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# Task Characteristics and Prompt Effect on Test Performance: IELTS Academic Reading

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## ABSTRACT

Reading is a complex and interactive activity that needs resources to develop. In essence, reading lets learners examine arguments, make prediction, inference, or interpretation, and explore implication and consequence. Hence, the research aims at investigating how test takers' performance in IELTS academic reading may differ on such tasks. As such, three kinds of tasks were selected in this study: multiple choices; matching information to paragraphs; and yes/no/not given. In order to accomplish the objectives of the study, 30 test takers have already participated in this research. To determine the participants' homogeneity as well as reading proficiency, IELTS reading test was carried out at the outset of the research. Based upon the result, 23 test takers were included in this research and four original tests of IELTS were utilized. One-way ANOVA together with Sheffe Test were employed to analyze the subsequent data. Data recognized that test takers had performed differently on IELTS reading test because of dissimilar task type delivered. The finding of the research indicated that the task types had significant effect on the performance of IELTS reading test

**Keywords:** IELTS, Reading, Task Characteristics, Performance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading has an important aspect of language learning as reading materials are considered to be one of the primary sources to acquire explicable input. Reading [1] was an active and fluent process which involved both the readers and reading materials to build meaning. Meanwhile, the texts, the readers, and the interaction between the text and the readers were implemented in reading [2]. Meaningfulness has significant role to obtain better comprehension of reading text in interactive reading. Most cognitive psychologist focused on background knowledge organization and meaningful learning

Reading is a purposeful, comprehending, flexible, and interactive activity which needs resources and considerable time to enhance. The readers maintained information flow at sufficient rate to have connection to comprehension [3]. It is activity that the readers can make use of information from their background of knowledge and many skills run together in the process. The readers expect to comprehend the texts they are reading. Reading is flexible that means the readers implement some strategies to read effectively. In brief, reading has developed and the readers do not become

fluent readers immediately in a reading development course.

Reading skill [4] involved identifying word meaning, recognizing mood of passage, deciding inferences, finding writers' technique, and identifying the answers. Reading skill can include deducing the meaning, comprehend explicitly and non-explicitly information, relations within parts of text and cohesion devices, and communicative value of sentences. Furthermore, it also recognized the script of language, the main information in discourse, the topic sentence from supporting details, appropriate extraction of the related points from the information, scanning, skimming, and trans coding the data from info graphs. Reading skill was literal comprehension; it involved structural and vocabulary knowledge, automatic recognition skill, content background knowledge, formal discourse structural knowledge, synthesis and evaluation strategies, and skill monitoring [3]

Reading skill has already attracted language testers' attention as the main source of input for the researchers as well as ELT teacher. Reading was the most available information; furthermore, it was important input to EFL learners [5]. Foreign language learners feel hard to understand the passages by reading once. IELTS is as

one of the tested skill within popular English proficiency. The participants' performance could be determined by some factors and one of which is the task characteristic [6]. This study tries to focus on the specific assessment task applied in IELTS reading test and the possible impact on the test takers' performance

Reading needed interactions between text and reader; the characteristics of both the texts and readers influence the process of reading. Task characteristic [7] was synonymous with the method of the test. Thus, the characteristic evaluation of the reading test would be the proper tool for performance evaluation. The characteristics of the task could be influential factors which affected the performance of the participants[8].

The task characteristics [7] framework required four aspects of the tasks including: test rubric, setting, expected response, and input. Test rubric dealt with the features showing how the test takers proceeded to accomplish the task. Rubric characteristics included the instruction, the structure or organization of the text, how used language was evaluated, and the duration of the text. The instruction in the test task should be clear and explicit as learners should know clearly what they should do and the instructors could make optimal decisions based upon the test performance. The test task structure recognized how the different test were presented to the learners. The aspect referred to the number of tasks and the sequence of task showing the dissimilar items became relative significance of the tasks. Time allocation was the amount of time for the entire of the test.

The second aspect to mention here was setting which referred to the physical conditions of testing taking place. Setting involved the task time, participants, and physical setting. The third aspect of the task characteristics was expected response. The demand of the test task and the response characteristic [9] should be involved into consideration; the test methods could be identified as limited, open and closed-ended. Likewise, the selected response example was multiple choice questions. The response could be single phrase, word or single utterance.

The fourth aspect of task characteristics employed in this research was input. Input was utilized in this research and it was composed of the material of the test task in which learners were going to proceed. Input could be learned from different format either format or language. Format referred to the way how the input was performed. It included language, channel, type, length, vehicle, and also degree of speediness. Language could be the test takers' target or native language. Type of length, input could be an extended discourse, paragraph, sentences, or part of sentences. Channel meant how input was presented; it could be aural, visual, or both. In the term of type, the input could be an item or a prompt. Speediness degree meant the rate that the test takers processed the information. Vehicle was the meant the

input was conveyed and it could be reproduced [10]. Task characteristics and reading comprehension require clarification before conducting the research on the effect of task characteristic on test takers' performance in IELTS Academic Reading.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Regarding the recent study on the task characteristic on students' performance, some researchers have been carried out. First, it [11] studied about task type and performance effect on IELTS writing tasks. The observation revealed that the type of the test did not give crucial effect on participants' performance in writing task. There was no the prompt difference of the participants' performance between the integrated and independent task. Moreover, the significant effects were only found out on the test takers' performance on IELTS writing task 2. The finding indicated that different integrated tasks simply affected the scores consistency

Second, it [12] discussed about accuracy and complexity effect on IELTS academic writing. The research finding revealed that low demanding task particularly in info graphics task had elicited the best performance in accuracy than argumentative essay of high task. On the other hand, the simply complex was in the term of lexical resources and conjunctions. The measurement of discourse and accuracy showed that IELTS test takers' problem dealt with genre writing. The teacher could manipulate the features of the task to test items in which they got failed.

Likewise, [3] research focused on text difficulty of parallel academic IELTS reading test. The study aimed at revealing to how the tests got comparable in scope of item, construct coverage, task difficulty, and scope of task. The Coh-Metrix TEA software had been utilized to analyse the task difficulty. The finding explained that the tasks were partly comparable in the item cope, together with construct coverage. However, they did not get comparable in the term of response format.

The previous researches give understanding about existing research, provide the theoretical framework, and build knowledge relevant to the written report. There is a similarity between previous researches discussed above and this study. The past studies are relevant to the tasks' effect on IELTS. In this study, it also focuses on the prompt effect on IELTS task characteristics. Instead of similarity, it is found that the past studies emphasize on IELTS academic writing task and comparability of text difficulty in IELTS reading test; however, this research is conducted to examine task characteristic effect on IELTS academic reading.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Accomplishing the purpose of the research, 30 learners participated in this research. Having been given IELTS reading tasks, 23 learners' scores with one standard deviation below and above the mean score were

selected as the research subject. A test of proficiency based on IELTS reading test was conducted to homogenize the level of participants' reading proficiency. Five IELTS reading test were employed in this research. The reading tests were selected from Cambridge English IELTS 12 Academic. IELTS was the standard test used to test participants' English proficiency. It was composed of four skills: listening; reading; writing; and also speaking. As listening, writing, as well as speaking session not being the focus of the research, were overlooked for practical reason.

Several steps were minded to obtain proper data. Reading parts of IELTS tasks were held in order to make sure the participants' homogeneity and to decide their reading proficiency level. Having homogenized, 23 learners were involved in the research. Three IELTS tests were taken to compare the learners' performance on different types of IELTS reading test. Three kind of six teen different task types were minded in this research: matching information, sentence completion, Yes/No/Not given. Those task above were separated and all learners were tested relevant to their tasks. The distribution statistics of dissimilar tasks were as follows

**Table 1.** Kinds of Tasks

Groups	Number of Questions
Matching information	10
Sentence completion	10
Yes/no/not given	10

The technical techniques were employed to test the hypothesis. Standard deviation and descriptive statistics were applied to homogenize the learners' reading proficiency [3]. Similarly, to get the mean scores of the group and to know the prompt effect of task characteristic in IELTS reading test, one-way ANOVA was employed. While multiple-comparison were carried out using Sheffe test to differ particular difference of IELTS reading test. The objective of the research was to decide the effect of task characteristics of participants' performance in IELTS reading test. Considering the purpose above, this research formulated null hypothesis: H0: Task characteristics do not give the affect of the test takers' performance.

**4. FINDING**

A series of statistical procedures were presented in the study to test the hypothesis. To validate the IELTS reading test, this test was administered 23 test takers as the sample. The reliability of this test is shown in the table 2.

**Table 2.** Reliability Coefficient

Mean	Variance	Std. Deviation	Reliability Coefficient
32.6	115.4	10.7	.87

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics of one-way ANOVA

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Error	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Y/N/NG	23	5.35	0.39	1.84	2.00	9.00
Match. Info	23	6.57	0.33	1.56	4.00	9.00
Sent. Completion	23	4.39	0.65	3.10	0.00	11.00
Total	69	16.3	1.12	5.37	8.00	26.00

The descriptive statistic for Yes/No/Not Given question is represented in the table 2. The mean score for Yes/No/Not Given is 5,3 and standard deviation is 1.8. While, the mean score for matching information is 6,5 and standard deviation is 1.6. Likewise, the mean score for sentence completion is 4,39 and the standard deviation is 3,1.

**Table 4.** One-way ANOVA

One-way ANOVA	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F Critical	Sig.
Between Groups	54.69	2	27.30	5.3	.007
Within Groups	340.35	66	5.16		
Total	394.9	68			

One-way ANOVA runs to find out the differences between the mean score of two or more groups. Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for one-way ANOVA. It was elaborated in the table that the probability level was lower than .05 i.e. .007. Thus, the task characteristics had significant effect on test takers' academic IELST Reading test.

**Table 5.** Sheffe Test

Groups (X)	Groups (Y)	Mean Difference (X-Y)	Std. Error	Sig.
Y/N/NG	Match.Info	-1.217	.670	.199
	Sent. Completion	.957	.671	.366
Match. Info	Y/N/NG	1.217	.672	.199
	Sent. Completion	2.174	.673	.008
Sent. Completion	Y/N/NG	.957	.674	.366
	Match.Info	-2.174	.675	.008

Shefee test is implemented to identify the variance analysis on different test characteristics. Performed on the table 5, the proper difference was between matching information and the other groups. The comparison between matching information and Yes/No/Not Given showed that there was not a significant different between the test performances of the test takers in those group as the level of probability was .199. Similarly, the comparison between Yes/No/Not Given and sentence

completion stated that the probability level is .366; thus, the test takers' performance did not give significant effect. On the other hand, the difference of IELTS reading test performance, especially matching information and sentence completion was significant i.e. .008.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The research question addressed to the prompt effect of task characteristics on the test performance particularly on academic IELTS reading test. Given the comparability in the task characteristic on academic IELTS reading test, the participants' performance was significantly different. The finding was consistent with other researches and consolidated the result that the task characteristics had tremendous impact on participants' performance. One possible finding [13] revealed that the particular characteristics of the task affected the participants' choice of linguistic elements for the answers. Tests developers together with the teachers should pay heed to the test type especially to those utilized in this study i.e. the difference in expected response and the degree of being communicative. Teachers have to be aware of task characteristics and employ the test which suit learners' needs.

The test takers did better on the matching information than Yes/No/Not Given questions. The participants on the matching information and Yes/No/Not Given did better than sentence completion. It can be summed up that sentence completion is a kind of the task in which learners get more rehearsals to master the strategies to answer. Sentence completion [13] was very frequently found out in IELTS reading test both general and academic training test. Further, sentence completion and other questions of filling in have a vital role to decide the score. Hence, practicing sentence completion is mandatory as it appears in almost all IELTS reading test.

The characteristics of the test had significantly effect on the learners' performance. The task characteristics had to be in accordance to specified aims and the procedure of class. In a well-organized curriculum, both the procedure and the teacher resources ought to be predefined and relevant to the course objectives. Moreover, the proper task characteristics should be chosen as well. Selecting the appropriate test, some of the task characteristics should be considered such as input, expected response, and setting [12].

The finding of the present study could be used in all education institutions. It obviously had indirect and direct implications in teaching and learning process, design of syllabus, test, and material development. Considering the essential decision based upon the task and the possibility effect on learners' fate, some characteristics of the task had to be incorporated into the syllabus. Since recent years, the focus has moved on from teaching products to the processes, and the types of assignments implemented in the classroom ought to be thought about carefully. Teachers [14] should make proper instruction for the instructional together with the evaluation score of the task.

The task characteristics are necessary to describe successful task performance. Language teachers were aware that the characteristics of the task included in a language test were significant [15]. One of the questions asked in class was about the opinion on the fancy way to evaluate a specific area of English proficiency. The teachers should not have refined the specific characteristics which let a task more suitable for a particular purpose. Nevertheless, they realized the way they tested language proficiency greatly affected their learners' performance on language tests [16].

## 6. CONCLUSION

Task characteristics employed always affect the test score to some degree; there is so that hardly any test yields information only about the ability being measured. As teachers cannot completely eliminate the effects of the task characteristics, they should learn to understand, control, and ensure that the test will meet desired quality and suitable for their intended use. The different tasks are regularly minded for testing English proficiency. The sentence completion tests topic content, level of lexical resources, syntactic complexity, and type of response answered. The type includes a variety of prompts which can distinguish test characteristics either objectives of the task or the intended audience. Teacher cannot properly characterize the test if they consider the test tasks only as a holistic type. Hence, it needs a descriptive framework of the task characteristic. The framework allows the teachers to comprehend which specific tasks can be varied, so it provides a valuable tool for tailoring the test appropriately to a particular group of participants and enables them to perform at their best.

The finding of this research can assist teachers, administrators, curriculum designers and writers of EFL textbook develop the tests. This study is expected as a guide to help EFL teachers select the task. Carrying out this study, there are a number of limitations resolved in further research. This research could be replicated by various testing methods, larger sample, different language proficiency levels, and other language skills. Here are further recommendations: a) do the task characteristics affect EFL Learners' personality character? and do the task characteristics influence EFL learners' learning style?

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