Evaluation of IELTS Preparatory Courses in Iran: Teaching Practices and Strategies in Focus

Omid Rezaei

PhD candidate, Faculty of Foreign Languages University of Isfahan, Iran

Hossein Barati[1]

Associate professor, Faculty of Foreign Languages University of Isfahan

Manijeh Youhanaee

Associate professor, Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan

Abstract
The aim of this study was to discover teaching practices and strategies employed in IELTS preparatory courses taught via strategy-based vs. nonstrategy-based instruction in Isfahan, Iran. In so doing, two preparatory courses: strategy-based vs. nonstrategy-based instruction were selected. Courses were observed by employing Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) which is a standard observation scheme (Hayes, 2003). The results revealed that positive washback was observed in both strategy-based and nonstrategy-based classes and candidates in strategy-based group outperformed their counterparts in nonstrategy-based group in reading and writing section of IELTS. In contrast, nonstrategy-based group performed significantly better in speaking section. There was, however, no significant difference between the two groups' performance on the listening section of the test. The findings of the study will have implications for both IELTS teachers and preparation centers in determining effective teaching methods for the courses they offer.

***Keywords*:** COLT, IELTS, Observation, Preparatory Course, Washback

1. Introduction
Language proficiency tests have gained unprecedented prominence in modern societies. They provide vital information for policy-makers to make crucial decisions about the professional and academic life of test takers.

---

[1] Corresponding author: h.barati@gmail.com

Language tests are controversial issues and continue to make debates among language researchers and test developers. Such tests can have tremendous effect on individual test taker's life, micro level, and on the society, macro level. They can select, motivate, and reward; in the same way they can exclude, demotivate, and punish.

The last few decades have witnessed a great number of studies on test impact on teaching or 'washback'. This has helped researchers to examine the desirable as well as undesirable effects tests might have at macro level, as they might at micro level.

One such areas where the effects of test at both micro and macro levels are greatly observed is in preparatory courses for the tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). These tests serve as gatekeepers for admission of international students to English-speaking universities. The daily increase in the demand of students worldwide for getting prepared for the high stakes tests has led to countless preparatory classes, in a way that the present situation could rightly be referred to as test preparation industry.

In Iran too, test preparatory classes have been quite common in the last few years. The study has particularly focused on IELTS preparatory courses in the country. IELTS is a task-based test which has been considered as a reliable indication of English proficiency on an international scale (Hayes, 2003). The IELTS Test (IELTS.org) is an established and widely used international English language proficiency exam that comes in two formats, each for a different purpose: Academic and General Training. The test has four sections, one for each of the language skills, which are equally weighted to give an overall averaged band of proficiency measured from zero (lowest) to nine (highest).

IELTS preparatory courses are mostly characterized by being short and providing candidates with the required skills and strategies for completing the test successfully. Teachers for such courses are pressed by both the candidates who need their IELTS score as soon as possible, and the institutes which expect successful courses for their advertisement.

It is obvious, then, that IELTS has great impact (i.e., washback) on its preparatory courses. Washback studies traditionally followed two lines of research. Firstly, to investigate the effect of a new test on teachers and learners (e.g., Cheng 1997; Qi, 2002 in Chinese context; Watanbe, 1996 in Japanese context). Secondly, to examine the effect of a test which is not compatible with the current teaching principles and techniques in an educational context (e.g., Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996).

On this ground, IELTS assesses the required language skills in the test takers who need to handle academic tasks in their later foreign education. Therefore, the test's preparatory courses should mirror university tasks necessary for graduate education. This is basically concerned with principles of communicative language teaching and hence focuses on English for Academic purposes (EAP), authentic materials and tasks, and learner-centered approach which aim to promote learner autonomy.

This study was an attempt to evaluate the way IELTS preparatory courses are offered and to see in particular how the teaching practices used in such courses affect their success. With this in mind, the study focuses on the way the structure of the test affects the method of instruction employed by the teachers. This, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, has so far been left intact area in Iran.

2. Literature Review
Research investigating the consequential validity of the IELTS Test has considered washback on teaching practices (Green 2006a, 2007; Mickan &

Motteram, 2008), teaching materials (Saville & Hawkey, 2004), learners' approaches to test preparation (Brown, 1998; Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Green, 2007; Read & Hayes, 2003; Mickan & Motteram, 2009), learners' perspectives on IELTS preparatory course expectations and outcomes (Green 2006a) and score gain (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Green, 2007; Humphreys et al., 2012; O'Loughlin & Arkoudis, 2009).

Based on the effect high stakes tests, especially IELTS, have on society, in general, and on individuals, in particular, both test developers and testing researchers have focused on the washback of such tests. For instance, research on the washback of IELTS (e.g., Read & Hayes, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004; Saville & Hawkey, 2004; Hawkey, 2006; Mickan & Motteram 2008, 2009) has shed light on the sophistication of the educational system and test scores interpretation, specifically in accordance with role of teachers (see also Gibson & Swan 2008).

Read and Hayes carried out a study in two phases on the impact of IELTS on the preparatory courses in New Zealand (Hayes, 2003; Read & Hayes, 2003; Hayes & Read, 2004). The first phase of the study showed that preparatory courses in the country are generally of three types: (1) as an independent, part-time course that was relatively short; (2) as an optional component of a full-time general English program; and (3) as an integrated component of an extended full-time course in English for academic purposes (EAP).

In the second phase, which was in form of observation, two IELTS preparatory courses in two different public English schools were observed. Both courses had the aim of preparing candidates for academic module of IELTS. The first course was an independent course providing candidates with strategies and skills required in the test by focusing on the components of the course. The second course was a general course with the aim of improving

candidates' general proficiency, academic skills and finally making students familiar with the test.

The study highlighted a great difference between these two courses. The most obvious was 'who had control of the lessons' (Hayes & Read, 2004, p. 104). In the first class teacher was in the complete control of the class and spent most of the time of the class teaching effective strategies for taking the test. On the other hand, in the second class teacher mostly served the role of an assistant for learners practicing individually or in pairs. Regarding the content, in the first class content was mostly IELTS-like materials. On the contrary, the second class covered a wider range of materials with the purpose of teaching language skills. In spite of these differences, not much variation was observed between the pretest and posttest of both classes. Findings of the study revealed that there was a great deal of negative washback in the first school. However, the differences between the two courses may be attributable to their specific aims and structures rather than to the test per se. Therefore, to better understand and explain its effects on teaching, a comprehensive evaluation of the test preparation program is necessary.

Mickan and Motteram (2008) conducted a narrower scrutiny of IELTS preparatory courses in Australia. They took a step further by analyzing not only the content and teaching practices in the class but also the interaction between teachers and learners. Consistent with the findings of Hayes and Read (2004), this study also showed that preparatory courses are mainly teacher-centered and test-oriented. Dominant activities were test practice, test skills-focused exercises, and explanations of the format and content of the IELTS modules and test-taking procedures. The instruction also focused on language awareness, particularly on the discourses and linguistic elements relevant to actually doing the test. The focus on language was integrated into

Evaluation of IELTS Preparatory …

the modelling of responses, reflections on test items and giving feedback on practice tests. However, the researchers did not consider these activities as instances of negative washback, they argued from the sociocultural perspective that the instruction in the IELTS preparation class constituted a process of socialization into test-taking behaviors and into the values or priorities embodied in the test.

One of the drawbacks of IELTS-observational studies is that they lack a comparison between courses aimed at IELTS preparation with those with purposes other than exam preparation. Without this comparison, it would be hard to evidentially link the observed practices to the test. Accordingly, Green (2006) conducted a series of observations focusing on IELTS preparatory courses and classes for EAP writing in the UK by comparing the test preparation classes and the nontest EAP classes, "evidence was found for substantial areas of common practice between IELTS and other forms of EAP, but also for some narrowing of focus in IELTS preparatory classes that could be traced to test design features" (Green, 2006, p. 333). In accordance with Alderson and Hamp-Lyons' (1996) study in the TOEFL context, this study revealed that teachers' practices in IELTS preparatory courses may be based on the test or the other way round. Therefore, Green (2006, pp. 363–364) noted "many of the differences observed between classes might be linked rather to teacher or institutional variables, such as levels of professional training and beliefs about effective learning, than to the influence of the test".

In a more recent study, Sadeghi and Ketabi (2014) investigated the impact of high stakes tests on preparatory courses in Iranian context. The study was carried out by selecting four IELTS and TOEFL preparatory courses in Iran. The design of the study was ethnographic and the instruments for collecting data were observation and field notes. To have more precise and directed

observation, *University of Cambridge Observation Scheme* (UCOS) was also used. The scheme was used to show how much instruction was test-driven. The results revealed that preparatory courses, methods of teaching, and syllabus were heavily influenced by the test. Therefore, this study is an attempt to address the following questions in Iranian context:

1. What teaching practices are employed in IELTS preparatory courses taught via strategy-based vs. nonstrategy-based instruction?
2. Which teaching method: strategy-based vs. nonstrategy-based is more significantly effective on candidates' performance on different sections of IELTS?

3. Method
3.1 Design
Both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were employed, therefore the design of this study is mixed-method.

3.2 Participants
The participants of this study were Iranian IELTS candidates pursuing their preparation for IELTS in an IELTS preparation center in Isfahan, Iran. Generally, there are two types of IELTS preparatory courses held in this preparation center. First, the course which is part of the normal curriculum of the center which means that graduates of the center enter the IELTS course as a requirement to complete their general English courses and the determined curriculum of the center. Second, the courses which participants take part in through a placement test and they seek preparation for attending the test. The former courses are mostly aimed at improving the proficiency of participants through IELTS-oriented tasks and exercises. Therefore, test-taking strategies and skills are not in the focus of the course (nonstrategy-based courses). The latter courses were mostly oriented on making participants familiar with test-taking strategies and skills. In these courses participants get familiar and

practice employing test-taking strategies to improve their test scores (strategy-based courses).

To fulfill the purpose of the study one nonstrategy-based and one strategy-based IELTS preparation classes were selected. Prior to the beginning of the study the course director in the center was informed of the whole process of data collection and he was asked to fill in a consent form for ethical consideration of the study. Each class whether strategy based or nonstrategy-based included eight participants.

All participants took an authentic IELTS past paper to make the researcher sure of their homogeneity. To standardize the scoring of the test, IELTS official scoring procedure from www.IELTS.org was utilized. All the prospective participants of the study scored 4-5 based on standard scoring scale of IELTS.

3.3 Instruments
3.3.1 Observation
For observing classes two methods of observation were possible. One was recording the whole class sessions by using a camera and another was by completing field notes and using coding sheets. Using camera in classes was against the policy of the IELTS preparation center the second method of observation was employed by the researcher. Instead of simply coding the classroom interactions and activities in real time, notes were taken during the lesson and timings were recorded to the nearest second. The notes were used to code COLT as the standard observation checklist used in this study.

The scheme is oriented on a solid theory of communicative approach in language teaching. It scrutinizes all aspects of teaching processes and strategies from a communicative point of view. It examines the discourse of teachers and students, the form of the questions students and teachers ask,

type of tasks an exercises completed in the class, the materials covered in the class with a focus on the authenticity of the materials.

The scheme is made up of two parts, but only its first part (part A) was utilized in this study. Yu (2006) mentions that Part A concerns with the macro level analysis of activities in the classroom which must be completed during the teaching time which is based on five criteria. The first criterion is activity type which enables the observer to examine the type of tasks and exercises used in the class. The second criterion deals with participant organization, such as teacher-centered activities as opposed to student-centered activities, and it records the amount of time devoted to different types of class interaction. The third criterion which is content focuses on the orientation of the content and whether they are code-based of meaning-based. Code-based instruction is characterized as form-focused teaching which mainly is concerned with form, function, discourse, and sociolinguistic rules, whereas meaning-based orientation is realized by the subclasses of other categories. Students' modality as the fourth criterion is mainly about the amount of time learners spend on four skills of language in the time of the class. The last criterion, materials, deals with the type, length, and source of texts being used in the class.

3.3.2 IELTS retired test

A retired IELTS test adapted from Cambridge IELTS series was employed to both homogenize the participants and make sure that they all have the same level of proficiency and also to measure the efficacy of strategy-based as opposed to nonstrategy-based methods of teaching IELTS preparatory courses. The test was adopted from the past paper collection published by Cambridge University press to obviate the need for estimating the reliability and validity of the test by the researcher. Because the test was already valid and reliable there was no need for piloting the test.

3.4 Procedure
3.4.1 Course selection
To answer this study's questions an IELTS preparation center in Isfahan, Iran was selected. To start the study, it was necessary to get the written permission from IELTS preparation center's administrator. In so doing, the center's administrator was informed about the whole process of data collection and a written permission was signed by the center had two types of courses: one for graduate learners of the center who completed general English courses and another one was exam preparatory course for those who would take part in the actual test. In the former course learners after passing a general English course consisting of 12 semesters are required to take part in IELTS preparation courses which is considered as an advanced course. In spite of the fact that these courses are labeled as preparatory courses, they are nonstrategy-based courses in which the primary goal is to enhance learners' general proficiency rather than making them familiar with test-taking strategies. On the other hand, the latter courses are designed for those candidates who are real IELTS candidates who will take part in the test after finishing the course. These courses have the purpose of making students strategic test-takers and also familiarizing them with the test format and tasks, therefore they are mainly strategy-based courses.

3.4.2 Precourse activities

In the center one strategy-based and one nonstrategy-based class including eight participants were selected. To ensure that all candidates have the same level of proficiency prior to observation they all sat for a retired IELTS test. Based on IELTS scores those who scored between four and five were deemed as the participants.

3.4.3 Whilecourse activities

Both strategy-based and nonstrategy-based courses were based on four skills tested in IELTS. Ten sessions each 120 minutes depending on the administrative policy of the center were devoted to each skill. For observation five session of 10 sessions allocated to teaching each skill were randomly selected. The whole sessions from the beginning to the end were observed by the researcher and field notes with exact timing of the events in the class were filled. Coding sheets of COLT were completed after each observation based on field notes.

3.4.4 Postcourse activities

The 41st session of the course was the assessment session in which a retired IELTS test was administered to examine the efficiency of methods employed in the courses. The timing and all administration conditions were kept similar to the real test. All participants were informed of the results of the test through email. At the end of the process of data collection to appreciate both participants, instructors and administrators of each center were given an IELTS preparation book as a gift.

3.5 Data Analysis
3.5.1 Qualitative data

To make the researcher able to decide on the teaching practices and strategies employed in each class data obtained from observations had to be coded based on the percentage of the time of the class devoted to each category of observation schemes. Field notes were used to compensate for inaccuracy of observation schemes due to the fact that simultaneous observation and completing the form could cause inaccuracy on the part of the observer. After coding the observation schemes the percentage of time devoted to each category under COLT in strategy-based and nonstrategy-based classes were compared.

3.5.2 Quantitative data

To compare the effectiveness of the methods, test scores of posttest of both classes were put in independent sample t-test.

4. Results

4.1 Teaching Practices and Strategies

The categories under the observation scheme used in this study, that is, COLT were coded based on the time devoted to each category and subcategory during the whole class time. The results are presented in Tables.

The first COLT category is concerned with the focus of the activity in the class and whether it is oriented on the teacher or on the students working as a whole class, in groups or as individuals. Table 1 illustrates the percentage of time devoted to each subcategory of participant organization in both groups.

Table 1
Participant Organization

Participant Organization	Strategy-based Average	Non strategy-based Average
Teacher to Student/Class %	46	22.5
Student to Student/Class%	17.7	39
Choral %	0.00	1.2
Group - same task %	13.5	26.3
Individual - same task %	22.8	11
Individual - different tasks %	0.00	0.00
Total % of Participant organization	100	100

As it is evident from Table 1, strategy-based class was more teacher centered than nonstrategy-based class. It can be inferred that 46%, which is almost half of the time of the class, was devoted to teacher-initiated activities. On the other hand, 39% of the class time in nonstrategy-based class was allocated to student-student interaction and activities. Another sharp difference between the groups was related to the amount of the time spent on individual activities and group work. In strategy-based class only 13.5% of the time of the class was devoted to group and pair work activities. On the on the hand, in nonstrategy-based class almost twice as much time as in the

strategy-based class was spent on group work. In contrast, carrying out tasks individually was more evident in strategy-based classes with 22.8% of the time as opposed to nonstrategy-based class with 11%.

In the second category of COLT content of classroom from different perspectives is evaluated. Firstly, it checks on the orientation of the content whether it focuses on meaning or form. There is also a dichotomy that shows if the content refers to the immediate classroom (Narrow), or encompasses broader topics (Broad).

Table 2
Content

Content	Strategy-based Average	Nonstrategy-based Average
Procedure only %	22.5	6.4
Form - Vocabulary only %	7.4	16.8
Form - Pronunciation only %	0.00	3.4
Form - Grammar only %	9	10.8
Form - Spelling only %	0.00	0.6
Function only %	11.6	9
Discourse only %	4.5	1
Sociolinguistics only %	1.25	6.5
Form - vocabulary and Discourse %	3.75	9.5
Form - vocabulary and Form – Grammar %	9.5	17
Narrow %	8.5	4.4
Broad %	22	14.6
Total Content %	100	100

The fact that strategy-based classes are teacher fronted is also reflected in the content category and especially in procedure subcategory which is 22.5% of the total time of the class. In contrast, nonstrategy-based classes allocate only 6.4% of their time to this sub category. Following the principles of strategy-based instruction, the strategy based teacher spent 22% of the time of the class focusing on the broad topics mostly IELTS exam itself. Similarly, the nonstrategy-based teacher took more broad topics into consideration at 14.6% that included the monitoring of group and pair work activities.

Another obvious difference between the classes was regarding pronunciation. No time was devoted to pronunciation in strategy-based classes as opposed to nonstrategy-based classes in which 3.4% of the whole time of the class is spent on practice of pronunciation.

Next category of COLT deals with control of materials. It checks on who is responsible for the selection of materials. Decisions on the content are made either by the teacher, the student/s, the teacher and text, or a combination. Table 3 shows the percentage of the time each subcategory was in charge of the content of the course.

Table 3
Content Control

Content Control	Strategy-based Average	Non strategy-based Average
Teacher/text %	64.7	46.5
Teacher/text/ student %	36.3	54.5
Total % of Content control	100	100

As it can be seen from Table 3 in strategy based classes 64.7% of the time of the class teachers made decisions about the content of the course, and the rest 36.3% was shared between students and the teacher. And students where never allowed to make decision about content on their own. On the other hand, in nonstrategy-based classes this was divided between teacher and students and tasks evenly at 54.5%. This could be seen when students were asked to carry out group and pair work. Teacher/text alone account for 46.5% of the total time of the class.

The fact that strategy-based class was more teacher-centered was again highlighted in this category. When comparing strategy-based and nonstrategy-based classes it can be seen that students enjoy more freedom to have control over the selection of materials compared with strategy-based ones. Besides, students in nonstrategy-based class spend more time on productive skills than receptive skills in contrast to strategy-based classes.

In the next section which is called 'students modality' the amount of time devoted to each language skill and also their combinations are examined. It also includes a section concerning acting and drawing which was actually absent in the classes in the focus of this study (Table 4).

Table 4
Student Modality

Student Modality	Strategy-based Average	Non strategy-based Average
Listening only %	28	14
Speaking only %	16.5	16.7
Reading only %	12	27.2
Writing only %	7.5	13.5
Other only %	0.00	0.00
L + S %	24	12
L + R %	4.5	9
L + W %	0.5	1.5
S + R %	0.00	1.5
L + S + W %	0.00	2.5
L + S + R %	7	2.1
Total % of Student modality	100	100

Listening in isolation with 28% was the most frequently-used skill in strategy-based class. It is followed by speaking with 16.5% of the total time of the class. Reading with 12% and writing with 7.5% are less frequently-used skills in the class. In this regard, time was more equally devoted to skills in nonstrategy-based classes, and reading was the most frequently-used skill at 27.2%.

Considering the combination of skills, a counterbalance between L+S and L+ R in strategy-based and nonstrategy-based was observed. Time devoted to L + S combination in strategy-based is twice as much as the time devoted to the same combination in nonstrategy-based classes. The same was true about L + R combination in a reverse direction. In case of triple combination of skills in strategy-based class only 7% of the time was devoted to L+S+R combination. On the other hand, in nonstrategy-based class L+S+W

combination L + S + R combination devoted 2.5% and 2.1% of the time to themselves respectively.

The last category of COLT deals with the materials used in classes. It looks at the materials from two perspectives one regarding the length of the materials and the other regarding the authenticity of the materials. The former perspective labels one sentence and short texts as 'minimal' and longer units of language as 'extended'. The latter perspectives labels materials either designed for educational purposes for nonnative speakers (L2 NNS) or piece of writing for native speakers. Besides, audio and video materials are also recognized here. Table 5 shows the averaged of the results of materials on which activities are based.

Table 5
Length and Authenticity of Material Used

Materials Used	Strategy-based Average	Non strategy-based Average
Minimal L2 - NNS %	26.5	41.2
Extended L2 - NNS %	11	8.3
Minimal + Extended + L2-NNS %	21.4	11.4
Minimal + Audio + L2-NNS %	3.1	2.8
Extended + Audio + L2-NNS %	10	1.5
Audio + L2-NNS %	0.00	0.00
Audio + Visual + L2-NNS %	0.00	19.3
Minimal + Visual + L2-NNS %	0.00	0.00
Minimal + Student Made %	0.00	3.5
Extended + Student Made %	2.5	4.3
Minimal + Visual + L2-NS	0.00	0.00
Visual + Student Made	0.00	0.00
Visual + L2-NNS	0.00	0.00
Total % of Materials used	74.5	96.3

The results indicated that Minimal L2- NNS was the most common category in both classes. Also, this Table indicates that non strategy-based teacher made use of more visual materials for example educational videos to improve the candidates' listening at 19.3% as opposed to 0.00% in strategy-based classes. In addition, in nonstrategy-based class a wider range of

materials were used (i.e., Audio + Visual + L2-NNS, Minimal + Student Made) such as vocabulary revision exercises, discussion questions, and academic word lists which were absent in nonstrategy-based class.

4.2 Results of Comparing Methods

To ensure the homogeneity of the candidates prior to the beginning of the experiment all of them sat for IELTS retired test those who scored 4-5 were chosen as the target participants of the study. The posttest scores of candidates in both strategy-based and nonstrategy-based groups were compared by running independent sample t-test. For the test is made up of 4 skills, each skill was separately compared in both groups ($p < .001$).

The results obtained from speaking posttest indicated that non strategy-based group (M = 6.53, SD= .39) outperformed strategy-based group (M= 5.50, SD= .30), t (16) = -10.97. Table 6 shows the results of t-test run on speaking posttest.

Table 6
The Results of t-test in Speaking Posttest

F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
5.158	.027	-10.972	55	.000	-1.0345
		-11.024	52.218	.000	-1.0345

Regarding reading posttest, strategy-based group (M = 5.92, SD = .35) gained significantly higher scores than nonstrategy-based group (M= 5.05, SD = .36), t (16) = 9.25. Table 7 illustrates the results of t-test of posttest scores of both groups.

Table7
The Results of t-test in Reading Posttest

F	*Sig.*	*t*	*df*	*Sig.* (2tailed)	Mean Difference
.002	.963	9.257	55	.000	.8768
		9.262	54.996	.000	.8768

Evaluation of IELTS Preparatory …

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the performances of both groups in writing posttest. There was a significant difference in the scores for strategy-based group (M = 6.41, SD = 0.33) and nonstrategy-based group (M = 5.5, SD = 0.36); t (16) = 9.61. These results suggest that strategy-based group performed significantly better than nonstrategy-based group in writing section of the test. Table 8 shows the results of t-test on writing posttest.

Table 8
The Results of t-test in Writing Posttest

F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
.002	.969	9.613	55	.000	.8935
		9.628	54.852	.000	.8935

In the last section of the test, listening, strategy-based group (M= 7.01, SD= 0.41) and nonstrategy-based group (M= 7.10, SD = 0.33) did not perform significantly differently t (16) = - 0.85. Table 9 reports the results of t-test on listening posttest.

Table 9
The Results of t-test in Listening Posttest

F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
.339	.563	-.851	55	.399	-.0856
		-.848	51.81	.401	-.0856

5. Discussion

This study attempted to investigate different teaching practices and strategies used in IELTS preparatory courses in Isfahan, Iran. In so doing, two major types of IELTS preparatory courses: strategy-based and nonstrategy-based were observed by employing COLT observation scheme. COLT which is a standard observation scheme (Hayes, 2003) helped the researcher to scrutinize every nuance of the courses meticulously. Two types of

preparatory courses in the focus of this study were strategy-based and nonstrategy-based courses. The former was aimed at making candidates familiar with different sections of the test and helping them employ test-taking strategies for getting better results on the test. This was accomplished by teaching test-taking strategies and using exam-like materials. On the other hand, the latter courses tried to increase the level of proficiency of the candidates and teaching test-taking strategies was not in the focus of the course at all. Because, the latter type of preparatory course was in fact the advanced level of the curriculum of the center, IELTS was not the main focus, instead increasing learners' communicative competence and language proficiency was pursued. In other words, IELTS tasks were used as formative assessment to help the instructor to notice the deficiencies of teaching practices.

In this section the results obtained from COLT are discussed and evidence of existence of washback in both classes are traced. Taking participant organization which focuses on the orientation of activities into account, the results suggested that strategy-based class was more teacher fronted in comparison with nonstrategy-based class. This is in line with the findings of the study conducted by Hayes and Read (2004). They showed that in IELTS preparatory courses teachers are in complete control of class as opposed to EAP courses in which learner-centeredness is more noticeable. Being teacher-centered is one of the remarkable characteristics of exam preparatory courses. Having to make candidates familiar with an array of strategies that are to be employed in the test, teachers have to be in the center of the class and take the control of the activities in the class (Baily, 1996).

On the other hand, in nonstrategy-based classes learners played more active role and most of the activities were in form of role plays and group work. This could in fact reflect the essence of communicative approach to

language teaching and learning. This is in line with findings of the study conducted by Sadeghi and Ketabi (2014) that showed student-initiated activities can be considered as instance of positive washback. Therefore, the construct of IELTS which is communicative is mirrored in teaching practices in nonstrategy-based courses through learner-centered activities.

The second category of IELTS is concerned with content of the materials used in the class. As the result revealed, in strategy-based class teacher was mainly concerned with broad topics that included talking about the test itself and strategies and tips needed to carry out the tasks successfully and this is an indication of washback. On the contrary, in nonstrategy-based class sociolinguistic aspect language was also taken into consideration that is an indication of communication approach to language. Therefore, in both classes signs of washback of the test was observed.

Teacher-centeredness of strategy-based class once again was highlighted by the fact that teachers for 64.7% of the time of the class made decision about the content of the course. In contrast, teacher in strategy-based class 46.5% of the time determined the content of the course. The findings of this part of observation are in agreement with those of Hayes (2003) that also came up with the conclusion that teachers in IELTS preparatory courses as opposed to EAP courses are more concerned with deciding on the content of course. This suggest that nonstrategy-based class was more dominated by principles which considered active role of learners in providing materials. On the other hand, the test dictated use of exam-like materials which consequently put the burden of making decision about the content on the shoulder of teachers.

Next section of COLT is concerned with student modality or portion of time devoted to each skill or combination of skills in the class. The results revealed that nonstrategy-based course was mostly oriented on productive

skills, speaking and writing, this can be partly explained by the fact that nonstrategy-based class involved a lot of pair work and group work whereas strategy-based class is dominated mostly by receptive skills. This is due to the fact that classroom discourse is mainly about IELTS itself and reading tips and instruction of employing test-taking strategies. These findings are in line with those of Green (2006) that suggest many teaching practices in preparatory courses should be traced to the test design which means that test imposes its impact even on student modality.

The last category of COLT, dealing with the materials used in class, showed that nonstrategy-based class used a wider range of materials including audio-visual materials comparing to strategy-based class. Washback of the test was observed in strategy-based class due to the fact that the materials used in this class were mainly exam-like. Practice tests made a great portion of materials in strategy-based class. On the other hand, in nonstrategy-based class authentic materials were used to enhance the learners' exposure to real life language and exam-task were mostly assigned as homework.

In the second part of the study the result of the posttest of both groups were compared. Strategy-based group outperformed nonstrategy-based group in reading and writing section of the test. It may be explained by use of exam-like materials during the class which gave the candidates the opportunity to experience the test before the actual test. The results are not in line with those of Humphreys et al. (2012) that indicated using exam-like materials have no significant effect on score gain of IELTS candidates.

On the contrary, nonstrategy-based group outperformed strategy-based group in speaking posttest. This is in line with study conducted by Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) which claimed that using interactive tasks and group work comparing to teaching strategies have more significant effect on candidates'

performance in speaking section of IELTS. This can be justified by the fact that pair work and group work can make more contribution to candidates' oral ability rather than teaching speaking strategies that are mainly in form of prefabricated chunks.

In addition, no significant difference was observed between the performances of both groups in listening posttest. In this regard, nonstrategy-based group being exposed to authentic materials may have given the candidates the ability to deal with speaking tasks of IELTS as well as those in nonstrategy-based who practiced exam-like materials and sample tests. It may be inferred that increasing exposure to authentic material can have the same effect as employing strategies on candidates' performance.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study attempted to carry out an evaluation of teaching practices and strategies employed in IELTS preparatory courses taught via strategy-based vs. nonstrategy-based instruction. To this end, using a standard observation scheme, both types of instructions were observed within their corresponding courses. Moreover, many previous studies in the literature concerned analysis of ILETS courses which drew significant conclusions and implications for the current field; and this study had a similar purpose. Particularly, it focused on the teaching practices and strategies in IELTS preparatory courses. It also investigated the presence of positive washback of the test in such courses. Based on the observations and the results of the posttest strategy-based course, focusing on familiarizing candidates with test-taking strategies, instances of positive washback were observed, especially on reading and writing sections of the test. On the contrary, nonstrategy-based course, based on communicative approach and using exam tasks as assessment, showed

better performance on speaking. Furthermore, it was observed that performance of both groups was equal on listening posttest.

Regarding offering implications for the conditions of IELTS courses, it can be suggested that, using the present findings, IELTS instructors can implement a useful array of teaching practices and strategies in preparatory courses. IELTS preparation centers can also benefit from the results by determining the policy of the center to enhance the fruitfulness of the courses and helping more candidates to gain better scores in IELTS.

With regard to findings related to washback effect it can be recommended that, if provided with sufficient time, ILETS instructors can use posttest activities more to evaluate their students' learning. As proved by the results of the study, one influential activity can be checking learning of skills through washback. Furthermore, the notion of washback gains more importance particularly for those instructors who do not include it in their teaching procedures. So, it is expected that IELTS learners be more conscious of their learning processes through feedbacks they receive.

References

Alderson, J. C., & Hamp-Lyons L. (1996). TOEFL preparatory courses: A study of washback. *Language Testing*, *13*(3), 280-297.

Bachman, L., & Palmer A. (1996). *Language testing in practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bailey, K. (1999). *Washback in language testing*. Princeton: Educational Testing Service.

Brown, J. D. H. (1998). An investigation into approaches to IELTS preparation, with particular focus on the academic writing component of the test. *IELTS Research Reports*, *1*, 20-37.

Cheng, L. (1997). How does washback influence teaching? Implications for Hong Kong. *Language and education, 11*(1), 38 – 54.

Davies, A. (1999). *Dictionary of language testing*. Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.

Elder, C., & O'Loughlin, K. (2003). Investigating the relationship between intensive English language study and band score gain on IELTS. *IELTS Research Reports, 4,* 207-254.

Gibson, C., & Swan, A. (2008). The significance of sociolinguistic backgrounds of teachers of IELTS test preparation courses in selected Malaysian institutions. *IELTS Research Reports, 8*(1), 45 – 144.

Green, A. (2006a)*.* Washback to the learner: Learner and teacher perspectives on IELTS preparatory course expectations and outcomes*. Assessing Writing, 11*(2), 113–134.

Green, A. (2006b). Watching for washback: Observing the influence of the IELTS academic writing test in the classroom. *Language Assessment Quarterly, 3*(4), 333–368*.*

Green, A. (2007)*. IELTS washback in context: Preparation for academic writing in higher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Humphreys, P., Haugh, M., Fenton-Smith, M., Lobo, A., Michael, R., & Walkinshaw, I. (2012). Tracking international students' English proficiency over the first semester of undergraduate study. *IELTS Research Reports, 8*(3), 1-41.

Hawkey, R. A. H. (2006). *Impact theory and practice: Studies of the IELTS test and ProgettoLingue: Studies in Language Testing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Cambridge ESOL.

Hayes, B., & Read, J. (2004). Preparing students for the IELTS academic module in New Zealand. In L. Cheng, Y. Watanabe and A. Curtis (Eds.), (in press). *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and method.* Mahwah*:* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hayes, B. M. (2003). *IELTS preparation in New Zealand: an investigation into the nature of the courses and evidence of washback* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Victoria University, Wilington.

Mickan, P., & Motteram, J. 2008. An ethnographic study of classroom instruction in an IELTS preparation program. *IELTS Research Reports, 8*(4)*,* 17-43.

O'Loughlin, K., & Arkoudis, S. (2009). Investigating IELTS exit score gains in higher education. *IELTS Research Reports, 7*(2)*,* 95 – 180.

Luxia, Q. (2002). Is testing an efficient agent for pedagogical change? Examining the intended washback of the writing task in a high-stakes English test in China. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice, 14*(1), 51-74.

Read, J., & Hayes, B. (2003). The impact of IELTS on preparation for academic study in New Zealand. *IELTS Research Reports*, *5*(4), 153-206.

Sadeghi, S., & Ketabi, S. (2014). High-stake test preparation courses: Washback in accountability contexts. *Journal of Education & Human Development, 3*(1), 17-26.

Saville, N., & Hawkey, R. (2004). A study of impact of the IELTS, with special reference to its washback on classroom materials. In L. Cheng, Y.

Watanabe & A. Curtis (Eds.), *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and method* (pp. 125-147). Mahwah*:* Lawrence Erlbaum.

Swain, M. (1985). Large-scale communicative language testing: A case study. In Y. P. Lee, A. C. Y. Fok, R. Lord, & G. Low (Eds.), *New directions in language testing* (pp. 135-156)*.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Wall, D. (1997). Impact and washback in language testing. In C. Clapham & D. Corson (Eds.)*, Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 291-302). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Watanabe, Y. (1996a). Does grammar-translation come from the entrance examination? Preliminary findings from classroom-based research. *Language Testing, 13*(3), 319-333.

Watanabe, Y. (1996b). Investigating washback in Japanese classrooms: Problems of methodology. In G. Wigglesworth & C. Elder (Eds.), *The language testing cycle: From inception to washback* (pp. 319-333). Australia: Applied Linguistics Association Publication.