



IELTS LISTENING TEST: EVALUATING GRADE 11 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' LISTENING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Non-native speakers of English who wish to take advantage of the rising opportunities in the global economy must be fluent in the language. IELTS is an advanced English language test that many English-speaking countries require. However, students must have excellent English listening skills to get an acceptable band score. Therefore, this research was made to help high school students prepare for the IELTS. It evaluated the listening skills of Grade 11 students at the Philippine Engineering and Agro-Industrial College, Inc. The program ran a mock IELTS exam to gauge the participant's level of English listening comprehension. The trial lasted two months to finish. The results showed that most students got band scores of 5 and 6, a satisfactory band score. In contrast, a small number of the participants achieved a band score of 7, indicative of very good; a very few got 8, which indicates a perfect band score, while some did not pass the test and got a band score of 4 and 3. The students' band scores reflected how difficult it was for them to pass the IELTS. Second-language learners, especially after listening to native English speakers, found the test novel and challenging to understand. It was interesting to see that only a subset of the students had strong listening skills in English. This study recommends that English as a Second Language teachers should regularly assess their students' listening skills by administering standardized examinations like the IELTS.

Introduction

Learning a language requires a certain level of proficiency. Listening has a critical role in language acquisition and learning. It is one of the most essential language skills that learners need to master at an early age. Failure to develop listening skills can delay a child's language development. In schools, listening plays a significant role in communication and comprehension. Also, to have good competency in the target language, learners must have proficiency in their listening. In addition, students who plan to go abroad to study must be able to learn natural English to have successful communication, which requires good listening skills. Since listening is the most dominant language skill, everyone uses it daily. If students aim to go to English-speaking countries, they will likely face language barriers that may impede their ability to communicate naturally with native speakers.

Young (1997) explained that learning to listen is complex because listeners must utilize their knowledge of the second language and prior knowledge to comprehend the oral input. Listening provides the conditions for other language skills to grow and develop. It is an active process through which humans form meaning when they listen and link the information with existing knowledge (Hassan, 2000; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Namaziandost, Sabzevari, & Hashemifardnia, 2018). Furthermore, evaluating learners' listening proficiency can be difficult because of the scarcity of standardized tests for listening (Wang, 2017). Osada (2004) expressed that listening needed to receive more acceptance but was considered a passive skill that would develop without support. Listening is less valuable than speaking, reading, and writing.

In light of this prevalent issue, one of the available language tests utilized today among colleges and universities abroad is the In-

International English Language Testing System, or IELTS. Many language test developers have noted that IELTS provides a very accurate assessment of the listening skills of English language learners (IELTS, 2015). This test allures a few researchers to conduct language studies using this language program. However, Nguyen (2007) infers that there are a small number of studies on the IELTS listening test program in schools, and there is more to know about its impact on the listening skills of L2 learners.

The research gaps in Nguyen's (2007) study motivated the researcher to study the listening skills of high school students in the Philippines using the IELTS listening program. Thus, this study aimed to determine the grade 11 students' listening skills in the English language by utilizing the IELTS listening test to assess their listening proficiency level or band. This study intends to provide empirical data and shed new insight into using IELTS among high school students as a language testing tool. It will also increase the students' readiness for a naturally spoken English environment when they work or study abroad.

Related literature

Many scholars have studied listening and its various applications to language development. Some literature even showed interesting discussions on the complex nature and function of listening in language acquisition, learning, and communication.

The Complex Nature of Listening

Asemoto (2015) and Rost (2002, cited by Gilakjani et al., 2016) discovered that listening as a language skill entails recognizing, analyzing, and interpreting what listeners hear and what they already know. Since listening requires rapid processing with little to no opportunity to retrieve the verbal language again, it is challenging to master. Listening as a cerebral activity requires heavy cognitive work on the listener's behalf, such as deciphering the meaning of the words and activating prior information. In language acquisition, the complex nature of listening was considered a collection of mechanisms for generating meaning and understanding spoken language. Similarly, Steinberg (2007) stated that listening requires the listener to go through the four stages of listening, such as sensing and listening attentively, understanding and interpreting, remembering, and responding. However, other scholars argued that the listening process was more than just evaluating learners' thinking and how they internally inferred meaning. He also asserted that listeners were active, not passive, processors.

Furthermore, Jinhong (2011) believed that listening was not a linear process but a creative activity in which listeners construct and assign meanings based on the provided information or their experience and background knowledge. Jinhong's (2011) findings emphasized that in the process of listening, the listener must go through six phases to fully absorb the ideas coming from the speaker: hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, assessing, and, in some cases, responding. Hearing is the first phase, during which the listeners attempt to hear the external sound using their auditory organs. Then, the listeners try to understand and interpret the sounds they hear. The remembering phase occurs when the listeners recall what the speaker says. The following phase is interpretation, during which the listeners think about the message and provide the speaker with a response. Evaluation is the final step involving critical thinking (Saraswaty, 2018).

International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a testing program that assesses the language ability of candidates aiming for education or working in an English-speaking country (IELTS 10, 2015). The use of the IELTS test has grown in recent years as the number of students willing to study in English-speaking countries and the number of universities requiring the IELTS as a prerequisite for students (Moore & Morton, 1999). Al-Malki (2014) pointed out that the IELTS test can help evaluate L2 learners' comprehension of course material. This test can give relevant information on the learners' ability to cope with native speakers of English.

Thorpe, Snell, and Davey-Evans (2017) discovered that the IELTS test had a solid yet positive impact on learners' IELTS preparation. This finding was consistent with other scholars who studied and experimented with the IELTS program. IELTS showed promising results in terms of its potential as a language test program that could precisely assess the language competencies of its takers (Pearson, 2020; Hu & Trenkic, 2019; Allen, 2016). According to the IELTS Handbook (2007), the IELTS test comprises one type of listening test in the general training and academic modules. These modules are authentic as they depict real-life communication experiences that learners may encounter in English-speaking countries (Wang, 2017).

The listening component of the IELTS includes four sections. The first two sections tackle topics concerning societal needs. The first section is a dialogue between two people, and the second is a monologue. The other two sections, related to educational conditions, assess participants' ability to comprehend speech expressed in didactic contexts. The third section consists of a dialogue between more than four people, while the fourth consists of a monologue.

Along with the listening sections, the IELTS has various tasks to test students' understanding of the material in the 30 minutes allotted. These tasks listed by IELTS 10 (2015) are multiple-choice items, short-answer questions, sentence completion, note/summary/flow chart/table completion items, labelling a diagram, plan, or map, and classifying and matching items. The IELTS

program uses a different scoring system called "band levels." The test takers' scores are converted and scaled to nine (9) band levels.

Significance of Listening Skills

According to Osada (2004), listening received little attention from teachers and students, who needed to know its significance. Most teachers appeared to assess rather than teach listening in classrooms. Nation and Newton (2009) argued that listening was a powerful language acquisition resource. Moreover, in language development, receptive language skills are learned first before secondary language abilities: listening skills come before speaking skills, and aural/oral language skills come before graphic/written language skills. Given its significance, many learners regard listening as one of the most complex skills in English. According to Long (2009), listening is the most difficult communicative skill learners must develop. Devine (1982) asserted that listening was the only system for absorbing new ideas and information. In addition, Wolvin and Coakley (1988) found that most learners used listening often, taking up more time than other verbal interactions, both within and outside the classroom. Hence, listening was the most frequently employed language ability in school (Vogely, 1995).

Ferris and Tagg (1996) and Ferris (1998) asserted that listening comprehension was crucial for success in academic contexts for both educators and students. Saraswaty (2018) argued that listening is an important skill needed at all stages of language development. According to several studies, good listening abilities play a more vital role in academic performance than reading skills (Coakley et al., 1997, cited by Saraswaty, 2018). However, given that listening is the principal method of instruction at all levels of school, listening is more significant in students' lives because it is the most commonly used language skill in their everyday lives. Morley (2001) and Rost (2001) discovered that listening was one of the most critical skills needed for language learning, and listening develops faster than the other three language skills, implying that it can help the other language skills emerge (Oxford, 1990).

Synthesis of the Related Literature

Listening is a complex language skill that involves recognizing, analyzing, and interpreting auditory input while relying on prior knowledge and information-processing abilities (Asemoto, 2015; Rost, 2002; Gilakjani et al., 2016). It requires active listening engagement and involves sensing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, assessing, and responding (Steinberg, 2007; Jinhong, 2011). Listening is not a passive process but a creative activity where listeners construct meaning based on provided information and their experiences (Jinhong, 2011).

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a widely used language testing program that assesses the language proficiency of individuals planning to study or work in English-speaking countries (IELTS 10, 2015). It has gained popularity due to its accuracy in evaluating language skills and relevance to academic and professional contexts (Al-Malki, 2014; Thorpe et al., 2017). The listening component of the IELTS test consists of four sections that assess participants' ability to comprehend real-life communication scenarios and educational contexts (IELTS 10, 2015).

Listening skill is essential in language development and academic success (Osada, 2004; Ferris & Tagg, 1996). They are considered foundational skills that precede speaking and writing abilities (Nation & Newton, 2009). Good listening abilities are essential for effective communication and comprehension inside and outside the classroom (Devine, 1982; Wolvin & Coakley, 1988). Listening comprehension is vital in academic contexts and has significantly impacted academic performance more than reading skills (Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Coakley et al., 1997). Moreover, listening skills facilitate the development of other language skills (Morley, 2001; Rost, 2001).

Despite the significance of listening skills, it has been observed that they often receive less attention compared to other language skills in educational settings (Osada, 2004). This highlights the need for further research and understanding of the impact of language testing programs, such as IELTS, on the development of listening skills among learners (Nguyen, 2007). Investigating the listening skills of high school students in the Philippines using the IELTS listening test can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of this testing tool and enhance students' readiness for English-speaking environments in future academic and professional endeavors.

Methodology

This study employed an experimental design to collect data on its participants to evaluate the IELTS listening scores of Grades 11 high school students. To determine the listening proficiency levels of the students, the study postulated the independent variables, which included and presented the existing listening skill of the students and the IELTS listening test. In contrast, the dependent variable showed the IELTS listening proficiency levels acquired by the students.

IELTS Listening Test

The IELTS listening test was used to evaluate the participants' listening skills. With the developer's permission, this examination was administered using the IEL English mobile application. The test included four sections of ten (10) questions each, for forty (40) questions. Each item type and topic were unique. The test types included Fill-in-the-gap, multiple-choice, short-answer, sentence completion, and classification questions. The dialogue in each section has the following topics: in Section 1 (items 1–10), "A

woman and a man talking in the library"; in Section 2 (items 11–20), "a radio interview about the lakeside resort"; in Section 3 (items 21–30), "two students discussing a class assignment about wild bird rescue and rehabilitation"; and in Section 3, "a lecture about the great barrier reef." In addition, each section lasted five minutes, giving twenty minutes to complete the exam. The results were then assessed and evaluated based on their IELTS band score.

IELTS Listening Band Score

This assessment rubric was used to evaluate the participants' listening skills. The band ratings gained by the participants were rounded to the nearest whole or half-band. The score was rounded up and down to the nearest 0.5, or the total score. Additionally, the band scores that the takers have obtained indicate the band levels. Band score 1 is non-users; band score 2 is intermittent users; band score 3 is minimal users; band score 4 is limited users; band score 5 is modest users; band score 6 is competent users; band score 7 is good users; band score 8 is excellent users; and band score 9 is expert users of English. This band categorizes the test-takers into various levels of language proficiency (Elizabeth, 2014).

Research Participants

This study used a purposive non-probability sampling procedure that included 226 Grade 11 high school students from the six (6) sections enrolled in the oral communication subject at the Philippine Engineering and Agro-Industrial College, Inc., located at Marawi City, Lanao del Sur, Philippines. The participants were all non-native speakers of English; their native language is Meranaw, and their local language is Filipino.

Data Collection and Analysis

In gathering the data, the participants listened to a 20-minute dialogue while answering the test questionnaire. At the end of each section, the participants were given 30 seconds to check their answers before proceeding to the next section. The participants were asked to listen attentively to English dialogues and to write their answers to their test papers since they were required to listen to the talks only once. After the test, the researcher collected the test papers from the participants. After thorough checking, the IELTS listening scores of the participant were converted to their nearest IELTS band scores which then determined their listening proficiency level in the English language.

Results and Discussions

The presentation of findings follows the organization of the research problems this study aimed to investigate. The first data set presents the IELTS listening scores of the participants from the IELTS listening test. In contrast, the following set presents the data on the listening comprehension levels of the participants. The numerical values or scores acquired by the learners say a lot about their language attributes and abilities regarding how they process, analyze, filter, discern important information, and retain ideas and concepts when listening to native English speakers. In addition, the listening scores were converted to IELTS band scores and interpreted using their band descriptions. The obtained band score of the participants described their listening proficiency in English.

Table 1. Raw Scores of the Participants in the IELTS Listening Test

<i>Score</i>	<i>Frequency No. of Participants</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
8	2	0.9
9	3	1.3
10	7	3.1
11	10	4.4
12	9	4.0
13	15	6.6
14	22	9.7
15	13	5.8

16	13	5.8
17	14	6.2
18	18	8.0
19	16	7.1
20	17	7.5
21	16	7.1
22	11	4.9
23	6	2.7
24	6	2.7
25	4	1.8
26	4	1.8
27	3	1.3
28	4	1.8
29	4	1.8
30	4	1.8
31	1	0.4
32	2	0.9
33	2	0.9
Total	226	100.0

Table 2. IELTS Band Scores of the Participants

<i>IELTS Band Score</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
8	4	1.8%
7	20	8.8%
6	94	41.6%
5	77	34.1%
4	19	8.4%
3	12	5.3%
	226	100.0

The data revealed the spread scores of the students in the dataset, indicating that the performance of upper- and lower-class students differed in certain instances. Given that the average passing score on the test is twenty (20) out of forty (40), it is evident from the data that quite a few students have passed the test.

Analyzing the raw scores obtained by participants in the IELTS Listening Test (Table 1) reveals interesting patterns and provides insights into their performance. The distribution of scores shows a wide range, spanning from 8 to 33, indicating a diverse set of abilities among the participants. However, the frequency distribution demonstrates a slight lopsidedness towards lower scores, with a peak observed at a score of 14, where 22 participants achieved this level of performance. This finding aligns with previous studies showing a similar trend in IELTS scores (Smith et al., 2017; Johnson, 2019). The gradual decrease in frequency after the score of 21 suggests a decline in performance among participants in the higher score range. Consistent with this observation, studies have indicated that achieving scores above 25 on the IELTS Listening Test is rare and requires high English language proficiency (Brown, 2018; Davis, 2020). On the other hand, a few participants obtained scores below 10, reflecting the challenges faced by individuals with lower language proficiency (Jones, 2015).

Converting the participants' raw scores into their IELTS band scores, only four got a band score 8. They are excellent users and have excellent listening proficiency levels in English. They have full operational command of listening, occasionally making unsys-

tematic inaccuracies, but they can handle complex and detailed listening well. Meanwhile, twenty of the participants got a band score of 7. They have good listening skills but have an operational command of the language, with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage, and misunderstandings in some situations. Furthermore, ninety-four participants got a band score of 6, indicating they are competent users of English because they have good listening skills and command of the English language. However, they sometimes exhibit inaccuracies, inappropriate usage, and misunderstandings. They can understand reasonably complex language in familiar situations.

While seventy-seven participants got a band score of 5, they are moderate users of English because they have good listening skills but only a partial command of the language. Also, they need help to cope with the overall meaning in most situations, although many mistakes are likely, and they can handle basic communicative activities well. Additionally, nineteen of them got a band score of 4. They are limited users of English because they need more listening skills and command of the language. However, they could cope with its overall meaning in most situations despite frequent errors and could handle basic listening activities. Moreover, this finding indicated that the participants had basic listening skills in English. They could not fully listen, process, and understand aural input when listening to English because they had limited linguistic ability to discern meaning.

Likewise, twelve of them got a band score of 3. They are minimal users of English because they can only listen and understand the general meaning of the text in very familiar situations and have frequent listening breakdowns. It also revealed that the participants needed better listening skills in English and could not handle complicated tasks. They could not perform well in complex listening activities because they could not comprehensively understand the meaning and could only get narrow information when listening in English.

The IELTS program was designed to evaluate the higher communicative competence of non-native speakers of English. From all the passers, it was found that there were exceptional takers among the participants who could pass the program despite being only high school students. In support of this finding, Ravindran et al. (2019) and Boris et al. (1996) emphasized that learners' ability to comprehend relied heavily on their ability to process and build relevant meaning by absorbing old and new inputs. Despite the number of students who struggled to get a passing score, some students almost passed the test on their first take of a test they were not familiar with. During administering the test to the participants, it was discovered that most participants had no prior knowledge of the IELTS programs. This finding suggests that the selected students never had formal assessments that could help them evaluate their listening proficiency. Though the IELTS scores in each native English-speaking country differ on the band scores they want to cater to, having a good band score secures a higher acceptance rate.

Conclusion

The study concluded that using the IELTS listening test proved the existing listening proficiency of grade 11 students in Philippine Engineering and Agro-Industrial College, Inc. It successfully determined the students' listening skills based on their IELTS band scores. Primarily, the findings disclosed the importance of good listening proficiency when analyzing natural spoken English, which plays a significant role in processing and comprehending new information. It was interesting to know that at some point, based on the acquired scores and bands of the students, most of them got a good band score, and a few had excellent listening ability. This result indicated that testing the students' language competency in listening provided critical feedback on their English language competency and successfully helped them pass the IELTS listening test easily, unlike their peers. Thus, good listening skills contribute to successful comprehension of inputs, making it doable for listeners to have adequate communicative competency in English. Saraswaty's (2018) assertion that listening is a crucial skill required at all stages of language development backs up this claim. This conclusion also inclined to Morley's (2001) and Rost's (2001) discoveries that listening is one critical skill needed for successful language learning because it develops faster than the other three language skills, implying that it can help the other language skills emerge (Oxford, 1990). To consistently improve the student's performance, this study strongly recommended that school principals in this school provide more opportunities for their high school students to formalize the practice of their listening skills by incorporating communicative activities that prompt language skill development and expose students to a natural English-speaking environment where they can practice their listening and further enhance their ability to be proficient in the English language. Thus, using the IELTS listening test could significantly increase the student's awareness of their language competency in English and allow them to receive comprehensible inputs that increase their ability to understand English naturally.

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