IELTS Preparation Courses in China:

The Reading Comprehension Task

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Abstract

More and more private language schools provide IELTS preparation courses for candidates who want to sit the test for admission to undergraduate and postgraduate courses in English-speaking countries. This essay investigates whether the IELTS preparation course in a language school in China offers an adequate preparation for candidates. The study focuses on one preparation course for the IELTS reading test (other modules are beyond the scope of the present study). A questionnaire and interview questions concerning both the IELTS reading test and the preparation course were given to 20 candidates and two teachers by e-mail.

This study first analyzed the reading skills tested in the IELTS reading test and discussed possible test difficulties. It then investigated the IELTS reading preparation course by means of candidate feedback on course expectations, course structure, teaching materials and teaching methods. The feedback shows that the course fulfilled the candidates' expectations, i.e. it taught them useful test-taking techniques and reading skills. The teachers' responses indicate that the course achieved its objective to familiarize candidates with the IELTS reading test. The study results demonstrate that the preparation course is test-based, teaching candidates IELTS test-taking strategies, which effectively prepare candidates for the IELTS test. Candidates and teachers also offered suggestions for future course improvement.

Key words: the IELTS reading test, the preparation course, test-taking techniques, reading skills, test difficulties.

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1. Introduction

IELTS, abbreviated from International English Language Testing System is a task-based testing system, whose results have become recognized as an international benchmark for proficiency in English. It is owned jointly by three partners: the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the British council, the International Development Program (IDP) Education, Australia. IELTS is currently taken at 224 centers in 105 countries such as China, Japan, Nepal, Singapore, Malaysia, Pakistan, India and Korea, by over 100,000 candidates per year - most of whom are seeking admission to higher education or training in the UK, Australia, Canada and the USA.

Accordingly, the importance of the IELTS test facilitates the development of IELTS preparation courses in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. The potential economic gains can be seen in the proliferation of private language schools at tertiary institutions. In China, there are a great number of private language schools providing preparation courses booming up as well. As scores on IELTS are widely used by universities as their criterion for admission, it becomes the goal of candidates applying for oversea study to gain a qualified score. The higher band score they have, the more chances they can get. Candidates need to have test-taking skills in order to perform well in the IELTS test. To meet the demand of the IELTS preparation market and help more and more candidates succeed in the IELTS test, language schools providing corresponding IELTS preparation courses become more and more popular.

IELTS assesses the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, which candidates need to study or practice in the medium of English (*IELTS Handbook*, 1999: 2). The IELTS test consists of two modules: the Academic and General training modules. As the Academic Module is designed for those seeking admission to undergraduate and postgraduate courses like all the candidates involved in this essay, so this study focuses on the academic reading module. The IELTS reading test assesses a wide range of reading skills of candidates, including reading for gist, reading for main ideas, reading for detail; understanding inferences and implied meaning; recognizing a writer's opinions, attitudes and purpose; and following the development of an argument (*Information for IELTS Candidates Booklet*, see www.ielts.org).

IELTS reading preparation courses in language schools provide lessons to improve candidates' reading skills and test-taking skills to help them gain a high score in this part.

1.1 Aim

This study aims to investigate to what extent and in what ways the IELTS reading course in a language school in China offers candidates an adequate preparation for the test. It offers a detailed discussion about how the preparation course improves the candidates' test performance through investigation of their feedback on course expectation, course structure, teaching materials and teaching methods. The study attempts to explore whether the reading course in this language school lives up to the requirements of the IELTS reading test and effectively helps candidates perform well in the test.

1.2 Material

The test description in *IELTS Handbook* introduces the format and specific reading skills tested in the reading test. The Cambridge IELTS collection, including *Cambridge IELTS 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7*, one of the official study materials (it is also the teaching materials at School A), provides some sample reading tests for the analysis.

In addition to these documentary materials, two groups of people are involved as participants in this study. The first group is composed of twenty non-English major college students who have just passed CET4 (College English Test Band 4, which signifies the medium level of English proficiency in Chinese colleges and universities). They have taken the preparation course in a language school (the school is hereafter referred to as 'School A') in Ningbo, China. They sat the IELTS test on March 19, 2011. The candidates' scores of taking both the mock tests which are of the same standard as authentic IELTS tests in the course and the final actual IELTS test are recorded and changes of the scores will provide valid and reliable sources to analyze whether the IELTS reading course offers them beneficial preparation for the test.

The second group of participants in the study consists of two teachers: Teacher A is a female and Teacher B is a male, both of whom teach the IELTS academic reading course in the language school. Ten of the twenty candidates in the study are Teacher A's students, the other ten are

Teacher B's students. Both teachers are graduates of English and had received professional teacher training in New Oriental School, which is the most authoritative language training school in Beijing, China. Both of the teachers hold TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certificate, one of the official ELT (English Language Teaching) qualifications as well. They have a good knowledge and teaching experience of the IELTS reading comprehension task. And up to the time of the research, these two teachers have been teaching the course in this language school for six years and have had a great deal of successful experience of assisting candidates to improve their reading skills and gain high band scores in the test.

1.3 Method

First of all, in the IELTS reading test, reading skills tested and possible test difficulties are clarified in the analysis section. The assessed reading skills include reading comprehension skills and test-related skills, which are identified by consulting the official requirements of IELTS. The difficulties are illustrated from three aspects: text difficulties, question difficulties coupled with time pressure.

Furthermore, a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) concerning whether the candidates obtain benefits from the preparation course was handed out through email. There are altogether 16 questions in this questionnaire. The first five questions intend to inquire about why the candidates sat the IELTS test, what assessed skills they knew about and what difficulties they met in the IELTS reading tests. Questions 4 and 5 are multiple-choice questions that allowed candidates to choose more than one alternative, and there was no requirement for them to rank their choices. Question 6 is related to their expectations of the IELTS reading preparation course. Questions 7 to11 are to investigate the arrangement of the course and how it prepares them for the reading task in the test. The following five questions require students to give their feedback and attitudes towards the course. Questions 6 to16 are open-ended questions, from which candidates can show their authentic feeling and responses towards the course. At the end of the questionnaire, the candidates were required to write down their scores they got in the three mock tests and in the actual IELTS test on March 19, 2011.

In addition, the teachers engaged in preparing students for the IELTS academic reading received online interviews (see Appendix 2) as well. The teachers confirmed that there was a high level of demand for these courses from students who wanted to pass the test and get admission to an overseas university. They answered questions about how they design their courses, what aim they have, what materials they select and what special teaching approaches they apply. They discussed whether the lesson plans for various question tasks in IELTS reading reach the goals and how effective they are to help candidates improve their reading performance in the test. Furthermore, the teachers also pointed out the weaknesses of the course and provided their suggestions for the future improvement of their teaching program.

Through the information collected from the experience of both candidates and teachers, this essay analyses how the IELTS preparation course in the language school prepares candidates for the reading test by helping them learn test-taking skills and deal with difficulties they might meet. To be specific, this study intends to evaluate course effectiveness by means of candidate feedback on course, expectation, course structure, teaching materials and teaching methods. The researcher has had no access to the three mock tests, only the scores, and in the later analysis section, the average score of the three mock tests will be compared with the score in the final actual IELTS test. The score changes will help identify whether candidates have got their results improved. Feedback from the candidates and comments from the teachers are discussed to evaluate whether the course has fulfilled the candidates' expectations, and to what extent it has influenced their test-taking skills and reading abilities. Finally, a summary of the analysis and discussion section will be presented.

2. Theoretical Background

In this section, the theories concerning specific reading skills and their measurement, test formats, and potential test difficulties for candidates are introduced. The IELTS reading preparation course is described at the language school studied. The theories outlined here are useful in establishing whether School A: a). fulfils the official requirements of IELTS; b) equips candidates with the necessary skills to perform well in the IELTS reading test.

2.1 Reading Skills Tested

According to Alderson (2000: 51), the sole purpose of students taking a test is to answer the questions correctly. The IELTS reading test, as a proficiency test [1], measures test takers' proficiency in reading comprehension, as represented by their ability to perform a range of tasks for academic purposes.

As Alderson (1990b: 436) puts it, "answering a test question is likely to involve a variety of interrelated skills, rather than one skill only or even mainly one skill". Compared with reading in real life, reading in a test situation calls for specific reading comprehension skills and techniques for examination conditions (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 119). Reading tests, such as IELTS reading tests, measure a candidate's general reading comprehension skills, knowledge of vocabulary and use of reading strategies (Schwartz, 1984: 60). The specific reading skills tested in IELTS reading will be illustrated in section 3.1.

2.1.1 Reading Comprehension Skills

Reading comprehension skill refers to the ability to understand a text. In most reading tests, this skill is typically measured by requiring candidates to answer questions following the given texts. As Lennon (1962: 334) suggests, comprehension of both explicitly stated materials and implicit or latent information are important components. That is to say, reading comprehension tests not only assess general reading comprehension, but also inferential reading comprehension, so-called "reasoning in reading" (Davies, 2008: 19). To be specific, to perform well in the reading comprehension test, test takers need to master the skills outlined below.

First and foremost, test takers are required to understand both the main ideas and some detailed information of the text, i.e. recognizing a writer's opinions, tone, mood, attitudes and purpose on the basis of general comprehension. Additionally, test takers need to make inferences: drawing inferences about the meaning of unfamiliar words or expressions in context; finding answers to questions answered explicitly or in paraphrase; and deducing implied meaning in the content.

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[1] Proficiency tests are designed to measure people's ability in a language, regardless of any training they may have had in that language (Hughes, 2003: 11).

Last but not least, as in the context of a test, test takers must finish all the reading tasks within a limited time; a fast reading speed is thus important in reading comprehension.

2.1.2 Knowledge of Vocabulary

Researchers tend to agree that vocabulary knowledge is a major prerequisite in comprehension and that there is a relationship between vocabulary size and reading comprehension. Rost (1993: 88), for example, states that vocabulary is an important knowledge component assessed in reading comprehension tests. Laufer describes knowledge of vocabulary as the key ingredient to successful reading, and he argues that "no text comprehension is possible, either in one's native language or in a foreign language, without understanding the text's vocabulary" (1997: 20). Laufer emphasizes that a larger vocabulary enhances a candidate's text comprehension and improves performance in reading comprehension tests.

In tests for higher level students, such as those taking the IELTS examination, lexical range in texts includes sub-technical words, which are seen as "academic vocabulary" by Marton (1976: 92). Cowan (1974: 391) defines these sub-technical words as "context independent words which occur with high frequency across disciplines". Hence, IELTS reading tests do not simply measure candidates' lexical knowledge, but how they identify meanings of difficult vocabulary within the context. In other words, test takers are not just required to recall the meaning of learned vocabulary but also to infer meaning from unknown ones as a means of facilitating reading comprehension.

2.1.3 Reading Strategies in Tests

Under examination conditions, good text comprehension requires that readers employ a variety of reading strategies which are regarded as components of reading skills. Alderson (2000: 50) claims that different purposes for reading a text will influence the way readers read, the skills they require and use, and their ultimate understanding. To fulfill the various reading purposes in a test, there are two main reading strategies: expeditious reading[2], and careful reading. Skimming, search reading and scanning constitute the main expeditious reading operations used for reading

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[2] The term "expeditious reading" is described by Urquhart and Weir as "how readers process texts quickly and selectively, i.e. expeditiously, to extract important information in line with intended purposes" (1998: 101).

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fast and efficiently (Schwartz, 1984: 60). Careful reading refers to reading slowly and carefully to glean detailed information from the given texts.

Skimming for the general idea

Skimming is defined as "expeditious reading carried out for the purpose of extracting gist" (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 252). Hughes (2003: 138) also states that by using the strategy of skimming readers can extract the main ideas quickly and efficiently; rapidly establish the structure of a text and decide the relevance of text (or part of a text) to their needs. In a timed reading test, skimming is a helpful technique to note the chief point and its relevant information within the shortest time.

Search reading to locate information

For Urquhart and Weir (1998: 103), search reading "involves locating information on predetermined topics". Readers use search reading when they want to find information to answer certain questions in a reading test. It differs from skimming to establish a macro-propositional structure for the whole text. The search will primarily involve keeping an eye on words in the same or related semantic field, such as using titles, subtitles and other discourse clues (Van Dijk, 1977: 79). The reader may contribute formal knowledge of text structure to assist in the search process. As with skimming, where the selected text is identified as being important, search reading will be carried out more carefully by candidates in a reading test.

Scanning for specific items

Scanning involves "reading selectively, to achieve very specific reading goals" (Khalifa & Weir, 2009: 59). Hughes argues that as a very different technique from skimming for the gist of a text, scanning is applied by readers to quickly find specific word or phrases; figures, percentages; names, dates of particular events; specific items in an index and specific names in a bibliography or a set of references (Hughes, 2003: 138). As a powerful test-taking technique, scanning is frequently used by candidates to look for specific information to answer questions.

Careful reading to learn details

Urquhart and Weir (1998: 103) claim that one of the defining features of careful reading is that readers attempt to handle most of the information in the text, and the process is not selective. In other words, to glean the most important information from a text or passage calls for word-by-word reading, namely reading carefully and slowly.

In a general reading test, careful reading is an indispensible strategy for test takers to make inferences, such as to identify the writer's views and some other detailed information (Hughes, 2000: 139). For example, to infer the meaning of an unknown word from context; to make propositional informational inferences, answering questions beginning with "who", "when" and "what"; to make propositional explanatory inferences concerned with motivation, cause and consequence, answering questions beginning with "why", "how"; to make pragmatic inference, which are those where test takers have to combine information from the text with knowledge from outside the text, etc.

In the IELTS reading test, for the purpose of providing the correct answer to each question, candidates are entailed to combine both expeditious and careful reading operations (Grellet, 2004: 19). Efficient candidates skim through a text for the general topic first, and then try to locate as many clues as possible to get some background information, e.g. pictures or images related to the topic; an eye-catching title, etc. Following that, candidates scan specific items and read the text more carefully to find relevant information to answer each question task.

2.2 Format of Reading Tests

Urquart and Weir (1998: 152) advise that every attempt should be made to ensure that candidates are familiar with the test format before sitting a reading test. In general, text and question tasks make up the basic format of a reading test. Texts selected differ in their types, forms and topics in every test. As testing techniques, question tasks vary in types as well.

2.2.1 Text Characteristics

Hughes (2003: 140) claims that 'good' reading tests and 'good' assessment procedures in general ensure that readers' ability to understand texts in a range of different types, forms and topics are

fairly assessed. According to Hughes, these three characteristics are important parameters for specifying texts in reader-text interaction.

The main text **types** fall into two categories: literary and non-literary. Literary texts, such as poems/verse, novels (extracts), short stories and literary articles are considered difficult to understand (Alderson, 2000: 65). Non-literary texts comprise leaflets, notices, manuals, postcards, timetables and advertisement picked from newspapers, journals or magazines. These are considered easier to understand. Reading texts may provide both verbal information in the form of several passages and non-verbal, e.g. graphic information, such as diagram, charts and pictures for test takers followed by comprehension questions (Alderson, 2000: 77).

As for text **forms** in a reading comprehension test, the most common ones include description, exposition, argumentation, instruction and narration. Among these, expository and argumentative texts dealing with a variety of topics are the main forms adopted in the IELTS reading test.

The text **topics** are listed or defined for academic purposes. They often include non-specialist texts in the arts and humanities, and to some extent non-technical texts in the social sciences or in relation to a set of candidates whose background is known (Alderson, 2000: 62). Whether or not one accepts the universality of certain topics or text contents, the test designer must be aware that variation in text content can be expected to lead to different test results; sampling is thus important, namely different content types should be selected. Sometimes candidates may meet specialist academic, scientific and technical texts as well, but they can manage to interpret them with the help of the glossary provided.

Although IELTS candidates are undergraduates or postgraduates from varying cultural backgrounds, the reading test contains texts suitable for all. Most of the texts selected are non-literary. According to the official IELTS description, the reading texts comprise notices, advertisements, document and articles taken from books, journals, newspapers and magazines. The text topic may be related to economics, education, science, medicine, the environment, geography, biology, culture and society. At least one text will contain a logical argument. Another may contain non-verbal materials, such as a diagram, graph or illustration. If there are

any words or terms of a specialist/technical nature that candidates cannot be expected to know, a short glossary is provided[3] (*IELTS Handbook*, 2007: 7).

2.2.2 Testing Techniques

There are various types of testing techniques that elicit a certain kind of behavior by candidates that reveal candidates' abilities (Alderson, 2000: 203). Common techniques represented by different question types, such as multiple-choice, gap-filling, matching, yes or no, list of headings, short answer and information-transfer can be used for testing reading abilities.

Multiple-choice questions

Multiple-choice questions are acknowledged to be by far the most common in large-scale assessment when testing detailed comprehension of a text (Khalifa & Weir, 2009: 83). Seen as an "objective" technique (Alderson, 2000: 205), "multiple-choice" usually provides candidates with four options and can be marked mechanically. This type of questions allows testers to control the range of possible answers to comprehension questions, and, to some extent, to control the students' thought processes when responding. Below is an example:

> The book *Educating Psyche* is mainly concerned with
> A. The power of suggestion in learning.
> B. A particular technique for learning based on emotions.
> C. The effects of emotion on the imagination and the unconscious.
> D. Ways of learning which are not traditional.
> (*Cambridge IELTS 7*[4], 2009: 28)

In this example, candidates are required to provide evidence of 'successful' reading by choosing one alternative. Candidates need to skim for the main idea of the passage first and then scan for the relevant items of *Educating Psyche* to select a correct response.

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[3] Examinationples can be found in Passage Two, Test One, in *Cambridge IELTS 7* (2009: 24).

[4] The Cambrige IELTS collection, including *Cambridge IELTS 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7*, contains authentic IELTS papers from Cambridge ESOL, providing excellent examination practice.

However, there are some problems with multiple-choice questions as well (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 158). It is difficult for testers to know whether a candidate's failure is due to lack of comprehension of the text or lack of understanding of the question. A candidate might get an item right by eliminating wrong answers, a different skill to being able to choose the correct answer. In spite of the disadvantages, the multiple-choice format is still favored by the IELTS examination boards when designing reading tests as it is an efficient approach to activating strategies of expeditious and careful reading.

Gap-filling questions

Another common vehicle is gap-filling or cloze questions, which are typically constructed by deleting words from selected texts and 'simply' requiring the test-taker to restore the word that has been deleted. Gap-filling questions can be both subjective with open-ended items and objective with selective alternatives. In some scoring procedures, credit may also be given for providing a word that makes sense in the gap, even if it is not the word which was originally deleted, which makes the technique of gap-filling subjective. If certain options are already provided or relevant information can be found directly in the text, then the technique is objective. In the IELTS reading test, all gap-filling tasks are objective ones. The following are two examples:

> A.) To support his claim that the Mafia is taking over Russia, the author points out that the sale of＿＿＿＿＿＿ in Moscow has increased by＿＿＿ percent over the last two years.
>
> B). According to Figure 1,＿＿＿ percent of faculty members agree with the new rules. (Hughes, 2003: 149)

In the above examples, all the answers can be found in the text. The two examples indicate that gap-filling has a number of advantages: Example A signals that "gap filling" is used to test the ability to recognize detail presented to support a main idea; Example B shows that it can also be used for scanning for information.

"Gap-filling" is also the basis for what has been called "summary cloze". An example can be found in Passage One, Test One, in *Cambridge IELTS 7* (2009: 20), where questions 6 to 9 appear in the form of "summary cloze". In this question type, candidates are required to fill in the

gaps left in a summary of a reading passage. This technique permits the setting of several reliable but relevant question tasks on a relatively short passage.

Matching questions

"Matching" is a variant of multiple-choice and is seen as an objective technique (Khalifa & Weir, 2009: 85). Two sets of stimuli must be matched with each other, for example, "matching headings" of paragraphs to their corresponding paragraph, titles of books with extracts with the relevant book, and so on. "Matching headings" is a common testing technique in the IELTS reading test; the percentage can be found in Table 1 (see p. 15).

Questions 14 to 20 in Passage Two, Test One, in *Cambridge IELTS 7* (2009: 22) are examples of "matching headings" that require candidates to choose the correct heading for each paragraph. In effect, these are varied multiple-choice test tasks with a common set of six choices, five of which act as distracters for each task. In addition, more alternatives are given than the matching question task requires (i.e. than the number of items) to avoid the danger that once all but one choice have been made, there is only one possible final choice, which ensures the content validity[5] of the IELTS test.

Yes/No and True/False questions

"Yes/No" and "True/False" are questions in which the test takers have merely to choose between "Yes" and "No", or between "True" and "False". It can be seen as an effective multiple-choice question with only two choices. To test candidates' abilities of interpreting texts, there are several sentences concerning the information of the text, and candidates need to identify whether these sentences are correct or incorrect in the context. Yes/No questions are sometimes modified by requiring test takers to give a reason for their choice. Test takers have a 50% chance of choosing the correct response.

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[5]A test is said to have "content validity" if its content constitutes a representative sample of the language skills and language structure. The test would have content validity only if it included a proper sample of the relevant structures (Hughes, 2003: 26). The matching technique above aims to test candidates' reading abilities, and its properly-designed item structure ensures the validity of the test.

In the IELTS reading test, "Yes/No" and "True/False" are changed into forms of "Yes/No/Not Given" and "True/False/Not Given", which are also regarded as variants of multiple-choice questions since there are three options provided (Khalifa & Weir, 2009: 85). Below the instructions are given for the completion of these two question types in the IELTS reading test:

Yes	if the statement agrees with the claims of the writer
No	if the statement contradicts the claims of the writer
Not Given	if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this

(*Cambridge IELTS 7*, 2009: 25)

True	if the statement agrees with the information
False	if the statement contradicts the information
Not Given	if there is no information on this

(*Cambridge IELTS 7*, 2009: 29)

The above statements show that the "Yes/No/Not Given" task aims to test the candidates' ability to recognize writers' views, opinions or ideas, and is thus often used with discursive or argumentative texts, while the "True/False/Not Given" task tests candidates' ability to recognize particular pieces of information conveyed in the passage. Both question forms in IELTS are efficient techniques for measuring candidates' general and detailed comprehension of the text.

Short-answer questions

Hughes (2003: 79) states that items in which the test taker has to provide a short answer are common, particularly in reading and listening tests. Alderson (2000: 205) regards short-answer questions as a "non-objective" technique that has to be subjectively evaluated. Test takers are just asked a question that requires a brief written response, i.e. a few words, as in the example below. And an attempt is made to restrict the length of answer, i.e. to two or three words in IELTS, to ensure scoring consistency. "Short-answer" not only tests careful reading strategy for detailed information, but also tests expeditious reading strategies, such as skimming for the gist of a text, searching reading to locate information and scanning for specific items (Khalifa & Weir, 2009: 87). The justification for this technique is that it is

possible to interpret students' responses and establish if they have really understood, whereas in multiple-choice tasks, students give no justification for the answer they have selected, selecting the correct answer by a process of elimination.

Questions 10 to 13 in Passage One, Test One, in *Cambridge IELTS 7* are typical examples of short-answer tasks:

> Instruction: Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the passage for each answer
>
> Question 10 Long before the invention of radar, _____ had resulted in a sophisticated radar-like system in bats (*Cambridge IELTS 7*, 2009: 21).

The instruction clarifies that candidates can just choose NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS from the passage for each answer. They need to write a correct but short answer in the blank. The above example is another task for assessing candidates' skill in scanning for specific information in a text.

Information-transfer questions

Information-transfer questions are a common testing technique in reading tests as well. It is a testing technique where the information transmitted verbally is transferred to graphic texts in non-verbal forms, such as diagrams, charts and tables (Khalifa & Weir, 2009: 88). Generally, candidates are asked to identify the required information in the target text and then to transfer it into a table, flow-chart, diagram, map or a graph. Sometimes the answers consist of names and numbers easily found and can be marked objectively; at other times, they require phrases or short sentences paraphrased and need to be marked subjectively. The official description indicates that diagram completion, flow-chart completion and table completion are typical forms of information-transfer technique in IELTS reading tests.

Examples of information-transfer question can be found in Questions 38 to 40 in Passage Three, Test Three, in *Cambridge IELTS 6* (2007: 74). The text is a factual diagram with some blanks. Candidates are asked to read the text and then to identify the relevant information missing and finally to add it to the text.

Alderson (2000: 248) states that there is a problem with this technique of information-transfer, because in the original text, verbal and graphic texts are complementary: the one helps the other. As a reader's understanding of the verbal text is assisted by reference to the (intact) graphic text, the verbal text becomes harder to understand if the relationship has been disrupted by the deletion of the information.

In short, Alderson (2000: 206) argues that it is not sufficient to measure the comprehension of a text by one method only, and objective methods can effectively be supplemented by more subjectively evaluated techniques. The reading test of IELTS is likely to employ a number of different techniques, possibly even in the same text, but certainly across the range of texts tested.

Table 1: The Percentage of Questions Types in the Sample Tests in
Cambridge IELTS 7

Question Types	Numbers	Percentage
Flow-chart	5	3.13%
Sentence Completion	7	4.38%
List of Heading	7	4.38%
Table Completion	7	4.38%
Multiple Choice	16	10.00%
Cloze Summary	26	16.25%
Matching	29	18.13%
Y/N/NG or T/F/ NG	60	37.50%

The data in the table above show that the IELTS reading test assesses reading comprehension by employing multiple testing techniques, represented by eight main types of questions. Question types, such as Yes/No/Not Given or True/False/Not Given; matching, cloze summary and multiple-choice have the highest percentage, i.e. 37.50%, 18.13%, 16.25% and 10%, respectively. Techniques of gap-filling in the form of sentence completion, cloze summary, and information-transfer in flow chart and table completion though with lower percentage are also favored in the IELTS reading test.

2.3 Test Difficulties

How easy or difficult a test is will affect candidates' performance. The level of difficulty is determined by various factors. This study will briefly illustrate three aspects that influence the test difficulties: text difficulties, question difficulties and difficulties brought by time pressure.

2.3.1 Text Difficulties

A reading text may be easy for some readers but hard for others, depending on the candidate's familiarity with the text topic, the level of vocabulary in the text and the text length.

Khalifa (1997:124) claims that **familiarity with the text topic** can be a good predictor of test difficulty. According to Clapham (1996: 133), students' familiarity with the subject area or topic of a reading passage helps them to answer the comprehension question. That is to say, background knowledge of the content of a reading text enables candidates to perform confidently, and tests based on specialized texts test subject knowledge rather than reading ability. If the content of a text is completely unfamiliar to them, candidates will not have sufficient existing schemata that enable them to deploy appropriate skills and strategies to understand the text though they may have the requisite reading ability (Urquhart & Weir, 1998: 143). Non-native test takers find it difficult to deal with texts concerning local cultural or specialist topics, such as technical, engineering aspects that they know little about.

As for **difficult vocabulary**, it has become one of the greatest stumbling blocks to English language reading proficiency. Simply put, a difficult vocabulary item is a word or phrase which blocks reading comprehension. Farr (1971: 17) claims that difficulty of vocabulary affects the readability of a text. More specifically, difficult vocabulary includes: low frequency words, unfamiliar words, long words, idiomatic words, polysemous words (i.e. words with multiple meaning), technical terms, multisyllabic words, and abstract words. Test takers believe that words and phrases used in daily life are easier to understand than academic ones in test texts; and specific words and expressions in certain subjects, involving background knowledge while reading, are more difficult to comprehend than words and expressions that can be easily understood. Candidates' performance is affected by their misunderstanding of the meaning or quite simply their fear of unfamiliar vocabulary in reading tests.

With regard to **text length**, it seems that candidates are always in fear of long texts. Alderson claims that when texts longer than 1,000 words are used, the abilities that could be measured change (2000: 108). This signifies that the ability to identify the main idea of long texts might be thought to be qualitatively different from the ability to that of shorter texts. Nuttall (1996: 174) argues that if candidates are to make judgments about relevance and irrelevance, or distinguish between main points and subsidiary detail, then a long text is needed for operations such as skimming and search searching to be truly realized. Tests such as IELTS use longer texts, while TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) prefers shorter passages that allow a wider range of topics to be covered. It is certainly true that lengthy tests have the drawback of being time-consuming. While in such cases, to decrease test difficulty, fewer passages will be provided for candidates, e.g. there are only three passages in IELTS reading test. Hence, test difficulty cannot be judged by the length of a text only.

2.3.1 Question Difficulties

The difficulty of question tasks in reading tests is affected by various factors as well. The analysis in this essay is focused on two aspects: difficult language used in the questions and certain difficult question types.

Hughes (2003: 86) suggests that "if the language of the questions is harder to understand than the passages themselves, the reader is presented with an additional layer of difficulty". If the instruction for completing the question is expressed in complicated sentences or the questions are written in unfamiliar vocabulary, the test difficulty increases in such situations. Test takers are able to learn simply what they are required to do with the text, not to mention giving the correct answers to the question.

In addition, question tasks of different types vary in difficulties. Alderson (2000: 87) explains that questions that are explicitly based on the text tend to be easier than those are not. In other words, questions, the answer to which can be found directly from the same sentence or text, are considered easier than those for more complicated answers. In the IELTS reading test, questions of basic comprehension, such as matching headings and questions of finding specific items such as short answers, gap-filling, information-transfer are explicitly based on the text. Nevertheless,

questions of learning details and making inferences, such as multiple-choice, Yes/No/Not Given or True/False/Not Given questions, are not directly based on information in the text. That is why the latter types of question are more difficult than the former ones.

2.3.3 Time Pressure

Every test has its time allocation, which is considered as the physical setting. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996: 51), time allocation refers to the amount of time the test takers use in finishing each part and the whole test. They claim that there are two sorts of tests resulting from different time allocation. One is designed to be speeded tests, short ones in which not all the test takers are expected to manage to complete all the tasks. The other one is the power tests, in which longer time is given and test takers are expected to attempt every question task. Speeded tests tend to be easier than power tests because in the former kind, the texts and the questions are less difficult and test takers are required to give a quick response. Power tests seem to be more time-consuming and exhausting since test takers have to spare no efforts to concentrate in the whole test. In the IELTS reading test, a power test, time pressure could be a mechanical factor that affects candidates' performance. If candidates fail to arrange their time or use improper reading strategies, their reading efficiency will greatly become influenced by time pressure.

2.4 Preparation Course for the IELTS Reading Test at School A

School A in Ningbo, China is a language school that has been running for 11 years. It provides IELTS preparation courses for the four modules of the IELTS test: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Throughout the 11 years, the language school has successfully helped a large number of candidates gain high band scores in the IELTS test. Its reputation attracts a great amount of IELTS candidates to enroll before they sit the test. The goal of the IELTS preparation course in this language school is to "prepare the candidates in terms of examination techniques", which complies with the requirement of the IELTS preparation course according to the official checklist[6]. The reading preparation course investigated in this study aims to teach candidates test-taking strategies and reading skills officially required in the IELTS reading test, thereby fulfilling the candidates' expectations.

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[6] To know more about the checklist of the IELTS preparation course, assess
http://www.chinaielts.org/en/guide/suggestion2.shtml#c.

In preparing for a test, special teaching activities are introduced, a limited period of time is allocated, teaching materials are developed, and special teaching methods are applied (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt & Ferman, 1996: 298). In School A, the teacher is responsible for deciding how the course is structured and what teaching materials and teaching methods are used.

The reading preparation course was a four-week block of 100 hours in total. The students studied five days a week. Every day included two hours of instruction and three of self-practice. The teachers in School A uses the Cambridge IELTS collection, i.e. *Cambridge IELTS 1, 2 3, 4, 5, 6, 7* as main teaching materials. This collection is printed by an authorized publishing house (Cambridge University Press). It contains authentic IELTS papers from Cambridge ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), providing ample examination practice. The teachers also design their own lesson plans for classroom activities. During the four weeks of the course, the general aim is to familiarize candidates with the test, moving from teaching skills to practicing the test itself. On the first day, the teacher outlined the course and gave students a general overview of the IELTS reading test. She then gradually introduced the different question types in the test, providing the students with tips on test-taking and giving them the opportunity to practice. As most of the students were non-English major college students, and had just passed CET4 (College English Test Band 4, which signifies the medium level of English proficiency in Chinese colleges and universities), the teacher taught in both Chinese and English.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis and discussion consists of two main parts: a) the IELTS reading test; b) the preparation course for the IELTS reading test at School A. In accordance with the theoretical section, the first section illustrates the specific reading skills measured and potential test difficulties for candidates. The results are analyzed by using the official description of IELTS and comments from candidates and teachers. Then the IELTS reading preparation course at School A is evaluated from candidates' feedback on four aspects: course expectation, course structure, teaching materials and teaching methods. Candidates' responses in the questionnaire are compared with teachers' in interviews. Candidates' test results are also used to analyze whether the course has fulfilled their expectations, improved their test-taking skills and reading skills. Some suggestions for the course improvement are given at the end of this part as well.

3.1 Reading Skills Tested in the IELTS Reading Test

IELTS is the equivalent of English-language entry requirements for non-native speakers of English entering universities in English speaking countries. As a proficiency test, the IELTS reading test measures candidates' English proficiency in terms of reading ability. According to the official IELTS description[7], the reading test tests students' ability to read, understand and answer questions on a range of text types. The IELTS reading test attempts to measure two main kinds of reading skills: general reading comprehension skills and test-related skills.

3.1.1 Reading Comprehension Skills

In IELTS reading tests, candidates need to read three passages first and then finish a number of tasks based on comprehension. When interpreting the texts of various topics, students may be expected to understand opinions and attitudes and be able to distinguish these from facts. They are also expected to distinguish main ideas from subsidiary evidence. According to the official specification of IELTS, reading comprehension skills required in the reading tests are as follows:

> 1. Identifying structure, content, sequence of events and procedures
>
> 2. Following instructions
>
> 3. Finding main ideas the writer has emphasized
>
> 4. Identifying the underlying theme or concept
>
> 5. Identifying ideas in the text, and relationships between them, e.g. probability, solution, cause, effect
>
> 6. Identifying, distinguishing and comparing facts, evidence, opinions, implications, definitions and hypotheses
>
> 7. Evaluating and challenging evidence
>
> 8. Formulating an hypothesis from an underlying theme, concept and evidence
>
> 9. Reaching a conclusion by relating supporting evidence to the main idea
>
> 10. Drawing logical inferences
>
> (IELTS Specification, [8] December 1989)

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[7] For more information of "the IELTS test description", see *IELTS Handbook* (2007: 7)

[8] The IELTS Secification is found in Appendix 4.5 in *The development of IELTS: a study of the effect of background knowledge on reading comprehension* (Clapham, 1996: 229-30).

The above requirements indicate that the following skills are tested: how to understand main idea and how to find specific information; do survey the text; analyze the questions; go back to the text to find answers; check the answer. The test does not incorporate candidates' ability to read for pleasure, focusing instead on finding the correct information quickly and reproducing it accurately. Therefore, the candidates have to develop ways of reading quickly and efficiently by surveying the passage concerned without reading every word, reading the instructions carefully, finding the specific information needed, allowing time for checking the answers and reviewing answers of which they are unsure. The candidates need to analyze each question to discover exactly what is being requested, noticing which questions require general and which require specific information, and they need to know when to look for specific information and how to find it.

3.1.2 Test-related Skills

In addition to the above general skills used for comprehending specific texts, there are several specific test-based techniques that help candidates to perform well in the IELTS reading test.

In the questionnaire, Question 4 is phrased "What skills and knowledge do you think are entailed in performing well in the IELTS reading test?" (Candidates are allowed to choose more than one of the following options):

A. Knowledge of vocabulary.

B. Familiarity with the test format

C. Use of reading strategies such as expeditious and careful reading

D. Prior experience

E. A fast reading speed

**Table 2: Reading Skills Required in the IELTS Reading Test**
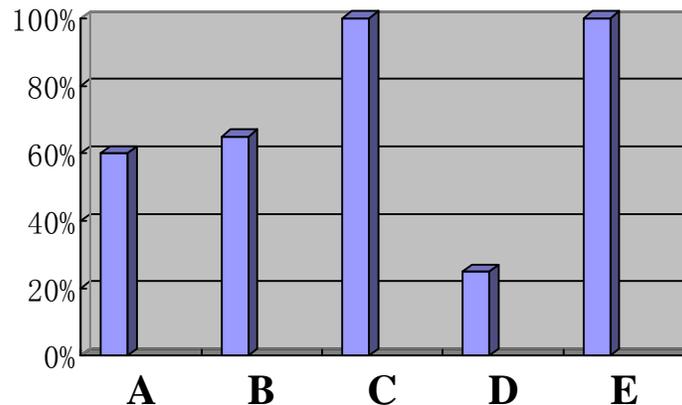
As candidates were allowed to choose more than one answer, the table shows that almost all the candidates chose C and E, which are related to each other. "A fast reading speed" is seen as the most indispensible skill where time is limited. "Expeditious reading strategies such as skimming, search reading and scanning" are effective methods for improving reading speed when seeking information in texts. As mentioned in section 2.1.3, careful reading is a strategy used to study details, and it calls for word-for-word reading.

Furthermore, 65 % of the 20 candidates regarded "familiarity with test format" as a crucial factor. Their responses indicate that being familiar with the text topics increases comprehension; mastering the specific techniques to tackle each question type is very helpful in improving performance. 60% of the candidates also believed that to perform well they must have a good knowledge of vocabulary if they are to improve their reading comprehension. As mentioned in the previous section, with fewer vocabulary difficulties, candidates could read though texts faster and more successfully. 25% pointed out that "prior experience" was advantageous in reducing nervousness during the examination. Teacher A mentioned that considerable practice before the test familiarizes candidates with the main question types to be found in the IELTS reading test and help candidates to understand and anticipate certain questions and problems. Teacher A emphasized that only by combining the general reading comprehension and specific test-based techniques can candidates perform well in the IELTS reading test.

3.2 Test Difficulties in the IELTS Reading Test

In the questionnaire, Question 2 asks "Which one of the four test modules in IELTS is the most difficult?"

Table 3:   Candidates' Perception of Difficulty of the Four Test Modules
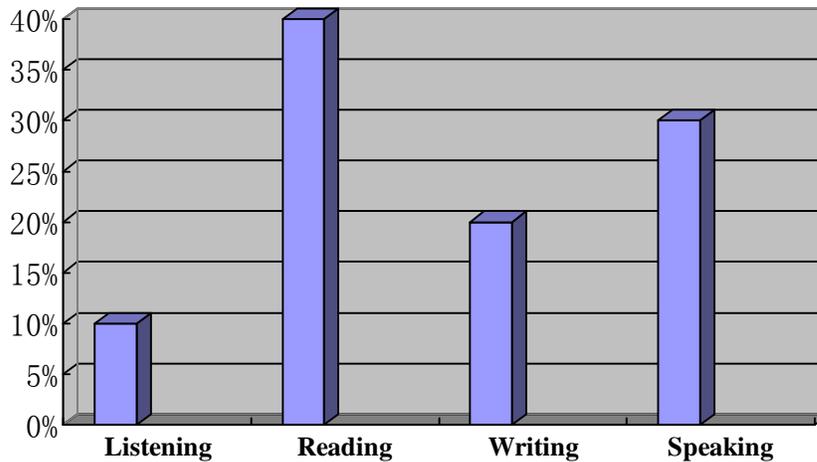
The above table indicates that most candidates (40%) who filled in the questionnaire stated that among the four tasks in the IELTS test, the reading test was more difficult than the other three tasks, i.e. listening, writing and speaking. These candidates believed that the reading test was the most difficult owing to various difficulties that affect their performance. In accordance with section 2.2.2 and on the basis of the feedback collected from the candidates and teachers, this essay explores potential difficulties of candidates in interpreting texts, answering questions and coping with time pressure.

In Question 5, candidates were asked to select the main difficulties they have encountered in the IELTS reading test. This question is a multiple-choice question that allows the 20 candidates to choose more than one alternative. Table 4 below shows the general results of the main difficulties specified by candidates.

Table 4: Difficulties Affecting Candidates in the IELTS Reading Test

Difficulty of text	Unfamiliarity with text topics	60%
	Difficulty of vocabulary	80%
	Fear of long texts	15%
Difficulty of questions	Difficulty of question language	20%
	Difficulty of certain question types	70%
Time pressure		90%

As the above table demonstrates, time pressure becomes the main difficulty for most of the candidates (90%). 80% and 70% of the candidates found it difficult to deal with complex vocabulary and certain types of question respectively. 60% claimed that unfamiliar text topics would create difficulty in the test. Only 20% considered the question language to be difficult and only 15% feared long texts. Following is a detailed analysis of these test difficulties.

3.2.1 Text Difficulty

As the above table indicates, familiarity with the topic, mastery of vocabulary and text length are important factors in test performance. Following is the analysis of how candidates get affected in interpreting IELTS texts by the three factors.

Unfamiliarity with text topics

Topic familiarity is increasingly seen as one of the chief determinants of performance in reading tests (Khalifa, 1997: 124-125). Conversely, unfamiliarity with the text topics will increase the difficulty of a reading test. According to the official IELTS guidelines, the passages used in the IELTS reading test are based on authentic texts and are taken from magazines, journals, books and newspapers (*IELTS Handbook*, 2007: 7). They are written for a non-specialist audience. The topics are of general interest and deal with issues that are interesting and accessible to candidates at undergraduate or postgraduate level. At least one IELTS text features a detailed logical

argument. IELTS texts feature business studies and social science, life and medical sciences, and physical science and technology.

Clapham (2000: 105) found that some texts featuring in the IELTS reading test are too specific for the intended test takers, as regards their empirical difficulty (resulting in lower scores than expected for some test takers), whereas other texts are general, and do not allow background knowledge to have the expected facilitating effect in text comprehension. According to the investigation, 60 % of the candidates (see Table 4) thought that limited background knowledge was one of the factors influencing their performance in the reading tests. Teacher A claimed that test difficulty was perceived either as a function of text content or subject matter. She found that candidates who had already received former study of the subject area would properly achieve significantly higher scores than those who had less knowledge of this area in the reading test. The following table is an investigation of IELTS candidates' score difference among different academic disciplines in 2005/06.

Table 5: Candidates' Average Score by Academic Discipline[9]
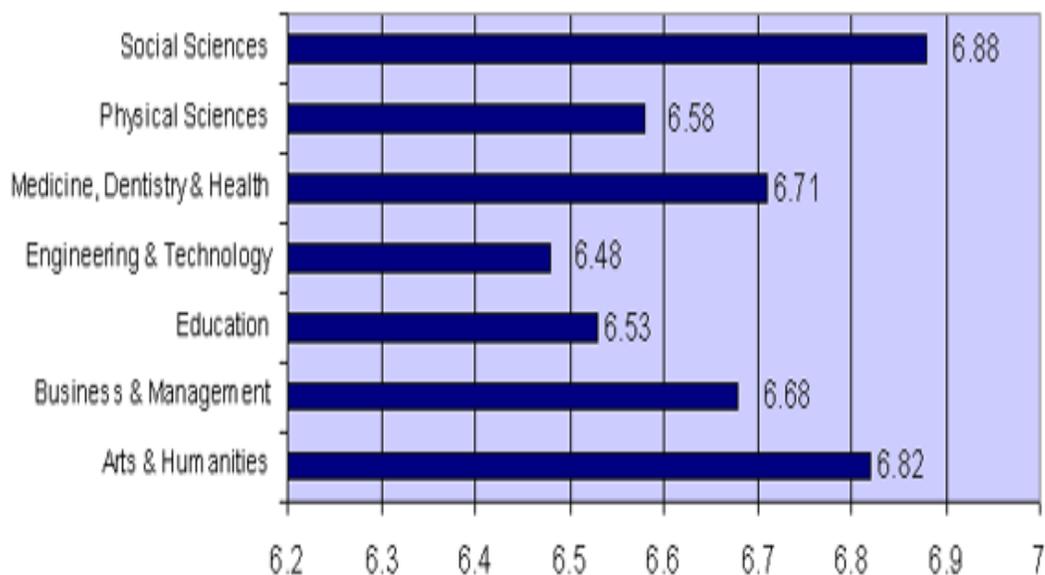
The table above demonstrates some differences, albeit relatively insignificant, in different disciplines. Texts on the social sciences and arts & humanities, i.e. less specialist subjects, seem to be easier for candidates to comprehend and scores are normally higher (6.88 and 6.82

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[9] The table is accessed in the website **http://www.docin.com/p-81209797.html.**

respectively) in the relevant tasks. Texts on medicine, dentistry, health, business & management, physical sciences, education, engineering & technology, on the other hand, are relatively harder for candidates as they lack background knowledge.

IELTS designers try to avoid content that is dependent on knowledge either of specific discipline areas or particular cultures (see www.ielts.org). According to Teacher A interviewed, an unfamiliar topic to candidates in the appropriate subject area cannot be seen as an unsuitable one. She clarified that the comprehension of a discipline-related text could be predicted by both knowledge of the subject area and by language level. As IELTS candidates are mostly college students with higher language level, they do not see unfamiliarity with topics as the main difficulty that affects their reading performance.

Difficult vocabulary

Vocabulary difficulty has been shown to have an effect on all English learners' understanding of texts. IELTS candidates are no exception. While lack of familiarity with the topic can be compensated for by using less complex vocabulary, texts with difficult vocabulary do not become easier when they deal with familiar topics. 80% of IELTS candidates (see Table 4) complained that unknown words or expressions in the reading texts impeded their comprehension. It is because they always spend a great deal of time working out the meaning of these words, which prevents them from finding the correct answers to the questions.

In the interview, Teacher B indicated that a poor knowledge of vocabulary was a major disadvantage for candidates in the IELTS reading test. He explained that difficult vocabulary would weaken the readability of a reading text and destroy a candidate's motivation, sometimes putting undue pressure on a candidate under examination conditions. Teacher B's statement corresponds with Farr's claim in section 2.2.2. Teacher B emphasized that academic words, such as specialist terminology used in scientific or medical fields would increase difficulty in text interpretation. The candidates and the teachers made the common comment that faulty understanding of a single word may lead to misunderstanding of the whole sentence or paragraph, leading to the wrong answers being given in a reading comprehension test. Additionally, if

candidates use improper strategies to deal with unknown vocabulary, they will hardly get high scores.

Long texts

The IELTS academic reading test includes three reading passages with a total of 2,000 to 2,750 words (*IELTS Handbook*, 2007: 7). According to the results of the present study, approximately 15% (see Table 4) of the candidates feared long texts. It is because long texts require considerable information processing, making the test time-consuming. Unfamiliar topics and difficult vocabulary augment the problem. Teacher A stated that a long text might somehow reduce a candidate's interest or motivation in finishing the task within the allocated time. While it is true, as already discussed in 2.3.1, there is no need to read word-for-word to find information for each question, so that long texts seem not to cause very much stress for candidates.

3.2.2 Question Difficulty

In this section, the level of difficulty of the questions in the IELTS reading task is analyzed from the two aspects discussed in 2.2.3.1: the language used in the questions and the types of questions.

The language used in the questions

If the language used in questions in a reading test is harder to understand than the passage itself, the reader is presented with an additional difficulty, making it impossible to tell whether a candidate's poor performance is caused by the difficulty of the text or the language in which the question is phrased. In IELTS reading tests, all instructions and questions are written explicitly and clearly, only 20% of the candidates (see Table 4) found it difficult to understand what the question requires them to do.

In the IELTS reading test, for instance, the instruction in multiple-choice questions reads: "write the correct letter in boxes 27- 30 on your answer sheet". It can be seen that all instruction is written in readable language. Likewise, as multiple-choice questions are quite familiar to candidates, it is easy for them to understand how to mark their answers by following the instruction. Teacher B also clarified that his students had no problem in understanding questions provided there was no unfamiliar vocabulary or the sentences were unusually long or difficult to

read. The comment shows that the language used in the questions is not difficult to interpret for IELTS candidates.

Types of questions

There are eight types of questions in IELTS reading: multiple-choice, list of heading, Yes/No/Not Given, matching, flow chart, summary, sentence completion, and table completion *(IELTS Handbook*, 2007: 7). 70% of the candidates (see Table 4) found that some question types in the test were difficult. In Question 3 in the questionnaire, the candidates were asked to specify the question task most difficult for them, the following three types are concerned as the most difficult ones.

Table 6: Most Difficult Question Types

Question types	Percentage
Yes/No/Not Given,	50%
Multiple-choice	25%
Matching,	25%

The table above demonstrates that half of the candidates claimed that "the 'Yes/No/Not Given' type is the most difficult". The reason is that when dealing with this type of questions candidates are easily influenced by their life experiences or background knowledge, taking certain information for granted. Teacher A gave the example that once in a titled "International Internet" passage, there was a question that stated "people have to pay for Internet", which seemed quite common in China, so most candidates marked "Yes". While actually there was no clarification in this passage, so the correct answer should have been "Not Given". The finding indicates that candidates' own knowledge would sometimes make it particularly difficult to identify the writer's views and choose the correct alternative.

25% stated that multiple-choice questions were difficult as there were many distracters. Sometimes this type of question requires candidates to have an overall understanding of the main points of the text, in which case they need to be able to read for gist. Multiple-choice questions, on the other hand, may sometimes require candidates to have a detailed understanding of

particular points, in which case they must be able to read for specific details. Candidates said that they had to guess sometimes as they did not know which choice was the correct answer. That is why this question type raises special difficulties for candidates.

The remaining 25% thought matching was difficult as they had to spend a great deal of time and energy searching for information. In particular, "matching heading" is hard since it always requires candidates to grasp the main idea of every paragraph before they make their choice. According to the candidates' responses, sentence completion, summary, flow chart and table completion questions are less difficult to find answers to and fill them in each blank.

3.2.3 Time Pressure

As Hawkey (2006: 124) explains, the reason why the reading test is considered more difficult than the other three IELTS test modules is time pressure. The majority of the candidates (90%, see Table 4) claimed that "we do not have enough time to read three long passages and finish 40 questions in one hour". There is a mechanical reason for the concern: unlike the listening test, no extra time is given at the end to transfer the answers to the answer sheet in the reading test.

Another reason is that the candidates always handle time improperly. Most of the candidates waste a large amount of time reading irrelevant paragraphs, studying a question that only requires a quick scan through or guessing some of the difficult vocabulary, with the result that they do not finish all the questions in time. A similar problem might arise when so much time is spent on earlier questions that subsequent ones which demand careful scrutiny have to be answered more hurriedly. Teacher B remarked that nervousness also caused candidates to underperform. Hence, only by improving one's reading speed and adopting efficient reading strategies, such as skimming, search reading and scanning can the problem of time pressure be significantly reduced.

3.3 The Preparation Course for the IELTS Reading Test

The preparation course for the IELTS reading test in School A was investigated on the basis of candidates' comments on four aspects: course expectations, course structure, teaching materials and teaching approaches. The candidates' feedback on the latter two aspects is compared with comments from the teachers in the interviews. Following the analysis of the above four sub-

sections, there is a sub-section on course evaluations. In this part, the candidates' test results from both the mock tests and the actual IELTS test are used to analyze whether the course has fulfilled the candidates' expectations, and to what extent it has influenced their test-taking skills and reading abilities. Some suggestions from both the candidates and the teachers as regards possible improvements in the course are given at the end of this part.

3.3.1 Course Expectations

Question 6 asks "What were your expectations of the IELTS reading preparation course? Why did you enroll on it?"

Table 7: Candidates' Course Expectations

Expectations	Number	Percentage
1.To get a high score	20	100%
2. To learn test-taking strategies	18	90%
3. To learn reading skills	16	80%
4. To enlarge vocabulary	10	50%

The table shows that all 20 candidates emphasized that the purpose of enrolling on the course was to achieve a high score. 90% and 80% of the candidates expected to learn test-taking techniques and reading skills. Half of the candidates also wanted to enlarge their vocabulary during the course. As the above table demonstrates, it was the primary goal of every IELTS candidate in the study to gain a score that meets the requirements of overseas universities. The responses also show that the candidates expected the course to teach them test-related techniques, reading skills and the necessary vocabulary to perform well in the IELTS reading test.

3.3.2 Course Structure

Whether the course structure contains useful content and proper time allocation was investigated in Question 7 in the questionnaire.

Question 7 asked candidates to comment on the structure of the course in terms of **a)** content and **b)** time allocation.

Table 8: Candidates' Comments on Course Structure

General responses	Comments on "Content"	Comments on "Time Allocation"	Percentage
Response One: Very satisfactory	The content is varied and comprehensive. The class activities are inspiring and helpful.	Perfectly arranged	15%
Response Two : Satisfactory	The teacher's instruction is interesting. The three mock tests are helpful to check whether we have made progress during the course.	Properly arranged, but not long enough	60%
Response Three: Not quite satisfactory	The content is too compact; the materials are not enough; few chances to practice.	Four weeks are too short	25%

The above table presents three general responses to Question 7. Response One shows that a small number of the candidates (15%) thought the course structure was "very satisfactory". They were impressed by the varied and comprehensive content. Likely, they were quite content with the time allotment. Most of the candidates (60 %) were satisfied with the course structure. Their comments demonstrate that the course content includes interesting and stimulating instruction and practical mock tests, indicating their level of knowledge at every stage of the course. The remaining 25%, however, were not satisfied. This group of candidates did not think the content was adequate for them to learn more reading skills, but so compact and intensive that they had limited access to study materials and exercises. As for time allocation, Responses Two and Three reveal that the course time allocation is not sufficiently long for them to learn enough reading skills. Shortage of time is one of the course weaknesses that will be discussed later, in 3.3.5.

3.3.3 Teaching Materials

With regard to the teaching materials adopted in the preparation course, the teachers' responses are compared with those of the candidates. The investigation of whether the two types of comments match each other provides highly important suggestions for future improvements in the course.

Question 5 in the interview with the teachers reads, "What materials do you use for teaching? What are your criteria for selection of materials?" Following are the teachers' responses.

Table 9: Teaching Materials

Teachers	Comments
Teacher A	We use Cambridge IELTS collection (i.e. *Cambridge IELTS 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7*) which is recognized as the most authoritative teaching and practicing materials for IELTS candidates. Since the book contains authentic IELTS papers, it provides students with an excellent opportunity to familiarize themselves with IELTS reading tests and to practice specific examination techniques. We also provide exercises for candidates to practice.
Teacher B	In addition to the official practicing materials, we design our own lesson plans. In each class, we will carry out teaching activities by following the lesson plans.

In the questionnaire, the candidates were asked to "Comment on the teaching materials in terms of content and relevance" (Question 8). Following are some of their sample comments.

Table 10: Candidates' Comments on Teaching Materials

Responses	Sample Comments	Percentage
Response One: Satisfactory	Cambridge IELTS collection is very popular and complies with the requirement of IELTS. All the texts in it are extracted from newspapers, magazines, academic journals or books as required in the IELTS specification. We can get familiar with IELTS test by using it. Teachers' lesson plans are interesting.	65%
Response Two: Not quite satisfactory	Some reading texts in the IELTS collection are out of date. The exercise materials are not enough, either. We have to buy some other materials to practice.	35%

The majority of the candidates (65%) were satisfied with the teaching materials, in particular "Cambridge IELTS collection" because of its popularity and relevance to the IELTS test itself. They said they appreciated the teachers' lessons in terms of structure and delivery. These comments match the teachers' view in table 8: the candidate agree on the teacher's reason for choosing the "Cambridge IELTS collection", i.e. to familiarize the candidates with the IELTS reading test. There is, however, a small group of candidates (35%) that did not agree with the

teachers' view. They claimed that the reading passages in the "Cambridge IELTS collection" were out-of-date; more modern materials were required. In addition, they thought that they did not have sufficient materials to practice on in the course and must buy supplementary ones. As Urquart and Weir (1998: 152) emphasize (see 2.2), every attempt should be made to ensure that candidates are familiar with the test format before sitting a reading test. The lack of practicing materials is a serious impediment to progress and has important implications for the suggested improvements in the course discussed in 3.3.5.

3.3.4 Teaching Methods

In the interview, Teachers A and B claimed that the general goal in the reading course is to familiarize candidates with the different types of tasks and teach them the relevant test-taking techniques for the reading test. They adopt various teaching approaches to achieving this goal. Following are the responses from Teachers A and B with respect to their general teaching methods.

Table 11: Teaching Methods

Teachers	Answers
Teacher A	I use competency–focused teaching methodology, i.e. student-centered. I encourage teacher-student and student-student interaction by carrying out interesting activities.
Teacher B	I prefer teacher-centered method, focusing on instructions in the class and let students practice afterwards.

Teachers A and B differ in their teaching approaches. Teacher A attaches importance to stimulating the initiative of students. She interacts with students and encourages them to take part in class activities. Teacher B, on the other hand, specified that he preferred to first provide instructions and advice in the class and then allow his students to do self-practice. Both of the two teachers have developed their own teaching styles and are much appreciated by their students.

Below will be illustrated how the two teachers familiarize candidates with different question types, and deal with unfamiliar vocabulary and time pressure.

Familiarize candidates with different question types

In the interview, Question 7 asked the teachers "How do you help students deal with question of various types in the reading task?"

Table 12: How to Deal with Question Types

Teachers	Answers
Teacher A	I design specific lesson plans for each question task and teach students the relevant techniques to deal with each task. I encourage students to share their own techniques with classmates.
Teacher B	I usually provide some advice or tips for each type of question. For instance, to deal with multiple-choice I suggest candidates to eliminate choices they think are incorrect or use reading strategies such as skimming and scanning. After demonstration, I will let my students do some practices.

The above table shows that both Teachers A and B teach what is required to pass the test. They offer the candidates techniques for each question type, thereby fulfilling the candidates' expectations of the course (see Table 7). As already established, Teacher A focuses on the candidates and encourages them to communicate with classmates, while Teacher B prefers to demonstrate theory first and then gives students guided practice. Technique, such as giving practical tips further demonstrates that the preparation course focuses on teaching candidates test-taking strategies. Following is the candidates' feedback on teaching methods.

In the questionnaire, Question 9 asks, "Comment on the teacher's input in helping you understand and successfully complete specific question tasks."

Table 13: Sample Comments on Question 9

Responses	Sample Comments	Percentage
Response One: Satisfactory	1. Teacher A's activities are directly related to certain question types. 2. The techniques introduced in the Teacher B's class are quite useful. I practice a lot and learned how to use them in the test.	60%

|		
Response Two: Not quite satisfactory	My teacher's advices are good techniques, but I always forget to use these techniques in the test and keep using my own.	30%
Response Three: Not satisfactory	The techniques are hard to learn and some are useless, I did not use them when I sat the test.	10%

60% of the candidates completely agree with the two teachers interviewed. This group of candidates enjoyed the teacher's lesson activities and thought they were well-organized and carried out efficiently. Their responses show that teachers' instructions make them more familiar with each question type and help to master skills to perform well in the tasks. 30% stated that they were not quite satisfied. They agreed that their teacher's tips as regards how to approach the main types of questions were useful, but they still preferred to use their own techniques. This is because they find it hard to memorize the different skills and apply them under examination conditions. A small number of candidates (10%) did not think their teacher's suggestions helped them to improve their test performance. Their attitude is based on the fact that they failed to gain a satisfactory score[10] in the test,

Dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary

Question 8 in the interview concerns how teachers help candidates deal with unfamiliar vocabulary. Both Teachers A and B encouraged candidates not to panic when they come across unknown words, as it is possible to work out the possible meaning by using appropriate strategies. Sometimes they do not even need to figure out the exact meaning of every word in the examination. Teacher A introduced five main strategies: context, definition, word class, connective words and affixes to deduce the meaning. In Question 10 in the questionnaire, candidates were asked whether the teachers' methods were effective. The following table displays their feedback on the five strategies.

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[10] The candidates' test scores are presented in 3.3.5.

Table 14: Effectiveness of Teacher's Strategies for Dealing with Unfamiliar Vocabulary
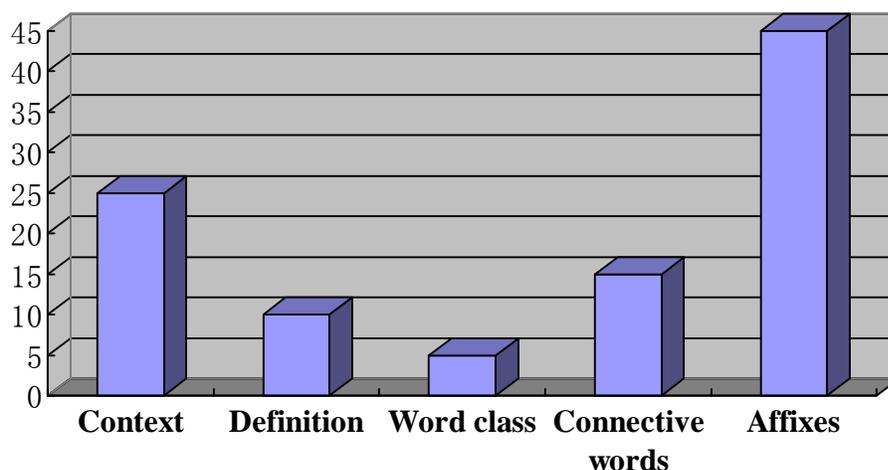
The above table demonstrates that most of the candidates thought that the five strategies taught by the teacher differed in their effectiveness. Most (45%) thought using "affixes" was most effective. Because they just need to memorize the root of the particular word, and "prefixes" and "suffixes" are always useful in working out the variants. 25% specified that the context was helpful as they found that it often contained clues about the meaning of unknown vocabulary. 15% claimed that by looking for connecting words such as "however", "while" and "nevertheless", they could also deduce the meaning of a word. Checking the definition (glossary following the IELTS reading texts) and word class are also effective methods according to the remainder of the candidates. In addition to these vocabulary-related techniques, Teacher A also suggested that "if there is no need to know the meaning of some words, candidates should just skip them". This advice is another example of a practical test-taking technique for improving test performance.

Dealing with time pressure

In the interview (Question 9), the teachers were asked to introduce how they help candidates deal with the problem of time pressure. Following are responses of Teachers A and B:

Table 15: How to Deal with Time Pressure

Teachers	Answers
Teacher A	I recommend my students to improve their reading speed and finish each task within the allocated time in class and under my supervision. I also suggest them to split time through the following steps: previewing (about 2 minutes); interpreting the instructions and questions (about 2 minutes); scanning the text for specific answers (about 1 minute per question); checking answers (about 3 minutes).
Teacher B	I recommend my students to use expeditious reading strategies such as skimming, search reading and scanning. I also suggest them to skip over difficult questions to make sure they can complete the following ones.

Teacher A suggested that one should improve reading speed and arrange the time efficiently given that "a fast reading speed" is an important reading skill in the IELTS reading test, as already established in 3.1.2. Her suggestion of splitting time allows candidates to finish the task more successfully. Teacher B's recommendation of adopting specific reading strategies is also seen as an indispensable factor for improving reading efficiency in the IELTS reading test. As discussed in the theory section (2.1.3), expeditious reading strategies such as skimming for gist, search reading to locate information and scanning for specific items are helpful for candidates in finding the correct answer quickly. His advice of skipping difficult questions is a useful test-based technique to ensure that candidates finish all the tasks in time.

Question 11 in the questionnaire asked candidates "how effective was the teacher's advice in dealing with time pressure in the examination situation". The following table shows the candidates' responses.

Table 16: Comments on Teacher's Strategies for Dealing with Time Pressure

Responses	Sample Comments	Percentage
Response One: Satisfactory	I think teacher's suggestion of applying reading strategies and splitting time is practical and conductive to good performance in the test. I have greatly improved my reading speed after a great deal of practice.	65%
Response Two: Not satisfactory	I have not improved my reading speed very much. I would never think of splitting time under the examination conditions. still have difficulties following the teacher's advice and using the techniques	35%

About 65% of the candidates were content with the teaching approaches. Candidates always find it difficult to finish all the question tasks within one hour when they start the course; as the course progresses and they have had more practice and become more familiar with the tasks, they can accomplish the tasks faster. In addition, this group of candidates managed to apply these techniques in the IELTS test. They thus appreciated the teachers' suggestions as regards reading strategies and allocating time for each task. The remaining 35% were not, however, satisfied. They felt that they still had difficulties in following the teacher's advice and applying the techniques under examination conditions. Their negative response results from their failure to finish the tasks both correctly and rapidly in the test. It is common when sitting the test that the candidates would feel nervous and forget to apply what they have learned from the course.

3.3.5 Course Evaluation

The final four questions in the questionnaire were concerned with the evaluation of the preparation course from four particular perspectives: fulfillment of candidates' expectations, improvement in test-taking abilities, improvement in reading abilities, and suggestions for course improvement.

Expectation fulfillment

Test results are one part of the candidates' expectations as discussed in 3.3.1. The test scores of the three mock tests and the final IELTS test are presented below.

Table 17: Scores of the Three Mock Tests and the Actual IELTS Reading Test on March 19, 2011.

Candidates	Mock tests			Average Score of Mock Tests	Actual IELTS Test
	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3		
Candidate 1	5	6	5.5	5.5	6
Candidate 2	6	5.5	6	6	6.5
Candidate 3	5.5	5	6	5.5	6.5
Candidate 4	5.5	6	6.5	6	6.5
Candidate 5	5	6	5.5	5.5	6
Candidate 6	5	5.5	6	5.5	5.5
Candidate 7	4.5	5	5	5	4.5
Candidate 8	6.5	7	7	7	6.5
Candidate 9	6	6	7	6.5	6.5
Candidate 10	6	6	6.5	6	6.5
Candidate 11	6.5	6	7	6.5	7
Candidate 12	6	5.5	6.5	6	6
Candidate 13	5.5	5	6	5.5	6
Candidate 14	4.5	5	5	5	5.5
Candidate 15	5.5	6	6	6	5
Candidate 16	6	6	6.5	6	6.5
Candidate 17	5.5	5.5	6	6	5.5
Candidate 18	5	6	5.5	5.5	6
Candidate 19	6	6	6.5	6	7
Candidate 20	5.5	5.5	6	6	6

Table 17 above indicates that more than half of the candidates in the course gradually increased their scores in the three mock tests, though there are some fluctuations. Compared with the average score in the three mock tests, 12 candidates (60%) increased their score in the actual IELTS reading test by between 0.5 and 1.5; they considered this increase satisfactory. Four candidates gained the same scores, and another four received lower scores (between 0.5 and 1

lower). They were depressed by the test results as they were unexpected. More information about expectation fulfillment is found in the candidates' responses to Question 12 of the questionnaire, discussed below.

Question 12 asked candidates whether the preparation course for IELTS reading fulfilled their expectations. Following are the results.

Table 18: Expectation Fulfillment

Responses	Sample Comments	Percentage
Response One: Expectation is completely fulfilled	From the course, I learned the relevant test-taking techniques, practiced reading skills and gained the score for which I had hoped	30%
Response Two: Expectation is fulfilled partly	I learned useful test-taking techniques and reading skills, but did not enlarge my vocabulary. I got my score improved, but not very much.	50%
Response Three: Expectation is not fulfilled at all	The techniques taught in the course are useless, I got a low score.	20%

30% of the candidates felt that their expectations were completely fulfilled. They claimed that they had learned useful test-taking techniques and the reading skills needed to pass the IELTS reading test. They were thus satisfied. 50% of the candidates considered that their expectations were only partially fulfilled. They stated that although they had gained useful information during the course and improved their score, they were still not completely satisfied with their overall band score. They expected to achieve a higher score by attending the course. 20% of the candidates with low scores thought the course was useless and that it had not in anyway improved their test performance. To a considerable extent, the candidates' assessment of the course is based on the final score achieved; it is not necessarily a fair assessment of the content of the course or its teaching methods.

In the interview, teachers were also asked "Do you think the preparation course for the IELTS reading module can achieve its goals and fulfill candidates' expectations?" (Question 10) Both Teachers A and B agreed that they had achieved their objectives for the course, i.e. familiarize

candidates with the test and to teach them the reading skills required in the test. According to them, candidates who showed good performance managed to master the test-taking strategies. The teachers felt that the candidates who showed poor performance did not make enough effort to learn and practice the test-taking techniques taught on the course.

Improvement in test-taking skills

As for the test-taking skills, Question 13 asked: "Do you think the reading course has improved your ability to pass the reading comprehension test?"

Table 19: Improvement in Test-taking Skills
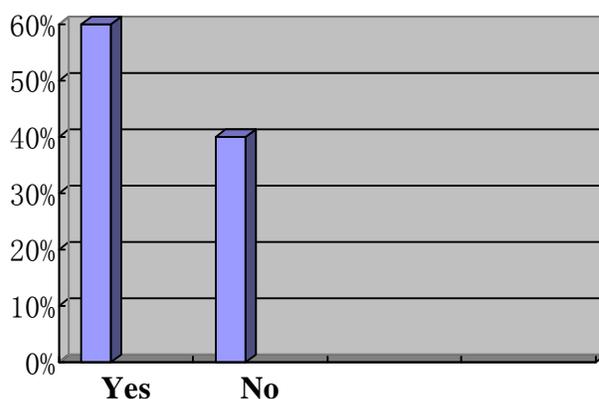
60 % of the candidates answered "Yes". These candidates are exactly the same group of candidates who improved their scores. As far as they were concerned, the test score could represent a candidate's reading abilities, so that the increase in scores signifies a development of reading abilities. The remaining 40 % of the candidates answered "no". They did not think their reading abilities improved as a result of attending the course. Their dissatisfaction results from the fact that they did not increase their scores very much or even gained lower scores than the average scores in their mock tests. There is a clear correlation between candidates' feedback and test performance.

Teachers in the interviews were asked the same question "How effective is the course in improving the students' test-taking skills in the reading task?" (Question 11) Teacher A pointed out that in the three mock tests, the majority of the 20 candidates had made progress in applying

test-taking tactics and improved their band scores. That is to say, the course is effective in improving candidates' ability to perform well in the reading test.

Improvement in reading ability

With regard to improvement of reading ability, Question 14 in the questionnaire required candidates to explain "whether the reading preparation course has improved their ability to read academic texts in general".

Table 20: Improvement in Reading Ability
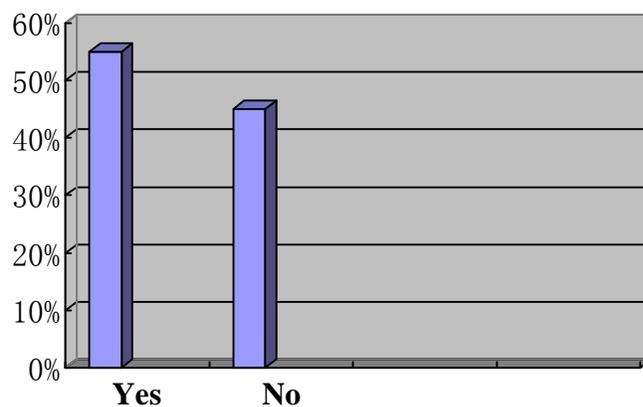
55% of the candidates answered "Yes" and agreed that the preparation course had improved their reading skills and that these would be useful in their future academic study. They felt that the strategies they learned for tackling different question types, difficult vocabulary and the time pressure would be useful in future examinations or when reading academic texts in other contexts. The remaining 45% of the candidates did not agree. They held the view that the preparation course simply aimed at introducing test-taking techniques rather than improving language proficiency. This indicates that although candidates can improve their reading test scores by training, such improvement reflects an enhanced ability to do question tasks rather than any real increase in language ability. However, as mentioned in section 2.4, the general goal of the preparation course in School A is to "prepare the candidates in terms of examination techniques", so "improving language abilities" is not involved in the course purpose. One candidate's comment that "we have improved reading abilities for future academic study" presents a spin-off

effect. It is interesting to see that the candidates have gained a bonus in addition to having achieved test-taking techniques by attending the course.

Accordingly, in Question 15 candidates were asked "If you do not get the score you require this time round, will you take part in the course again before the next test?"

Table 21: Re-doing the Course
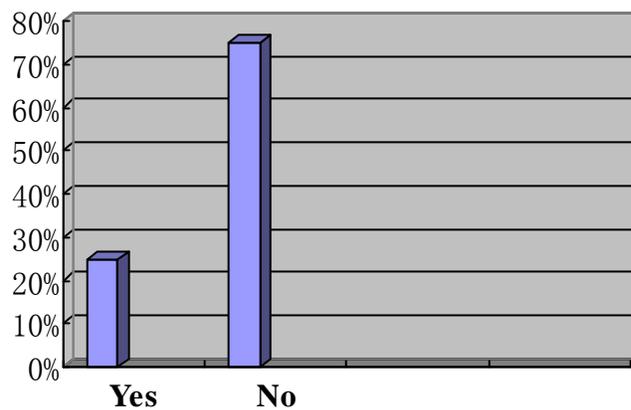
The bar chart above shows that around 75% of the candidates answered "No". They explained that since they had learned the test-based techniques in the course, they could prepare for the test alone the next time. 25% of the candidates wanted to re-do the course. They wanted not only to learn new knowledge and skills, but also consult teachers whenever they encountered difficulties.

In the interviews, Question 12 asked, "Do you think this course prepares candidates for academic study in general or only for the IELTS test itself?" Teacher A confirmed that the course did not prepare candidates for academic study, only the IELTS reading test itself. Teacher B explained that because the course was so intensive, the content was directed solely toward coping with the test.

Both candidates' responses to Questions 13, 14, 15 in the questionnaire and the two teachers' responses to Question 12 in the interview reveal that the preparation course in School A focuses

on "teaching to the test"[11]. Like most private language schools, School A is under great pressure from IELTS candidates to provide intensive coaching to pass the test. This is why the preparation course aims to offer candidates IELTS test-taking techniques and gives practice rather than improving language abilities systemically.

Suggestions for course improvement

Furthermore, to investigate potential weaknesses in the preparation course, Question 16 in the questionnaire asks: "What aspects of the preparation course do you think need to be improved?" The following pie chart displays the results.

Table 22: Weaknesses in the Preparation Course
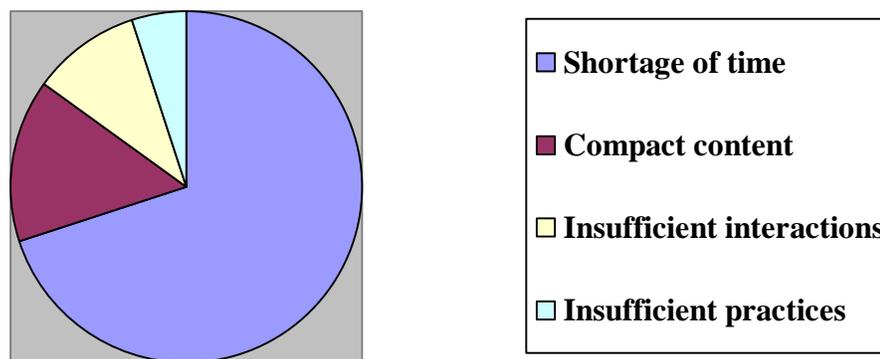
70% of the candidates claimed that the four-week course was not sufficiently long to learn new reading skills and enlarge vocabulary. Shortage of time was thus identified as the most serious weakness in the preparation course. 15% of the candidates regarded the course as so compact and intensive that on occasions they felt it hard to follow the teacher and master the different techniques sufficiently quickly. The remaining 10% and 5% suggested it would be better if they could have more interaction with teachers and more practice exercises in the preparation course.

In answer to Question 13 in the interview, "What improvements can be made in the preparation course?", Teacher A expressed some frustration that the limited amount of classroom time had

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[11] "Teach to the test" implies "doing something in teaching that may not be compatible with teachers' own values and goals, or with the values and goals of the instructional program" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996: 33).

not allowed her much opportunity to establish a good rapport with her students. Teacher B felt that he was considerably constrained in teaching and helping students solve problems within such a short period. Both of the teachers' responses correspond with the candidates' response, "shortage of time", in the above pie chart. The candidates' complaints also offer enlightening suggestions for course improvement. Teacher B recommended to making the course longer. Moreover, he also suggested renewing the course by using more up-to-date materials, introducing more vocabulary acquisition methods, and providing more practice opportunities for candidates.

According to the feedback and comments from both the candidates and the two teachers, the IELTS reading preparation course in School A can thus generally be deemed effective in preparing candidates for the test. It conforms to the requirement of the IELTS reading test. The reading preparation course has also fulfilled most of the candidates' expectations of gaining a satisfactory score, and provides candidates with the practical test-taking techniques they need to perform well in the test. According to the interview results, the teachers' objectives to familiarize candidates with the test were also achieved. At the same time, the study shows that the majority of the positive and negative responses are based on the candidates' test performance rather than on any objective evaluation of the preparation course. That is to say, some of their feedback may not be either fair or objective. The candidates' attitudes may be affected by various factors: the IELTS test they sat this time is more difficult or easier; they might like or hate a particular teacher; whether they trust the examination results of the language school they chose or not. Further investigation of these factors needs to be included in future research on the effectiveness of the preparation course.

4. Summary and Conclusion

As more and more students sit the IELTS reading test as part of their goal to be admitted to undergraduate and postgraduate courses in English-speaking countries, private language schools providing test preparation courses are developing at an accelerating rate. This study has investigated whether the IELTS reading course in a language school in China offers candidates an efficient and effective preparation and improved chances to gain high scores. A questionnaire and interviews were given to 20 candidates and two teachers in School A via emails.

In accordance with the theory section, this study identified the primary reading skills assessed in IELTS reading, including general reading comprehension and specific test-based techniques to produce a good vocabulary; familiarity with different question types; use of expeditious reading strategies such as skimming, search reading and scanning; prior experiences and a fast reading speed. The analysis was carried out through the consultation of IELTS official description. The study also discussed test difficulties in IELTS Reading with regard to text difficulties, question difficulties and time pressure based on the candidates and teachers' responses.

In the investigation of the IELTS reading preparation course provided in School A, the study has evaluated course effectiveness by means of candidate feedback on course, expectation, course structure, teaching materials and teaching methods. The teacher's comments are compared with those of the candidates. From the feedback from candidates, it can be seen that the course has fulfilled their expectation to learn test-taking techniques and the reading skills required in the IELTS reading task. And the teachers have achieved their objectives to familiarize students with the test, as identified in the interview results.

Moreover, both the candidates' and teachers' responses signify that the preparation course "teaches to the test", i.e. focuses on teaching the candidates' IELTS test-taking techniques rather than improving their actual reading abilities, which conforms to the general purpose of the preparation course. There are also some aspects of the preparation course in need of improvement, such as the shortage of time, compact content, insufficient teacher-student interaction and insufficient opportunities for practice. Accordingly, both teachers and candidates suggested that the length of the course be increased and more materials for practice and teacher-student interaction be provided. These are important recommendations worthy of research.

The present study of whether the IELTS preparation course in terms of reading task is effective in improving candidates' performance in the test is preliminary. The study also shows that both the positive and negative comments by the candidates are based on their test performance and cannot be considered completely objective evaluations of the course. Other factors could also have contributed to the candidates' attitudes to the course as well as their performance in the test. For instance, the IELTS test they sat this time is more difficult or easier; they might like or hate a particular teacher; whether they trust the examination results of the language school they chose or

not, etc. Such factors require further investigation and should be included in future research on the effectiveness of the preparation course. This study expects that more improvement for the preparation course to be made to benefit more IELTS candidates.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Questionnaire

I am a graduate student at Kristianstad University in Sweden working on a study of the IELTS preparation course and how it prepares candidates for the reading comprehension test. The investigation is anonymous and the result will be used only for research purposes. I know you have taken the course and recently sat the test I would greatly appreciate it if you would kindly fill in the accompanying questionnaire. Thank you for your time.

1. Why did you take IELTS?

A. Overseas study

B. Improving your English language skills

C Finding a job in China or abroad

D. Immigration

2. Which one of the four test modules in IELTS is the most difficult? Why?

A. Listening   B. Reading   C. Writing D. Speaking

_____

3. Which question task in the IELTS reading test do you think is most difficult? Why?

_____

4. What skills and knowledge do you think are entailed in performing well in the IELTS reading test? **(You can choose one or more options)**

A. Knowledge of vocabulary.

B. Familiarity with the test format

C. Use of reading strategies such as expeditious and careful reading

D. Prior experience

E. A fast reading speed

F. Other skills _____

5. What are the difficulties that your meet in the reading task? **(You can choose one or more options)**

A. Unfamiliarity with text topics

B. Difficulty of vocabulary

C. Difficulty of question language

D. Difficulty of certain question types

E Time pressure

F Fear of long texts

G Other difficulties_____

6. What were your expectations of the IELTS reading preparation course? Why did you enroll on it?

_____

7. Please comment on the structure of the course in terms of **a)** content and **b)** time allocation.

_____

8. Comment on the teaching materials in terms of content and relevance.

_____

9. Comment on the teacher's input in helping you understand and successfully complete specific question tasks.

_____

10. How did your teacher help you deal with unfamiliar vocabulary? Were his/her methods effective? Please explain your answer.

_____

11. How did your teacher help you deal with time pressure? How effective was his/her advice in the examination situation?

_____

12. Did the preparation course for IELTS reading fulfill your expectations? Kindly explain your answer.

_____

13. Do you think the reading course has improved your ability to pass the reading comprehension test?

_____

14. Has the reading preparation course improved your ability to read academic texts in general? Kindly explain your answer.

_____

15. If you do not get the score you require this time round, will you take part in the course again before the next test? Please explain your answer.

_____

16. What aspects of the preparation course do you think need to be improved? Kindly explain your answer.

_____

Scores of three mock IELTS reading tests _____ _____ _____

Score of the IELTS reading test on March 19, 2011 _____

Appendix 2

Interview Questions for Teachers

1. How many years have you been teaching the IELTS reading course?

2. Do you think IELTS preparation courses are necessary? Please explain your answer.

3. What is your primary aim in the preparation course for the IELTS reading test?

4. What are the difficulties candidates might meet in the reading comprehension task, in your opinion?

5. What materials do you use for teaching? What are your criteria for selection of materials?

6. What are your main teaching methods? Do you think they are helpful?

7. How do you help students deal with question of various types in the reading task?

8. How do you help your students deal with unfamiliar vocabulary?

9. How do you help your students deal with time pressure?

10. Do you think the preparation course for the IELTS reading module can achieve its goals and fulfill candidates' expectations? Please explain your answer.

11. How effective is the course in improving the students' test-taking skills in the reading task?

12. Do you think this course prepares candidates for academic study in general or only for the IELTS test itself? Please explain your answer.

13. What improvements can be made in the preparation course, in your opinion?