowest proportion of topics; the figure is 0.40%. The statistics show such a small percentage, say the highest 15.25% and the lowest 0.40%, because there are various materials in various areas in Cambridge IELTS practice test papers.

The learners could easily find exciting topics from their respective areas by choice. It is easy to locate the topics by creating code numbers of different topics in different test papers in various skills of English. For example, if someone wants to find the issues under the science area, they could easily select any topic from the 123 topics in the science section by creating codes within a whole list of issues area-wise. Then, they could use a code (e.g., “C11 (2016) LT1”), and it means Cambridge IELTS Practice Test Paper Volume 11, which was published in 2016 and also LT1 stands for Listening Test 1 (similarly, e.g., LT=Listening Test, ST=Speaking Test, RT=Reading Test, and WT= Writing Test). In such a way, the IELTS test takers and other learners could automatically locate, practice, and learn their learning materials by choice and with exciting feelings and genuine motivation. When they are ready for the challenge, they will practice various topics.

3.2 *The Diversity of Length, Range, and Sources of Materials*

This study adopts and explains the diversity of sources with the various lengths and range of materials also given by Gabby Wallace, a video from GoNaturalEnglish.com at YouTube, and Oli and Kasia, a video from Oxford Online English at YouTube. They explained the diversity of learning materials, and this study focuses on various diversities of materials as stated below:

The diversity sources of materials: In the case of listening materials, diversity means different voices, such as speakers from all over the world. It also means speaking materials of men, women, children, Americans, Australians, Canadians, and English and other non-native English speakers. The diverse materials might cover different formats and sources, such as songs, TV shows from the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, etc. Sometimes learners could practice materials covering films, audiobooks of Cambridge IELTS practice test papers, and textbook exercises, and could listen to a podcast of American voices and listen to speaking of one’s friends, family members, relatives, colleagues, and anything else.

In the case of reading materials, the Cambridge IELTS practice test papers cover a wide variety of materials which has been addressed, as a central part of the findings, in the previous section of this paper. In addition, the listening materials mentioned above would be the reading materials in one sense. For another reason, newspapers, journal articles, textbooks, and other reference books in different areas of learning, novels, story, history, etc., would be good sources of reading materials. However, where do the learners get materials? It is accessible to learners who can get on Google or any other search engine, YouTube, and other social media and can have various sources of reading materials.

The diversity of the range of materials: In the case of listening and reading materials, the range of materials means materials in different fields or topics. The learners could first try to learn the issues that motivate them and fit within their interests, and when they are ready for a challenge, they could try materials that may be something in a different field or topic. For example, if someone is an artist, s/he could try to learn science, technology, business, sports materials, and a diverse range of materials, which our study argues. The Cambridge IELTS practice test papers present various categories of listening and reading materials we found while reviewing.

The diversity of length of materials: Diversity of size of materials designates shorter-length and longer-length or advanced materials. Shorter-length materials are better for repeating over and over. For example, 1-5 minutes songs, videos to one hour, two hours, and three hours movies, TV shows, TV talk shows, and any other conversations. The Cambridge IELTS practice test papers confirm different lengths of listening and reading materials we found while reviewing.

3.3 *Global Diversity of Listening and Reading Learning Materials*

In addition to the diversity of Cambridge IELTS practice test papers, our study emphasizes the importance of global diversity in listening and reading learning materials. There are four skills in English: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. Among four, the importance of using a wide variety of listening learning materials has been addressed by a video produced by Oxford Online English as stated below:

“We argue for listening to as many different voices as possible, doing something every day and something different every day by following a listening plan for one week. We advise learners to write it down and be stick it somewhere in your home, for example, on the wall or in your fridge. Then, when you do your listening

practice each day, cross it off your plan. That way, you would see what you are doing every day so that you will not want to miss a day (Oli & Kasia, 2020).”

The wide variety of listening materials can support learners as one kind of reading material. For example, the transcriptions of these listening audio and videos could be an excellent start to understanding the diversity of reading materials. When people become used to accepting the challenge of using a wide variety of materials, they can start understanding the reading materials in the format of reading-like passages.

3.4 The Diversity of Test Format and International Assessment Criteria

1) The variety of test formats

Within the IELTS, the first three tests are held on a single day in the order: of listening, reading, and writing. A separate date is allocated for the Speaking test.

Speaking test: The test taker would take the speaking test for 11-14 minutes, which focuses on a face-to-face interview with a diversity of lengths about candidates’ familiar topics, followed by structured discussions. The speaking test examines candidates’ fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range, accuracy, and pronunciation.

Listening test: In the speaking test, the first two sections are related to social needs, and the final two sections are concerned with situations related to educational or training contexts. The duration of the test is 30 minutes. There are various question types in four sections to test the test takers. For example, the question types, such as MCQ, short-answer, sentence completion, notes or form or table or summary or flow-chart completion, labeling a diagram or plan or map, and matching questions, are common in the test format. This reflects that it has a variety of formats.

Reading test: In the case of academic reading, three long academic passages focus on general interest and logical argument. However, the passages within General Training (GT) reading are less academic; instead, they focus on the basic linguistic survival of English. Like the listening test, in both categories of passages (academic plus GT), a variety of question types is used.

Writing test: In the case of academic writing task 1, test takers are assessed on their ability to organize, present and possibly compare data, describe the stages of a process, represent an object or event, or explain how something works. In the case of general training (GT) writing task 1, IELTS candidates are asked to write a letter requesting information or explaining the situation. In task 2 of academic and GT, IELTS test takers have to write an essay focusing on the point of view, argument, or problem. They are assessed on their ability to write in an appropriate style available on the IELTS website (British Council, 2022).

2) The diversity of international assessment criteria

The IELTS 9-band scoring system measures and reports scores consistently. The band descriptors describe performance in four categories, such as, task achievement/Fluency (for the speaking test), coherence and cohesion, lexical resource (a variety of vocabulary), grammatical range and accuracy, and finally, pronunciation (for the speaking test) available at <https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/find-out-about-results/ielts-assessment-criteria> (British Council, 2021). It would be perfect if the learners understood these assessment criteria.

3.5 Guidelines for Enhancing English Proficiency

After analyzing the results of this study, we propose a set of guidelines for improving language skills, specifically for enhancing English proficiency. *Guideline 1* suggests that learners could *start with preferred topics and proceed to learn with enough variety of materials*: The learners could first try to understand the issues that motivate them and that fit within their interests, and when they are ready for a challenge, they could try materials that maybe something in the different field or different topic. For example, if someone is an artist, s/he could try to learn science, technology, business, sports materials, and a diverse range of materials. Why is it? Because we have learned our mother language, starting with simple and preferred issues and daily matters.

Guideline 2 urges test takers to *ensure enough variety of materials a day*: The learners should practice different kinds of English. The learners should practice something different daily, focusing on various sources and other listening and reading materials. If someone has a few times a day and spends that time a day, the good target would be 25-30 minutes a day. If someone does the same thing every day, s/he will need more variety.

Guideline 3 motivates language learners to *make a plan for one week with enough variety and stick to following the study plan*: Monday: 1-2 songs, 2-3 times each, 1-2 newspapers reading materials, Tuesday: listening to speakers’ voices, such as American, Australian, Canadian, and so on and 1-2 IELTS test papers reading

materials, Wednesday: watching TV shows for 20 minutes and 1-2 Journal articles, Thursday: 1-2 listening exercise from IELTS audiobook, 1-2 reading materials from reading test papers, Friday: watching 15 minutes of a TV news show or TV talk shows, 1-2 IELTS test papers reading materials, Saturday: watching 15 minutes of an old movie, 1-2 IELTS test papers reading materials, Sunday: make a conversation with your friends and family members. This is a rough estimate; all individual learners' plans might differ. The concept of this guideline has been adopted and accumulated from videos presented by Oli and Kasia, a video from Oxford Online English on YouTube.

Guideline 4 forces learners to Learn through the listening process: The English learning process should be started by practicing the listening materials from a wide variety of sources because listening is not the same as reading, and most non-native English learners learn English through the reading system, even from their early life's schooling. Listening is a good way of learning as our mother language has been learned from the very early stage of our life. The learners absorb their native language from their early stage of life. The children first listen to people surrounding them, mainly their parents, friends and family, relatives, acquaintances, strangers, and gradually to colleagues at the workplace. The direction of this guideline 4 has been adopted from videos delivered by Oli and Kasia, a video from Oxford Online English on YouTube.

4. Concluding Remarks

This study thoroughly evaluated the Cambridge IELTS practice test papers ranging from volume one (1996) to volume seventeen (June 2022). We argued how the diversity of the learning materials could support learners in understanding foreign languages like English. Our study found around thousand categories of various topics under more than twenty different areas related to art, academics, agriculture, archaeology, business, culture, economics, education, entertainment, environment, health issues, history, human resources, information technology (IT), language, media, psychology, science, social issues, sports, transportation, tourism, and all other different kinds of topics in the category of miscellaneous. Science and academic areas cover most of the learning materials. Interestingly, business topics eventually overtook all sorts of issues, including science and education.

This study also defined the diversity of learning materials from various contexts, such as range (different areas and different topics), length (short to long materials), source (different kinds of voices, bases listening materials are available in various places like online sources, hard copy sources in various educational institutions), and test format assessment criteria (different categories of question types in test with varying standards of assessment).

This study works as a complete guide to learning a foreign language. More specifically, the arguments within this study may be a comprehensive guide to learning English for non-native English speakers, which may help them to understand languages other than their mother language. This study symbolizes 'cloud learning' with 'cloud computing'. Therefore, we argue that "cloud learning" with enough variety of materials can motivate English learners to start learning a foreign language. Because among various topics, they can choose the topics they are interested in. In this way, when they start their language learning, they become habituated to learning foreign languages. Finally, this study presents a set of guidelines for improving language skills among learners. We argue that English language learners should start learning with preferred topics and proceed to learn with enough variety daily. They can make a plan for one week with enough variety and must stick to that study plan. We argue that listening is an excellent start to learning a foreign language like English. We infer that the findings of this study would directly benefit the IELTS test takers, test makers, English teachers, and education policymakers. However, this study needs more evidence from empirical research on *to what extent the diversity of learning materials influences learning levels among learners worldwide*, which future research could cover.

Acknowledgments

This group research project of 'Diversity of learning materials and language proficiency' has no external funding. However, the co-authors use their funds to carry out the research process, including publication. The co-authors acknowledge the contributions of writers of Cambridge IELTS practice test papers, video presenters of Oxford Online English, other organizations, and past researchers. The authors thank the anonymous reviewers and editorial board members of *English Language Teaching* for their thorough and valuable comments. The authors declare that they contribute equally to completing the research work within this paper. The authors of this study want to claim that they have no conflicts of interest regarding their authorship or article publication.

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