

Perceptions and Experiences of English Education Students in Learning IELTS through the IELTP Class

Sri Hastuti Novila Anggraini Saiful
srihastuti@uinmataram.ac.id

Miftahul Jannah
miftahuljannah950@uinmataram.ac.id

Tuning Ridha Addhiny
tuningaddhiny@uinmataram.ac.id

Titik Agustina
titikagustina@uinmataram.ac.id

Nurul Lailatul Khusniyah
nurullailatulkhusniyah@uinmataram.ac.id

Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram

ABSTRACT

In an increasingly globalized academic environment, English proficiency particularly through standardized assessments like IELTS is essential for non-native speakers. This study explores the perceptions and experiences of English Education students at UIN Mataram enrolled in the IELTP (International English Language Test Preparation) class. The research addresses the challenges and benefits encountered by students in institutional IELTS preparation programs, aiming to understand how they interpret and engage with the learning process. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, ten sixth-semester students were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured formats. Thematic analysis revealed consistently positive perceptions of the IELTP class, with students highlighting the clarity of instruction, authentic IELTS materials, and supportive classroom atmosphere. Despite varied motivations, ranging from pursuing postgraduate studies abroad to personal development, all students were highly engaged in the classroom. However, challenges such as large class size, internet instability, and test-focused intensity were noted. Participants suggested more interactive methods to balance the rigor of IELTS preparation. The findings suggest that the IELTS class should be well-facilitated; thus, it can offer meaningful language learning experiences and foster professional growth for students, particularly for pre-service teachers. The study recommends incorporating learner-centered strategies and inclusive practices to improve program effectiveness.

Keywords: Students' Perception; IELTS Preparation; Learning Motivation

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in English has long been recognized as an essential skill for students who intend to participate in global academic and professional contexts. For non-native English speakers, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the most widely accepted instruments for demonstrating English proficiency. It is commonly required for university admission, scholarships, immigration, and employment in English-speaking countries. Therefore, students from non-native English-speaking countries, including Indonesia, need to meet international standards of English proficiency in order to pursue higher education and career opportunities abroad.

However, many students still face difficulties in achieving the required IELTS band scores. Some talented students miss scholarship opportunities, overseas study programs, and employment prospects because they are unable to meet the minimum IELTS requirements. One major factor contributing to this problem is the lack of early exposure to IELTS preparation. Many students begin learning IELTS only after graduating from university or by joining private courses outside their formal academic programs. This condition shows the need for earlier access to IELTS learning within higher education institutions.

In response to this need, many universities in non-native English-speaking countries have begun integrating IELTS preparation into their curriculum. This effort aims to help students become more familiar with the test format, improve their academic English skills, and prepare them to meet global language proficiency standards. In the English Education Department of the State Islamic University of Mataram, this preparation is provided through a language test preparation program known as the IELTP class, or International English Language Test Preparation class. The program is designed to support students in developing the language skills needed for IELTS and other academic purposes.

English Education students, in particular, are expected to have strong English proficiency because they are not only language learners but also future English teachers. This dual role makes IELTS preparation especially relevant for them. They need English proficiency for their academic development, future professional opportunities, and teaching competence. However, IELTS is often challenging because it involves complex tasks, strict time limits, and high accuracy in listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Even after joining structured preparation programs such as IELTP, students may still experience difficulties in achieving their expected band scores.

These difficulties are not only related to linguistic competence but also to emotional and motivational factors. Test anxiety, lack of confidence, limited familiarity with test strategies, and insufficient exposure to authentic English materials may affect students' performance. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions and experiences in IELTS preparation is important. Their voices can provide valuable

information about what supports or hinders their learning process in the IELTP class.

This study aims to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of sixth-semester English Education students of UIN Mataram who participate in the IELTP class. The study focuses on how students interpret their learning journey, what aspects of the IELTP class support or hinder their progress, and how they respond emotionally and academically to the preparation process. By using a qualitative approach, this study seeks to provide a student-centered understanding of IELTS preparation in a teacher education context.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to both IELTS instruction and teacher training. Students in English Education departments are future teachers who may later apply the learning strategies and instructional practices they experience during their studies. Their perceptions of IELTS preparation can offer useful insights for improving teaching strategies, providing more effective feedback, integrating authentic learning materials, and creating a more supportive classroom environment. Therefore, this study is expected to contribute to the development of more meaningful and responsive IELTS preparation programs in higher education, especially in English Education departments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

IELTS Preparation and English Proficiency

IELTS preparation plays an important role in helping students develop academic English proficiency. The IELTS test measures four major language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Each skill requires not only language knowledge but also test-taking strategies, time management, and familiarity with academic discourse. For students who plan to study or work in international contexts, IELTS preparation can help them understand the test format and improve their ability to use English for academic and professional purposes. For English Education students, IELTS preparation is closely related to their academic and professional development. As future English teachers, they are expected to demonstrate good English proficiency and understand how language skills are developed. Through IELTS preparation, students may improve their own language competence while also gaining insights into language learning strategies that can be applied in their future teaching practice.

However, IELTS preparation is often demanding for students. The test requires students to understand complex reading passages, listen to various accents, write organized academic essays, and speak fluently and coherently within a limited time. These demands may create pressure, especially for students who have limited exposure to academic English. Halid, Machmud, and Abid (2022) noted that students' IELTS performance can be influenced by test anxiety and lack of

confidence. This indicates that IELTS preparation should not only focus on test practice but also address students' emotional and motivational needs.

Students' Challenges in IELTS Preparation

Previous studies have shown that students face various challenges during IELTS preparation. Khuong and Trang (2022), for example, examined strategies used by Vietnamese students in an English Language Teaching program. Their study found that many students relied on practice tests, mock exams, and repetition as their main preparation strategies. However, some students still needed more targeted feedback and more opportunities to practice speaking. This suggests that preparation activities should not only provide test exercises but also include meaningful guidance and interaction.

In addition, students often experience difficulties in managing time, interpreting complex instructions, and producing accurate and coherent responses. In the speaking section, problems may include pronunciation, fluency, coherence, and confidence. In the listening section, students may struggle with different accents, fast speech, and unfamiliar contexts. Sovann et al. (2024) found that students often lacked confidence in their listening ability and needed more exposure to real-life audio materials. These findings show that IELTS preparation should expose students to authentic materials and realistic test conditions. Students' difficulties in IELTS preparation are also connected to their learning environment. A supportive classroom, clear instruction, constructive feedback, and regular practice can help students become more confident. On the other hand, limited feedback, monotonous activities, and lack of interaction may reduce students' motivation. Therefore, students' perceptions of the learning process are important because they can reveal how students experience the preparation class and what improvements are needed.

Approaches to IELTS Preparation

Several studies have examined different approaches to improving students' IELTS performance. Yu and Nguyen (2024) investigated the use of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in IELTS preparation. Their findings showed that CALL had a positive effect on students' test performance and engagement, especially for learners with lower proficiency levels. Technology-based learning can provide students with more flexible access to materials, practice tests, and interactive learning activities. Although technology can support IELTS preparation, previous studies often focus more on the effectiveness of tools and interventions than on students' personal learning experiences. Many studies measure improvement through test scores, but fewer studies examine how students feel, think, and respond to the preparation process in formal classroom settings. This creates a need for research that explores students' subjective experiences in institutional IELTS preparation programs.

Maryam et al. (2025) studied the relationship between IELTS preparation and students' overall English proficiency. Their findings confirmed that structured

IELTS training significantly improved students' language skills. However, the study used a statistical approach and did not provide detailed explanations of how students perceived their learning process, what challenges they experienced, or how they responded emotionally and academically to the training. This shows that qualitative studies are needed to understand students' experiences more deeply. Yanmei (2020) also explored students' perceptions of English preparation for academic studies. The study highlighted the importance of English for Academic Purposes and IELTS in preparing students for future academic environments. However, the study was conducted in a general academic English context and did not focus specifically on students in English teacher education programs. Therefore, there is still limited research on how English Education students experience IELTS preparation as both language learners and future teachers.

Research Gap

Based on previous studies, IELTS preparation has been widely examined in relation to learning strategies, technology-based instruction, listening skills, academic English, and language proficiency improvement. However, many of these studies focus on general EFL learners, international students, or the effectiveness of specific interventions. Limited attention has been given to students' lived experiences in formal institutional programs such as the IELTP class. In addition, previous studies tend to emphasize test performance and measurable outcomes rather than the holistic learning experience of students. The emotional, academic, and pedagogical dimensions of IELTS preparation remain underexplored, particularly in English Education departments. This is important because English Education students are not only preparing for a test but also developing professional knowledge as future teachers. Therefore, the present study fills this gap by focusing on sixth-semester English Education students at UIN Mataram who are enrolled in the IELTP class. Unlike previous studies that mainly examine tools, strategies, or score improvement, this study explores students' perceptions and lived experiences. It aims to understand how students experience IELTS preparation, what challenges they face, what aspects of the class support their learning, and how the preparation process influences their academic and professional development.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate how English Education students perceive and experience their IELTS preparation through the IELTP class. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to provide clear and detailed descriptions of participants' real-life experiences without manipulating variables (Lambert & Lambert, 2012). Qualitative research is especially suitable when the focus is on exploring human perspectives, emotions, and learning processes in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study used a descriptive qualitative design to present students' experiences as they naturally

occurred in the classroom setting. The participants consisted of 10 students who were purposefully selected from the English Education Department. All participants had completed the IELTP class. Purposeful sampling was applied to ensure that only students with firsthand knowledge and direct experience of the program were included in the study (Patton, 2015).

Instruments and Procedures

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to explore students' perceptions and experiences related to IELTS preparation in the IELTP class. The interview questions focused on several key aspects, including students' challenges, learning strategies, emotional responses, perceived benefits, and feedback on the instructional process. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on the availability and condition of the participants. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain focus on the main research topics while also giving participants opportunities to explain their experiences freely and in detail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the interview process, participants were encouraged to share their personal experiences, difficulties, and reflections after completing the IELTP class.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a deep understanding of the participants' responses. Second, meaningful statements related to students' perceptions and experiences were identified and coded manually. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader themes. The themes that emerged from the analysis included learning motivation, learning experience, instructional feedback, challenges in IELTS preparation, and students' emotional responses. These themes were then interpreted to explain how students experienced the IELTP class and how the program supported or challenged their IELTS preparation. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation and peer debriefing were applied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These strategies helped validate the findings, reduce researcher bias, and strengthen the credibility of the data interpretation. Through this analytical process, the study was able to provide a deeper understanding of students' lived experiences within a structured IELTS preparation environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Perceived Benefits and Positive Attitudes toward the Class

All participants expressed a high level of enjoyment and appreciation for the IELTS class. Regardless of their proficiency level, students noted that the program provided structured exposure to IELTS-specific tasks, which helped them become familiar with the test format and expectations. Many students, particularly those new to IELTS, reported a sense of accomplishment after completing mock exams and receiving direct feedback.

"I didn't even know what IELTS was before, but now I feel like I understand how it works. The teacher helped us step by step," said one participant (P4).

This aligns with constructivist learning theory, where learners build knowledge based on experience and reflection (Vygotsky, 1978). Even students who were previously unfamiliar with IELTS found the class rewarding, as it helped them understand the test structure and improve their confidence.

Learner Motivation: Diverse Goals and Perceptions

The interviews revealed varied motivations among students. Three participants explicitly mentioned plans to pursue postgraduate study abroad, indicating a clear sense of urgency to achieve a high IELTS score. These students demonstrated integrative and instrumental motivation as defined by Gardner and Lambert (1972), combining internal interest with external goals.

Conversely, some students admitted they had no specific plan to take the official IELTS test soon but still felt motivated due to the relevance of IELTS to their major and future teaching careers. Regardless of the level of urgency, all students described the experience as personally enriching.

"I don't plan to study abroad now, but I know IELTS is important. It challenges me to use real English," said another student (P7).

The Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) helps explain this phenomenon many students were driven by intrinsic motivation and a sense of personal growth, even in the absence of immediate external rewards.

Classroom Environment and Student Engagement

Participants described the overall classroom atmosphere as supportive and enthusiastic, largely due to the teacher's method and the collaborative learning environment. Even those who were typically less active still felt comfortable asking questions and participating.

The teacher's method was consistently praised for being clear, encouraging, and tailored to student needs. Several students highlighted the use of real IELTS samples, peer discussions, and breakdowns of each test section as especially helpful.

"Our teacher never made us feel stupid if we got something wrong. She always gave us examples and explanations," (P3).

However, students also noted that the large class size—with more than 40 students—sometimes made it difficult to ask questions or receive individual attention. This issue reflects Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which states that crowded and less personalized classrooms may raise learners' emotional filters, limiting language acquisition.

Individual Differences and Equity in Learning

Despite attending the same class, participants reported varying levels of confidence and ability, particularly in speaking and writing. Students with higher proficiency were more likely to engage actively and feel confident about their progress. Meanwhile, lower-proficiency learners often expressed anxiety and struggled with time management in timed mock tests. However, the class's inclusive atmosphere, consistent schedule, and encouraging teaching approach appeared to support all learners, regardless of their starting point. This finding aligns with the idea that structured input combined with affective support can benefit a diverse group of learners (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Overall, students viewed the IELTP class as a valuable and motivating experience, regardless of their prior knowledge or language level. They appreciated the teacher's method, the structured exercises, and the exposure to authentic IELTS materials. However, challenges such as large class size, poor internet connection, and highest intensity were also noted. Importantly, students recommended incorporating more interactive and fun learning activities to balance the rigor of test-focused instruction.

The findings of this study strongly suggest that students hold positive perceptions of the IELTS Preparation Program (IELTP) class, irrespective of their previous exposure to IELTS or their initial proficiency level. Students appreciated the class for its structure, relevant materials, and especially the teacher's supportive and well-organized instruction. This aligns with the constructivist view of learning, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the importance of the teacher's role as a scaffold for student learning. In this case, the teacher did not merely deliver content but facilitated understanding, corrected misconceptions, and motivated learners to engage with demanding IELTS tasks.

This positive perception contrasts with earlier studies that often portray IELTS-focused instruction as monotonous or anxiety-inducing (Green, 2007). While test-prep classes are sometimes criticized for being too mechanical, the students in this study perceived the IELTP class as meaningful and engaging. Their enthusiasm for the class suggests that when test preparation is contextualized within a supportive learning environment, it can foster both affective and cognitive engagement. This difference might also be due to the specific population studied English Education students who may be more naturally inclined to appreciate structured language instruction due to their academic orientation. Moreover, the fact that all students, regardless of whether they had plans to take the actual IELTS test, expressed satisfaction with the class reflects the class's perceived value beyond testing. This reinforces the importance of perceived relevance in shaping learner attitudes

(Richards & Rodgers, 2014). It also supports the idea that preparation classes can provide transferable skills in academic English, critical thinking, and communication, which students value even if they are not immediately pursuing IELTS certification.

A major finding of this research is the significance of students' emotional and experiential engagement in the learning process. Most students expressed a sense of growth, confidence, and even enjoyment, despite the demanding nature of the class. This echoes Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which posits that learners' emotional states such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation significantly affect their ability to acquire language. The low affective filters in this class, facilitated by a supportive teacher and positive peer environment, allowed students to take risks, engage deeply, and reflect on their learning. Interestingly, this finding stands in contrast with the traditionally negative connotation associated with standardized test preparation. While test-based learning environments often raise stress levels, participants in this study consistently described the IELTP class as a "safe space" for making mistakes and learning through feedback. This suggests that the emotional tone of the classroom largely influenced by the teacher's behaviour can transform even a high-stakes test-prep setting into an emotionally constructive experience.

It is also important to note the emergence of learner identity in this context. As students progressed through the program, many began to see themselves not just as test-takers, but as capable users of English. This transformation in self-concept aligns with Norton's (1995) theory of language learning and identity, which asserts that learners invest in language learning when they see it as part of their imagined future. In this study, students' experiences with the IELTP class seemed to help them envision themselves as global communicators or future educators, thereby deepening their engagement.

Students' motivation to engage with IELTS varied significantly, from extrinsic motives such as pursuing a master's degree abroad, to more intrinsic motives such as personal development and academic curiosity. This diversity reflects Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which differentiates between autonomous (intrinsic) and controlled (extrinsic) motivation. What is notable in this study is that regardless of whether students had external goals like scholarship applications, they all demonstrated a sustained effort and enthusiasm toward learning.

This contradicts some earlier studies suggesting that students with no immediate testing goals are less likely to engage seriously in preparation programs (Cheng, 2008). Instead, the students in this study, even those who had just learned about IELTS for the first time, perceived the experience as valuable for their academic and future teaching careers. This may relate to the dual identity of the participants as language learners and future educators which may inherently promote deeper engagement with language learning tasks. Moreover, some students noted a growing appreciation for IELTS as a structured framework for improving English

skills, not just as a gateway test. This echoes findings by Khuong and Trang (2022), who argued that structured IELTS training supports learners in mastering higher-order thinking and academic writing skills. In this study, the IELTS context served both as a motivational driver and a learning scaffold, enabling students to build practical skills within a familiar and high-stakes structure.

Despite the many strengths of the IELTP class, students also encountered practical and instructional challenges. One of the most prominent issues was large class size, which limited opportunities for individualized attention and interaction. In a class of over 40 students, students expressed difficulty in asking questions, receiving feedback, or engaging in meaningful speaking practice. This finding is consistent with studies highlighting the negative effects of large classes on language instruction, including increased learner anxiety and reduced language production opportunities (Nation & Macalister, 2010). This issue directly connects with Krashen's (1982) assertion that crowded, impersonal learning environments may raise the affective filter, particularly for lower-proficiency learners. Interestingly, however, students in this study did not express high anxiety. This may indicate that other factors—such as teacher behavior and peer support can compensate for environmental constraints. Still, the challenge of limited speaking practice in a test-prep class remains a significant pedagogical concern, especially since speaking is one of the most performance-dependent IELTS components.

Another challenge raised by participants was the technological dependence of the program. With many tasks and mock tests conducted online, students with weak internet connections faced interruptions, especially during listening practice. These findings highlight a form of digital inequity in the classroom a factor often overlooked in IELTS preparation literature. While online platforms provide valuable access to authentic materials, they must be supplemented with offline resources or low-tech alternatives to ensure inclusive access for all learners. Additionally, students voiced concern about the intensity of the instructional design, describing the program as “too serious” and “overwhelming” due to its focus on full-length IELTS exercises in nearly every session. While students recognized the value of such rigor, many suggested integrating interactive and game-based elements to reduce fatigue and sustain engagement. This call for pedagogical variety is supported by learner-centered approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), which emphasize the need to tailor instruction to learners' emotional and cognitive needs. The challenge here is not the IELTS format itself but the monotony of instructional delivery, which could be addressed by incorporating formative activities, pair work, or creative speaking tasks without diluting the test focus.

Taken together, the findings of this study resonate with and expand upon several theoretical frameworks. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory supports the importance of teacher scaffolding, which students repeatedly praised in this study. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis helps explain the learners' emotional receptiveness to instruction despite environmental challenges. Gardner's (1985) and Deci and

Ryan's (1985) motivational theories shed light on the diverse motivational orientations seen among students, from those pursuing postgraduate education to those driven by personal growth. Comparatively, this study's findings both align with and diverge from previous IELTS-related research. Like Maryam et al. (2025), this study affirms that structured preparation can build students' language confidence and awareness. However, unlike Maryam's focus on measurable outcomes, the current study foregrounds qualitative learner narratives, offering deeper insight into the emotional, social, and instructional dynamics of test preparation.

Additionally, while Yanmei (2020) discussed the general perceptions of Chinese students toward English for Academic Purposes (EAP), this study situates itself in a teacher-training context. This context adds a unique lens, as the participants are not only preparing for IELTS but are also future English educators. Their reflections offer insights not just into learning but into pedagogical modelling, potentially influencing how they may teach test prep or academic English in the future. This dual identity of "student-as-learner" and "student-as-future-teacher" may partly explain the unusually high engagement levels observed in this study. Even students with low mock test scores or limited prior knowledge of IELTS were consistently reflective, enthusiastic, and future-oriented in their comments.

As a researcher, I find that these findings underscore the complexity of IELTS preparation in institutional contexts. While commonly viewed as rigid and high-pressure, IELTS-focused learning, when mediated through thoughtful pedagogy and learner-responsive practices, can become an opportunity for growth, empowerment, and professional development. The findings challenge simplistic notions of "teaching to the test" and instead point toward a model where standardized preparation becomes a platform for meaningful language engagement. However, this study also raises critical questions: Can such programs truly serve all learners equally in large, resource-constrained classrooms? How can educators balance test readiness with enjoyment and creativity? These questions merit further exploration, especially in multilingual and under-resourced contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions and experiences of English Education students participating in the IELTP (International English Language Test Preparation) class at UIN Mataram. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, it examined how learners with diverse backgrounds, levels of English proficiency, and motivation engaged with IELTS preparation in an institutional context. The research aimed to understand how students perceive the class, the challenges they face, and the elements that support their learning process. The findings indicate that students held highly positive views of the IELTP class. They valued the teacher's supportive approach, the use of authentic IELTS materials, and the structured nature of the

program. Motivation varied some were driven by academic goals like postgraduate studies abroad, while others were motivated by personal growth. Nonetheless, all students demonstrated commitment and emotional engagement with the class. The IELTP was seen not just as a test-preparation platform but also as a transformative learning experience that enhanced their confidence, identity, and teaching aspirations.

However, the study also identified several challenges, including large class sizes, inconsistent internet access, and the intensity of test-oriented instruction. These issues highlight the need for more interactive, learner-centered strategies and improved infrastructure support. Additionally, this study has limitations, notably the small sample size and single institutional setting, which may affect generalizability. For future research, broader and more diverse samples are recommended. Studies might also explore longitudinal impacts of IELTS preparation or the role of technology and gamified learning in test-prep settings. Such research could guide institutions in designing more inclusive, engaging, and effective IELTS training for future educators.

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