A Comparison of IELTS Preparation Courses: Taiwan and the UK
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Summary
Previous studies concerned with research into IELTS preparation courses have mainly concentrated on the impact of IELTS preparation, for example, Brown (1998), Celestine and Su Ming (1999), Rao, McPherson, Chand and Khan (2003), and Read and Hayes (2003). Despite these studies, empirical comparisons of IELTS preparation courses between two countries are still lacking. This research compares and contrasts six IELTS preparation classes from six different language institutes, four classes in Taiwan (TW1, TW2, TW3, and TW4) and two classes from the UK (UK1 and UK2). In general, the duration of the preparation courses in Taiwan (45-48 hours in total) was much longer than in the UK (12-30 hours). Apart from the UK1 Class, which only focused on preparing students for the speaking and writing sections, the other five classes covered the four areas of the IELTS test. In addition, all four observed classes in Taiwan and UK1 Class were structured as independent short term courses which focused on the IELTS test only, while UK2 Class was part of a full-time general English course.

Though this research aims to describe rather than to evaluate, the data from both observation and interviews still reveals some interesting points. Classroom observation was conducted in an unstructured non-participant form with audio recording and note-taking. The observation focused particularly on investigating four classroom features: classroom organisation, activity, teaching methodology, and material. The findings of observation show that first language (L1) instruction only occurred in TW1 Class, while the others all applied English as a medium of instruction all the time. The similarity in all six classes was that a ‘whole class’ form dominated and was predominantly led by the teacher especially in TW1, TW2, TW4 and UK2 classes. The teachers of TW3 and UK1 classes tended to organise more ‘pair work’ than the others, whilst ‘individual work’ was more frequent in TW1, TW2, and UK2 classes. ‘Group work’ was only arranged by the teachers in TW3, TW4, and UK2 classes and occupied a relatively short period. In addition, the relationship between the teacher and student(s) was most interactive in TW3 Class and less interactive in TW1 Class. The relationship between the teacher in TW1 Class and student(s) was more interactive only when practising the speaking tasks. The interaction between student and student in TW3 Class was the most frequent among the six classes, while pair work hardly happened in TW1 class.

The other similarity among all classes was their narrow focus and the exclusion of certain typical language learning activities, explicitly justified by the relevance to exam needs. Apart from UK1 class which only offered speaking and writing practice, students in their classes experienced practice of various tasks in the four areas of the IELTS test. Since class time was limited, the actual use rather than practice of English rarely appeared in all classes. However, in several circumstances some practice could be seen, not only as target language (English) practice, but also as using the target language in a real situation. For example, Excerpt 1 shows that the teacher might treat it as a speaking task exercise, but the responses from the student conveyed authentic information. Another example of using the target language to transmit authentic information was in UK2 Class. Excerpt 2 shows that at first, a conversation practice was carried out, and then students were very interested in the topic, so the target language practice became a case of conveying real information. Also, in UK1 Class, the teacher asked each student to introduce themselves at the beginning of the course which was obviously a real use of English.

Excerpt 1
(Observation TW1 Class, Lesson 4)
7:40 T: Students, look at page 51, not many people have started with this rule, ‘Mind maps’. This is a very useful guideline to use in your speaking test. Always try to cover the five wh-questions: who, when, where, what, and why in your oral exam. When you are speaking, try to keep these ‘mind maps’ in your mind and make sure you answer all five wh-questions. Jack, what do you do in your leisure time?
S (Jack): Um, I often go swimming.
T: Swimming? So, where did you go swimming?
S (Jack): I usually go to a school’s swimming pool near my house.
T: Really? And when do you usually go swimming.
S (Jack): I usually go swimming in the afternoon 4 or 5 o’clock.

Excerpt 2
(Observation UK2 Class, Lesson 6)
2:48 T: Katrina, do you like British food?
S (Katrina): No, I don’t like British food, because it’s very oily, unhealthy, for example in restaurants here everything comes with crisps, and they only eat very few vegetable.
T: Chips, yeah.
S (Katrina): And they serve so many fast foods here.
People don’t really cook. In Germany, when we come back from work, we always prepare and cook something for dinner. But, here people just buy some microwave foods from supermarket.
T: Yes, I suppose that’s because people are tired after a day’s work, so they don’t have energy to spend on cooking.
S (another student voluntarily participates in the conversation): Yeah, you know lasagne right?
It’s my favourite dish, and every time my mum cooks it, it takes her 3 hours to cook it.

Since these observed classes were not only language classes, but also specifically exam preparation classes, varieties of exam-taking skills to deal with each area of the test were emphasised by the teachers in each class, for instance, speed/scan/skim reading, identifying key words, summarising techniques, planning an essay, a 5-Wh question answering strategy, planning a speech by making notes, and predictions for the answers. In contrast, language features, such as the difference between British and American English in both vocabulary and pronunciation, the use of formal and informal phrases and vocabulary, were only highlighted in these classes occasionally.

With regard to the use of material, the textbook, worksheets, and whiteboard were the major materials in all observed classes. The teachers of the TW1 and TW3 classes tended to use the textbook more often in the class, whilst, the teachers of the TW2, TW4, UK1, and UK2 classes used more worksheets. In fact, no regular textbook was used in the UK1 Class, so the teachers only used copied handouts in this class. Teachers from TW2, TW4, and UK2 classes tended to choose the main textbook as homework material and supplied other practice worksheets from a variety of published materials to use in their classes.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 students (Subject (S) 1 to S5 from TW1, S6 to S10 from TW2, S11 to S14 from TW3, S15 from UK1, and S16 from UK2), and 7 teachers from each class (Teachers E and F both taught UK1 Class). The findings of interviews show that the teachers considered the students in the preparation course were all highly motivated, and they expected more exam-taking techniques to be taught and more supplementary practice materials to be provided by the teacher. Although both TW1 and TW2 classes originally aimed to cover the four areas of the test, the students in TW1 Class described how the teacher spent much more time on writing activities than other sections, and the students in TW2 Class pointed out that the teacher focused more on reading and writing than the other two sections. Writing practice was undoubtedly considered as the most useful activity by the students in these preparation classes; in contrast, the listening activity was considered as being the least useful practice. Moreover, the preparation class in Taiwan tends to offer practice tests to students, while students in the UK classes did not receive any practice tests. Some subjects believed that it was very important and useful to experience practice tests at least once before taking the real IELTS test. Additionally, S7, S11, S15, S16 and the teachers in TW4 and UK1 classes considered the duration of the preparation course was too short. The students claimed that they could not absorb so much information within such a short duration; the teachers suggested that since the duration of the class time was so short, students should do more self-studying beyond the class. On the other hand, S4, S11, S12, S13, and S16 admitted the benefit and usefulness of taking the course. In general, the teachers distinguished such an exam preparation course from a general English course, so they considered that in order to benefit more, students should have a certain level in English to attend this course.

References


