

Self-Selecting Students Rapidly Improve and Maintain Ability

~IELTS International English Testing and Student Awareness~

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Abstract

This research investigates the impact of giving students choice regarding their English class placement in terms of their IELTS test results. The paper provides evidence that two groups of students can be compared, and goes on to show that the group of students who were placed in their class based on a combination of (1) student opinion regarding their preferences and (2) results of a placement test are initially more successful in their studies (based on IELTS test results) than students who are placed on placement test results alone. The paper concludes that the hypothesis "students who self-select themselves for classes advance their skills the most during the first two months (or one quarter) of an English programme" is true, and further reveals that such an advancement in skills is not a temporary phenomenon. Possible underlying reasons for this are proposed, although it is noted that the quantitative analytical approach of the research is not by itself enough to support these reasons, and that qualitative analysis is needed. The research concludes by calling for further investigation into why the slope of improvement is eventually lower for students of higher (IELTS proven) ability than for those with lower results.

Keywords: *Ability Shown in IELTS, Student Self Selection, Maintained Ability*

1. Introduction: Giving Students Class Placement Choice and Related IELTS Results

Previous research (Lynch, 2015) compared two groups of students who were placed in a high-stakes, international testing (IELTS) English class. The first group (Class A) were placed automatically based on (their relatively good) results of a pre-entry placement test (TOEIC), while the second group (Class B) were placed based on the results of their pre-entry placement test (TOEIC) *and* on evaluation of a self-selection form and interview. In other words, Class B had had the option to decide for themselves if they wanted to join such a high-stakes class (Class B) (including the pressures and expectations that went with it), or to join a regular class (thus, selecting not to be in Class B). The high-stakes class (both A and B) included IELTS training and testing, while the other classes did not. The high-stakes class had students take an official TOEIC test and IELTS test a minimum of twice over the course of one year, which other classes were only expected to take the TOEIC.

The results indicated that both groups (Class A and Class B) increased their overall ability in terms of two-skill (listening and reading) TOEIC scores, and four skill IELTS scores, although questions remained to be

addressed regarding the students' performance in each individual skill when comparing the first test taking instance of a test with the subsequent instance (i.e., same-test comparison), and also when comparing instances of different test taking with each other (different-test comparison). Details of this are outlined in Lynch (2015).

This paper looks at overall performance in the IELTS test, and seeks to explain the reasons behind and value of students' scores in two test IELTS taking instances over one academic year, while comparing the two groups, Class A and Class B. In particular, this paper seeks to explore the hypothesis that *students who self-select themselves for classes advance their skills the most during the first two months (or one quarter) of an English programme*. By “their skills”, this research refers to the students' overall performance in IELTS testing.

2. Background

The hypothesis given in the introduction comes from comparing the initial TOEIC scores of two classes (Class A and Class B), and then looking at their IELTS scores after just over two months. While the groups had similar TOEIC scores, the IELTS scores for Class B were higher than those for Class A (Lynch, 2015). The classes went on to continue to improve their overall IELTS skills, although the gap between the two classes narrowed slightly over one academic year.

The number of students in this study were reduced from the total class number as only students who sat all the tests were included (over 90% of students are included, and reasons students gave for not taking tests were not serious or education related, including forgetting to bring identification for the IELTS, not waking up in time for the test, etc.). All students were first year Japanese, and none were English language majors – they were all part of an economics department in a private Japanese university. Class A totalled 52 students for the TOEIC (A-TOEIC n = 52), and 48 for the IELTS (A-IELTS n = 48). Class B consisted of 19 students for the TOEIC (B-TOEIC n = 19), and 18 for the IELTS (B-IELTS n = 18).

The Class A group were divided into two smaller groups for teaching purposes, but were otherwise treated equally. Class A were taught in the 2013 Japanese academic year (April 2013 to March 2014), while Class B were taught in the 2014 academic year (April 2014 to March 2015). All students (Class A and Class B) were taught by two teachers, Teacher X and Teacher Y.

The students took a pre-test in the month prior to beginning university. This was a TOEIC test, and was followed by another TOEIC test the following January, when they had almost reached the end of their first year. They also took an IELTS test after just over two months of education (i.e. in June), and another one the following January.

3. Data Collection, Analysis and Results

3.1 Data Obtained from Pre-Entry TOEIC Testing, and Validation

The fundamental research on which this paper is based (Lynch, 2015) showed that Class A could be compared to Class B in terms of both classes starting from a similar pre-entry placement test score. The data is shown in Table 1.

	n	Score (mean)	Median Score	CoVar
Class A	52	393	390	18.54%
Class B	19	412	390	21.38%

Table 1: Class A (n=52), Class B (n=19) Pre-Entry TOEIC Score Data

It can be seen that the median score was the same for both groups, but Class B shows a higher mean score. However, for the purposes of this paper, we would like to compare Class A and Class B more exactly. A clue as to why a disparity in the mean scores existed can be found in the CoVar percentage, which is higher for Class B. As there is more variation in the scores for Class B, and the mean score is higher, but the median is the same when compared to Class A, this indicates that there were one or more upper outliers in Class B.

Experimenting with the data (removing one, two and three of the top scorers from the data in Class B) resulted in finding a best-fit result whereby Class A and Class B could be deemed to be most similar and comparable. The best-fit result was obtained by removing one top scorer. Note that this slightly changed the results shown in Lynch (2015) as the best scorer of Class B is left out. The adjusted data yielded the results shown in Table 2 (Class A results are reprinted to allow comparison at a glance).

	n	Score (mean)	Median Score	CoVar
Class A	52	393	390	18.54%
Class B	18	401	377	18.47%

Table 2: Class A (n=52), Adjusted Class B (n=18) Pre-Entry TOEIC Score Data

It can be seen that the mean score in Class B is 8 points higher than the score shown for Class A, and that the median is 13 points lower, with the CoVar differing by 0.07%. This data allows us to reasonably claim that the scores do not differ significantly for the groups in this research population, allowing comparison to be made.

TOEIC scores cannot be easily or exactly converted to IELTS equivalent scores. However, to establish a starting point in IELTS for this research, the scores in Table 2 are converted to the equivalent of IELTS 3.5 (using data from Globaledu, (2011)). As both Class A and Class B were shown not to differ significantly in their initial TOEIC scores, and both classes have the similar backgrounds, assigning them the same initial IELTS scores makes sense.

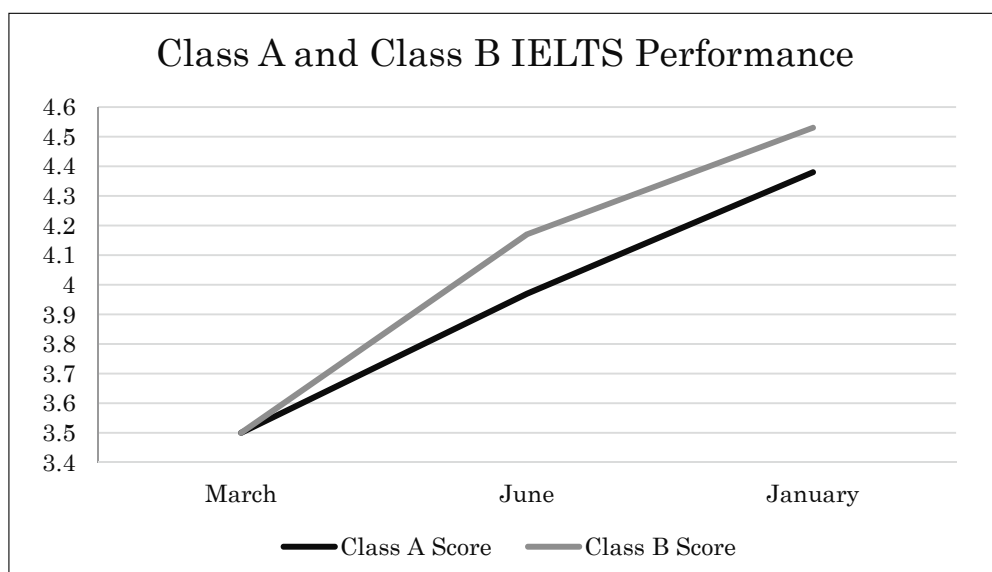
3.2 Data Obtained from IELTS Testing, and Validation

The IELTS was taken in June (just over two months, or approximately one quarter after entering university), and again in January, near the end of the academic year. The results are given in Table 3. For the purposes of this paper, the overall results only are given (the individual results are dealt with in other research). It turned out that it made no difference to the results whether the outlying student discussed in 3.1, above, was included or not. Therefore, the student has been left in, for completion.

		Overall
Class A	June 2013	3.97
	January 2014	4.38
Class B	June 2014	4.17
	January 2015	4.53

Table 3: Class A and Class B IELTS Test Scores

The data was plotted, including the starting point IELTS result of 3.5, calculated above. The starting point is given as March, the month of the pre-entry TOEIC test. The result is shown in Graph 1. Note that the data in Graph 1 removes the year in which the tests were taken as it is not significant and results in allowing easier comparison.



Graph 1: Class A and Class B IELTS Test Performance

It can be seen that the improvement of Class A (the lower line) was almost linear throughout the year. On the other hand, Class B (the upper line) showed a greater initial burst of ability improvement, then settled into a lower slope of progress.

4. Research Findings and Conclusions

The following was understood from the data:

1. Both classes (Class A and Class B) benefited from taking part in English education in university as part of a high-stakes English class.
2. Although Class A and Class B started off at approximately the same point in terms of IELTS overall ability, Class B were more effective than Class A in quickly improving their English skills.
3. Although Class A maintained a continuous improvement in their IELTS score, and Class B's improvement slope was relatively flatter in the final stage, Class A was not able to catch up with Class B over one year. This shows that the initial high score obtained by Class B was beneficial in the long run (i.e., no burn-out was observed). Overall, Class B could maintain a positive advantage over Class A in terms of skills shown by IELTS test scores.

It could be concluded from this research that giving students a choice in their placement in an English class at university results in such students performing better than students of equal ability who had not been given such a choice. Some of the reasons for this are not discoverable from quantitative analysis, so qualitative analysis is necessary. It could be speculated that students who opt in to a high-stakes English class are more accepting of hard work and are able to concentrate better. It could also be related to students accepting responsibility for a choice they made, and trying to do their best with that choice.

The hypothesis that *students who self-select themselves for classes advance their skills the most during the first two months (or one quarter) of an English programme* has been shown to be true, and the data shows that such an increase in skills is not a temporary phenomenon as students were able to continue to improve their scores as time went on.

Further research could be into investigating the reasons why the slope of improvement is lower for Class B than for Class A from the June to January testing results.

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