

The Impact of IELTS on the Test Preparation Industry of Pakistan

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) on the growth of private English language institutes offering preparation for IELTS in Pakistan. In Pakistan, as elsewhere, IELTS has assumed great significance on account of its gate-keeping function in emigration, higher education abroad and professional registration. There is a growth in IELTS candidature, resulting in an expansion of IELTS preparation courses. The current study conducts a qualitative face-to-face survey of 35 IELTS preparation institutes of Pakistan. The results of survey showed a radical expansion of IELTS preparation courses. Courses, although relatively expensive, are very short and most test-preparers enter them with lower English proficiency than is appropriate for IELTS. We argue that because public education is not meeting the demand for English, IELTS is now perceived as a route of English education and general certification, and a badge of middle class status if not actual material gain.

Key Words: Washback, Impact, high-stakes, Gatekeeping, IELTS preparation providers.

1. Introduction

This study investigates the ‘impact’ of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) on the test preparation industry of Pakistan. The IELTS is an international standardised test of English language proficiency for non-native English language speakers (IELTS, 2001:2). IELTS measures both academic and general English language proficiency, and therefore consists of both an ‘Academic’ and a ‘General Training’ module, each with four components: Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. Of all the internationally acclaimed English language proficiency tests (such as Test Of English as a Foreign Language, Test Of English for International Communication and so on) IELTS enjoys a high status as one of the most widely taken international English language proficiency tests as it is accepted by tertiary institutions, immigration authorities and professional associations around the world (Coley, 1999; Davies, 2008; Green, 2007; Hyatt and Brooks, 2009; Merrifield, 2012; Merrylees, 2003; and O’Loughlin, 2011). There is heightened awareness of IELTS, as a consequence of its gate-keeping function in these areas, and the test has assumed enormous significance in Pakistan.

High-stakes English language proficiency tests such as the IELTS significantly affect the life chances of individual test-takers through their use in controlling access to international education and employment opportunities. Language tests also affect the educational and social systems in which they are located, e.g. when language test results are used to make important decisions about curriculum planning or funding allocation for schools, immigration policy or the licensing of health professionals such as doctors and nurses. There may also be economic and commercial interests related to language assessment especially when they carry high-stakes. If there is a viable market, publishers produce preparation materials and private tuition centres run preparation courses for these high-stakes tests (Saville, 2009; Taylor, 2005).

It is these wider effects and consequences within society which are referred to as language test impact in the field of language testing (Saville, 2009). According to Hawkey (2006), impact studies investigate the influences of language programmes and/or language tests on stakeholders beyond the immediate learning programme context. He says: 'An impact study might, for example, investigate the effects of a programme or test on school heads, parents, receiving institution administrators, and high-stakes test preparation providers' (2006:7).

The increasing demand for IELTS has led to proliferation of IELTS preparation courses in Pakistan. The IELTS preparation courses offered by private English language centres in Pakistan are part of a broader privatisation of English Language Teaching in South Asia (Billah, 2010; Hawkey, 2006; and Moore et al., 2012). This study attempts to assess the impact of IELTS on the private centres which run preparation courses for high-stakes English Language proficiency test of IELTS. Thus the overarching aim was to examine the impact of IELTS on preparation centres of Pakistan. Based on this broad aim, the following research question was formulated:

RQ1: What is the impact of IELTS on the test preparation industry of Pakistan?

RQ2: What are the different types of IELTS preparation institutes available in Pakistan?

Coleman (2010) estimates that there are 256 English language institutes for IELTS preparation throughout Pakistan. It is unlikely that this figure includes numerous informal preparation courses such as those offered by neighborhood tutors from their homes. No research to date has been conducted in Pakistan to assess the impact of IELTS on the IELTS preparation institutes which has been on the increase for more than two decades. Rahman (2001) records only one locally-owned private institute, called the Pakistan American Cultural Centre (PACC), functioning in Karachi before 1990s. Due to the deteriorating law and order situation in Pakistan, international organisations like the British Council do not offer any preparation courses in the country (Rahman, 1996). IELTS preparation courses therefore are only offered by private English language institutes, owned either by local people or by a few international chains. The impact of IELTS on the test preparation industry is an important area to be researched in Pakistan, where a range of private institutes have opened up for economic and commercial interests. There is a gap in the existing body of IELTS literature which this study aims to fill from a South Asian context.

2. Literature Review

It has long been recognised that testing significantly impacts on the educational system and, more broadly, on society as a whole. Taylor (2004) suggests that tests have a significant impact on the careers of test-takers as they provide them with potential access to educational and employment opportunities; they also impact on educational systems and, more widely, on society (2004). Bachman and Palmer (1996:29) state that the high-stakes tests have an impact on society and educational systems and on the individuals within those systems. According to them, the impact of the test is experienced at two levels: the micro-level and the macro-level. In the former, it is the effect of the test on individual teachers and students and in the latter, the effect of the test on wider society and educational systems. In a similar vein, Saville (2009:25) suggests that 'the extent to which a test interacts with or is conditioned by factors beyond the classroom is a feature of the test's wider impact on society and educational systems'.

According to Saville (2009), the concept of impact in the field of language assessment is relatively new and has only fairly recently appeared in the literature as an extension to the notion of 'washback'. Both Hawkey (2006) and Saville (2009) define impact as the superordinate concept covering the effects and consequences of tests and examinations throughout society, whereas washback is more limited and refers to the influence of tests and examinations on language learners and teachers, language learning and teaching processes (including materials), and outcomes. Some researchers in recent years have differentiated between the 'wider' and 'narrower' effects by calling the former 'impact' and the latter 'washback' (Bailey, 1996; Wall, 1997).

Most of the impact studies are funded by Cambridge ESOL as a part of the test validation process because the examination boards 'review and change' tests and programmes in the light of findings on the use of exams by stakeholders and their view of these exams to ensure the tests' validity (Hawkey, 2006). The Cambridge ESOL Research and Validation Group undertake impact studies for all their exams, including IELTS. They are responsible for the provision of quality assurance services for Cambridge ESOL exams. Research and analysis of both test material and test takers' performance are carried out to ensure that not only does IELTS provide accurate information for the institutions that recognise it, but that tests are fair to test takers whatever their nationality, first language and gender (Green, 2007; Hawkey, 2006).

IELTS impact studies are significant in the test validation process as they provide data from learners, teachers, and other stakeholders from different countries on a wide range of impact and test validation areas, such as: candidate profiles, test attitudes, perceptions of test motivation and stress, candidate and teacher perceptions of test relevance, difficulty and reliability, candidate and teacher views on test preparation course content and materials. The data collected on test impact may inform changes designed to improve the test and related systems (Green 2007; Hawkey, 2006; Saville, 2009).

There have been a very limited number of studies focusing on the impact of IELTS on test preparation providers. The majority of the studies have mainly investigated the impact of preparation courses on IELTS score gains. In their two phase impact study of language schools, Read and Hayes (2003) included both private language schools (independent commercial enterprises) and teaching centres belonging to public universities. In the first phase of their study, Read and Hayes (2003) surveyed language schools in New Zealand to find out about the nature of courses offered by these schools for the preparation of international students for the Academic module of IELTS. They mailed questionnaires to 98 language schools throughout New Zealand to collect information about the types and lengths of courses offered, a brief profile of their students (focusing on their motivations for taking the test, and their perceptions of it), the teaching materials used by these schools, and a profile of their teachers (qualifications, experience and so on). In total 78 language schools returned the questionnaires with responses. The questionnaires were supplemented by follow up interviews with 23 teachers of IELTS preparation courses chosen randomly from the sample of 78 centres. These interviews provided detailed information about the ways in which courses were conducted and the impact of the test, as perceived by teachers, on students' overall preparation for academic study at tertiary level.

Through the survey of 78 institutes, Read and Hayes (2003) found that the majority of the New Zealand centres were private language schools, and that they had mainly Asian students enrolled on their courses. 60 centres reported that they mainly offered IELTS preparation courses, while a few centres had courses like English for Academic Purposes and TOEFL preparation. Read and Hayes suggested that this indicated a strong preference for the IELTS test in New Zealand, and a subsequent wide availability of IELTS preparation courses to international students in the country. These schools had been preparing students for five years or more. The schools mentioned that their students were mainly motivated to take the test in order to gain admission to tertiary institutions, with a small number of candidates interested in immigration and professional registration.

Read and Hayes discovered through teacher interviews that nearly half of the centres used a specific assessment procedure to screen students for their IELTS preparation courses and some of the institutes reported using IELTS test tasks for screening and admitting applicants who showed some degree of variation within the required 4.5 to 5.5 band score. Some teachers confirmed that students at intermediate level were accepted on to the course, while some accepted students only at upper intermediate level. Some language schools also had to accept lower level students. Read and Hayes explained that:

Some schools operating on a commercial basis in a competitive environment found it necessary to accept lower level students into an IELTS course to avoid losing them to another school, in which case teachers had to cope as best as they could (2003:164).

The majority of the language schools reported having a separate IELTS course with a median length of 50 hours, while a very few reported having only six hour, part-time courses, just to familiarise the students with the test tasks. The profile of IELTS teachers in these centres suggested that many had certificates such as CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults), and some had experience of teaching, while a few others were selected on the basis of their knowledge of IELTS. Read and Hayes therefore reported that 'IELTS preparation is generally entrusted to well-qualified and experienced teachers' (2003:165). The teachers tended to use IELTS preparation materials in classes where the focus was primarily on practice of the test. The IELTS test was mainly preferred to TOEFL in New Zealand by both students and teachers who had positive views about it, considering it to be the best proficiency test according to its suitability for academic study.

Hawkey (2006) conducted a detailed impact study of IELTS on a range of stakeholders. A questionnaire was sent to 300 test preparation centres worldwide (North, Central and Southern Africa, Pacific East Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Central and South America, the Middle East, North America and Mexico, South Asia and Western Europe). The purpose of the questionnaire was to get updated information on the current courses for language tests, dates and durations of such courses, the numbers and nationalities of students, teacher strength and the textbooks and other materials used by these centres.

The survey results suggested that most centres surveyed (83%) run courses for IELTS preparation (these were mixed centres like university centres, British Council and IDP Education Australia centres, and other types of language teaching institutions). Some centres also offer preparation for TOEFL, TOEIC and other Cambridge ESOL exams. These centres offer the preparation courses for different durations (1-2 weeks, 3-5 weeks, 6-8 weeks, 9-12 weeks, 13-16 weeks and longer). These centres have different numbers of students enrolled in their courses. The survey provided a useful list of IELTS preparation course textbooks they used. This data helped choosing of IELTS centres for the main data collection phase of Hawkey's (2006) study.

There have been a number of studies exploring the impact of IELTS on test preparation teachers, students, their parents and on the scores of test-preparers (Brown, 1998; Elder and O'Loughlin, 2003; Green, 2007; Moore et al., 2012; Rao et al., 2005). These all studies have been conducted in native English speaking countries. This suggests that there was a need to conduct an impact study in non-native English speaking context, particularly focusing on the growth of private IELTS preparation centres.

3. Research Methodology

In the introduction of this study, I discussed that the IELTS preparation courses in Pakistan are only offered by private language centres. There are no state-owned language centres or institutes typically associated with universities in Pakistan which offer these courses as is mostly the case in developed countries. There has been a significant growth of these centres in Pakistan since 1990, but to date there is no published literature in Pakistan on the growth of private English Language centres, and in order to fill this gap, we conducted a face-to-face survey of these language centres to obtain a broad overview of teaching institutes in Pakistan. We suspect that this is where IELTS is having the greatest impact financially, both on test preparation providers and the test-preparers. Being a part of Pakistani society, we know the context very well. We had background knowledge and information about the IELTS preparation industry. Our prior knowledge of these institutes, and information gathered through newspapers, websites and blogs, could have been sufficient to form the backdrop. Conducting face-to-face surveys in the institutes was a conscious step to avoid any bias regarding these institutes and to ensure objectivity in the data collection procedure. This way we were able to avoid preconceptions about these institutes.

The majority of the private English language centres are locally owned, whereas a few are international franchises, thus the two broad categories are; locally owned and internationally owned private institutes. In comparison to Hawkey (2006) and Read and Hayes (2003), the present study conducted face-to-face surveys in the private institutes, which is more advantageous than mail, online and telephone surveys as the researcher is able to spend some time (at least 2-3 hours) in each centre gathering information, as well as observing and if possible, speaking to students and teachers. In order to assess the impact of IELTS on private institutes in Pakistan, the face-to-face survey aimed to establish the following:

- range of different types of institutes (offering General English and IELTS preparation courses),
- the ratio of local to international providers of these courses,
- the types of courses offered (such as General English, IELTS, TOEFL, and any other courses),
- duration of their courses,
- their entry requirements,
- the profiles of their students and teachers (specifically the typical socioeconomic status of their students),
- The fee structure of these providers.

Compared with mail, online and telephone surveys, face-to-face surveys offer significant advantages in terms of the amount and complexity of the data that can be collected (Doyle, 2005). Face-to-face surveys typically offer the highest response rates obtainable. They also offer advantages in terms of data quality, as the researcher has control over the data collection process and environment. If the respondent finds a question to be confusing or ambiguous, they can ask for clarification which would not be possible with a mail survey (Doyle, 2005). In the present context of the study, there are some particular difficulties with mail or online surveys; for example, electricity failure for about 12-14 hours is very common which would delay filling out online surveys. Also, most of the institutes do not have either computer or internet connections so online questionnaires could not be used. Mailing questionnaires was also not considered a reliable way to gather information as people would either not fill in the form or post it back to the researcher in self-addressed stamped envelopes. Therefore, face-to-face surveys best fit the purpose of the study to gather information from the private institutes.

The survey was carried out in Karachi and Hyderabad over a two-month period. Our data collection cities are representative of tier 1 and tier 2 cities in Pakistan: Karachi is the largest city in Pakistan, is the capital of the province of Sindh, and representative of tier 1 cities in the country. Hyderabad, on the other hand, is the second largest city in Sindh province, and representative of tier 2 cities. Before conducting this survey, the relevant information regarding these institutes (such as locations, opening hours, and contact numbers) was gathered for some fifty-seven centres, through newspaper advertisements, their websites, internet blogs and street billboards. Some centres were not appropriate for inclusion due to their remote location or, for security reasons travelling in their neighbourhood areas was risky for a lone woman, and some other institutes did not allow access. We included thirty-five private centres through 'stratified random sampling'; twenty from Karachi and fifteen from Hyderabad. The chosen sample of institutes (N=35) for face-to-face surveys are representative of a larger group of institutes (local and international) which are prevalent in cities like Karachi and Hyderabad.

We had a very limited access of these centres which were included for survey. For example, they did not allow us to see their classrooms, observe any IELTS preparation classes or to speak with their teachers regarding test preparation materials and methods. Stratified sampling involves dividing the population into homogenous groups, each group containing subjects with similar characteristics (Gray, 2009). We mentioned earlier that there are two broad categories of institutes in Pakistan: local and international institutes. The international institutes do not have any sub-groups, so we only divided the local institutes into different sub-groups (e.g. neighbourhood tutors chain institutes and so on) and then randomly chose institutes from the different strata. These constituted a representative sample of private institutes offering IELTS preparation courses in Pakistan.

The information from the chosen institutes was gathered via informal conversational interviews with the administration staff. None of the language centres permitted us to record the interviews. This did not affect the data collection as we used an information sheet which made it convenient to fill in all the relevant information in appropriate boxes during the interview. The main purpose of these face-to-face surveys was to collect information about these centres rather than eliciting attitudes so the verbatim quotes are not so important for these interviews. Furthermore, we also made detailed notes immediately after conducting interviews, so there were no issue with not tape recording these interviews. Interviews are particularly useful for getting in-depth information around the topic (Kvale, 2007). For example, with interviews we had the opportunity to probe or ask follow up questions unlike questionnaire surveys. In each interview with the administration staff, we took notes on: location, name of the institute, types of courses offered, duration of General English and IELTS preparation courses, placement test, classroom setup, average number of students, tuition fees, teaching materials and other additional information. Most of the administration staff preferred to speak to us in Urdu, while only a few people provided information in English. It is mainly because the administrative staff is neither well-educated nor fluent speakers of English. We spent almost 75 hours gathering information from the centres, spending an average of 2 hours at each one. Before gathering any information, we visited most of the centres more than once to contact their owners/managers to gain access to collect the data. We were able to speak with these owners explaining them about our research and getting their consent to conduct a survey. The consent form detailed all relevant information about our research, assuring confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any stage.

We mentioned earlier that we were not allowed to record the interviews conducted with the administration staff at the private centres. We sometimes noted things in English, for example the fee structure, and duration of their classes. But any other information, we noted in Urdu. To analyse the face-to-face surveys, we initially translated any information which was written in Urdu as most of the administration staff preferred to speak in Urdu. We then prepared Microsoft Excel Spreadsheets and filled in the information for every participating institute in the relevant boxes. The information was broadly categorised under the type of institute in the presentation of findings (Doyle, 2005).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Face-to-face survey results: types of private institutes in Pakistan

The survey of private institutes was conducted to assess the impact of IELTS on the test preparation industry of Pakistan. Private English language institutes in Pakistan differ according to the courses they offer and the social classes they cater for. Some of the private centres offer a wide range of General English language courses at different levels, Business English courses, as well as preparation for international exams like IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, GMAT and SAT, and local exams like the Central Superior Services of Pakistan.

The majority of the centres exclusively offer IELTS preparation courses, while some others offer preparation for entry tests for private universities in Pakistan along with the IELTS preparation courses. The majority of English language institutes claims to make learners proficient English users within a stipulated time, and charge them heavily for doing so. Most of the institutes cater for people of less elite socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and thus large numbers of institutes are found in low-income residential areas, whereas very few are located in high-income residential areas. These institutes are mostly owned by local Pakistanis, but a small number are international franchises. The two types can be broadly categorised as:

- Locally owned private institutes.
- Internationally owned private institutes.

Within the broad category of locally owned institutes, there are a number of different types. First of all there are centres which are owned by a single individual who is commonly known as a neighbourhood tutor. The second type of private institutes are established in an office/commercial space and a third type has more than one branch. Figure 1 below shows the division of locally owned private institutes. Each of these institutes will be further discussed individually in the subsequent sections below.

4.1.1. Local private tutors/Neighbourhood tutors

In figure 1, the first category of local institutes comprises self-employed tutors. The centres are owned by one person, who is also usually the sole tutor at the institute, but who will typically employ some administrative staff. There is a large number of these local private tutors in the low-income residential areas of Karachi and Hyderabad, whereas they are never found in high income areas. These institutes are set up in the proprietor's small flat (usually consisting of one bedroom) or small bungalow. Such institutes typically offer IELTS preparation alone. None of these tutors have a placement test which shows that, due to the fierce competition in the market, they accept everyone applying for their course. The class comprises 12-15 students or more, depending on the number of admissions. The private tutors offer IELTS preparation classes of various lengths; some of them for five hours in total, some for one week and others for one month.

These institutes are not very well equipped; classrooms have chairs and a whiteboard, but no audio-visual facilities. Courses are not very expensive (charging roughly 5000 PKR, US\$ 51) and are therefore easily affordable for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (lower class). All private tutors tend to have a similar fee structure. The students look for the most reasonable price on the market, and they are easily attracted by tutors offering them a slight discount (typically 100 or 200 PKR, US\$ 1-2). The institutes are usually attended by people who live nearby because their mobility is very limited.

Some of the tutors also replace their names with a more American or British-sounding one to present themselves as native English speakers. These tutors offer a free demonstration class, in which they attempt to convince potential clients that only by preparing with them will they achieve high IELTS band scores. Some of the neighbourhood tutors also offer incentives like free IELTS preparation books and CDs or fee discounts. All such institutes in Pakistan are unregistered, do not pay tax, and are therefore unchecked by the law. The private tutors offering English language classes and preparation for international exams like IELTS and TOEFL advertise in local English and Urdu newspapers (such as, The Dawn, Daily Times, The News and Jang), on billboards, as well as on different websites. These tutors' classes are well attended and there is stiff competition for new business between them in the private English Language Teaching market.

The number of such tutors has almost doubled in the last ten years. The growth of these centres suggests that IELTS preparation courses are in greater demand in low-income residential areas. They are mostly attended by extremely low proficiency students, so it is unlikely that their students would get the required IELTS scores to study abroad. Even if any of these students do manage to get above a 4.0 band score, they do not have the resources to go abroad. There is no information available about what the remainder do with their IELTS certificate when they do not manage to go abroad.

4.1.2. Stand-alone institutes

Within this same category of locally owned institutes, there are some centres which have a dedicated building with at least three or four classrooms, an administrative office and a small staff room. These institutes cater primarily for lower middle class people but sometimes also attract people from the lower class. Students from the local neighbourhood can easily access these centres.

These institutes have very deceptive names which show their apparent affiliation with American or British institutes like Anglophile, British Academy, The American Centre, British English Language Learning, Brit-Pak school, and The American Communication Council to name just a few. They also, like the private local tutors, offer a free demonstration class. Classrooms are furnished simply and very few of these institutes are equipped with audio-visual facilities. They only offer preparation for IELTS and TOEFL. The staff members are not highly qualified. They are university or college graduates (in any subject) and they are not required to provide any English language certificate or degree related to English language teaching.

They usually have 12-15 students per session but sometimes the classes are crowded, with 20 or more students (depending on the uptake), as, like the private tutors, there is no admission or placement test. These institutes are better known than those of the individual tutors because of their tall and prominent buildings, and their names, which show their apparent affiliation with American or British institutes, such as The American Centre (TAC), Anglophile, Pak-British institutes, British English Language Learning (BELL) to name just a few. These institutes also advertise in local newspapers and on billboards. Unlike private tutors, these institutes have websites where they provide course information.

They charge almost double or more for their IELTS preparation compared to the private tutors (i.e., 10,000 PKR, US\$ 100). Due to their relatively high fees compared to the private tutors', they are also attended by a few people from the upper middle class. These institutes, like the private tutors, also make exaggerated claims and guarantee high scores to their test-preparers in newspaper advertisements. Due to the high enrolment of people with low-proficiency in English and similar limitations in teaching as the private tutors, it is unlikely that the test-preparers will go abroad, due to financial constraints and/or not attaining the required IELTS scores, similar to their counterparts attending private tutors. Below we will discuss the third category of locally owned institutes.

4.1.3. Local institutes with multiple branches

The largest types of local institutes are those which have at least three or four branches in one city, and sometimes they may have a branch in other cities as well. Institutes like Domino English Learning Centre, Anees Hussain, Anees Hassan, Aptech, Alpha Institute, Innovative Learning Centre and Parlance all fall within this category. They are mainly attended by upper middle class people, with some clients from the lower and lower middle classes. These types of institutes are mostly located in low-income residential areas of Karachi and Hyderabad, but can occasionally be found in expensive areas as well. They offer English language courses, along with IELTS and TOEFL preparation classes. They have, in their buildings, some classrooms, a reception area, a waiting room, an administration room, and a staff room. Such institutes commonly advertise in newspapers and on billboards. Unlike private tutors and local private centres, they do not offer any incentives or free demonstration classes. These institutes provide comprehensive information on their websites as well. Similar to other categories of local institute, there is no test for their IELTS preparation course. There is no maximum limit on the intake per session, and classes usually have between 12 and 15 students but occasionally more (20 or above), depending on the number of admissions. The teachers at these centres are also quite similar to the private tutors and those in the stand-alone institutes in terms of their qualifications.

Their fee structure is slightly higher than the second category of private institutes (i.e. 15,000 PKR, US\$ 150). As mentioned earlier, the majority of students attending these centres belong to the upper middle class and therefore tend to be slightly more proficient than students attending the other two types of local institutes. They have a thin chance of getting a band score of above 4.0, to meet the requirements for going abroad. Some of the students might also be able to find funds of their own while others look for scholarships to go abroad. In the next section, we will discuss the second main category of private institutes which are those owned by international franchises.

4.1.4. Internationally owned private institutes

The second category of institutes, which are internationally owned, are very rare in Pakistan and are found only in big cities like Karachi, Islamabad, and Lahore, with one or two branches in each. In Karachi there are only three internationally owned institutes. These institutes have all been established very recently in Pakistan (after 2000). They are located in high-income residential areas of Karachi.

The international private institutes offer a General English course which is regarded as a stepping stone to IELTS and is offered to those who fail to attain a pass mark in their placement test for the IELTS preparation course. The administration staff in these institutes explained that the majority of the students on their General English courses are aiming to move on to the IELTS preparation course.

These internationally owned institutes have a limited intake of students (10-12 students per class), so their classes are never crowded like some of the locally owned institutes. These institutes are largely attended by people belonging to elite families (those of landlords and businessmen) because they are extremely expensive for lower middle class families. A few are upper middle class, but they can only afford to study there by doing part-time jobs. These institutes charge 25,000 PKR (US\$ 253) for their IELTS preparation course.

The classrooms in the international institutes are air-conditioned, and well-decorated with good quality furniture. Their classrooms are well equipped with multimedia technology and a CD player, facilities rarely found in locally owned institutes. Other facilities provided at these centres include free photocopying and printing on campus and standby generators to cope with electricity failure which is a major problem in most of the cities in Pakistan. They possess computer labs for their students to improve their listening skills and practise online material. The faculty members of the internationally owned institutes are all postgraduates in different subjects, some of them in linguistics, and are therefore highly competent English speakers. A full training is provided to all their teachers after recruitment as the centres have their own syllabus and teaching methods. These institutes run their sessions from morning to evening, attracting housewives in the mornings, college and university students in the afternoon and professionals in the evening. The students attending these institutes come from a better educational and financial background compared to students attending the private, locally owned institutes. Therefore, these students have a relatively high chance of achieving their required band scores and have sufficient funds to go abroad.

The findings from the survey of private English language institutes suggest that the majority of them are owned by local Pakistani people and found in the low-income residential areas of Pakistan. There is no limit on student intake in the lower end private institutes whereas international institutes only take 10-12 students per session. Due to the tough competition, these local institutes do not have any placement test for IELTS which contrasts with the survey results of Read and Hayes (2003) where students were only admitted to an IELTS preparation course in New Zealand if they achieved around a 5.0 band score. Fierce competition means that these language centres have to accept lower level proficiency students (below 5.0 band score) in order to avoid losing them to other language schools. Read and Hayes (2003) also reported some language schools accepting lower proficiency students in New Zealand in a competitive environment. The situation is similar in Pakistan but on a much larger scale as it is very common for most of the institutes to accept students with a low proficiency level (those achieving below a 5.0 band score) in order to avoid losing them to other private centres.

Candidates belonging to lower-middle or lower income groups with limited proficiency in English find it difficult to emigrate, mainly because of limited sources of funding. The majority of Pakistani IELTS preparation teachers in locally owned institutes are not well qualified and experienced compared to those found in other parts of the world such as Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Elder and O'Loughlin, 2003; Green, 2007; Read and Hayes, 2003).

5. Conclusion

This study dealt with the detailed discussion of IELTS preparation industry in Pakistan, providing useful information about the nature of the private English language teaching industry, distinguishing between different types of institutes, the courses offered, course duration and fee structure. There is a range of private institutes which aims to cater for different sections of society. The private institutes focusing exclusively on IELTS preparation are on the rise in Pakistan. The majority of the institutes that have sprung up cater for low-income candidates with little experience of English-medium education in the second- and third-tier cities in Pakistan; many are local neighbourhood tutors. These small businesses co-exist alongside international franchises, which cater for test-takers with higher incomes and some degree of English-medium education. The private (both local and international) institutes attract substantial numbers of clients. The growth of IELTS test-preparers has resulted in economic opportunities for IELTS test preparation providers. IELTS, therefore, has had a significant financial impact on both test-preparers and test preparation providers.

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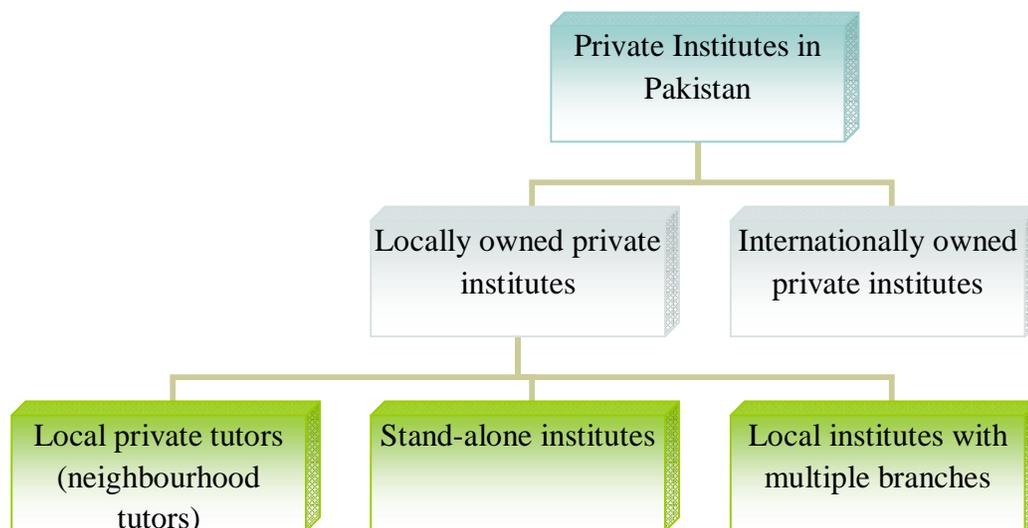


Figure 1 Types of private institutes in Pakistan