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International Students' Expectations of a Twelve Week IELTS Preparation  
Course

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## **ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge, it contains no material written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the qualification of an other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the acknowledgements.

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## ABSTRACT

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) English proficiency test has been the focus of increasing research since its inception in 1989. While research has contributed to a better understanding of test construction and has highlighted the limitations of individual test scores for predicting academic success, few studies have focused on students' perceptions of the academic module of IELTS. The present study attempts to address this gap in the research by investigating student expectations of an IELTS preparation course. The study, adopting a multi-method approach using surveys and interviews, investigated ten international students enrolled in a twelve-week academic IELTS preparation course in a language school affiliated to a university in Auckland, New Zealand.

The study found that students have high expectations not only of an IELTS preparation course, but of the IELTS band score they will achieve. The study also found that student expectations of the course were met at least to some extent. Various factors contributed to the fulfilment of students' expectations including a focus on speaking and listening activities and the use of formative practice tests. Although all four language skills were recognised by the students prior to the course as being important, speaking and listening were identified as those most expected to be improved. By the end of the course, however, reading and writing skills were acknowledged to be most important, suggesting a growing awareness of the importance of literacy skills, both for achieving an appropriate IELTS score and for further academic study. Although limited by the number of participants, the findings have significance for the development and delivery of academic IELTS preparation courses. Firstly, although there is value in focusing on listening and speaking skills, given the change in students' perceptions, academic literacy skills perhaps need a predominant focus. Related to this focus, challenging reading activities and related vocabulary development should be an integral part of the course. Secondly, the inclusion of practice IELTS tests provides an important formative component of preparation courses. Finally, the study suggests that administration staff and teachers need to better prepare students to have realistic expectations of an achievable IELTS band score.



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUTEC	Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee
AUT IH	Auckland University of Technology, International House
DELNA	Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EAP	English for Academic Purposes
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other Languages
FCE	First Certificate of English
FFPS	Full-fee Paying Students
GPA	Grade Point Average
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
OET	Occupational English Test
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TOEIC	Test of English for International Communication
UCLES	University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test plays a crucial role in allowing international students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) to enrol in New Zealand universities. In recognition of the gate-keeping role of IELTS considerable research has focused on the effectiveness of the IELTS test (Academic module) in preparing students for the actual demands of university study (e.g. Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000; Moore & Morton, 2005). However, despite this focus on effectiveness few studies have focused on learner perspectives (Green, 2006; Hayes & Read, 2004). This study is concerned with the listening component of an IELTS preparation course offered in a language school affiliated to a New Zealand tertiary institution in an attempt to identify student expectations and to what extent students' expectations are met. In order to achieve satisfaction with a product, expectations should be met (Bordia, Wales, Pittam & Gallois, 2006). Students invest a significant amount of time and money in order to learn English; in this case, to achieve their short-term goal of being accepted into an English language university. One step towards achieving this goal is enrolling in an IELTS preparation class where they hope to improve their English sufficiently to gain a high IELTS score.

The study has the intention of addressing programme planning. Despite the ready availability of commercial texts related to IELTS preparation, programme planning for Academic IELTS preparatory courses continues to be a challenge for practitioners. The identification and subsequent recognition of student expectations allows for IELTS preparation courses to provide what students want as well as what is needed in order to help them achieve the highest possible band score. As Bordia et al. (2006) found, when student expectations are not fulfilled negative behaviour and poor performance can result and thus, a decrease in motivation in learning English.

#### 1.1.1 International Students in New Zealand

In the tertiary education sector, substantial numbers of international EAL students have been coming to New Zealand to study English for well over a decade (Tarling, 2004). Many international students, particularly those with insufficient English language proficiency to directly enrol in university programmes, come to New Zealand in order to improve their English language skills and subsequently, to gain entry to New Zealand universities, graduate with an English medium qualification and improve their chances of finding professional employment in an increasingly competitive market in their home countries (Sherry, Bhat, Beaver & Ling, 2004).

Studying in an English-speaking country such as New Zealand provides international students with the opportunity to develop and improve their English language skills in a way not easily possible in their own country (Chang & Read, 2006). For example, many second language learners overseas have little opportunity to listen to native speakers (Huang, 2006; Nation, 2006) and so their listening ability is limited. An EAL learner may find listening difficult for many reasons including unfamiliarity with vocabulary and difficult syntax or the speed of native speaker speech (Buck, 2001; Huang, 2004). Huang (2006) argues that EAL learners overseas need more exposure to English in order to improve their listening skills, as well as other language skills.

With these goals in mind, international students have been coming to New Zealand in substantial numbers from all over the world to immerse themselves in English with the result that numerous second language institutions have developed English language courses to accommodate the specific needs of these learners. One type of course in high demand is a preparation course for the IELTS test (Davies, 2008; Read & Hayes, 2003).

### **1.1.2 Role of IELTS**

IELTS was established in 1989 as a measure of a person's proficiency in the English language and is jointly managed by the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations (Cambridge ESOL or UCLES), the British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia. The standardized proficiency test is subject to considerable on-going research by the IELTS development team in order to address issues of validity and reliability (Davies, 2008; IELTS, 2007). The test format and the test questions are regularly monitored and adjusted

to provide an unbiased, objective test of English language skills in four areas: Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. Question types, depending on the skill being tested, include short answer, multi-choice questions, sentence completion, summary, table completion, classification and matching. There are two modules: Academic and General. The Speaking and Listening sections are the same for both the Academic and General modules; the Reading and Writing sections are different reflecting the additional demands of academic literacy. Each of the four skills provides a band score, ranging from zero (non-user) to 9 (expert user) and an average of the 4 scores determines an overall band score.

There has been considerable debate about the role and effectiveness of the Academic IELTS test since its inception. As a standardized test of English proficiency the Academic IELTS module does not claim to adequately prepare a student for university studies but is an assessment of English language ability (UCLES, 2007). It has, however, been strongly criticised for not offering adequate preparation for the actual demands of academic study in universities (Coffin, 2004; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Hunter & Pickering, 2002; Moore & Morton, 2005). The Academic IELTS module is therefore not a test that indicates academic prowess, but is simply a measure of English language proficiency and a tool used to provide a guide for entry to university. Depending on the qualification sought and the policies of individual departments within New Zealand universities, international students require a minimum average band score of 5.5 for a certificate based course or 6 for a degree course.

Given the debate surrounding the Academic IELTS module, research has increasingly looked at the relevance of preparing students not only for the IELTS test but also for the demands of actual academic study (Green, 2006; Hayes, 2003; Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999; Moore & Morton, 2005). Moore and Morton (2005) recommended that preparing for the IELTS test should be separate from preparing for tertiary education, especially with regard to the writing component.

International students in New Zealand take IELTS preparatory courses for a variety of reasons, but primarily for gaining an adequate average band score to allow entrance into university programmes. Some students who do not have the goal of studying at university may require a high IELTS score to improve employment opportunities on return to their

own country, while a minority take the IELTS preparatory course simply to improve their English. It is worth noting that the IELTS test is also used in New Zealand for immigration purposes (Read, 2001); however, this purpose is not the focus of the present study which concentrates on the expectations of international students preparing for the Academic module.

Export education has become a growth industry in New Zealand. From March 2007 to March 2008 international students paid \$121 million to New Zealand English language schools to improve their English and an estimated \$1 514 million in living expenses was expected to be injected into the New Zealand economy by these students (Ministry of Education, 2008a). Despite the downturn in international students studying in New Zealand in recent years, IELTS preparation courses remain commercially viable. The IELTS test, with improvements made as a result of regular research, is well maintained and has remained efficient for the last ten years (Davies, 2008). Testing all four skills, it has its critics, particularly on the appropriacy and relevance of the writing component with particular reference to preparation for tertiary education (Barkhuizen & Cooper, 2004; Green, 2006; Moore & Morton, 2005) but still remains a prestigious language proficiency testing system. Necessary for entry into the tertiary education system in New Zealand, students demand preparation courses to help them gain a place in university and polytechnics for further study.

IELTS preparation courses are usually designed to help the student achieve the highest possible score in the IELTS test. However, many IELTS preparation courses, as a result of research (Green, 2006; Read & Hayes, 2003) also teach skills that can be used for university-level study. The nomenclature for these courses often includes titles such as IELTS or English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Washback, a term used in research either negatively or positively, meaning teaching solely with the aim of the test or exam is a factor that must be taken into account when designing an exam or test preparation course (Spratt, 2005). With so much at stake, as with IELTS it is expected that, to an extent, teaching on the preparation course will be prescriptive (McCoy, 2006).

The full-time IELTS preparation course at AUT IH was developed in response to student demand. When informally surveyed in June 2007, 78% of the AUT IH students said they

needed IELTS to go to university and 73% of those questioned said they would join a full-time IELTS course. 57% stated they would prefer a 3 month course. The objective of the resulting course was to provide a full-time preparation course for lower intermediate level students, using a commercial textbook (Objective IELTS Intermediate, Cambridge University Press, 2006) as the basis of teaching material.

## **1.2 Aims of the Study**

The study investigates the expectations of 10 international students enrolled in an Academic IELTS preparation course: in particular to what extent student expectations are met. The study is limited to the listening component of the IELTS partly due to time constraints and partly because listening is one of the language skills reported as difficult to improve in the student's own country (Griffiths & Jordan, 2005; Huang, 2006).

Furthermore, a substantial amount of research has been made concerning the writing, reading and speaking components of the test. The study seeks to find out what international students expect from an academic IELTS preparation course and to identify the factors that contribute to any fulfilled or unfulfilled expectations. As a result the study seeks to inform programme planning for academic IELTS preparation courses in an effort to provide what students want; achieving a sufficient IELTS score with what is needed, i.e. enough English language to successfully complete a tertiary course.

## **1.3 Rationale for the study**

Although this study is not concerned with course design and needs analysis, a relevant matter for discussion in this study is course planning. Test preparation courses, particularly for the IELTS test, claim a substantial stake in the New Zealand economy. It is also pertinent for course planners to remember the importance of language learning and to not just look at a course as a means to an end, the end being the test. Furthermore, this approach should be passed on to the students, as many appear to have tunnel vision and cannot see beyond the end goal of attaining a sufficiently high score in the test to reach that goal. A study by Coleman, Starfield and Hagan (2003) investigated student perceptions of the effectiveness of IELTS preparation for language demands. Not surprisingly, participants

believed the IELTS test to be largely a means of gaining entry to university rather than a tool that facilitates language learning.

Ideally a course should take into account student perspectives as well as those of teachers in order to have a healthy balance between improving language skills and learning enough to do well in a test. As stakeholders the students need to be listened to (Tajino, James & Kijima, 2005; Wall, 2000). Barkhuizen and Cooper (2004) investigated students' perceptions of how helpful IELTS preparation is for tertiary study. They found that IELTS preparation courses are useful if learners are motivated and take responsibility for their own learning.

It is a matter of great importance to get the content right when designing short courses (Nunan, 2004). Communicative teaching has been practised in New Zealand language schools since the 1970s (Richards, 2001) and is a move away from the traditional teaching of grammar and translation, which is still often the method of teaching in the countries New Zealand's international students come from. The courses for IELTS preparation at AUT IH are commonly topical and task-based involving all four skills and so are designed to encourage students to learn about different topics that are likely to come up in the IELTS test as well as aiming to improve English language skills. The syllabus includes teaching students strategies on how to deal with the IELTS-specific question types so that students can gain as high a band score in IELTS as possible. The courses also aim to prepare students for tertiary study and autonomous study skills.

Course planning should be influenced by research theory (Richards, 2001) and this research should include consideration of what students want as well as what teachers and course-planners consider they need, which are often at variance with each other. In a study investigating the washback effects in IELTS preparation courses, Hayes and Read (2004) found that students expected more instruction related to test-taking strategies than language skill development. In another study researching the washback effects of IELTS courses, Green (2006a) also found the expectations of students were quite different from those of the teachers.

The international education market is competitive and the researcher believes that it is incumbent on language institutions to listen to what the students expect to learn and to provide appropriate courses that will improve students' English language ability so they can perform to their best ability in the IELTS test. If students' expectations are not met learners may well be discouraged from taking IELTS preparation courses in the future. If, on the other hand, the student voice is heeded and their needs and wants are provided for, the outcome may well be a contented student with good test results. Standards should not be lowered and a high level of teaching exam or test courses should be maintained. However, realistic expectations should be encouraged, so that students are not disappointed or misled.

Research indicates that the performance of international students at tertiary institutes is declining (Hunter & Pickering, 2002). As one way to attempt to reverse this decline, some (such as Shohamy, 2000) recommend that institutions and those involved in IELTS/TOEFL assessment need to be more prepared to listen to the opinions of the students who are on the receiving end of that assessment.

#### **1.4 Chapter Summary**

This study will investigate the expectations of international students enrolled in a full-time academic IELTS preparation course with the intention of using the findings to improve the service offered to fee-paying customers. As an informal programme evaluation the study is expected to have implications for the design of future Academic IELTS preparatory courses, particularly the listening component, by providing a largely absent student voice which can facilitate future programme development, thereby offering the possibility for improved student outcomes.

Although a limited amount of research has sought to investigate student perceptions of the Academic IELTS test, there are few studies that have focused specifically on the listening component. In addition writing and speaking have been the prime focus of research. Green (2006a), however, has argued other language skills (besides writing) should be the focus of research in order to obtain a balanced view. The current thesis seeks to address this gap in the literature by investigating student expectations with regard to the listening component of an Academic IELTS preparation course.



## **1.5 Thesis Outline**

Chapter Two reviews the literature in the area of student expectations and preparation courses, particularly surrounding the IELTS test and other high stakes proficiency examinations.

Chapter Three explains the methodology and describes in detail the design and implementation of the study. It also describes the methods of data collection and data analysis which were used in the study.

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study in relation to the three research questions.

Finally, Chapter Five discusses the implications of the findings and conclusions are drawn. The study's limitations are discussed. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of the pedagogical implications for language provider institutes and identifies areas for further research.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter looks at the literature relating to the present study. The literature review first examines export education in the context of globalization and the increasing arrival of adult international students in New Zealand. The chapter then discusses the expectations of international students in tertiary education before continuing to consider the role of the IELTS proficiency test in screening international students wishing to enrol in New Zealand universities. Key research areas in IELTS are then examined with a particular emphasis on teacher perspectives, its effectiveness in preparing students for academic study, washback, and the expectations of international students taking academic IELTS preparation courses. It is argued that to date very little research has investigated students' perspectives of IELTS preparatory courses and identifies as a gap in the literature the comparative absence of research that explores student expectations.

#### **2.2 Background to export education**

In an increasingly globalised world, people move between countries either permanently or temporarily for different reasons, including education and employment (Butcher, 2004). Integral to this global movement of people, international education has become an increasingly visible development, both overseas and in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2008b). Export education, that is, the accommodation of overseas students within a country's universities and other educational institutions for tuition fees that are often substantially greater than those paid by that country's students, is an important aspect of the developments in international education (Butcher, 2004). Export education, however, is distinctive from educational immigration in that the overseas students usually intend to return to their home country when their education abroad has been completed (Butcher, 2004). In contrast, educational immigration is when "... immigrants arrive in New Zealand in order to bypass full cost fees paid by FFPS [full-fee paying students]" (Butcher, 2004, p. 257). However, more than half the international students who complete their education in New Zealand (export education) apply for permanent residence (Tan, 2009).

Although the distinction between export education and educational immigration is at times blurred, this study is mainly concerned with export education.

Along with economic globalisation has been a commensurate increase in the popularity of the English language as an international lingua franca. English is now the preferred language of use in a number of global contexts, from the Internet to business, from entertainment to tourism (Block, 2008; Nunan, 2001). The expansion of the use of the English language is not universally considered to be beneficial as it is blamed by some globalisation theorists for the demise of minority languages (Block, 2008). However, for many English is a language that has become an essential tool in the world of business. As the use of English has increased in its global popularity, the teaching methodology has also changed from the outdated grammar-translation method to the communicative approach. However, this is not always a feasible method when the cultural differences interfere with the main ethos of that country (Block, 2008).

### **2.3 International students in the New Zealand tertiary sector**

In the tertiary education sector substantial numbers of international EAL students have been coming to New Zealand to study English for well over a decade (Tarling, 2004). Sherry et al. (2004) note that international students seek such opportunities in order to improve their language skills and subsequently to gain entry to New Zealand universities, graduate with an English medium qualification and improve their chances of finding professional employment in an increasingly competitive job market in their home countries. Although the numbers of international students fluctuate from year to year, export education has become a major export industry (Butcher, 2004; Butcher & McGrath, 2004; Collins, 2006; Tarling, 2004), particularly for Auckland, which has the greatest number of international students in the country. In 2008, 50 percent of all foreign fee-paying students (which also includes primary and secondary school learners) came to study in Auckland (Ministry of Education, 2008b).

In the year to March 2008 a total of 39 668 international students were enrolled in language schools in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2008a). As indicated by the Ministry of Education statistics, international student numbers have increased considerably since 1998, the majority coming from Asia, notably the People's Republic of China and the Republic of

Korea. More recently, student numbers from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have been growing in New Zealand and Australia due to recent educational scholarship schemes (Gauntlett, 2005). Accounting for only 1% of international students in 2006, this cohort is currently the fastest growing group to study in New Zealand, having increased by 708% in the last 4 years (Ministry of Education, 2008a). For the year ending March, 2008, \$121 million was spent in tuition and related fees by international students, with the largest increase in expenditure exhibited by students from Saudi Arabia, who spent 68% more than in the previous year (Ministry of Education, 2008a).

International students often need to improve their English skills in order to gain acceptance to universities where the language of instruction is English. Many choose to undertake English as a Second Language (ESL) courses in language schools in New Zealand, notably Auckland. Studying in an English-speaking country, such as New Zealand, provides international students with the opportunity to develop and improve their English language skills in a way not easily possible in their own country (Chang & Read, 2006). For example, many second language learners overseas have little opportunity to listen to native speakers (Huang, 2006; Nation, 2006) and so their listening ability is limited. Listening is an essential skill in tertiary education, particularly, as a large part of the teaching is verbal in lecture or tutorial style (Read, 2002). This type of listening, which Buck (2001, p.98) terms 'non-collaborative' is a significant component of the proficiency tests (Read, 2002). An EAL learner may find listening difficult for many reasons including unfamiliarity with vocabulary and difficult syntax or the speed of native speaker speech (Buck, 2001; Huang, 2004). Huang (2006) argues that EAL learners overseas need more exposure to English in order to improve their listening skills, as well as other language skills.

#### **2.4 Study needs of international students in the tertiary sector**

Research has been conducted on the study needs of international students from the student's perspective (Bordia et al., 2006). However, studies have shown that many international students do not adjust easily to a different education system due to differences in learning styles (Banerjee, 2003 as cited in Banerjee & Wall, 2006, p.5; McCoy, 2006). International students in New Zealand, especially from countries with very different teaching styles, such as Middle Eastern and Asian countries, are often unfamiliar with the student-centred approach used in this country and may have difficulty participating in

group discussions or when asked to critically evaluate the work of peers or others. Chinese learners, in particular, may prefer to learn by rote than in a communicative style (Coleman et al., 2003). Huang (2006) reports that Chinese students often have enormous difficulties with tertiary studies in English-medium universities even though they may have obtained high scores on previous English proficiency examinations. Vietnamese learners also study in a traditional way, learning by memorising and following the book closely (Nguyen, 2002).

There are a wide range of factors involved in the improvement of English skills, ranging from cultural differences, such as critical thinking and learning strategies to social aspects, such as making friends with New Zealanders and the cost of instruction (Bellingham, 1995). For many students, the teaching methodology that they encounter in New Zealand is quite different from what they usually experience, especially for those from Asian countries and the Middle Eastern states where pedagogy is more teacher-orientated (Butcher & McGrath, 2004; Gunn, 2007; Huang, 2004; Li, Baker & Marshall, 2002). In New Zealand language teaching methodology is largely communicative and more student-centred and many international students are not used to this pedagogical approach, or the self-study and autonomous learning strategies that are often encouraged. Li (2003) claims that generally Asian students respect their teachers, are committed to academic success and are focused on success in the field of employment and that they are hard-working and often highly motivated but few are used to taking responsibility for their own learning being the focus of the learning process. Nguyen (2002), states that Vietnamese students also respect education and regard the teacher as the main source of instruction.

International students who come to countries with quite different cultures to their own run the risk of what Burns (1991, p.61) termed 'study shock'. Burns investigated 133 first year international students in Australia from Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong and compared their questionnaire responses to 76 Australian born first year students predominantly of British or European origin. He found that the international students had a significantly higher degree of difficulty adjusting to Australian teaching methodology which varied significantly from the teaching they had received in their own countries. In this same study only 35% of the overseas students felt that university life was what they had expected; the figure for Australian students was 73%. Fifty-five percent of the Asian sample found it hard

to adjust to life on campus compared to 16% of the local group. Some of the Asian students noted that they were reluctant to openly express personal opinions in case their views were relayed to their own governments, a state of affairs which could result in quite negative consequences for themselves or their families. The difficulties students face in adjusting to a different pedagogical style remain as potentially problematic today as they did in 1991 as shown by Gauntlett's (2005) ongoing study investigating Middle Eastern students' academic expectations in Australian education institutions.

Research has indicated a mismatch between the academic expectations of international students and their English language skills. Read and Hayes (2003) note "even students who gained the minimum band score for tertiary admission were likely to struggle to meet the demands of English-medium study in a New Zealand university or polytechnic" (p. 154). A recent study undertaken at the University of Western Australia (Barrett-Lennard & Bulsara, 2008) investigated international students' perspectives of English needs in their institute. The researchers found that the students had unrealistically high expectations of academic achievement, even though they acknowledged their own inadequacies in English language. In addition to reviewing international student perceptions the researchers also reviewed support processes and found that students expected a lot more help and language support from the university than they actually received. Sherry et al. (2004), discussed above, found there was a difference between what international students expected from tertiary education and what local students anticipated. These two studies suggest that international students have greater concerns about the teaching, learning and support offered at tertiary institutions and that their expectations are frequently unrealistic.

To make the most of their time in a tertiary institute, international students need sufficient listening skills to be able to take adequate notes in a lecture and follow the lecturer as he or she is talking, and even make predictions (Huang, 2006). In her study in an American university, Huang analysed 78 Chinese students' self-reported listening skills and found that students believed this area to be their weakest ability. Research has shown that many ESL students believe listening, in particular, is a difficult skill to improve (Chang & Read, 2006; Griffiths & Jordan, 2005; Huang, 2006; Kirkness, 2004).

At a time when international student numbers had been decreasing in New Zealand Li et al. (2002) investigated 23 Asian students' expectations of two New Zealand tertiary

institutions. As a result of this research recommendations were made that cultural differences in communication skills between teachers and students be addressed. A similar conclusion was reached by Kirkness (2004) in her comparative study of 242 students with EAL and 171 students for whom English is their first language in their first year in an Auckland university. In addition, interviews were conducted with 15 of those students' teachers. Kirkness found that a greater understanding of their students' cultures, particularly in different approaches to communication, would enable these teachers to better anticipate difficulties that may arise and so help the students more.

Expectations are often incompatible between students and teachers. For example, Li et al. (2002) note that in China teachers are often responsible for what a student learns and the student's performance is directly related to the teacher's ability. They go on to argue that Asian students are generally assessed by tests and exams as opposed to presentations or projects and consequently have developed different learning strategies to those needed in New Zealand. There is little room, if any, for student-led study techniques. A report by Elenwo (1988) in the United States of America suggested that international students have clear objectives but vague expectations. The resulting disparate reality had the potential to undermine their university achievement. Mismatched expectations could still be considered to be the case. Sherry et al. (2004), for example, conducted research at UNITEC, Auckland, looking at the gap between student expectations and quality of education received from the student's perspective. A questionnaire was completed by 402 students. The researchers found that students believed they were not getting what they wanted from UNITEC either academically or personally. Similarly, Bordia et al., (2006) looked at student and teacher perspectives in Australia by interviewing 26 ESOL students and 15 teachers in two separate studies. Study 1 was a content-analysis and consisted of interviews of six international students at a university language school, and five teachers. Study 2, using computer software, investigated 20 students and ten teachers from two language schools. Both studies were concerned with student and teacher perspectives on student expectations and found that lack of fulfilment led to poor behaviour and performance.

## **2.5 IELTS and international students**

In response to the goals and needs of international students who have insufficient English language skills to enrol directly in university studies, as elsewhere, second language

institutions in New Zealand have developed specific courses that focus on developing English language proficiency. The most popular English language course for such international students is the IELTS preparation course.

There are a number of internationally acclaimed English language proficiency tests, including the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Cambridge administered First Certificate of English (FCE) and IELTS. The IELTS test is arguably one of the most significant, (Read-Dickins & Scott, 2007). The use of IELTS in New Zealand as a gate-keeper to mainstream tertiary study is reflected in its increasing use worldwide. The IELTS test is taken in more than 100 countries globally (UCLES, 2007). According to Davies (2008), the number of candidates sitting IELTS worldwide increased from 50 000 in 1995 to more than 700 000 in 2006.

However, IELTS is not the only tool used to show language ability in New Zealand. Some university faculties also use alternative proof of English language competency, such as the Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment (DELNA), recently implemented at the University of Auckland (see Elder & von Randow, 2008) after admission for students in their first year. This test is used to screen students who are New Zealand citizens or Permanent Residents, some of whom could be considered educational immigrants in that they may have an EAL background but, being classified as domestic students, are therefore not required to take the IELTS test (Read, 2008). IELTS, though, remains the main gateway to tertiary institutions for the majority of international students in New Zealand and IELTS preparation courses are in high demand (Read & Hayes, 2003).

The IELTS test is constantly updated and altered as a result of research, which is actively encouraged and supported by the IELTS development team (Davies, 2008; UCLES, 2007). The test format and the test questions are regularly monitored and improved to provide an unbiased, objective test of English language skills in four areas: speaking, listening, reading and writing. Although a 'test' IELTS is often referred to, particularly by students, as an 'exam', possibly due to the high stakes and importance it has. Students talk about 'passing' IELTS although it is not designed to be 'passed' or 'failed' but each of the four skills provides a band score, ranging from zero (non-user) to 9 (expert user) and an average of the four scores in each skills section determines an overall band score.



## **2.6 Key research areas in IELTS**

### **2.6.1 Teachers' perspectives**

Research related to teachers' perspectives of the IELTS test has indicated mixed feelings concerning the effectiveness of the IELTS test. For example, Coleman et al. (2003) found that teachers generally had a negative view of the test which was in complete contrast to the views that Read and Hayes (2003) found in their study. Coleman et al. (2003) surveyed over 600 participants across three countries; the United Kingdom, the People's Republic of China and Australia. Interviews of students and staff were conducted subsequent to the student surveys. The researchers found that whereas more than half the students expressed positive views about the IELTS test just under half the teaching staff made negative comments about it. The Read and Hayes (2003) study was much smaller involving only 23 teachers of IELTS preparation courses in New Zealand, but included class observation as well as interviews and surveys. In contrast to Coleman et al. (2003), the study found that teachers believed IELTS was an appropriate test of measuring language ability. However, teachers also indicated there was a need for a more academic approach to the preparation courses.

Green (2006a) conducted a study primarily looking at washback which is "... a set of relationships, intended and unintended, positive and negative, between testing, teaching and learning" (Cheng, 2008, p.349) as well as teacher and learner perspectives with particular attention to the academic writing component in an IELTS preparation course. 108 Chinese students learning English in the United Kingdom completed questionnaires at the beginning and at the end of either an IELTS preparation course or an EAP course prior to university study and the results were compared. The same questions were also completed by 39 teachers and these responses were compared with those of the students. Although teacher responses paralleled student comments indicating that more grammar was taught on the IELTS preparation courses than the EAP courses, Green's study indicated that overall teacher and student perspectives are very different. It showed that students' perceptions of the IELTS test and how to prepare for it are different from the teachers' perceptions. Green (2006a) however, suggests that his wording on the questionnaire may have influenced the ranking given by students. Students from both the IELTS preparation courses and the EAP courses were found to have similar expectations of the course content. Students stated they

didn't want to only be learning what would be tested on the IELTS course, with respondents on both courses expressing the view that developing writing skills was more of a priority than doing practice tests - a different response from that given by the teachers. Green's (2006a) study showed that students found the non-IELTS courses to be as effective as the IELTS preparation courses which differed from what the teachers believed.

### **2.6.2 Does IELTS prepare international students for tertiary education?**

A second key area of research in IELTS concerns its effectiveness in preparing international students for the realities of academic study, in particular, language requirements surrounding course work and course outcomes.

As in other countries where IELTS is used as a gate-keeper to university studies, IELTS does not prescribe a fixed band score for entry to university in New Zealand. The band score required is dependant on the actual academic course being applied for and the level of English proficiency considered necessary for success in that field. Thus, entry to New Zealand universities is decided by the faculty or department concerned. In order to be accepted into a tertiary institution in New Zealand international students usually require an IELTS band score of at least 5.5 for courses that are not so linguistically demanding, or a minimum of 6.5 for courses that require a higher proficiency level. According to the IELTS handbook, a person with a band score of 5 is considered a "modest user (with) ...partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes" and "should be able to handle basic communication in own field" (UCLES, 2007, p.4). Someone with a band score of 6 is considered a "competent user (with) ... generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings" and "can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations" (UCLES, 2007, p.4). IELTS alone, however, does not sufficiently prepare international students for the reality of academic study. Other factors are involved in order for the student to be successful in tertiary education.

Successful academic performance is influenced by many different factors such as motivation, personality and language ability (Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Hill et al., 1999). As noted previously, research also suggests that many practitioners

believe that IELTS preparation courses do not adequately prepare students for tertiary education (Green, 2006a; Coleman et al., 2003).

In relation to IELTS as preparation for higher education, Bellingham (1995) investigated the premise that the higher the level of English language skill the more likely a student is to do well academically in tertiary education in an English-speaking country. Bellingham compared the IELTS scores of 38 intermediate level students who had completed one semester of a business course in an Auckland tertiary institution with their first academic assessment grade average. Language proficiency on its own was not found to be a factor that affected academic performance in further education. Although Bellingham found IELTS to be a useful diagnostic tool, she found that with an overall band score of 6 or more in IELTS students only had a 50% chance of passing the business course. The lower proficient students with an overall band score of less than 6 had even less chance of passing. However, the lower proficient students with language support and a less demanding workload achieved better results. Bellingham (1995) concluded that "... especially at the lowest levels, language proficiency is a primary factor, along with individual differences, educational environment, and social context, that influences academic outcomes" (p. 27). In a similar study in Australia, Hill et al. (1999) investigated the predictive ability of IELTS and TOEFL exam results. 55 first year international students at the University of Melbourne, who had previously taken IELTS or TOEFL and had completed a university course, took part in the study. The researchers found a relationship between both IELTS band scores and TOEFL scores and the grade point average (GPA) but the correlation was stronger between IELTS scores and GPA. However, when non-linguistic factors, such as assistance with English language ability, were considered, Hill et al. concluded that "neither IELTS nor TOEFL appeared to be particularly good predictors" (p.62).

Kerstjens and Nery (2000) also investigated the relationship between IELTS results and subsequent academic performance. They looked at 113 IELTS band scores of first year international students in an Australian university and compared them with first year semester grade point averages and found similar results to Bellingham (1995). Speaking and listening scores were not found to be predictive of academic performance. However, when asked in a survey, students reported that gaining higher scores in IELTS reading, writing and listening would have helped to better prepare them for academic study.

Kerstjens and Nery (2000) also found that the majority of staff indicated at interview that listening was the single most important skill enabling the students to do well in the first semester.

Dooley and Oliver (2002) have contributed to the increasing evidence that IELTS scores were not reliable as a predictor of academic performance. 65 students from 15 different countries and with a total of 13 first languages were involved in their study. It was shown that there was no significant correlation between the IELTS scores and the results of academic assessments, with the exception of the reading scores, but this was only with the business students not with those studying science or engineering. Dooley and Oliver note that their findings may have been influenced by the diverse backgrounds of the students and because of other factors such as stress and financial concerns of studying overseas. In a further study, Read and Hayes (2003) found that students had difficulty meeting academic expectations at tertiary level, even when the student had achieved the required IELTS band score.

Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) investigated the effect that an intensive English language course would have on IELTS band scores. The study, funded by IELTS Australia, involved 112 students completing a 10 to 12 week intensive EAP course (as opposed to an IELTS-specific or General English course) in four language schools in Australia and New Zealand. Questionnaires and a live IELTS academic test were completed by the students at the beginning and again at the end of the three month EAP course. The pre- and post- scores were compared. It was found that students with relatively low-level entry proficiency, for the most part, gained an increase of 0.5 in their band score after three months with the greatest gains in listening. Students with higher level entry proficiency did not show the same kind of gains.

The area in which there is most agreement that IELTS preparatory courses do not adequately prepare students for tertiary study is writing (Coffin, 2004; Coleman et al., 2003; Dooley & Oliver, 2002; Green, 2006a; Green, 2006b; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000 and Moore & Morton, 2005; Read, 2007). Moore and Morton (2005) investigated the efficacy of the writing component of an IELTS preparation course as preparation for tertiary education and found that IELTS writing is dissimilar to tertiary writing in many respects. The study undertook a discourse analysis of the writing assignments given on two Australian

university courses in relation to IELTS Task 2 (a discursive essay with a minimum limit of 250 words). It was found that preparation for the IELTS Task 2 writing may not be helpful in preparing students for university writing tasks, which Moore and Morton (2005) found to be generally essay-type; case-study; exercise or research report - that is, quite dissimilar to the genre required by the IELTS task, which is a written argument or case. Although the written argument is similar to the university essay the differences that remain between IELTS writing and university writing are numerous. As Moore and Morton (2005) sum up, “in short, in the university context, the content of a piece of writing is primary, in a language testing context it is often incidental” (p. 54). The study also showed that teachers of the IELTS preparation courses thought they were not preparing students well enough for tertiary study and not to the same degree as their EAP colleagues. Read (2007) also states that although the IELTS writing section tests the learners’ ability to write to a time limit, it doesn’t bear much resemblance in other ways to university-type essays.

### **2.6.3 Washback**

A third area of IELTS research is related to washback. Washback is a term used to refer to the complexity of how a test influences teaching (Cheng & Curtis, 2004) and can be negative or positive. Negative washback occurs “when a test’s content or format is based on a narrow definition of language ability, and so constrains the teaching/ learning context” (Taylor, 2005, p.154). Positive washback is when “a testing procedure encourages ‘good’ teaching practice...” (Taylor, p.154). Washback is most acute when the stakes are high, such as entry to university.

High stakes tests or examinations like IELTS have an impact on how preparation courses are taught (Cheng, 2008). “Where impact occurs in the form of teaching and learning directed towards a test, both intended positive or unintended negative effects are generally referred to by the term *washback*” (Green, 2006a, p. 114). There are high expectations from teachers and students alike and it is inevitable that a certain amount of washback will occur. Washback, or backwash as it is sometimes known, is an area of importance for everyone involved in IELTS preparation courses (Taylor, 2005). Rea-Dickins and Scott (2007) note that there has been a lot of research on washback, particularly with the two major, international English language proficiency tests, IELTS and TOEFL.

Read and Hayes (2003) found negative washback in one of the two language schools they researched:

Often it seems that preparation for the test has become an end in itself, rather than part of a larger process to equip students from a very different linguistic and educational background to cope with the demands of tertiary study in New Zealand through the medium of English. (p.189)

In this case, it was felt by the teacher concerned that there was insufficient time on the month-long course to do more than offer specific instruction on IELTS test-taking strategies with no time to teach wider language skills. The teacher at the second language school, however, not only prepared students for the IELTS test but also included a broader range of activities that were student-led.

Green (2007) compared IELTS preparation courses with EAP classes with particular emphasis on the writing sections. The three courses investigated were an IELTS test preparation course, an intensive language course and a course that was an intensive language course combined with IELTS test preparation. Green found that not all the writing skills necessary for tertiary education could be adequately taught on an IELTS preparation course and that one reason may be due to washback. The IELTS test does not require skills such as critical thinking or sourcing materials in either of the two writing tasks so these are not taught on the preparation courses. Interestingly, Green's study of 108 students (Green, 2006a) showed that narrow test preparation may not be any more effective than the broader courses. Referring to an earlier model of washback (Green 2003), Green (2006b) found areas of overlap in his comparative study where 22 IELTS preparation classes and 13 EAP classes were observed. Green (2006b) also found that IELTS preparation classes had a more narrow focus than the EAP classes and were "explicitly directed toward test success" (p.358).

Spratt (2005) has made suggestions on how to teach on exam preparation courses and wonders if teachers use exam orientated materials because that is what they think students expect. Spratt claims that the success of a course is largely due to the teaching and the decisions made about how best to teach the exam course.

## **2.7 Student expectations of academic preparation courses**

Little research on student expectations of academic preparation courses has been done but findings from the limited research indicate there is frequently no correlation between learner and teacher expectations (Coleman et al., 2003; Green, 2006a; Li et al., 2002; Peacock, 1998).

As noted previously, international students in New Zealand take IELTS preparatory courses for a variety of reasons, but primarily in order to gain an adequate band score to allow entrance into university programmes. Some students who do not have the goal of studying at university may require a high IELTS score to improve employment opportunities on return to their own country, while a minority take the IELTS preparatory course simply to improve their English.

Given the role Academic IELTS serves as a gate-keeping function for university entry it would be of interest to uncover student perceptions. One of the few studies in this area is Barkhuizen and Cooper's (2004), who investigated students' perceptions of how helpful IELTS preparation is for tertiary study. They found that if learners are motivated and take responsibility for their own learning, IELTS preparation courses are perceived to be useful. A study by Coleman et al. (2003) investigated student perceptions of the effectiveness of IELTS preparation for language demands. Not surprisingly, participants believed the IELTS test to be largely a means of gaining entry to university rather than a tool that facilitates language learning. In a study investigating the washback effects in IELTS preparation courses, Hayes and Read (2004) found that students expected more instruction related to test-taking strategies than language skills development. Green (2006a), noted previously in regard to washback, also found the expectations of students were quite different from those of teachers.

Most international students coming to English-speaking countries to improve their English have time and financial restrictions (Bordia et al., 2006). It is a logical progression to say that these students have high expectations of the academic courses in which they enrol in order to achieve their goals in the limited time available. Bordia et al. argue that if expectations are not met it may follow that students leave the educational institute. Conversely, if expectations are met, student motivation can increase.

### **2.7.1 Expectations of international students sitting IELTS**

Candidates around the world take the IELTS test for a variety of reasons. While in countries such as New Zealand and Australia an appropriate IELTS band score offers entry into mainstream tertiary study, in Hong Kong, for example, the IELTS test is not a gateway into university but is an exit test from tertiary education to show prospective employers the student has the relevant high levels of English necessary for employment (Flowerdew, 2005). Read and Wette (2008) found that overseas' trained health trained professionals believed the IELTS test was better than the Occupational English Test (OET), which was specifically developed for the assessment of health workers in Australia.

Students sit IELTS in New Zealand for progression to tertiary education although candidates also take IELTS for immigration purposes (Read, 2001); to improve their chances of employment in their home country or as evidence of reaching a certain level of expertise in English.

Students' expectations of IELTS, however, are often unrealistic (Bordia et al., 2006) and they have little specific knowledge of the IELTS test prior to the preparation course (Hayes, 2003). In the comprehensive study conducted by Hayes (2003) the students who had previously taken the IELTS test had a far more accurate idea of what to expect from sitting the IELTS test than those who had not. Hayes investigated three IELTS preparation courses run by tertiary institutions in Auckland. She found that two of the courses largely familiarised students with the test while the third course was topic-based and the teaching style was more communicative. From the pre-course questionnaire Hayes found many students had no pre-conceived ideas of what the IELTS test would be like even though there is a plethora of information about IELTS on the world-wide web network. Hayes found that students were ignorant of many aspects to the test. Coleman et al. (2003) found that students achieve higher IELTS scores when they know what to expect from the test. This being the case, then it follows that a clear indication of what the test comprises is a vital part of course preparation.



### **2.7.2 Expectations of international students in IELTS preparation courses**

Few studies have been undertaken on what students expect from IELTS preparation courses. In one study of note, Coleman et al. (2003) investigated 429 students in China, the United Kingdom and Australia. Participants were asked for reasons why they took the IELTS test. 38% said they had to take the IELTS test for university entrance, a far higher percentage than for the second reason given, which was to improve the chances of gaining entry to university. The third reason given was a desire to improve English skills overall.

International students enrol to study in an IELTS preparation course with expectations that they will improve their English in order to achieve as high a band score in the IELTS test as they need with little thought as to how they might achieve this (Barrett-Lennard & Bulsara, 2008; Hayes, 2003). The IELTS test is a high stakes test and students are under enormous pressure to do well so that they can immigrate, go on to university or return home to a good job. They expect to follow the learning style of their own countries and to follow what the teacher tells them and to do practice tests, which is considered a good method to improve test scores, along with rote memorisation of model answers rather than learning strategies and then applying them (Gauntlett, 2005; Hayes, 2003; Macleod, 2007).

### **2.8 Addressing the gap in IELTS research**

The past decade has seen little improvement in the amount of research in second language acquisition that has investigated students' perspectives of study (Bordia et al., 2006; Wall, 2000). While there has been a substantial amount of research on language testing (Read, 2007) and a smaller amount on the effectiveness of preparation courses (Coombe & Barlow, 2007; Nunan, 2004; Richards, 2001) there is still a dearth of research from the students' perspective and particularly student expectations of academic IELTS preparation courses (Bordia et al., 2006; Coleman et al., 2003; Read, 2003; Wall, 2000). Green (2006a) argues that in order to improve the IELTS preparation courses and make these courses as effective as possible more research is needed to find out learners' motivation and expectations. Green states that there is a need for research into how learners prepare for tests of reading, listening and speaking and the way that washback may affect this preparation. In the same study he suggests in-depth interviews be utilised in order to elicit what students specifically want from a test preparation course.

The study reported in this thesis attempts to address this gap in the research by investigating the expectations of 10 international students enrolled in a 12 week IELTS preparation course. The study asked the following questions:

1. To what extent does a 12 week Academic IELTS preparation course meet the expectations of the international students enrolled?
1. What are the factors that contribute to fulfilling students' expectations?
2. What is the relationship between students' expectations and learner gains, as measured by the results of two practice tests related to the Listening section of the Academic IELTS test: specifically, do students with fulfilled expectations make better gains than students with unfulfilled expectations?

## **2.9 Chapter Summary**

Chapter Two discussed the literature related to academic IELTS preparation courses, washback and student expectations of these courses. Globalisation and educational migration was first offered as background to the increasing phenomenon of international students coming to New Zealand to study in tertiary institutions. The IELTS test was then examined as a gate-keeping device to screen international students with insufficient English language proficiency. It was argued, however, that success in IELTS does not readily predict academic achievement. Student expectations, both in the tertiary sector and of academic preparatory courses were then examined. The chapter concluded by identifying a gap in the research; namely that to date very few studies have attempted to investigate students' expectations of IELTS preparation courses. Chapter Three identifies the methodology and methods used in the study.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter describes the methodology for the study and expounds the methods used, the participants and context as well as the instruments used in this study. It also recounts the pilot study conducted prior to the research study, subsequent changes made and the process of data collection and analysis for the research study.

#### **3.2 Research Methodology**

It was decided to employ both qualitative and quantitative methods of research for this small study, as a mixed method approach, now widely acknowledged as an accepted form of research (Cresswell, 2003; Dörnyei, 2007), would be the most appropriate approach to answer the research questions. In accordance with Tashakkori and Teddlie's (2003) view that mixed methods have an advantage over single approach research in certain areas of research, the researcher decided that a mixed method approach would be more beneficial in answering the research questions in this study. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) state that mixed method studies "... can answer the research questions that the other methodologies cannot; ... [the] research provides better (stronger) inferences; mixed methods provide the opportunity for presenting a greater diversity of divergent views" (p.14-15).

This research project was designed to elucidate the expectations that ESOL students had of an IELTS test preparation class. The project used only a very small sample size, for the reasons explained below, and it was believed that qualitative research would be more appropriate to uncover individual student perspectives for the respondents in this smaller study (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003; Dörnyei, 2007; Richards, 2003). In order to best elicit this information, in addition to qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews were decided on as the best way to get participant opinions (Dörnyei, 2007; Moore, 2000). Two kinds of survey were chosen for the bulk of the research project; a self-administered questionnaire and a semi-structured, individual interview survey (Moore, 2000). The questionnaire survey (referred to as simply 'survey' henceforth) provided mostly

quantitative data whereas the interview survey (referred to as ‘interview’ hereafter) provided qualitative data. A Likert-type scale was used to measure the participants’ attitudes. Originally developed in the 1930s by Rensis Likert (Dörnyei, 2003) a Likert scale is a relatively easy, reliable and widely used way of measuring respondents’ attitudes. Rating scales are particularly useful for obtaining respondents’ attitudes and perceptions (Cohen et al., 2003). Although Likert scales have certain limitations, such as less validity in studies of fewer than 30 respondents, and not inviting further comment (Cohen et al., 2003) they were chosen for this study to measure how often the participant expected to do a particular exercise or use a particular activity or learning tool in class and were followed up in a subsequent interview in which further comment was invited. There was a choice of four options on the Likert-type response scale, ranging from ‘often’ to ‘never’. Data collected using a Likert-type scale are precise and focused, thus making quantitative analysis more appropriate (Dörnyei, 2007). A Likert-type response scale was used in this study for formative purposes i.e. to provide information for further explanation in the interview. It was interview data that provided the main findings of the study.

In order to uncover possible changes in student perceptions both the survey and the semi-structured interview were conducted on two occasions, once at the start of the IELTS preparation course and once after the completion of the course.

### **3. 3 Context**

The research study was carried out within AUT IH, an independent language school attached to a large university in Auckland, New Zealand. The school offers a range of ESOL classes from Elementary level through to Advanced. 60-70 per cent of the students at AUT IH are from Asia which is in accordance with the national average. Students come to the school to learn General English, Business English, and English for Academic Purposes or to prepare for the IELTS test. Learners are drawn to the IELTS preparation courses by word-of-mouth and via their agents or from the AUT IH website, which also displays the AUT IH prospectus and relevant course information. As participants need a reasonable level of English proficiency to complete the Academic IELTS preparation course (as determined by in-house assessment) their level of comprehension was deemed sufficient to cope with the demands of a face-to-face interview.

AUT IH offers several short IELTS preparation courses every month, and two full-time courses were offered at the time of this study; one for lower intermediate level students and a subsequent course which was designed for slightly higher intermediate level students. The curriculum of the course used on this study comprises a commercial text book and supplementary material adapted from IELTS publications or the official Cambridge IELTS website, together with additional grammar and vocabulary exercises and authentic materials, such as radio or television news broadcasts adapted by teachers. Test-taking strategies as well as self-directed learning strategies are taught throughout the three months and IELTS practice tests are conducted regularly to measure progress and give students relevant test-taking experience. A communicative style of teaching is used focusing on speaking, reading, listening and writing.

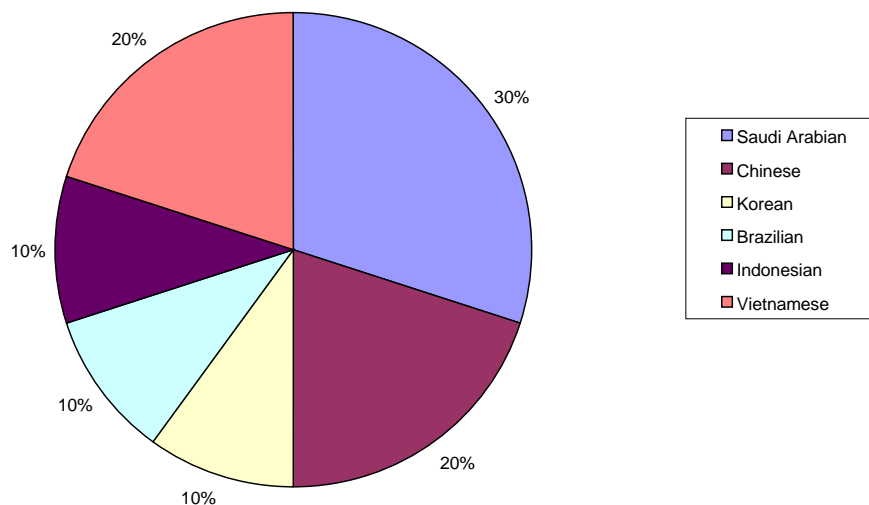
The researcher is a full-time ESOL teacher at AUT IH. As participants came from the student population of AUT IH, the researcher was familiar with some of the participants but had not taught any of them and did not teach on the full-time IELTS course during the study. The initial interview was the first time the participants met the researcher.

### **3.4 Participants**

As there is usually only one full-time IELTS preparation class for each of the two intermediate levels at AUT IH at any one time, all students enrolled in the lower proficiency level 12 week course were invited to take part in the research study. Due to time constraints, as the researcher is in full-time employment as an ESOL teacher, and for logistical reasons, it was decided not to involve students from other language schools. It was also believed that the research questions could be answered with only a small cohort. Thirteen of the total fourteen students in the AUT IH class volunteered to participate. One student chose not to take part in the study. One of the thirteen had to be excluded when it was discovered he had completed the same full-time course the preceding month, and the researcher believed his responses to the interview questions about his expectations would not be valid, as he would have a prior knowledge of the course, with the potential to adversely affect the results of the study. Two students had to be removed from the study as they left the course prematurely, before taking the second listening test and without completing the second survey or attending the second interview of the study. The remaining

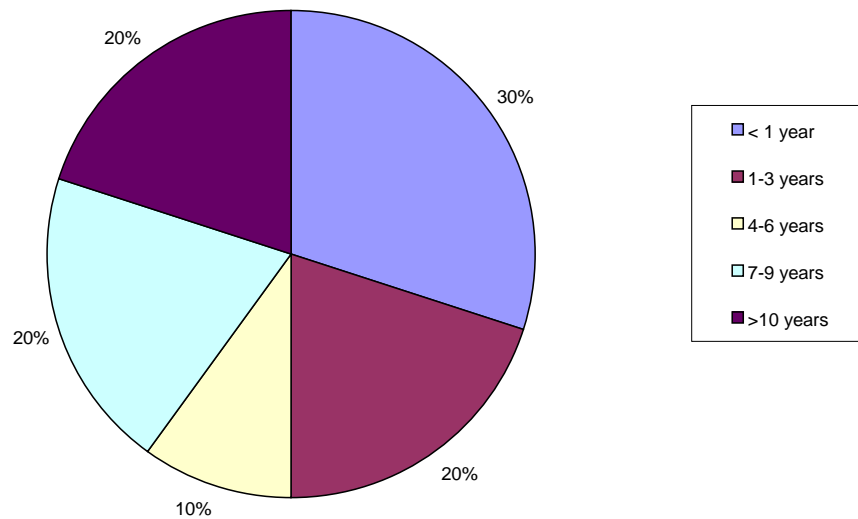
ten participants were highly motivated, international students who had come to AUT IH within the last twelve months with the intention of eventually enrolling in an English-speaking university, as identified in the background information in Part A of Survey I. Throughout the study the participants were also referred to as students or learners.

The educational backgrounds of those on the course were varied but in order to be accepted as students at AUT IH all had to have completed high school. Participants came from a variety of countries as shown in figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1: Nationalities of the participants**

Six male and four female students, aged between 18 and 35 years, volunteered to take part in the study. They had all been in New Zealand for less than a year. Four of the participants had been in New Zealand for less than one month and the other students had been in this country for varying periods, all for less than one year. The length of time each participant had been learning English varied from less than a year to more than ten years, as shown by figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2: Length of time learning English**

Three participants had taken the Academic IELTS test before and had each achieved an overall band score of 5, while all ten participants intended to take the IELTS test during the year the study was undertaken.

The students were at an intermediate level of proficiency (as determined by an in-house placement test and subsequent monthly tests; the three students new to the school had an average IELTS band score of 5). The placement test is completed on arrival at the school by most students and consists of multiple-choice grammar questions, two short written texts and a short interview. This assessment determines the initial class level of new students. A four-weekly progress test consists of a written test including a grammar and vocabulary section, a speaking assessment, a listening test and a reading comprehension test. The results of this monthly test determine progression to the next level of study. Students who have not attended the school prior to the first day of the full-time Academic IELTS preparation course must have recently undertaken an IELTS test and achieved an average band score of 5 to be eligible for the course.

### 3.5 Ethics

As the research involved human subjects ethics approval from the university was necessary and was subsequently obtained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

The research project was explained to participants by a third party who was not involved in the research or in the course teaching. This Academic Leader made it clear that the research was voluntary and that students could withdraw at any time without affecting their course assessments in any way. The Academic Leader also explained that the research was confidential and the participants would have confidentiality and that those who wanted would have the opportunity to read a summary of the research once completed. These issues were addressed in the Consent Form (see Appendix I) and the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix II). All students who volunteered to take part in the study gave informed consent to participate.

As with all research involving a student cohort, there were special concerns with regards to ethics. First, students in the full-time academic IELTS preparation course may have felt obliged to participate in the study either as an obligation to their class teacher or the researcher, who was known to some students as a staff member and who might discuss their responses with their teacher. Secondly, some may have felt peer pressure to participate solely in order not to be part of an 'excluded' minority within the class. The participants were largely unknown to the researcher, who, although employed at the same institution where the study was being conducted, had not taught any level lower than Upper Intermediate or Advanced for the preceding six months to the study and was not directly involved with the course nor had the course teacher been part of the explanatory phase of the study. It was in order to minimise any sense of obligation that invitation to participate in the study was carried out by an independent person who was not associated with the students.

Furthermore, neither the researcher nor the institution has direct connection to the high stakes Academic IELTS test, which is run independently of AUT IH and is controlled by



strict test procedures governed by the Cambridge Examining Board. The practice tests that students do as part of the course are for formative purposes.

Students were also informed that anything they said in the interviews or wrote in their surveys would not affect any assessment in any other course they were enrolled in at the school. In order to protect participant confidentiality and anonymity no names were written anywhere. Each participant was awarded a number prior to administration of the first survey by the class teacher and this same number was used on all subsequent documents, including the practice tests, and for identification at each interview. In addition, the transcriber of the taped interviews signed a Confidentiality Agreement form (see Appendix III). It was emphasised that students who were part of the full-time course but who did not wish to take part in the study would in no way be disadvantaged by not doing the surveys or interviews. All students on the course, however, still did the two practice IELTS tests as part of the existing course. All students received exactly the same instruction.

### **3.6 Instruments**

Three instruments were used in this mixed method study in order to address the three research questions: survey questionnaires; semi-structured interviews; and the listening component of IELTS practice tests.

#### **3.6.1 Survey**

Two surveys were used as the first instrument; Survey I (see Appendix IV) which consisted of 2 parts and Survey II. Part A in Survey I requested background information which, although peripheral to the study provided bio-data useful in constructing a subject profile (this section was omitted from Survey II). Part B, which was the only section in Survey II (see Appendix V) contained questions pertaining to the participants' expectations of the course and invited participants to express how often they thought certain activities would occur in the 12 week preparation course, and responses were measured on a Likert-type scale. Eleven class activities or tasks were carefully chosen from previous similar research studies and adapted for this survey (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Green, 2006a; Hayes,

2003), with a final open-ended question designed to invite further exploration in the following semi-structured interview (Lumley & Brown, 2005).

As recommended by Dörnyei (2003) the survey was kept to two sides of a page and designed to take less than 30 minutes to finish. This also minimised what Mackey and Gass (2005) call the ‘boredom factor’ (p.114). The survey was uncomplicated, clearly presented and questions were worded so as to be straightforward to complete (Neuman, 2003).

One problem with a self-completed survey, however, especially with ESOL participants, who have English as an additional language, is that no matter how much care has been taken with the construction of the questions to make them unambiguous and have clear instructions, the responses may not be relevant to the question. Responses may not be accurate and as a result may be misinterpreted by the researcher (Robson, 1998). To counter the potential misleading results, it was decided to follow up the self-completed survey with a one-to-one semi-structured interview.

### **3.6.2 Interview**

In addition to addressing the possibility of misleading results, another reason for adopting the second instrument, interviews, was as a supplementary method of data collection, one which is often better able to uncover what is meaningful and relevant to participants. Follow-up interviews also gave students the chance to further explain their responses to the survey questions. As Cresswell (2003) notes, the results from a survey help inform a subsequent interview. Green (2006a) also found that semi-structured interviews with each participant soon after each of the surveys (i.e. both pre-course and post-course) were a good means of eliciting participant perspectives.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) the strength of interviews lies in the fact that they enable the researcher to facilitate immediate follow-up clarification; gain context information that facilitates analysis; provide validity checks and ensure triangulation. The use of interviews in this study was also found to reduce the possibility of what Mackey and Gass (2005) call the “halo effect” (p. 114), that is, participants giving answers they think the researcher wants. In a semi-structured interview, in particular, the researcher has the

opportunity to modify the order of the questions and paraphrase the responses to fully understand what the participant has said. With an interviewee some of the questions can be omitted if particular questions seem inappropriate (Robson, 1998). Pre-planned questions enable systematic coverage of the subject matter, but as May (1997) comments, the interviewer is freer to probe beyond the answers in a manner which would appear prejudicial to the aims of standardisation and comparability.

Data collected from Surveys I and II, particularly from the open-ended Likert-type scale items, helped to inform the subsequent semi-structured interviews and allowed participants to give a more detailed response to the survey statements. Open-ended questions were chosen to minimise bias so the participants could offer their answer with no perceived pressure. There was a set of questions with prompts for each of the two interviews (see Appendices VI and VII), to act as a guide, which were open-ended with the aim of inviting and encouraging the participant to give as full an answer as possible (Dörnyei, 2007). The sequencing of questions was deliberately intended to encourage responses. Questions the participant would more likely be able to answer were asked first in order to increase his/her confidence (Neuman, 2003).

In order to address the third research question and as a means of providing triangulation in this mixed method study the results of the listening section of two practice Academic IELTS tests were used.

### **3.6.3 Listening Test**

The third instrument was an IELTS practice listening test, which was an integral part of the course. As an intrinsic part of the course, two different but comparable practice tests related to the listening section of the Academic IELTS test were administered in Weeks 1 and 12 of the course during class time. The IELTS practice tests, commercially available, are used in the existing course for formative purposes (i.e. feedback on progress and experience in working under the pressure and time constraints of test conditions). As the study was not an experimental study focused on the effectiveness of instruction, causality is not claimed.

For this study, individual learner gains were calculated and the results compared with data relating to individual learner goals, strategies and expectations. The two tests each comprised four sections consisting of 40 questions and took 40 minutes to complete under test conditions. The tape was only played once, as is the actual IELTS listening test. Individual learner gains were calculated and the results given to the researcher to be compared with data relating to learner expectations. Gains (or reduction) in listening scores were used, in conjunction with both the survey and interview data, to construct individual learner profiles that might help explain the relationship between expectations and success. In this way the results of the practice listening tests were used to provide triangulation as “a means for seeking convergence across qualitative and quantitative methods” (Cresswell, 2003, p.15).

To summarise, the instruments used for data collection in this study are shown in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1: Data collection instruments**

<b>Survey 1</b>	Background information & bio-data for student profiles Rank-order questions; rating scales re: expectations of preparation course
<b>First Interview</b>	Semi-structured, using Survey I as guide; recorded & transcribed
<b>IELTS practice listening test 1</b>	Administered in class as part of course; results only
<b>Survey II</b>	Rank-order questions; rating scales re: expectation fulfilment
<b>Second Interview</b>	Semi-structured, using Survey II as guide; recorded & transcribed
<b>IELTS practice listening test 2</b>	Administered in class as part of course, different from test 1 but comparable; results only

### **3.7 Data collection**

As outlined in Table 3.2 data collection took place in two stages. Stage 1 included the first week of the course, in which the initial survey, the initial interview and the first practice test were conducted. Stage 2 involved the final week of the course in which all three data collection procedures were repeated.

**Table 3.2: Outline of data collection procedures**

	<b>Time-line of study</b>	<b>Data collection</b>
Stage 1	Day 1 of Week 1	Survey I anonymously conducted in class; bio-data; short answer & multi-choice questions; rank order questions; rating scales (10-20mins)- see Appendix IV
	Week 1	1:1 semi-structured interviews- recorded & transcribed using Survey I as guide; open-ended questions (20-30mins)-see Appendix VI
	Week 1	Practice IELTS Listening test administered in class by course teacher as part of course (40mins)
	Instruction	No data collected
Stage 2	Week 12	Survey II anonymously conducted in class; rank order questions; rating scales (10-15mins)- see Appendix V
	Week 12	2 <sup>nd</sup> practice IELTS Listening test administered in class by course teacher as part of course (40mins)
	Week 12	2 <sup>nd</sup> 1:1 semi-structured interviews- recorded & transcribed using Survey II as guide; open-ended questions (20-30mins)-see Appendix VII

### 3.7.1 Stage 1

Survey I was distributed to the participants by the Academic Leader, after they had given consent to take part in the study. Once the surveys were completed they were given back to the Academic Leader who passed them on to the researcher. All surveys were completed on the same day, with the exception of two which were handed in the next day, although these were still received prior to the interviews.

The one-to-one semi-structured interviews were held over three days during the first week of the course at a time convenient to both the participants and the researcher, outside class time. The participant was invited into a quiet, unused classroom and the interview commenced shortly thereafter. Participants were asked what expectations they had of the course. Finally, comments were invited. The interviews were recorded digitally and professionally transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews. After being checked by the researcher each transcription was read and confirmed as an accurate record by each participant.

A full practice Academic IELTS test was administered by the course teacher on the second day of the course in the class. The results of the listening section were given to the researcher the following day.

### **3.7.2 Stage 2**

The whole procedure was repeated at the end of the course, in week 12. Survey II, asking for participants' views on what took place on the Academic IELTS preparation course, was completed by the participants and returned to the Academic Leader who passed them on to the researcher. The one-to-one interviews were held after completion of the surveys and within the last week of the course at a time convenient to both the researcher and the participant outside class time. Again, the interviews were held in a quiet, unused classroom and the interviews were recorded digitally and professionally transcribed shortly after the interviews. After being checked by the researcher each transcription was read and confirmed as accurate by each participant. A second, different full practice Academic IELTS test was administered by the course teacher on the Monday of the last week of the course. The results of the listening section were given to the researcher the following day. This second stage of the study allowed investigation into the changes in student perceptions and the relationship between individual student expectations and individual student gains in the practice listening test.

### **3.8 Data analysis**

The bio-data from Survey I were collated, giving background information on age, nationality, length of time studying English, length of time in New Zealand and main reason for doing the preparation course. Information was presented in graph and table form. Data relating to student expectations, questions 4-10 on the survey, were put in a table and each participant's response, identified by number only, was entered. Responses with the Likert scale measurement were highlighted as part of the data collection process. Expectations 11-14 were put on a separate table as these involved more specific activities, such as watching television. The tables provided an overview of student expectations. The highlights were colour-coded for clarity; expectations 4-10 and the more specific activities 11-14 together with the participants' reasons for studying for IELTS. The two tables were

then examined and compared. The students' responses in the 4-point Likert-type scale of expectations were coded and given a score of 1-4; 1 for least often and 4 for always. The measure was then a score of between 1 and 4 (Yates, 2004).

The taped interviews were transcribed shortly after by a professional. The transcriptions were checked by the researcher and print-outs were made available to participants for verification. This checking had an additional advantage in that the researcher could familiarise herself with the material. The transcribed comments made by students were all placed on separate pieces of paper under headings derived from the interview guide: why they were taking the IELTS course; useful activities for IELTS; who had taken an IELTS course before and any additional comments made by participants. The responses to the same questions that had been asked on the survey were highlighted on the transcriptions and comments made. The interview transcriptions were examined for patterns, categorised and interpreted qualitatively (Cohen et al., 2003; Richards, 2003). The data collected from the interviews were then compared with the data from the survey.

Learner gains were calculated from the results of the two practice IELTS listening tests and a table was made to compare the two listening scores. These listening scores were then compared with learner expectations. Any correlation of expectations and an improved listening test score was noted. Due to the fact that half the participants did not attend the second formative IELTS practice test, and due to the resulting limited data, the participants who took the IELTS test towards the end of the preparation course, or shortly afterwards were invited to report their actual IELTS band scores to the course teacher who then passed them on to the researcher. These actual band scores were presented together with the band scores expected by the participants on a table for comparison.

### **3.9 Pilot study**

A pilot study was carried out prior to the research study. It involved the participation of three students at intermediate level studying on a part-time IELTS preparation course at AUT IH. They were one male and two females and were Saudi Arabian, South Korean and Japanese.

The primary aim of the pilot study was to trial the use of the survey questions and the semi-structured interview. It was also important to ascertain whether the interview questions elicited enough relevant information to address the research questions. A third objective was to undertake preliminary analysis of the data from the audiotapes of the interview. Furthermore, the pilot study provided a guide for the amount of time needed to complete the surveys and the interviews, which enabled participants in the full study to be informed of the likely time commitment they were asked to give.

The participants completed the first survey after class which took ten to fifteen minutes. The first interviews were arranged for the days after completion of the survey and the first listening test. The first interview took an average of ten minutes and provided sufficient data for analysis. The process was repeated at the end of the four week course. The second interview took slightly more time as the participants seemed a little more relaxed and offered more information in response to the questions.

Revisions and improvements were made to the survey and interview guide as a result of the pilot study. These included changing the wording of questions to reduce ambiguity that had led to some confusion in the comprehension of terms, such as ‘most important’ and ‘least important’ in two of the three responses given to the second part of the survey, question number two, which asked for the rating of language skills. The re-wording of the pivotal term ‘expectations’ was necessary in the interview guide, as none of the three participants understood what was meant by this. One participant even gave two conflicting answers in response to whether his expectations were met, in the second interview, according to how the question was worded. Therefore, the wording of the prompts was subsequently expanded to include: ‘Were your expectations met?’; ‘was the course what you expected?’; ‘did you learn what you wanted to learn?’

It was found that inviting participants to comment on what they had put in the survey worked well in the interview, in that it encouraged participants to give their own opinions as was particularly apparent in the second interview. Each of the three respondents gave oral answers which differed to some extent from their earlier written answers in the survey. By asking them to explain what they meant, it was possible to elicit longer and more



detailed responses to the questions. Prompts were necessary especially when misunderstandings arose from key vocabulary, such as ‘activities’.

As a result of the pilot study it was brought to the researcher’s attention that more expansive prompts would be necessary for better explanation of the vocabulary used, which resulted in the prompts being altered accordingly. Question number 5’s prompt was expanded to include the sort of things they expected to learn as it was thought that this would help participants offer more information that would be relevant. The question from the survey regarding the participants’ expectations of the degree of difficulty posed by the IELTS test was introduced to the interview guide to help relax the participant and to allow for more discussion. It was concluded that more effort would be needed from the researcher to elicit the information required to answer the research questions. Moreover, the pilot study alerted the researcher to the importance of paraphrasing the participant’s response to help in transcription as it was being done by a third party.

Although the listening test results showed no improvement for any of the three participants this was, perhaps, more a reflection of the unpredictability of the commercial practice tests than the students’ abilities. The tests had been carefully chosen for being of similar level of difficulty, but it became apparent that the second test was in fact a lot more challenging. Another factor that may explain the results is that not much improvement would be expected after only four weeks of part-time study, when it has been shown that improvement is possible only after 3 months’ intensive study on an IELTS preparation course (Elder & O’Loughlin, 2003). It was expected the main study (12 weeks duration) would offer better evidence of improvements.

### **3.10 Chapter Summary**

This chapter has set out the methodology and methods that informed the research study. The instruments used were two forms of a survey; a questionnaire and a semi-structured face-to-face interview as well as commercially available IELTS practice tests related to the listening module. The chapter also highlighted the ethical considerations of the study and illustrated how data was collected and analysed in two stages over the 12 week duration of the course. A summary of the pilot study was provided, including insights that led to

subsequent changes and improvements to the research methods arising from incomprehension and ambiguity of the vocabulary.

The following chapter will present the findings of the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

#### **4.1 Chapter Overview**

The previous chapter identified the multi-method approach decided on to answer the three research questions on which this study is based, being:

1. To what extent does a 12 week Academic IELTS preparation course meet the expectations of the international students enrolled?
2. What are the factors that contribute to fulfilling students' expectations?
3. What is the relationship between students' expectations and learner gains, as measured by the results of two practice tests related to the listening section of the Academic IELTS test: specifically, do students with fulfilled expectations make better gains than students with unfulfilled expectations?

Chapter Four will present the findings from the analysis of the research data from this study. As referred to in the Methodology chapter, a total of ten students took part in the study. The participants were all allocated the letter 'S' followed by a number, for anonymity. Due to an initial misunderstanding, 15 numbers were allocated to the class of 14 students. After the initial allocation 1 student chose not to participate in the study; 1 student was removed because he had taken the course previously and 2 were removed as they left the school prior to completing the course. The number allotted to each participant was thus not in numerical sequence.

The study first gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from a questionnaire survey conducted at the beginning of the course, closely followed by an interview which provided more in-depth information. A second survey was completed by respondents at the end of the course followed by a second face-to-face interview. The surveys were designed to elicit initial thoughts from the participants and the subsequent interviews allowed the students to speak more freely about their perceptions and expectations, without constraint. Analysis of

the interviews was carried out on the basis of qualitative content analysis. Quantitative analysis was made of the results of the listening sections of two formative practice tests taken by the participants, one at the beginning of the course and one at the end of the 12 weeks.

Data from both surveys and the two interviews provided findings related to the first research question: to what extent an IELTS preparation course meets the expectations of students.

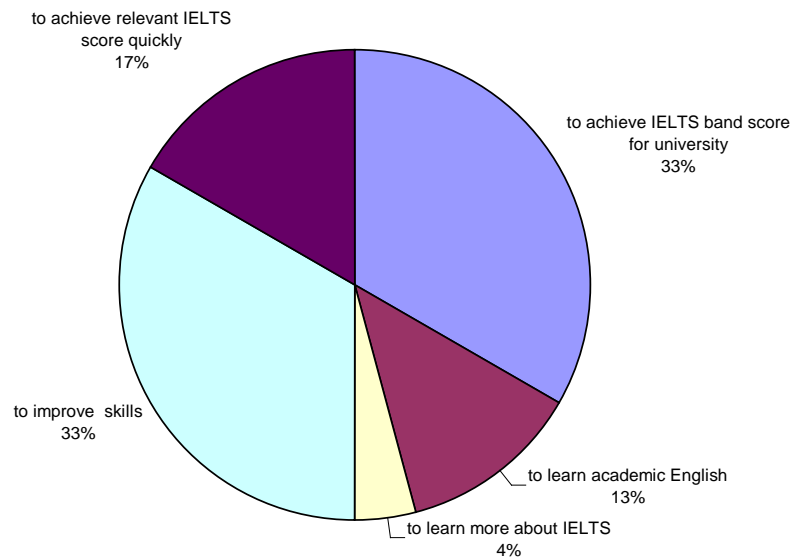
#### **4.2 Research Question One**

In order to ascertain the extent to which an IELTS preparation course meets students' expectations it was first necessary to establish why the students wanted to do the course.

##### *Reason for enrolling on the IELTS course*

Participants were asked on Survey I, administered at the start of the course, to identify the main reason for enrolling in the IELTS course. The three options given on the form were for entry into an English-medium university; to gain an English language qualification; or as a requirement for employment purposes. Participants were also invited to state any other reason. Without exception the main reason given by all ten participants enrolling in the IELTS course was to gain entry into university.

In the subsequent interview, the ten participants were asked to expand on their reasons for enrolling in the full-time IELTS course. An analysis of student comments revealed 5 categories as illustrated in Figure 4.1, with several students giving more than one reason.



**Figure 4.1: Reasons for doing the IELTS course from 1<sup>st</sup> Interview**

Two notable reasons given in the first interview for enrolling on the course were to improve language skills and to achieve the appropriate band score in IELTS in order to go on to university. Given the response in Survey I it was no surprise that many participants wanted to get a high IELTS score. It was also interesting to note that the same number of responses was given for language skill improvement, which suggests that the students were looking beyond obtaining the qualifications to be accepted into university. The comments illustrating students' reasons (with the code 'I' or 'II' to indicate the comment was made at the first or second interview, respectively, and 'S' with a number to denote which participant it was, for example 'I/S4' means participant S4 made the comment at the first interview), indicate that students expected all four language skills to be improved:

"I want to improve all my skills and I think the right place is take a IELTS course." (I/S4)

"I think full-time IELTS it can make my English improving very fast... [to improve] reading and listening." (I/S7)

Achieving a target band score of between 5.5 and 6.5 quickly was another reason of note with four of the participants particularly expressing the need for speed, intimating the time pressure many students were under:

“Because I need 6.5 going three months so I have to do it quickly, because I have no time to do it again.”  
(I/S2)

“Because in my opinion it will be good for me to pass my exam in December, next December and that’s why I take it now.”  
(I/S4)

“And I need pass the exams before January.”  
(I/S10)

“I’d like to do exam in November, so I choose full-time IELTS because I haven’t any time, enough time...”  
(I/S11)

The preceding analysis illustrates students’ rationale for enrolling in the full-time academic IELTS course. However, to discover the extent to which an IELTS preparation course meets the expectations of the students enrolled, it was necessary to identify those expectations. Statements to ascertain specific student expectations were made first in Survey I, and followed up in the first interview, then made a second time in Survey II and finally in the second interview at the end of the course for comparison.

#### *Student expectations of activities and tasks on course*

Ten statements were provided in Survey I about activities and tasks that might be included in the 12 week Academic IELTS preparation course and students were asked to identify how often they expected to study or learn these. The responses were on a 4-point Likert scale measuring from *often* (4) to *never* (1). Survey II duplicated the statements but replaced the phrases “I expect to take; I expect to learn...” with “I took...; I learned...” The participant responses to all the statements in Survey I are tabled in Appendix VIII and responses to the statements in Survey II are tabled in Appendix IX.

There was a tendency for students to have greater expectations than they perceived actually took place. This may be due to students having high, yet unrealistic expectations. Survey I showed that the majority of students expected to take part in all the given activities and tasks *often*, with the exception of watching television and listening to the radio. It is interesting to note that although 7 students *often* expected to do activities and tasks similar

to IELTS tasks (question 5 on the survey), Survey II showed that less than half the students perceived they had done these activities *often*, as shown in Table 4.1. The unlabelled columns denote responses where participants placed their response between two adverbs of frequency.

**Table 4.1: Frequency of activities and tasks similar to IELTS tasks - Surveys I + II (n=10)**

Question 5	Often		Sometimes		Not often
Survey I	7		2		1
Survey II	3	1	4	1	1

All ten participants expected to improve their general listening skills (question 9) *often* on the course, but in Survey II only half the respondents claimed they did the listening tasks *often*, as shown in Table 4.2.

**Table 4.2: Frequency of learning general listening skills – Survey I and II (n=10)**

Question 9	Often		Sometimes
Survey I	10		
Survey II	5	1	4

The question pertaining to listening to the radio (question 12) resulted in contrasting data because although 7 students expressed the expectation that they would listen to the radio in class *sometimes* in Survey I, in fact, only 3 students perceived they *sometimes* engaged in radio listening during class time in Survey II and five students stated they had *not* listened to it *often*, as shown in Table 4.3.

**Table 4.3: Frequency of listening to the radio - Surveys I + II (n=10)**

Question 12	Often		Sometimes		Not often		Never
Survey I	1		7		2		
Survey II			3	1	5		1

In both subsequent interviews students identified the importance of using radio and television as useful media tools for improving language skills:

“It will improve your listening because I think, because difference between listening with what we did do with the [course book]...and in the radio... we want to listen to people...who speak English very well.”  
(II/S4)

“...When we listen to the radio the language on the radio to be hard to us... If we understand the radio I think we'll understand all, I think.”  
(I/S2)

Two students stated that they didn't expect to use class time to use the media of television and radio:

“I [watch TV programmes and listen to the radio] at home a lot.”  
(I/S13)

“I can watch TV with my home stay family and listen radio programmes in my cellphone. Oh yes, I usually do it.”  
(I/S14)

More than half the respondents *often* expected to practise conversation skills (question 13) on the course but, as illustrated on Table 4.4, nearly all of them claimed to have done this on Survey II.

**Table 4.4: Frequency of practising conversation skills - Surveys I + II**

Question 13	Often		Sometimes		Not often
Survey I	6	1	2	1	
Survey II	8	1		1	

The statements expressed on the two surveys were also discussed at both subsequent interviews, which allowed the participants the opportunity to justify the responses they had given in the surveys. Students expressed a strong interest in wanting to gain the skills necessary to get a good IELTS score such as academic writing and learn how to structure an essay.

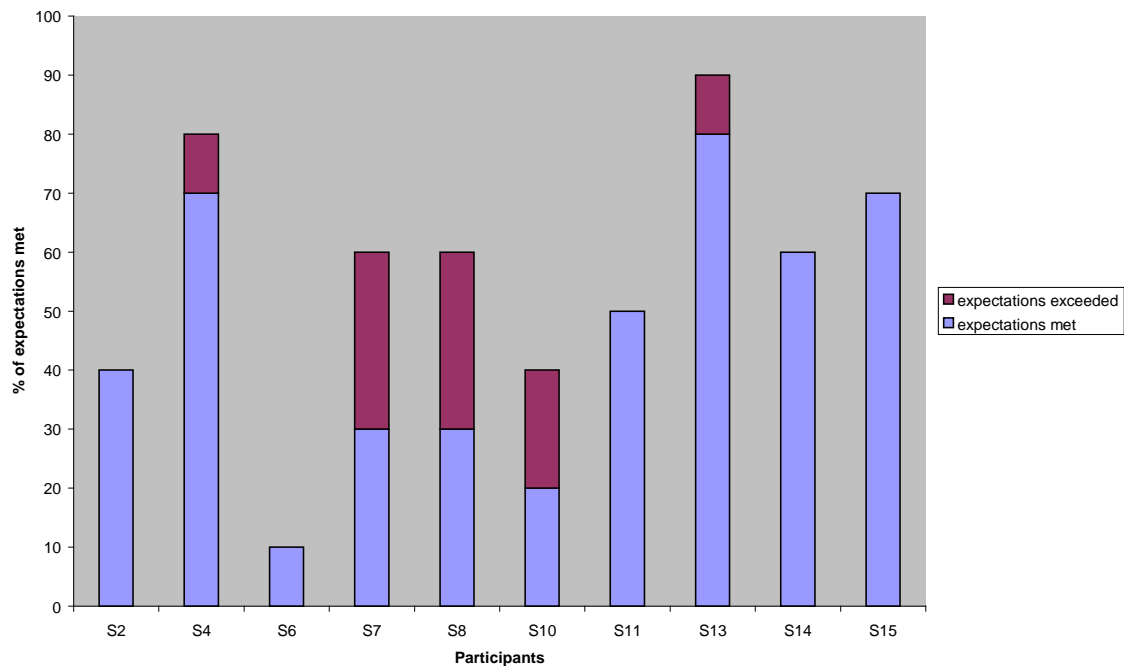
One student indicated he wanted to be taught “everything about IELTS course...IELTS exam and improve my skills, writing and listening, reading. Make everything easy for me or show me the way how I can take to pass the IELTS exam.”  
(I/S4)

### *Expectations met*

To find out whether expectations of course activities and tasks were met or not, the responses to the ten statements on Survey I were compared with the responses on Survey II. Where participants had placed a response between two ratings of frequency, the response



was moved to the next rating down for clarity. The percentages of expectations that were met and had been rated at a higher frequency in Survey II, thus exceeding expectations, were calculated (see Figure 4.2).



**Figure 4.2: Expectations met - Survey II**

As shown in Figure 4.2, five of the ten participants (S4, S11, S13, S14 and S15) perceived that half or more of their expectations of the course activities and tasks were met. Five respondents stated in the second interview that at least one activity or task had been taught more than they had anticipated and this was considered beneficial, thus exceeding expectations. Two participants in particular, S4 and S13, found their expectations were met at least 70 percent of the time.

On the other hand, one participant, S6, felt that only one expectation of the course activities had been met. His one expectation, surprisingly on an IELTS preparation course, was that he did not often expect to learn activities and tasks similar to tasks in the IELTS test. He confirmed this perception on Survey II by stating that he had not learned these IELTS-type activities. It was also noted that, on Survey II, this same participant moved all his responses to the next rating down in frequency. However, when asked at the end of the second interview if he had learned what he wanted to learn overall, S6 replied that he had and had

learned lots of vocabulary and how to improve his spelling. The fact that his expectations of the activities and tasks were not met is further commented on in the section of Research Question Three which looks at the findings of test results in relation to student expectations.

In contrast to S6, although S10 only found 20 percent of her expectations of specific activities on the course were met, she found the course offered more general vocabulary and grammar than she had expected, thus bringing her percentage of expectations met or exceeding expectations up to 40%. In addition, when asked at the second interview if the course met her expectations overall, she replied that although helpful, there weren't enough practice tests for her, so for this reason the course had not fully met her expectations.

As well as determining what specific activities were expected on the course the participants were also asked at the second interview if the course, as a whole, met their expectations.

Seven participants claimed that the course met expectations:

"I think the course was exactly what I expect. It was so focused on the IELTS and speaking. I didn't expect extra activities, games. I really expect hard work to achieve my target." (II/S13)

"...now I study with foreign friends so I have to speak English with them and my teacher is the best teacher I think... and I improve a lot of skills such as listening or speaking... now I have more confident and I think I can do speaking well." (II/S14)

"...is improve the four skills in reading and writing and speaking...yeah, it's good." (II/S15)

For some of the students, S2, S4 and S10, however, the course did not often meet specific expectations and further comment was made in the final interview. Surprisingly, even though one participant had identified expectations of most of the activities as having been met in Survey II, he was among the few students who felt overall, their expectations of the course had not been fully met when asked at the second interview:

"Little bit less I thought it's because it's three months without ... holiday, so under pressure, you know...too much pressure and long." (II/S4)

When asked about what participants had learned on the course, compared to what they had expected to learn, it was revealed that one student who had stated the activities were not what she expected had not really known what to expect.

There was a mixed reaction to the listening taught on the course. Although listening had been stated as being a skill often expected on the course by all ten participants, two students felt they didn't have enough listening on the course and as a consequence these students undertook additional tasks outside the class. One student believed there were more tasks than he had expected but this was positive. One student claimed to have only done three listening tests during the course although there were several throughout the course book and five full practice tests, each of which included a listening section.

Seven students were dissatisfied with the quality of the reading tasks on the course. Several students expressed the view that the reading texts in the book were too easy compared to the actual IELTS test. Some took it on themselves to study in their own time and one felt she had to "buy a lot of books" (II/S14) to supplement the class lessons.

Practice IELTS tests were generally felt to have been held less often than expected. Half the participants wanted them from daily to weekly. However, one student found the timing, especially for the reading sections, to be particularly useful and another participant found the tests the "best way to improve listening" (II/S14). One student believed the tests had been held more often than he had expected.

Some of the comments made at the second interview show the variance in student perceptions of just what constitutes 'often'. Students stated they listened to the radio from once a week to three times in the whole course to never. The course teacher reported that the attendance in this course was not good, especially towards the end of the 12 weeks, and this may partly explain the discrepancy between perceptions of how often 'often' is.

To summarise, students expected to do most of the suggested activities and tasks which might be on the preparation course often and the second survey indicated that the majority of the participants believed at least half their expectations of the IELTS preparation course were met or exceeded. One participant (S13) felt that 90 percent of her expectations had been met. Three students perceived that less than half their expectations were met (S2, S6 and S10) in Survey II. S6 seemed totally dissatisfied with the course and only had one, negative, expectation of the course activities met. S10, who only had two of her expectations met, had two other tasks and activities that were taught more frequently than

expected, which was better than she had expected. However, when asked at the second interview, S6 stated that the course taught him what he had expected, whereas S4, who had stated 70% of his expectations had been met, said the course had not fully met his expectations, at the interview, and that the course had been too long. S2 and S10 maintained that the course had not fully met their expectations. It was found that the reading tasks were not challenging enough for several participants and half the students wanted more practice tests. The Discussion chapter will explore further the extent to which participants' expectations were met.

The second research question, which focused on the factors leading to any expectations being fulfilled, was also addressed by both the two surveys and the two interviews.

### **4.3 Research Question Two**

To further identify factors which contributed to fulfilled expectations participants were asked at the two interviews to comment on the activities and tasks taught on the course.

#### *Most Useful Activities*

Participants were asked in the first interview which activities they thought would be the most useful on the course. The responses indicated that participants expected a range of activities to be useful in the IELTS course including practice tests, vocabulary activities, listening tasks, writing tasks and speaking activities. In addition, almost half the students expected speaking activities to help them specifically improve their English communication skills to talk with friends, or for use at university:

“I want to, I can communicate with flatmate, or New Zealand national peoples of the university. I think it is a useful activity.”  
(I/S8)

“I think that's like discuss with other friends, teacher, yes, very useful and when I discuss with the teacher, when she or he talking I can listening, yes, I can listen and when I talk with them maybe...I think it's good discussion.”  
(I/S14)

Interestingly, one student stated he expected activities to help his writing, listening and reading skills, but not speaking as he believed he could improve his speaking outside the school.

At the end of the course, in the second interview students were asked which activities had been most useful. More than half the participants identified that speaking had been most useful:

“I think everything is good for me; speaking, writing, listening. Reading also, quite good for me but if I choose of them I will choose speaking.” (II/S11)

“We had to discuss a lot of topics... [The teacher] gave us a lot of talk about the family, environment...ah something about I think a lot of topics...” (II/S14)

Three participants, two of whom felt their expectations of the course had not been fully met and one, for whom 90 % of her expectations of course activities had been met, stipulated that practice tests had been most useful:

“...practice tests, yeah, actually it’s uh, it was more useful for us” (II/S2)

“Every month we have a exam, it’s similar to the real exam for IELTS exam so I think it’s very useful because I can see I’m improved, yeah, every month.” (II/S10)

“The games with vocabulary because it was good to fix the vocabulary but I think also the IELTS practice tests that we always have.” (II/S13)

The students’ perceptions of the anticipated difficulty of the IELTS test was another factor investigated.

### *Student perceptions of the difficulty of the IELTS test*

In Survey I respondents were asked to identify how difficult they expected the IELTS test to be using a Likert scale of 0-5, with 0 being *very easy* and 5 *very difficult*. The same question was repeated on Survey II for comparison. The mean level of difficulty was calculated at 3.9 from Survey I compared with 3.2 from Survey II.

According to the surveys students generally felt the IELTS test was more difficult at the start of the course, with the notable exception of two participants who stated they believed the IELTS test to be slightly more difficult on the second survey. One participant (S2) originally thought the IELTS test was really difficult giving it a rating of 5 but after completing the course reduced the level of difficulty by 2.

For further clarification the students were asked at each interview how difficult they thought the IELTS test would be. It was often found that there was a discrepancy between what was put on the survey and what was said at the interview. This may be due to a misunderstanding of the question. Alternatively, it may be due to the timing of the first interview, which was shortly after the students took the first full practice IELTS test. For many students this test was the first time they had taken a timed test and may have been perceived as difficult. One student had put the level of difficulty at a level of 3 on Survey I but at the following interview, she rated it a little more difficult. She explained that she had taken a full practice IELTS test as part of the course between completing Survey I and the first interview, which she refers to as an ‘IELTS exam’:

**S11:** I think that just a ...it was before then I took IELTS exam so now I think it's like a '4'.

**R:** So when you completed the survey you had not taken the first practice test?

**S11:** Yes.

**R:** So, now you've taken the first practice test you think it's more difficult?

**S11:** Yes. (I/S11)

In the second interview, having completed the course, it was found that the majority of students believed the IELTS test would not be as difficult as they had stated in the first interview:

“It's now clear for me now how exam will be and technique for how reading, writing how you can seem to me it's arrange everything for me now, yeah I can start doing exam I think well.” (II/S4)

“I think the real test may be more difficult than my thought... especially in listening in other three parts of IELTS I think, I don't think is so difficult, just listening...” (II/S8)

“After 3 months I study here I think that I have lots of information and experience and I can do IELTS good...” (II/S14)

Sometimes, however, the comments made at interview did not match with what was claimed on Survey II. Although on the survey they had rated the IELTS test to be less difficult having completed the course, in the second interview with prompting, almost half the participants (S6, S7, S8 and S10) stated that having completed the course they, in fact, thought the IELTS test was more difficult, which lead the researcher to believe that not all participants had fully understood the question on the survey. One participant had put the level of difficulty at a rate of 3 on Survey II but at the second interview stated:

“I think now I found the exam is more difficult...Maybe I am improved my English but I still think the exam is more difficult.” (II/S10)

Two participants, who had both taken the actual IELTS test by the time of the second interview, found the test was more difficult than they had expected, even after completing the course, and they both put a higher score on the survey and re-iterated their choice at interview:

“...the first time I don't, I didn't have enough information of IELTS test and last week I took the test IELTS exam reading was very difficult...yes, so I now I think about the IELTS test is difficult test.” (II/S11)

“I didn't change my opinion about the test but about the preparation because with the course I get more useful, I get used with the test... I didn't realize how was the complexity about the test and when I start to study and to practise, to really practise to do the test I realise that it's not so easy...” (II/S13)

Another factor that may have contributed to the fulfilling of students' expectations was how the participants rated the importance of the language skills in the course.

#### *Importance of language skills*

In Surveys I and II the participants were invited to rate the importance of the language skills in an IELTS preparation course on a scale of 1-4, with 1 being *the most important*. However, this question seemed to give rise to a lot of misunderstanding by the students, and appeared to result in several inaccurately reported ratings. In the subsequent interviews, where discussion and prompting helped the students to understand the question better, the rating of the language skills were renewed or confirmed, some rated equally. One participant gave no ratings in the first interview.

Another participant explained that as speaking English was difficult for her it was, therefore, the most important skill for her:

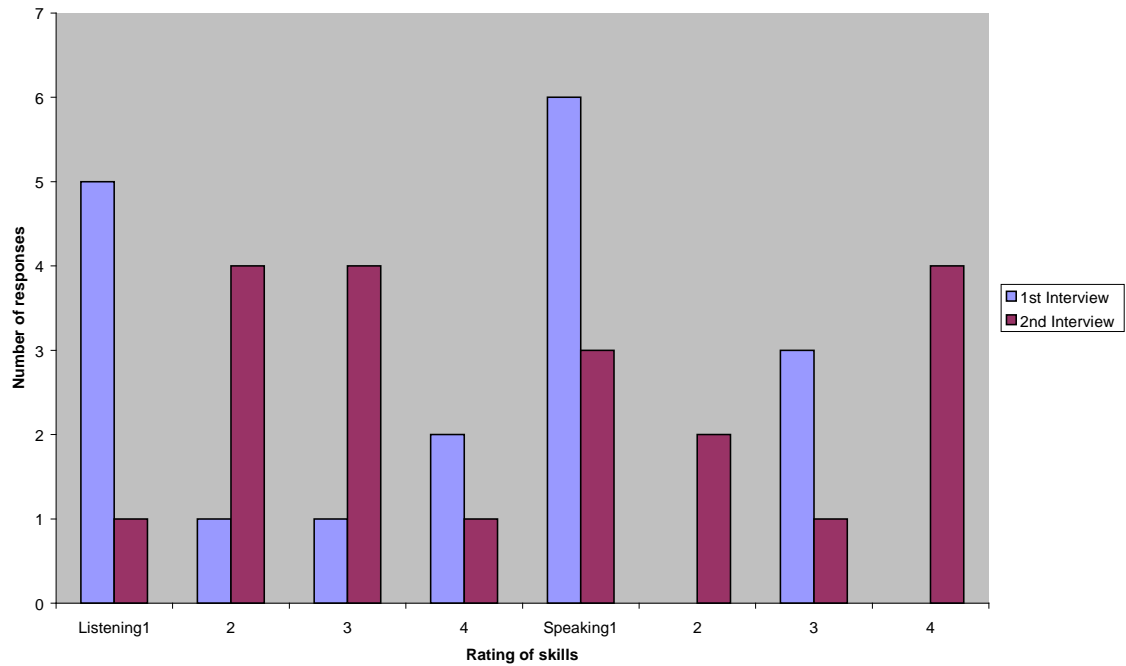
“Because it's more difficult for me speaks with others. I try to speak a lot and when I'm no in class I speak with my home stay mates and they are Korean, so we only have to speak in English so...” (I/S13)

When asked to confirm his rating scores at the first interview one participant changed the order of the most important skill he had put on Survey I from writing to reading with the following explanation:

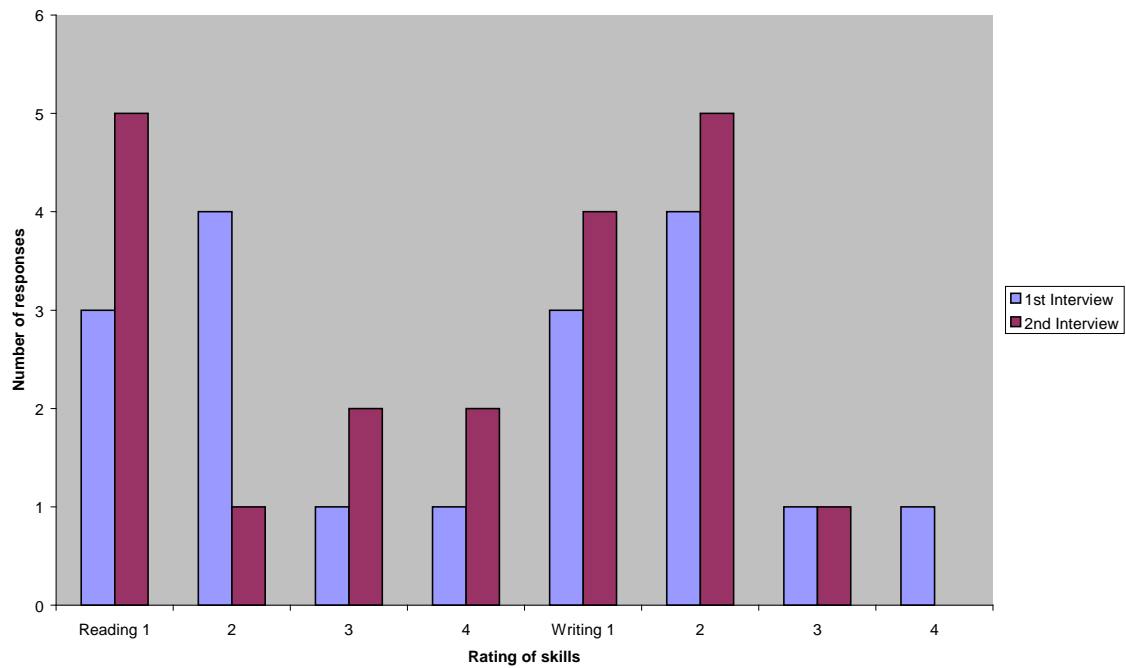
“I think reading is very important because when you read something and you don’t understand it then you can’t speak...it’s good for other skills, listening and speaking and writing.” (I/S4)

As shown in Figure 4.3, at the first interview just over half the students considered speaking to be the most important skill closely followed by listening. In contrast, as shown in Figure 4.4, at the second interview these two skills were rated lower (see Appendix X for a breakdown of responses).





**Figure 4.3: Rating of Listening and Speaking skills at interview**



**Figure 4.4: Rating of Reading and Writing skills at interview**

The skills of reading and writing were considered to be the most important skills at the second interview, as shown in Figure 4.4. Five students rated reading the most important skill and 4 rated writing as the most important skill in the second interview. At the second interview the students accounted for why they had changed their rating of the language

skills from the first interview. Some explained that the importance of the language skills had changed because they recognised that they were needed at university:

“... because university need the writing more than other skills.” (II/S2)

“... in university that you need just writing, your pen and your eyes.” (II/S4)

“I think if I just can speaking or just reading very good but another parts is very poor so it’s harmful for me to go to university...just if I just can do some reading test or writing test very quickly, but I can’t understand our teacher’s talk it’s very terrible.” (II/S8)

“Because the writing is so important for the skill for my university subject ...” (II/S15)

Other participants changed their rating because of what they learned on the course:

“Yeah, because I find when I’m reading do the real exam the reading it’s very difficult because there are a lots of new vocabulary and I also reading a little bit slowly, so now I think reading is the most difficult.” (II/S10)

“Now writing is so important because you should put all your knowledge in the writing. Grammar, vocabulary, expressions, punctuation, so it’s really important and you get this ability in the writing, reading and listening so I think the reading is the most important...sorry, the writing.” (II/S13)

“...because I saw what the difference between the course and the test and actually I try it because I don’t understand the reading it was most difficult than the writing. Before it was the writing that was trouble.” (II/S6)

One participant gave a comprehensive reason for his choice of rating:

“...because in my opinion the first thing most important in English for speaking because if we can’t speaking we cannot communicate with another people. And the second one I think is listening because if other people say something to me and I can’t understand what they say it’s very difficult I think...and then writing, I think it’s the most important too because if we want to get a job or something like that we must write a CV so I think it’s really important. But the reading, it’s the...I hate this part because it’s very difficult especially the reading for the newspaper article, yeah, I really don’t like it.” (II/S7)

Research Question Two also attempted to uncover students’ expectations of their IELTS scores to determine if their expectations were realistic or not and, ultimately, to see if they contributed to fulfilled expectations.

#### *Expected IELTS band score*

This full-time academic IELTS preparation course was aimed at helping students to obtain an overall 5.5. However, as indicated in Table 4.5, when asked on Survey I whether they expected a high IELTS band score and exactly what overall IELTS band score they expected to get, eight of the ten participants reported they expected to get a band score of at

least 6 and four thought they might get 6.5, even though they acknowledged it was a high score.

**Table 4.5: Expected IELTS band score-Surveys I+II (n=10)**

Participants	Expected score-Survey I	Expected score-Survey II
S2	6	
S4	6.5	6
S6		
S7	5.5	5.5
S8	6.5	6.5
S10	6.5	6.5
S11	6	
S13	6.5	6.5
S14	6	6
S15	6	6

When the same question was stated in Survey II, six respondents still claimed they expected to get a score higher than 5.5. Students' high expectations may have been due to a misinterpretation of the question to mean what score they needed rather than wanted.

Several students were under pressure to get a high score for acceptance to university so therefore had high expectations for high band scores even after they had completed the course. Time pressure was also a factor as one participant needed 6.5 by January so she could actually start university in the first semester, for which she had a conditional offer. One student was fairly confident she would get the band score of 6.5 that she needed for entry to the university that had given her a conditional offer.

Another student, (S8), stated that although he had been learning English for ten years he had not studied speaking or listening prior to enrolling in this IELTS course. At the beginning of the course he believed his reading and writing skills were between 5.5 and 6.5 and by the end of the course he expected to improve his speaking ability from a band score of 4 to 6 and his listening skills from 4.5 to 6. He wanted to start university in the following March, (some three months after completing the course) and was taking the IELTS test the Saturday after the second interview. In the second interview he conceded that he may not,

after all, achieve the 6.5 he needed at this stage but would take the IELTS test later with more time to prepare for a higher band score:

“...maybe I think next January I can got 6.5.” (II/S8)

Only one respondent (S6) stated he didn't expect a high score in IELTS in Survey I, which he changed in Survey II but made no comment as to what the score might be until the second interview when he stated that he needed 6.5.

By the end of the course half the students had not changed their high expectations. The one student who had the realistic expectation of a 5.5 IELTS band score, did not change his mind but commented at the second interview that he would try to get a higher score.

S4 had lowered his estimated band score by 0.5 but was still expecting a relatively high band score of 6. Two other participants changed their expectations from getting a band score of 6 to not getting a high score in IELTS.

Another student wrote that he didn't expect a high score on Survey II at the end of the course and in the second interview, when asked if the course met his expectations, stated:

“...before we enrolled to this class we didn't know that the class just help, helps us to get 5.5 and what we need 6.5. After we enrol this class they said we just help you to get 5.5, yeah. And, it's still useful for us because when we get this class, when we get this class we had no, no academic skills.” (II/S2)

Two of the students who commented in Survey II that they could achieve 6.5 in the test seemed to have a more realistic expectation in the second interview than they had put in the survey. Although one had stated she expected to get 6.5 on Survey II, in the second interview she said:

“I think full-time IELTS course is very helpful but so far I think it's not enough because my purpose is find 6.5 but now I think I just can go to 5 or 5.5.” (II/S10)

The other acknowledged that he may need to enrol in the higher level full-time IELTS preparation course on completion of the present course:

“He [the teacher, who was a woman], said this course just, it may help, help you for the 5.5 and I need 6.5 and because that I prepare to study on IELTS 2.” (II/S6)

In summary, half the participants identified that the most useful activities on the preparation course had been speaking exercises. Practice tests were also noted to be useful. By the end of the course four students believed the IELTS test to be less difficult than first expected. The remaining students all rated it to be slightly more difficult or the same level of difficulty once they had experienced some practice IELTS tests. Speaking and listening were rated as being the most important language skills at the beginning of the course but these had been replaced by reading and writing by the end of the 12 weeks. This could be due to the underestimated skills required for the academic tasks. All but two students had high expectation of achieving an IELTS score of 6 or more, which was unrealistic given the level of their English and the goals of the course and its 12 week duration.

Turning to the third research question, the results of the listening section of two practice Academic IELTS tests were examined to act as a point of triangulation and to determine the relationship between students' expectations and learner gains.

#### **4.4 Research Question Three**

Table 4.6 illustrates participants' results from the Listening section of a formative, practice Academic IELTS test taken at the beginning of the course together with a second, different one taken at the end of the 12 weeks. However, only 5 participants took both tests with the result that only limited data were able to be collected.

**Table 4.6: Results of formative IELTS practice tests (n=10)**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Listening Test 1 /40</b>	<b>Listening Test 2 /40</b>	<b>Score difference</b>
<b>S2</b>	16	25	+9
<b>S4</b>	16	27	+11
<b>S6</b>	8	-	
<b>S7</b>	15	27	+12
<b>S8</b>	10	18	+8
<b>S10</b>	11	30	+19
<b>S11</b>	18	-	
<b>S13</b>	22	-	
<b>S14</b>	9	-	
<b>S15</b>	13	-	

As shown in Table 4.6, all the students who actually took both listening tests made substantial gains in their test marks. S10 made the most significant gain by more than doubling her original score from 11/40 to 30/40, which was particularly notable as she was one of the three participants whose expectations were not fully met. Even the student with the lowest score, (S8), managed to increase his mark almost twofold. Perhaps not surprisingly, the student who had expressed dissatisfaction with the course by his negative comments, S6, was not present for the second practice test. It is also interesting to note that his first listening test result was the lowest of all respondents which may have been related to his negative expectations.

Due to the fact that absences resulted in only 5 students taking the corresponding end of course test, the actual IELTS band scores voluntarily self-reported by some of the participants who showed their official results to the teacher after completion of the course were also analysed. These seven students sat the actual IELTS test within a month of completing the preparation course and returned to the language school after they had received their actual IELTS band score to show the course teacher their results. The course teacher then passed these on to the researcher.

As shown in Table 4.7, three students succeeded in attaining the band score in the actual IELTS test that they expected to get, while two scored half a band lower than they had

anticipated. One student scored a whole band lower than he had expected. Four of the students scored 5.5, which is the band score expected for students to obtain by the end of this course. It is interesting to note that two of the participants for whom the course did not meet expectations (S2 and S4) were among those who received a lower than expected IELTS score, yet still a score commensurate with course goals. S6, the student who claimed in the second interview that the course had overall met his expectations despite the fact that only one of the specific activities and tasks met his expectations on Survey II, attained a low band score.

**Table 4.7: Results of actual IELTS band scores**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Expected IELTS band score</b>	<b>Actual IELTS band score</b>
<b>S2</b>	6	5.5
<b>S4</b>	6.5	5.5
<b>S6</b>	-	4.5
<b>S7</b>	5.5	5.5
<b>S8</b>	6.5	-
<b>S10</b>	6.5	-
<b>S11</b>	6	5.5
<b>S13</b>	6.5	6.5
<b>S14</b>	6	6
<b>S15</b>	6	-

In summary, all students who took the two formative listening tests appeared to show considerable improvement. The three students whose expectations of the course were not fully met, not only made gains but one (S10) made the most significant gain. Two of these participants also managed to get a band score of 5.5 in their actual IELTS test, which meets the aims of this particular IELTS preparation course. The student whose expectations of course activities were met 90% of the time, S13, achieved her goal of 6.5. S6, who had only one course activity expectation met, but who overall believed the course was what he expected, however, achieved the lowest IELTS score of 4.5.

## 4.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, three research questions relating to student expectations of a 12 week IELTS preparation course were addressed. The analysis of data was informed by a multi-method approach. Both descriptive quantitative analyses and qualitative content analyses were carried out in order to ascertain the extent to which the course met students' expectations and to uncover factors which contributed to fulfilled (or unfulfilled) expectations. Descriptive quantitative analysis was employed to address Research Question Three which sought to find a relationship between student expectations and student gains, as measured by the two formative practice IELTS tests administered during the course. A major, and obvious, limitation of the study was the small number of participants, particularly with regard to data collected from the second, formative, practice IELTS test, which only five of the ten participants sat. Another limitation appeared to relate to inconsistencies between what participants reported in the surveys and what they said in the interviews, a result of possible misinterpretation of some survey questions or simply a tendency of some students to be inaccurate in self-reporting.

Despite these limitations a number of findings can be highlighted. First, although students primarily enrolled on the course to attain the relevant IELTS band score for entry to university, many also wanted to improve their language skills. Second, the suggested activities and tasks were all selected by the students as being on the course. Listening skills and conversation skills were among the most expected activities, along with practice tests and were also stated as being the most useful. Reading was found to be the least useful activity. Third, 70% of the students felt their expectations were fully met when asked in the second interview. Many of the students had unrealistically high expectations of a relatively high IELTS band score. Language skills ratings changed completely by the end of the course. Finally, all students who took the second listening test achieved an improvement in scores.

The significance of these findings will be discussed in the following chapter.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS**

#### **5.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter presents a discussion of the key research findings for each of the three research questions in this study. First, the extent to which a twelve week Academic IELTS preparation course meets the expectations of the international students enrolled is discussed. This is followed by discussion of factors that contribute to the fulfilment of students' expectations. Next, the relationship between students' expectations and learner gains is considered. The chapter ends with conclusions, followed by the pedagogical implications of the study, a reiteration of the study's limitations and recommendations for further research.

#### **5.2 Discussion of key findings**

As IELTS preparation classes often tend to provide a small data pool, carrying out research can be fraught with difficulty from the beginning. This study was no exception and it is not possible to generalize to other IELTS preparation courses and other student populations. Another point is that students often sit the IELTS test while enrolled in a preparation course and leave prior to the end of the course, if they have acquired the IELTS band score sufficient for their needs. This departure from the course can further reduce student numbers and the amount of data able to be collected. In addition this course was held at the end of the academic year when attendance is typically lower than usual and students often leave before the completion of the course and the school's annual holiday. With these limitations in mind, the findings presented in the previous chapter are discussed in relation to the three research questions.

##### **5.2.1 Research Question One**

The first research question was designed to find out what students expected on an IELTS preparation course. Several questions on the two surveys were designed with a view to finding out what the expectations were and responses at the interviews were also examined.

Participants gave two main reasons for enrolling on the course:

- Entry to university
- To improve language skills

All ten of the participants stated that they enrolled on the full-time academic IELTS preparation course as a prelude to entry to university. It was revealed at interview that there were other, more specific reasons, too, including improving one or more of the language skills, or learning vocabulary; to do well in the IELTS test and to learn academic English so a better IELTS band score could be attained. Having other motives for studying on an Academic IELTS preparation course reflects Green's (2006a) findings that the students in his study didn't want to just learn about IELTS but also to develop their language skills. As found with other research (Barrett-Lennard & Bulsara, 2008; Hayes, 2003), the findings of this study indicate that while students may primarily enrol in a specific preparation course to do well in the IELTS test, in fact, negative washback occurs in many of the commercial courses available, foregoing the opportunity to develop language skills and tailoring the courses to help the learners gain the highest band score in the IELTS test (Read & Hayes, 2003).

A number of participants stated they wanted to complete the course in order to improve their language skills. One participant, S14, specifically stated that she wanted to improve her language skills with a view to doing better once at university so she would be able to understand the professors in lectures. This apparently far-sighted student appeared to be looking beyond the preparation course and was thinking of the time when she would need adequate language skills, once she had been accepted into university. This finding appears to be in contrast to Coleman et al. (2003) who found that students believed the IELTS test solely to be a means of entry to university rather than a tool to develop language learning.

#### *Expectations of the activities and tasks on the course*

Specific activities were named in Survey I in order to elucidate what students expected to learn on the IELTS preparation course. The students were asked to rate how often they expected the activities to be done. Findings from the survey results indicated that in particular, three activities were expected:

- Listening
- Speaking
- Practice tests

A key finding was that the majority of students expected to improve general listening skills as well as IELTS-style listening skills. In addition, all but two expected to at least sometimes watch television or listen to the radio in class time and practise conversation skills, even though these are not traditionally IELTS-type skills. This seems to accord with Green's (2006a) findings that students wanted to learn more than just what will be tested in IELTS but in contrast to Hayes and Read (2004) who found that students expected less skills' development and more strategies to do well in the IELTS test.

Both Huang (2006) and Nation (2006) comment that second language learners have limited opportunity in their own countries to listen to native speakers with the result that their listening ability is limited so it was perhaps unsurprising that all students expected to improve their listening skills on the course. The importance of listening was also reflected in the number of students who specifically wanted to improve listening skills as one of the main reasons for enrolling on the full-time IELTS course at the first interview. Kerstjens and Nery (2000) found that listening was the skill most often mentioned by participants in their study that would have helped them in their tertiary studies.

As Griffith and Jordan (2005) state, listening and speaking are very difficult skills for non-native speakers to acquire. Huang (2006) found that Chinese students, in particular, lacked confidence in both listening and speaking. Participant S8, who comes from China, specifically mentioned that learning skills to improve English-speaking and listening were difficult. He commented in quite some detail about the lack of speaking and listening experience he had had in China. He revealed that this full-time Academic IELTS preparation course was, in fact, the first time he had been taught how to improve both skills in the ten years he had been learning English. The other Chinese student in this study, S10 also specifically talked about speaking and listening being difficult skills.

On Survey I and again at the first interview, students stated they generally didn't expect to watch television or listen to the radio often in class time, although a large number of them (8) expected to do this at least sometimes, which was quite surprising as comments were made at interview that these were activities that could be done in the home. Three participants claimed that this is, in fact, what they did which appears to be contrary to research that claims that Asian students generally rely on teacher-driven learning (Li et al., 2002; Nguyen, 2002), although it must be noted that easy access to English-medium television in New Zealand combined with a lack of friends in a strange country, may have contributed to more independent learning strategies. By the end of the course, however, students declared that it was satisfactory not to have watched television or listened to the radio as part of the course, with the exception of one student, participant S15, who would have liked television in class time to help him improve his listening skills and speaking.

Participant S10 commented that she would have liked more radio to be played in class time, to help her with listening skills and S4 would have liked to watch TV to improve his listening as he said it was different watching it in class to watching at home and it was good to listen to native speakers. Both Huang (2006) and Nation (2006) comment that listening to native speakers is difficult to do in the learners' own countries, so is therefore an important part of learning English in an English-speaking country. In light of this finding it could be suggested that IELTS preparation courses include some authentic listening activities, and teachers promote the use of television and radio as an independent learning strategy as a means of improving listening skills.

A second key finding was that all participants expected to practise conversation skills in class and all but one participant expected to have formal discussions in class. The fact that the two speaking activities were expected in the course is in accordance with Huang (2006), who found Chinese students, in particular, lack confidence in speaking and pronunciation. Griffiths and Jordan (2005) also state that speaking skills are very difficult to gain. Participant S8, as noted above, stated that in ten years of studying English this full-time IELTS preparation course was the first time he had been taught speaking and listening skills. A Vietnamese participant, S15, whose pronunciation was extremely poor, wanted more of these activities to improve his speaking and listening.

Although another participant answered in Survey I that he expected to practise both conversation and discussion skills, when asked in the first interview what he thought the most useful activities would be on the course, he stated that everything except speaking would be useful as “Speaking is easy to learn. You can learn outside the school” (I/S2). This student may have found that the speaking component on the course was inadequate for his needs, which he then followed up himself outside the class. Or, it is possible he did not see the benefit of the speaking activities provided on the course.

When the participants were asked how they expected to improve speaking on the course, also at the first interview, participant S13 said that she spoke English outside class time and tried to speak a lot in class. Participant S14 stated she hoped to improve her English by talking with her homestay family and friends, which she acknowledged she could not do in her country. Overall, the students in this study appeared to be aware that living in a country where English is spoken was a good opportunity to improve their listening and speaking skills.

A third key finding was that all ten participants expected to take IELTS practice tests during the course, which seems to support Hayes (2003) and Li et al. (2002), who found that students expect instruction on test-taking strategies more than development of language skills. However, this finding is in contrast to Spratt (2005) who suggested that teachers only think students want exam-orientated teaching. However, the majority of students in the present study came from Asia and the Middle East where the taking of regular tests is considered to be an effective strategy to help improve test scores (Gauntlett, 2005; Macleod, 2007), so it is highly probable that this background was a factor. In Survey II nine of the ten students stated that they had taken practice tests during the course. The number of practice tests taken, however, appeared insufficient which seems to be in contrast to Green’s (2006a) study which found students placed more importance on skills other than practice tests, such as writing development.

Of the seven participants who commented on the practice tests in the second interview, three decided there were fewer than expected and four felt there were the right number. In Survey I participant S10, from China, stated that she wanted practice tests often. In her second interview, when reflecting on the course, she explained that she was disappointed

that tests were only done sometimes. For her, this wasn't enough as she would have liked them everyday to improve her writing speed. On reflection, however, she commented that the monthly practice tests were useful because she could see that she had improved. Participant S13, from Brazil, stated in her second interview that, for her, along with vocabulary games, practice tests were the most useful activities in the course.

It is worth noting that sometimes the frequency a skill or activity was perceived as being used in class varied. For example, participant S2, a student from Saudi Arabia, had expected practice tests more often but in the second interview he stated that what he perceived as weekly practice tests were useful. However, another participant (S11) said that although she had expected them weekly she was happy they were monthly. These discrepancies may be due to a number of reasons including class absences. One further interpretation may be that students have different perceptions of the word 'often' used in the survey Likert-type scale. The discrepancy in the students' perceptions of how often the formative tests were administered during the course can perhaps be explained by S13 who found all the tests helpful. She remembered having practice tests three times in the twelve week course, or monthly, but recalled that shorter tests were also given every week.

Only tests which are similar to the actual IELTS test are available for practice as there is no access to previous test papers. These comparable tests are found in abundance in published volumes or on the world-wide web for public use and this facility was utilised by at least one participant on the course, S14. This Vietnamese student wanted more formative tests to help with her listening and reading development and as she considered they weren't sufficiently catered for on the course she did them at home from the Internet. This independent studying behaviour was particularly interesting as it did not follow the traditional teacher-led style of education common in Vietnam (Nguyen, 2002).

Listening, speaking and practice tests were found to constitute students' prior expectations of the course. At the end of the course, students were invited on Survey II to indicate how often their expectations of the course activities were met and at the second interview, if the course, generally, had met their expectations.

In Survey II:

- 70% of participants indicated that over half of their expectations of course activities had been met
- 30% of participants indicated that less than half of their expectations of course activities had been met

In the second interview:

- 70% of participants indicated that their expectations of the course had been met
- 30% of participants indicated that not all expectations of the course had been met

According to the survey, more than half the participants felt that at least 50% of their expectations had been met or exceeded; that is to say what was taught exceeded their expectations. However, three students indicated that less than half their expectations of course activities had been met, or in other words, that the course had not fully met their expectations. Findings from the interview were commensurate with those from the survey. However, when asked at the second interview if overall, their expectations of the course had been met it was discovered that this question was misunderstood by several participants. Consequently, it had to be carefully re-worded and paraphrased until the participants understood it and could give an appropriate response. An example of the miscomprehension is illustrated by a Vietnamese student, whose poor English pronunciation and weak listening skills seemed to hinder comprehension:

**R:** Overall, were your expectations met? Was the course what you expected it to be?

**S15:** 6 point.

**R:** No, during the course...

**S15:** Yeah.

**R:** ...the actual 12 weeks...was it what you expected it to be?

**S15:** Expected...

**R:** Now you've finished it...

**S15:** Yeah.

**R:** ...and you look back.

**S15:** In test I expect a 5.5 but I go to do improve a test to get a higher score.

**R:** Do you think the course has helped you to hopefully get a higher IELTS score?

**S15:** Yeah.

**R:** So you think it's done what you wanted it to do? It's taught you the skills to help you get a higher IELTS score...is that what you're saying?

**S15:** Yeah.

**R:** Sure?

**S15:** Sure, yeah, is improve the four skills in reading, writing and speaking on I have a discussing topic, yeah it's good.

(II/S15)

Nevertheless, despite some instances of initial misunderstanding most students replied that the course was what they had expected. S6 stated that although disappointed that the course aimed at students attaining a score of 5.5 rather than the 6.5 he needed, he believed that overall the course had been good and had been what he had expected as he had learned a lot of vocabulary and improved his spelling. Participant S8 found it met his expectations particularly for learning new words and new grammar. Although not used to the autonomous learning strategies (Nguyen, 2002) employed in New Zealand, the two Vietnamese students both claimed to have practised self-study methods and still felt their expectations of the course were met.

However, S4, a Saudi Arabian student, answered that his expectations of the course generally had not been met. He felt he had been under a lot of pressure and the course was too long which may, in part, have been due to Burns' (1991) 'study shock' caused by the completely different culture of education in New Zealand. Even so, he perceived that some expectations had been met, as indicated on Survey II, because he had learned some IELTS test techniques. S2 was also disappointed when he realised that he probably would not achieve 6.5 but acknowledged that he had learned academic skills on the course. The third participant who responded that she wasn't fully satisfied with the course was one of the two Chinese students, S10, who also fixated on an IELTS band score of 6.5. The mismatch between the high expectations and realistic ones of students has been noted by Read and Hayes (2003) in their study of tertiary students as well as by Barrett-Lennard and Bulsara (2008).

### **5.2.2 Research Question Two**

To find out what factors contributed to fulfilling the students' expectations, participants were asked at the interviews which activities they thought would be, or were, most useful on the course.

At the first interview, it was found that a range of activities were expected by the students. By the end of the course two activities were considered as the most useful:

- Speaking tasks, especially in a group



- Practice tests

Conversely, a key finding was that reading activities were considered to be least catered for. The participants suggested a variety of activities including speaking and listening activities to help with their communication skills and specifically, in one case, to get a higher IELTS score. The students found that speaking in a group or practising discussion together, and learning vocabulary in class, were very useful activities.

By the second interview, conducted in the final week of the 12 week course, three of the same four participants who had said speaking would be a useful activity still thought the speaking activities were the most useful activities. An additional three participants decided speaking was a useful activity making a total of six, thus accounting for more than half the participants. This perhaps reflects the importance of and opportunities provided by living in an English-speaking country to improve the spoken language. Surprisingly, as many of the students were from countries where the teaching style is less autonomous and who therefore may not be used to the communicative method of teaching in New Zealand, speaking in a group was identified as being the most useful activity on the course by all six students. This appears to be in contrast to research that showed students don't adjust easily to new learning styles (Banerjee & Wall, 2006; McCoy, 2006; Coleman et al., 2003).

As previously discussed in relation to Research Question One practice tests were considered a valuable component of the course.

While speaking tasks and the use of practice tests were seen as valuable, reading was specifically identified as a skill that was inadequately catered for in the course. Interestingly, participant S11 was the only student who expressed the view that reading had been a useful activity, albeit, in her opinion, too easy. She acknowledged that reading in the actual IELTS test was hard. S6 was the only student to comment that there was enough reading on the course, though he didn't claim it as the most useful activity. The absence of challenging reading tasks was confirmed by several participants in the second interview as being inadequate preparation for the IELTS test. The three participants (S2, S4 and S10) for whom overall expectations had not been fully met all felt there was not enough reading practice to improve their skills. Two students claimed that the course reading was much

easier than the actual IELTS reading texts. The perceived difficulty of IELTS reading texts is supported in the literature. Hayes (2003), for example, found that students considered the reading section of the test to be the most difficult because of unknown vocabulary.

Students were asked in the two surveys to identify the level of difficulty they considered the IELTS test to be, both at the beginning of the course and again, at the end of the course.

It was found, according to Survey I, that at the beginning of the course most participants perceived the IELTS test to be difficult, giving it the second most difficult rating on the Likert scale. By the end of the course, as stated on Survey II, all but two participants perceived the IELTS test to be less difficult. However, it became apparent during the interviews that many participants had not fully understood the question. In the second interview, at the end of the course, when asked to explain their given rating in Survey II almost half the participants, including S10 whose expectations were not fully met, stated that they perceived the test to be more difficult and not less. Five of the remaining participants thought the test to be a little easier which seems to be in agreement with Hayes' (2003) findings that students who know more about the test feel it is not as difficult. S2 and S4, whose expectations of the course were not fully met, were two participants who stated at the second interview that they believed the IELTS test not to be as difficult at the end of the course. After completing the IELTS preparation course that instructed students on what to expect in the IELTS test the students' perceptions of how difficult the test is tended to be more realistic. The confusion arising from the question in Survey II may have been partly due to the IELTS test being such a high stakes test with the result that students may not be able to look beyond what they want or need and so end up confusing what is difficult with what they can achieve.

On Survey I and again on Survey II, participants were invited to state, on a Likert-type scale, the importance of each of the four language skills. The key findings indicated that students completely changed their views by the end of the course:

- At the beginning of the course Listening and Speaking were ranked most important
- At the end of the course Reading and Writing were ranked most important

This survey question gave rise to a lot of confusion with the meaning of ‘important’ which was interpreted by many students to mean ‘difficult’ and therefore confusing it with what they needed the most. Even at the interviews, when the researcher took the opportunity to re-word and explain the difference in meaning, several of the participants appeared to remain confused.

When asked in Survey I to rate the importance of the four language skills on an IELTS preparation course, listening and speaking were equally highlighted as the most important. This finding was not surprising as research has shown that ESL students often rate listening as a difficult skill (Chang & Read, 2006; Griffiths & Jordan, 2005; Huang, 2006; Kirkness, 2004).

However, by the end of the course the participants had replaced the importance of listening and speaking with reading and writing. In fact, in Survey II speaking was chosen by four students (including two who had rated it as most important in Survey I, S13 and S15) as the least important skill.

Reading was mentioned at the second interview as not being taught adequately. By the second interview half the participants (S4, S6, S8, S10 and S11) rated reading as being the most important or difficult skill. One possible interpretation may be that participants felt they were inadequately prepared for the reading section of the IELTS test and so gave it a high ranking at the second interview. Participants S6 and S11 specifically cited reading as the most important language skill as they had taken the IELTS test and found the reading section the hardest. These two students appeared to have resolved the ambiguity between the term ‘important’ given in the survey and how difficult they found the skill.

Reading and writing were considered to be the most important and second most important language skills by the end of the course. Although research has shown that IELTS-type writing skills bear little resemblance to tertiary writing skills (Moore & Morton, 2005; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000; Read, 2007), it would appear that as the course proceeded students began to relate the importance of writing to university study. Green (2006a) also found that the development of writing skills was given a high priority.

A further key finding of the study was that students expected an unrealistically high band score when sitting the IELTS test.

Even though the students acknowledged their limited English language abilities for university level eight of the ten participants in this study had unrealistically high expectations of IELTS band scores which supports what Barrett-Lennard and Bulsara (2008) found in their study of university student expectations. In the current study almost half the participants, having experienced the course, felt the IELTS test would be more difficult than they first thought and yet six students still expected to get the relatively high score of 6 or 6.5. Participant S8, even though aware of his English language limitations, as shown previously by his comments about speaking and listening, still expected the relatively high band score of 6.5. Unrealistic expectations of students enrolled in IELTS preparation courses were also a finding of Read and Hayes (2003). In the current study, only one of the ten participants had a realistic expectation of achieving a band score of 5.5. One participant, S6, stated that he did not expect a high score in the IELTS test on Survey I but changed his answer in Survey II, though he didn't state what band score he expected to get.

Just as Bordia et al. (2006) found that some students are under pressure to achieve their goal of attending university in a certain time frame, so too in this study four participants (S2, S4, S10 and S11, three of whom were the students whose expectations of the course were not fully met) were under enormous time pressure to get the required IELTS band score and reported expectations that were unrealistically high. Hayes (2003) also found that students are often in such a hurry to go on to university that they take the IELTS test before they are ready. The full-time course at AUT IH was set up, initially, in response to the lower level students in the school who wanted to take the IELTS test and it was designed for these mid-intermediate level students to help them achieve a band score of 5 or 5.5. A second, higher level course has since been designed for the higher level students and aims at helping students achieve a band score of 6 or 6.5.

Gauntlett (2008) found that students are frustrated and stressed when they do not reach their goals even though they may not have the required level of ability. Even when they know their level of English is insufficient (Barrett-Lennard & Bulsara, 2008) students still have high expectations and find it difficult to come to terms with not being allowed to study

what they need, i.e., even though they know their English is not good they still feel they should be able to study further in an English-speaking tertiary institution. This was particularly true for the three students in this study whose expectations were not fully met. Bordia et al. (2006) found that unrealistic expectations led to frustration and disillusionment. Some students in this study seemed to believe that simply by being on an IELTS course their language skills would improve automatically. When asked in the first interview how difficult she thought the course would be S11 stated she thought if she attended 100 per cent she would improve her English ability.

A full practice IELTS test was given to the students on the second day of the course so they could experience an IELTS-type test and the results gave the students and teacher a baseline to work on throughout the course. A second, different full practice IELTS test was given at the end of the 12 weeks so the results could be compared. For the current study the test results of the Listening section were recorded in order to address the third research question.

### **5.2.3 Research Question Three**

In order to investigate the relationship between students' expectations and gains made on the Listening section of the IELTS practice tests, the participants' scores in the two formative listening tests were compared. The finding was that all participants who sat both practice tests made significant improvement, whether their expectations of the course were met or not. However, this finding is limited by the fact that only 5 of the 10 participants sat both practice tests.

Interestingly, the student who made the most significant gain (S10) was, in fact, one of the three for whom the course did not fully meet expectations, suggesting that fulfilled expectations and doing well in IELTS are not necessarily related. Read and Hayes (2003) found with the students who were studying only IELTS that the only statistically significant increase in score was in the Listening module of the IELTS test. However, regarding the current study, it is difficult to draw any conclusions of importance or relevance as only half the participants took the final practice IELTS test. Even with full participation, however, any similar finding would have been limited by the relatively low number of participants.

Due to the low number of students who took the second formative practice test, the researcher also requested the actual IELTS band score of those participants who sat the IELTS test towards the end of the course or after completion of the course. The relationship between student expectations and the IELTS band scores achieved were examined, finding that there was no relationship between expectations and listening scores and only a minimal relationship between expectations and overall band scores.

No-one in the study, as far as the researcher was informed, exceeded their IELTS score expectations. Three of the seven participants (S7, S13 and S14) who informed the researcher of the actual IELTS test band score achieved their desired goal in the IELTS test. Two even managed to earn the relatively high scores of 6 and 6.5 they wanted. S13 and S14 both made positive comments about the IELTS preparation course in the second interview. S14 stated he had received lots of "...information and experience and...can do IELTS good..." (II/S14).

### **5.3 Summary of key findings**

In summary, all ten participants chose to enrol on the Academic IELTS preparation course in order to gain entry to university in an English-speaking country. Many also wanted to improve their language skills. Students particularly expected activities on the course to improve their listening and speaking skills and overall, students' expectations were met. Practice tests were also expected regularly and although the number of times they were perceived as being done varied, half the students believed the tests were done as expected. Overall, by the end of the course 70% of the participants believed the course was what they had anticipated. Although expectations were not fully met even the remaining three believed that they had benefited from the course.

The current study found that the factors that contribute to fulfilling students' expectations are activities such as speaking in a group, doing practice tests and providing sufficient and appropriately challenging reading activities. There was a mixed response to how difficult the students perceived the test to be. Half the participants believed the test to be easier by the end of the course, whereas four believed it to be more difficult once they had experienced the practice IELTS tests and learned more about the level of skills needed for a

good band score. Whereas listening and speaking were considered to be important skills at the beginning of the course, reading and writing had assumed this role by the end of the 12 weeks.

Although limited by insufficient data, all students who took both formative practice IELTS tests showed a significant gain in listening scores, indicating an improvement in this skill. Most of the IELTS band scores reported by the participants after taking the actual test reflected the band score that students are expected to reach upon completion of the AUT IH preparation course. The current study showed that there was no relationship between student expectations and learner gains in listening. There was only a minimal relationship between expectations and the overall IELTS and scores.

#### **5.4 Conclusions**

The main objective of this study was to consider the students' perspective of an academic IELTS preparation course. Students' expectations of the preparation course and factors that contributed to these expectations were examined. The study also considered what, if any, was the relationship between learner gains and expectations. The study was conducted with ten intermediate-level international students enrolled in an academic IELTS preparation course at a language school affiliated to a university in Auckland. Questionnaire surveys and face-to-face interviews as well as the listening component of formative practice IELTS tests were the instruments used to collect data.

The findings of this study are indicative of a particular research context only and do not claim to be transferable to other pedagogical contexts in which academic IELTS preparation courses are delivered. The significance of the findings is also limited by the small number of participants and by their variable English language proficiency.

Despite these reservations a number of conclusions can be drawn from the study.

#### *Research Question One*

*To what extent does a 12 week academic IELTS preparation course meet the expectations of the international students enrolled?*

The study found that the reason students enrolled on this course was to prepare them for university, not just to gain entry but also to provide them with the requisite language skills needed for study at an English-medium tertiary institution. The majority of activities and tasks offered on the course matched student expectations, especially those activities concerning listening and speaking. The study showed that the international students who came to New Zealand to improve their language skills seemed to take full advantage of the opportunity to improve their listening and speaking skills in particular. A focus on oral language is not unexpected given the social needs of the students in a target language environment but as seen with students' changing perceptions of the language skills needed for IELTS as the course progressed, such a focus on oral language may have obscured the crucial importance of academic literacy skills. Overall, the study found that the students' expectations were generally met, with the exception of three participants who appeared, in part, to have had unrealistically high expectations. This study also indicates that international students not only adapt to the communicative style of teaching in New Zealand in order to enhance their speaking skills, but also change their learning styles to expand their learning opportunities.

*Research Question Two*

*What are the factors that contribute to fulfilling students' expectations?*

All students on the study reported that at least some of their course expectations were met. The factors that contributed to fulfilling students' expectations were activities such as engaging in group discussions and listening activities as well as undertaking practice IELTS tests. The study found that students initially identified the skills of listening and speaking as most important but by the end of the course they had recognised that reading and writing skills were more important. This suggests a growing awareness of the importance of academic literacy skills, both for achieving an appropriate IELTS score and for further academic study. Although reading was a language skill identified as not adequately provided for, in order to improve their reading skills some students took the



opportunity to employ independent learner strategies and changed their learning style from a traditional teacher-led method to a more autonomous style. The study further suggests that students who had learned what to expect in the IELTS test, having been taught appropriate strategies, appeared to perform better in the actual IELTS test. It was observed that most participants had an unrealistically high expectation of the IELTS band score that could be achieved by completing the 12 week course.

### *Research Question Three*

*What is the relationship between students' expectations and learner gains, as measured by the results of two practice tests related to the listening section of the Academic IELTS test?*

There were limited data to address this third research question. Although there appeared to be no relationship between student expectations and learner gains, all students who took both formative listening tests did improve their scores in this area. However, no assumptions regarding the effectiveness of the course are made. Although the 12 week Academic IELTS preparation course seemed to adequately prepare at least some of the participants for the IELTS test, as shown by their actual IELTS results, the band scores were generally lower than the students expected. All but one of the participants who gave the researcher their actual IELTS band score managed to attain a band score of at least 5.5, an outcome which accords with the aim of the course.

To sum up, the results of this research showed that student expectations of the Academic IELTS preparation course were met at least to some extent. Various factors contributed to the fulfilment of students' expectations including a focus on listening and speaking activities and the inclusion of formative practice tests. However, student perceptions of the relative value of speaking and listening skills shifted over the duration of the course. By the end of the course, in recognition of the importance of academic literacy skills for IELTS and for further studies, reading and writing skills were identified as most important. Although there was some evidence of gains made in listening skills over the 12 week course, the study showed little or no relationship between student expectations and student gains.

## 5.5 Pedagogical Implications

The student voice has largely been absent from research related to IELTS. The current study, however, suggests that student expectations provide valuable input into the planning of IELTS preparation courses.

Firstly, the current study appeared to confirm the value of a focus on listening and speaking skills especially because it is difficult to improve these two skills in the students' own countries. This study has also shown that in order to adequately prepare students for the IELTS test, particularly to help students improve their listening and speaking skills, the use of authentic materials, such as television and radio, could be considered. Furthermore, if students are taught strategies they are better able to undertake extra work themselves and thus have more chance of achieving the required IELTS score.

Another implication that the current study has indicated is that IELTS preparation courses need to include language skill development in tandem with IELTS test-taking skills, in order to help prepare students for tertiary education. The study also confirmed the importance of a conversation-rich classroom environment, particularly oral interaction related to group work and problem solving.

The results of this study also confirmed the importance of test-taking practice as a component of IELTS preparation courses. The practice tests also highlight the specific skill areas that students need to improve, such as timing.

By the end of the IELTS preparation course students came to understand that the academic literacy skills of reading and writing were crucial for obtaining a sufficient IELTS band score and allowing entry to university studies. The current study identified reading as an area of concern and lacking sufficient instruction. More challenging reading activities in line with the actual IELTS test could be given on the preparation courses with more emphasis given to developing reading skills and strategies for self-study, along with vocabulary development. The study also highlighted a misconception among some students that oral skills are all that language learning involves.

Finally, teachers need to give students realistic expectations of what will be taught on the course as well as of the band score that is likely to be achievable. A balance is needed to encourage students to be hopeful of an appropriate band score yet, at the same time, to recognise the limitations of their expectations and that too high a band score is not probable without applying numerous strategies and undertaking extra work and self-study. If students are motivated and take responsibility for their own learning, IELTS preparation courses are very useful as preparation for university study (Barkhuizen & Cooper, 2004).

## **5.6 Limitations**

One obvious limitation of the study is the small number of participants. This number was further reduced in relation to Research Question Three due to some students exiting the course prior to its completion. Further research into student expectations of IELTS preparation courses would require a greater number of participants to minimise the negative effect of students leaving the course prematurely.

A further limitation concerned the interpretation of frequency terms used in the surveys. For example, students appeared to interpret the term 'often' quite differently with regard to the practice tests. As one student correctly identified, in fact, the course administered one full practice test monthly and a series of smaller tests on a weekly basis. However, there appeared to be some confusion, first, concerning what constitutes a test and second, the frequency of such tests.

Additionally, on several occasions participants appeared to have difficulty understanding some of the survey questions, although the construction of the questions had been given careful attention following the pilot study. These misunderstandings became apparent during the subsequent interviews when the survey questions were explored further. As an example, many students appeared to misunderstand the term 'important' in reference to rating the four language skills, confusing it with 'difficult'.

Interviews were also problematic in other ways on occasion. Although Robson (1997) states that interviews allow for clarification, mutual understanding was sometimes difficult, despite the researcher's repetition and paraphrasing. Difficulties with language were

undoubtedly related to participants' English proficiency level. Although assessed at intermediate level prior to course entry there appeared considerable variation across the four macro-skills, with some students having lower English language listening and speaking ability.

These differences point to the constraints of researching learners with English as an additional language, even though it was assumed that students with intermediate level proficiency could adequately cope with the communicative demands of the research.

### **5.7 Recommendations for further research**

This study investigated student expectations with regard to a 12 week academic IELTS preparation course. Although IELTS has become a significant area of enquiry, few studies have focused on students' perspectives. The current study addresses this gap and despite its limitations, contributes to the growing literature in the area of IELTS preparation.

Further research using a larger cohort over a series of preparation courses would be a timely addition, but would need to be cognizant of the constraints described in the present study.

Although not related to student perspectives and requiring a different methodology and methods, another area for further research might be in investigating whether listening to the radio or watching television, either in class time or in the students' own time, would help improve listening and speaking skills in relation to the IELTS test. Similarly, it would be interesting to do further research investigating any similarities or differences between nationalities, particularly with students who come from countries where the learning style is in contrast to the communicative, autonomous style associated with New Zealand learning environments. Further research into the value of speaking and listening skills compared with the more academic literacy skills of writing and reading would also be of interest.

Given the role of English in globalisation and the development of export education in New Zealand, the Academic IELTS test increasingly plays a crucial gate-keeping role in admitting overseas students with English as an additional language to university-based

studies. Consequently, IELTS preparation courses are growing in popularity and have the potential to be income generators for the near future. It is in the interest of language institutions, not only financially, but also educationally, to provide preparation courses that help students to achieve their goal of attaining an appropriate IELTS band score, while also improving the language skills of the individual student. It is hoped the findings of this study can contribute to this aim.

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**APPENDIX I**

**CONSENT FORM**

# Consent Form



*Project title: The expectations of international students enrolled in a 12 week full-time Academic IELTS preparation course at a private language institution.*

*Project Supervisor: Kevin Roach*

*Researcher: Isobel Bailey*

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2008.
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that the interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- The information for the interview and survey will be confidential. My name will not be mentioned in the report.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I wish to receive a copy of the report from the research (please tick one):  
Yes  No

Participant's signature : \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 22 August 2008 AUTEK  
Reference number 08/146*

**APPENDIX II**

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

# Participant Information Sheet

22<sup>nd</sup> September 2008

## **Title of Study**

The expectations of international students enrolled in a 12 week, full-time Academic IELTS preparation course at a private language institution.

## **An Invitation**

My name is Isobel Bailey, and I am a teacher at AUT, International House. I am currently completing an MA in Applied Language Studies in the School of Languages and Social Sciences, AUT. As part of my studies I am doing a research project into the expectations of students on an Academic IELTS preparation course. As you are a student enrolled on the full-time IELTS course I would like to invite you to take part in this project. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without it affecting your class performance or test results. The project will not interfere in any way with your current studies.

## **What is the purpose of this research?**

I would like to find out students' expectations of an Academic IELTS preparation course, so that in the future AUT IH can provide a course that helps students to prepare for the IELTS test in the best way possible.

## **How was I chosen for this invitation?**

You were invited to take part in the research because you are enrolled in the full-time IELTS course. All students who have enrolled in the IELTS full-time course have been invited to participate in the study. All students who agree to take part in the study will be volunteers. Whether you choose to take part or not will not, in any way, affect your work for the course.

## **What will happen in this research?**

In Week One of the course you will be asked to complete a survey (about 20 minutes). Also, you will take part in an interview (20 minutes) with the researcher (Isobel). In the final week of the course (Week 12) you will be asked to complete another survey, followed by another 20 minute interview. Both interviews will be taped and transcribed. Your class teacher will also give me the results of two practice IELTS tests (Listening section only).

## **What are the discomforts and risks?**

You may have seen me at AUT IH, know I am a teacher there and feel a little embarrassed about discussing your IELTS expectations and IELTS course with me.

## **How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?**

- I will send you a copy of your interview(s). You can change or delete anything you do not agree with. Please return it to me.
- If you want to, you can stop doing the study at any time. If you stop the study, it will not affect this course or the result of any other course you are doing at AUT IH. If you stop the study I will destroy all the surveys and the interview tapes.

### **How will my privacy be protected?**

Your name will not be used at all. You will be given a number when you complete the first survey. You will use the same number on the second survey and on the two IELTS practice tests. I will not see your practice tests. I will only get the results. Your number will also be used on the interviews. Your name will not be used anywhere when I write up the study.

### **What are the costs of participating in this research?**

Taking part in the research will take up approximately 2 hours of your time (but the tests will be done in class time). You will be able to have the interviews at a time as convenient to you as possible, outside classroom time. Each interview will take about 20 minutes.

### **What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?**

An academic leader at AUT IH will discuss the study with you. At this time you can ask her questions about the study. After the project is first discussed with you, you can take up to 24 hours to decide if you wish to take part or not.

### **How do I agree to participate in this research?**

If you agree to participate in this study you need to complete a Consent Form, which will be explained to you in detail. This will be explained to you at the information session by the AUT IH Academic Leader.

### **Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?**

If you wish to receive feedback on the study you can indicate this on your Consent Form. I will send you a summary of the findings.

### **What do I do if I have concerns about this research?**

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, *Kevin Roach*, [Kevin.roach@aut.ac.nz](mailto:Kevin.roach@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext 6050

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTEC, Madeline Banda, [madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz](mailto:madeline.banda@aut.ac.nz), 09 921 9999 ext 8044.

### **Whom do I contact for further information about this research?**

#### ***Researcher Contact Details:***

Isobel Bailey  
Senior Lecturer  
[Isobel.bailey@aut.ac.nz](mailto:Isobel.bailey@aut.ac.nz)  
09 921 9999 ext 4705

#### ***Project Supervisor Contact Details:***

Kevin Roach  
Senior Lecturer  
School of Languages and Social Sciences  
[Kevin.roach@aut.ac.nz](mailto:Kevin.roach@aut.ac.nz)  
09 921 9999 ext 6050

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 22 August, 2008, AUTEC Reference number 08/146.



**APPENDIX III**

**CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**



# Confidentiality Agreement

*Project title:*                   **The expectations of international students enrolled in a 12 week Academic IELTS preparation course at a private language institution.**

*Project Supervisor:*       **Kevin Roach**

*Researcher:*                   **Isobel Bailey**

---

- I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.
- I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber’s signature:

.....

Transcriber’s name:

.....

Transcriber’s Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

Date:

Project Supervisor’s Contact Details (if appropriate):

Kevin Roach  
Senior Lecturer  
School of Languages and Social Sciences  
[Kevin.roach@aut.ac.nz](mailto:Kevin.roach@aut.ac.nz)  
09 921 9999 extn 6050

***Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 22 August 2008  
AUTEK Reference number 08/146***

**APPENDIX IV**

**SURVEY I**

**SURVEY ONE**

**Participant Number:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PART A: Bio-Data**

Please answer the following questions:

1. Are you Male/Female? (please circle one)
2. How old are you?  
(please tick 1 box)      36-45       18-25       26-35   
46-55       46-55       over 55
3. Where are you from?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your first language?  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. How long have you been learning English?  
(please tick 1 box)      Less than 1 yr       1-3 yrs   
4-6 yrs       7-9 yrs   
Over 10 yrs
6. How long have you been in New Zealand?  
(please tick 1 box)      Less than 1 mth       1-3 mths   
4-6 mths       7-9 mths   
10-12 mths
7. What's the main reason you are doing this IELTS course?  
(please tick 1 box)      For entry into an N.Z. / overseas university   
For an Eng. language qualification   
As required by my job   
Other reason (please give your reason)   
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Have you taken IELTS before?      Yes       No   
If yes, when?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- What was your score:      Reading \_\_\_\_, Listening \_\_\_\_, Writing \_\_\_\_, Speaking \_\_\_\_,  
Overall \_\_\_\_?
9. Are you planning to take IELTS this year?      Yes       No   
If yes, what score do you need? \_\_\_\_\_

**PART B: Expectations of the IELTS course.**

Please complete the following statements.

1. I think the IELTS test is (please circle 1 number):  
 0 \_\_\_\_\_ 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5  
 Very easy \_\_\_\_\_ very difficult
2. In an IELTS preparation course, I think these language skills are  
 (please put a number in each box; **MOST IMPORTANT-1**; not important at all-4):  
 Listening  Reading  Speaking  Writing
3. After taking the IELTS course, I expect to get a high score when I take the IELTS test:  
 Yes  No   
 If yes, what score do you expect? \_\_\_\_\_
4. I expect the IELTS course to help me to learn how to organize my time for studying:  
 Yes  No
5. I expect the activities & tasks we do in class to be similar to the tasks in IELTS  
 (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
6. I expect to take IELTS practice tests in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
7. On the course I expect to learn general vocabulary (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
8. On the course I expect to learn grammar (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
9. On the course I expect to learn how to improve my general listening skills  
 (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
10. On the course I expect to learn about the kinds of listening tasks in the IELTS test  
 (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
11. I expect to watch TV programmes in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
12. I expect to listen to English language radio programmes in class  
 (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
13. I expect to practise conversation skills in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
14. I expect to practise formal discussion skills in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 often sometimes not often never
15. Do you expect anything else from the course? (please comment here)

**APPENDIX V**

**SURVEY II**

**SURVEY TWO: Expectations of the IELTS course.**

**Participant Number:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please complete the following statements.**

1. Having completed the IELTS course, I now think the IELTS test is  
(please circle 1 number):  
0 \_\_\_\_\_ 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 2 \_\_\_\_\_ 3 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_ 5 \_\_\_\_\_  
Very easy \_\_\_\_\_ very difficult
2. In an IELTS preparation course, I now think these language skills are  
(please put a number in each box; **MOST IMPORTANT -1**; not important at all **-4**):  
Listening  Reading  Speaking  Writing
3. Having taken the IELTS course, I now expect to get a high score when I take the IELTS test:  
Yes  No   
If yes, what score do you expect? \_\_\_\_\_
4. I found the IELTS course helped me to learn how to organize my time for studying:  
Yes  No
5. I believe the activities & tasks we did in class were similar to the tasks in IELTS  
(please put an **X** on the line):  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. I took IELTS practice tests in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
7. On the course I learned general vocabulary (please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
8. On the course I learned grammar (please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
9. On the course I learned how to improve my general listening skills  
(please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
10. On the course I learned about the kinds of listening tasks in the IELTS test  
(please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
11. I watched TV programmes in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
12. I listened to English language radio programmes in class  
(please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
13. I practised conversation skills in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
14. I practised formal discussion skills in class (please put an **X** on the line):  
often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ not often \_\_\_\_\_ never \_\_\_\_\_
15. Any other comments about the course?

**APPENDIX VI**

**FIRST INTERVIEW GUIDE**



## 1<sup>st</sup> Interview Guide

(Introduce self; say thank you for taking part in study. State date; participant number & interview number for tape).

Following the survey you filled in:

1. Why are you taking the IELTS course?  
(PROMPTS- what made you choose IELTS, rather than Business, General English?)
2. How easy/difficult do you think the IELTS test is?
3. What are your most **important** reasons for taking the IELTS preparation course?  
(PROMPTS- learn about the structure of the test  
- to improve general level of English  
- to find out how to answer IELTS questions  
- to get a high score in IELTS  
- to improve chances of work?)
4. What do you expect to learn on the IELTS course?  
(PROMPTS- refer to survey responses 4-10; ask HOW?)
5. What do you think are the most **useful** activities when studying for the IELTS test? What will help you learn most? What sort of things do you think you'll be learning?  
(PROMPTS- refer to survey responses 11-14).
6. How do you rate the different language skills?  
(PROMPTS- refer to survey response 2)
7. Do you think enough preparation will be taught for the language skills you rated the most important?
8. Do you have any questions or comments?

**APPENDIX VII**

**SECOND INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview Guide

(State date; participant number & interview no. for tape. Express thanks for filling in the 2<sup>nd</sup> survey).  
Following the 2<sup>nd</sup> survey you filled in:

1. Having completed the IELTS course, have you changed your opinion on how easy or difficult the IELTS test is?  
(PROMPTS- survey response 1)
2. Comparing the answers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> survey and the 1<sup>st</sup>, I noticed a few differences between what you expected & what was actually done in class. Do you have anything to add or comment on/ do you have anything to say?  
(PROMPTS- mention the differences 4-10)
3. What do you think were the most useful activities when studying on this course/ what things did you do in class to help you learn?  
(PROMPTS- refer to survey responses 11-14,  
- e.g. what **Speaking** activities did you do, specifically?)
4. Having completed the full-time IELTS course, how do you now rate the different language skills?  
(PROMPTS- refer to survey response 2)
5. Do you think enough preparation was taught for the language skills you rated the most important?
6. Overall, were your expectations met/ was the course what you expected/ did you learn what you wanted to learn?
7. Do you have any questions or comments?

Thank you for taking part in my study.

**APPENDIX VIII**

**FREQUENCY OF STUDENT EXPECTATIONS OF COURSE ACTIVITIES AND  
TASKS - Survey I**

**Frequency of student expectations of course work activities and tasks- Survey I**

Survey I		Frequency (% of respondents)			
Expectation	Survey question number	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never
1	5.Activities & tasks similar to IELTS tasks	70	20	10	
2	6.Take practice tests	70	30		
3	7.Learn general vocabulary	60	40		
4	8.Learn grammar	60	20	20	
5	9.Improve general listening skills	100			
6	10.Learn IELTS-type listening tasks	90	10		
7	11.Watch TV programmes	10	60	20	
8	12.Listen to radio programmes	10	70	20	
9	13.Practise conversation skills	70	30		
10	14. Practise formal discussion skills	50	40	10	

**APPENDIX IX**

**FREQUENCY OF STUDENT EXPECTATIONS OF COURSE ACTIVITIES AND  
TASKS - Survey II**

**Frequency of student expectations of course work activities and tasks- Survey II**

Survey II		Frequency (% of respondents)			
Expectation	Survey question number	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Never
1	5.Activities & tasks similar to IELTS tasks	30	50	20	
2	6.Take practice tests	50	40	10	
3	7.Learn general vocabulary	60	40		
4	8.Learn grammar	60	40		
5	9.Improve general listening skills	50	50		
6	10.Learn IELTS-type listening tasks	60	40		
7	11.Watch TV programmes			10	90
8	12.Listen to radio programmes		20	70	10
9	13.Practise conversation skills	80	10	10	
10	14. Practise formal discussion skills	50	50		

## **APPENDIX X**

### **COMPARISON OF LANGUAGE RATING SKILLS - 1<sup>ST</sup> AND 2<sup>ND</sup> INTERVIEWS**



## Comparison of Language Rating Skills - 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Interviews

<b>1<sup>st</sup> Interview</b>	<b>1 Most important</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4 Not at all important</b>
Listening	5	1	1	2
Reading	3	4	1	1
Speaking	6	0	3	0
Writing	3	3	1	1

<b>2<sup>nd</sup> Interview</b>	<b>1 Most important</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4 Not at all important</b>
Listening	1	4	4	1
Reading	5	1	2	2
Speaking	3	2	1	4
Writing	4	5	1	0