



**The Washback Effects of Teaching Academic IELTS on  
Emirati Students' Language Proficiency At A Technical High  
School in Abu Dhabi**

التأثيرات الانعكاسية لتدريس إمتحان الأيلتس الأكاديمي على الكفاءة اللغوية للطلبة الإماراتيين في المدرسة  
الفنية الثانوية في أبو ظبي

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## *Dedication*

*I would like to dedicate all my work to my husband Wasif who was my pillar of strength during my times of stress. I would also like to dedicate it to my mother who believed in me, encouraged me and taught me to strive for the best. I also dedicate it to my brother and sister who always put my fears to rest and wished only the best for me. Last but not least, I dedicate it to my precious boys, Armaan and Ayaan, who are my life and soul.*

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## List of Abbreviations Used

<b>ADEC</b>	Abu Dhabi Education Council
<b>AE</b>	Academic English
<b>AEP</b>	Academic English Program
<b>ATHS</b>	Applied Technology High School
<b>AY</b>	Academic Year
<b>CEFR</b>	Common European Framework of Reference for Languages
<b>EAP</b>	English for Academic Purposes
<b>ESL</b>	English as Second Language
<b>EoY</b>	End of Year
<b>IELTS</b>	International English Language Testing System
<b>KUSTAR</b>	Khalifa University of Science, Technology and Research
<b>SAT</b>	Scholastic Aptitude Test
<b>TOEFL</b>	Test of English as a Foreign Language
<b>UAEU</b>	United Arab Emirates University
<b>ZU</b>	Zayed Univesity

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## **Abstract (English)**

The aim of this small-scale study is to look at the washback effect, positive or negative, of teaching IELTS in a tertiary vocational school in the UAE. The research was carried out on two Grade 12 classes – one that was taking an Academic English Course and one that was a purely IELTS preparation class. An effective understanding of the effects of washback is relevant and important in today's times when high-stakes exams have become inevitable to seek admission into universities or to seek jobs. The present study follows 40 Grade 12 students' performance in English Exams over the last two years to explore the possibility of washback effects on teachers and students due to a strict IELTS preparation course being taught.

To conduct this study, English exam marks of the two grade 12 classes were collected for the past two years at the Applied Technology High School in Abu Dhabi. These test scores were then compared using the t-test to validate or reject the null hypothesis that there is no washback effect of teaching to a test. The findings of the study indicate that negative washback can be seen in the teaching and learning of students in the IELTS preparation class while students in the AE class showed better English language proficiency.



## Abstract (Arabic)

إن الهدف في (IELTS) في كلية مهنية تابعة لوزارة التعليم العالي في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة، ثم الحكم عليه سلباً أو إيجاباً. لقد أُجري هذا البحث على شعبتين من مرحلة الثاني عشر، أحدها تلقى الطلاب في هذه الدراسة صغيرة النطاق هو أن ننظر إلى التأثير الرجعي في تدريس ها دروس اللغة الإنجليزية الأكاديمية، والأخرى تابعوا دورات الإعداد لامتحان (IELTS) دون الدراسة الأكاديمية.

إن الفهم العميق للتأثيرات على أساليب التدريس ضروري ومهم ولا سيما في العصر الحالي. حيث إن الامتحانات الدولية من مستلزمات القبول في الجامعات، أو الحصول على وظيفة. تتبعت هذه الدراسة أداء أربعين طالباً من الصف الثاني عشر في امتحانات اللغة الإنجليزية على مدى العامين الماضيين، لاستكشاف إمكانية التأثيرات الممكنة على المعلمين والطلاب، بسبب دورة الإعداد الصارمة لامتحان (IELTS).

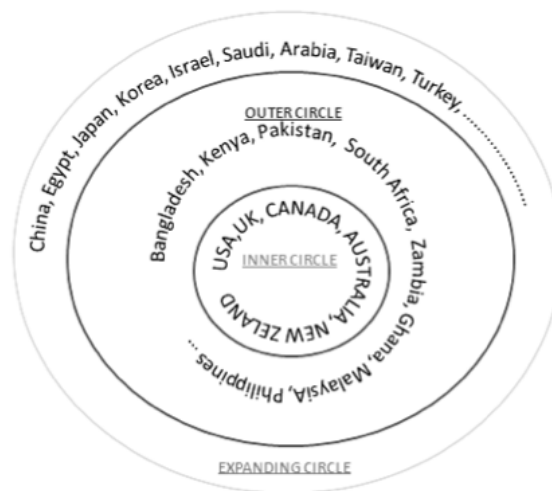
أُجريت مقارنة لدرجات طلاب صفين من ثانوية التكنولوجيا التطبيقية باستخدام البرنامج الإحصائي (T-Test) للتحقق من صحة أو عدم صحة الفرضية التي تعتبر أن لا تأثير يُذكر.

نتائج الدراسة تشير إلى أن التأثيرات كانت سلبية على التعليم والتعلم لدى طلاب إعداد (IELTS). في حين أظهر الطلاب في صف الإنجليزي الأكاديمي إجابة أفضل في اللغة الإنجليزية.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

It is undeniable that English has become a universal language and is required for almost everything. It is used in all walks of life be it education, employment, business, media, travel, tourism or as the widely used language for communication. English has been labeled with several titles over the last century. From being called 'World English' in the 1920s to being termed 'International English' in the 1930s, it transitioned to be named as 'Global English' around the mid-1990s. All these terms have very little difference and are primarily used to refer to English as a universally accepted language of communication across continents. According to Kachru<sup>1</sup> (1985), English around the world can be divided into three circles – Inner Circle (consists of native speakers), Outer Circle (refers to former colonies) and the Expanding Circle (countries where English has recently become important for various purposes).



*Figure 1 – Kachru's Circles of English*

According to Crystal (2012), an estimated one in three people across the world can speak English. For this reason, English is now considered as the Latin of the modern world as stated by Al-Dabbagh (2005). In this light, English was adopted as the medium of instruction by most educational systems globally. Having realized the importance of having English language

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<sup>1</sup> Renowned linguist & professor at The University of Illinois

skills for higher education, many countries in the Gulf have modified not only their medium of instruction but also introduced English Language instruction at the primary school level as a second language. The United Arab Emirates followed suit in doing so as well. The Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the UAE, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, said that learning English was vital as it permitted various societies to communicate and connect with each other as stated in The National Newspaper – ‘All students must learn English, UAE education minister says’ (Ola Salem 2012). This is particularly important in the UAE as it comprises of a large population of expats coming from approximately 200 different countries who belong to different ethnic backgrounds and speak around 100 languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Urdu, Hindi, Farsi, German, Russian, etc. as per Randall & Samimi (2010). In such a society, where all these nationalities have to co-exist along with the Emiratis, it becomes imperative to have a common language of communication. English has thus become the lingua franca next to Arabic.

With the UAE hosting the Expo 2020, the country will be further exposed to the influx of tourists and business delegates from all around the world. As a growing cosmopolitan nation that has opened its doors to the world, knowing English becomes even more significant. In order to prepare for the future and serve the country better, knowing English has become crucial. All jobs in the UAE employment sector such as the police, military, banking, the hospitality industry, and others now require employees to have a certain level of English language proficiency. Therefore, in order to maintain its continuous and sustainable progress, the UAE has a high demand for increase in English language proficiency.

### **1.1 The International English Language Testing System (IELTS):**

The International English language Testing System (IELTS) is a standardized international English language proficiency exam taken by students and professionals across the globe to pursue higher studies, to seek jobs or to immigrate to countries such as Australia and Canada. It is administered jointly by the University of Cambridge, the International Development Program, Australia and the British Council (Saville & Hawley, 2004). According to the

official IELTS website<sup>2</sup>, the IELTS test is recognized by more than 3800 educational organizations, professional establishments and governments across 120 countries worldwide.

There are two forms of an IELTS: the General Training Module that is taken for immigration or job related purposes and the Academic Module that is taken for pursuing higher studies. In an IELTS exam, all four skills, vis-à-vis, listening, reading, writing and speaking are tested. The purpose is to establish whether a person can communicate in English in daily life and comfortably proceed with learning at the university level.

Likewise, several schools and institutions have started offering IELTS preparatory classes as an integral part of their English language classes. The market for IELTS has grown significantly due to the increasing number of students joining universities locally and in English-speaking countries. Consequently, IELTS preparation is no longer a proficiency exam taken by students on completion of high school or as part of their university application process. It has been adopted by several secondary schools as a course in order to better equip students for university placement and readiness.

A technical high school in the UAE has also mandated the IELTS exam for all Grade 12 students as the main benchmark exam. Students are required to score a minimum of Band 6 at the Academic Module, which is taken as 10 percent of their EoY summative mark for English. Most students at this school plan on pursuing university education in foreign countries such as the USA, Canada, UK, Australia, Japan, etc. It thus becomes an important requirement for them to take the IELTS exam to demonstrate language proficiency before moving to one of these countries for higher studies.

## **1.2 Academic English:**

Academic English (AE) is the appropriate or formal use of English in an educational setting. AE curriculum and program focus on developing language skills in all four areas –reading, writing, speaking and listening in addition to grammar and vocabulary. The main focus in AE is to develop

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<sup>2</sup> [www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)

writing conventions that are standard, formal and impersonal as required for university writing. AE is more challenging and complex, however is necessary to attain success at school and university. Mastering AE is quite challenging for students, especially for those students who get very little exposure to the language outside school. According to Bailey (2007, pp. 10-11):

“[a]cademic language proficiency is knowing and being able to use general and content-specific vocabulary, specialized or complex grammatical structures – all for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills, interacting about a topic, or imparting information to others.”

Developing Academic Language proficiency not only helps in developing language proficiency, but is also an important factor for overall academic success of a student. Acquiring Academic Language Skills typically takes five to seven years compared to two to three years for general English. When students are not exposed to AE during their schooling, university requirements become extremely daunting for them. For this reason, in countries such as the USA, strong emphasis is placed on teaching AE at the school level. AE is therefore an integral part of the Common Core Standards in the USA. AE plays a vital role in improving students' semantic knowledge, thus helping them with the better comprehension skills in all subject areas. For example, before learning a science topic students may already have the vocabulary needed to understand the basic concepts involved. Thus, it can be concluded that students who are skilled at AE will be more successful at acquiring new knowledge, expressing their ideas orally and in written form as well as in test taking.

For further clarification, AE can be described as the language that is divergent to unregulated language, which is language used outside the classroom. It can further be differentiated from everyday English on lexical, syntactic and discourse levels. Due to the academic nature and complexity of AE, it is best dealt with at the school level in order to ensure college readiness. While it is easier to acquire second language, development of academic language skills takes immense time and effort. This is more evident in current times when digital literacy is hindering students' literacy skills.

### **1.3 English Education in the UAE:**

The vision of the UAE leaders is to transform the country into a knowledge based economy. Education has been put at the forefront of all strategic planning in the country. In the emirate of Abu Dhabi, educational policies are governed by the Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC). The primary aim of ADEC is to provide innovative, student-centered education through the public and private school systems as well as through its higher education programs. One major step in this direction has been ADEC's emphasis on developing literacy skills in both Arabic and English. English is taught as a second language at the public school and tertiary level. A constant effort is being made at all levels to enhance the English language level. Nonetheless, a big gap still exists between expectations and the actual English language level of students in the UAE.

An article published in one of the local daily newspapers, The National, reported that approximately 9 out of 10 Emirati students are not ready for university in English (Melanie Swan 2012). This poses a major problem as all courses at the university level are taught in English. At the end of high school, students are required to have a minimum score of between Band 6 to Band 6.5, depending on the university and the course being applied to, on the Academic IELTS Test in order to secure direct entry into any bachelor's courses. Several students do not possess the required language level and are required to go through a foundation course to enhance their language skills. What factors can this be attributed to?

The aforementioned newspaper article quotes teachers who have taught at some of the government schools who believe that the curriculum offered at public schools in the country fails to provide students with the right skills. Furthermore, there seem to be huge discrepancies in students' grades, which are 90 percent, which are not reflective of their English language skills. Statistics from 2008 show that only 3 percent of high school graduates from public schools went on to degree programs while the rest were placed in foundation programs. After the first year, an estimated 20 percent dropped out of these programs.

## 1.4 English Courses at ATHS:

ATHS is a secondary technical high school set up under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan in the year 2006. The school has branches in all Emirates of the UAE separately for boys and girls. Being a secondary school, it only has grades 9 to 12. Most students who join the school come from other government schools; some of which do not have English as their main language of instruction. They are all native speakers of Arabic with varied proficiency levels in English Language. There are on average 12 sections per grade level and each class comprises of 20 to 25 students with mixed abilities. Students who enter ATHS in Grade 9 could be placed at the level of an IELTS Band 3.5 to 4.0. They<sup>3</sup> are expected to score a minimum of Band 6.0 in the Academic Module by Grade 12 before they graduate.

The curriculum at ATHS is divided into two main streams, vis-à-vis, the mainstream or core program and the Advanced English Program (AEP). The English Curriculum at ATHS is predominantly an ESL curriculum for grades 9 and 10, but becomes a purely IELTS preparation course in grades 11 and 12. However, the AEP curriculum includes study of Academic English. Students in both courses take 11 lessons of 45 minutes each per week in grade 11 and 8 lessons of the same duration in grade 12. At the end of grade 12, both groups have to take the IELTS Exam in addition to the school-based end of year exam.

With the two programs running parallel simultaneously at the same school with varied results, it was of interest to see why the AE group was performing better at the IELTS exam than the students in the IELTS Preparation class. Although the IELTS group received intensive IELTS training for two full academic years, their IELTS scores were definitely lower than the AEP students' scores who study AE instead of IELTS related material. This study intends to investigate the reason for the discrepancy in scores of the two groups of students.

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<sup>3</sup> Students in AEP and IELTS Preparation Course

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Washback is the effect of testing on the teaching and learning process. This effect can either be positive or negative. In case of high stakes tests, preparation for it can overshadow all teaching and learning. When the test content and techniques are different than the objectives of the course objectives, then negative washback is possible. On the other hand, a curriculum that incorporates the content to be tested in tandem with the test strategies can cause a positive washback effect. In the words of Wall (1993), the impact of testing has become an important area of interest in language testing in recent years.

Several studies have been conducted to examine the effects of various standardized tests. TOEFL, for example, has been criticized for having a negative washback effect –e.g., Raimes (1990), Peirce (1992). This is because of the test's reliance on short- texts, use of more multiple-choice questions, lack of a speaking test, etc. However, the academic IELTS Test has been considered to promote a more positive washback due to the inclusion of the speaking, listening, reading and writing components; the academic design of the test tasks, especially the reading section where the texts are longer with a variety of question types. Nonetheless, these features do not necessarily ensure that there is no negative washback as a result of teaching IELTS oriented learning outcomes and strategies. As per Alderson and Wall (1993), such assertions need to be empirically investigated.

Several studies have been done in this regard at both international and local levels. An investigation done by Deakin (1997) in Australasia of tertiary level teachers' attitude towards IELTS was a generally positive one, although there were some reservations. They considered it to be a good test as well as a good measure of English for academic purposes. Another small-scale experimental study was carried out by Brown (1997) in Melbourne to compare the efficacy of an EAP class with an IELTS Preparation Class. The quantitative comparison of the aforementioned classes revealed that students in the IELTS Preparation Course showed lower proficiency when compared to



the EAP class. This suggested that students who were exposed to formal academic mode of study showed a higher proficiency in the language. On the contrary, an action research study that was carried out locally by Lewthwaite (2006) suggests that the teachers' attitude to an exam coupled with the range of activities that are used by them to prepare students for the exam are major determiners that strike a balance between the positive and the negative washback in the classroom.

## **2.1 Definitions of Washback:**

In recent times, the term washback has been used frequently in applied linguistics, however it is a word that cannot be found in the dictionary. Nonetheless, the word backwash is found in the New Webster's Dictionary, which describes it as the "disagreeable effects of an event or situation". Several researchers and linguists have proposed definitions, of which some are simple while others are complicated. The simplest definition comes from Hughes (1981) who describes washback as the harmful or beneficial effect of testing on teaching and learning. According to him all teaching and learning activities will ultimately be dominated by a test if it is considered highly important. However, if the teaching and learning are not in line with the assessment techniques, there will be a negative impact. From his definitions, the following two deductions can be made: a) testing has a huge impact on teaching and learning, and b) there has to be harmony between teaching and testing in order to successfully accomplish the learning objectives.

Shohamy's (1992) definition of washback emphasizes using external language tests in order to motivate foreign language education in schools. According to her definition, learning of foreign languages is highly influenced by the external testing as they have a huge impact on the teaching and learning in schools. However, it is important to note that several external language tests are administered with the purpose of assessing the language level of a person. Such tests are not part of curriculum and are a general assessment. Their influence should therefore have no washback effect on any form of teaching and learning.

Another definition provided by Messick (1996) states that washback is the extent to which a test influences language instructors and students to do what they would have generally not done to enable language learning. As per this definition, the extent and frequency of what teachers and students do to learn a language may not necessarily be related to any test. It may be routine practice adopted to learn the language. However, when a test becomes part of the equation and an activity is repeated frequently, due to it being part of the test, the effects of washback can be seen.

Brown (2004) also provides a similar definition that claims washback as the effect testing has on instruction. However, Brown's definition does not factor in anyone else, for example teachers, except the effect on instruction. This definition is not holistic.

The aforementioned definitions basically all describe the effect of washback on teachers and students in a typical classroom setting. However, it is important to realize that the effects may be far greater than that. The consequences of washback may also extend to the whole educational system or even the society. This has been Pierce's (1992, p.687) outlook, who defines washback as "[t]he impact a test has on classroom pedagogy, curriculum pedagogy, curriculum development and educational policy."

This definition clearly emphasizes a broader impact of washback i.e., on curriculum, pedagogy and policy as a whole rather than just on the teaching and learning process. Similar views have been shared by Bachman and Palmer (1990), who believe that the effect can be seen on individuals such as test-takers, the educational system and society as well. In addition to this list, Andrews (1994) is of the opinion that parents are not an exception to its effects. He further describes washback as an ill-defined phenomenon that requires further investigation.

Researchers have thus provided two kinds of definitions for washback- one that describes the 'broader' effects of washback and the other that describes the 'narrower' effects. While the narrower effects can be seen on teachers and students, the broader effects can be seen on curriculum design, education policy and the whole society. One definition that encapsulates both

narrow and broader aspects of washback is provided by Turner (2001) who states that the effects of washback can be described as the impact of testing or educational practices on the teaching and learning.

It can be concluded after looking at various definitions that the effects of washback can be due to the influence of the test rather than the test itself. Another point worth noting is that this phenomenon is experienced in the case of high-stake tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, etc. as these tests are utilized to make important decisions. The current research will look at the effects of IELTS on the teaching, and learning at a technical high school in Abu Dhabi.

## **2.2 Washback - Theoretical Studies:**

With the recent interest in exploring the washback concept, researchers have suggested several hypotheses and models. Both provide extremely significant frameworks for research related to washback – Alderson and Wall's Washback Hypothesis and Hughes and Bailey's Washback Model. Alderson and Wall's Hypothesis (1993) helped lay the foundation of washback studies. It focuses on the effects of testing on teaching and learning without any form of affirmation or rejection. It simply helps in clarifying various issues that must be addressed by studies related to washback. They insist on further in depth research on the topic with different tools such as class observations.

On the other hand, Hughes and Bailey's Model helped understand the washback process through a tripartite model. Their model shows three things that may get affected by the type of test, vis-à-vis, participants (students, teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, publishers, etc.), process (development of materials, syllabus design, teaching methodology, test taking strategies, etc.), and products (things learned such as facts, skills, etc.). According to this model, a test can have a three-fold effect. At first it may influence the understanding of the participants and their attitude towards teaching and learning. This is followed by influencing of the completion of tasks, which may ultimately affect the learning results. Therefore, with the help of this model we can clearly understand the effect a test has on its participants involved in various processes leading to varied products suited to each group of participants.

Bailey's Model implies that there is no direct effect of teaching on the test while all other factors such as learning, new materials and curricula do. It also does not take into account test design based on learners' needs in individual situations. As a result, this model may not be applicable to tests that are designed specifically to stimulate particular outcomes. However, given that this research will be exploring the washback effects of the IELTS Test, this model will be applicable as IELTS is a test that has been in existence for quite some time.

Accordingly, we can summarize that the Alderson and Wall's Washback Hypotheses focuses on two aspects – teaching and learning and two participants – teachers and students. On the contrary, Bailey's Model explores three areas – participants, process and products, which brings curriculum writers, publishers and researchers into the equation as well.

The aforementioned discussions on theoretical approaches to washback help in laying concrete groundwork for experiential studies, which will be further discussed subsequently in this chapter.

### **2.3 Washback: Positive or Negative:**

According to Bailey (1996), the washback effect of testing can be either positive or negative. It is termed as being positive if a test can yield positive results by promoting teaching, learning and the educational goals of an individual or school. On the contrary, there may be negative effects of washback if a test impedes teaching, learning and educational goals of a learner or school. Alderson and Wall (1993) have stated that some tests have a negative washback effect, which can adversely affect not only curricula but also instructional time and critical thinking skills among students. This kind of washback is undesirable and should be prevented.

Some researchers in this field believe that it is appropriate to have tests influence teaching and learning in order to bring about a positive change in terms of students' marks. It is believed that in such cases it will create a positive among teachers and learners towards the test and they will work

together willingly to fulfill its objectives. For instance, Heyneman (1987) states that it is believed by many advocates of academic achievement testing that the ability to coach for a test is indeed a virtue and not a drawback. Just as good tests influence teaching and learning, good teaching and learning will also impact testing.

Every test has not only negative but also positive washback effects. The negative effects and its causes should be identified by researchers to effectively deal with and avoid. Messik (1996) states that the validity of a test should be assessed based on the positive or negative washback effect it manifests. According to Anderson and Wall (1993), 'A test will influence **what** the teachers teach and **how** they teach.' So, the question arises whether IELTS has an impact on what and how a teacher teaches in class when preparing students to take the exam.

Based on the aforementioned studies, we can conclude that there has been no consensus in regards to whether washback has positive or negative effects on the teaching and learning process. The reason for this is the two-way nature of a test – positive or negative, which can be influenced by several factors. Anderson and Wall (1993) concur that any test or exam, good or bad, will have either beneficial or damaging effects. It will thus be more beneficial if researchers turned their attention to the factors that influence positive or negative washback effects of a test rather than simply looking at its effects. One of the major factors that influences tests is the political interference as revealed by Heyneman (1987). He adds, 'to a large extent, the quality of tests relies on the ability of a test agency to pursue professional ends autonomous.' (1987, p.262)

Therefore, for a test to be fairly evaluated, it is important that the educational context in which a test is administered be looked at carefully as well. This will help in understanding where and how washback exists and whether it has a positive or a negative impact.

## **2.4 Previous Studies of Washback:**

Researchers have been interested in the topic of washback and its effect from the 1990s, before which this area was not explored. However, recently there

has been great interest in this field of study. This could possibly be due to the increasing importance of high-stakes exams such as IELTS, TOEFL, SATs, and more. It became imperative to delve into this area to study the effects of all these tests. Various research methods have been used to carry out research in this field. Some of the more relevant and significant ones have been reviewed and mentioned in this chapter.

One of the most noteworthy studies, being the first one in this field, carried out is a longitudinal study carried out by Alderson and Wall in 1993 to examine the effects of O-Level Exams on students in secondary schools in Sri Lanka. Several observation tools such as questionnaires, class observations, interviews and document analysis were done before and after administering of these tests. The incorporation of class observations was an important step in this research as almost 300 classrooms observations were conducted in this study. Due to this reason, it became a significant model for studies that followed it. The study revealed that there was washback effect of the test (positive as well as negative) on the content taught by teachers and class tests designed by teachers. No washback effect was noticed in the teaching methodology of the teachers. The reason for this can be attributed to the fact that the test included only reading and writing and not all four skills. Skills such as speaking and listening require pair work or group work that is not necessary when students are doing reading and writing as these can be done individually. Hence we can surmise from this that no washback was felt in the teaching methodology of these teachers due to the inappropriate format of the test.

A similar research was carried out in Australia by Deakin (1997) to study the impact of the IELTS Exam on English instructor at the tertiary level. When questioned about the possible washback effects of IELTS on their students, the teachers mostly felt that there certainly were some washback effects. Due to the nature of the test, a washback effect was seen on the Academic English skills of the students, as the test did not focus on these skills. Students who had scored the required IELTS band still struggled to accomplish longer writing tasks, critical thinking and appropriate analysis of academic reading skills.

Brown (1998) piloted a relatively small-scale research in Melbourne to study how effective an IELTS preparation class was in comparison to an EAP class in enhancing students' writing skills. The study found that there was a clear distinction in the activities and resources used in class by the teachers. However, the quantitative studies for this research were unfounded due to the low level of the students. This suggests that further research in the area is needed to recognize such variables that affect the study.

Barrett-Lennard (1997) draws attention to an Academic English preparation course that was designed and used at the Macquarie University in Sydney. The purpose of this course was to prepare students to take the IELTS exam while simultaneously enabling them to cope with the need to study Academic English in Australia. Hayes and Watt (1998) had a different experience in New Zealand where an IELTS Preparation Course was designed for the Auckland University of Technology. The material for this course was taken entirely from IELTS books. At the end of the course, no significant improvement was noticed in the test scores of these students forcing staff to redesign the program by amalgamating the IELTS program with an academic English program to provide a more holistic approach to language learning. These studies point strongly to the fact that test preparation should be embedded into a broader linguistic program in order to ensure that students' academic skills are sufficiently enhanced.

Another study conducted in New Zealand by Hayes and Read (2004) investigated the washback effects of the academic module of the IELTS exam. The model adopted by them was a comparative one where IELTS was compared with English for Academic Purposes Course. Both courses lasted four weeks and focused on developing the four skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening. The researchers collected data using different tools such as interviews, class observations, questionnaires along with quantitative data in the form of pre- and post- tests conducted. The study found that washback was clearly evident in the IELTS Exam preparation course, albeit a negative one. A similar comparative study will be conducted in the current research of which IELTS and AE are the two courses being reviewed for washback. However, the current study will look at these courses over a period of 1.5 to 2 years while the study conducted by Hayes and Read (2004) was

only over a period of 4 weeks. This may result in varied results as washback effects can vary over a prolonged period of time.

The washback effects of IELTS have been explored in the UK as well by Green (2007). In this study, three different courses were compared which were being used to prepare students for entry into various British universities. One of the courses was a test preparation course, one was a purely academic writing course and the third one was a combination of the two. Questionnaires as well as pre- and post- test data was collected over a period of 4 to 14 weeks. No significant improvement in students' writing skills was found in the test preparation course. Several other studies related to washback due to IELTS tests were conducted by Deakin (1996), Brown (1998), and Hawkey (2006). Nonetheless, these studies do not examine any change in teachers' behaviors as these researches focused on only the IELTS exam in contrast to the present study that carries out a comparative analysis of the IELTS exam and AE, which helps in the development of language.

Examples of more recent experimental washback studies are of those conducted by Saif (2006), Fox & Cheng (2007), and by Monoz & Alvarez (2010). The aforementioned discussions thus prove that washback exists either in the positive or negative form and is a complicated and unpredictable phenomenon to understand. It is influenced by several factors such as educational and test contexts, participants, teachers, etc. To arrive at more conclusive findings, further empirical studies are needed in the area that are conducted for specific tests in specific contexts through various phases of its implementation.

## **2.5 Empirical Studies of Washback in the UAE:**

Looking for research done to look at the effects of washback as an impact of the IELTS test revealed that extremely few studies have been done at the local level in this regard. There have been only 3 studies conducted so far – one by Lewthwaite (2006) at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) located in Al Ain, the second one by Garinger and Schoepp (2013) at the Zayed University (ZU) located in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and the third more recent one by Freimuth (2014) at the Khalifa University in Abu Dhabi



(KUSTAR). Both UAEU and ZU are top-ranked federal universities in the UAE which require students to have a certain IELTS band level, band 6 in most cases, to start most degree level courses. Students who do not meet this requirement have to go through the Foundation Course and retake the IELTS exam to meet the requirements.

Before looking at the findings of the aforementioned researchers, it is important to understand the popularity of the IELTS exam in the UAE. The IELTS exam is primarily used as a doorway to higher education, which makes it a high-stakes exam in the country. Students who wish to join any of the universities in the country for higher studies need to take the Academic Module of the IELTS exam. The average university prerequisite for admission across the UAE is Band 5, which indicates that the student has limited command of the language but can manage basic communication. The average score of students in the UAE is 4.9, which is low compared to average scores in western countries such as Germany that has an average score of 7.2 or France with 6.7 (IELTS Researchers, 2012). Recently, most universities in the UAE, like KUSTAR, have raised the bar to Band 6. As per the IELTS band descriptions, a candidate with band 6 as his/her score exhibits understanding of complex language although he/she may still make several errors. This was an important step in helping students avoid the foundation year and cope better with graduate studies.

The empirical research conducted by Lewthwaite (2006) looks at the attitudes of teachers and students at the UAEU towards IELTS writing tasks. In this study, Lewthwaite states that teachers felt the IELTS Task 1 and Task 2 writing, which are academic report and essay writing, had a positive effect on students' overall writing skills thus demonstrating positive washback effects of the IELTS Exam on students' writing. However, students studying Law and Business Studies at UAEU were not of the same opinion. They generally felt that there was no usefulness to the academic IELTS writing tasks. Overall according to Lewthwaite, the academic IELTS tasks were considered as useful guides in improving students' academic writing skills.

The study conducted by Garinger & Schoepp (2013) highlights a comparison in IELTS scores and academic scores of students at Zayed University (ZU).

Approximately 300 students' IELTS scores at entry-level form the foundation program were compared to the GPA of their English language class. The study concluded that a high level of language proficiency did not necessarily guarantee academic success. It was evident that some students who had IELTS scores as low as band 5 were able to succeed as well as those who had a band score of 6.5. These research findings contradict other similar studies done within the region that stated that there was a correlation between high language proficiency to high academic success. For example, the study conducted by Maleki & Zangani (2007) in Iran found a positive link between students' language proficiency and their academic accomplishment. Similar results were found by Wilson & Komba (2012) in a study conducted in Tanzania. Accordingly it can be concluded that in these two cases there was a positive washback effect of IELTS.

The third and most current research done in the UAE in this field was at KUSTAR by Freimuth in 2014. Although this research was related to IELTS, it was not intended to study its washback effects. The primary focus of this research was to analyze the impact of IELTS writing prompts that are culturally new on students' writing scores. Another similar research was conducted in Iran by Ghamarian, Motallebzadeh & Fatemi (2014). The purpose of this research was to investigate the IELTS test washback effect on students' life skills. No significant relation was found among the two.

## **2.6 Summary:**

After looking at the various studies and their findings, it is clearly evident that there have not been any studies conducted in the UAE that analyze the washback effect of teaching an IELTS preparation course compared to an AE course as this study proposes to. In addition to comparing the scores of students in the two courses to study any washback effects of the IELTS exam, the study aims to look at washback effects on teaching and learning. Another aspect of this study that makes it stand out from others is the prolonged period of study. This study looks at data collected over a period of two years to effectively study any effects of washback. This research will therefore be a comprehensive review of washback effects of the IELTS exam on students, teachers, curriculum and materials at ATHS.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Theoretical Approach & Methodology**

Analyzing research done by various researchers in the field in the previous chapter has helped in providing the theoretical and realistic basis for this study. It is clear from the above mentioned examples that several studies related to washback have been carried out in the past years, especially since the 1990s due to the increasing importance of international exams with high-stakes. The research into previous studies also helped in identifying the shortcoming of not having enough research in the UAE related to washback. It is hoped that the current study will help in exploring the effects of washback due to IELTS in comparison to AE in one of the renowned schools in the country.

#### **3.1 Research Methodology:**

The current study presents a detailed review of the effects of an exclusive IELTS preparation course at a technical high school on students, teachers and materials used in class. The study also endeavors to compare the language proficiency of Emirati students enrolled in two different courses offered at ATHS – AE and IELTS preparation. A detailed understanding in these areas will help not only teachers but also curriculum developers in reassessing their decisions about curriculum design. To help look at all the abovementioned areas the research will adopt the triangulation method. According to Creswell (2003), a mixed method study is the most applicable and widely acknowledged methodology in answering research questions.

##### **3.1.1 Research Questions:**

This research was undertaken due to the difference in the language competency of the two groups of students. While students in the IELTS preparation class were taking the IELTS course from grade 11, students in the AEP class were taught AE for the same duration. Results of school based exams showed a difference in the two groups' performances. To understand this discrepancy in marks, the current study will look at the following questions

to help understand the effects of washback due to the IELTS test and compare IELTS class with AE class.

1. What is the washback effect of the IELTS Test on teachers preparing students to take the test at the end of Grade 12?
2. Which course, Academic English or IELTS, is able to achieve better results in developing students' overall English language skills? How does it manage to do so?

In order to investigate the above questions and employ the Washback Hypotheses suggested by Alderson & Wall (1993), and Hughes' Washback Model (1993), the following sub-questions will also need to be explored:

- a. Does the IELTS Test influence what teachers teach in both classes?
- b. Does the IELTS Test restrict what students learn?
- c. Does the IELTS Test influence the attitudes of teachers and students?

### **3.1.2 A Mixed Research Methodology/ Triangulation:**

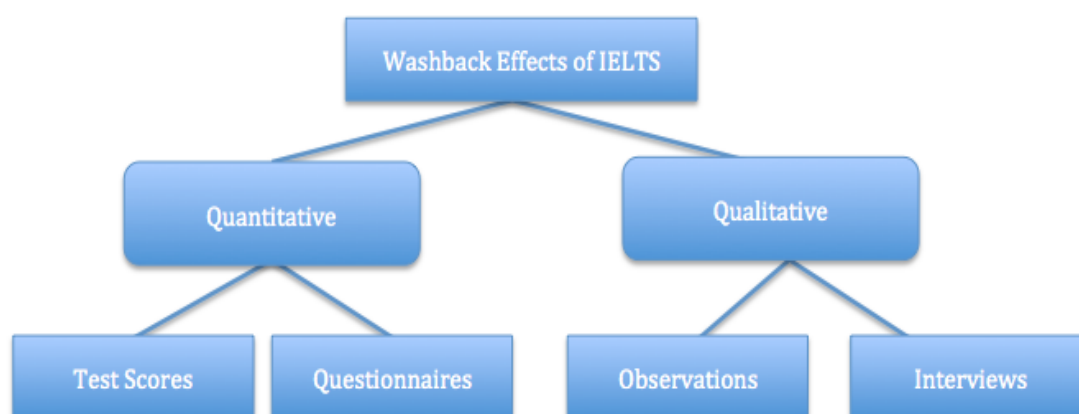
The method of research in this study is to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.17) have described the mixed research methodology as "The class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, concepts or language into a single study." Several researchers have debated over the superiority of the two different methods of study over each other, as they did not think the two were compatible. However, Patton (1990) stated otherwise. In many instances, it becomes necessary to use the two methods together in order to get a holistic view of the subject being researched.

Qualitative methods include the use of surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and class observations. It is information that is gathered through use of descriptive data. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, use numerical and statistical data to gather information and analyze it. Both methods have their own strengths and limitations. The decision on what method of research to use will depend entirely on the nature of the research and the research

questions. In fact, most studies can benefit from a triangulation of the two methods as they complement each other rather than being different.

### 3.2 Research Design & Context:

As mentioned above, this study will use a mixed method approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data. However, with each method there can be different instruments that can be used to collect data. This study will use data collection instruments as illustrated in Figure 2 below:



*Figure 2 – Research Design*

#### 3.2.1 Research Design:

The research to study washback effects of the IELTS Preparation Course in comparison to the AE Course will be an investigation encompassing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The study will employ a triangulation of these methods to get a well-rounded indication of whether washback exists or not and if it does is it positive or negative? A longitudinal approach was taken in collecting quantitative data in the form of students' test scores. The researcher collected test scores of the two groups of students over the last two years to compare results. For the qualitative side of data collection questionnaires, interviews and classroom observations of teachers teaching the two courses was carried out. The questionnaires were designed separately for students and teachers (Appendices D &E) to get first hand feedback from the two most important stakeholders. Interviews were done with two teachers teaching both programs to get their perspective about the two courses and their benefits and drawbacks (Appendices G &H). Class

observations were conducted to observe lessons, teaching methodology and student attitudes to the two courses. This gave the researcher good insight into the two programs, students' language acquisition, and teaching methodology.

### **3.2.2 Participants:**

ATHS being a government institution, enrollment is only open to Emirati students. As the focus of the study is to investigate any washback effects of a purely IELTS class, students from two different grade 12 sections were chosen. For the purpose of this research, we will name the AE class as "Class A" and the IELTS Preparation Class as "Class B". Class A and B both have 20 students each. Overall, there are 210 students in all of grade 12 in the school. These students are Emirati boys in their final year of high school aged between 17 to 18 years. At ATHS, the students choose different clusters of study when they enter grade 11 such as engineering, computer science, applied engineering, etc. This helps them to select and work towards a career path of their choice.

Students who join ATHS at grade 9 level come mostly from various public and private schools in the country. This means that they come with varying degrees of English language proficiency. While some students are excellent in English others need help with basics. There is a significant gap between their levels. To address this issue, the school has introduced a two-week Intensive English Program that is mandatory for all students entering grade 9. Students are divided according to their language level into 2 or 3 levels and given a rigorous language course to prepare them for grade 9 language course, which is the CEFR - A2 level. Students are given a diagnostic test and an end of course test to check their level after the two-week intensive course. Based on these marks, students are then filtered into two groups in grade 9— advanced and regular. Students in the both groups take ESL English at CEFR-A2 level, however the advanced curriculum is paced faster while the regular curriculum includes additional basic grammar objectives. Students are again regrouped in grade 10 into advanced and regular levels, which are the CEFR-B1 level, based on their end of year performance.

On reaching grade 11, the levels are no longer split into advanced and regular. Based on students' marks in the grade 10 final exam, they are assigned to the AEP or the IELTS Preparation Course. Students who score 80 percent or above are allowed to join the AEP while others take the IELTS course. They continue to be in the same groups in grades 11 and 12 as the AEP course is fairly advanced and progressive. Consequently, moving levels is not allowed at this stage. Although students are apportioned into the two programs based on their level, each class still comprises of students with mixed abilities.

There are a total of 10 grade 12 sections at ATHS, which comprises of one AEP class and 9 IELTS preparation classes. For the purposes of this study, the AEP class and one of the nine IELTS preparation class was chosen. In addition to students in the two grade 12 classes, teachers teaching these classes can also be considered as participants of this study. This is so because the study intends to examine not only washback effects on students, but also on teachers. Although only two grade 12 classes were chosen for the study, teachers teaching the AEP and IELTS Preparation classes in grades 11 and 12 were chosen. There are a total of 6 teachers who are chosen for this study – 3 teach grade 11 classes and 3 teach grade 12. While 4 teachers exclusively teach IELTS classes, 2 teach a combination of IELTS classes and an AEP class each. The two teachers teaching both classes were chosen for this study based on stratified sampling. Consent of these teachers was sought before asking them to participate in this study.

### **3.2.3 Research Context:**

The research was carried out at the Applied Technology High School – Boy's Campus located in Abu Dhabi. The primary reason for choosing this school was due to the fact that the researcher works at the same school and was intrigued by the difference in the two English programs offered to the senior students, grades 11 and 12. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the school offers ESL studies at the grade 9 and 10 level and a choice of either AE or IELTS Preparation at the grade 11 and 12 levels. Irrespective of the English course chosen, all students are required to take the IELTS exam by the end of grade 12. Students are required to score a minimum of Band 6. Students who are

not successful at scoring the required band are encouraged to retake the exam.

ATHS has been known for setting high standards for its students and for continuously raising the bar as part of its efforts to improve the quality of education provided. The main reason behind ATHS mandating a minimum score in IELTS was to enable students to start graduate studies immediately after graduating from high school. This helps in ensuring that students do not have to go through a foundation course that is offered at universities if students do not have the required language skills. It also helps in preparing students for tertiary education, abroad or locally, where English is the medium of instruction. It is important for students to have fair to good language skills to be able to cope with university studies. In addition, tests and test scores have a very strong impact on several other things such as educational policy changes, the suitability of students for an educational program, job applications, etc.

The curriculum of the AE course focuses on academic language skills such as academic writing, reading, listening, speaking, academic vocabulary and intensive grammar practice. The IELTS Preparation Course curriculum takes a more communicative approach with focus on reading, writing, speaking and listening with some focus on grammar and academic vocabulary. In addition to this, the IELTS curriculum used at the school includes test-taking strategies as well. Both courses use commercial textbooks designed for each respective course. Material is supplemented using online resources, IELTS publications, and authentic materials such as news articles.

In this context, the question that arises is whether students in either course are acquiring language or is there any washback effect due to the focus on IELTS preparation? This forms the basis of the study in addition to investigating if there are any washback effects on other factors, such as students, teachers, their teaching methodology, and materials. It should be noted that the classes chosen for this research are ones that are not taught by the researcher. This was deliberately done in order to ensure that researcher bias would not influence the study.



### **3.3 Data Collection Instruments:**

Five instruments were used for this mixed-method study in order to address the research questions: Quantitative instruments –test scores and questionnaires; Qualitative instruments – interviews and class observations. This is in accordance with suggestions made by researchers who have studied the effects of washback. According to Creswell (2008), a triangulation of methods should be used to analyze the washback effects of a test.

#### **3.3.1 Test Scores:**

One of the main data collection tools used was the test scores of students on the AEP and IELTS programs. Test scores help in giving a researcher good perspective in terms of students' performance and level. This research being a longitudinal study, individual student improvements were calculated by comparing test scores of students in the two programs over the last two years. The purpose behind choosing a longitudinal approach was to identify any possible attrition in language among students as an impact of exclusive test preparation over a prolonged period of two years in grades 11 and 12. These test scores will help in providing the quantitative data required to support the qualitative findings and vice versa.

#### **3.3.2 Questionnaires:**

A questionnaire can be defined as a set of questions on a specific topic or group of topics that is given to participants to respond to in order to collect information needed for a study. According to Tuckman (1999), it is the most common research tool used by researchers in social sciences. For the purpose of this study, two questionnaires were designed – one for teachers teaching grades 11 and 12 English classes and the other for students in the grade 12 AEP and IELTS class. When writing questions for the questionnaires, qualitative input from related literature review was obtained. In addition to this, opinion of some colleagues who have been ESL teachers for several years was sought. My own experience as an ESL teacher was also used.

The questionnaire designed for teachers consists of two parts (Appendix E (i) & (ii)). Part 1 is aimed at collecting basic demographic information of participant teachers in addition to their general opinion regarding teaching English. The second part of the questionnaire asks questions about the two courses: AEP and IELTS. Overall, the questionnaire is designed to investigate the following issues: teacher backgrounds, their opinions about language teaching, factors that influence their teaching, the extent of influence of the IELTS test on their teaching, classroom activities and more.

The student questionnaire (Appendix D (i) & (ii)) is also divided into two parts: Part 1 that collects students' general opinion about learning English and Part 2 that targets the AEP and IELTS courses offered at the school. This will help in getting students' perspectives about English in general and the two courses as well. Questions on the students' questionnaire enquire about course features, language skills, students' perceptions, etc.

Both questionnaires comprise of multiple choices based on the Likert scale. Questions were modified from an existing questionnaire that was used for a similar study by Ying (2011) to suit the needs of this study. Ying's student and teacher questionnaires comprised of three parts that included demographic details as well as open-ended questions. These were excluded to create a quantitative questionnaire for teachers while the student questionnaire comprised of two open-ended questions. They were designed in such a way that all participants, both teachers and students, could only choose one answer for each question ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Both questionnaires were in English, with fairly simple English on the students' version to make sure the questions were not only simple but unambiguous as well.

### **3.3.3 Observations:**

Marshall & Rossman (1989) describe observation as "the systematic description of events, behaviors, and artifacts in the social study chosen for study." Usually observations are associated with teacher evaluation and/or appraisal. However, it has become a frequently used tool in educational research as well. This is done to collect information related to teaching and

learning, classroom settings and interactions. Observations can be done by a researcher as a complete participant or as a nonparticipant. Complete participation allows researchers to participate in classroom activities and with students to get first hand experience of the proceedings of the class. However, as a researcher I preferred to be a nonparticipating observer who observed without taking part in any of the activities. This was done in order to avoid any interruptions to the normal flow of the lesson.

The main purpose of doing observations for this research was to compare what teachers and students did in the two programs – AEP and IELTS. A comparative model of observations was adapted to observe two teachers who taught both courses. This was done in order to see if there were any washback effects on teaching due to IELTS Exam preparation. According to Brown (2001), a research should be conducted in such a way that it demonstrates the ability to accurately identify and explain the subject being observed. To accurately observe for washback effects in the IELTS and AEP classes, this method was adopted. The diagram below further illustrates the comparative design adopted for this study.

	Teacher A		Teacher B
IELTS Preparation Course		çompared toè	
	é compared to ê		é compared to ê
AEP Class		çompared toè	

*Table 1 – Classroom Observation Comparative Design*

The hypothesis associated with this design is that different teachers teaching the same course may use similar teaching, learning and materials or they may be different in the two courses taught by the same teacher. In other words, different teachers teaching the same course may have the same teaching and

learning activities or vice versa. The observation tool used for this purpose is attached as Appendix F. It is based on the observation scheme developed by Spada & Froehlich in 1995 known as Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation Scheme (COLT) as it helps to investigate different features of a language classroom in an organized manner.

#### **3.3.4 Interviews:**

Kvale (1996) describes interviews as an exchange of views and thoughts between two or more people on a specific subject. It is a very specific conversation with a precise purpose, which is used frequently for various purposes in modern times. It is widely accepted as an important tool in educational research and linguistic studies. Due to it being a vital data collection instrument, it has been chosen as an integral part of this study.

In this study, structured interviews were used to interview teachers to gain more insight into the effects of IELTS on students, their teaching methodology and the implications on the course itself. This would help in eliminating any limitations of other data collected such as class observations and questionnaires. Limitations of questionnaires would be misinterpretation of questions due to idiosyncracics. Furthermore, interviews helped in providing valuable face-to-face discussions on the subject. It also helped with the possibility of high researcher bias that was possible from interpretation of class observations. This would help in making the study more credible.

Questions used during the interview with the teachers are presented in Appendices E & F. Interviews were conducted over a duration of 15 to 20 minutes due to time constraints and were recorded in order to ensure none of the information was lost. This was later transcribed. The process helped eliminate problems associated with such tasks such as note taking and nervousness of interviewees.

The following table summarizes the instruments used for this study and the research questions they help in answering.

<b>Instrument</b>	<b>Research Questions Addressed</b>
Test Scores	1. Which course is able to achieve better results in developing students' overall English Language Proficiency? 2. Which course is able to achieve better results?
Teacher & Student Questionnaires	1. Does the IELTS test influence what teachers teach in both classes? 2. Does it influence teacher and student attitudes to teaching and learning?
Structured Teacher Interviews	1. Does IELTS test affect their teaching methodology? 2. Does IELTS preparation course cause attrition in students?
Class Observations	1. Does IELTS test affect teachers' teaching methodology? 2. Does the IELTS test influence choice of materials used in class?

*Table 2 – Research Instruments*

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations:**

Considering the fact that this study involves use of data such as students' marks, teacher and student interviews, observations, etc. proper ethics were adhered to at all times. Permission to use marks and conduct observations was sought from the school Principal. Teachers' consent was sought before they were observed and interviewed. They were assured that no names would be mentioned or used anywhere in the study. The observations would be done solely for the purpose of the research and will be kept confidential.

The students were informed of the nature of the study before they were asked to complete the questionnaires. These students are not known to the researcher and were under no obligation to complete the questionnaires. They were informed that not completing the questionnaires would not have any effect on anything. They were asked to complete the questionnaires without writing their names on it to maintain confidentiality.

Furthermore, neither the researcher nor the school have any direct affiliation with the high-stakes IELTS exam, which is conducted independently of ATHS by institutions authorized by the Cambridge Examining Board. Any tests used by the teachers in school, that are based on IELTS, are from IELTS training material available commercially and used for formative purposes only.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis:**

The process of data collection procedure was carried out from December 2014 to February 2015. Data related to previous years was available through the school data base system.

#### **3.5.1 Test Scores:**

The End of Year (EoY) English Exam at all grade levels comprises of all four skills- reading, writing, speaking and listening. Grades 9 and 10 also include a grammar and vocabulary section. Grades 11 and 12 do not include an explicit grammar and vocabulary section as these exams are modeled as per the IELTS exam. All sections are equally weighted in all grade level exams.

A sample IELTS test was given to students in the two groups, which was taken from commercially available books. This test included all four skills – reading, listening, writing and speaking. Marks for each skill were equally weighted. The rationale behind choosing to give both groups an IELTS type test is that the EoY exams given to grade 11 and 12 students are based on the IELTS format and test all 4 skills. Keeping the same format of the test helps in maintaining the validity of the grades and the analysis.

As mentioned above, test scores of students in the AEP and IELTS course were collected from the school database for the academic year 2013-2014. Test scores of the test given to students in grade 12 were recorded and analyzed using the t-test statistical method to check for variances in the language skills of the two groups. The research will be based on the null hypothesis that there are no washback effects of testing on students' language proficiency.

### **3.5.2 Questionnaires:**

Teacher questionnaires were given to 6 teachers – 3 grade 11 teachers and 3 grade 12 teachers, of which 2 teach both AEP and IELTS classes. While some teachers completed the questionnaires on the same day, others completed them within a day or two. All 6 teachers have experience teaching IELTS and 4 of the 6 are also IELTS examiners. As a result, they had good insight and experience about the exam and the course offered at ATHS. Student questionnaires were administered to 40 students – 20 in each class, which were completed anonymously. Students were informed that their responses on the questionnaire would not affect them in any manner. Instructions on how to complete the survey were given to the students before they were given the questionnaires to complete.

The questions on the student questionnaires were divided into two parts – Part I consisted of multiple-choice questions using the Likert scale and Part II comprised of open-ended questions. Teacher questionnaires had only multiple-choice questions using the Likert scale as these were followed by interviews. Both questionnaires were in English language only and made available to teachers and students through Survey Monkey. The main objective of both questionnaires was to gather teachers' and students' perceptions of the IELTS and AEP courses offered at the school. Furthermore, the questionnaires helped in collecting information about the validity of the IELTS test as per teachers and students, the effect of having to take the IELTS test on students, the effect of the test on teaching and learning in both courses, etc. Both questionnaires have been included as part of Appendices (Appendices B & C).

### **3.5.3 Observations:**

The researcher observed a total of 2 classes: 2 of the classes observed were AE classes and the other 2 were IELTS preparation classes. To maintain the validity and reliability of the observations, the researcher chose to observe the 2 teachers who taught a class of each course. This was in accordance with Cheng, Watanabe & Curtis's (2003) classroom observation comparative design as mentioned in Section 3.3.3 of this study. The observations helped in

not only comparing teaching methodology of the teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B), but their choice of materials as well.

The teachers were informed of the time and purpose of the observations and were requested to conduct their classes in the usual manner without any changes. The reason teachers were informed was to choose a similar objective or skill being taught to draw a fair comparison of the two courses and the teaching and learning taking place in each class. A simple observation form was used by the researcher (Appendix F) that comprised of essential elements that were to be observed, such as learning objective or skill being focused on, activities and materials used in class, level of test-preparation and teacher-student interaction. Information gathered during these observations was tabulated to analyze it qualitatively in detail. Each observation was conducted for the entire duration of one lesson per class, which is 45 minutes long. While observing the teaching and learning taking place in the classes, the researcher also recoded and observed any form of test-taking strategies and tips specific to the IELTS test that were offered to the students. Finally, any instances of group or pair work were also recorded.

#### **3.5.4 Interviews:**

As mentioned in section 3.3.4, structured interviews with the two teachers teaching both courses were conducted following the class observation with the sole purpose of confirming and further clarifying interpretations made during classroom observations. The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. These were read by the researcher several times in addition to notes made during class observations to fully understand the nature of these classes. Detailed notes were written to analyze all information gathered (Appendices E & F).



## **Chapter 4**

### **Results and Discussion**

This chapter provides details on how the qualitative and quantitative data was analyzed to check for any washback effects of the IELTS test on teaching and learning at the school. This will help enable the researcher to find answers to the research questions that this study is based on:

1. What is the washback effect of the IELTS Test on teachers preparing students to take the test at the end of Grade 12?
2. Which course, Academic English or IELTS, is able to achieve better results in developing students' overall English language skills? How does it manage to do so?

As mentioned previously in Chapter 3, answers to the following sub-questions will need to be sought as well to effectively answer the aforementioned three main research questions. The sub-questions also help in using the Alderson & Wall's (1993) Washback Hypothesis and Hughes' Washback Model (1993)

- a. Does the IELTS Test influence what teachers teach in both classes?
- b. Does the IELTS Test restrict what students learn?
- c. Does the IELTS Test influence the attitudes of teachers and students?

The researcher gathered all quantitative data first which was the test scores and questionnaires for teachers and students. As mentioned earlier, 6 teachers and 40 students, 20 in AEP and IELTS class each, were chosen for the study as participants. Qualitative data was collected in the form of class observations followed by interviews with the two teachers who taught both courses to find further evidence of washback, if any, due to IELTS testing. Findings from each research instrument are described in detail below.

#### 4.1 Comparison of Test Scores (AEP vs. IELTS):

In order to look for any possible washback effects of the IELTS test on students' language proficiency and to establish which course helped in language acquisition, test scores of students in the two groups were compared. Test scores of the same students were collected from the last two years, which were available at school. As mentioned previously, students in grade 10 took English as a second language and it was only from grade 11 that they could choose whether an AEP or an IELTS preparation course. To fully compare students' progress in English language over a period of two years, it was important to start by looking at their language level in grade 10. This was done by looking at their end of grade 10 English Exam marks. The table below gives the grades of the two groups of students for the EoY English Exam in grade 10. Although the AEP and IELTS course did not exist at that grade level, the students have been categorized in a similar manner for ease of comparison.

Group A (AEP Course)			Group B (IELTS Preparation Course)		
#	Student	Marks	#	Student	Marks
1	Student A	98	1	Student 1	72
2	Student B	87	2	Student 2	90
3	Student C	97	3	Student 3	89
4	Student D	89	4	Student 4	90
5	Student E	72	5	Student 5	87
6	Student F	87	6	Student 6	91
7	Student G	92	7	Student 7	86
8	Student H	70	8	Student 8	93
9	Student I	91	9	Student 9	90
10	Student J	96	10	Student 10	96
11	Student K	91	11	Student 11	88
12	Student L	95	12	Student 12	79
13	Student M	78	13	Student 13	81
14	Student N	95	14	Student 14	89
15	Student O	97	15	Student 15	78
16	Student P	93	16	Student 16	89

17	Student Q	91	17	Student 17	88
18	Student R	97	18	Student 18	93
19	Student S	93	19	Student 19	95
20	Student T	90	20	Student 20	87

*Table 3 – Grade 10 EoY Students' Marks- June 2013 (AY-2012-2013)*

From the above marks of the two groups of students studying in grade 10, it is evident that both groups comprise of students with good to excellent language skills. Group A's average of EoY marks is 89.95% while Group B's average is 87.55%. Thus, it can be concluded that both groups comprised of students of similar level with a difference of only 2.4% in the group averages before they were exposed to different English language courses.

The next set of data collected was for the same groups of students, but at the grade 11 and 12 levels. From grade 11, Group A students started taking the AE course while Group B students started the IELTS course. Both classes took 8 periods (45 minutes each) of English in grade 11 and 6 periods in grade 12 of the same course. Their scores for the EoY English Exam at the end of grade 11 were taken from the school database for AY 2013-2014. To compare their progress from grade 11 to grade 12, which is the current AY, a test similar to the IELTS Test was given details of which are mentioned in Chapter 3.5.1. (See Appendix C)

Group A (AEP Course)				Group B (IELTS Preparation Course)			
#	Student	G11-Marks	G12-Marks	#	Student	G11-Marks	G12-Marks
1	Student A	94	91	1	Student 1	63	67
2	Student B	95	93	2	Student 2	79	71
3	Student C	93	90	3	Student 3	79	70
4	Student D	93	94	4	Student 4	79	68
5	Student E	85	89	5	Student 5	77	80
6	Student F	90	95	6	Student 6	73	86
7	Student G	83	91	7	Student 7	79	73
8	Student H	79	83	8	Student 8	83	77
9	Student I	88	90	9	Student 9	84	80
10	Student J	92	90	10	Student 10	80	82
11	Student K	90	96	11	Student 11	76	72
12	Student L	91	85	12	Student 12	71	70
13	Student M	89	96	13	Student 13	75	69

14	Student N	93	93	14	Student 14	83	76
15	Student O	92	93	15	Student 15	85	82
16	Student P	94	94	16	Student 16	78	77
17	Student Q	82	88	17	Student 17	74	71
18	Student R	97	95	18	Student 18	78	77
19	Student S	93	94	19	Student 19	78	65
20	Student T	89	90	20	Student 20	61	56
	Average	90.1	91.5		Average	76.75	73.45

Table 4 – Grade 11 & 12 Students' Marks- June 2014 & February 2015

The above data was collected and analyzed to check for difference in scores of students in the two groups after being exposed to two different programs over a period of two years. The tests given in grade 11 and 12 are both based on IELTS, therefore making comparisons more valid. From the data available in Table 4, it can be clearly seen that the mean of Group A in grade 11 and 12 were 90.1% and 91.5% respectively. The mean for Group B was 76.75% in grade 11 and 73.45% in grade 12. Clearly students in Group A were doing better than Group B.

t-test Values		
Values	Group A	Group B
N	20	20
N-1	19	19
$\Sigma d$	28	-66
$\Sigma d^2$	316	868
$(\Sigma d)^2$	784	4356
t	1.64	-2.52
p	0.1	-0.025

Table 5 – t-test (related) Values

To further verify the above findings, a t-test (related) was used to compare the changes in the two groups' performances from grade 11 to grade 12. This was also to ensure that statistical calculations, as shown in Table 5, were used to check the null hypothesis made rather than simply making an 'educated guess'. The calculated t-value of Group A was 1.64 with  $p=0.1$ , which clearly shows positive progress in this group's students. On the other hand, the t-value for Group B comparing grade 11 scores to grade 12 scores is -2.52 for  $p= -0.025$ . This shows a very small, but negative probability in Group B's test scores. Hence, the null hypothesis can be rejected in both cases. While Group A shows a positive impact, Group B clearly shows a negative impact.

## **4.2 Findings from Questionnaires:**

The questionnaires were designed to elicit responses from teachers and students regarding the AE and IELTS course. While teacher questionnaires only included multiple-choice responses, student questionnaires encompassed open-ended questions as well to allow students flexibility in expressing their opinions about the two courses without any constraint. Of the 40 students and 6 teachers, all participated in this part of the research.

### **4.2.1 Student Questionnaires:**

The first part of the student questionnaire was quantitative data collected through the use of the Likert scale. The main objective of these questions was to find answers to the research questions: Is there any influence of the IELTS test on teaching and learning in both courses and whether the test influences student motivation?

It is evident from the responses collected that students in both courses considered their respective course important for university admission. They all acknowledged that they had to take the IELTS test, however only 30% students in the AE course (Group A) thought it was important while 75% of students in the IELTS course (Group B) were of the same opinion. Overall, a majority of students in both groups, 85% in Group A and 80% in Group B, did not feel that IELTS was an effective measure of a person's language level. This can be clearly seen in student responses for questions 5,7 and 8 on Questionnaire I and questions 7, 8 and 9 on Questionnaire II given below as Tables 6(a) and 6(b).

Student Questionnaire I- Group A (AEP)					
#	Questions	Strongly Disagree / No Influence / Never	Disagree/ Little Influence / Sometimes	Agree/ Some Influence / Often	Strongly Agree/ Great Influence/ Always
1	Are you taking the AE course to improve your language?	0	0	60	40
2	Do you think the AE course is lively and interesting?	5	25	70	0
3	In the AE course do you get opportunities for group/pair work in class?	0	0	45	55
4	In the AE course do you get sufficient opportunities to interact with your teacher and get feedback?	0	5	45	50
5	Do you need to take the IELTS Test at the end of the year?	0	0	0	100
6	Does your teacher often talk about you taking the IELTS Test?	0	50	50	0
7	Do you think the IELTS Test is important?	10	60	20	10
8	Do you think the IELTS Exam effectively evaluates a person's language level?	40	45	10	5
9	Do you think the AEP is a challenging course?	15	25	35	25
10	Does the AEP course help you in learning the English Language?	0	0	65	35
11	Does having to take the IELTS test at the end of the year add pressure to your learning?	0	20	70	10
12	Do you do any of the following as exam practice as part of your AE course?	0	0	0	0
a	Learn about the content and format of the test	0	100	0	0
b	Review and practice past papers	0	100	0	0
c	Discuss IELTS exam techniques	0	100	0	0
d	Receive feedback in the form of IELTS band scores	100	0	0	0
13	Do you think taking the AE course will benefit someone taking the IELTS test?	0	0	70	30

Table 6(a) – Student Responses as Percentages for Questionnaire I

Students in Group B clearly expressed that the reason why they were taking the IELTS score was to succeed in the test with a higher band score. 100% of the students either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. Of the 20 students in Group B, 60% agreed that the IELTS test was challenging to them while only 40% felt otherwise. They were divided on whether the IELTS course helped them learn English language with 45% agreeing and 55% disagreeing as can be seen in Table 6(b) below.

<b>Student Questionnaire II- Group B (IELTS)</b>					
<b>#</b>	<b>Questions</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree/ No Influence/ Never</b>	<b>Disagree / Little Influence / Sometimes</b>	<b>Agree/ Some Influence / Often</b>	<b>Strongly Agree/ Great Influence / Always</b>
1	Are you taking the IELTS course to gain entry into university?	0	0	75	25
2	Are you taking the IELTS course to help improve your band score?	0	0	25	75
3	Do you think the IELTS Test influences your teacher's teaching?	0	0	20	80
4	Do you think the IELTS Test influences your own language learning?	0	15	60	25
5	In the IELTS course do you get opportunities for group/pair work in class?	0	0	50	50
6	In the IELTS course do you get sufficient opportunities to interact with your teacher and get feedback?	0	0	60	40
7	Do you need to take the IELTS Test at the end of the year?	0	0	0	100
8	How important do you think is the IELTS Test?	0	25	35	40
9	Do you think the IELTS Test effectively evaluates a person's language level?	20	60	15	5
10	Do you think the IELTS Test is a challenging course?	15	25	50	10
11	Does the IELTS course help you in learning the English Language?	20	35	30	15

12	Does having to take the IELTS test at the end of the year add pressure to your learning?	0	0	20	80
13	Do you do any of the following as exam practice as part of your IELTS course?	0	0	0	0
a	Learn about the content and format of the test	0	0	0	100
b	Review and practice past papers	0	0	100	0
c	Discuss IELTS exam techniques	0	0	100	0
d	Receive feedback in the form of IELTS band scores	0	100	0	0
14	Do you think taking the IELTS course will benefit someone taking the IELTS test?	0	15	60	25

Table 6(b) – Student Responses as Percentages for Questionnaire II

Another important thing to note in both questionnaires is the influence of test practice in both courses. As is evident from student responses above, several test practice strategies such as practicing past test papers, learning about the exam format and content as well as exam techniques formed an integral part of the IELTS course. On the contrary, these techniques were not a fundamental part of the AE course. All students in Group A felt that the AE course was sufficient to succeed on the IELTS exam while only 85% of students in Group B felt the same about their course. A graphical representation of students' responses further illustrates the above-mentioned points:

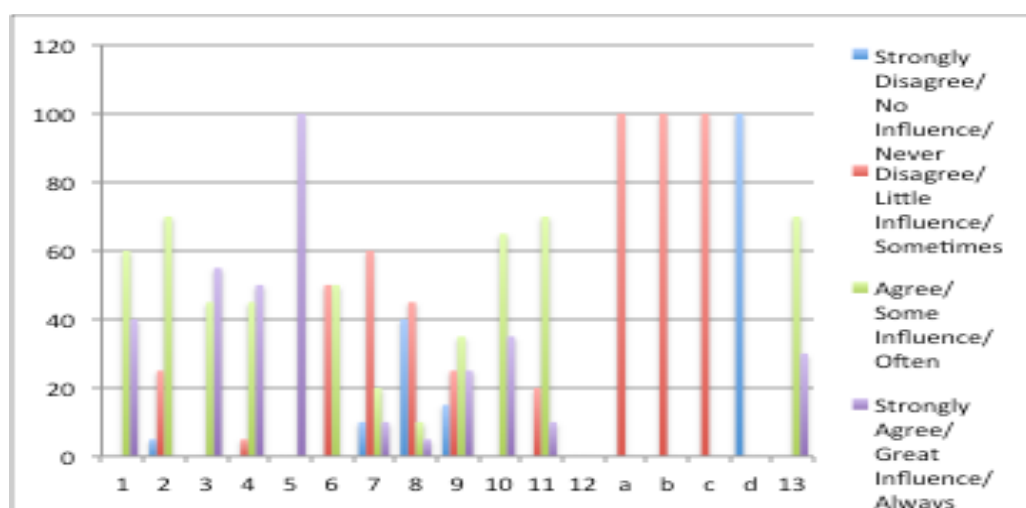


Figure 3(a) – Group A Responses



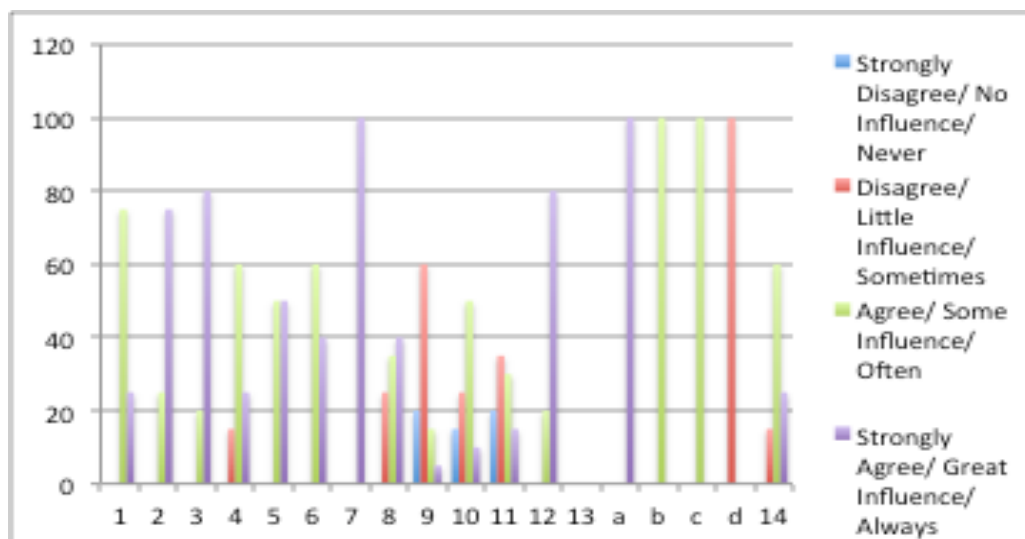


Figure 3(b) – Group B Responses

#### 4.2.2 Teacher Questionnaires:

Teacher questionnaires helped the researcher in understanding the effect of teaching for a test on teachers and their teaching methodology. Similar questionnaires were given to the 2 AE Teachers and the 4 IELTS Teachers. Both AE Teachers felt that the students were generally motivated in class. Teaching techniques that are consistent to any typical language lesson were being used by both teachers, such as vocabulary practice, some use of role play, dialogue, presentations, etc. When asked if having the AE students take the IELTS test causes any issues with their teaching philosophy, both teachers replied in the negative. This also demonstrates a positive attitude among teachers towards the IELTS test as can be seen in their response to Question 14 in Table 7(a) given below. Some of these questions were further explored when the researcher conducted interviews with these teachers.

Teacher Questionnaire I- Group A (AEP)					
#	Questions	Strongly Disagree/ No Influence/ Never	Disagree/ Little Influence/ Sometimes	Agree/ Some Influence/ Often	Strongly Agree/ Great Influence/ Always
1	Are you familiar with the IELTS test?	0	0	0	100

2	Are students generally motivated to learn in your class?	0	0	100	0
3	How do the following factors affect your teaching:	0	0	0	0
a	Syllabus	0	0	0	100
b	Textbooks	0	0	0	100
c	Examinations	0	50	50	0
d	Students' Needs	0	0	0	100
e	School Expectations	0	0	0	100
4	Has the IELTS Test influenced your teaching methodology?	100	0	0	0
5	Has the IELTS Test influenced your choice of teaching materials?	0	100	0	0
6	How often do you teach grammar?	0	100	0	0
7	How often do you explain vocabulary in class?	0	0	100	0
8	How often do you/your students read aloud?	50	50	0	0
9	How often do you use role play/ dialogue/ simulation in class?	0	50	50	0
10	How often do students do presentations in class?	0	0	100	0
11	Do you feel that there has been a drop in students' marks in the past 2 years?	100	0	0	0
12	Are students generally motivated with material covered in the AEP class?	0	0	100	0
13	Does language acquisition take place in the AEP class?	0	0	0	100
14	Are skills integrated in AE lessons?	0	0	0	100
15	Do you think IELTS is a valid measure of English language proficiency?	0	0	100	0

Table 7(a) – Teacher Responses as Percentages for Questionnaire I

It must be noted that all teachers, teaching AE as well as the IELTS Classes, were familiar with the IELTS test. This eliminates the pressure a teacher may have if he/she is unfamiliar with a test format and contents and struggles to teach his/her students. It is evident from teachers' responses to Questions 4, 14 and 16 in Table 7(b) given below, that while teachers felt that the IELTS Exam was a valid test, it undoubtedly affected their teaching methodology. This is in total contrast to what teachers teaching the AE course mentioned in their survey [Table 7(a)]. This could be due to the heavy emphasis on test preparation in the IELTS class, which was further clarified during interviews with some of these teachers.

Teacher Questionnaire II- Group B (IELTS)					
#	Questions	Strongly Disagree/ No Influence / Never	Disagree/ Little Influence/ Sometimes	Agree/ Some Influence / Often	Strongly Agree/ Great Influence / Always
1	Are you familiar with the IELTS test?	0	0	0	100
2	Are students generally motivated to learn in your class?	0	25	75	0
3	How do the following factors affect your teaching:	0	0	0	0
a	Syllabus	0	0	0	100
b	Textbooks	0	0	0	100
c	Examinations	0	0	0	100
d	Students' Needs	0	0	75	25
e	School Expectations	0	0	0	100
4	Has the IELTS Test influenced your teaching methodology?	0	0	0	100
5	Has the IELTS Test influenced your choice of teaching materials?	0	0	0	100
6	How often do you teach grammar?	0	0	100	0
7	How often do you explain vocabulary in class?	0	0	0	100
8	How often do you/your students read aloud?	75	25	0	0

9	How often do you use role play/dialogue/simulation in class?	25	75	0	0
10	How often do students do presentations in class?	0	100	0	0
11	Do you feel that there has been a drop in students' marks in the past 2 years?	0	0	75	25
12	Does language acquisition take place in the IELTS class?	0	50	50	0
13	Do you think IELTS is a valid measure of English language proficiency?	0	0	100	0
14	Is there some form of attrition in the IELTS Preparation Class?	0	0	100	0
15	Are skills integrated in IELTS lessons?	100	0	0	0
16	Is the focus of IELTS class more on exam strategies than language learning?	0	0	0	100

*Table 7(b) – Teacher Responses as Percentages for Questionnaire II*

Responses of teachers teaching the IELTS course for Questions 3 to 10 clearly indicate that there is a strong emphasis on test-taking strategies rather than language acquisition. Activities that help in developing language such as presentations, role-plays and reading aloud were rated as being used sometimes or not at all. It was also stated that language attrition to some extent was seen in students in Group B. Nonetheless, 75% of the teachers felt students were motivated in class. This could be attributed to the fact that students were interested in achieving a high band score in the IELTS test rather than the actual learning of the language. To verify this assumption, teachers were asked to elaborate on this point during the interview.

#### **4.3 Classroom Activities Observed During Observations:**

Observations of the 4 lessons to comprehend the nature of teaching and learning in each of the courses provided strong evidence that the IELTS Preparation classes were completely influenced by test prep. Both Teacher A and Teacher B used several test preparation practices in class such as timed activities, use of past papers to practice, focus on question types typical of the IELTS test, identifying key words in questions, deducing meaning of

vocabulary from context, and strategies to find the right answers quickly through skimming and scanning. On the other hand, the AE class comprised of discussions about the reading topic, checking for comprehension of the given text, analyzing and answering critical thinking questions, learning topic-related academic vocabulary, etc. as can be seen in Table 8 below.

Observation Criteria	Teacher A		Teacher B	
	AE Class	IELTS Class	AE Class	IELTS Class
1. Skills focused on	Reading	IELTS Reading	Reading	IELTS Reading
2. Interaction	Teacher & Student-centered	Teacher & Student-centered	Teacher & Student-centered	Teacher centered
3. Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyzing given text</li> <li>- Answering comprehension questions</li> <li>-Critical thinking</li> <li>-Asking questions</li> <li>-Related discussion</li> <li>-Vocabulary activities</li> <li>-Feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Skimming &amp; scanning for information</li> <li>- Identifying key words</li> <li>- Identifying statements as T/F/NG</li> <li>- Writing no more than given number of words</li> <li>-Deducing meaning from context</li> <li>-Feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Analyzing given text</li> <li>- Answering comprehension questions</li> <li>-Critical thinking</li> <li>-Asking questions</li> <li>-Related discussion</li> <li>-Vocabulary activities</li> <li>-Feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Skimming &amp; scanning for information</li> <li>- Identifying key words</li> <li>- Identifying statements as T/F/NG</li> <li>- Writing no more than given number of words</li> <li>-Deducing meaning from context</li> <li>-Feedback</li> </ul>
4. Test-Preparation	Occasional instructions related to IELTS test	Focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Test format</li> <li>- Test instructions</li> <li>- Timing</li> <li>-IELTS Reading practice from past paper</li> </ul>	Occasional instructions related to IELTS test	Focus on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Test format</li> <li>- Test instructions</li> <li>- Timing</li> <li>-IELTS Reading practice from past paper</li> </ul>
5. Materials Used	Authentic reading material	IELTS Reading – IELTS Test prep material	Authentic reading material	IELTS Reading – IELTS Test prep material

*Table 8 – Teacher A and B Observation Summary*

In both courses, Teachers A and B were found to be focusing on test-taking strategies. However, this was significantly more evident in the IELTS

preparation class. In the AE class teachers appeared less fixated with adhering to rules governing the test. For instance, instead of explicitly teaching vocabulary in the IELTS class, students were taught how to deduce meanings of new lexis from context. The meanings of vocabulary words were discussed after this. The approach was very different in the AE class where the teacher tried to elicit the meanings of new lexis failing which he helped students understand the words and use them in context.

Teachers A and B provided feedback after students completed the reading tasks. A more comprehensive discussion of answers and critical thinking responses was done in the AE classes. Feedback in IELTS classes was focused on correctness of the response and strategies to locate the correct answer. The main aim of feedback in this class was for students to evaluate their work. A more constructive feedback approach was found in the AE classes.

#### **4.4 Teachers' Evaluation of the Two Courses (Teacher Interviews):**

As a follow-up to the observations and questionnaires, teacher interviews were done with the two teachers teaching both AE and IELTS courses. The rationale behind interviewing these teachers was to get their perspective as they had first-hand experience of both courses. From both teachers' responses to interview question #3 (Appendices G & H), a positive attitude to the IELTS test is evident. Both teachers also went on to elaborate that students in Group B generally showed a more positive attitude towards the IELTS test as they had a clear goal to achieve. Teacher A believed that this was a washback effect of the test, as students did not exhibit any intrinsic motivation for language learning.

Teacher A's statement in response to question # 9 shows that a washback effect of the IELTS test is felt on the teacher's teaching methodology. Teacher A states, "*My teaching has undoubtedly become much more test-oriented*". Overall, the teacher has expressed a positive attitude despite a test-teaching attitude in the IELTS course due to the fact that the students exhibit motivation to score a higher band score. On enquiring about language acquisition and attrition due to a string focus on IELTS preparation, the

teacher felt that both were noticeable. Acquisition of language was observed in target language and structures related to the IELTS test, but attrition was also evident. Teacher A felt that some degree of language acquisition was possible while learning exam strategies. Albeit, the effects of washback were observed by the teacher in both teaching and learning.

Similarly, Teacher B expressed a positive attitude towards the test, but did not refute the claim that there was no washback effect. It was reported that the focus had clearly shifted from a communicative language approach to a more structured test practice in the IELTS Preparation course. In order to adequately prepare students for university, Teacher B recommends a remedial approach to provide them with grammar and other skills necessary. This statement is a clear indication of washback due to the influence of teaching for a test. The language level of Group A students was reported as generally strong while Group B comprised of a more mixed-ability set of students. A lot more variety in teaching techniques was employed with students in Group A compared to Group B due to the restrictive nature of test preparation done in the IELTS class.

#### **4.5 Summary of Findings:**

The research carried out as part of this study, following Alderson & Wall's (1993) Washback Hypothesis, has shown that students and teachers showed a positive attitude towards the IELTS Test. The main reason for this, as highlighted in interviews with teachers, was the clear goal set by the school of achieving a Band 6 at the IELTS Academic Module at the end of Grade 12. Students were driven by this decision and the fact that they had to improve their band scores. Teachers also felt that student enthusiasm in turn led to their motivation. This was further demonstrated through student and teacher responses on the questionnaires.

The t-test (related) was used to compare students' scores in the AEP and IELTS Courses. It showed a clear regression in students' scores in the IELTS class. Students from the AE course did much better on the same test given to them by approximately 8%. The p-values of each group were further indicative of this. P-value for Group A was 0.1 while it was -0.025 for Group B. This

shows that students studying the AE course demonstrated better language skills than those in the IELTS course.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the research questions were further divided into sub-questions that covered the three elements highlighted in Hughe's Washback Model (1993), vis-à-vis, participants, process and products. The findings indicate that the test influences both participants in this study quite positively as mentioned above. However, the process or teaching methodology takes a set back in terms of heavy emphasis on test-taking strategies rather than acquiring language skills. Washback on product was also noticed in choice of materials and content being taught in the IELTS Preparation Class during observations. There was clear evidence of influence of testing in this class compared to the AE class.

Observations of the IELTS class revealed a structural approach to skills practice and production related to the test in the IELTS class with reduced emphasis on the communicative aspect of language learning. On the other hand, a more communicative teaching approach was evident in the AE class. Due to the nature of the exam, teachers had a more formulaic approach to teaching the IELTS class. During interviews teachers' responses indicated their awareness that while the IELTS class helped students with some language acquisition, it also caused some degree of attrition. Teachers and students worked towards achieving the required band level, but were not prepared to deal with the language requirements of study at the university level. Students in the AE course were better equipped in this regard.

A key finding of this study was from student questionnaires that revealed that students were keen on taking the IELTS test and realized its importance for university admissions. All students unanimously agreed that they were taking the IELTS Preparation Course to seek university admission with 85% of them being aware that this course had an impact on their language acquisition. Another interesting student response was that 80% students felt that the IELTS test was not a true measure of a person's language. Consequently, while achieving test scores created motivation it also created a negative attitude towards the test. This could be attributed to the immense pressure students feel associated with the exam.



In conclusion, it can be stated that the IELTS test had a positive impact on teachers' attitude, but a negative impact on students' attitude, grades, language proficiency and teaching methodology adopted by teachers in these classes. These finding strengthen Yildirim's (2010) statement, "Preparing for exams may harm the natural development process of L2 learning and possibly L2 acquisition."

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

The main aim of this study was to investigate the impact of teaching an IELTS Preparation Course at a Technical High School in Abu Dhabi in comparison to an AE Course. In general, with the importance of high-stakes exams like IELTS growing, test preparation seems to have gained significance over acquiring a strong linguistic background that is essential for tertiary education. While the school in question is offering a dual language program choice for its senior students, a majority of the students are enrolled in the IELTS Preparation Course. The implications of this choice and limitations of this study are discussed in this chapter.

#### **5.1 Limitations of the Study:**

As with any research conducted, the current study also has some limitations. For example, this study has only investigated a small number of students at high school level taking either the AE or IELTS preparation Course. It does not take in to account language programs offered at other schools in the country nor IELTS Preparation Courses offered by other schools and institutions. Another limitation of this study is gender related. This study was conducted with 40 Emirati boys since the school is a boy's school. The findings of the study may vary if the participants were female. In addition to students, teachers were the only other participants of this study. To gain more valuable and comprehensive information, it would be more desirable to include other stakeholders, such as parents, curriculum developers, and university lecturers in this study.

The study focused largely on students' grades and implications of the IELTS test on teaching and learning in class. Its emphasis was more on the effect on the teaching methodology and attitudes. The addition of student interviews would have complemented data collected through student questionnaires to gain further insight about student perspectives related to the IELTS test as well as the AE course. These limitations serve the basis of further research in the field.

## **5.2 Recommendations to the School:**

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher would like to make the following recommendations to the school:

- i. A smooth transition should be made from the Grade 10 curriculum to the Grade 11 curriculum to bridge the gap generated due to the diverse nature of the two programs.
- ii. Grade 11 and 12 students should be offered a general ESL course instead of a pure IELTS Preparation Course. IELTS preparation should be embedded within the curriculum to target language acquisition as well as test preparation simultaneously.
- iii. Formative and summative tests given to students at school should include not only IELTS based question types, but also higher order thinking questions that involve analyzing, inferring and synthesizing of given information.
- iv. The curriculum should allow for integration of all skills while adopting a communicative language approach.
- v. Teachers should work on developing not only receptive skills in students, but productive as well.
- vi. Structured and progressive grammar objectives should be made part of the curriculum at all grade levels to ensure students learn the accurate use of structures for speaking as well as for writing. This will help in preparing students for not only for tertiary level studies, but also for real life situations.

## **5.3 Suggestions for Future Research:**

With the globalization of English language, exams such as IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, etc. have increased in demand. More and more studies are being conducted to study the impact of these exams on teaching and learning. While several studies in this regard have been done at the international level, not many have been done at the national level. This study is also limited to a single branch of a school in the UAE. Conducting a more in-depth nation-wide research on the topic will help in further enhancing the education structure in

the UAE. It is also important to include both boys and girls as participants in the study to avoid the research from being gender biased.

Due to time constraints, interviews were only conducted with teachers. Future research should look at conducting interviews with students as well to get a complete perspective from students as well. It would also be advisable to include other stakeholders in the study such as parents, curriculum developers, and school leadership to investigate washback effects on the learning product. Although a longitudinal study method was adopted to investigate students' marks over a period of two years, the same was not done with classroom observations. Once again due to time constraints, four classes and two teachers were observed. Doing a longitudinal study of classroom observations with a higher number of teachers would not only help in enriching the data, but also in contributing more insight into the research area.

#### **5.4 Conclusion:**

This research found a negative impact on the language level of students in the IELTS class thus answering research question #2. While teachers and students generally showed a positive attitude toward the IELTS test, a negative washback was found on the materials used in class. Teachers also expressed that their teaching methodology was impacted by the test, which was due to the test-driven course. Overall, it can be concluded that although a negative washback was seen on students' test scores and language acquisition, teachers' and students' attitudes towards the test were fairly positive.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Student Dissertation Receipt



#### STUDENT DISSERTATION RECEIPT

Programme	M.Ed.	Submission Date	29 <sup>th</sup> March 2015
Student ID	2013201034	Supervisor	Dr. Yasemin Yildiz
Submission purpose: Marking	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Final	<input type="checkbox"/>
No. of copies	3	Soft copy format	CD

#### DECLARATION

I confirm that I have read and understood the University Policy on Academic Honesty and that the work contained in the attached dissertation is my own work. Any assistance, of any type, has been acknowledged in my bibliography.

I also understand that the university may use plagiarism detection software on any submitted work, whether plagiarism is suspected or not.

I hereby consent/do not consent (delete as applicable) that my work is submitted into the plagiarism detection software to check the originality of my work.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature Date

Collected by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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#### FOR LIBRARY USE ONLY

#### STUDENT DISSERTATION RECEIPT

Student ID: \_\_\_\_\_ Date of submission: \_\_\_\_\_

Received by: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Official stamp: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B: Consent Form



**Title of the Study:** *The Washback Effects of Teaching Academic IELTS on Emirati Students' Language Proficiency At A Technical high School in Abu Dhabi*

**Researcher:** *Nazi Ahmed – English Lead Teacher, ATHS- Boy's Campus, Abu Dhabi, UAE*

Please tick the corresponding box.		
	Yes	No
1. I understand the purpose of the research study.		
2. I ascertain that my participation is voluntary, and that I have the right to withdraw at any time without providing reasons.		
3. I am aware that all records will be kept confidential.		
4. I agree to participate in the study.		
5. I agree to take part in interviews, questionnaires and performance tests.		
6. I approve of recording my interview answers for data records and private access.		
7. I understand that my responses may be used in future research, conferences and data centres.		

**I have read this consent form. Opportunity was given to me to ask questions. I, therefore, give my consent to take part in this study.**

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____

## Appendix C: Test

### ATHS-AUH-Boy's Campus IELTS Based Test

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Section I: Listening

[25 marks]

Part I - Listening I - Questions 1-10

#### Questions 1 – 4

(4 marks; 1 each)

Choose the correct letter A, B or C. Write your answers in the **ANSWER BOOKLET** provided.

1. What can visitors use free of charge?
  - A. pushchairs
  - B. child carriers
  - C. coats and bags
  
2. Which of the following can visitors buy at the shop?
  - A. coins
  - B. refreshments
  - C. postcards
  
3. When did the Grand Opening of the baths occur?
  - A. 1894
  - B. 1897
  - C. 1994
  
4. The Romans built on the site
  - A. after the Celts
  - B. before the Celts
  - C. at the same time as the Celts

**Questions 5 - 10****(6 marks; 1 each)**

Complete the summary below. Write **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER** for each answer.

The Great Bath is 5. \_\_\_\_\_ deep. Around the bath area are alcoves where there were 6. \_\_\_\_\_ and tables where bathers could relax. The water temperature of the Sacred Spring is 7. \_\_\_\_\_. The water is rich in 8. \_\_\_\_\_. In Roman times, the Sacred Spring was well known for its 9. \_\_\_\_\_. The Temple was constructed between 10. \_\_\_\_\_ AD.

**Part II- Listening II – Questions 11-20****Questions 11 - 15****(5 marks; 1 each)**

Complete the sentences below. Write **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS AND / OR A NUMBER** for each answer. Write your answers in the **ANSWER BOOKLET** provided.

11. What is John researching?

---

12. Apart from pollution, what would John like to see reduced?

---

13. According to John's tutor, what can cars sometimes act as?

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14. How much does John's tutor pay to drive into London?

---

15. In Singapore, what do car owners use to pay their road tax?

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**Questions 16 - 20****(10 marks; 2 each)**

Complete the sentences below. Write **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND / OR A NUMBER** for each answer. Write your answers in the **ANSWER BOOKLET** provided.

16. In Athens, cars can only enter the city center on \_\_\_\_\_.

17. 'BRT' stands for 'bus \_\_\_\_\_'.

18. In London, after a new road tax was introduced, moped and bicycle use increased by \_\_\_\_\_.

19. Both Japan and Holland provide \_\_\_\_\_ for those cycling to train stations.

20. In the USA, police officers on bikes make more \_\_\_\_\_ than those in patrol cars.

**Section II: Reading****[25 marks]**

*You should spend approximately 20 minutes on questions 21-34 based on the reading passage below. Write your answers in the **ANSWER BOOKLET** provided.*

**Is Technology Harming our Children's Health?**

Technology is moving at such a breakneck speed that it is enough to make your head spin. It can be difficult to keep up. However, with each new technological marvel come consequences. Much of the research conducted has shown the extent of the damage being done to our health by technology. It is a scary thought, and with teenagers and children being heavy consumers of these gadgets, they run the risk of being harmed the most.

The digital revolution in music has enabled people to download, store and listen to songs on a tiny, portable device called an MP3 player. The process is quick and afterwards you can have access to a library of thousands of

songs that can fit into your palm. But experts say that continuously listening to loud music on these small music players can permanently damage hair cells in the inner ear, resulting in hearing loss. For instance, old-fashioned headphones have been replaced with smaller ones that fit neatly into the ear, instead of over them, which intensifies the sound. In addition to that, digital music does not distort and keeps its crystal clear sound, even on loud settings, which encourages children to crank up the volume. Combine that with the fact that many children will spend hours listening to their iPods, and you have the recipe for hearing loss. Put into further perspective, most MP3 players can reach levels of 120 decibels, which is louder than a chainsaw or lawnmower. When you consider 85 decibels is the maximum safe decibel level set by hearing experts over the course of a working day, and that children will listen to music at higher decibel levels than that for long periods of time, hearing will invariably suffer.

Apart from hearing damage, there are other serious health risks. We are living in a wireless age. Calls can be made and received on mobiles from anywhere and the Internet can be accessed without the need for cables. The advantages are enormous, bringing ease and convenience to our lives. It is clear that mobiles and wireless technology are here to stay, but are we paying the price for new technology? Studies have shown that the rapid expansion in the use of wireless technology has brought with it a new form of radiation called 'electropollution'.

Compared to two generations ago, we are exposed to 100 million times more radiation. The human body consists of trillions of cells, which use faint electromagnetic signals to communicate with each other, so that the necessary biological and physiological changes can happen. It is a delicate, natural balance. But this balance is being upset by the constant exposure to electromagnetic radiation (EMR) that we face in our daily lives and it is playing havoc with our bodies. EMR can disrupt and alter the way in which our cells communicate and this can result in abnormal cell behavior. Some studies have shown that exposure to wireless technology can affect our enzyme production, immune systems, nervous system and even our moods and behavior. The most dangerous part of the phone is around the antenna. This area emits extremely potent radiation, which has been shown to cause genetic damage and an increase in the risk of cancer.

Research shows that teenagers and young adults are the largest group of

mobile phone users. According to a recent *Eurobarometer* survey, 70 percent of Europeans aged 12-13 own a mobile phone and the number of children five to nine years old owning mobiles has greatly increased over the years. Children are especially vulnerable because their brains and nervous systems are not as immune to attack as adults. Sir William Stewart, chairman of the National Radiological Protection Board, says there is mounting evidence to prove the harmful effects of wireless technologies and that families should monitor their children's use of them.

Besides the physical and biological damage, technology can also have serious mental implications for children. It can be the cause of severe, addictive behaviour. In one case, two children had to be admitted into a mental health clinic in Northern Spain because of their addiction to mobile phones. An average of six hours a day would be spent talking, texting and playing games on their phones. The children could not be separated from their phones and showed disturbed behaviour that was making them fail at school. They regularly deceived family members to obtain money to buy phone cards to fund their destructive habit. There have been other cases of phone addiction like this.

Technology may also be changing our brain patterns. Professor Greenfield, a top specialist in brain development, says that, thanks to technology, teenage minds are developing differently from those of previous generations. Her main concern is over computer games. She claims that living in a virtual world where actions are rewarded without needing to think about moral implications makes young people 'lose awareness of who they are'. She claims that technology brings a decline in linguistic creativity.

As technology keeps moving at a rapid pace and everyone longs for the new must-have gadget of the moment, we cannot easily recognize the long-term effects on our health. Unfortunately, it is the most vulnerable members of our society that will be affected.



**Questions 21-26****(12 marks; 2 each)**

Complete the table below. Write **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER** from the passage for each answer. Write your answers in the **ANSWER BOOKLET** provided.

How MP3 Players Can Threaten Health			
MP3 Player Features		Harmful Results	Effects
Problem A	(21) new _____ - _____ fit inside ears	creates intense sound	damage to hair cells and loss of (26) _____
Problem B	(22) _____ is distortion-free with clear quality sound	invites children to increase (23) _____	
Problem C	capable of producing sound at (24) _____ decibels	as loud as a (25) _____ or chainsaw – over recommended safe decibel level	

**Questions 27-31****(10 marks; 2 each)**

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the Reading Passage? In boxes **27-31** in your **ANSWER BOOKLET** write:

<b>TRUE</b>	<i>if the statement agrees with the information.</i>
<b>FALSE</b>	<i>if the statement contradicts the information.</i>
<b>NOT GIVEN</b>	<i>if there is no information on this.</i>

27. There are considerable benefits to our wireless world.
28. Wireless technology is a permanent part of our lives.
29. Exposure to EMR can lead to criminal behavior.
30. It is possible to become obsessed with technology.
31. Using technology always helps with academic success.

**Questions 32-34****(3 marks; 1 each)**

Answer the questions below using **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS** for each answer. Write your answers in the **ANSWER BOOKLET** provided.

**32.** According to Professor Greenfield, what kind of world do children live in when playing computer games?

---

---

**33.** According to Professor Greenfield, what may be lower in teenagers who play a lot of computer games?

---

---

**34.** What is overlooked when people long to have the latest technological equipment?

---

---

**Section III: Writing****[25 marks]**

Write about the following topic:

**In some countries young people have little leisure time and are under a lot of pressure to work hard on their studies.**

What do you think are the causes of this?

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

*Write at least **250 words**.*

## **Section IV: Speaking**

**[25 marks]**

### **PART I:**

1. Which school do you go to?
2. Where do you live?
3. Can you tell me something about the area you live in?
4. Can you tell me some famous landscapes or building near where you live?
5. What's the weather like in your country?
6. What's your favorite season of the year?
7. What do you like to do when it's hot?
8. What do you like most about your school?

### **PART II & III:**

#### **Part 2**

Take one minute to prepare a talk on the following subject. Take notes if you like and remember to include reasons and examples. You should then speak between one to two minutes.

Describe a memorable meal that you had at a restaurant.

You should say:

- What the occasion was
- Who was at the meal
- What you ate

And explain why the meal was so enjoyable.

#### **Part 3**

We have been talking about food and I would like to ask you one or two more general questions related to this.

- What do you think a healthy diet consists of?
- Which do people in your country prefer: traditional food or fast food such as hamburgers or pizzas?
- Do you think children should be taught about healthy diets and cooking at school? Why (not)?
- At what age do you think children should be taught to cook?
- Should rich countries help poor countries with more than just food?

## Appendix D(i): Student Questionnaire

### Student Questionnaire - I AEP Course

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect information about the AE and IELTS Preparation Courses offered at the school. Your response to this questionnaire will be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the study.

#### Part I:

Kindly rate the questions from 1 to 4 based on the following scale:

1-No influence at all/Strongly Disagree/Never

2- Little Influence /Disagree/ Sometimes

3 – Some Influence /Agree /Often

4 – Great Influence/Strongly Agree/Always

#	Questions	1	2	3	4
1	Are you taking the AE course to improve language skills?				
2	Do you think the AE course is lively and interesting?				
3	In the AE course do you get opportunities for group/pair work in class?				
4	In the AE course do you get sufficient opportunities to interact with your teacher and get feedback?				
5	Do you need to take the IELTS Test at the end of the year?				
6	Does your teacher often talk about you taking the IELTS Test?				
7	Do you think the IELTS Test is important?				
8	Do you think the IELTS Exam effectively evaluates a person's language level?				
9	Do you think the AEP is a challenging course?				
10	Does the AEP course help you in learning the English Language?				
11	Does having to take the IELTS test at the end of the year add pressure to your learning?				
12	Do you do any of the following as exam practice as part of your AE course?  a. Learn about the content and format of the test b. Review and practice past papers c. Discuss IELTS exam techniques d. Receive feedback in the form of IELTS band scores				
13	Do you think taking the AE course will benefit someone taking the IELTS test?				

**Part II:**

Kindly provide answers in detail.

14. What have you learned in the AE course?

15. Any other information:

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for participating.

## Appendix D(ii): Student Questionnaire

### Student Questionnaire - II IELTS Preparation Course

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect information about the AE and IELTS Preparation Courses offered at the school. Your response to this questionnaire will be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the study.

#### Part I:

Kindly rate the questions from 1 to 4 based on the following scale:

1-No influence at all/Strongly Disagree/Never

2- Little Influence /Disagree/ Sometimes

3 – Some Influence /Agree /Often

4 – Great Influence/Strongly Agree/Always

#	Questions	1	2	3	4
1	Are you taking the IELTS course to gain entry into university?				
2	Are you taking the IELTS course to help improve your band score?				
3	Do you think the IELTS Test influences your teacher's teaching?				
4	Do you think the IELTS Test influences your own language learning?				
5	In the IELTS course do you get opportunities for group/pair work in class?				
6	In the IELTS course do you get sufficient opportunities to interact with your teacher and get feedback?				
7	Do you need to take the IELTS Test at the end of the year?				
8	How important do you think is the IELTS Test?				
9	Do you think the IELTS Test effectively evaluates a person's language level?				
10	Do you think the IELTS Test is a challenging course?				
11	Does the IELTS course help you in learning the English Language?				
12	Does having to take the IELTS test at the end of the year add pressure to your learning?				
13	Do you do any of the following as exam practice as part of your IELTS course?  a. Learn about the content and format of the test b. Review and practice past papers c. Discuss IELTS exam techniques d. Receive feedback in the form of IELTS band scores				
14	Do you think taking the IELTS course will benefit someone taking the IELTS test?				

**Part II:**

Kindly provide answers in detail.

15. What have you learned in the IELTS course?

16. Any other information:

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for participating.

## Appendix E(i): Teacher Questionnaire

### Teacher Questionnaire - I AEP Course

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect information about the AE and IELTS Preparation Courses offered at the school. Your response to this questionnaire will be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the study. Kindly rate the questions from 1 to 4 based on the following scale:

1-No influence at all/Strongly Disagree/Never/Not at all

2- Little Influence /Disagree/ Sometimes/Somewhat Familiar

3 – Some Influence /Agree /Often/Mostly Familiar

4 – Great Influence/Strongly Agree/Always/Completely Familiar

#	Questions	1	2	3	4
1	How familiar are you with the IELTS test?				
2	Are students generally motivated to learn in your class?				
3	How do the following factors affect your teaching:				
	a. Syllabus				
	b. Textbooks				
	c. Examinations				
	d. Students' Needs				
	e. School Expectations				
4	Has the IELTS Test influenced your teaching methodology?				
5	Has the IELTS Test influenced your choice of teaching materials?				
6	How often do you teach grammar?				
7	How often do you explain vocabulary in class?				
8	How often do you/your students read aloud?				
9	How often do you use role play/dialogue/simulation in class?				
10	How often do students do presentations in class?				
11	Do you feel that there has been a drop in students' marks in the past 2 years?				
12	Are students generally motivated with material covered in the AEP class?				
13	Does language acquisition take place in the AEP class?				
14	Are skills integrated in AE lessons?				
15	Do you think IELTS is a valid measure of English language proficiency?				

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for participating.



## Appendix E(ii): Teacher Questionnaire

### Teacher Questionnaire - II IELTS Course

The purpose of this questionnaire is to collect information about the AE and IELTS Preparation Courses offered at the school. Your response to this questionnaire will be kept confidential and used only for the purpose of the study. Kindly rate the questions from 1 to 4 based on the following scale:

- 1-No influence at all/Strongly Disagree/Never/Not at all
- 2- Little Influence /Disagree/ Sometimes/Somewhat Familiar
- 3 – Some Influence /Agree /Often/Mostly Familiar
- 4 – Great Influence/Strongly Agree/Always/Completely Familiar

#	Questions	1	2	3	4
1	How familiar are you with the IELTS test?				
2	Are students generally motivated to learn in your class?				
3	How do the following factors affect your teaching:				
	a. Syllabus				
	b. Textbooks				
	c. Examinations				
	d. Students' Needs				
	e. School Expectations				
4	Has the IELTS Test influenced your teaching methodology?				
5	Has the IELTS Test influenced your choice of teaching materials?				
6	How often do you teach grammar?				
7	How often do you explain vocabulary in class?				
8	How often do you/your students read aloud?				
9	How often do you use role play/dialogue/simulation in class?				
10	How often do students do presentations in class?				
11	Do you feel that there has been a drop in students' marks in the past 2 years?				
12	Does language acquisition take place in the IELTS class?				
13	Do you think IELTS is a valid measure of English language proficiency?				
14	Is there some form of attrition in the IELTS Preparation Class?				
15	Are skills integrated in IELTS lessons?				
16	Is the focus of IELTS class more on exam strategies than language learning?				

This is the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for participating.

## Appendix F: Classroom Observation Tool

Observation Criteria	Teacher .....	
	AE Class	IELTS Class
1. Skills focused on		
2. Interaction		
3. Activities		
4. Test- Preparation		
5. Materials Used		
6. Other		

## **Appendix G: Interview – Teacher A**

1. Can you describe the English course offered to the AE class?

T – It has an academic focus i.e. the source material and the tasks are exclusively in an academic context. The course objective is for the students to acquire wider strategies in the 4 skills and to apply a higher level of reflective and critical thinking. Running parallel to this is the teaching and acquisition of specific skills required for success in the IELTS exam.

2. What is an IELTS Preparation Course?

T- The course has a strong focus on the language and specific techniques required to attain a good IELTS band score. Students learn to recognize different question types and which skills to apply to them. The application of the learned techniques will allow a weaker student to attain a higher score than perhaps his language level would suggest.

3. What has your experience been as a teacher teaching IELTS?

T- On the whole it has been positive. The students seem to appreciate the structured approach and ample opportunity to apply the skills and techniques to practice tasks. In addition, the constant attainment of marks appeals to their motivations.

4. How is it different from teaching Academic English?

T- The students have a much shorter-term goal (the attainment of an IELTS band score of 5.5+) and so they relate better to the course content of learning the skills and language necessary to achieve it. The AE students have actually voiced their opinion that the skills they are learning are not immediately applicable, and that the school exams reflect the IELTS part of the course rather than the AE. Those skills will be used 2 years from now.

5. Are both groups of students equally motivated to learn English?

T- Yes, but as stated above the core Grade 11 students have the goal of attaining a good band score in IELTS and the AE students have a longer-term view. However, a number of the AE students are already satisfied with their level of English, or have an artificially high perception of their abilities, and consider it sufficient for when in further education.

6. What is the reason for the above?

T- The same as stated above.

7. Is the IELTS course overwhelming for the students?

T- Generally no. Over the two years they learn enough skills and strategies to face the exam with confidence. Being broken down into 4 clear skills, it is also clear for each student where their strengths and weaknesses lie and thus much more simple to take action where necessary. It can be overwhelming for weaker students as the course book is aimed at Intermediate level, whereas many of them still find themselves at an Elementary level especially in reading and writing.

8. Is the AE course overwhelming for the student?

T – I don't think it is overwhelming, but having asked the students their feelings on the course I understand that they struggle to engage with the material.

9. How does the IELTS Course affect your teaching methodology?

T- My teaching has undoubtedly become much more test-oriented. The students are motivated by marks and the school has a strong focus on grades.

10. Is language acquisition evident in the IELTS class?

T- Yes. It is clearly more evident in productive rather than receptive tasks, through the application of target language and structures. However, there is an improvement in reading and listening scores, and while much of this is through improved technique, a higher level of language is also responsible.

11. Does attrition take place in the IELTS class, as the focus is more on exam strategies than on language acquisition?

T- Yes, to a reasonable extent. However, the language acquisition often comes via the exam strategies. They are not mutually exclusive.

12. Do you think the IELTS Preparation Course is useful for learning English?

T- Yes, although much more syllabus time could be dedicated to teaching grammar. It is assumed that many of the structures and tenses are already known, but this is often not the case.

13. Would the AE course be useful in learning English?

T- It would be useful for students wishing to attend higher education. It would have significantly less use in non-academic contexts.

14. For students planning on going to university, which course will be more beneficial? Why?

T- The AE course will have given them the skills required to get the most out of the higher education experience. Their writing will have a greater academic focus (from the planning/research stage through to the final draft), their reading will be considerably more critical, their listening will enable them to pick up on nuance and subtleties and their speaking skills will allow them to express ideas in greater detail and participate in group work and discussions.

15. What aspects of teaching and learning are influenced by IELTS in your IELTS preparation class?

T- There is certainly a washback effect in the classroom. The students are motivated by grades from assessments (classwork, homework, SBQ, SWQ and EOT exams) which are almost exclusively IELTS based. However, there is clear evidence of language acquisition. While this is in an academic context, much of the language can be transferred into a less formal context.

16. Kindly comment on the proficiency of your students in the four language skills in both courses.

AE- Students in this class have high English language proficiency and cope with the AE course quite well. The results of this class have been very good.

IELTS- Students in the IELTS class are a different story. First, they are a mixed batch, with some high achievers and some average to low level students. However, they all try hard because they would like to score a good band on the IELTS exam.

17. What factors influence your choice of teaching and learning activities?

T- Mainly it is influenced by the curriculum outlined for each course. Then, the level and needs of the students.

18. Please comment on your students' learning autonomy.

T- Not very good, especially in the IELTS Course. They need a lot of support and guidance from the teacher.

## **Appendix H: Interview – Teacher B**

1. Can you describe the English course offered to the AE class?

T – The program reflects something of a hybrid approach between Academic English and the IELTS skills required for graduation requirements. The content of the course is primarily focused on academic content and the foundational academic skills necessary to for operating at a first year university level. Material is drawn from academic sources and the language skills lend themselves to essay writing requirements, group discussion/negotiation skills, and listening comprehension in group and lecture scenarios. While the approach is academic in focus there is an effort to relate the material to IELTS and create a skills bridge.

2. What is an IELTS Preparation Course?

T- To me that would suggest a program structure that is solely focused on developing the skills needed for success in the IELTS test. Having said that, I don't think a good IELTS prep courses is primarily focused on teaching a test or learning test strategies. Only modest gains can be achieved with test strategy or formulaic approaches. A good IELTS prep course focuses on developing functional language skills within the framework of the test requirements.

3.What has your experience been as a teacher teaching IELTS?

T- I enjoy teaching IELTS skills to students. I find for the most part that having a clear goal orientated focus gives the students some clarity and extra motivation about why they are doing what they are doing. It increases engagement. On the other hand the focus on skills practice leads to students not connecting with the material often. They don't see the relevance of specific materials topics and have a hard time connecting the underlying skills practice to language development.

As a teacher, I find that teaching the language skills approach and achieving genuine language acquisition gains time. It is often is sacrificed to the smaller, but short-term gains available from teaching strategies and the testing skills.

4. How is it different from teaching Academic English?

T- The IELTS approach has a much more constrained and structural methodology. Genuine language skills are developed, but the contexts are limited. With the academic approach there is significantly more opportunity to explore and practice authentic communicative situations, contexts, and scenarios. Specific academic requirements, such as referencing sources, have less relevance to language acquisition, but the increased focus on interpersonal communication situations increases authenticity.

5. Are both groups of students equally motivated to learn English?

T- Well, I would have to frame this response within the wider context of our school requirements. I actually find that the students are more motivated with the IELTS material. However this is not anything intrinsic to the approach or material.

6. What is the reason for the above?

T- They can simply relate more immediately and directly to the clear goal and requirement demanded of them by the IELTS test and our graduation

requirements. The academic approach is a little more of an abstraction for them and for the highly motivated students even serves as a “distraction” from their goal of mastering the IELTS exam.

7. Is the IELTS course overwhelming for the students?

T- That would significantly depend on the grounding in basic language skills that the students has. The IELTS framework does not put off high ability students. They gain a structure to apply their skills to and see results and improvements.

Weaker students’ are totally overwhelmed. They do not have the language foundation to cope with the requirements, may become discouraged, and need to resort to strategies to see modest gains. Time pressure and the necessity of developing test skills often means that language acquisition is sacrificed.

8. Is the AE course overwhelming for the student?

T – All in all, no. They are a higher level and ability. Some of the language, grammar, and university level academic writing content is beyond what they require at this level, causing unnecessary complexity. However in my experience they are fully capable of dealing with most of the material. Overwhelming no... is the relevance called into question sometimes... yes.

9. How does the IELTS Course affect your teaching methodology?

T- The biggest issue with teaching IELTS for me is that I find it necessary to focus so heavily on reading and writing. I find myself leaning away from language acquisition to provide results oriented benefit to students who lack the foundational skills required for success and the time to develop them. Genuine communicative approaches are sacrificed. Variety and authenticity suffer. My methodology focuses heavily on developing reading skills, which are underdeveloped, and on providing a framework and organizational structure to writing to harness the language level of the student to maximum effect. This means the classroom methodology moves away from improving foundational language skills and “making the best” of the skills students have.

10. Is language acquisition evident in the IELTS class?

T- Yes, it certainly is. But again, this is dependent on the level of the student. Motivated students with a firm language foundation do make language gains. Weaker students simply struggle to come to grips with the test.

11. Does attrition take place in the IELTS class, as the focus is more on exam strategies than on language acquisition?

T- That would certainly seem to be the case in the context of our program. I don’t believe that it is intrinsic to IELTS teaching itself. As I pointed out in the beginning, ideally it would be a much longer-term language acquisition approach. However, this is not reality of our, or even most IELTS preparation programs. Students come to the program with whatever language skills they have, and it then becomes a rush to achieve a result in IELTS using whatever methodology will best maximize the student existing language ability within the IELTS context.

12. Do you think the IELTS Preparation Course is useful for learning English?

T- I do, but as I said in the last question, it requires a much longer timeframe and an acquisition approach for real language development. Test practice

would form a small part overall as the skills are developed using more communicative approaches.

13. Would the AE course be useful in learning English?

T- I think it would. It could be improved to reduce the academic level and eliminate some of the less relevant university specific content. But overall, the approach has more flexibility, variety, and authenticity.

14. For students planning on going to university, which course will be more beneficial? Why?

T- Well... I'm going to have to make a distinction again there... Which approach will be beneficial in terms of language acquisition, or which is immediately necessary to achieve the required outcomes in terms of graduation and gaining entrance to a university program. I have no doubt that the AE approach would be more beneficial in terms of raising real language acquisition and provide a broader base of language knowledge and experience for university life. That holds true for our higher-level students now. However, for many if not most of our students, I find that the IELTS approach is what is required to take their existing language skills foundation and give them the structure to use language in the academic context. I find that the IELTS approach to reading skills is particularly necessary to attempt to quickly make comprehension gains in week reading.

15. What aspects of teaching and learning are influenced by IELTS in your IELTS preparation class?

T- Well, there is significant move away from more group based, communicative, negotiation based, skills and activities. The context/variety of language use and authenticity suffer. Teaching and tasks become more structured with more rigidly defined results. For example, in writing, teaching focuses heavily of providing a framework and scaffold structure for the students to work within. Specific grammar becomes more important to present ideas in a particular way. I say this because in the context of our students, I am talking about a "remedial" approach to preparing them for university when their foundational language skills are lacking. IELTS does provide an approach that is specific to this task. It is structured, defined, and provides a context to improve on basic reading comprehension, written language, and grammar for specific tasks.

16. Kindly comment on the proficiency of your students in the four language skills in both courses.

AE- Generally strong in speaking and writing. Grammar remains a weakness, but in general does not intrude too much of expression. Listening is generally strong. However, comprehension issues arise in the context of increasing complexity in material/discussions. Reading is good, but comprehension breaks down quickly as understanding requires more abstraction.

IELTS- Reading is generally very poor. Comprehension is limited beyond basic information gathering. Listening follows the same dynamic. Speaking is often good at the communicative level, but grammar and vocabulary limitations quickly arise in more complex discussions. Writing is very mixed, ranging from extremely weak, to quite expressive with grammar issues.

17. What factors influence your choice of teaching and learning activities?



T- Student willingness to engage is a big consideration. In the AE program I employ a lot more variety and group/interactive approaches. The capacity and willingness of students to engage productively is higher, allowing less focus on IELTS outcomes and more on language use and acquisition. The opposite is true of the IELTS program. Tasks are more structured towards IELTS outcomes, and communicative approaches are employed less as students simply do not participate as productively.

18. Please comment on your students' learning autonomy.

T- In general, low. That is true of both courses, with the obvious exception of particularly motivated students. The AE program students often rely on their superior language foundation to achieve results. This may be largely due to the heavy requirements placed on them by other subjects. They feel they can "get by" in English more easily on their ability than other subjects. In the IELTS

In the IELTS program, this is significantly worse. Outside of classroom participation and application they do not display any willingness to develop language ability. The few exceptions, who come to me to assist them with self study strategies, illustrate the general trend all too clearly.