

2. Student identity, learning and progression: The affective and academic impact of IELTS on ‘successful’ candidates

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the possible affective and academic impacts of the IELTS performance of a group of postgraduate students.

The institutional use of IELTS for university admissions reflects an implicit claim for a student's language development and growth. The extent to which such potential is realised, or not, can therefore be considered a consequential validity issue of the IELTS examination. To date, there has been relatively little focus in IELTS impact studies on the different IELTS profiles of 'successful IELTS students'. This research adopted a case study approach and tracked 26 postgraduate students over a five to 11 month period in one English university. Framed as a post-IELTS impact study, it has examined the possible affective and academic impacts of the students' IELTS performances (in all four language skill areas) from the point at which they start their academic programs of subject learning. Identity is conceptualised from a socio-cultural perspective: drawing on the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998), the development of identity involves negotiation of access to communities of practice. Identity and learning are performed, and through narrative accounts of performance in learning journals, interviews and student workshops, we document the process of learning by international students. This process is further informed by two other data sets: i) the accounts of academic tutors and administrators, and ii) assessments of learning power, as represented by the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (Broadfoot 2005; Deakin Crick et al, 2004).

Student performance on IELTS has been analysed in relation to the four language skill areas. Two approaches have been taken to the analysis of the data: (a) ethnographic accounts of subject learning through the medium of English, and (b) categorical analysis using winMAX (Kuckartz 1998). The findings from this research are several and point to: (i) the affective dimensions of the struggle of postgraduate students and the ways in which these derive from the test itself; (ii) the linking of this struggle with how they work through the four language skills; (iii) an overwhelming lack of awareness of admissions staff about IELTS; and (iv) the assumptions about the test by tutors and how these might impact on student performance.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research purpose

This study investigates the possible *affective* and *academic* impact of IELTS results on students once they are accepted by an institution, with specific reference to their learning experience (eg engagement with their courses) and academic progress and achievement (eg via coursework assignments). It is relevant within the context of other IELTS impact studies (see Hawkey 2001; Saville 2000; Saville and Hawkey 2004) in that it aims to illuminate some of the post-IELTS impact on ‘successful’ IELTS students-as-stakeholder groups as they engage with their academic programs of study. Specifically, we have investigated student experiences of preparing for, and sitting IELTS, and the impact and/or ‘meanings’ of IELTS results for the students themselves *prior to*, as well as *during* their postgraduate study in the UK. We have also analysed how these students – with different IELTS profiles – have negotiated the ‘new’ challenges and experiences with which they have been faced as part of their postgraduate studies in a UK-learning environment. The specific lens through which we have engaged in this research has been constructed with a view of impact explicitly referenced to facets of *student identity*, as conceptualised through the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Wenger (1998), see 3.3. In this respect, we have also sought to prioritise methodologically the concept of *orientation to stakeholders* in test validation, using a largely narrative approach to develop case studies which illuminate processes of identity formation and the role of IELTS in this process. Further, we have explored perceptions of acceptable IELTS entry levels and the consequences of these for student learning and progression, from the perspectives of tutors and administrators involved in the student admissions process, thereby analysing IELTS as a management tool for both admissions and learning.

1.2 Organisation of the report

In this introduction, we present an overview of our research purpose. In 2, we provide the rationale for the research study focused around seven assumptions. The literature reviewed in 3 examines aspects of stakeholding in test validation (3.2) which, in turn, links to the central focus of this study in addressing issues of student identity (3.3, 3.4). In 3.4 we highlight a number of research studies of central relevance to this study. The specific research questions, the selection of research approaches to investigate these questions, and details of the research procedures and tools for data analysis are provided in 4. Our findings are reported in three sections, analysing, in 5, facets of IELTS as a management tool; in 6, student learning experiences with reference to the IELTS scores in the four language skills, and, in 7, examining student learning and progress in terms of academic grades and learning power, and then relating these to both processes of identity negotiation and IELTS scores. The summary of central findings, the limitations of and implications from the research as well as conclusions and recommendations for action are presented in the final section, 8.

We turn first to our central motivations for this research and outline the main assumptions underpinning our study.

2 RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

Our research rests on a number of assumptions based on our experience of, and knowledge about, overseas student admissions procedures in university contexts, postgraduate teaching and learning at both masters and doctoral levels, and language testing research. These assumptions relate to concerns of test consequences for ‘successful’ IELTS candidates in respect of: (i) approaches to test validation; (ii) relationships between IELTS profiles and student engagement in postgraduate learning; (iii) student projections of self and student learning trajectories; and (iv) uses of IELTS data by university staff involved in student admissions. We outline these assumptions below, each of which is taken up for subsequent analysis and discussion in later sections of this report.

Assumption 1

Methodologically, it is appropriate to take a process approach to test validation with an emphasis on post-IELTS impact on student learning.

Early approaches to IELTS validation were dominated by product-focused approaches that, for example, involved a detailed specification by the IELTS providers of the target language-use domain (following Bachman 1990) or, as reflected in predictive validation studies, focused on test-takers' academic achievements within students' university courses (Table 3.1). A feature of these studies is the primary focus on the relationships between IELTS-related judgements on subsequent student academic outcomes as evidenced primarily through examination performance in areas of students' specialisation. However, the range of approaches, both epistemological and procedural, has been extensively widened in recent years, evidenced through the different phases of the IELTS Impact Studies (IIS) (see Hawkey 2001; Saville 2000; Saville and Hawkey 2004) and the research that has been commissioned through the IELTS research grant awards competition (see 3.2 and 3.4 below). Our research is aligned to these significant changes in approaches to test validation by focusing on *process* concerns in relation to the consequences for 'successful' IELTS candidates in terms of their capacity to engage fully with the learning demands of their postgraduate studies. (Note: 'Successful' in the sense we are using it in this report refers not only to the performance in the IELTS test, but also to the acceptance of this score as sufficient for entry to a specific program, and subsequent registration in the program by a test-taker.) It also takes a student-as-stakeholder stance. Specifically, for the main data collection phase we have adopted a narrative approach to data collection through conversations with students, individually or in focus groups, and student language and learning journals (see 4 below for details of our methodology).

The next set of assumptions, 2 and 3, connect to facets of student learning in terms of a student's IELTS profile.

Assumption 2

IELTS profiles may not only predict academic course grades, but they may also be factors in determining the nature of student engagement with complex learning tasks during their postgraduate studies.

Assumption 3

The initial difficulties experienced by many overseas students in adapting to their postgraduate studies tend to persist for students with 'weaker' IELTS profiles and may even be exacerbated as they progress through their studies.

Our experience suggests that the achievement of different IELTS band score levels (ie high, adequate or bare pass levels) may impact on students' experiences of studying through the medium of English, with consequences for students on both academic (ie learning within the specific framework of the program) and affective (eg emotional, motivation, confidence, levels of engagement and other forms of learning) dimensions. Ongoing research suggests that the challenges of learning for international students in a British higher education context have a significant affective dimension: students' confidence and engagement with complex tasks seem to be shaped in part by their self-esteem as an English language user (Kiely, Clibbon, Rea-Dickins, Walter and Woodfield 2004). Since the IELTS result is a significant marker of this competence (the significance enhanced by the recognition accorded by the British institution), it is important to understand the affective impact of the test in the context of learning on the program for which it has been a significant entry requirement. Further, 'informally' gathered evidence suggests that in academic study reading and writing requirements pose significant challenges for the majority of international students but constitute more enduring problems for some; this impacts on both their self-esteem and on their academic performance.

Assumption 4

International students have to negotiate new learning identities as they navigate the learning challenges implicit in their overseas (ie UK) academic study contexts.

While IELTS, on the one hand, can only provide a ‘snapshot’ of a student’s language proficiency for university departments, its use by institutions for admissions purposes, on the other hand, reflects an implicit claim for the student’s language development and academic growth. The extent to which such potential is realised, or not, in the university program can therefore be considered a consequential validity issue of the IELTS test. Further, the program experience as a whole, and related student’s academic identity and affective factors, through which this potential is realised or not, can be considered a dimension of this issue (see assumptions 2 and 3 above). There has been relatively little focus on the impact of different IELTS profiles on students’ experiences of learning, see 3.2, 3.4. Our experience suggests that effective learning involves adapting to new learning environments. Such adaptation can be seen as negotiation of a new identity as each student performs in the learning community of their program. The challenges faced include for example, varying levels of autonomy and novel learning experiences. We have observed greater navigation capacities on the part of some students than others. This research seeks to investigate further the links between students’ learning capacities and their IELTS profiles.

Assumption 5

University tutors and pathway coordinators project views about students’ potential and learning based on IELTS scores.

Assumption 6

There is a perception that reading and writing are particularly important skills for successful postgraduate studies and that students who present with weak scores in these areas might be at greater risk.

Again, experience suggests an IELTS profile sometimes shapes the expectations that tutors have of international students, with tutors claiming that linguistically weaker students face significant problems coping with coursework, and may need more tutorial support in completing assignments. In addition, based on informal comments voiced by some tutors, there is a view prevailing that, perhaps, higher scores in the IELTS reading and/or writing subtests (than listening and speaking) might be more appropriate for postgraduate admissions. While the above only constitute anecdotal evidence, they reflect opinions aired on a fairly regular basis in one of the departments in which this research is located. This research therefore seeks to investigate if there is any validity in either of these claims.

Assumption 7

IELTS as a management tool in admissions is perceived as largely ‘unproblematic’ whereas in reality it is quite the reverse.

Our experience over many years in different institutions suggests that use of IELTS data by administrators who process admissions and program coordinators who make the decisions about student applications may be somewhat inconsistent. Firstly, there may not be shared understandings of the measure and what the test score means; secondly the use of IELTS may constitute a different criterion for admissions from those used in decision-making about non-international applications. We have observed, for example, a range of understandings of IELTS, from more extensive to very little awareness indeed of what an IELTS score might mean, with total grades interpreted in a very literal and categorical sense. Overall, we have been concerned by the representation of the IELTS in admissions processes as straightforward and unproblematic whereas, in actual fact, it is much more complex. Such a view may be evidenced in two ways: the IELTS score may be viewed as a precise

statement of academic English competence, and once the required threshold has been met, students need the same support and learning opportunities. Secondly, when learning difficulties are encountered, explanations other than readiness related to language skills are sought: ‘suspicious’ IELTS score, lack of confidence or cultural background. A further complexity is that an IELTS score is required for those international students whose first language or language of education is not English, but not for other applicants. Included in these other criteria are quality of first degree (including status of the awarding institution), relevant professional experience, motivation for postgraduate study as set out in the personal statement. Whereas reaching a decision on the basis of these criteria might be considered more of an art than a science, the clarity of the IELTS score in the application of those applicants from whom it is required may mean that decisions on such applicants are effectively made on a different criterial base from others.

3 POSITIONING THE RESEARCH

3.1 Introduction

We position our research in three ways. Firstly we outline our rationale for the student-as-stakeholder approach to our research (3.2). Secondly we present our conceptualisations of identity and explain how we construct student identity with reference to our data and the research context (3.3, 3.4). Thirdly, we highlight findings from previous research of central relevance to our study (3.4).

3.2 A student-as-stakeholder approach to test validation

Below we first analyse the different research approaches adopted in the impact studies supported through the IELTS Research Scheme, plus two other relevant ones (Allwright and Banerjee 1997; Banerjee 2003). With reference to this analysis in Table 3.1, we then, in 3.3, provide a rationale for our research approach that has sought to value student voice as a means to analysing consequences from IELTS in relation to individual student learning and progression.

1. IELTS research studies focusing on test preparation courses, eg	
Read & Hayes (2003)	<p>First Phase: survey and interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A survey of the provision of IELTS preparation in the tertiary/adult sector in New Zealand (language schools including language departments /centres associated with public tertiary institutions as well as private language schools) ▪ 23 follow-up interviews with teachers engaged in IELTS preparation at the larger language schools: probing the structure and delivery of IELTS preparation, and exploring the relationship between preparing students for the test and for academic study. <p>Second Phase (one month): classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaire</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Observation of two preparation classes using Part A of the Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation Scheme (COLT) and the draft classroom observation instrument developed by Lancaster University team commissioned by UCLES in 1995. ▪ Interviews with the two teachers of the preparation classes (before the courses began and weekly thereafter once the observations were underway) and a questionnaire for them when the observations were complete. ▪ Student questionnaires: (1) pre-observation to collect information on their background, English language training, perceptions of IELTS and expectations of the IELTS preparation course; (2) at the end of the course to record any changes in their perceptions. ▪ Pre- and post-testing using retired version of IELTS: in the first and last weeks of the courses the students were given the Listening, Reading and Writing models of retired versions of IELTS as pre- and post-tests.

<p>Elder & O’Loughlin (2003)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Score gains on IELTS at the beginning and end of a 10-12 week period of intensive English language instruction ▪ Pre- and post-study questionnaires to all student participants (n=112) to elicit information about the range of personal, instructional and environmental variables that might influence language test performance. ▪ Semi-structured interviews with a subset of 18 students sampled according to their level of gain at the post-test session in order to probe the nature of students’ English study experience and possible reasons for their progress (or lack of) over the three month period ▪ Interviews with administrators and teachers at the participating institutions (Australia and New Zealand) to elicit information about (1) the learning environment and (2) other critical factors in determining the English language progress of EAP students in general and those 18 students chosen for in depth interviewing in particular. Some interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and others in the context of a focus group. ▪ Regression analyses were undertaken to investigate the relationship between personal, instructional and environmental factors and scores gains.
<p>Rao et al (2003)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Pre-test of a sample of potential Fiji IELTS candidates ▪ 30 hours intensive preparation classes focusing on General Training Reading and Writing ▪ Exit test and oral interviews with the participants at the conclusion of the intensive preparation classes
<p>2. IELTS predictive validation studies: of academic readiness or outcomes, eg</p>	
<p>Cotton & Conrow (1998)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Student (n=33) questionnaire (Semester 1) ▪ Student interviews (n=23) at Semester 2 which consisted of a significant amount of structured questions “similar to the semester 1 questionnaire in seeking quantitative information” (p.82) ▪ Grade Point Averages ▪ Academic staff (n=34) rating of student performance ▪ Surveys for two international student advisers and two English language support tutors (questionnaire similar to those sent to the academic staff) ▪ Student self-assessments of their performance
<p>Hill, Storch & Lynch (1999)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students’ (n=55) Grade Point Average, IELTS and/or TOEFL scores ▪ Student questionnaires asking for their view of the types of language skills necessary for academic success at university: their test scores and self-assessment of language proficiency, and English language support. ▪ Follow-up interviews (n=22) with students to gain understanding of the factors which students perceived as contributing to their success or failure at university.
<p>Kerstjens & Nery (2000)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students’ (n=113, from Technical & Further Education and Higher Education sectors) IELTS scores and Grade Point Average ▪ Student questionnaires to elicit students’ perceptions of the adequacy of both their IELTS scores and general English language proficiency for academic performance in their first semester of study. ▪ Academic staff interviews to elicit their perceptions of the adequacy of first year international students’ IELTS scores and general English language proficiency for academic performance.
<p>3. IELTS in managing admissions and managing learning, eg</p>	
<p>McDowell & Merrylees (1998)</p>	<p>First tier</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A large survey using a questionnaire to investigate various issues of uses of tests (incl. IELTS) in Australian universities and colleges <p>Second tier</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personal interviews with a number of academic staff [NB. No details of these in their report] to find out how academics feel about the level of English of their non-English speaking background students and any changes they would like to see in terms of gate-keeping arrangements (tests, or other procedures).

Coleman, Starfield, & Hagan (2003)	<p>Comparisons of the perceptions and perspectives of university staff and students (in the UK, Australia and PRC) towards IELTS through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Surveys to staff (academic and administrative) and currently enrolled students ▪ 37 interviews with staff and students
Allwright & Banerjee 1997 (also reported in Banerjee 2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Collection of biodata of 38 student participants, eg age, gender, country, first language, subject of first degree, academic course, relevant work experience, English language proficiency admission scores ▪ Base-line measure of English language proficiency using IELTS test ▪ Measures of academic achievement such as final degree results, marks/grades for term assignments, projects, tests and examinations and dissertations ▪ Student questionnaires (Questionnaire 1 asked students to provide a self-assessment of the impact of language on their academic performance at the end of Term 1; In Questionnaire 2, students provided self-assessments of the impact of linguistic and non-linguistic factors on their academic performance at the end of Term 2) ▪ Tutors questionnaire (All course directors of the students in the study evaluated their students' academic performance and adequacy of English at the end of Term 2) ▪ Structured interviews with 21 "interesting" cases of limited English language proficiency. 10 of them might not have been accepted for the academic courses if the University's admission criteria had been applied inflexibly (p.9).
Banerjee (2003)	<p>Ethnographic approach (for the main study) involving:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interviewing each of the four university admissions personnel from two postgraduate degrees for a minimum of one hour ▪ Interviewing students (n=25) between two and four times during the main study ▪ Requiring students to keep critical incident diary entries for the first two terms ▪ Providing detailed analyses of the learning experiences of two students (in the main part of the dissertation) to explore the relationship between language proficiency and learning experience in terms of the "cost" the students incurred in pursuit of their degrees – a key conceptualisation developed from the preliminary study (i.e. Allwright & Banerjee 1997)
4. Analysis of student writing	
Kennedy, Dudley-Evans & Thorp (personal communication)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Text and discourse analysis
5. Authenticity of IELTS writing tasks (not strictly an impact study but links with Assumption 6)	
Moore & Morton (1999)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Task survey: comparing 155 assignment tasks from a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses with a corpus of 20 IELTS Task 2 items, according to four dimensions of difference – genre, information source, rhetorical function, object of enquiry. ▪ Small-scale staff survey: interviews with 12 lecturers of first year undergraduate subjects to obtain their views on the relationship between university assignment tasks and IELTS Task 2 items.

Table 3.1: An overview of the research approaches of IELTS studies

Among the five main trends in researching facets of the validity of IELTS, predictive validation studies, early examples of which includes Criper and Davies (1988), continue to prevail. Several of the recent post-IELTS impact studies have focused on the predictive validity of IELTS in relation to test-takers' academic achievements within students' university courses, as in Cotton and Conrow (1998), Hill et al (1999), Kerstjens and Nery (2000). A shared feature of these studies is the primary focus on the relationships between IELTS-related judgements on subsequent student achievement – eg academic performance evidenced through GPA, in areas of students' specialisation, supported by

data from academic staff/student advisors, student self-assessment, and student questionnaires and interviews.

A rather similar *outcomes-oriented* approach is visible in the majority of studies that have investigated student gains. These have used a pre- and post-test design, linked to EAP pre-session training or specific IELTS preparation classes of varying lengths, eg Read and Hayes (2003), Elder and O’Loughlin (2003), Rao et al (2003), also Archibald 2002 (cited in Green 2004). However, Read and Hayes (2003) also included a *process* approach element captured through an observational component to enrich the data elicited through questionnaires, interviews and pre- and post-test results.

As identified in 3 in Table 3.1, IELTS as a tool in managing admissions and linked to students’ learning experiences has been researched through survey approaches (eg questionnaires), interviews with relatively small participant numbers and an ethnographic case study.

A further approach using corpora is evidenced through the analysis of text and discourse features (Thorp, personal communication) and in Moore and Morton (1999), supported in the latter case with subject tutors’ interview data.

In summary, then, IELTS research studies have begun to cast their nets more widely, examining the impact of IELTS from a variety of perspectives. To date, approaches to IELTS validation have:

1. investigated statistically the relationships between IELTS scores and academic achievement as a product
2. investigated statistically student gains from specific language training or IELTS preparation classes
3. sought to incorporate stakeholder perspectives on the use and interpretation of IELTS through interviews and questionnaires
4. gained access to IELTS preparation through classroom observation
5. adopted an ethnographic and narrative approach to capture insights into students’ learning experiences and the student admissions process.

We also conclude that students have been involved in four main ways, as:

- *test takers*, ie through their IELTS performance or other ‘parallel’ tests
- *classroom participants*, ie captured through observational means
- *respondents* to questionnaires or interviews
- *story tellers* of their own learning experiences.

It is with this last mode of participation that this study connects and develops.

3.3 Conceptualising student learning identities

3.3.1 Introduction

Historically, there have been various ways of conceptualising and researching human identity. These range from a focus on the one hand on demographic and psychological parameters of the individual determined through survey and psychometric procedures, to a view of identity as socially situated and construed and explained with reference to membership of communities of practice and interaction with ‘significant others’. Central to our conceptualisation of student learning identities is the notion of community (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). In our case, we take as our community the academic context of teaching and learning in which membership for international students constitutes both the process and the outcome of learning. The focus of our analysis, then, involves the various processes through which i) the individuals manage their membership of the academic program community, and ii) the program (and wider institutional) context evolves to become a learning community, ie facilitating and supporting membership.

Specifically, our conceptualisation of student identity focuses on three facets of the individual: intra-personal identity and knowledge (3.3.2(i)); socio-historical constructions of self(ves) in 3.3.2(ii); and construction of self(ves) in relation to significant others, as summarised in our working model in Figure 3.1 below.

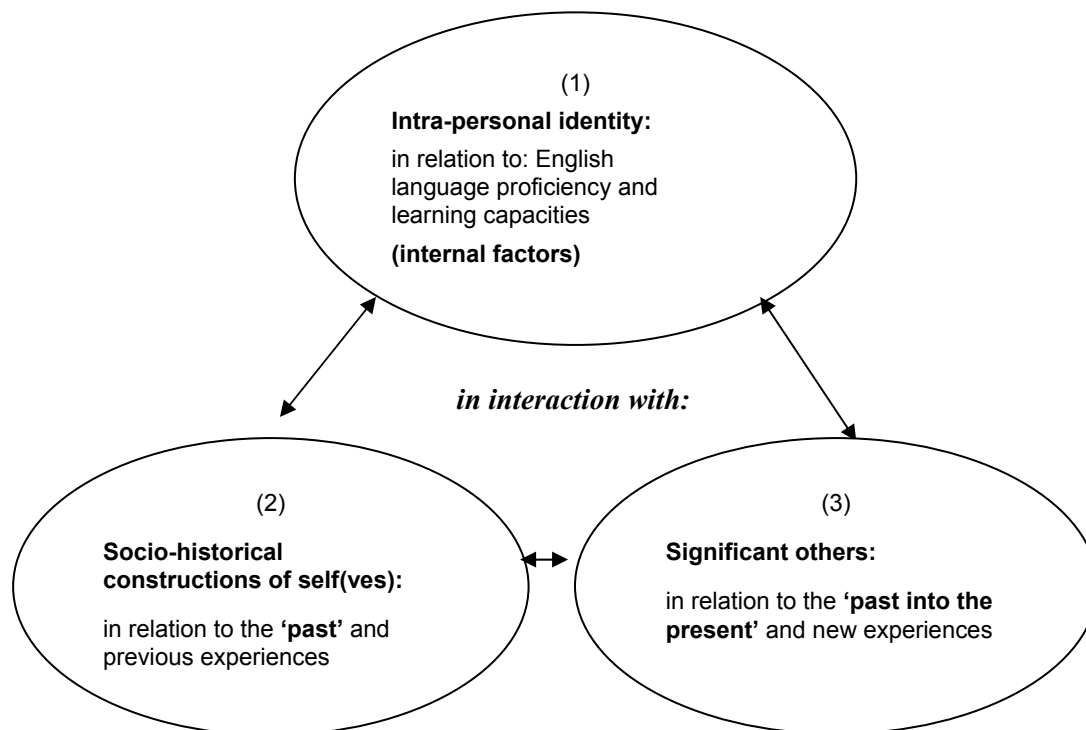


Figure 3.1: Working with student identity

As observed in Figure 3.1, we are working with two ‘periods’ in time: the ‘past’ and the ‘present’, with the former linked to (1) evidence of language ability and student learning capacities and (2) student accounts of their previous language, learning and professional experiences, and the latter characterised by (3) ways in which students construct themselves in response to new learning challenges, by ‘bringing their past experiences and knowledge into the present’. We also recognise the dynamic of the ‘future’ in sharing both the past and the present. This notion corresponds to what Wenger (1998) labels ‘imagination’ or ‘imagined self’, and encompasses both interpretations of past experiences and performances (such as IELTS scores), and visions of the future that drive motivation for learning and reflect readiness for new dimensions of identity.

Further, the above model allows for a detailed analysis of student voice, fundamental to our ‘stakeholder’ orientation in this research. As opposed to engaging students-as-stakeholder in the role of informant responding to structured or time constrained data collection procedures, we have involved our student participants in dialogue with us – as researchers – over a five to nine month period on tasks over which they have had significant control (see 4).

In the sections that follow, we analyse further the facets of our working model with reference to the relevant literature and, subsequently, provide exemplars from our data to clarify our model.

3.3.2 Identity as knowing from and about the past

3.3.2a Student intra-personal identity and knowledge

This represents the starting point in our research for elaborating facets of student identity. We have selected to work with two specific dimensions relating to:

1. students' learning capacities, orientation and motivation assessed via the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory, ELLI, (see 4.5.1; see also 7), and
2. students' language proficiency, via their IELTS profiles.

Although both of these could be considered 'traits' in the psychological sense, we are not working with these constructs as fixed innate capacities. We recognise, as Pollard and Filer (1999, p 21) observe:

I either intellectual, physical nor affective dispositions are genetically fixed – but they do remain important factors in exploring capability.

Nonetheless, the use of IELTS as an indicator of 'linguistic readiness' for university study implies the notion of 'capacity for further language development' that will evolve once a student engages with learning through the medium of English in their selected programs of academic study in the UK. By the same token, the use of the ELLI is also premised on the notion of 'growth in learning'. This student intra-personal capacity – captured through both the linguistic and the learning dispositions' indicators identified in Figure 3.2 – are portrayed as *growable*, that is, not as innate or fixed but as implying 'opportunity for potential growth'.

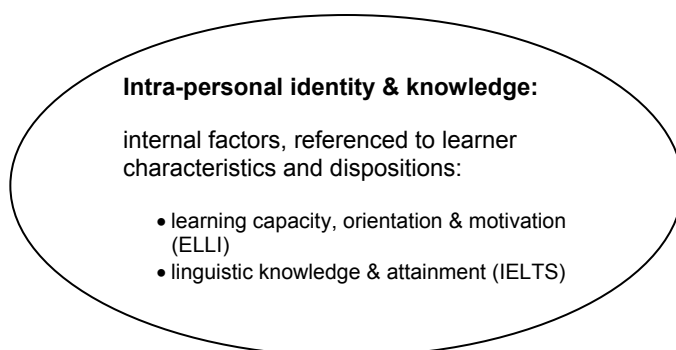


Figure 3.2: Student intra-personal identity and knowledge

While the orientation represented by Figure 3.2 above only snapshots student knowledge, capacity, and dispositions, both of these two areas (ie learning capacity and language proficiency) are central to effective participation in the academic learning community. According to this view, we have moved away from the traditional labels and identity reification of students, for example in terms of gender, country context, and L1, towards one which focuses on what we know about a student's language proficiency and learning capacity at the point at which they start their academic studies. In this respect, all the students may be said to be entering the UK academic learning environment from the position of non-participating members of the academic community. A core assumption is that this intra-personal knowledge and capacity will impact in some way on how students engage with their future learning and the processes involved in negotiating membership of this 'new' academic community.

3.3.2b Socio-historical constructions of self(ves)

While the orientation defined in Figure 3.2 above provides the initial platform for capturing student identity, as measured by IELTS and ELLI, it is only a partial representation of student learning identities, as these student intra-personal identities and characteristics are inseparable from those that are shaped by or through others, as reflected in the following observations:

Building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities. The concept of identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual, so that each can be talked about in terms of the other. It avoids a simplistic individual-social dichotomy without doing away with the distinction. The resulting perspective is neither individualistic nor absolutely institutional or societal. It does justice to the lived experience of identity while recognizing its social character – it is the social, the cultural, the historical with a human face.
(Wenger 1998, p 145)

Thus, a second facet of the ‘past’ to be captured from our data draws upon socio-historical perspectives, reflected through student projections of themselves, as outlined in Figure 3.3.

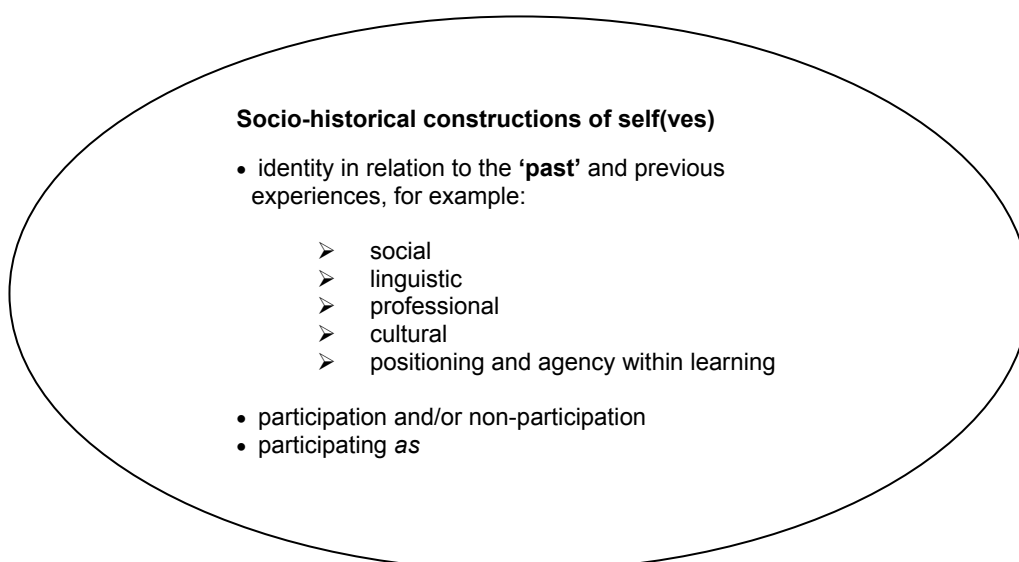


Figure 3.3: Socio-historical constructions of self(ves)

These perceptions of how students both perceive and/or project themselves were derived through narrative student accounts (see 4) captured at the early stages of their engagement with their academic courses. These are, in other words, representations of the student’s subjective sense of self(ves), what Wenger (1998) labels ‘imagination’, as individuals about to engage in learning through the medium of English. They are evidenced through ways in which students aligned themselves to the past with, for example, references to their ‘professional self’ as an English teacher with membership of the community of English teachers, or to their ‘learning style’ as shaped through their membership of a particular cultural context with a specific set of learning traditions. Of particular interest at this level of data capture are the ways in which both English proficiency and engagement with learning are imagined as part of student identity through their narrative accounts.

Relevant to both the socio-historical constructions of self described above and the identities forged with reference to ‘significant others’ are the facets of identity conceptualised by Wenger (1998, p149); the emphases are ours. These are:

1. Identity as *negotiated experience*. We define who we are by the ways we experience ourselves through participation as well as by the ways we and others reify ourselves.
2. Identity as *community membership*. We define who we are by the familiar and the unfamiliar.
3. Identity as *learning trajectory*. We define who we are by where we have been and where we are going.
4. Identity as *nexus of multi-membership*. We define who we are by the ways we reconcile our various forms of membership into one identity.
5. Identity as a relation *between the local and the global*. We define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and of manifesting broader styles and discourses.

These notions of identity formation are particularly relevant to understanding learning by international students in the context of postgraduate study. Each represents a challenge, which at an affective level may be represented as ‘struggle’, which is overcome by drawing on:

- resources of the imagination (Wenger 1998)
- the opportunities for interaction and dialogue in the study context
- growth in capacity, in terms of language use, learning power more widely, and personal coping strategies.

We focus next on these processes of identity formation.

3.3.3 Identity as becoming: negotiating the past into the present

Central to this facet of identity are: (i) the notions of movement from a position of non-participation to one of engagement and effective participation; (ii) students’ perceptions of their own agency or that of others; and (iii) the notion of struggle in negotiating membership of the new (academic) community. This last has been captured by Ranson (1998, p 21):

The purposive nature of learning presupposes a strong sense of identity in the learner. The purposes which grow out of learning imply a sense of self and personhood and thus the confidence to engage in the struggle of learning to create the values of the unfolding life. The identity we develop, however, and the motivation we have to unfold it are always acquired with and through others. Limited conceptions of ourselves, and limited expectations from others, seriously limit the motivation to learn.

In our view, the notions of ‘struggle’, ‘unfold’, and ‘motivation’ are projected as integral to our model of identity and learning. Other researchers and educationists, too, have recognised this phenomenon of struggle. Writing within a pedagogical context and of learning styles, Coffield et al (2004, p 62) cite Kolb (1984, p 41):

Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it.

Referring again to the work of Kolb, they continue:

*Learning requires the resolution of conflicts between **dialectically** opposed modes of adaptation to the world. For Kolb, learning is by its very nature full of tension, because new knowledge is constructed by learners choosing the particular types of abilities they need.*
(Coffield et al, 2004, p 62)

While the views of Kolb resonate with our conceptualisations of student learner and learning identities, our position extends beyond a learning-style inventory approach to one in which we explore the processes through which students move from a mode of non-participant to participant within an academic learning community.

The tensions involved in the struggle may be viewed as a tension between ‘fixedness’ in the view of self, and a more dynamic, evolving view. A ‘fixed’ view may derive from past experiences, evidenced in for example, the idea that experiences in the past of ‘being good at English’, or ‘able to grasp new concepts quickly and effectively’, as part of identity. Such views may be particularly important for some of our research participants who are likely to have a history of achievement in English. When learning proves particularly challenging, and feedback directly challenges this established view, the struggle to learn to participate may be more acute. An alternative to relying on past achievements as determinants of community membership is active engagement with the novel, identifying and investing in growable areas of personal learning resources, so that the transformations through learning are not just in terms of achievements, but also in terms of the process.

Above, we have set out our conceptualisation of student learning identities taking into account both intra-individual and interactionist constructions of identity, as summarised in Figure 3.4 on the following page.

Identity and the process of identity formation as negotiation of membership of new communities are social. As Wenger (1998, p 154) notes:

Identity in practice is defined socially not merely because it is reified in a social discourse of the self and of social categories, but also because it is produced as a lived experience of participation in specific communities.

We are thus working with a construct of identity characterised as follows:

- identity is fundamentally temporal
- the process of identity formation as negotiation of membership of social communities is ongoing
- the process is enacted in social contexts, so the temporality of identity is more complex than a linear notion of time
- the process has an important affective dimension, which may be a ‘struggle’ both in interaction with significant others, and a struggle in reconciling different ‘imagined’ view of self
- identities are defined with respect to the interaction of multiple convergent and divergent trajectories.

In using the term ‘trajectory’ we do not imply a fixed course or a fixed destination. The term trajectory suggests not a path that can be foreseen or charted but a continuous motion – one that has momentum of its own in addition to a field of influences. It has coherence through time that connects the past, the present, and the future.

This temporal notion of trajectory characterises identity as:

- a work in progress
- shaped by efforts – both individual and collective – to create a coherence through time that threads together successive forms of participation in the definition of a person
- incorporating the past and the future in the experience of the present
- negotiated with respect to paradigmatic trajectories
- invested in histories of practice and in generational politics.

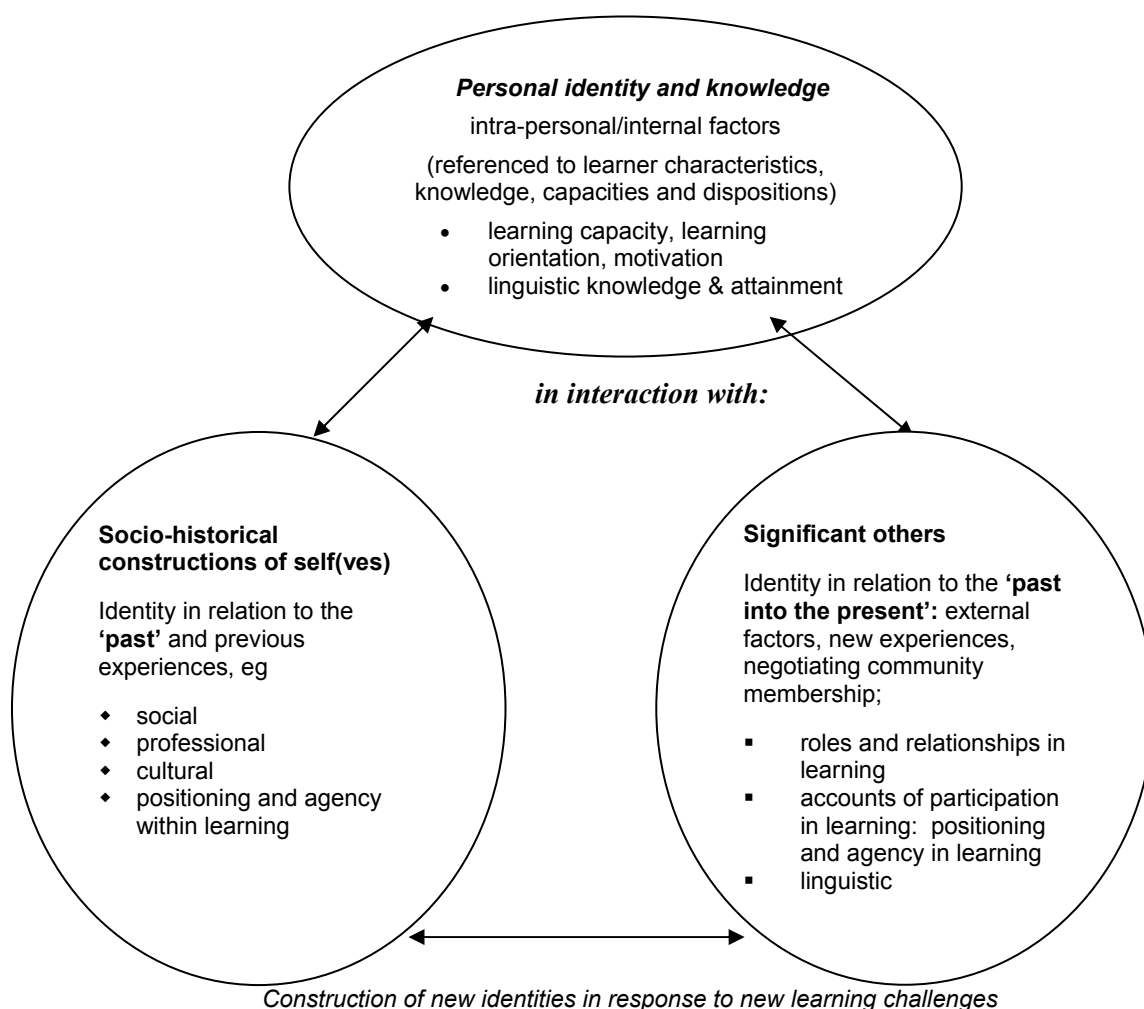


Figure 3.4: Operationalising student learning identities

In summary, a central feature of our interpretations of identity is that it is not an object but that, following Wenger (1998, pp 153-154):

identity in practice arises out of an interplay of participation and reification ... it is ... a constant becoming [our emphasis]. The work of identity is always going on. Identity is not some primordial core of personality that already exists. It is not something we acquire at some point in the same way that, at a certain age, we grow a set of permanent teeth. Even though issues of identity as a focus of overt concern may become more salient at certain times than at others, our identity is something we constantly renegotiate during the course of our lives.

3.4 Operationalising student learner and learning identities

Above, we have summarised the conceptual bases underpinning our understanding of student and learning identities. Next, we analyse some of the implications with specific reference to operationalising our construct of student learner and learning identities in relation to our research and participants. This discussion is further amplified in the elaboration of our research design in 4 below.

For our participants – international students who come to study in Britain – the notion of community is complex. We can hypothesise two communities where membership is to be effectively negotiated:

1. the academic community which is pre-existing, has a sense of itself, what it has become, is becoming (evidenced in structure, mission, and constructions such as website) and whose ‘core’ members, the tutors, are ‘significant others’ (significant because of the hierarchy element; and the high stakes of ‘engagement’, in particular the processes of assignment preparation and assessment) and ‘alignment’ (in particular meeting the assessment requirements)
2. the student community is a community in formation – no-one knows anybody else, there are a range of opportunities for forming relationships (such as through L1 groups; class groups; hall of residence groups). The task for each student is perhaps what Côté and Schwartz (2002) describe as ‘individualisation’ – ‘using their own devices’ in managing new situations and in ‘forming integrative bonds’.

Much of our data informs on processes in relation to (1), but we have to bear in mind the significance of (2). From a range of perspectives, the student learning data in journals, workshops and interviews (see sub-section 4 below) points to the importance of membership of the student community, both in itself as a confirming dimension of identity, and as a series of support mechanisms in the struggle to achieve membership of the academic community.

The analysis of our data relates to the processes of interaction between the three facets presented in Figure 3.4 above. This involves:

1. tracking academic progress over time, not as pre-planned trajectories, but as processes of achieving membership of the academic community
2. relating this progress to ‘fixed points’ (IELTS scores and ELLI profiles of learning power). These fixed points are both highly visible but relatively minor facets of identity. Wenger (1998) notes that such reifications have salience largely in terms of how they contribute to the imagined self, a dimension of analysis facilitated by the richness of accounts provided by students
3. operationalising the imagination mode of belonging of the Wenger framework – which involves developing case studies of progress and identity formation which emphasise each student’s own account of learning and community membership
4. situating the IELTS score as part of the imagination – its impact in how it frames the student as an English user, and how the assumptions of readiness for postgraduate study are actually realised and
5. situating success in IELTS as one of a complex network of factors which relate to success in learning

6. In addition to the concept of community in which the students participate and negotiate membership are notions of institutional users of IELTS as communities of practice. The community of practice here is formed around two uses of IELTS scores in decision-making processes, about (i) applications (see 5.2), and (ii) support strategies and interpretations of performance.

Practices here too can be understood in terms of our model (Figure 3.4) and the Wenger framework. Community membership processes involve agreed positions on the importance of English in postgraduate study; the relative importance of strengths in the different skills, and the general complexity of the nest of factors which determine success in study, among which IELTS is located and must be understood. In 5 below our findings inform on different aspects of how the academic communities construct IELTS, and areas where these communities can enhance their own learning.

3.5 Findings of previous IELTS studies

In 3.2 we briefly reviewed approaches taken in IELTS supported studies (see Table 3.1). Here we summarise findings from studies that have focused specifically on (i) the predictability of IELTS for academic success, either through the more traditional regression analyses (eg Cotton and Conrow 1998; Hill et al 1999; Kerstjens and Nery 2000) or through ethnographic account of students learning experiences (eg Banerjee 2003); and (ii) the use of IELTS to manage international student admissions (eg Allwright and Banerjee 1997; Banerjee 2003; McDowell and Merrylees 1998). In addition, a comparative study on the authenticity of IELTS Academic Module Writing Task Two in relation to tasks set within academic departments (Moore and Morton 1999) is also considered of central relevance to our research study.

IELTS predictive validation studies: of academic readiness or outcomes, eg	
Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There was a moderately strong correlation between GPA and IELTS scores; whereas the correlation between GPA and TOEFL score was relatively weak. However, neither IELTS nor TOEFL seemed to be particularly good predictors of academic success (using linear regression analyses) ▪ Data from student interviews and questionnaires identified some non-language skill factors (eg whether assistance was sought voluntarily from English as a second language programs) that might affect academic performances. In particular, students who “voluntarily seek assistance from the ESL Program achieve significantly lower grades in their first semester at Melbourne University than students who do not seek assistance” (p.62) ▪ Such non-linguistic factors may help to explain the weak correlations between language test scores and academic achievement.
Cotton & Conrow, 1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ No positive correlations were found between IELTS overall score and three measures of academic achievement: GPA, academic staff ratings of student performance and students’ self-assessment. ▪ However, in terms of reading and writing sub-scores, they did appear to have significant but weak correlations with staff ratings of students’ academic achievement (0.36 and 0.34 for reading and writing respectively), and with students’ self-assessment of their academic performance at the second semester (0.46 and 0.39 for reading and writing respectively). Reading sub-scores were found to be the best predictors of subsequent academic achievement. ▪ No positive correlations existed between IELTS scores and students’ self-reported language-related difficulties experienced in relation to their subject learning. ▪ The qualitative data suggested that language difficulties were one of the many factors affecting academic endeavours and achievement, eg the amount of English language assistance received, motivation, cultural adjustment and welfare difficulties.

<p>Kerstjens & Nery, 2000</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ There were significant but weak correlations between reading and writing and GPA (0.262, 0.204 respectively) for the total sample (ie students from TAFE and HE sectors). ▪ IELTS scores had a small-to-medium predictive power of academic performance in the higher education sector. Reading was the only significant predictor of academic performance. ▪ However, IELTS scores did not significantly predict academic performance in students from Technical and Further Education. ▪ The qualitative data (student and staff perceptions of the relationships between English language proficiencies and academic performance) somewhat corroborated the statistical findings above. However, both students and staff highlighted the importance of listening skills particularly in the first semester. ▪ Language may not be the only source of influences on academic performance; sociocultural and psychological factors such as motivation, maturity, financial and family pressures, social and cultural adjustment, and learning styles.
<p>IELTS in managing admissions, eg</p>	
<p>McDowell & Merrylees 1998</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ This large survey did not provide much detailed information on the use of IELTS as a management tool for admission purposes.
<p>Coleman, Starfield, & Hagan, 2003</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students on the whole were more knowledgeable than staff on a wide range of themes relating to IELTS. ▪ Students and staff had different views on the predictive power of IELTS test scores on academic achievements.
<p>IELTS study with reference to both student admissions and learning experiences</p>	
<p>Allwright & Banerjee 1997 (also reported in Banerjee 2003)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Above an IELTS score of 7.0, no risk of failure in academic studies existed. ▪ “Below an IELTS score of 7.0, the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance was not straightforward.” (p.66). Apart from English language proficiency, many factors could have contributed to the academic success or failure, “people did succeed academically despite low English language proficiency at entry.” (p.66) ▪ Based on their first questionnaire data (November 1995), it seemed that listening presented more problems than other skills to the participants as a whole group. However, according to the data from their second questionnaire to the students (March 1996), the whole group seemed to have difficulties with the productive skills of writing and speaking. The slightly higher IELTS profile students seemed to experience less difficulty than those of lower profiles. ▪ According to the data from the tutors’ questionnaire, it was found that the tutors did not attribute the students’ academic performances solely to their English language proficiency. Other factors included students’ “conceptual ability”, “personality” and “background knowledge”. ▪ In terms of the cost to students themselves and to tutors and their departments, two broad categories were identified: linguistic and non-linguistic (pp. 53-54). Linguistic cost to students included “found it difficult to identify main ideas”, “could not cope with reading load”, “avoided reading academic articles harder than textbooks”; non-linguistic cost to them included anxiety, pressure, stress, disappointment with assignment grades, boredom, lowered self-esteem, lowered ambition, etc. Costs to tutors and departments can be “written work difficult to understand”, “unable to establish rapport with students”, “pedagogical frustration”, “student demanded greater pedagogical skill of tutor”, “time spent because student came to ask questions or seek additional material”, etc.

<p>Banerjee 2003</p>	<p>Banerjee (2003) focused on two major themes: admissions process and student learning experience:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Admissions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) There are many guides to admission processes in the University, however, these guides concentrate on procedural issues such as documentation on each application, interpretation of academic qualifications, but little on the interpretation of language proficiency scores (p.376) (ii) Several factors were identified as influential in the admissions process such as timing of application, recommendation of agents, whether the student is a recipient of a scholarship, or whether the student is recommended by academic staff. (iii) The admission personnel know and use the University’s published language proficiency criteria. They are also aware of the need to look at the total and sub-scores and also the linguistic demands of postgraduate studies. However, it does not seem that they understand what a particular score implies what a student can or cannot do in English. ▪ Learning experiences of 8 selected cases (with 2 reported in the body of the dissertation and 6 as appendices) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Students’ initial language proficiency did not have a direct and linear relationship with their academic achievement. (ii) In terms of the “cost” to these students’ learning experiences, there are clear patterns: the two “clear accept” students suffered no debilitating language problems; students in “safe bet” suffered prolonged language difficulties; students in the “risk” categories experienced severe and prolonged language difficulties, they were frustrated and disappointed in their subject studies. ▪ Relationship between admissions decisions and learning experiences “... the admissions decisions are rather accurate in predicting whether a student will cope well with academic study in English or whether they will struggle” (p.398). Banerjee attributed this to the fact that during admission processes several other indicators of academic success were already taken into consideration.
<p>Authenticity of IELTS writing tasks</p>	
<p>Moore & Morton 1999</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Their survey of tasks found that IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 items bear some resemblance to the major genre of university study activities, ie essay-type written assignments. ▪ However, a number of important differences were also observed, for example, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) in a subject learning context, “the content of a piece of writing is salient”, while in the IELTS test “it is often incidental” (p.87), (ii) in a subject learning context, reliance exclusively on prior knowledge will usually be criticised for being “anecdotal” (p.87), assignments require the use of external sources – primary and/or secondary, while in the IELTS test it would be sufficient for the students to base their assertions on “their own ideas, knowledge and experience”. (iii) IELTS writing is more or less “<i>opinionative</i>” (or <i>hortative</i>), however this function of <i>hortation</i> was relatively rare in university assignments, and (iv) the functions of <i>summarisation</i> which were common in university assignments did not appear in the IELTS samples the researchers analysed (p.91). ▪ University lecturers identified substantial differences between the writing needs for the test and for the academic subject studies.

Note: In a strict and traditional sense, Allwright and Banerjee (1997) and Banerjee (2003) should also be considered as predictive validity studies. However, as Banerjee (2003) herself suggested “predictive studies are out of date”. She argued that “what is needed is a closer examination of how admissions decisions are made in order to understand better how test results are being interpreted and used as well as the relationship between language proficiency and the incidence of ‘cost’ in a student’s study experience.” (cited from the abstract of the dissertation, no page number indicated). This is a view with which we strongly concur.

Table 3.2: Main findings of previous IELTS research relevant to our study

As in most of the predictive validation studies on the relationship between language proficiency and academic achievement, the findings reviewed above are to some extent also mixed and contradictory in terms of which IELTS sub-score can better predict academic success. However, there does seem to be a consensus that English language skills *per se* may only be able to account for a small to medium part of the variance of international students' academic achievement. The findings may also be sample-specific, for example, Kerstjens and Nery (2000) find IELTS scores can have small to medium predictive power of the academic achievement of their participants in the higher education sector but failed to make significant prediction of the academic achievement of participants from the Technical and Further Education sector. Hence the importance, in our research study, to capture insights into subject learning through the specific lens of the student participants.

4 DESIGN OF STUDY

4.1 Research aims and objectives

This study was framed as a post-IELTS impact study in which we investigate how IELTS is perceived to shape the students' linguistic and learning identities and how this might impact on student learning and progression. The research questions below were also informed by our own experience of how IELTS band scores are used within our institution and the perceptions, value and impact of IELTS in student selection. This study also considers how institutions construct and value students' language competence. Thus, the aim of the research specifically centres on issues of impact and test consequences for students.

4.2 Research questions (RQ)

RQ1

What is the level of awareness of the different targeted stakeholder groups of IELTS scores and the implications for student learning and progression?

RQ2

What use, if any, is made of IELTS scores (individual skills and aggregated score) by different participating stakeholders, in particular program admissions staff and tutors?

RQ3

What are the reported experiences of student learning in their subject specialisms through the four language skills, with specific reference to their band levels obtained in reading, writing, speaking and listening on the IELTS?

RQ4

Does, and if so how, the IELTS language profile construct students' linguistic identity as English language users in the context of university study?

RQ5

What impact does the identity (see RQ4) have on student learning, and on affective responses to the student experience?

RQ6

With reference to data obtained from the above research questions, how may we frame the stakes for the post-IELTS student-as-stakeholder group?

RQ7

Do the above research questions vary according to level of study: Master and Doctoral levels? And, if so, how exactly?

4.3 Research approach

Our primary focus was on capturing student learning experiences, with an aim to providing a dynamic account of the impact of IELTS on students in relation to their performance not only in terms of overall score but also in the four language skill subtests. In addition, our intention has been to relate institutional practices in the use of IELTS to the experience of students within their programs of learning. We therefore, adopted a case study approach, developed from rich narrative accounts of learning experiences within programs. This approach is congruent with the focus of this proposal and the importance of gaining in-depth understandings of perceptions of the value, utility and impact of IELTS in making judgements about admissions and, in particular, about post-IELTS impact on student learning experiences.

Our use of narrative research methodology derives from three features of the approach:

1. It affords a key role for each student's own story, a stakeholder account based on actual experience, presented through learning journals, interview and narrative workshops
2. It provides opportunities to include all aspects of the student's story, such as social encounters, and aspects of the learning process from the perceived role of national or ethnic identity to crises of motivation and self-esteem
3. It looks for meaning and explanation in connections, so learning experiences can be related to judgements by tutors (academic grades), the IELTS process, and assessment of learning power through ELLI.

Narrative research methodology, therefore, is particularly suited to an enquiry context where there is an established research discourse (test validation), a network of assumptions relating to policy and practice (the seven assumptions set out above) but only limited understanding of how the complex conjunction of factors involved here afford explanation, or even form hypotheses for explanation.

We consider the 'case study' approach to be a strength, not a limitation, as it has afforded the opportunity to:

- determine patterns of post-IELTS impact on specific categories of students
- capture in-depth and rather intimate accounts of students' experiences of gaining entry to subject specialist learning through the medium of English generated by the narrative research approach
- create genuine opportunities to capture student voice such that the student-as-stakeholder is *empowered* in this research, rather than 'overpowered' or somewhat silenced.

4.4 Participants

4.4.1 Participating students

In investigating student learning experiences, three categories of students were invited from two departments (namely, Graduate School of Education, Department of Politics) of the university to participate in the research:

Three categories of students participated in this research, identified as those:

Category 1

Students admitted for M level and MPhil/PhD programs with a strong and similar IELTS profile (ie 7 and above across the 4 language skills);

Category 2

Students admitted to the university but who are required to follow pre-sessional language training prior to embarking on their studies (this would apply to M level students only);

Category 3

Students whose overall band score meets the entry requirement but whose profile includes a lower score in one or more skill areas, suggesting that a student might be ‘at risk’ (eg Listening 6.5, Speaking 7, Reading 6, Writing 5).

Two student cohorts were achieved (Cohort 1: February – December 2004; Cohort 2: October 2004 – February 2005). The following tables summarise the achieved samples for this research.

Name	ID	overall	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Category	Notes
Alice	1M1a	8.5	8.5	8	8.5	8	1	
Amanda	1M1b	7	7.5	7	7	7	1	
Angela	1M1c	7.5	8.5	7	7.5	7	1	
Bella	2M1d	6	6.5	6	6.5	6	2	8 weeks BLC
Benny	2M1e	6	5.5	6	6.5	6	2	8 weeks BLC
Brenda	2M1f	5.5	5	6	5	6	2	8 weeks BLC
Cindy	3M1g	6.5	6.5	7	5.5	6	3	
Della	3D1h	7	7.5	7	6.5	7	3	
Denise	3D1i	6.5	6.5	7	6.5	6	3	
Diana	3D1j	8	8.5	8	6.5	9	3	
Dora	3D1k	7	6.5	8	7	7	3	
Dotti	3D1L	6.5	6	7	6.5	6	3	

Table 4.1: Final cohort 1 (N=12)

Name	ID	overall	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Category	Notes
Rebecca	1M2m	8	9	8	7	8	1	
Renee	1M2n	7.5	8	7	8.5	7	1	
Rhona	1M2o	7.5	7.5	8	7.5	7	1	
Rita	1M2p	7.5	7.5	7	8	7	1	
Ruth	1M2q	7.5	7	7	9	7	1	
Sally	2M2r	6	5.5	6	6	6	2	5 weeks BLC + pre-session in Australia
Sandy	2M2s	5.5	5	8	5	5	2	10 weeks BLC
Tamara	3M2t	6.5	6.5	6	7	6	3	
Tanya	3M2u	6.5	6.5	6	7	6	3	
Teresa	3M2v	8	9	6	8.5	6	3	
Thomasina	3M2w	7	7.5	6	7	7	3	
Thora	3M2x	7	8	6	7.5	7	3	
Tina	3M2y	6.5	6	6	7	6	3	
Toni	3M2z	6.5	7.5	6	6.5	6	3	

Table 4.2: Final cohort 2 (N=14)

Key: BLC = Bristol Language Centre

Participant coding: first number indicates categories 1 to 3 (see 4.4.1); M=Master’s student; D=Doctoral student; a-z=participant identifier. To facilitate reading of this report and other accounts of the research, we have allocated names to students. All are feminine, regardless of actual gender, and have initials as follows: A – Cat 1, Masters, Cohort 1; B – Cat 2, Masters, Cohort 1; C – Cat 3, Masters, Cohort 1; D – Cat 1, Doctoral, Cohort 1; R – Cat 1, Masters, Cohort 2; S – Cat 2, Masters, Cohort 2; T – Cat 3, Masters, Cohort 2.

4.4.2 Admissions staff and tutors

Sixteen staff members participated in this research. Five were from the Department of Politics, and eleven from the Graduate School of Education, six of whom were in the TESOL/Applied Linguistics programs. In this report, they were anonymised as EA/ET/PA/PT01-16 (E for Graduate School of Education, P for the Department of Politics, A for admission staff, T for subject tutors).

4.5 Data capture

There were two main levels of data capture summarised as follows.

4.5.1 Level 1: student perspectives

Data on the affective and academic impact of IELTS band scores (overall and individual skill areas) on student identity and their learning experiences were obtained through a longitudinal approach tracking the two cohorts of students (see 4.4.1): Cohort 1 over 11 months and Cohort 2 over five months. This tracking involved:

1. Retrospective narrative workshop:
This was planned at the beginning, or as soon as possible thereafter, of the students' commencement of studies. This served the purpose of orienting the students to the research (see Appendix 2) and identifying for the researchers some of the key issues that were subsequently followed up through the students' language and learning journals or individual interviews. These were focused more narrowly on capturing the students' socio-historical constructions of themselves (see 3.3).
2. Student language and learning journals and interviews:
The majority of students kept these over their period of participation in the research. The guidelines for keeping the journals appear as Appendix 3.1. These were deliberately very loosely structured to allow for the students' agenda to surface. An early version of the guidelines was piloted with a student who was not a member of Cohort 1 in order to establish a balance between student focusing and structuring on the one hand, and relevance to the research focus on the other. After an initial meeting (with cohort 1 and again with cohort 2), students were invited to send their journal entries to two of the researchers on a reasonably regular basis. What this meant in practice was that some students wrote extensive and very regular journals; others less so. From time to time, dependent on what the students wrote, the researchers engaged with some of the issues or questions in the journals. This provided a means to secure further entries. Importantly, they generated a dialogue through which keener insights into the students' engagement, or lack of, in their learning were made available to the researchers. Extracts for one student are presented in Appendix 3.2, from which the reader can also see the nature of engagement in the student-researcher dialogue.
3. Given the richness of data provided by the individual student participants through their language and learning journals, the original intention for a series of focus group discussions was abandoned in favour of individual interviews with students (Appendix 3.3). This allowed for a tighter focus on student-specific issues that proved essential in the development and interpretation of student profiles (in 7).
4. The findings from two structured measures were used as part of the development of the student profiles:
 - IELTS Test Report Form, as provided in the student applications
 - Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI)
 - Drawing on ongoing research in the Graduate School of Education (see Broadfoot 2005; Deakin Crick et al 2004), the ELLI was administered as part of this research.

The aim of the ELLI project is to identify the characteristics and quality of effective learners through a tool for evaluating growth in learning. As a means to assess the individual student learning power, the ELLI was administered at the beginning and end of the tracking period for Cohort 1 and towards the end of the tracking period for Cohort 2 (given the length of this period (one term) it was felt there would be only limited value in assessing growth in learning power).

In summary, to answer research questions 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7, the ELLI inventory and the IELTS were used alongside our primarily narrative research methodology, which comprised language and learning journals and loosely structured student interviews.

4.5.2 Level 2: staff perspectives

Data on subject and admissions tutors' use of IELTS scores were gathered through one-to-one interviews; an analysis of written feedback on students' assignments and presentations and a tutors' focus group, in order to address research questions 1, 2 and 6.

More generally, we were aware that a wide variety of research protocols for the evaluation of IELTS impact had been developed and we had considered using/adapting the student and tutor interview schedules for our own research purposes. However, given the nature of the data that our own approach was yielding – through our narrative orientation in the interviews and the student journal data, we rejected this option as unnecessary on grounds that we were already achieving adequate data capture commensurate with our research aims.

4.6 Data analysis and interpretation

This was approached in three ways:

1. Using a grounded theory approach informed by our conceptualisations of student identity. Our perspective on learning as identity development and the processes of establishing membership of a community of practice (3.3) provided a conceptual framework. The data relating to this derived from three sources: a) the academic grades achieved on the program; b) students' accounts of the experience of achieving these and other markers of community membership; and c) the views of the tutors and other 'significant others' which constitute an important voice in this learning process. The narrative of 'struggle' woven from these strands is complemented by socio-historical data provided by each student (see Figure 3.2 above), the IELTS score as an account of linguistic readiness for postgraduate study; and the ELLI assessment of learning power to provide a basis for explaining why learning (the task of identity formation and negotiation of community membership) succeeds (or fails), and more specifically, accounting of the impact of the IELTS test in this.
2. Using both specific interview questions in the case of university admissions staff, as well as taking an *emic* (insider) approach as in (i)
3. Using a qualitative software program, winMax (Kuckartz, 1998) for the analysis of (a) student interview and journal data and (b) admissions staff interviews so as to identify specific linguistic challenges for learning with reference to the four language skills.

Our approach to data analysis was in part iterative; interview opportunities with students provided the space to seek further understandings and to clarify issues with the students concerned. In most cases, admissions staff also had an opportunity to comment on their transcribed interview data. Further, we also sought another means to involve academic tutors in reviewing and commenting on our data and interpretations, through two sessions on our research within the university's *Teaching and Learning Away Day* specifically focusing on international student issues and a *Research Away Day* on the theme of Researching Culture and Identity.

5 IELTS AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

5.1 Introduction

Our conceptualisation of IELTS as a management tool is constructed around its roles in relation to *managing student admissions* and *managing learning*. The analysis and discussion are based on interviews with program admissions' tutors, other program tutors, and program administrators who work alongside admissions tutors, with research questions as follows:

What is the level of awareness of the different targeted stakeholder groups of IELTS scores and the implications for student learning and progression? (RQ1)

What use, if any, is made of IELTS scores (individual skills and aggregated score) by different participating stakeholders, in particular program admissions staff and tutors? (RQ2)

First, we present our findings on the use of IELTS during admissions processes (5.2). We then analyse the knowledge base amongst administrators involved in admissions (5.3) and amongst academic tutors in 5.4.

5.2 IELTS as gatekeeper and paper exercise

We start first with an administrator's profile on her use of IELTS in the admissions process, one that we have found typical across our study. This account reflects practice generally, irrespective of subject area, whether the informant was an admissions administrator or an admissions tutor, or of program level (ie masters or doctoral).

Extract 5.1

We're involved in checking the scores. The University standard is 6.5, but the TESOL/Applied Linguistics pathway is 7. But it's not all down to the [IELTS] score ... the other strands (ie specialist pathways) look for other things. TESOL score is a secondary thing ... I mean pathway X if a student has a 6.5 we never query it to a 7. But with research they are taken on their topic ... and then if we've got a supervisor then I suppose the language is probably secondary once you find a supervisor.

I don't know much about the IELTS to be perfectly honest. It's a University regulation that we have to put in place. But in your case we're governed by what you know because you're the expert on the sort of language scores. We're just governed by the University ... we get them from the Registry Office.

It's just a list of what the equivalent is. So many points to say three to four weeks at the Language School, etc, etc. To be honest we just do the paperwork and accept the overall score.

To be honest, I don't think any of them (ie other admissions tutors) would particularly know what the breakdown meant. I mean Dr X does the ones for course Y and they always check if the certificate's there, but he never queries how it's broken down. He just looks for the 6.5.

The implications of comments such as these are explored in what follows. We first consider the use of IELTS at the application assessment stage.

5.2.1 IELTS minimum entry levels

As revealed through the above profile, the university minimum IELTS entry level is 6.5. Both departments (Politics and Education) adhere to the university entry threshold of 6.5, with only four out of 13 programs –in Education – opting for a higher entry level, as summarised in Table 5.1 below. As might be expected three of these are the TESOL/Applied Linguistics pathways.

In one of the programs requiring IELTS 7 (MSc in Information & Library Management), this was explained as a professional rather than a learning requirement:

Extract 5.2

... because our degree is an Information degree where they have to give out information, they have to learn to give out information, really their language skills have got to be perfect. (EA03, see 4.4.2 for respondent codes)

Two factors add elements of complexity to use of the basic IELTS requirement. First, in programs with buoyant student recruitment, IELTS score may play a part in selection:

Extract 5.3

... an MSc program is quite heavily over-subscribed, so we in a sense can afford to be quite tough in terms of the criteria that we apply to the students that we select. So a student with a weaker application and a weak IELTS score would probably not get through the application process. (PT07)

Second, where recruitment is less buoyant, the basic IELTS requirement may be replaced with a requirement to attend a pre-session English program:

Extract 5.4

... whereas on other pathways on the program there's more flexibility and although students are required to meet the 6.5 overall minimum, students maybe score 6 would be allowed, would be offered a place on condition that they completed a pre-session course. (EA05)

5.2.2 Use of IELTS overall and sub-skill scores

Admissions staff focus overwhelmingly on the overall band score. Two administrators in education showed awareness of the sub-scores, both as a result of work on applications for TESOL/Applied Linguistics programs where the admissions tutor took these scores (eg writing into account when making admissions decisions). Thus, we see that the gate-keeping function of the IELTS, ie in the management of admissions, is followed by and large in a fairly rigid sense (cf attitudes to pre-session language support in 5.2.3 below), to check if the test certificate and overall score are included in the application material and if they meet the “university” requirements/guidelines.

5.2.3 IELTS as ‘necessary but not sufficient’

While we have observed above the minimum entry requirements, the language score is not everything, with several other factors considered identified as contributing to admissions decisions: i) the working background of the applicant was found to be highly valued (eg when the admissions tutor talked about an applicant with NGO or government experience; ii) the applicant's qualifications, in terms of prior academic achievements; iii) the overall coherence of the application, such as ‘the covering letter, the enthusiasm and interest and sort of around knowledge that the student has about the course’ (PT10); and iv) in the case of doctoral applications, the quality of the research proposal may be decisive for a prospective supervisor.

5.2.4 IELTS alignment with additional language support

Admission to a program conditional on successful completion of a pre-session program was only evident at M level, and then with some variability due to specific program practices, ie not used in the doctoral research students' admissions process, and individual positions of admissions tutors. For example, buoyancy in recruitment affected the use of pre-session course attendance where the IELTS requirement was not met (see 5.2.1). Factors which related to limited use of pre-session course attendance included practical factors, such as arranging accommodation for the summer period, the late determination of success or otherwise in academic courses being completed, as well as admissions tutors views on the raising of IELTS score within a short timescale:

Extract 5.5

I don't think you can improve your language skills that much” in 10 weeks. (PT09)

On the other hand, a small number of admissions tutors saw the pre-sessional option as facilitating admission where English language skills are the only weak aspect of the application:

Extract 5.6

... I think the English ... you know provided people have appropriate postgraduate experience and they fulfil the entry requirements at other levels and their references are satisfactory we will try and ... you know we'll try and accommodate them, as I said ... if they fall slightly short of the appropriate score, then maybe by suggesting that they attend ... or saying that entry is conditional upon their attendance at a pre-sessional course. (EA05)

Particularly problematic is the notion of 'successful completion of the pre-sessional course' and what 'conditional on pre-sessional language support' actually means. It appears to relate to i) developing the language competence reflected by the required IELTS level, and ii) the skills represented by the end-of-course assessment. There is no evidence, however, that there is a precise or validated correspondence between these levels.

At a more practical level, the pre-sessional assessment results are unable to support a negative decision on admission as students may already have joined the program. For these reasons the use of pre-sessional language support may mean changing the goalposts, and admission of students who are not ready for the specific program. This is a concern for IELTS as the overall IELTS score (which falls short of the required level, and triggers the conditional offer) is a key part of the process which facilitates admission to the program. The analysis of particular students in 7 below, students who are admitted through successful participation in pre-sessional courses have different learning experiences (eg Brenda (2M1f) and Cindy (3M1g)), and in some ways these differences relate more to aspects of the IELTS profile, than to the suggested parallel to an improved IELTS profile that is inferred from success in the pre-sessional.

We analyse next the familiarity of admissions staff with IELTS.

5.3 Knowledge about IELTS

In some ways the finding that IELTS data is processed in a rather routine and unproblematised way is unsurprising given the relative lack of information that our respondents had about IELTS. At the same time, we were struck by the lack of knowledge about IELTS, as well as the low level of information to which admissions tutors and administrators reported having access, especially in the department which did not 'rub shoulders' with TESOL/Applied Linguistics staff. An extreme case was the admissions tutor who was hesitant about the actual entry level:

Extract 5.7

And I think that our score is 6.5, if I'm right. (PT08)

This same tutor – not the only one - also confused the IELTS with the TOEFL writing score:

Extract 5.8

I know that it's got three main components – the reading, writing and listening test with an essay score, and all I need is a tool. Something that tells me ... does someone have adequate English for the degree they're about to do. And we've set a requirement as IELTS 6.5 plus 4.5 in the writing test. (PT08)

Sources of information on IELTS reported by or respondents are summarised in Table 5.1.

Education	Politics
<p>from university registry:</p> <p>We did have a chart some time ago which was put out with all the equivalents (EA05)</p>	<p>from faculty:</p> <p>... so we use these equivalents. These are agreed equivalents, they're not our departmental decision they're as agreed with faculty (PT10)</p>
<p>from TESOL/Applied Linguistics Staff:</p> <p>Well I know that X [TESOL admissions tutor] is very interested that they have good writing. (EA04)</p>	<p>from the language centre:</p> <p>This is what we got from the language centre basically about the score (PT09)</p>
<p>Just picked up over time, as well as influenced by TESOL staff:</p> <p>I: Where did you learn about IELTS? How did you develop your knowledge about IELTS?</p> <p>R: That's hard to say because I think it's something that was gradually ... I can't remember when I first started it was quite so prominent. I think it's something that's gradually happened. And I think perhaps more so since you've arrived as well. (EA01)</p>	<p>from a relative!</p> <p>Um, I don't know too much and some of what I know comes from outside the University through my brother who's an English language teacher and uses the IELTS himself ... I think it's quite low 6.5 but that's a sort of inherited comment from my brother who works in the field who was horrified when I said 6.5. (PT07)</p>

Table 5.1: Where does knowledge about IELTS come from?

There were also mixed views on the usefulness of further information. On the one hand, some informants were resistant to further information, feeling the IELTS score is a clear benchmark or tool. On the other, there was awareness of the interpretation processes in using IELTS scores for admissions, particularly evident in data from staff working with or close to TESOL Applied Linguistics staff.

5.4 IELTS in managing student learning and progression

5.4.1 Introduction

The interviews with admissions staff were also revealing in their projections of (i) the nature of the struggles in learning faced by some international students in different subject learning contexts and (ii) international student success with specific reference to achieved IELTS scores. This section presents the findings relevant to these relationships between IELTS scores and students' learning and progression. First we analyse the nature of some of the struggles in learning mentioned; secondly we analyse the perceived impact of IELTS scores on student achievement which, in turn, raises unpredicted equity issues.

5.4.2 The nature of the struggles

One of the admissions tutors in Politics provided an explanation about some of the difficulties international students faced in their subject learning:

Extract 5.9

Well they're struggling for a start because they can't follow what's going on in the seminar classes. The way that we teach at MSc level is very interactive and very participatory. We don't have didactic taught lectures for MScs, it's all seminar based. So students have to do a series of some often quite you know theoretically complex readings before they turn up to those seminars. [...] Now if students are really struggling with their English and they've not prepared or read properly for the sessions they're going to struggle in those sessions. Now there are ways that we try and get round that as tutors. And over time I would suggest that actually 90% of students with a second language whose English is not you know wonderful, by the end of the course their essays are up to scratch, they get through at MSc level and they have a very sharp learning curve. But at this time of year [ie first academic term] in

particular its quite difficult and there are every year one or two students who simply just do not manage to make that extra jump. (PT08)

We learn that this program is designed around seminars with extensive reading requirements, rather than a series of formal lectures. Extensive reading and the demands it places on students was also mentioned with specific reference to different IELTS scores:

Extract 5.10

- I: ... do you think having a high IELTS helps with academic success?
R: Yes, I mean absolutely. Absolutely.
I: Yeah. In what way does it help?
R: Comprehension ... simply getting through the volume of material that you need to get through and having the confidence to ... it's very hard for a student when they're reading very slowly and they don't get through all of the required reading for that week. You know you have to say to someone 'look just let that go and don't worry, the momentum will build up through the term and you'll get better at reading' this stuff and so on. So yeah absolutely it makes a big difference in terms of comprehension, sure. It makes a big difference. (PT10)

These data are interesting in relation to our findings in 7 below where, in the analysis of student progress data, there appears to be a tentative link between strong information processing skills – as represented by the Listening and Reading test scores – and success on the academic program. This hypothesis would need to be further researched. Further, data in 7 illustrate that many students consider themselves to be 'slow' readers, a perception which may be a function of the volume of reading required rather than an assessment of their reading comprehensions skills. Again, this is a finding that would require further empirical scrutiny.

Informants also note the challenge of listening and speaking for international students, especially in the early stages of programs. The English language issues here were integrated with aspects of academic literacy at university level – engagement with new concepts, following the discussion, the relevance of their own interventions – which are not tested in IELTS, but may be considered to be part of the 'readiness for academic study' which is the basis of the IELTS claim. Other factors in meeting the challenges of academic study are individual students' confidence, and reassurance provided by tutors (see, for example, data 5.10 above and section 5.4.3 below). While these factors may relate to language competences in different ways (Banerjee 2003), the relationships are complex and merit further study. The next section explores some of this complexity in terms of the impact of students' struggles.

5.4.3 Impact on student success

The prevailing view in our data was that in spite of the constraints in learning and the struggles experienced in the process, students usually achieved success in the end. Part of the explanation of success might reside in the nature of support provided by tutors which, in turn, provides an example of consequences for staff and institutional resourcing more generally:

Extract 5.11

... because we try to support our students to the nth degree really. And we try and ... we try and enable successful completion of the course. And there are always cases of course where students either have to settle for an interim award or they fail, they fail at the final hurdle and they have to resubmit their dissertations. But we have lots of systems in place to help to support students who seem to be failing. ... I think there are a combination of factors and I think English language is one of them and it is an important one. (EA05)

Extract 5.12

And even with my very good PhD students who I know are very intelligent and bright and who are close to finishing their PhD. And I say this because I spent about 3 ½ hours reading a chapter and correcting the English in it as well, ... But I often actually make ... because I think students if I have time to do it it's a helpful thing to do. And as someone who has a language degree as well, a foreign language degree um ... I wouldn't necessarily call myself a linguist ... I realise how important it is to have someone somewhere who's actually helping you with these sorts of areas, which otherwise you would continue to do for the rest of the year. And if no one tells you ... hopefully if you're told once or twice you won't do it again. (PT07)

Another reason for their succeeding rather than sinking relates to our initial hypothesis (p 3) that the IELTS presumes a capacity for further language learning and that students in assuming and performing their identity as postgraduate students actually achieve intended learning:

Extract 5.13

I mean it seems to me that for all of the things I've said, if we actually step back and we look at students' grades, by the end of the course most students will have done well enough and improved enough to pass their MScs. It is a rare minority who don't. I mean there are one or two or maybe three every year who really do struggle. But they are in a minority, and given that we have you know getting on for 150 Masters students, you know, it is a very small minority. ... in the main it seems to work in that most of our students in the end after a year of ... some of them it's a very very hard year ... but at the end of that year most of them pass our MScs at the appropriate level. And so in that sense, you know, the system works. We're not taking on swathes of students who are just not up to it and who are dropping out and who are not getting on with things. We are taking on one or two students like that. We are taking on a higher number of students who struggle and because of their language struggles perhaps do not get the grade that their abilities merit, but you know overall most of them will come out with an MSc and some of them will really turn around and come out with a distinction. (PT09)

There are three points to make here. First, what is somewhat concerning in this account is the implication that although international students may pass they may not actually achieve their potential. In fact, a glass ceiling may well exist in terms of their ultimate performance:

Extract 5.14

Getting a pass is um ... pretty much everyone will do, if they're an individual who's prepared to accept the advice and support that's on offer. But getting a distinction is noticeably harder if you're a student who's coming here especially having taken pre-sessional English language training. The chances of getting a distinction are low.

Second, a point that comes across from data 5.14 is the idea of students just 'managing' to get a pass, most manage to 'get through the program'. The approach to learning appears analogous to factory throughput, rather than one that values growth and depth in student learning.

Third, language ability is portrayed as one of two deficits in our data, with the second linked to 'critical thinking abilities':

Extract 5.15

The bigger problem I think with language is ... more one associated with how you write critical social science essays. And part of that is not just a language issue but it's an academic culture issue. There are certain things that we are very clearly looking for as tutors in terms of how we mark and how we assess essays, and critical analysis is one of the things that we look for in our essays. Analysis more generally. That whole approach to writing and studying and thinking about issues in the social sciences is often absent. And that's something that we work hard to try and deal with. For example I do an essay skills ... essay techniques session with my students. There are classes that we offer for those students in terms of departmentally available ones, university available ones and so on. However that doesn't help them

for the first semester. And there are a significant proportion of the students who have come here from other countries or non North American or European countries. And even then we have some problems, will fail their essays first time round. And so in a sense they will then have to resubmit. Now in the main in the resubmission process as with the language, you know they tend to turn things round and their second set of essays is very good. But because we're having to do all of this in session they're automatically disadvantaged in a sense over the course of the year ... (PT09)

This third point suggests a co-occurrence of language and critical thinking challenges. The merged construct here may constitute an explanation for the operation of the glass ceiling and self-fulfilling prophecies elaborated above: the highly visible features of a student's text such as problematic word choices and infelicitous sentence structure may be viewed as indicators of less visible qualities, such as a critical perspective in analysis and discussion. The perceived lack of impact of language and academic skills programs provided by the university may in turn accord a permanence to such tutor perceptions of students' ability, and the inevitability of completing the program with the minimum M-level grade. The patterns here are important for an understanding of the consequential validity of the IELTS test: where IELTS 6.5 is used to admit students to a program, the very features of students' use of English, particularly in writing, may set them on a track where a high level of achievement in learning is unlikely.

5.4.4 Summary

We have identified four important patterns in the use of IELTS as a management tool. First, the IELTS is used as an uncomplicated benchmark, with little attention to the potential richness of the information provided in the sub-test scores. Second, in managing learning on programs, tutors and administrators recognise a pattern of student struggle, deriving to a large extent from – in some tutors' minds – a merged construct of weak English language skills and limited critical analysis faculties. Third, there is a pattern of differential achievement (between students who have English as a second or other language, and those who use English as a first language). The unproblematised use of IELTS for admissions described above may contribute to the merged language skills/critical faculties construct, and in turn constitute a significant factor in differential achievement. Fourth, there is extensive concern among staff about the difficulties faced by international students. We have no reason to believe that this is not genuine, or that it does not lead to successful support in individual cases. It may be, however, that such a caring approach may obfuscate the institutional lack of equity, and serve to render acceptable to international students themselves, a somewhat lower level of learning achievement (pass rather than distinction) than their potential might otherwise afford.

6 STUDENT SUBJECT LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

6.1 Introduction

The IELTS Test and report is structured around the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). This section explores the links between these skills and students subsequent learning experience in their postgraduate programs. It addresses the following research question (RQ3):

What are the reported experiences of student learning in their subject specialisms through the four language skills, with specific reference to their band levels obtained in reading, writing, speaking and listening on the IELTS?

Our specific focus is the student participants' own perceptions and self-evaluation of their subject learning experiences through English. Self-report data (individual interviews, language and learning journals) and focus group discussions/workshops are analysed to examine:

1. the *overall* relationships between students' language skills and their academic performances as perceived by the students themselves (see 7 for discussion of associations as evidenced in the students' learning progressions)
2. the relationships between the individual language skills (ie listening, speaking, reading, or writing) and subject learning experiences
3. the specific ways in which these relationships are affected (if at all) by the levels (overall and sub-skill scores) of the students' IELTS profiles.

The implications of the findings are discussed, with suggestions for the IELTS partners on test material development and validation.

6.2 Student perceptions of relationships between language skills and academic performance

As observed above (3.2, 3.4), previous investigations into the relationships between IELTS test performance and academic performance have used student product data (eg Green 2002; Banerjee 2003). Our emphasis, however, has been to capture any such links by allowing the students' own voices to emerge and for them to recount their "in-flight" subject learning experiences mediated through the four language skills. Conceptually, this emphasis affords a linking of the performance in the four language skills and the processes of identity formation through negotiation of membership of the academic community.

Two contrasting views on the overall relationships between language skills and academic performance are evidenced in the data. First, the students with higher IELTS profiles tend to think that their high IELTS scores do not necessarily contribute to their academic achievement. Second, those students with lower IELTS scores feel that this aspect of their entry profile contributed significantly to a weak or problematic academic performance.

6.2.1 Limited contribution of strong IELTS scores to academic performance

Some students felt that their strong IELTS score did not constitute an important advantage in their academic study. For example one participant (Diana), with the IELTS profile of Listening=8.5, Writing=9, Reading=6.5, Speaking=8 offered the following perspective.

(Note: This participant was a very special case; she was in our Category 3 because her Reading sub-score was 6.5, so she did not meet our Category 1 criteria where all sub-scores should be 7 or above. However, because of her overall band of 8 and a full score for writing (9), she was considered as having a higher IELTS profile.)

Extract 6.1

I think the IELTS result can only say whether you are proficient or not. Proficient English language user, that's it. But it has no connection with whether you are going to be a good student or not. Like if you look at my IELTS result I could be the best student here. (laughs) Compared to some students who only got like 6.5. But what I'm doing now has got nothing to do ... of course to a certain extent if your English is good it helps. Then maybe you don't need to deal much with grammar and stuff, or you can express your ideas clearly, you know, I mean better. But um there are other things that contribute to the success of a student. For example like you said (inaudible) experience. I don't have that much experience. So I may not be struggling that much I think with my language, but I am struggling with how to conduct research. So the IELTS result to a certain extent only say whether your English is good or not, that's it. But it has no ... I don't think there is a correlation between IELTS result and whether he or she is a good student or not. There are a lot of factors, you know. I may be a good English user, but I may have other problems you know. (*Interview: Diana 3D1j*)

There are two points to make here. First, the low reading score and subsequent weak academic performance may be support for the information processing hypothesis introduced above (5.4.2) and set out in 7 below, and a topic for further research in 8. Second, a high IELTS profile was considered supportive of better academic achievement, but not necessarily essential, and not predictive of an

excellent or easy academic performance. For Diana “how to conduct research”, rather than her high language proficiency, seemed to matter most for her doctoral studies. This perspective on IELTS is similar in some respects to that of admissions staff who balance an IELTS score in favour of a range of other highly valued criteria presented as part of a student’s application (5.2(iii)). In terms of Diana’s achievement data, she gained a bare pass for her early assignments on taught doctoral units. This, to some extent, corroborates what she asserts in interview (6.1). However, there might be another explanation, one suggested elsewhere in our data, ie a strategy adopted by students who wish to avoid ‘taking the responsibility’ for low assignment grades while, at the same time, maintaining that they are a “good English user”. It is understandable that people do not want to link what they are good at with what they are much less competent at. Our conceptualisation of identity (3.3, 3.4) emphasises the influence of the imagined self as part of the identity formation process: thus, what students carry with them from their past into their current academic program may need to be maintained in the context of challenging interactions with significant others.

6.2.2 Strong contribution of weak IELTS scores to academic performance

By way of contrast, the reverse view was presented by some of the students with low IELTS profiles. They projected a view that their low academic achievement was more to do with their English language abilities (though not necessarily a direct and cause-effect type of link) than with other factors in their learning. Again, it could be that this is another example of transference with, in this case, low language ability (as the scapegoat) providing the explanation for their low academic achievement). Other potential ‘scapegoats’ noted in our data for low performance in subject learning include: *lack of time to read* (a comment reflecting another complex relationship in student accounts: the link between *time* and *effective reading*) and *not knowing tutor’s taste of what’s a good assignment*.

6.3 Relationships between the individual language skills and subject learning experiences

We first report the relative importance of the four individual language skills for subject learning, as evidenced in the student participants’ self-reported data, followed by the detailed analyses on students’ subject learning experiences through the four language skills, in the order of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

6.3.1 Relative importance of the four individual language skills for subject learning

Each IELTS sub-score (ie Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening) is reported separately and projected as contributing equally to the final overall band score in the Test Report Form. This way of reporting the test result is viewed by the IELTS partners as an aspect of the integratedness of the test (see IELTS Frequently Asked Questions, <www.ielts.org/teachersandresearchers/faqs/default.aspx>). However, an equal contribution perspective to the overall IELTS band may not reflect accurately the different linguistic demands that postgraduate students actually face in their subject learning. In our data the individual language skills (ie reading, writing, speaking and listening) appear to impact differently on students’ experiences in subject learning. Skills in *reading*, *writing*, and in particular *reading-to-writing* were considered the most important for academic studies.

(Note: The relationships between individual language skills and subject learning experiences should be interpreted in the general context of the non-essential correlations between English language abilities and academic achievements. More students expressed concerns with reading and writing than with listening and speaking skills for their subject learning.)

Extract 6.2

- I: [...] reading and writing, speaking and listening ..., which do you think is the most important, or particularly important for your study?
- R: It is definitely reading and writing. [...] I think reading because you can’t ... you can’t write anything without reading. That’s the one source ... well it’s a major source of getting ideas and understanding what you’re doing. And then you have to be able to express yourself with writing.
(Interview: Benny 2M1e)

Students' higher positioning of reading, writing and reading-to-writing over the other language skills was established probably because of the value placed by the higher education system in the end product, ie written output such as assignments and dissertations, as mentioned by Benny and Cindy (see 7.3.2b below). However, this valuing of reading and writing may also be dependent on how the students self-assess their reading and writing abilities. One student, for example, commented that it was because she had far less confidence in the areas of reading and writing and was, thus, very concerned about her academic studies where success she thought would be judged on what she wrote rather than on how well she could present her ideas orally. Her view of the importance of writing and her own self-assessment in writing led to her enrolling in a pre-session course, even though, with IELTS 7, this was not a condition of entry to the program.

While some students found it difficult to isolate specific language skills in analysing the challenge of learning – each of the four skills made a contribution – there was widespread emphasis on writing. This may in part be due to its greater visibility as a focus of difficulty, both for students and tutors. Writing is difficult in any language, assignments are what students get feedback on, and thus frame the interactions with significant others which are in effect instances of negotiation of community membership.

This critique, together with the somewhat simplistic use of IELTS scores in the university admissions process (see 5.2(ii) above) suggests two lines of development. First, in terms of enhancing the IELTS validity claim of representing readiness for academic study, further research into the contribution of levels of competence in the four skills is required. Second, more effective advice on using IELTS scores for decision making, especially focusing admissions tutors' attention to the sub-test scores might be developed. The next sections explore in more detail the student perspective on each of the four skills.

6.3.2 Listening skills and subject learning experiences

Three major themes emerge from the students' comments on their listening skills, as tested in the IELTS and as required and experienced in their subject learning contexts:

1. difficulties linked to understanding lectures expressed as the speakers' linguistic (un)friendliness, eg the frequency of academic terminology and speed
2. test nervousness: the listening sub-scores may not reflect their true listening abilities
3. discrepancies between the IELTS listening test and real-life demands on listening skills in subject learning.

6.3.2a Linguistic unfriendliness

Two aspects of linguistics unfriendliness in relation to listening comprehension as a listening challenge are the frequent use of academic terminology in tutorials or lectures and the pace of delivery in lectures and tutorials. Students spoke of a threshold beyond which they found it difficult to understand lectures, as in:

Extract 6.3

My listening skill is the best compared with other skills. [...However] I cannot sometimes understand some of the words that my tutor mentions during the class. Most of these words are new terminologies in the field.
(Language and Learning Journal: Cindy 3M1g)

This linguistic demand in conjunction with pace of delivery was the last straw for one student:

Extract 6.4

R: Was excited at the very first period. Wanted to talk to anybody. Want to imitate the accent of the local people. But was lost in the first lesson. That's in X's course. ... She spoke fast and then a lot of terms difficult to follow. I didn't read the pre-session reading. ... That's the reason I was lost.

(Interview: Renee 1M2n)

6.3.2b Test nervousness, test performances and real listening abilities

While it is not possible to eliminate nervousness during a test, some students expressed concerns about the way in which 'being nervous' had impacted on the IELTS listening performance.

Extract 6.5

R: Yeah. And also I didn't do well in IELTS because I think that I always get nervous in the examinations. And also the listening because never can just to go back, so when it is past it is past.

(Interview: Tamara 3M2t)

The excerpt above is not to comment on the listening tests *per se*, rather it is to demonstrate that Listening sub-scores may not reflect test takers' listening comprehension abilities, as 'truly' as Reading sub-scores do in relation to reading abilities: in our data students did not report that they felt the IELTS Reading test underestimated their skills. It may be that test nervousness, combined with opportunities to adapt to demands in real life contexts such as postgraduate programs present a particular challenge to predictive validity of IELTS Listening tests. This mismatch between test and real-life listening contexts may also be explained from another perspective.

6.3.2c Discrepancies in performances between listening test and real-life subject learning

The IELTS is designed:

"to test the readiness to enter the world of university-level study in the English language and the ability to cope with the demands of that context immediately after entry."

(IELTS FAQs)

One immediate implication of this is that the IELTS listening tasks (see also IELTS FAQs for the implication of this for reading and writing papers) cannot be constrained by a narrow interpretation of "authenticity" and, as a consequence, cannot simulate university-level-type listening tasks of the kind that the test-takers will encounter in their subject learning (IELTS FAQ). However, it is clear from our participants' narrative accounts that the official explanation above is wholly endorsed by our test-takers themselves, ie by "successful" test-takers who were admitted to postgraduate studies partly because their IELTS profiles met the university's entry requirement. The following comments describe students' views on possible links between their listening test performance and that in real-life subject learning contexts.

Extract 6.6

I: Compared with listening through this year do you think your listening skills, which were the weakest in the IELTS profile, were some kind of problem for you?

R: No. When I listen to lectures or to talks it seems that I understand most of the things. But when it comes to taking listening tests I just don't seem to do well. (Interview: Dora 3D1k)

Dora (whose IELTS profile is: Listening=6.5, Speaking=8, Reading and Writing=7) seems to be suggesting some kind of discrepancy between listening test and real-life subject learning contexts.

A discrepancy of a different order was felt by Angela (1M1c), another low risk student (Category 1) but whose Listening score was 8.5:

Extract 6.7

R: Actually when I arrived here I feel confident with the study here. I think I'm qualified so they give me the permission to study here. So that is ... um, I think IELTS is one aspect for the qualification of study here. When actually it starts it sometimes shakes my confidence here. You know I get, I just want ... can I give just examples of details?

I: Yes, sure yes.

R: Yes because I get the highest mark in listening and actually I ...

I: What did you get for listening?

R: 8.5. ... Yeah and so I think I'm confident with that. But actually when I arrived here I hear people saying things I cannot understand. And I will ask them to repeat, something like this. And sometimes even I understand I will also ask them to repeat. I don't know because I haven't confidence in that. So there is some discrepancy in that.

(Interview: Angela 1M1c)

Her confidence, established by her high Listening score (8.5), was dented by her experience of routine interactions (social and academic) in her program context. It may be that a high score in listening comprehension could well be attributable to the fact that the test *per se* might be quite easy. If this is the case, then the easily built up confidence from test results becomes shaky when the listening skills are tested in a real-life environment, particularly where such confidence does not derive from a student's own listening skills self-assessment, as in the case of Dora above.

Rita's experience illustrates a balancing of IELTS (Listening=7.5, Speaking=7, Reading=8, Writing=7) and self-assessment in the context of listening skills:

Extract 6.8

R: I'm not very ... actually I'm not very confident in my listening.

I: Mm.

R: Surprisingly. ... that is why I was a little bit surprised when I got the IELTS results of the listening score, it is a little bit higher than the speaking. Actually I felt well those IELTS listening test is too easy. And that maybe affects my scores. Listening skills should not be that easy as those in the test. Because I got an American flatmate and then a British flatmate. And sometimes when they talk I found myself ... sometimes I cannot catch up with them, because they have like British accents and American accents. And some words they use are completely different. Like you refer to hair here on the forehead, and my American flatmate would say 'bangs'. And the first time I heard about it I didn't know why this is 'bangs'. And then my British flatmate said it is 'fringe'.

(Interview: Rita 1M2p)

Discrepancies such as those observed above support, to some extent, the IELTS partners' claim that the Listening test tasks do not necessarily represent the real-life university-level academic listening tasks, and hence Listening sub-scores may not predict students' listening performances in academic studies. However, as IELTS sets out to assess readiness for academic studies, it seems to be desirable to have *some* elements that reflect academic listening demands integrated into the IELTS Listening paper. One question we have, therefore, is whether it is necessary to develop an academic version of the IELTS listening paper, if the listening test for general training purposes does not indeed require more academic-like language use and associated information processing tasks.

6.3.3 Speaking skills and subject learning experiences

Speaking in relation to subject learning was the least frequently mentioned skill by the participants in our data. The most significant context of learning in which students reported having to speak was in one-to-one tutorials, one in which our participants reported considerable difficulties. Typically, difficulties were characterised as deriving from ‘nervousness’, ‘use of new terminology’ and pragmatic aspects of interaction such as understanding the expectations and intentions of tutors and the appropriateness of repeated requests for clarification in tutorials. A key factor here is differential status of tutors and students, and how this divide is managed to realise legitimate peripheral participation (Wenger 1998) as a means of negotiating an identity as a postgraduate student, and member of an academic community. As stated above (6.3.1), this process is framed by written texts: the spoken interactions on these texts might be considered to have a similarly key role in managing and progressing learning.

6.3.4 Reading, writing, and reading-to-writing skills and subject learning experiences

As revealed in 6.3.1, our student participants considered reading and writing skills the most important for their subject learning. Interestingly, these are also the areas in which students reported experiencing most difficulty. Our data also indicate that reading and writing skills are “intimately” linked (see 6.9 as an example); we have therefore decided not to separate them in our discussion below. In the words on one participant:

Extract 6.9

The relationship between the writing and reading skills is crucial because I have to put into my own words of what I have read and surely it constitute feedback on reading comprehension. I mean, if I don't understand thoroughly what I have read, there is no way that I can put that information into my own words.
(Language and Learning Journal: Dora 3D1k)

The rest of this section is organised as follows:

1. the narrative account of the difficulty and despair experienced by some participants, linked to:
2. the development of their down-to-earth strategies for reading-to-writing assignments
3. their experiences of learning how to write academic-like essays from reading published research papers and tutors' comments on their assignments, and
4. the discrepancies in demands of reading abilities between test and subject-learning contexts.

6.3.4a Difficulty and despair in reading and writing for subject study

Enormous difficulty was experienced in reading and understanding academic texts when preparing for assignments. Throughout our data (interviews and journals) are emotional accounts of the difficulties experienced in reading academic texts and writing academic-like assignments, and the resilience and perseverance required to complete these tasks:

Extract 6.10

I am still reading texts on Ethics. Today, I think I managed to grasp some of the ideas better than the previous week. I now have a vague idea of what to write so I will have to keep on reading. ... In the process of reading the texts I realised that I really need time to be able to understand thoroughly the concepts and theories of the subject matter. I had to read at least three to four times the same texts over and over again [...].

[...Four days later]

I am still reading the text on Ethics. This is the third time that I am reading the same text again. However, I find that I can understand the concept better and hope that I will be able to apply the

concepts in my essay. I feel that I still need to learn how to read more efficiently like trying to grasp the main idea. The text is mostly based on philosophy and so I feel that that makes it even harder to understand. I think that this is one reason why I have to read many times. I realised that the subject matter does matter in a way that if one is not familiar with a certain topic, it makes it harder to comprehend. (*Language and Learning Journal: Dora 3D1k*)

Extract 6.11

I keep reading the articles our teachers distribute to us. However, I do not read the articles on different units simultaneously, as there is no good for me in doing so. [...] It usually takes about three hours to read one article (approx. 15-20 pages). Sometimes it takes more. My technique is very time-consuming but it is the only way in which I can do my readings effectively. (*Language and Learning Journal: Benny 2M1e*)

These extracts show the time and effort invested in reading, and the strategies devised to cope with the task. They demonstrate the resilience and commitment which may be factors in the ultimate success of the study enterprise: the majority of narratives of struggle (see 7 below) formed part of successful study, both in terms of progression and graduation, and of a sense of a successful learning experience.

However, this is sometimes achieved at a huge cost, in terms of both the tutorial support provided and to the students themselves (see also Allwright and Banerjee 1997; Banerjee 2003). One such cost is the emotional impact of what appears to be a struggle against the odds. One low risk student, (Teresa, overall band=8, Listening=9, Speaking=6, Reading=8.5, Writing=6) wrote of a ‘reconciliation’ in accepting that overseas students are “at distinct disadvantage”, unable to compete with native speakers of English:

Extract 6.12

What I did think was slightly intimidating for me, much more than my English or American friends could imagine was the study of past distinction level essays. It really took a lot of self-convincing for me to believe I could compete with that level of language, I must clarify, it was not the concepts or theory but the language used in such works. In the end, I reconciled myself to the fact that I would put in my best and then leave the rest to the examiner. Perhaps, this is where non-native speakers of the language are at a distinct disadvantage – at a psychological level more than at an actual one. (*Language and Learning Journal: Teresa 3M2v*)

Allowing oneself to be defeated psychologically in this way before the game actually starts can deteriorate into “despair”, with students lowering their expectations of themselves, and settling for grades which they initially felt would not reflect their actual ability.

Such accounts are arguably part of any demanding university program. The unifying thread in our data is the second language context of learning: participants’ accounts of the *insecurity*, *intimidation* and *inequality* experienced in their subject learning are considered to derive from their language identity. There are frequent comparisons with English native-speaker peers in reading-to-writing tasks, and firm views that, despite the statement of readiness embedded in the IELTS result, achieving learning goals will be much more difficult for them.

6.3.4b Strategies for reading-to-writing assignments

As a response to the effort involved in reading and writing tasks, our participants developed their own strategies to cope with the workload, including:

- reading just what was required for assignments
- getting tutors recommendations for essential reading for specific tasks
- reading articles selectively.

Extract 6.13

[...] But now I know that I need to be selective. Because I know what I'm searching for ... I don't read the whole article in details. I just read ... okay I know that when I look at the headings for example, so I know there might be something useful here. So then I concentrate on that part. (*Interview: Diana 3D1j*)

Extract 6.14

Skimming and scanning became the most effective strategies in my readings.
(*Language and Learning Journal: Cindy 3M1g*)

The analysis and discussion here raise an interesting issue for ongoing IELTS validation. In language testing, conventionally, the strategies that have been investigated are test-taking strategies. In the context of IELTS, particularly in the reading-to-writing area, the tasks could reflect strategies that are particularly important in academic study, and investigation of these strategies could form a part of the validation of the *readiness for study* assertions fundamental to IELTS.

6.3.4c Practise and learning academic writing from reading published papers and tutors' comments

Learning to write in an academic-like way seemed to be central to students' subject learning experiences, and essential for the legitimisation of their membership of the research community that they were both eager to be affiliated to and recognised by. Our data projected two critical sources that worked hand-in-hand to foster the development of students' academic writing abilities: tutors' comments on their written summaries, and attention to features of published research papers.

Feedback from tutors was particularly formative in developing a critical stance. Tina, a low risk student who experienced difficulties in writing describes her experience:

Extract 6.15

R: I benefited from a tutorial like I asked X (tutor) 'Do you think my assignment is critical enough?' I mean the second time. And X said 'To be critical is write something like ... you quote somebody's opinion and you say 'The question is ...' and quote another also an opinion to compare those opinions. And add your own understanding to that. So that make me understand what means critical. [...] now I'm more aware of that and try to be more critical in my assignment.
(*Interview: Tina 3M2y*)

The pattern here of students starting writing from a very low level of readiness is strong across the data. For some, like Renee, an early assignment prompted feedback that was seminal and enduring, establishing a kind of template which generated successful assignment throughout the year:

Extract 6.16

When I got the feedback of my first assignment, I read the tutor's comments. He suggested me interpreting what the references mean and show how much I understand. I went to see my personal tutor with the questions 1) "how to show how much I understand" 2) why I shall put references before my statements. My tutor told me this might be the difference between A and B in marks.

I got to know some aspects of academic writing. I could refer to others' ideas and try to discuss or analyse them with my own practice to show my own understanding not just state my ideas first then find out some literature to support mine. And I paid attention to the words other scholars employed in their writing. Imitation turned out to be a significant part of learning academic writing.

(*Language and Learning Journal : Renee 1M2n*)

For many students, the benefits of tutor feedback were only realised after a period of struggle with study (especially writing) strategies and techniques, accompanied by crises of confidence and self-doubt, as illustrated in the case study of Dora (7.2.4 below).

6.3.4d *Discrepancies in demands of reading abilities between the test and subject learning contexts*

The fourth significant theme that projected from our narrative data is the discrepancy in terms of demands of reading abilities in the IELTS test and in actual subject learning (see also 6.3.2 above linked to listening skills).

Extract 6.17

I attended a seminar today on “X”. While I was listening to the talk, I also tried to reflect what I experienced when I took the IELTS exams and I realised that the hardest part for me was the reading part. I would like to relate this to the difficulty that I am facing right now in reading and trying to understand the texts and articles that I am engaged in. I have to read several texts and write them in my own words in essays. I realised that what was tested in the IELTS exams was a lot easier. In IELTS, what I had to do was to answer the questions after reading the text hence, it does not have any impact or support me in anyway in doing my assignments. (*Language and Learning Journal: Dora 3D1k*)

As Dora (Reading=7) comments, it seems that the IELTS reading comprehension paper is far less demanding than those on her reading abilities in real-life subject learning experiences. It is not clear whether this is due to the sheer amount of academic reading that she has to finish, or whether it is due to different emphases on reading abilities between the test and the subject learning contexts. In the test context, test takers’ reading and writing abilities are measured separately in two papers (ie reading and writing). However, in the subject learning context, our participants were preoccupied with reading academic papers in order to produce their own academic-like assignments. On the one hand, they were not writing from scratch. In fact, in terms of current academic writing practice, it seems that no-one can actually write academic papers without reading and referencing to other published research. On the other hand, our participants did not read the academic papers for the sake of reading the papers. In fact, they read-to-write their assignments. This interplay of reading and writing abilities in their subject learning experiences seem to emphasise a unique and target language use specific ability: reading-to-write. It is probably neither reading, nor writing, nor a linear summing of reading and writing abilities alone that the reading-to-write ability would embrace. Overall, we would argue that the process of ‘reading-to-writing’ academic papers would involve, first, the reader/writer’s abilities in understanding and summarising the original texts, second, critiquing the original authors’ views and then, thirdly, combining the original views with their own understandings of the subject-specific issues in order to serve their own purpose of assignment writing and that, in turn, it would be these abilities that assessors/tutors would value.

The final comments in this section (6.18, 6.19) emphasise the complex processes of reading-to-writing assignments and how crucial the reading-to-writing skill is for academic success, thus summarising a number of the themes set out above:

Extract 6.18

I couldn’t just take the arguments and put it in a bulleted list. [Researcher’s interactive comments: Is this a style of writing which you usually find difficult? Any reasons?] I think I am having trouble summarising the essay into concise bits. I spoke to X (the tutor) about it and he advised to just find three points I got from the readings and elaborate them with examples and case studies. (*Language and Learning Journal: Rebecca 1M2m*)

Extract 6.19

Perhaps it's when I finally understand what do I read, because most of the first stuff is like ... I don't know what I'm reading. It's like I need to go back to the same paragraph, like I read three times, and it's so time consuming but the time is limited, you've got to hand in assignment within a few days.

So it's really a big challenge. And then finally okay I understand at least (inaudible) of that, I got the concept, I really know what's going on. But there's another challenge that comes that how to make these ideas into practice in my writing for my assignment. I mean you do not just tell the tutor 'I've read this, I understand this', they want to see how you learn this. And while you write it seems that you cannot really interpret what you read correctly. So that was another gap again, so that's the challenge I face.

(Interview: Benny 2M1e)

6.4 Summary

This section has focused on the four skills which make up the IELTS test, and which in our data capture key aspects of students learning experience post-IELTS. Three points in particular emerge:

1. Significant struggles on the part of students emerge consistently through our data:
 - some of these appear to be language related, with 'problems' explained by, for example, a deficit in one or more language skill, having non-native speaker status, or different previous study experiences
 - some of these are likely to be challenges faced by all students engaging in postgraduate study; in terms of identity theory they are likely to characterise all learning in terms of negotiating membership of a particular community, in this case the postgraduate academic teaching and learning community
 - the phenomenon of struggle appears to affect low-risk and high risk students alike, with reading-to-writing being the main locus of struggle, though the minority for whom the struggle does not end with success appear to be high-risk students.
2. From a stakeholder and identity perspective, these 'imagined' dimensions of the struggle can be considered actual, and thus require attention on the part of institutions as part of the institutional use of IELTS, ie as part of managing learning, as opposed to managing admissions (see 5).
3. In relation to specific IELTS subtests, two areas of discrepancy in particular emerge:
 - There is a gap between performance on the IELTS listening tests (in particular) and "real-life" subject learning conditions (eg linguistic unfriendliness of speakers: academic terminology, pace), thus suggesting a certain 'lack of fitness' for purpose for the existing listening test. Listening in interactive contexts is more challenging in one-to-one tutorials than in peer group discussion, suggesting that interlocutor status and density of information (cf: academic terminology) are contributory factors. In turn, the latter may connect to the way in which listening and reading scores in IELTS subtests may share an information processing element which, where strong, predicts a successful study experience (see 7.2.1 for further discussion of this hypothesis based on grade and progression data of Cohort 1 students).
 - The reading and writing tests raise a number of related issues. A key point made by student informants relates to the amount of required reading and the associated time demands rather than actual text content or textual features which were perceived for some students as a key source of difficulty. This finding can be understood in two ways: first it relates to capacity for information processing, that aspect of reading which may be shared with listening, and second, it relates to the process of reading for the purpose of writing assignments. Thus, a key capacity in postgraduate study

is what we label reading-to-writing. This capacity is not captured in either the reading or writing subtests (and associated test preparation processes), a lacuna which may be considered to weaken the IELTS claim that results are a statement about readiness for academic study.

Among these several issues evidenced in our data, four questions in particular emerge that have specific relevance for IELTS test development and validation:

1. Is the equal contribution of the four sub-scores to the overall band level a fair and accurate reflection of student needs in different skill areas for subject learning?
2. Should the current general Listening sub-test be replaced by one that has greater resonance with listening in subject study contexts?
3. Is integration of reading and writing tasks destined to be ‘muddied’?

And, more generally:

4. To what extent are the challenges faced by students in postgraduate study contexts different or similar for home and international students? And, in which specific respects?

7 STUDENT SUBJECT LEARNING AND PROGRESSION

7.1 Introduction

Having examined the role of the four language skills in the post-IELTS learning experience, and considered the validity issues for the IELTS test as a statement of readiness for study in higher education, we now focus directly on the student experience, exploring the relationships between IELTS and post-test learning and progression. This focus affords a discussion of identity formation and learning as a process of negotiated community membership. The discussion here is referenced to four research questions:

RQ4

Does, and if so how, the IELTS language profile construct students’ linguistic identity as English language users in the context of university study?

RQ5

What impact does the identity have on student learning, and on affective responses to the student institutional / academic / social experience?

RQ6

With reference to data obtained from the above research questions, how may we frame the stakes for the post-IELTS student-as-stakeholder group?

RQ7

Do the above research questions vary according to level of study: M and Doctoral levels? And, if so, how exactly?

Our findings are presented in three sections. 7.2 presents an overview of progression in one Masters cohort, and three case studies of learning, identity and progression from this cohort, one from each of the risk levels. 7.3 presents a similar case study of a doctoral student. This approach is taken in part to reflect the richness and complexities of the cases as narratives of learning, and in part to facilitate an integration of the different data sets in the analysis and discussion. 7.4 addresses the issues of identity more generally, analysing the framing of difficulty and progress in relation to Listening and Writing.

We have conceptualised student progress as achievement of community membership. The central idea here is ‘performed’ identity – based on Wenger (1998) and the model set out in 3.3 above – with identity ‘constructed’ in ‘interaction’. This performance is shaped by two aspects of ‘imagination’: i) how the student sees herself, that is, her sense of self which is stable or slowly evolving, and constituted by both past experiences and more visible labels, such as gender, age, and ethnic group membership, and ii) the idea of the person she is becoming, through achievement of group membership, that is, success in the educational program she is enrolled in. (Note: Feminine pronouns are used to refer to students to avoid specifying actual gender which might compromise anonymity.)

In these ways then, constructing identity as a postgraduate student involves a range of performances in interaction with fellow students, tutors and other members of the university community.

A particularly significant context of interaction with tutors is the preparation and completion of written assignments. This interaction results in judgements by ‘significant others’ (see section 3 above), which relate directly to community membership: achievement of grades that satisfy requirements for progression in the program or for the final award.

The discussion in this section presents student profiles in this frame of identity construction. The purpose of the profiles is to document some of the strands of identity imagination and performance so that the role of the IELTS test in the construct, and in the dynamics of progress in the program as an element of identity formation, can be understood.

Five kinds of data are particularly relevant here:

1. IELTS scores
2. Grades achieved in the academic program
3. Self-report – the account presented in learning journals, interviews and narrative workshops
4. The view of significant others – the tutors’ account in the form of assignment grades and comments
5. The ELLI (see 4.5.1 and Appendix 1) as accounts of growable learning powers. This procedure was administered on a pre- and post-test basis: at the beginning and at the end of the research period for Cohorts 1, and at the beginning of their study period for Cohort 2.

7.2 The masters students’ progress

7.2.1 The cases in context: grade data

The grade and progression data presented in Table 7.1 provides an overview of the cohort data which on the one hand provides a student learning and progression perspective on the tutor accounts in section 5 above and the issues relating to the language skills (L,S,R & W) in section 6. The overview also provides the account of the case studies, Brenda, Angela and Cindy (see 7.2.3), representing a parallel between a strong IELTS profile and success in assignments on the program: those who enter with a strong language skills profile do better. The difference in performance in assignments becomes more pronounced in the second term: the two Category 2 students had more re-submissions in the second term. This may be explained by generally greater support afforded by program tutors in the first term, and greater expectation of independent completion of assignments in the second term (data from interviews and workshops with tutors). Overall this finding supports our conclusion in section 5, in indicating the need for programs and institutions who accept students with weaker IELTS profiles to provide extensive and ongoing academic and other support for such students.

Student(1)	IELTS Score					Term 1				Term 2				D(2)
	Overall	L	S	R	W	Unit grades(3)								
Category 1														
Amanda 1M1b	7	7.5	7	7.0	7	C	B	B	C	B	B	A	C	C
Angela 1M1c	7.5	8.5	7	7.5	7	A	C	B	B	A	A	A	A	A
Category 2														
Bella 2m1d	6 *	6.5	6	6.5	5	C	C	B	C	C(4)	C	C	C	B
Benny 2M1e	6 **	5.5	6	6.5	6	A	B	B	A	A	A	A	B	A
Brenda 2M1f	5.5 **	5.0	6	5.0	6	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	D	Ext(5)
Category 3														
Cindy 3M1g	6.5 ***	6.5	7	5.5	6	B	C	B	A	B	B	A	B	B

Notes:

* Student attended 4 week pre-session course at University Language Centre **after** taking IELTS

** Student attended 8 week pre-session course at University Language Centre **after** taking IELTS

*** Student attended 8 month pre-session **before** taking IELTS

1. for details of SILP student categories, see 4.4.1 above
2. Dissertation
3. Unit grades: A, B, C represent PASS grades at Masters level which can be summarised as Excellent, Very good and Good/Satisfactory respectively. D is a PASS at Diploma level, and allows the option of re-submission for a Pass at Masters level.
4. Grades in Bold are re-submission grades, ie initial grade was a D
5. Ext: Extension – dissertation not submitted

Table 7.1: M-Level (cohort 1) grade profiles

We observe a distinct pattern of a stronger profile in comprehension skills in IELTS (Listening and Reading) compared to productive skills (Speaking and Writing) in predicting success. This applies across two categories where comparisons are possible:

Category 2: Bella 2m1d (L:6.5 & R:6.5) and Benny 2M1e (L:5.5 & R:6.5) do better than Brenda 2M1f (L:5 & R:5).

Category 1: Angela 1M1c (L:8.5 & R:7.5) does better than Amanda 1M1b (L:7.5 & R:7)

This tentative finding is interesting in two ways. First, it contrasts with the emphasis placed on the more ‘visible’ language performance skills which are considered indicative of readiness by program administrators (speaking) and program tutors (writing), see 5.4.3. Second, the finding may suggest a link between the nature of information processing implicit in the Listening and Reading IELTS tests, and the capacities which underpin success in postgraduate study. The notion of an information processing/comprehension skill may be found to parallel the skills of reading-to-writing set out in 6 above.

7.2.2 The cases in context: ELLI data

In Appendix 1, we introduced the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory (ELLI) that operationalises the concept of a *capacity for learning* as a growable energy for learning which includes as constituent element two sets of factors: i) knowledge, skills and understanding; and ii) attitudes, values, feelings, dispositions and motivation. Figure 7.1 illustrates the seven dimensions of learning power, as follows.

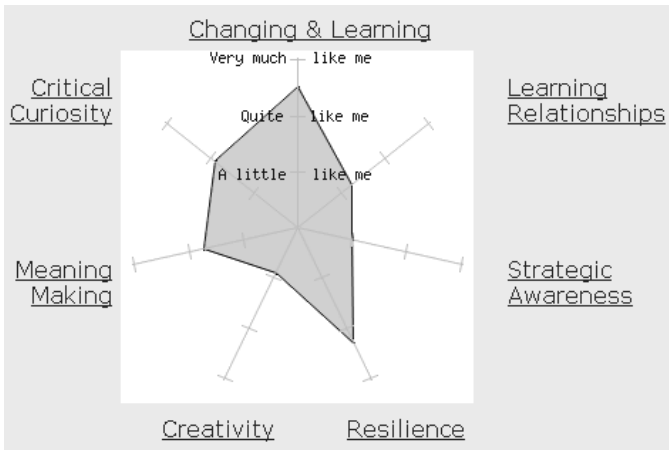


Figure 7.1: Student profile and seven dimensions of learning power

Below, in Figure 7.2, we summarise the ELLI profiles obtained on both administration occasions by Cohort 1 students.

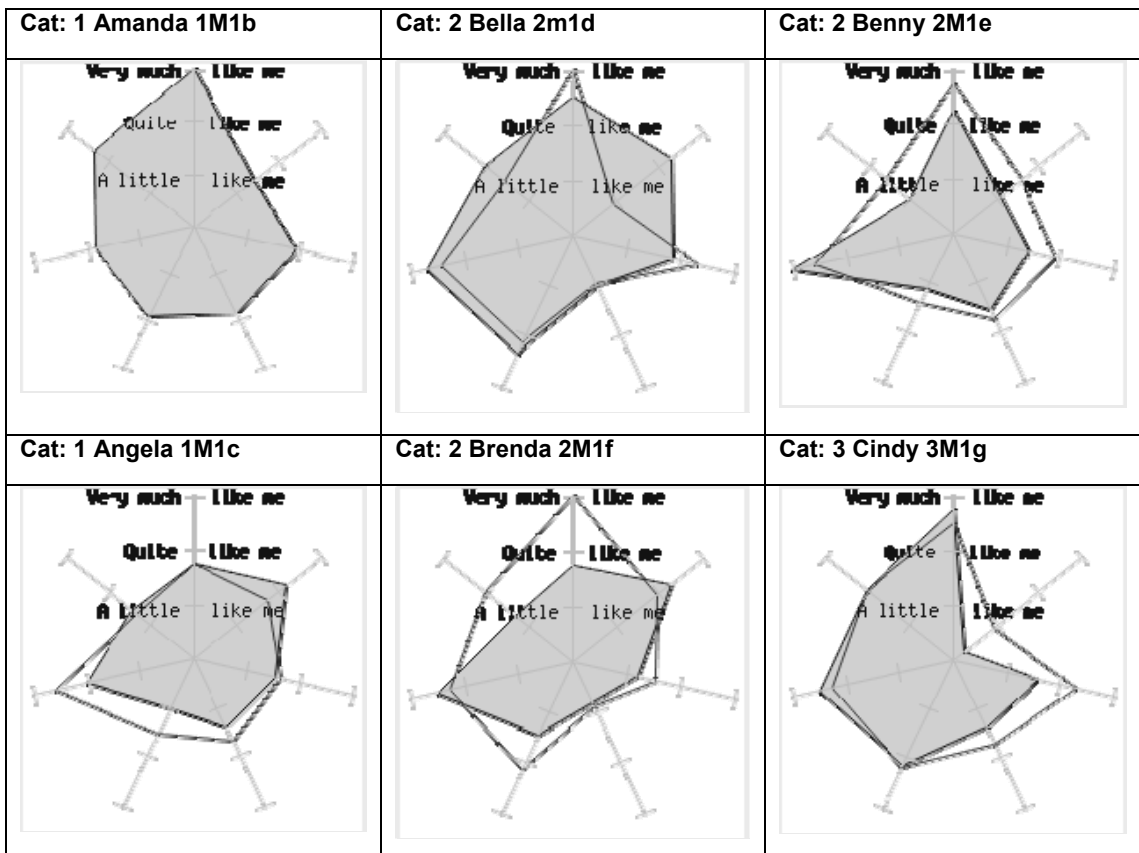


Figure 7.2: ELLI profiles of masters students – Cohort 1

Four trends are identified for the Category 2 students here. First, they grow in *Changing and Learning*, with ‘a sense of history and hope’. This ELLI factor captures notions of confidence and self-belief and is considered particularly indicative of progress in learning. Second, these students grow in *Strategic Awareness*, becoming more emotionally aware and less ‘robotic’. Third, Bella and Brenda decline in *Learning Relationships*, becoming both isolated and dependent. On the one hand this trend seems particularly meaningful in the case of these students, particularly Brenda, (see (iii) below). On the other, the *Learning Relationships* dimension is problematic across all cohorts, and needs to be interpreted with care. (Note: Since *Learning Relationships* relates in part to frequency and perceived value for learning of communications with a range of members of personal social networks, the particular context of international students may compromise the reliability of this factor. If, as is likely, they interpret personal and social networks as family and friends in their home country, then they are also likely to indicate that they are not frequent and close influences on their current learning. In both this cohort and in the profiles of Cohort 2, the results of this factor were considered by students in the ELLI feedback workshop to be counter-intuitive because of variations in interpretation of the relevant questions. In addition, in the factor analysis underpinning the ELLI framework as a whole, the *Learning Relationships* loading proved the weakest of the seven dimensions (Deakin Crick, R, Broadfoot, P & Claxton, G (2004) *Developing an Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory: the ELLI Project. Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 11, pp 247-272)

Fourth, Category 2 and 3 students in the pre-test had a strong *Meaning Making* dimension. This factor, reflecting an orientation to ‘coherence’ rather than to ‘fragmentation’, may contribute to high IELTS scores in the Listening and Reading tests which involve input processing (see 7.2.1 above). The decline on this dimension (ie *Meaning Making*) between the first and second tests may reflect a risk factor in intensive, full-time Masters programs: students ‘accumulate data’, and become overwhelmed by detail without fully appreciating the connections and shared meanings in the curriculum. The challenge here – we hypothesise – is one which linguistically better equipped students may cope with, but is a risk factor for students with weaker IELTS profiles, with the risk increasing as the program unfolds and the information load increases.

In the ELLI data, the Category 3 student was observed to ‘grow’ in three areas: *Learning Relationships*; *Strategic Awareness*; and *Resilience* – ‘stickability’, ‘taking risks’ and ‘perseverance when things go wrong’. The result in relation to Strategic Awareness corresponds clearly to self-report data, set out in Table 7.3 below. Only one Category 1 student in Cohort 1 (out of three) managed to complete the second ELLI test, so the opportunity to observe patterns is limited. However, two points can be made: first the profile of Amanda (see Figure 7.2) suggests a high level of learning power: particularly strong on *Changing and Learning*, and *Critical Curiosity*, and with no particularly weak dimensions. Second, the pattern of growth in the case of Angela is particularly interesting since she proved a highly successful student: the growth in the dimensions of *Meaning Making*, *Creativity* and *Resilience* may reflect more generally an approach particularly facilitative of identity negotiation and progress on such programs.

7.2.3 Three cases

Angela

The story of Category 1 student Angela is one of *nothing succeeding like success*: the likelihood of successful learning on a postgraduate program, suggested in part by a strong IELTS profile is realised. The extensive and insightful journal entries describe a struggle – an awareness of shortcomings and anxiety in the context of particular challenges – but these are effectively dealt with. She proves analytic in describing her learning experience, and recounts appropriate strategies: preparing well to build confidence:

Extract 7.1

I am not a born public speaker and perhaps too sensitive. However, I find that I have changed a lot since I came here and become more sociable, though I am still a person who feels insecure if I have not prepared well for all. (Journal)

Other strategies include imitating the writing style of academic articles.

Extract 7.2

I think there's several key points. For one thing I'm a very shy person. So first I have some communication problems. And then the other point is that the writing styles, just I'm trying to improve my writing. I think I'm just trying to read more, trying to imitate some academic writing style, something like this, trying to improve this. This is a point. And the other is the communicating point. I think this too is a key point for me. (Interview)

She actively seeks connections between different fields of enquiry: her account of a chance but academically productive encounter with a student from another program illustrates her capacity for *Meaning Making* (one of the three dimensions where the ELLI profile shows growth), and also a sense of the value of *Learning Relationships*.

Extract 7.3

The girl, who lives upstairs of my flat, came down and asked us to help her to do the questionnaire for her dissertation research. She studies psychology and her research is about the cognitive style and learning, closely related to learning style we have covered in [...] I also told her that I would do something about listening, a cognitive process. She recommended some books about attention, visual experiment in Psychological field. We discovered that she is doing something educational and I am doing things psychological. The subjects, though in different majors, are linked. (Journal)

Angela's strategies for successful negotiation of her academic community are recognised by her tutors. Analysis of program documentation shows this recognition, and also illustrates how powerfully the lexical choices (excellent, authoritative, confident, in control, logical, analytic, sophisticated) reflect and possibly construct her successful academic identity.

Extract 7.4

This is an authoritative and confident assignment, attending well to both the research process issues and the topic. ET12 (Tutor comment – Assignment 1)

Extract 7.5

Excellent: you seem very much in control of the task, know the points you wish to make and present these in a highly logical and analytic fashion. ET 14 (Tutor comment – Assignment 6)

Extract 7.6

This is an excellent dissertation, illustrating a deep understanding of research processes and sophisticated data management and analysis skills. The design of the study shows a commendable grasp of the key principles of empirical research. [...] this dissertation makes a distinct contribution, and has potential for publication in a TESOL or assessment journal. ET12 (Markers' comment – Dissertation)

Angela may be seen as a clear example of the assertion of readiness for academic study implicit in her IELTS profile being validated by the experience of successful learning. Her case also supports the view that an identity perspective as set out in Ch 3 above is a valuable way of understanding the process of learning. The next two cases present similarly detailed accounts, but with very different outcomes.

Brenda

The story of Brenda in the grade profile data and the accounts of learning experiences is one of struggle against the odds, without a happy ending. The extensive support afforded to her early in the course proved effective in the short term, but the effort required meant that the work stacked up: she spent much of Term 2 completing a re-submission from Term 1. Tutors found her a dependent student and difficult to support, her own perspective was one of depleting confidence and self-belief, and she gradually became more isolated – her journal entries dried up, and contacting her to arrange an interview towards the end of the period proved difficult. Her learning power (see Figure 7.2 above) shows growth on *Changing and Learning*, *Critical Curiosity*, *Creativity* and *Strategic Awareness* dimensions, but an absence of growth in the *Meaning Making* and *Learning Relationships* dimensions. The decline in *Meaning Making* may reflect the *fragmentation* rather than increasing coherence noticed by tutors, while the decline in *Learning Relationships* seems to capture the twin phenomena of *dependence* and *isolation* which characterised her participation in the program in Term 2, and is illustrated by this interview extract:

Extract 7.7

Sometimes I'm just confused. I cannot guarantee ... or I have enough competence to know this is a good assignment until my tutor say 'Oh this is a good assignment.' When I hand in I never ... I won't have the confidence to ... I don't have any confidence of this piece of work. And that when I hand in I don't have any confidence that it is a piece of work and I put in the box. I just feel very scared and put in the box.
(Interview)

In terms of identity formation, Brenda's learning has not achieved membership of the academic program. The view of her tutors that she is not engaged shows in contrast to Angela, how there is a lack of joint construction of the desired academic identity:

Extract 7.8

I tutored Brenda for the [research methods assignment], there were problems in terms of the questions that were asked of the critique and then there was evidence in that sort of oral discussion of really enormous difficulty in actually grasping the main points. [...] there were just enormous problems, and in the writing and expressing of the ideas. So you know in terms of engagement, there wasn't engagement of the type that I would expect. And Brenda just really couldn't benefit. And I found it very difficult, extremely difficult, trying to have some kind of impact and trying to assist the learning of Brenda.
ET13 (in tutor workshop)

The identity she has 'performed' in her writing and her interactions with 'significant others' has not conformed to community norms, and her sense of failure has poignantly affective elements. Her level of skills in English is a contributory factor to the failure, but needs to be understood as one of a network of factors. The succinct two-word phrase she remembers from the tutor's feedback describes not only her writing but her response to it, reflecting gaps on both her part and that of the tutor in making meaning in the formative assessment process:

Extract 7.9

If my tutor wrote the feedback like 'not clear' I am not sure what happened. Is it the matter about grammar or the meanings of the sentences, which did not be given enough information? During these eight months, I did try to overcome loads problems in writing.

Two other factors relate more directly to identity: first, there is evidence that she is not good at understanding purpose and modality of the academic community, understanding how ideas and practices are connected:

Extract 7.10

[Term 2 assignment] I have the reading but ... I cannot find the linking. It's very difficult.
(Interview)

Extract 7.11

Although you have read widely, the references are not used to set out a position and defend it. In future assignments, consider i) what the quotation actually means for the situation you are discussing, ii) whether you have made this clear in the text around the quotation, and iii) whether other sources might suggest something different.
ET12 (Comment on Assignment 6)

Second, she tends to be 'other-regulated' rather than 'self-regulated', seeking to get direction from others:

Extract 7.12

So I will think if I do what my tutor says I will get past. ... My learning process is just teacher centred. ... But I don't want to be a robot.

Her idea of not being a *robot* is important here, but it may be that her lack of a vision, a sense of what is required by the new community, leaves her with little option but to strive in robotic fashion to meet by chance these requirements. She values interactions, in the form of meetings with tutors, but in these interactions she sets out goals only for the tutor, who must 'push' her:

Extract 7.13

I think I am not an independent learner. I like the tutor to push me. I also like to meet her or him regularly to keep myself learning

Brenda, in not performing the desired identity of postgraduate student, may be performing another identity. She revealed in interview, that she had never been a high-achieving student, but through perseverance and family support she had achieved the learning goals she had set herself:

Extract 7.14

I'm a slow learner according to my previous learning. When I was in the junior school (inaudible) according to my ... I told my parents when I have a learning difficulty in the autumn term ... and my mum tried to help me. And she say when you are in junior high school think about what did you do. I say I went to school, after school I went to an after school.
(Interview)

It may be that on her postgraduate program, she is performing her 'struggler' identity, but perhaps because of the absence of a close family support, perhaps because of other factors, on this occasion perseverance is not enough.

This account illustrates both the reality of the struggle for a student such as Brenda, and also the complexity in predicting the outcome. The indication from the IELTS profile of a lack of readiness for postgraduate study seems borne out. The key questions for admissions procedures, however, relate the extent to which the IELTS profile i) is one aspect of readiness which may be compensated for by pre-sessional English, and ii) reflects a more general account of readiness (perhaps in terms of information processing and communication skills) which pre-sessional English is unlikely to compensate for. The challenge for institutions and admissions tutors in addressing these questions is explored further in 8 below.

Cindy

The story of Cindy in the program is one of reasonable expectations being realised. As a category 3 student she has met the IELTS entry requirements overall, but represents a level of risk in her reading score of 5.5 and her writing score of 6. There is little evidence of struggle: rather of pragmatic self-assessment and development of strategies to address needs:

Extract 7.15

At the beginning of the course, my reading ability was not that good. The lowest score in my IELTS exam was that of reading ... In the first week of the program, I received at least four articles to read. They took me the whole weekend to finish and not necessarily with complete understanding of what are written. Week after week, the load of articles is increasing. Besides, there are lists of key readings that our tutors suggest to read. To cope with these huge loads, I developed my own strategy for reading as follows:

- * not all articles should be read. I only read articles that will help me finish the assignments and also the ones that I feel interested in.
- * time management became more effective so that I read the assigned articles before coming sessions.
- * not all selected articles should be read thoroughly. So, skimming and scanning became the most effective strategies in my readings. (Journal)

Tutors commented on her independence and effectiveness in study tasks, with the emphasis consistently on ‘practice’ and ‘practical’ aspects of assignment topics.

Extract 7.16

This is a very good attempt to respond to the practice assignment question. Your answer is generally effective and you show that you have a very good awareness of current difficulties in the teaching of English in your context. You write well in English. ET 16 (Tutor Comment Assignment 1)

Extract 7.17

This is a strong piece of work, reflecting a sound grasp of the key concepts introduced in the unit. You have creative and practical ideas which complement this, and should enable you to innovate effectively in your teaching context. ET 12 (Tutor Comment Assignment 5)

Her journal entry (7.15) shows how her view of her reading skills appears framed by the IELTS score, and evidenced in the experience of learning on the course. The resolution of this challenge is a focused strategy for dealing with the felt challenge. Both the outcome in terms of grades and the ELLI profile (the most striking area of growth is *Strategic Awareness*) attest to the success of this strategy.

7.2.4 Summary of learning, progression and identity issues: the three cases

The cases presented above provide glimpses of different learning experiences that inform the process dimension of RQ4, the affective element of RQ5, and the stakes element of RQ6 (pp 50-51). The role of IELTS in identity construction is often real – virtually all students could provide precise details of their score in interview, often more than one year after the test, and many students like Cindy (3M1g; see Extract 7.15) refer to the IELTS score as a reason for a particular self-assessment. It may be that IELTS becomes part of the imagined self as language user and student, and is carried with a range of other accounts from the past into the present context of postgraduate study. It thus becomes a reference point for assessing performance in relation to specific encounters and interactions in negotiating membership of the new community. As such a reference point, it serves different functions: it accounts for success; it serves, where success is elusive, as a basis for expectations of greater success in the future, and as a weak or unreliable marker of identity, it can be set aside or replaced by other markers when the challenge of negotiating the new identity is not supported by the IELTS score. This multi-dimensionality of the contribution of IELTS to learning suggests that further

explorations in this area need to engage with learning in a broad social frame such as accessing communities of practice rather than constructing learning in a narrower cognitive or language acquisition frame.

There is some evidence in these accounts of the strength of the IELTS profile relating to identity as a postgraduate student. A key fact appears to be *engagement*, in terms of:

1. actual behaviour to establish participation in the program community, and
2. the more private experience of coping with the academic learning and assessment challenges.

Angela’s account of her approach to an experience, whether asking a question of a visiting speaker, seeing similarities between her dissertation and that of another Masters student, or more privately assessing areas for development and resolving to develop these, reflects both these modes of engagement. The term *engagement* comes up in the Brenda’s data: her tutor in a workshop discussion (see Extract 7.8 above: Tutor ET13 notes that in tutoring Brenda (2M1f), she observed a lack of *engagement*, and so felt there could be no benefit to learning). In Wenger’s (1998) account of identity and learning, engagement captures the interactions involved in negotiating community membership. We hypothesise, thus, that the notion of engagement may be a frame for understanding the student stake in the program: if their own capacities and the learning opportunities available together construct engagement, then the likelihood is that progression towards and achievement of the award will follow.

These accounts describe the process of learning of the masters students. The next section describes progress in the context of doctoral study.

7.3 The doctoral students

The doctoral participants in the project are both taught doctorate (EdD) and research doctorate (MPhil/PhD) students. The account of progress and identity issues of this cohort is presented around a single case study, with confirming and disconfirming voices of other students added to the discussion. The single case is Dora (3D1k) an experienced teacher of English in a university in her country, whose previous study (first degree and Masters) has been in her country and in the United States. Her IELTS profile is: IELTS: Overall: 7.0 L = 6.5 S = 8.0 R = 7.0 W = 7.0.

She attributes the high scores (Speaking, Reading and Writing) to her bilingual education. She does not feel that the Listening sub-score is a true reflection of her listening skills as she was very nervous during the test, and she has had no problems in understanding in academic and social interactions in the program context. Dora describes herself in interview and journals as having ‘a tendency towards shyness and nervousness’. She also describes herself as ‘passive’ and attributes this to a national rather than personal trait. Her ELLI profile (Figure 7.3) is particularly strong in *Changing and Learning* and *Meaning Making*, though there is very little growth in the period between March and September 2004.

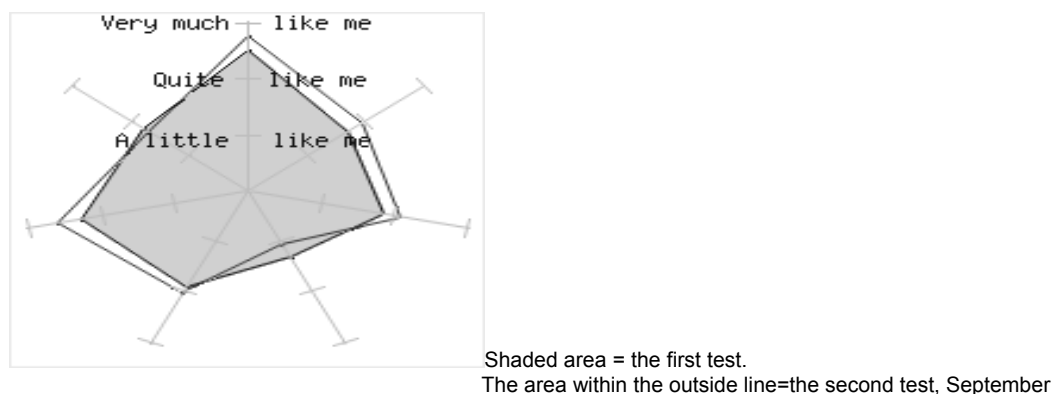


Figure 7.3: ELLI profile of Dora (3D1k)

As a taught doctoral student, Dora completed six assignments over the 14 months of the SILP project. The grades, set out in Table 7.7, show a slow start – three P3 grades – followed by a consistent pattern of commendable results – three P1 grades.

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4	Unit 5	Unit 6
P3	P3	P3	P1	P1	P1

P1: Excellent P2: Very good P3: Satisfactory

Table 7.7: Grade profile of Dora

Dora in journals and interviews describes her learning experience as a struggle, both in terms of the academic challenge and the studying through English dimension:

Extract 7.18

I felt that I have to read to understand certain concepts many times before I can understand it thoroughly. I don't know if this is because English is not my native language or is it because the text is difficult to grasp. *(Journal)*

There is also an affective aspect to the struggle, aggravated by her performance:

Extract 7.19

I have been experiencing emotional stress since I felt that I haven't been performing so well in the program. *(Journal)*

Her response to this stress is to call on her goal orientation:

Extract 7.20

It is not just studying but the fact from being away from home plays an important factor too (I think). [...] I ask myself why I'm in this country and why I'm in this program and reminding myself that I have a goal to accomplish. I'd say the distress didn't disappear right then but it's getting better. *(Journal)*

Dora identifies focus and criticality as performance requirements for community membership:

Extract 7.21

After reading the tutor's comments, I know that I still have several weak points. For example, I am not focused in my writing and also not being critical enough. *(Journal)*

In relation to these requirements however, she shows signs of 'other-regulation': she does not seem to work on a self-assessment, but is rather dependent on the view of the tutor:

Extract 7.22

P3 – devastated, demotivated [...] I felt I did much better this time. I did not understand why I still receive a 'bad' grade when the tutor said that I have improved. *(Journal)*

She identifies aspects of her work that she has to change – a change which involves abandoning a ‘national’ style:

Extract 7.23

In my culture, under the heading of ‘Introduction’, we would normally write things in general. However, after going through several research works, I realised that I could not stick to my original writing style. (Journal)

In addition to abandoning what she sees as features of ‘national’ style, she also has to add ‘voice’, though it is not clear whether this is to do with actual substance of her writing or more decorative features:

Extract 7.24

my tutor suggested that the assignment still lacks ‘my own voice’. [...]

the voice comment is to add in more of my own experience into my essay and I believe to make my writing more ‘vivid’. (Journal)

Overall a theme in her struggle is to do with agency: she seems to be working solely with the view of significant others. One context in which she does articulate ownership and a sense of responsibility is in describing the problems she has in following a seminar presentation: she sees her lack of comprehension as a function of her own lack of preparation – with no reference to the effectiveness of the speaker:

Extract 7.25

The speaker talked about how he applied Vygotskian theory in his class. The reason that I couldn’t understand his talk was probably because I didn’t spend enough time in reading the theory. (Journal)

To help with one assignment Dora asks a friend to help. This proves an effective strategy, but one that does not come naturally:

Extract 7.26

I am still reading the statistics and am finding it quite hard to understand. However, I tried to ask a friend who is familiar with statistics to help me out. Somehow, it turns out that the application that he has used in his field of studies is different from social science. But he managed to explain the basic concepts to me which I was able to relate to what I’m doing. [...] this is the very first time I asked a friend to help. In the past, I couldn’t find anyone in my field to help me and I’m the kind of person who tends to discover things for myself first. (Journal)

She also calls on another friend to help with some aspects of the language in an assignment:

Extract 7.27

After revising by myself. I also asked a friend who is a near native speaker to edit my work for me. She made some changes. After I get edited paper from her, I realised that sometimes I tend to use the same words too many times and sometimes the choice of words are inappropriate. [...] Changing some of the words make the sentences more cohesive (Journal)

These strategies prove effective for these assignments. Dora gets P1 grades, thus resolving the problems and anguish she had with her P3 grades. There is a cost however: as a bilingual learner she took pride in her English skills. She mentioned her English-medium education (in an international primary and secondary school) in her journals. In addition, her English skills were her primary claim to literacy:

Extract 7.28

My spoken [First Language] is good, I'm fluent in [FL], but my written [FL] is not as good as my written English. (Interview)

The struggle experienced by Dora is not unusual. Many doctoral students described a similar experience, where success came after a period of adjustment, characterised by a trial and error approach to completing academic tasks and by episodes of emotional self-doubt.

Four themes emerge in this case study on the writing experience in the development of an identity as a postgraduate student: i) the idea that writing is a 'problem', ii) the role of national identity on writing, iii) the notion of writing style separate from language, and iv) the nature of change involved in improving skills to meet writing requirements.

Many of these themes are also reflected in the accounts of writing of the Masters students. It may appear strange that the experience of doctoral students is similar to that of Masters students: they have in the main completed Masters degrees successfully (and as such are already inducted members of the academic community), and are accustomed to the demands of reading and writing. It may be however, that the accounts of struggle seem similar for three reasons. First, Doctoral level is generally understood as more challenging than Masters levels, and thus from the outset, self-questioning on suitability for study is more acute. Second, Doctoral study, where each student is forging her own learning pathway, and there is less classroom interaction than on taught Masters programs, is more isolated and isolating, thus creating only limited opportunities for using interaction to minimise feelings of stress. Third, the longer duration of Doctoral programs (than Masters programs) and the need for self-regulation in devising and developing a research proposal, may promote reflection and self-doubt, which in turn inform learning journal entries (as in the case of Dora) in ways different from the struggle at Masters level.

For these reasons our conclusions in relation to RQ7 are only partial. The similarities in learning processes observed relate to the first of at least three years. A study such as this which can document comprehensively the experience of learning and progression for Masters students, cannot claim to do the same for Doctoral students. A longer study is needed to understand the process of developing identity after the first year of Doctoral study.

7.4 IELTS and the construction of identity as a language user

The self-report data in our study has provided a context for exploring the ways in which the IELTS test score contributed to the imagined self (see 3.3 above), both as an already successful English language learner, and as a prospective member of a postgraduate community in a British university. The IELTS has salience here for two reasons: for many it is a new kind of test, the equal attention to the four skills being different from the emphasis on literacy and accuracy skills in previous experience of assessment. (See Section 6 for further discussion on this feature of the IELTS test.) Second, the explicit link between success in the test and admission to the university program gives the result a real-world, tangible validity, which in turn contributes to the future-oriented dimension of imagined identity discussed (see 7.1 above). It is important to understand therefore, how these validity dimensions of the IELTS score relate to the lived experience of being a postgraduate student.

The role of writing in identity formation in the academic community is particularly important in two respects. First, writing is a central part of the task of being a postgraduate student – the long coursework assignments are an ongoing challenge for all students regardless of their L1. Second, writing is the focus of judgements of the significant other – the tutor – and relates directly to the award of credits and progress towards the award. These aspects of writing are evidenced in a number of ways in the data. The notion of 'struggle' is particularly resonant in the profiles of students presented in preceding sections above, see the profiles of Brenda (see 7.3.2 above) and Dora (see 7.4 above) for vivid accounts of struggles with writing requirements. The majority of students noted the particular

challenge of being critical and/or analytic in their writing style (for tutor perspectives, see 5 above): in the journals and in interview they refer to the need to be a different kind of writer. We identify four writing issues that relate to learning progression and identity.

1. *Writing as a problem*

The difficulty here is in part due to the inherent challenge of writing, and in part due to the feedback from the tutor. Negative feedback, particularly in the context of failing grades actively constructs the difficulty of writing. In the profiles presented above both Doctoral and Masters students illustrate the central role of the tutor in framing the experience of difficulty in the identity of the postgraduate student.

2. *The role of national identity on writing*

Many of the students at Masters and Doctoral levels attribute difficulty to the writing style of their country, as a form of community of practice:

Extract 7.29

[...] at the beginning for doing assignments the written language also has some difficulties. Because I always have the Chinese way of thinking. I'm writing the things probably not catching to the main points, just wandering around the points that I should really hit. I think that's the problem.
(Interview with Angela)

For students, the source of the problem is external to their language and learning skills – the previous educational experience and expectations have led them to write in a way which they see as not meeting requirements for the current program. While one approach to this dimension of the problem may be to analyse it in terms of cultural strategy and style (Hofstede 1991) or contrastive rhetoric (Connor 1996; Connor 2002; Kaplan 1966), it is also possible to see it in terms of *imagined* and *performed* identities, in a learning context where the performance engages the new and uncertain, and the imagined by contrast, reflects something stable and safe. *Imagined* here refers to static facts while establishing an identity – what Wenger (1998) labels *reifications*, rather than the envisioning of emerging identity which drives performance. In the interview, Diana states that the use of pronouns is an example of her emerging, British-like writer identity.

Extract 7.30

[...] when I look back at my assignments, the first few ones, I had problems not with the language, but with the style, the writing style, the British academic writing style. I think that's where my problem was. For example here they seem to be using a lot of personal pronouns - "I" – that kind of thing. But it's not common in [country]. [...] I think I'm becoming more British now (laughs) in terms of my writing style.
(Interview with Diana)

This example relates to two aspects of academic writing on postgraduate courses. First, the use of personal pronouns is a situated rather than rule-governed issue for all academic writers: writers sometimes opt for a more personal tone, and sometimes judge a more de-personalised presentation of a point to be more appropriate. Second, the representation of such writer choices as rule-governed EAP (Lea and Street 1998), an approach which institutional or program academic writing style guides often emphasise, belies the more complex dynamics of negotiating identity in a context of change. Diana, on the threshold of new community membership (certainly in terms of her language skills as represented by her IELTS Profile: Overall: 8; L=8.5; S=8; R=6.5; W=9) may in fact have the wrong key to open that door!

3. *The notion of writing style separate from language*

While many students, like Dora, cite style as a context for the difficulty with writing, few refer to actual experience of problems with the language. Like Diana (Extract 7.30) they may provide

examples of difficulties that relate to language issues to describe an aspect of style. This may suggest a strong but somewhat tacit role for the IELTS score in framing the view of self in this regard: because the writing score on the English language test affirms readiness of the language dimension for postgraduate study, language issues do not emerge as explanations for difficulty (see section 6 above for an analysis of difficulties experienced in the reading-to-writing academic activity). Aligned to this tendency may be the professional language teaching identity of many of the students: several comment on how this assumes that there are no specifically language-related issues. These tendencies to represent issues as differences in style requirements rather than language skills deficits are essentially a stakeholder account, and given salience to an analysis constructed around identity development. Comparisons with home students studying and writing in their L1 (see section 5 above for tutors' views) illustrate that the language element of writing difficulties is very real.

4. *The nature of change involved in improving skills to meet writing requirements*

For many students understanding and accepting that change in their writing is necessary is not problematic. However, the willingness to conform to the emerging requirements of the new community does not construct the way forward. Many accounts (eg Brenda, 7.2.3b) and Dora (7.4) present an understanding of the need for change based on deficits. This may be a necessary first stage in engaging with the challenges of writing. It needs however, to be supported by a range of resources and support mechanisms that envision the future, the writing performances required for participation in the new community, rather than focus on current shortcomings: students might be exposed to samples of writing which represent successful, novice membership of the academic community. Such mechanisms might enable struggling students to learn through imitation, a strategy reported by successful students in this study (eg extracts in 7.2).

7.5 Summary

The discussion in this section affords both firm and more tentative conclusions to be drawn:

1. There is a fairly strong link in our data between IELTS profiles and success in academic study.
2. There are also non-conforming cases, suggesting that IELTS profiles need to be understood in conjunction with other factors which influence identity formation.
3. Strong Listening and Reading profiles may be predictors of success in ways in which Speaking and Writing profiles are not.
4. Students with weak profiles progress more slowly and may need more continuing support in study than other students.
5. All students struggle – the reality of learning as achieving participation in new communities.
6. Successful students engage, thus realising a kind of process stake that affords success.
7. Seeing negative feedback as a reflection of personal capacity is not conducive to learning; seeing such feedback as an opportunity to learn is more positive.
8. An imagined self based on national rather than personal traits may not be a helpful contribution of imagination to the challenge of community membership.
9. The affective dimension of learning should be resolved in interaction rather than suffered in isolation.
10. The Doctoral student experience shares much with Masters, but needs to be explored in a longer time frame than was possible in this case. Based on the analysis above, the following provides a summary of the main findings.

8 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Introduction

All students who enter higher education need to develop appropriate identities in order to negotiate membership of the academic teaching and learning community. In this respect it could be said that there is an equal playing field between home and international students and that, we would assert, it is equally as relevant to track the processes through which home students become integrated as learners in their different areas of study. Our focus has been on international students who have been ‘successful’ in so far as they have achieved university postgraduate entry that is attributable in part to their gaining an acceptable IELTS score. In itself this score, as we have indicated earlier (section 2 above) assumes that students (i) have demonstrated a ‘readiness’ for English medium study and (ii) will continue to develop in their English and, thus, engage with and benefit from their subject specialist learning.

As also indicated earlier (3.2 above), much IELTS validation research has focused on the predictive validity of the IELTS and cut-off scores referenced to student grades / performance in academic settings. More recent research has been linked to washback, with several studies focusing on aspects of IELTS preparation courses. Yet another focus has been on the language performance of students – on texts produced as part of the writing subtest – analysing textual features as a means of investigating differentiation of student product at the different IELTS levels. This study complements this body of research. It provides a rich account of students’ learning experiences and engagement in academic community membership through the medium of English and relates these to discussion of consequential rather than predictive validity.

In this chapter, we first summarise the central findings (8.2) and in 8.3 identify two limitations of our study. This is followed by suggestions of the potential impact and implications of our research for different IELTS user groups (8.4). With reference to this last, we identify a number of suggestions that might guide a future IELTS impact research agenda.

8.2 Summary of findings

It will be recalled that the overall aim of our research was to investigate:

the possible affective and academic impact of IELTS results on students once they are accepted by an institution, with specific reference to their learning experiences (eg nature of engagement with their courses) and academic progress and achievement (eg via coursework assignments or oral presentations).

In the analysis and presentation of findings above, section 5 addressed RQs 1 and 2; section 6 reported on RQ3; and section 7 addressed RQs 4, 5, 6 and 7. Below, we summarise our analyses referenced to the individual research questions. It is to be noted that some trends in the data emerged in several of our analyses but these are only mentioned once below. It is important, however, to look across the findings to gain a coherent perspective on student admissions, learning and progression with specific reference to IELTS.

8.2.1 Research question 1

What use, if any, is made of IELTS scores (individual skills and aggregated score) by different participating stakeholders, in particular program admissions staff and tutors?

- The university-recommended score of 6.5 is used across the majority of programs in this research. Most admissions tutors do not make use of IELTS sub-scores in their processing of applications, except for the TESOL/Applied Linguistics programs. Generally, the overall score is the ‘hard’ admissions criterion, that is, requiring little interpretation. The score is integrated with other factors in the admissions decision-making process

- There is some evidence that the Applied Linguistics staff in one department have had an influence on the depth of knowledge and implications of different IELTS cut-off scores.
- IELTS scores inform whether a student is recommended for pre-sessional training but (a) what constitutes a successful outcome of this training remains ambiguous; and (b) applicants with similar IELTS profiles may be treated differently across programs, eg some given a conditional offer, while others were not.
- The ways IELTS scores are used in the decision-making process and the limited knowledge base of what IELTS represents are a concern, and should be a focus for action both by programs and institutions (as service users), and by IELTS (as service providers).

8.2.2 Research question 2

What is the level of awareness of the different program admissions staff of IELTS scores and the implications for student learning and progression?

- Their IELTS knowledge base is weak, hesitant or even inaccurate. The main sources of information about IELTS come from the university registry or the language centre but this would appear to be somewhat ad hoc. There is little curiosity to know more about the IELTS with some staff explicitly stating they have no need to be better informed.
- IELTS scores are interpreted literally in the admissions process, and in terms of implications for student learning and learning support. These patterns of interpretation derive from limited attention to sub-test scores, and from the view that the minimum threshold equates to the optimum in terms of readiness for postgraduate study.
- International students who gain admission through a language test such as IELTS are often considered to lack critical thinking and evaluative skills. The merged construct of language and intellectual skills shapes tutor's views of required learning support, and may contribute to a pattern of such students not performing to their potential in their specialist subjects. In one department, for example, it was asserted that the chances of international students achieving a distinction grade were limited.
- Despite awareness among tutors of the challenges of learning and assessment through English for students entering with IELTS, there are variations in the learning support extended: some staff are more willing than others to provide individual support to students with weaker IELTS profiles.

8.2.3 Research question 3

What are the reported experiences of student learning in their subject specialisms through the four language skills, with specific reference to their band levels obtained in reading, writing, speaking and listening on the IELTS?

Significant struggles on the part of students emerge consistently through our data:

- Some of these appear to be language related, with 'problems' explained by, for example, a deficit in one or more language skill, having non-native speaker status, or different previous study experiences.
- Some of these are likely to be challenges faced by all students engaging in postgraduate study; in terms of identity theory, they are likely to characterise all learning in terms of negotiating membership of a particular community, in this case the postgraduate academic teaching and learning community.
- Students with a higher IELTS profile tend to attribute their difficulties in studying to factors other than language proficiency; those with weaker profiles highlight language problems as inhibiting their subject learning.

In relation to specific IELTS subtests:

- **Listening:** Some students felt the listening sub-test score under-represented their skill level due to test-taking factors such as nervousness or fatigue. Others felt the score exaggerated their skill level: they experienced challenges in coping with ‘real-life’ listening in their learning experience, due to factors such as linguistic unfriendliness of speakers, pace of delivery, academic terminology, and density of information. This suggests a certain lack of fitness for purpose for the existing listening test, a point shared with reading, and discussed in 8.4 below in the context of information-processing skills.
- **Speaking:** Accounts of study and learning problems relating to speaking skills were limited. However, participation in one-to-one tutorials was considered problematic by some students (eg status, anxiety, and academic terms) and by some tutors (lack of engagement in discussion). This contrasted with more successful participation in peer group discussion, and underlines the role of the significant other (see 3 above) in negotiating relationships essential to academic community membership.
- **Reading:** The amount of required reading and the associated time demands were perceived for some students as a source of difficulty rather than actual text content or textual features. The challenge here has two related dimensions, reading as information processing, where there is a parallel with listening, and reading-to-writing, where the task of reading is embedded in the task of writing assignments. These points are discussed further in 8.4 below.
- **Writing:** The assertion of readiness for postgraduate implicit in the IELTS score (which afforded entry to programs) emerged as problematic in both students’ and tutors’ accounts. The student experience of writing was one of intellectual and affective struggle, characterised by other – rather than self-regulation: the judgement of the tutor, and consequences of such judgements for learning and community membership was a constant factor. The tutor experience was one of engaging with the reality of the student struggle, devising viable learning support, and drawing conclusions on individual students’ intellectual achievements. Two points arise from these phenomena: first, the experience and product of student writing makes visible language and learning challenges other than writing. Second, the academic skill of reading-to-writing needs to be understood as an integration of reading and writing skills which may not be captured by the current IELTS test formats. This is discussed further in 8.4 below.

8.2.4 Research question 4

Does, and if so how, the IELTS language profile construct students’ linguistic identity as English language users in the context of university study?

- The IELTS profile was a significant identity factor for all student participants in this study: they remembered details of the profile, such as sub-test scores, and in journals and discussion related feelings of confidence, successful achievements and shortcomings to aspects of the IELTS profile.
- Students in all our risk categories – low, medium and high – experienced ‘struggle’ in realising program learning goals and achieving participation in academic communities. Our analysis shows that linguistic identity affects learning through *engagement* as a response to the experience of struggle. Two patterns are evident:
 - successful students engage: they persevere with reading, writing and interaction performances despite some negative feedback, and thus realise a kind of process stake which affords success
 - less successful students feel overwhelmed and become isolated. They feel their linguistic identity combines with other identity factors such as nationality, and feedback from tutors to render success or a high level of achievement impossible to achieve.

8.2.5 Research question 5

What impact does the identity have on student learning, and on affective responses to the student experience?

- There is a fairly consistent link between IELTS profiles and success in academic study. There are also non-conforming cases, suggesting that IELTS profiles need to be understood in conjunction with other factors which influence identity formation. These include learning capacity, captured in this study using the ELLI instrument, and national group identity factors which emerged in our journal and interview data. Also important are the socio-historical constructions of self (see Figure 3.4 above), for example, individual biographies of learning, which emerged in some student data, but which could not be explored systematically in this study.
- The impact on learning, as set out in some detail in points relating to RQ1-4 above, has a significant affective dimension. This can be related to the negotiation of community membership: achievement in learning constitutes an acceptance and welcome, whereas a lack of success reflects rejection, loss of self-esteem and sense of disappointment. This affective response constitutes an affective barrier to engagement and sustained effort, and underlines the need for learning support to be extended and effective early in the learning program.

8.2.6 Research question 6

With reference to data obtained from the above research questions, how may we frame the stakes for the post-IELTS student-as-stakeholder group?

- In relation to the use of IELTS in the admissions process, an important student stake is embedded in the macro-context of admissions decision making. Where student numbers are buoyant, students with weaker overall IELTS scores are less likely to gain admission. The reverse also holds, and an individual student may gain entry to a program when it is likely they will experience significant difficulties in their studies, when appropriate levels of support may not be in place, and when the likelihood of realising their investment – both materials and personal – in the program is limited.
- The assertion of readiness for academic study implicit in the IELTS score also has an embedded student stake: achieving the levels required by the program should afford confidence that the language skills required by the program of study are in place. The issues relating to information processing skills (Listening and Reading) and reading-to-writing skills discussed above may thus be considered as student stakes, and thus shape further development of the test.

8.2.7 Research question 7

Do the above research questions vary according to level of study, that is, Masters and Doctoral levels? And, if so, how exactly?

- The student experience at these levels is largely similar in so far as the notions of challenge and struggle derive from perceptions of the imagined self and of the challenge of community membership rather than the intellectual level of the learning.
- Doctoral programs involve a longer time frame, and thus may afford a better opportunity to overcome difficulties, and negotiate access to the academic community. The links between learning, engagement and time-frame implied here merits further empirical study.

8.3 Limitations

One limitation of our research relates to the achieved student sample (see 4.4.1 above): data protection measures introduced by the institution concerned at the time of initiating this study meant that access to student admissions data, such as IELTS profiles could only occur with the explicit consent of individual students. We were thus not able to ‘target’ a sample which fitted our design. Rather we had to engage with all students, and then work with those international students who had taken the IELTS test who expressed interest and on further information were happy to participate.

Second, the complexity of the identity model developed (from Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998), as well as the range of potentially useful explanatory factors in the data elicited: the journal and interviews proved a far richer seam than we could have predicted. This presented a challenge for our data management and analysis with reference to the resources afforded by the project, so there is a limitation here in terms of engagement in this report with all the full range of factors linking the IELTS test, learning and identity.

Third, we have not examined in our analysis the impact of this research: it is clear to us that the processes of participation in this research has shaped the views and practices of both students and tutors, and thus what we have captured in terms of learning, learning support and identity formation over time, merits analysis in terms of the impact of such induced reflection on IELTS and its consequences.

8.4 Research impact and implications

The study was conceived as having a transformative dimension, with potential benefits for three stakeholder groups: (i) institutions as users of IELTS, (ii) the testing service as providers of the IELTS product, and (iii) students as beneficiaries of the access to further study provided by a satisfactory IELTS score. We identify below the implications from this study for admissions policy and practice, supporting learning and issues for further research.

8.4.1 Admissions

Institutions and programs as IELTS users should:

- provide training for admissions tutors on IELTS in order that they become better informed on the meanings of the IELTS profile; this should include awareness of and access to IELTS website
- base IELTS admissions requirements on patterns of success, and where Language Centre attendance is used to compensate for IELTS shortfall, this also should be based on patterns of success
- advise students of the learning support strategies for international students, and the relevance of such support for particular IELTS profiles.

8.4.2 Supporting learning

Institutions and programs which are IELTS users should:

- provide induction to the academic culture for all students – expect the struggle and affective dimensions of learning at postgraduate level
- ensure attention to intercultural dimensions of this for international students
- work for student engagement in teaching and learning policy and practice, so that students do not feel isolated or marginalised
- provide language support for students with weak IELTS profile from the outset, without waiting for problems to emerge from assessment process

- develop a Teaching and Learning policy that mirrors the situation in departments where there are increased numbers of international students, alongside appropriate staff development opportunities.

8.4.3 Research

This study has provided considerable insight into staff perceptions of international students and their potential for achievement as well as facets of students' subject learning and early experiences of engagement in the academic community. We see this as evidence of the value of the narrative and grounded approach adopted for much of this research study and suggest that one of the ways forward in future IELTS impact studies is to adopt a similar methodological approach. Indeed, establishing the validity of IELTS from a predictive correlational/validation perspective does not and cannot – in our view – account for the mix of factors that exert an influence on students' effectiveness in study contexts. In terms of further development of the IELTS, we recommend research undertaken by both institutions using IELTS, and by the test providers.

Institutions and programs should take action by both:

- examining the patterns of admissions using IELTS (and indeed other language tests) to validate empirically the IELTS requirements of programs
- examining the finding in this study that the use of IELTS may compromise equality of opportunity for students who gain entry using a language test such as IELTS compared to other students.

The IELTS provider should:

- Examine the informational resources and procedures for users of IELTS such that all users (rather than just those with EFL, Applied Linguistics or Language Testing specialist knowledge) use the profiles in a manner which reflect their richness and complexity.
- Establish a research program to look more systematically at post-IELTS test validity. This study has examined the learning experience of successful IELTS-takers, that is, those who have secured entry to their postgraduate program. There are many aspects of learning which are related to IELTS, but which have not been examined in detail here. In addition there are many IELTS takers who are not successful, and the consequences for these test-takers also constitute a validity issue for IELTS.
- Examine systematically the notion of readiness for academic study which is implicit in the IELTS profile. This has particular implications for the Listening and Reading test formats on the one hand and Reading and Writing tests on the other. One hypothesis that has emerged is that information processing skills as assessed in the Listening and Reading components of the IELTS tests are particularly important for postgraduate study. Another is that a particular reading-into-writing skills may capture readiness more precisely than the current separate Reading and Writing tests. Three questions in particular merit attention here:
 - Is the equal contribution of the four sub-scores to the overall band level a fair and accurate reflection of the readiness for academic study construct?
 - Is there a case for replacing the current Listening sub-test with one that has greater resonance with listening in subject study contexts and is based on a notion of information-processing which might be shared with reading?
 - Is there a case for an integrated reading-into-writing task, which despite being 'muddied' might capture with greater validity the actual reading and writing experience of study in higher education?

8.5 Summary

This study has provided a glimpse into the post-IELTS learning experience of students who were successful in their applications to postgraduate programs in a British university. The basic structure of that glimpse – learning, identity formation and the network of factors shaping these processes – has resulted in a panorama of complex narratives and experiences, rather than the laser-like probe of pre-defined test validity issues. This panorama has many messages relating to improved policy and practice. In addition it suggests three areas for further IELTS research: factors which determine the effectiveness of information provided to users by IELTS; the relationship between IELTS success and failure and learning identity as a consequential validity issue of the test and test preparation experience; and finally, the notion of readiness for academic study as a language testing construct, and specifically, the notions of information processing and reading-into-writing as developed in this study.

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APPENDIX 1: AN OVERVIEW OF EFFECTIVE LIFELONG LEARNING INVENTORY (ELLI)

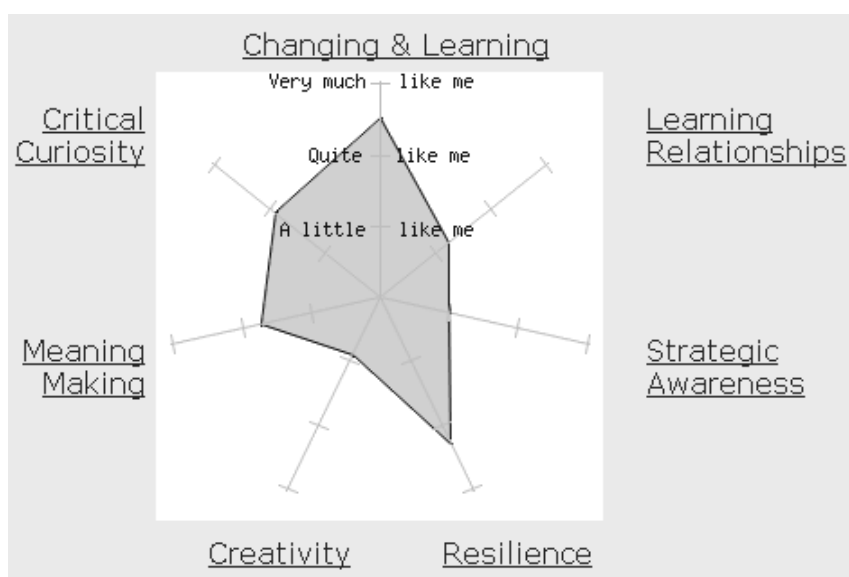
ELLI stands for the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory. ELLI has been developed as part of a research project at the University of Bristol funded by the Lifelong Learning Foundation and is jointly owned by the University and the Foundation.

It is a self-report questionnaire that is designed to find out how learners perceive themselves in relation to seven dimensions of learning power. These dimensions are Changing and Learning, Meaning Making, Curiosity, Creativity, Learning Relationships and Strategic Awareness (see below).

Doing an ELLI profile is a learning experience in itself. It will challenge the learner to think about all sorts of aspects of learning, which they may or may not have been aware of. It is usually introduced to learners as part of a more general focus on getting better at learning.

Doing the ELLI profile makes a significant contribution to the process of becoming learner centred. ELLI also provides feedback to learners and their teachers in the form of a personal learning profile. Profiles for groups of learners can also be generated.

Individual Learning Profiles are automatically generated in the form of a spider diagram. These locate the individual's average score on each learning dimensions along a 'leg' of the spider. This form of feedback suggests a profile of the whole person with many parts, rather than a summative set of scores that imply a 'pass or fail'. For this reason too, no numbers are given to the scores. Furthermore, the spider diagram makes it easier to visualise the learner as a whole, with a dynamic set of learning dimensions, thus supporting diagnosis and action planning.



The seven dimensions are all inter-related aspects of learning power, and people whose profile is low on these dimensions appear to be fragile and dependent as learners. Thus the ELLI profile is a means of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of individual learners. Strategic awareness appears to be a 'second order' or learned dimension – in other words it is something that can be developed and taught over time, and in some ways functions as the individual's 'monitoring system' for the other dimensions. These ELLI learning dimensions are rather like a shadow of the formal curriculum, and are applicable to all subjects and disciplines in the classroom and beyond.

SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF LEARNING POWER

Critical curiosity

Effective learners like to find things out, to get to the bottom of things and find out what is really going on. They like to ask the question WHY. The opposite of this is ‘passivity’.

Meaning making

Effective learners are on the look-out for links between what they are learning and what they already know – from their own life story, or from earlier learning. They like to see how things fit together. The opposite of this is ‘fragmentation’.

Creativity

Effective learners like to look at things in different ways, to find another angle. They are playful with ideas, and like to use their imagination and inklings which bubble up in their minds. The opposite of this is being ‘Rule Bound’.

Resilience

Effective learners like a challenge and are willing to ‘give it a go’ even if the outcome and the way to proceed are uncertain. They accept that learning is sometimes hard for everyone, and that to get something wrong is okay. The opposite of this is ‘fragility’.

Strategic awareness

Effective learners know about their own learning. They are aware of their feelings, their thoughts and their ideas for doing things differently in their learning. They have a toolkit of strategies they might use for different learning situations and they take time out to think how to use them. The opposite of this is ‘being robotic’.

Learning relationships

Effective learners like to work with other people, learning from them and learning with them. They can work on their own too. The opposite of this is ‘being dependent’.

Changing and learning

Good learners know that they can get better at learning over time. They believe that through effort their minds can get bigger and stronger just as their bodies can. The opposite of this is ‘being stuck’.

More details can be found at:

- <http://www.ellionline.co.uk/>
- Broadfoot, PM, 2005, ‘Dark alleys and blind bends: Testing the language of learning’ in *Language Testing*, 22, pp 123-141
- Deakin Crick, R, Broadfoot, P and Claxton, G, 2004, ‘Developing an effective lifelong learning inventory: The elli project’ in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 11, pp 247-272

APPENDIX 2: STUDENT IDENTITY, LEARNING AND PROGRESSION PROJECT BRIEFING

Student Identity, Learning and Progression (SILP) Project February 2004 – January 2005

What is the project about?

This research project is focused on the impact of the IELTS language proficiency examination and will track successful IELTS students over an 8 – 9 month period. We are interested in your experiences of learning through the medium of English, and in your progress in both your subject and language learning. In other words, we wish to focus on both the processes of your learning (language and subject knowledge) as well as on observable learning outputs (eg assignments and grades). We also wish to explore your current understandings of and your attitudes towards the IELTS examination and of yourself as an English language user. In summary, our goals are:

To investigate the possible affective and academic impact of IELTS results on students once they are accepted by an institution, with specific reference to their learning experiences (eg nature of engagement with their courses, their confidence as learners, their perceptions of IELTS in shaping the self-assessment of their linguistic capacities) and academic progress and achievement (eg via coursework assignments or oral presentations – as both process and product).

What will I need to do as participant?

If you agree to participate in this research, this is what you will be ‘signing up’ for:

- Workshops
 - 1: start of project
 - 2: early May
 - 3: early July 04
 - 4: end of September or October 04
- Language and Learning Journal

Write entries on a regular basis over the period of the SILP project, with occasional email communication with one of the researchers
- Lifelong Learning Inventory

Complete at beginning and end of your involvement – in September 04 you will receive a learning profile of yourself and the opportunity to attend a workshop on learning styles
- 1-1 Interviews

Probably 2 between now and Sept/Oct 04; max of 3; c.1 hour duration each

Pauline Rea-Dickins, Richard Kiely, Guoxing Yu
Research Team

APPENDIX 3.1: GUIDELINE FOR LANGUAGE AND LEARNING JOURNAL

Dear Participant,

Language and Learning Journal

We would like you – as part of the research to keep a diary on a regular basis – we suggest at least once a week. We will give you a disc on which you can write your comments and we would like to read your diary at three-week intervals. We are particularly interested in the comments that you make about what it is that enhances your learning or inhibits it. If there are specific “critical incidents” or “telling moments” we would like to read about them.

We would like you to reflect on two different aspects of studying through English: specifically (1) your own **language skills** – reading, writing, listening and speaking – and more generally (2) aspects of your engagement in **learning in your subject area**.

A. What **type of entries** should I write in my journal about my **English language use** and my **learning in subject area**?

DESCRIPTIVE EI TRIES: where you describe something that you feel is important in some way. For example:

“we had a 10 page chapter to read as preparation for our next class (give name of course) and it took me 2 hours to read”

EVALUATIVE EI TRIES: where you evaluate or critique something that was important to you. For example:

“I was surprised I was able to read the article in half the time I thought it would. The article was well written and organised so it was easy to follow. I also remember Tutor X talking about Y and so it was easier for me. There were a few words I didn’t understand but that didn’t give me any problems”

“I learned a lot, I mean I learned a lot from my tutor’s feedback. I thought I had understood the conceptual framework of the article, but after the tutor feedback, I kind of reread again the research article and I got a completely new idea”

“Last week, I managed to read all the key readings and some of the further readings. In addition to this, I also read some articles in English for pleasure. I developed the ability of reading something quite quickly in my early years which is beneficial to studying now. However, I still need to learn how to read more strategically and efficiently.”

QUESTIONS: this would be a question about something that is important to you. For example:

“Why did I find I only understood half of what the tutor was saying?”

<p>If you do have questions, it would be very useful to hear about your tentative explanations or own answers to the question.</p>

B. What should I write about in my language and learning journal?

You can write about any aspect of your study and learning but keep in mind that we are specifically interested in two aspects of your learning: your use of English – reading, writing, speaking, listening – and your learning in your specialist subject area. At times these two aspects may overlap.

Here are some suggestions of what you might like to record in your journal:

Your Language Skills:

identify, describe and comment on/evaluate:

- your strengths in each of the language skills? (eg your ability to express yourself in seminars or in formal spoken presentations)
- your weaknesses in any of the skills? (eg expressing precise meanings in your written assignments)
- which aspects of language (eg vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, etc.) you find easy in your current program?
- which aspects of language you have most difficulty with in your current studies?
- which aspects seem to be the most important for effective study?
- other? Please provide details.

Your Learning:

identify, describe and comment on/evaluate:

- your strengths in learning? (activities you feel confident in, eg presenting your ideas orally; doing a literature search; reading academic articles)
- your weaknesses in learning? (activities you do not feel confident in, eg working collaboratively with classmates; writing an essay)
- your engagement in learning new concepts or innovative approaches to your subject?
- which aspects of studying (ie your experiences of learning) differ from your expectations before starting your current courses?
- Other? Please provide details.

On your own

Reflect for a moment on one of the four language skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening – and try and recall something about your use of English that has been important to you in some way. Is there a “critical incident” in relation to your language use and subject learning that you can think of? Perhaps there is something that really helped you progress? Or, maybe there was something that prevented you from benefiting from a learning task? Write this down as a brief ‘journal entry’

Workshop One/Name

In pairs

In future, we will not be asking you to share your comments with your fellow students but, on this one occasion – to get you used to the procedure – we are.

Compare what you have written:

Is the focus:

- on language?
- on learning?
- on learning in relation to a particular language skill?
- your attitude towards a particular activity or task?
- other?

Are your comments:

- descriptive?
- evaluative?
- in the form of questions?
- other?

The way forward

We suggest the following:

- Try to write your comment down as soon as you can; if you wait a few days you may not make such an accurate observation;
- Try to be as reflective and evaluative as you can in relation to your learning through English;
- Try to write something on a regular basis: everyday may be too much but a couple of times a week;
- Try to get a good balance between description and evaluation/critique of your language and learning episodes;
- We would also be very interested in your questions to us, too.

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in our research. We assure you that any information you give us will remain confidential and if we use any of the information in, for example, a research report all data will be reported anonymously.

Pauline Rea-Dickins, Richard Kiely, Guoxing Yu
Research Team

APPENDIX 3.2: LANGUAGE AND LEARNING JOURNAL OF ONE STUDENT PARTICIPANT: AN EXAMPLE

Note: Italicised sections are communications between the research team and Dora when the journal entries were submitted via emails.

July 15 and 16, 2004

I attended a conference of the Doctoral Program Conference. There were many interesting topics. One of the talk that I attended was on the topic of Vygotsky. I've read some of the work of Vygotsky and I find it very interesting but somehow the some of the concepts seems a bit difficult to understand. I thought that by attending this talk, I might be able to understand the concepts better. However, it didn't really help much. I think one factor was because of the time constraint of the speaker where he had only 30 minutes. I feel that half an hour seems to be quite short for a speaker to go through things in details and to be able to explain anything that is complicated. [Researcher] *What was his aim in discussing Vygotsky? Was it different from your interest in a description of concepts? Did he assume understanding of concepts which you did not share?* [Researcher]

[Dora] *To be honest, I can't really remember what had been discussed. The speaker talked about how he applied Vygotskian theory in his class. The reason that I couldn't understand his talk was probably because I didn't spend enough time in reading the theory. (I'm not sure if this answers your question).* [Dora]

Other talks that I attended were the ones in which the speakers talk about their research topics and how they go about in collecting the data. Those talks were very useful so that when I have to do my own research, I can refer back to what I have jotted down from the talk. I feel that it is important to talk to people who have done actual research other than reading from the texts. This is because sometimes researchers might face with certain problems that might not be mentioned in the text. Another thing is that in different context and situation that a researcher is in, one might face with different problems. [Researcher] *This is very interesting both in terms of learning to research and also Vygotskian views of learning. Can you give examples of where the account of actual experience works better for you than a research handbook? Is reading a published article useful? Do you understand a concept better from an experience which represents a concept, than from an analytical account of the concept? (Vygotsky is very much about the links between these two).* [Researcher]

[Dora] *I do find research handbook useful but real experience would give a clearer picture of the problems one might encounter in different cultural context. For example, in Thailand, asking participants to sign their names on consent forms is not common, usually, a cover letter is enough. The researcher will have to prepare to explain of why they have to sign their names.*

Moreover, there are many times in which when I read a book which takes real experience into account, I would find that easier to understand. [Dora]

July 20, 2004

I am still working on my Data Collection Unit. The topic that I have chosen is related to one of the previous assignments so I referred back to that particular assignments several times. I went through the feedback that the tutor had given. In this data collection unit, I tried to address what had been suggested by my tutor in the previous assignment. Through addressing the feedback I hope that I will be able to write the essay effectively. [Researcher]*Is it easy to 'transfer' use of feedback in this way?*[Researcher]

[Dora]*Yes, it is easy to 'transfer' use of feedback this way. Another thing is that the feedback of the tutor was clear and detailed which made it even easier.* [Dora]

July 25, 2004

I am working on the literature review part of the assignment. I did what the tutor had suggested in my previous assignment. While I was writing up, I find that what the tutor had suggested me to do is very systematic and this is what I mean by 'learning process' in the previous entries. The feedback helped me to improve my assignment. I can feel it though I'm still not really sure if my DCA unit tutor will be satisfied with the essay or not. [Researcher]*Does this mean that you are not sure about the 'generic' value of the feedback?* [Researcher]

[Dora]*Well, I'm sure that the feedback would definitely help me write my assignment better but it depends on the tutor's expectations and whether I have met those expectations.* [Dora]

[There were more journals entries during this period]

August 2, 2004

I have finished the literature review part and I'm going on to the methodology part of the assignment. I think the section on the methodology is complicated. I have to read loads of texts. I realised that this time, I did a summary of what I've read. In the past, I just jot down a few things on paper but this time, I feel that there are so many concepts that I have to take into account. I feel that summarising and taking notes help a lot and helps me to refer back conveniently without having to find the topic in the textbook again.

[Researcher]*What do you mean by summarising here? Does it mean that you are writing from your own understanding of concepts? How does it differ from what you did previously? Do you consider this summarising approach an improvement in your writing?*[Researcher]

[Dora]*Yes, I write from my own understanding of the concepts. In the past, I usually read and put what I've read directly in the essay in my own words. I think that by summarising first on a separate notebook (along with the source, of course), I can refer to it without having to find the text book. I think it would help me work faster. Yes, I consider this summarising an improvement in my writing.*
[Dora]

APPENDIX 3.3: LIST OF QUESTIONS FOR STUDENT INTERVIEWS

In conducting the interview, I would hope to have as open a conversation as possible with the following prompts in relation to *IELTS*, *Learning through English*, and *Using English out of study contexts*.

The IELTS

- At the time – one year ago – how accurate did you think the results were for you (total and sub-skills)?
- What did the results mean for you?
- Looking back – one year on – was it a fair and accurate test of your English language skills? An accurate test? (eg Did it fail to reveal strengths or weaknesses?)

Learning through English

- How equipped were you to study through English in the different study contexts: lectures, small group work, tutorials, assignments, collaboration with peers, the dissertation process, and presentations?
- Which skills did you feel were particularly important for this?
- What were the obstacles/challenges that you faced?
- How would you summarise your ‘learning through English’ profile
 - (a) at the beginning of the course?
 - (b) at the end?
- Did anything in particular help or hinder your learning through English?

Using English ‘out of study’ contexts

- How equipped were you to settle into an English speaking environment? Which (language) skills did you feel were particularly important for this?
- What were the obstacles/challenges that you faced?
- How would you summarise your use of English in ‘out of study’ contexts?
 - (a) at the beginning of the course?
 - (b) at the end?
- Did anything in particular help or hinder your using/learning English in ‘out of study’ context?

General

Is there anything else you think important that you would like to mention?

APPENDIX 4: CONSENT FORMS FOR STUDENTS, ADMINISTRATORS/ PROGRAM DIRECTORS AND TUTORS

1. Consent Form for Students

Dear Participant,

I am writing to thank you for agreeing to participate in the **Student Identity, Learning and Progression (SILP)** project, funded by the British Council and carried out here at the University of Bristol Graduate School of Education. The data collection for this research would involve

- retrospective narrative workshops at three time intervals (1) Spring Term, (2) Summer Term, and (3) in September or October 2004;
- keeping language and learning journals at a regular basis, at least once a week, till late September;
- completion of a lifelong learning inventory, at the beginning and repeated towards the end of this research;
- your baseline data already available within the university and tutors' feedback on your assignments;
- follow-up interviews on a one-to-one basis, as appropriate;
- opportunities to comment and feedback on the data analysis.

All the interviews and workshop discussions will be video- and/or audio-recorded.

We would like to ask for your consent formally, and specifically in terms of the subsequent data use, as recommended by ethical guidelines for the conduct of research (UoB/GsoE, BERA, BAAL). All data collected for this research will be anonymised and used solely for this research. Your data will be protected and respected, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

We would be very grateful if you could tick and sign the consent clauses below, and if you do sign them, to indicate in the last box, the manner in which you would like your contribution to be acknowledged in the research report and any publications based on this.

1. Use of anonymised data – all students to consider

Use of baseline data, narrative workshops, language and learning journals, ELLI, interviews, comments on subsequent data analysis	<input type="checkbox"/> = Yes	Signature	Date
I agree to anonymised use of data which I will provide for the SILP project in research report and in academic publications			

2. Use of audio- and/or video- recorded data

Use of audio- and/or video- recorded data from narrative workshops and interviews	<input type="checkbox"/> = Yes	Signature	Date
I agree to the use of the audio- and/or video- recorded data, from narrative workshops and interviews, being used as part of academic papers presented at conferences or seminars by the research team, and in a manner which represents fairly and respectfully my contributions in the workshops and interviews			

3. Acknowledgement of contribution to the research – please choose A or B

Acknowledgement of contribution to SILP project – please select either A or B	<input type="checkbox"/> = Yes	Signature	Date
A. I would like acknowledgement and thanks expressed generically, i.e. to the students at the University of Bristol			
B. I would like acknowledgement and thanks expressed to mention me specifically, i.e. to the students at the University of Bristol, which includes [my name]			

[Your name in PRINT _____]

If you have any queries about the SILP project or this consent form, please get in touch.

Best wishes, **Dr. Pauline Rea-Dickins (Project Director)**

on behalf of the research team (Dr Richard Kiely, Guoxing Yu), Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol

2. Consent Form for Administrators and Program Directors

Dear Participant,

I am writing to thank you for agreeing to participate in the **Student Identity, Learning and Progression (SILP)** research project, funded by the British Council and carried out here at the University of Bristol. Your participation in the research will involve you in the following activities:

- interviews on a one-to-one basis;
- opportunities to comment and feedback on our data analysis of the interviews

All the interviews and discussions will be video- and/or audio-recorded.

We would like to ask for your consent formally, and specifically in terms of the subsequent data use, as recommended by ethical guidelines for the conduct of research (UoB/GSoE, BERA, BAAL). All data collected for this research will be anonymised and used solely for this research. Your data will be protected and respected, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

We would be very grateful if you could tick and sign the consent clauses below, and if you do sign them, to indicate in the last box, the manner in which you would like your contribution to be acknowledged in the research report and any publications based on this.

1. Use of anonymised data – all program administrators/directors to consider

Use of the data from the interviews and comments on data analysis of the interviews	√ = Yes	Signature	Date
I agree to anonymised use of data which I will provide for the SILP project in research report, conference presentations, and academic publications.			

2. Use of audio- and/or video- recorded data

Use of audio- and/or video- recorded data from interviews	√ = Yes	Signature	Date
I agree to the use of the audio- and/or video- recorded data from the interviews, being used as part of academic papers presented at conferences or seminars by the research team, and in a manner which represents fairly and respectfully my contributions in the interviews.			

3. Acknowledgement of contribution to the research – please choose A or B

Acknowledgement of contribution to SILP project – please select either A or B	√ = Yes	Signature	Date
A. I would like acknowledgement and thanks expressed generically, i.e. to the program administrators and directors at the University of Bristol			
B. I would like acknowledgement and thanks expressed to mention me specifically, i.e. to the program administrators and directors at the University of Bristol, which includes [my name]			

[Your name in PRINT _____]

If you have any queries about the SILP project or this consent form, please get in touch (P.Rea-Dickins@bristol.ac.uk)

Best wishes,

Pauline Rea-Dickins (Project Director), Richard Kiely, Guoxing Yu

3. Consent Form for Tutors

Dear Participant,

I am writing to thank you for agreeing to participate in the **Student Identity, Learning and Progression (SILP)** research project, funded by the British Council and carried out here at the University of Bristol Graduate School of Education. Your participation in the research will involve you in the following activities:

- participating in workshops
- follow-up interviews on a one-to-one basis, as appropriate;
- opportunities to comment and feedback on our data analysis.

All the interviews and workshop discussions will be video- and/or audio-recorded.

We would like to ask for your consent formally, and specifically in terms of the subsequent data use, as recommended by ethical guidelines for the conduct of research (UoB/GSoE, BERA, BAAL). All data collected for this research will be anonymised and used solely for this research. Your data will be protected and respected, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

We would be very grateful if you could tick and sign the consent clauses below, and if you do sign them, to indicate in the last box, the manner in which you would like your contribution to be acknowledged in the research report and any publications based on this.

1. Use of anonymised data – all tutors to consider

Use of the data from the workshops, interviews, comments on data analysis	√ = Yes	Signature	Date
I agree to anonymised use of data which I will provide for the SILP project in research report, conference presentations, and academic publications.			

2. Use of audio- and/or video- recorded data

Use of audio- and/or video- recorded data from workshops and interviews	√ = Yes	Signature	Date
I agree to the use of the audio- and/or video- recorded data, from workshops and interviews, being used as part of academic papers presented at conferences or seminars by the research team, and in a manner which represents fairly and respectfully my contributions in the workshops and interviews.			

3. Acknowledgement of contribution to the research – please choose A or B

Acknowledgement of contribution to SILP project – please select either A or B	√ = Yes	Signature	Date
A. I would like acknowledgement and thanks expressed generically, i.e. to the academic tutors at the University of Bristol			
B. I would like acknowledgement and thanks expressed to mention me specifically, i.e. to the academic tutors at the University of Bristol, which includes [my name]			

[Your name in PRINT _____]

If you have any queries about the SILP project or this consent form, please get in touch (P.Rea-Dickins@bristol.ac.uk)

Best wishes,

Pauline Rea-Dickins (Project Director), Richard Kiely, Guoxing Yu