



An Empirical Investigation of IELTS Preparation Practices among Pakistani Candidates: Study of Learning Strategies, Resource Utilization, and Exam Readiness

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Abstract

This study examines IELTS preparation practices among Pakistani candidates preparing for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination. The main objective was to identify common learning strategies, study resources, and preparation behaviours used by candidates in Pakistan for academic and migration purposes. A quantitative descriptive design was used, and data were collected from 75 IELTS candidates selected from language institutes and self-study backgrounds across Pakistan. A structured questionnaire was administered to gather information on study habits, preparation methods, and use of learning resources. Findings revealed that most candidates relied on private language academies, self-study materials, and IELTS practice tests, with limited engagement in structured or long-term language development strategies. Irregular study routines were common due to academic, professional, and financial constraints. The study also found that repeated test attempts were frequent, reflecting challenges in achieving required band scores. Largely, IELTS preparation in Pakistan is largely exam-focused and self-directed. The study highlights the need for more structured and skill-based preparation support to improve candidates' language proficiency and test performance.

Keywords: IELTS Preparation Practices, Pakistani Candidates; Learning Strategies, Resource Utilization, Exam Readiness

Introduction

This study examines the IELTS preparation practices of Pakistani candidates who are planning to take the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination. In Pakistan, IELTS has become a highly significant and high-stakes English proficiency test, as it is widely required for admission to international universities, scholarship opportunities, professional registration, and immigration to countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand. For many Pakistani learners, achieving the required IELTS band score is directly linked to their academic progression and future employment prospects abroad. IELTS plays a central role in determining eligibility for higher education and migration pathways. Universities

in English-speaking countries generally require international students to achieve IELTS Academic band scores ranging from 6.0 to 7.0, depending on the programme level. Similarly, immigration authorities require IELTS General Training results to assess English proficiency for visa applications. As noted by Mickan and Motteram (2009), IELTS functions as a critical gatekeeping mechanism in such contexts. In Pakistan, this pressure is strongly reflected among students and job seekers who increasingly rely on IELTS as a pathway to global opportunities. In many cases, Pakistani candidates also face financial and academic pressure due to repeated test attempts and high preparation costs. The importance of IELTS in shaping future opportunities has made test preparation a major concern among Pakistani candidates. Despite its significance, relatively limited attention has been given to understanding how learners in Pakistan actually prepare for the test in real-life contexts. Mickan and Motteram (2008) highlighted the need to examine learners' self-directed preparation practices beyond formal classroom or coaching environments. In Pakistan, IELTS preparation is commonly associated with private language academies, self-study through practice books, online materials, and intensive coaching programs. Studies by Ahmed and Mahmood (2020) and Iqbal and Nawaz (2021) further indicate that Pakistani learners often rely heavily on test-oriented preparation strategies rather than long-term language development approaches. To address this gap, the present study investigates IELTS preparation behaviours among Pakistani candidates through a structured research design. The study explores how learners organize their study routines, the types of resources they use, and the challenges they face during preparation. Mahmood and Iqbal (2019) emphasize that understanding such preparation practices is essential for identifying how learners develop the language skills required for success in high-stakes English proficiency examinations. In the Pakistani context, such insights are particularly important for improving IELTS preparation support systems and enhancing candidates' overall performance outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant academic, professional, and migration-related consequences associated with IELTS performance, the preparation practices of candidates—particularly those preparing independently outside formal instruction remain insufficiently explored in the literature. Earlier research on IELTS preparation has largely focused on classroom-based instruction and its impact on test scores, as well as comparisons between pre- and post-course performance (Brown, 1998; Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999; Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004). While some studies have examined learners' experiences within structured IELTS preparation courses (Hawkey, 2006; Mickan & Motteram, 2008), there is still a notable gap regarding how self-directed candidates manage their preparation process without formal institutional support. In the Pakistani context, this issue is particularly critical. A large number of IELTS candidates in Pakistan prepare independently due to limited access to high-quality training institutes or financial constraints. Many rely on self-study materials, online resources, and private academies with varying levels of effectiveness. Bashir, Hussain, and Nawaz (2018) similarly observed that in South Asian contexts, including Pakistan, self-directed IELTS preparation is a common practice, especially among candidates who cannot afford structured coaching. Consequently, IELTS preparation in Pakistan is not only a pedagogical issue but also reflects broader challenges related to educational equity, resource availability, and socio-economic constraints. Furthermore, in Pakistan, IELTS outcomes are closely linked to life-changing opportunities such as overseas study, employment, and migration. As a result, repeated test attempts are common, reflecting both the high stakes of the exam and the challenges candidates face in achieving required band scores. Khan, Ahmad, and Siddiqui (2021) highlight that Pakistani candidates often experience delays in academic or migration pathways due to insufficient preparation

support and unequal access to language learning resources. This situation reinforces the need to better understand how individuals actually prepare for the IELTS examination in real-life Pakistani settings. Repeated test-taking behaviour, also noted in earlier studies (Motteram, 2006), further suggests that many candidates do not receive adequate guidance on how to improve their performance between attempts. In Pakistan, this issue is compounded by reliance on rote learning practices and exam-focused coaching that may not effectively develop underlying language proficiency. The lack of strategic preparation support remains a critical gap in IELTS pedagogy and learner guidance within the Pakistani educational context.

Research Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- To examine IELTS candidates in Pakistan with regard to their demographic backgrounds, prior test experiences, and preparation practices.
- To identify and select participants representing diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds for detailed analysis.
- To explore in depth the independent and self-directed IELTS preparation practices of Pakistani candidates.
- To analyse the extent to which candidates' preparation activities contribute to language skill development relevant to IELTS performance.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What IELTS preparation practices are commonly adopted by Pakistani candidates?
2. To what extent do candidates rely on formal coaching institutions versus self-directed preparation?
3. What types of resources (books, online materials, practice tests, coaching centres) are most commonly used by Pakistani IELTS candidates?
4. How do socio-economic and personal circumstances affect IELTS preparation practices in Pakistan?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant at multiple levels, particularly within the Pakistani educational and socio-economic context. At a fundamental level, it provides empirical insight into how IELTS candidates in Pakistan actually prepare for the test, an area that has received limited systematic attention. By focusing on learners' lived experiences, the study aligns with the argument of Green (2007) and Tessler (2004) that learner-centred research is essential for understanding the realities of high-stakes language testing. In Pakistan, Siddiqui and Rehman (2020) similarly emphasise the importance of investigating learner experiences to better understand English language learning trajectories under exam-driven conditions. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings of this study are highly relevant for IELTS preparation practices in Pakistan. A large proportion of candidates rely on self-study or informal coaching systems, often without structured guidance in developing core language skills. This highlights the need for more accessible, skill-oriented, and context-sensitive IELTS preparation programmes. Mickan (2006) and Mahmood and Iqbal (2019) argue that effective preparation should go beyond test practice and focus on developing underlying discourse and communicative competence, a need that is particularly evident in Pakistani IELTS preparation environments.

Literature Review

The preparation of candidates for IELTS examinations has remained a significant concern for language institutions globally, particularly in contexts such as Australia and South Asia, where IELTS functions as a key gateway for higher education and migration. In Pakistan, IELTS preparation has also become increasingly widespread due to growing aspirations for international study, employment, and immigration. Prior research in this area has largely focused on test outcomes and score improvements following participation in formal preparation courses (Brown, 1998; Robb & Ercanbrack, 1999; Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004). While these studies provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of structured IELTS training, they offer limited understanding of how learners particularly Pakistani candidates independently prepare for the test in real-world contexts (Green, 2007). The conceptualization of IELTS preparation research has been strongly influenced by the wash back hypothesis, which explains how high-stakes examinations shape teaching and learning practices (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Mesick (1996) further argued that test preparation often encourages strategic score-oriented learning rather than genuine language development. In Pakistan, this phenomenon is particularly visible, as IELTS preparation is frequently driven by exam-focused coaching centres where emphasis is placed on practice tests and memorization strategies rather than communicative competence development. Studies such as those by Ahmed and Mahmood (2020) and Iqbal and Nawaz (2021) similarly highlight that Pakistani learners often prioritise test performance over long-term language acquisition goals, especially in high-stakes assessment environments. Existing washback research has mainly examined learners enrolled in formal IELTS preparation programmes. For instance, Green (2006) investigated preparation behaviours in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts in the United Kingdom, while Hawkey (2006) reported that the vast majority of test-takers in his study had attended formal preparation courses. In contrast, the Pakistani context presents a different reality, where a large proportion of candidates rely on self-study, informal tutoring, or low-cost private academies due to financial constraints and unequal access to quality language instruction. Bashir, Hussain, and Nawaz (2018) similarly observed among Pakistani immigrant populations in Australia that economic pressures and full-time employment significantly limit candidates' ability to engage in systematic and sustained IELTS preparation.

The importance of focusing on learner perspectives in IELTS research has been widely acknowledged (Bailey, 1999; Templer, 2004; Green, 2007). Despite this recognition, Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) noted that candidate voices remain underrepresented in the literature. In Pakistan, Siddiqui and Rehman (2020) emphasize that IELTS preparation practices are shaped by complex intersections of educational background, migration aspirations, and socio-cultural positioning. Pakistani candidates often view IELTS not merely as a language test but as a decisive instrument that determines access to global opportunities, which intensifies preparation pressures and influences learning behaviours. Furthermore, Khan, Ahmad, and Siddiqui (2021) argue that socio-economic inequality, institutional limitations, and language ideology significantly shape how South Asian, particularly Pakistani, candidates engage with IELTS preparation and high-stakes language testing. Building on this body of research, the present study extends the earlier case study work of Motteram (2006) by broadening the scope of investigation to include diverse preparation contexts, with particular emphasis on Pakistani IELTS candidates who operate outside formal language programmes. This expansion is crucial for understanding how self-directed learners in Pakistan manage IELTS preparation under varying socio-economic and institutional constraints, thereby contributing to a more context-sensitive understanding of IELTS preparation practices.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic research design supported by a case study approach for in-depth analysis. This design was selected due to its ability to capture the contextual and lived experiences of IELTS candidates in relation to their preparation practices. In the Pakistani context, where candidates often prepare under diverse socio-economic and educational conditions, such an approach is particularly suitable for understanding variation in learning behaviours. Rather than focusing solely on numerical generalization, the study emphasized rich, contextualized understanding of individual preparation experiences, similar to approaches used in prior IELTS research. The study was conducted in two stages over a defined period. The first stage involved a structured survey to obtain a broad overview of candidates' preparation patterns, while the second stage focused on detailed case studies of selected participants. This sequential design allowed survey findings to inform participant selection for in-depth exploration of IELTS preparation practices among Pakistani candidates.

Targeted Population

The target population for the study consisted of IELTS candidates in Pakistan who were preparing for or had recently attempted the IELTS examination. This included individuals from diverse academic, professional, and socio-economic backgrounds, reflecting the wide use of IELTS in Pakistan for study abroad, employment, and immigration purposes. For the second stage, the population was further refined to include candidates who were actively engaged in IELTS preparation, particularly those preparing independently without formal coaching. However, candidates attending private academies and language institutes were also included to allow comparative insights into different preparation modes within the Pakistani context.

Sampling Technique

The study used a mixed sampling strategy. For the survey phase, convenience sampling was employed by approaching IELTS candidates enrolled in or attending language institutes in Pakistan. This allowed access to a wide range of candidates with varying preparation backgrounds. For the case study phase, purposive sampling was used to select participants based on specific criteria, including variation in educational background, preparation method (self-study vs. coaching institutes), and IELTS test experience. This ensured representation of diverse preparation practices commonly observed among Pakistani IELTS candidates.

Sample Size

The total sample for the study consisted of 75 IELTS candidates from Pakistan. These participants represented both self-directed learners and candidates enrolled in language institutes. The sample included a balanced mix of male and female candidates with varying academic qualifications, primarily within the age range of 18 to 30 years. This sample size was considered appropriate for capturing meaningful variation in IELTS preparation practices within the Pakistani context, particularly for a descriptive and exploratory study of learning behaviours.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to examine IELTS preparation practices among Pakistani candidates. The questionnaire included sections on demographic information, educational background, IELTS test history, preparation methods, study materials, and time spent on preparation activities.

The instrument also included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture quantitative trends and qualitative insights. The tool was adapted from established IELTS preparation research instruments and refined to reflect the Pakistani learning environment, including coaching institute practices and self-study behaviours.

Data Analysis Tools

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distributions and percentages, to summarize IELTS preparation practices among Pakistani candidates. The data were organized into thematic categories such as study methods, resource usage, preparation duration, and reliance on coaching institutes. Qualitative responses from open-ended questions were analyzed thematically to identify common patterns in learners' preparation behaviours. The analysis also focused on comparing self-directed learners with those enrolled in formal IELTS coaching institutes to highlight differences in preparation strategies within the Pakistani context.

Survey Results

Demographic Overview

The survey collected responses from 75 IELTS candidates in Pakistan, consisting of 44 male and 31 female respondents. The majority of participants were young adults, primarily between the ages of 18 and 30 years, reflecting the typical profile of IELTS test-takers in Pakistan who pursue the exam for higher education, employment, or migration opportunities abroad. The distribution of respondents' educational backgrounds indicated representation from diverse academic fields, including English studies, education, business, engineering, and social sciences, highlighting the multidisciplinary nature of IELTS candidature in Pakistan. Many respondents reported English language institutes and private coaching centres as part of their learning environment, while others relied entirely on self-study.

Age Distribution

Age Range	Number of Candidates
18–20	14
21–23	21
24–26	18
27–30	15
30+	7

The data show that the largest group of candidates falls within the 21–23 age bracket, indicating that IELTS is most commonly taken during early university years or immediately after graduation in Pakistan.

IELTS Module and Purpose

Out of 75 respondents, 58 candidates (77%) had taken the IELTS Academic module, while 17 candidates (23%) appeared for the General Training module. This distribution reflects the strong academic orientation of IELTS in Pakistan, where most candidates use the test for university admissions abroad.

Purpose for Taking IELTS	Number of Respondents
Higher education abroad	49
Immigration	18
Employment / visa	6
No response	2

The findings show that higher education abroad is the dominant motivation, followed by immigration purposes, reflecting the increasing trend among Pakistani youth toward international mobility.

Preparation Practices

Respondents reported a variety of IELTS preparation strategies, as summarized below:

Preparation Method	Number of Respondents
Self-study (books, notes, online materials)	32
Practice tests only	18
Coaching institutes	15
Mixed approach (self-study + coaching)	6
No structured preparation	4

The most common approach was self-study using books and online resources, followed by practice-test-based preparation. A smaller proportion of candidates relied on formal coaching institutes, while some combined multiple methods.

Attendance at Formal Coaching

A key finding was the limited reliance on formal IELTS coaching in Pakistan.

Attended Coaching?	Number of Respondents
Yes	21
No	54

Approximately 72% of candidates did not attend formal IELTS coaching, highlighting the dominance of self-directed preparation among Pakistani test-takers.

Resource Use

Candidates reported multiple resources used for IELTS preparation.

Resource Type	Number of Respondents
IELTS textbooks	41
Online materials/websites	28
Coaching handouts	12
No specific resources	9

Among textbooks, Cambridge IELTS practice books were the most frequently used materials, followed by online videos and practice platforms.

Practice Test Use

Practice Tests Completed	Number of Respondents
Yes	51
No	24

Number of Practice Tests	Number of Candidates
1–3	19
4–10	17
	9
20+	6

Most candidates reported moderate use of practice tests, while a smaller group engaged in intensive repeated testing, especially near exam dates.

Additional Preparation Activities

In addition to formal preparation, respondents reported several informal learning activities:

Activity	Number of Respondents
Watching English movies/YouTube	22
Reading newspapers/articles	14
Conversing in English	11
Listening to podcasts/radio	9
Grammar practice	8

These activities reflect exposure to English in informal contexts, which many Pakistani candidates consider supportive for improving fluency and comprehension.

Thematic Analysis of Case Study Findings

The qualitative analysis of case study data from Pakistani IELTS candidates (n = 3 within the 20-case cohort), alongside comparative international participants, revealed three dominant themes that shaped IELTS preparation practices and outcomes in Pakistan's socio-educational context.

Theme 1: Self-Directed Preparation and Unequal Access to Institutional Support

A major pattern was the strong reliance on self-study approaches among Pakistani candidates, particularly those without access to formal IELTS coaching institutes. Most participants prepared through textbooks, online materials, and practice tests, often without structured guidance or diagnostic feedback. Only a limited number had access to coaching centres or tutoring services, while others prepared entirely independently due to financial constraints or limited availability of quality language instruction. This self-directed preparation often lacked strategic planning, resulting in fragmented study routines. Candidates who were enrolled in language institutes benefited from more structured instruction, whereas independent learners frequently struggled to identify specific areas of weakness. This disparity highlights how unequal access to institutional support significantly shapes preparation quality and effectiveness in the Pakistani context.

Theme 2: Socio-Environmental Constraints on Language Exposure

The second theme centres on how social and environmental conditions influenced English language exposure among Pakistani candidates. Living arrangements played a decisive role: candidates residing in shared accommodation with fellow Pakistani or South Asian students had limited opportunities for authentic English interaction, while those in mixed or English-speaking environments demonstrated greater communicative exposure. Similarly, employment conditions affected language development. Pakistani candidates working in service-sector jobs (e.g., retail, food outlets, hospitality) reported repetitive and limited English usage, whereas those in professional or academic environments experienced richer linguistic engagement. These contextual constraints reveal that IELTS preparation in Pakistan is not only an academic activity but is deeply embedded in broader socio-economic realities that restrict meaningful language practice opportunities.

Theme 3: Test Pressure, Repetition, and Fragmented Learning Progress

A third key theme was the experience of **repeated test-taking and performance stagnation**, which was particularly prominent among Pakistani candidates. Several participants had attempted IELTS multiple times without consistent improvement in their scores. Repeated attempts were often accompanied by financial strain and emotional frustration, as candidates invested additional resources without clear understanding of their weaknesses. A notable issue was the absence of effective feedback mechanisms. Candidates frequently relied on speculation or external explanations for their results rather than receiving targeted diagnostic guidance. This led to fragmented learning strategies and reduced confidence in their ability to improve. Over time, repeated failure contributed to diminished learner agency, reinforcing a cycle of dependency on test repetition rather than strategic skill development. Collectively, these three themes illustrate that IELTS preparation among Pakistani candidates is shaped by a combination of self-directed learning practices, socio-environmental constraints, and feedback-deficient test experiences, all of which interact to influence preparation effectiveness and test outcomes.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight important realities of IELTS preparation among Pakistani candidates, particularly those preparing under conditions of limited institutional support and uneven access to resources. A key pattern is the dominance of self-directed preparation, where candidates rely heavily on textbooks, online materials, and practice tests rather than structured coaching. This reflects a broader Pakistani context in which IELTS preparation is often shaped by affordability, availability of quality instruction, and individual responsibility rather than formal institutional guidance. A critical observation is the overwhelming reliance on practice tests as the primary preparation strategy. While such materials provide familiarity with test format, they do not necessarily develop deeper linguistic and discourse competencies required for high band scores. In many Pakistani cases, repeated practice testing without diagnostic feedback resulted in rehearsal of existing abilities rather than meaningful skill development, reinforcing a performance-oriented rather than learning-oriented approach to IELTS preparation. Another significant dimension is the role of socio-economic and environmental constraints. Pakistani candidates often face limitations such as full-time employment, shared living with non-English speakers, and restricted access to professional feedback or tutoring. These factors significantly shape preparation quality and consistency, indicating that IELTS performance is not solely a reflection of ability but is also deeply influenced by structural conditions and opportunity access. The issue of repeated test-taking without improvement further illustrates a systemic gap in preparation support. Many candidates attempt the test multiple times without

receiving clear diagnostic guidance on their weaknesses, leading to uncertainty, frustration, and financial strain. This pattern suggests that IELTS, in the Pakistani context, often functions as a high-stakes gatekeeping mechanism where progression depends as much on strategic awareness and feedback access as on language proficiency itself.

Conclusion

This study examined IELTS preparation practices among Pakistani candidates, revealing a dominant trend of self-directed learning, heavy dependence on practice tests, and limited access to structured feedback or institutional support. The findings demonstrate that IELTS preparation in Pakistan is largely shaped by individual effort operating within broader socio-economic constraints, rather than systematic instructional frameworks. The study concludes that while Pakistani candidates actively engage in IELTS preparation, their strategies are often fragmented and feedback-deficient, which limits meaningful improvement in language proficiency. Structural factors such as financial limitations, restricted access to coaching and uneven English exposure significantly mediate preparation outcomes. Overall, the study underscores the need for more accessible, feedback-rich, and skill-oriented IELTS preparation support systems in Pakistan. It also highlights the importance of addressing socio-economic inequalities that shape test preparation opportunities. Future research should further explore longitudinal preparation trajectories of Pakistani candidates to better understand how sustained intervention and guided feedback may improve IELTS performance outcomes.

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