

IELTS as a Requirement for University Admission in Vietnam: How High School Students View the Role of IELTS Certificate

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DOI: 10.21549/NTNY.44.2024.1.4

English language education in Vietnam has attracted significant attention over the past few decades. In recent years, numerous universities have adopted international English standard tests, notably the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), for admission. While this policy has its proponents, it also faces criticism. This paper delves into high school students' perspectives regarding IELTS as a requirement for university admission in Vietnam. The study adopts metaphorical analysis as a methodological tool and illuminates the fact that, from students' viewpoints, IELTS presents numerous challenges. However, it concurrently opens avenues for academic and career advancement, fostering a transformative shift in students' thinking. The study implies that while Vietnamese universities can maintain the regulation of using IELTS as a requirement for admission, the critical role of IELTS should be reduced to lower the pressure on high school candidates.

Keywords: IELTS, High School Student, High-stakes Test, Metaphor, Metaphor Analysis, Vietnam

Current situation of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Vietnam

Vietnam is a Southeast Asian country with 54 ethnic groups, totalling nearly 104.8 million people, and Vietnamese is the official language (CIA-The World Factbook, 23rd January, 2024). The economic reform in 1986 resulted in an influx of foreign investment into Vietnam. With the growth of foreign trade, business, and tourism in Vietnam's modern market economy, the ability to communicate in English has turned into a ticket to a more respectable career. In education, English became one of the subjects officially taught in school.

In many non-English-speaking nations, such as Vietnam, the rise of English as a global language has significantly influenced language planning policies (Tran, 2020). English was introduced nationally between 1982 and 2002 as an optional subject at the lower secondary level, depending on the resources available to the school. It also became a mandatory subject at the upper secondary level (grades 10–12), taught in three periods per week (a period represents 45 minutes), totalling approximately 300 periods (Van Van, 2020). English is given a special status, second only to Vietnamese, the national language, in terms of time allotted and the knowledge and skills needed (Van Van, 2020). English has taken the lead among foreign languages taught in secondary and tertiary education. Maintaining a high level of English skills has become imperative as the language has gained popularity in order to improve Vietnam's ability to compete in the global political and economic spheres (Nguyen, 2011).

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In 2007, Vietnam officially became a member of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and hence, the role of English and English education became more emphasised. In political, educational, and popular discourses, English came to be associated with economic progress and wealth, igniting an "English language fever" across the nation (Van Canh, 2020, p. 9).

The use of English standard tests as a requirement for university admission

In Vietnam, higher education holds significant importance. Getting into a public university is seen as a crucial first step towards a successful career, particularly for those from rural areas or underprivileged backgrounds. Admission to university in Vietnam follows this process:

Firstly, high school students must take the "National High School Examination," in which mathematics, literature, and foreign language (often English) are the compulsory subjects, plus two elective subjects. Secondly, students use test results from 3 out of 5 subjects to apply to university. There are many blocks with different subjects for students to select. The following are the fundamental blocks and the subjects included: Block A: Chemistry, mathematics and physics; Block A1: English language, mathematics and physics; Block B: Chemistry, mathematics and biology; Block C: History, literature and geography; Block D: Foreign languages, mathematics and literature (vietnameducation.info, 2024). Students mainly choose English for the applications among foreign languages since most schools in Vietnam introduce English as a subject in their curriculums. A university's prestige frequently correlates with its students' test scores; higher scores often indicate a more prestigious institution.

In recent years, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and other international certificates have been used as a requirement for admission to universities and colleges. These certificates can replace either the English language as a subject or the entirety of all three subjects of a block (in some universities). At first, the University of Languages and International Studies used IELTS to enrol students in training programmes that use English as the primary language of instruction. Then, other educational institutions followed suit. By 2021, more than 60 training facilities in Vietnam required international certificates like the IELTS, TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), or SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test or Scholastic Assessment Test) to admit new students, among which IELTS is the most popular certificate (Vietnamnet.vn, 6th January 2022).

The popular justification for this policy is that institutions want to recruit qualified students with foreign language abilities by offering international training programmes and novel enrolment strategies. Universities utilise the IELTS and other certificates as recruitment standards because they wish to encourage global integration. Besides, the results of the English tests administered at the high school graduation exams in Vietnam are insufficient to determine a candidate's proficiency level in language competence and critical thinking. However, things are different with IELTS and TOEFL, which have been well-established and have had high reputations for decades. These changes to admission requirements show that Vietnamese institutions, particularly the best ones, increasingly see proficiency in English as a vital skill and a crucial factor in selecting applicants.

According to university regulations, candidates with IELTS certificates will have their scores converted into English National High School Examination scores. Normally, the maximum number of points for each subject in the exam is 10. However, candidates with good IELTS band scores can gain more than 10 points in English in some universities. For instance, according to the admission information of the National Economics University, in 2023, candidates with an IELTS foreign language certificate of 5.5 will have their scores converted into 10 points in English, an IELTS score of 6.0 will be converted into 11 points. IELTS 6.5 converts to 12 points.

IELTS 7.0 or higher is converted to 13 points. IELTS 7.5 converts to 14 points. IELTS 8.0 or higher is converted into 15 points (xaydungchinh sach.chinhphu.vn, 18th July 2023).

Universities	5.0 IELTS	5.5 IELTS	6.0 IELTS	6.5 IELTS	7.0 IELTS	7.5 IELTS	8.0 IELTS
Hanoi University of Science and Technology	8,5	9	9,5	10	10	10	10
Hanoi National University	-	8,5	9	9,25	9,5	9,75	10
Hanoi Law University	-	-	9	9,5	10	10	10
National Economics University	-	10	11	12	13	14	15
Academy of Journalism and Communication	7	8	9	10	10	10	10
Academy of Finance	-	9,5	10	10	10	10	10
Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology	8	9	10	10	10	10	10
University of Commerce	-	12	13	14	15	16	16
Ton Duc Thang University	7	7,5	8	8,5	9	9,5	10

*Table 1: IELTS conversion table at some top universities (2023)
(source: xaydungchinh sach.chinhphu.vn, 18th July, 2023)*

Consequently, the proportion of students accepted into universities with foreign language certifications has risen significantly. The rate soared at the National Economics University, going from 5% in 2017 to 30% in 2022 (vnexpress.net, 22nd November, 2022). However, this movement also created a new phenomenon often referred to as "Vietnam's IELTS fever" in the entire nation, followed by both positive and negative impacts.

Since students who are good at English will have a huge advantage, there is a race among high school students as they exert themselves to study English and take the IELTS exam because getting maximum scores in 3 subjects in the graduation exam (30 points) does not guarantee that they can secure a position in top universities. Students whose English level remains average are in the dilemma of taking the IELTS exam to trade their score or taking the English graduation exam.

It should be noted that, as in many other countries, higher educational attainment is often seen as a crucial milestone for each individual in many aspects of life. According to national data, upward mobility from low-income groups to higher-income groups is more likely among families led by individuals with higher educational attainment (vietnam.oxfam.org, March 2018). It represents an opportunity for individuals to improve their socioeconomic status, access better job prospects, and enhance their overall quality of life. Compared to their counterparts without this education, college or university graduates enjoy a statistically significant difference in the quality of employment (Trung et al., 2019).

Given the critical roles of higher education, when parents realise the huge advantages that IELTS brings to their children when it comes to university admission, many of them have poured a huge amount of money into reputable English centres in the hope that their kids can practice IELTS with the best English teachers, including native speakers. The cost for IELTS courses, especially with native English speakers, is exorbitant, and families whose financial situation is difficult find it hard to follow the trend. In other words, it is highly likely that kids born into affluent families will be equipped with a good command of English and more likely to be admit-

ted to top universities. This phenomenon may deepen the chasm between rich and poor in the country for the foreseeable future.

The study

Given that many Vietnamese universities adopt IELTS as a requirement for admission, this study examines the attitude of high school students towards the IELTS exam. Particularly, the research goal is to investigate the meaning of IELTS certificates to high school students.

This paper aims to answer one question:

How do high school students in Vietnam view the IELTS certificate, given the context that many universities use IELTS as a requirement of admission?

To answer the question, metaphor analysis as a methodological tool is adopted to uncover high school students' underlying attitudes and perspectives.

Literature review

IELTS as a high-stakes test

For those who aspire to work or relocate to English-speaking nations, or who seek to complete their education there, the IELTS exam is a must. It is now jointly administered by the British Council and IDP Education Australia. According to Hughes et al. (1988), the novel style of the IELTS exam reflects advancements in language assessment as well as shifts in the idea of language acquisition and instruction. As the number of candidates for the IELTS exam rises, so does the number of organisations, colleges, associations, and governments that accept IELTS scores.

For English language learners wishing to take the exam for academic or non-academic objectives, IELTS is taking on a gatekeeping function (Khoshsima, Saed & Mousaei, 2018). Policymakers use the results of these language proficiency exams to inform important choices in the academic and professional life of test-takers. The development of IELTS was guided by the ideas of communicative competency (Hayes, 2003). He further suggests that preparatory courses should ideally reflect an emphasis on language proficiency and the application of suitable study techniques, such as the utilisation of real-world problems, communicative language instruction, and a learner-centred approach that supports students' autonomy.

Much research has been carried out globally to look at issues related to IELTS. For example, Read and Hayes (2003) looked at how IELTS preparation courses affected overseas students' academic achievement as university students in New Zealand. The results of this study showed that the performance of the group who participated in preparatory programmes and the group that did not show a number of notable disparities. Elder and O'Loughlin (2003) found that after three months of intensive English language study, students' IELTS band scores showed an uneven improvement, averaging around half a band. The effect of IELTS preparation courses on applicants' performance in the General Training reading and writing exam modules was evaluated by Rao, McPherson, Chand and Khan (2003). The study emphasises how a number of elements, including time, motivation, anxiety, and the skill itself influences applicants' success in the IELTS exam and during the preparation programme. Hoa (2018) investigates test takers' attitudes to the test content of the IELTS and TOEFL iBT listening tests.

Several studies in the world place emphasis on the critical role of language exams. In Iran, for instance, the results of language proficiency exams like IELTS may significantly impact test takers' lives (Khoshsima & Mousaei, 2018). From students' viewpoints, it opens up a wide range of opportunities in the future. Dooley (2008) said that the outcomes of language exams have grown to be a significant factor in providing test takers with opportunities. Bridgeman & Cho (2012) even claim that language tests can be considered a "gatekeeper." The use of language examinations can have an impact on students' social and academic lives (Shohamy, 2001). Terry (2003) discovered that IELTS is vital for everyone, regardless of age, and said that IELTS applicants' high enthusiasm and sincere goals should be taken for granted. Tests can dictate to test takers what they need to know, what they need to learn, and what they will be taught (Shohamy, 2001). To the best of our knowledge, however, no research appears to have looked at Vietnamese high school students' perspectives on the IELTS certificate.

Metaphor analysis as a methodological tool

Metaphors, as linguistic devices, have been recognised as powerful tools for conveying complex ideas and facilitating understanding. Metaphor is about understanding or experiencing facts, concepts or objects according to something else (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Put simply, metaphor refers to the idea that one thing is meant to represent another (Huang, 2011), or compares one thing to another in order to describe it (Richards, 1936). In the educational realm, Botha (2009) defines metaphor as "seeing, describing or interpreting some unfamiliar educational phenomenon, event or action in terms of a familiar thing, event or action" (p. 431).

When attempting to examine and comprehend anything esoteric, abstract, innovative, or extremely speculative, metaphor is used (Yob, 2003). Hence, it could be said that students should be able to express their viewpoints towards the IELTS exam, as well as the distinct images of themselves as IELTS candidates. Metaphors can also be used to convey a difficult-to-express notion or emotion. Low et al. (2010) claim that metaphor is pervasive and essential for conveying abstract cognition. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) believe that people utilise metaphor frequently as a means of making sense of their lives and their circumstances.

Nonetheless, a single metaphor cannot adequately express the complexity of the educational phenomenon under study, and any phenomenon can be understood more effectively by a variety of metaphors (Botha, 2009). This means that a student might adopt more than one metaphor to describe their situation as well as their viewpoint towards the IELTS certificate.

Humans interpret life, their experiences, and even their sense of self through words and pictures (Mahlios, Massengill-Shaw & Barry, 2010). Thus, many scholars used metaphors to understand how someone relates a concept to another experience or idea. Korkmaz & Senol (2014) explore medical students' professional identity while Zhu, Rice, Li & Zhu (2022) focus on student teachers' professional identity construction. Metaphors are used to understand the attitudes of teachers towards reforms (Ungar, 2016) and beliefs about mathematics teaching (Noyes, 2006).

Methodology

Participants

The research comprises 51 high school students (27 boys and 24 girls), more than half of them (26 students) in grade 12, with ages spanning from 15 to 17 years, their age deviation averages at 16.3. They come from different schools of the country, but all of them attend English courses outside school. Their parents primarily con-

sist of local civil servants with moderate to decent income levels. Since the participants' English proficiency is rather good (their IELTS level ranges from 5.5 to 7.0), they decide to cram for the exam in the hope that they can increase their band scores and use their IELTS scores for admission. Most of them have been practising IELTS tests since they entered grade 10, some having even started their IELTS journey in secondary school. Their parents have spent a significant amount of money so their children can attend several IELTS preparation courses in English centres, and now is high time for them to focus and face the test.

Data collection instruments

In this study, metaphorical analysis is adopted to study students' perspectives. Metaphors are powerful linguistic and cognitive tools that reveal how individuals conceptualise and make sense of various aspects of their experience, including their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs (Mahlios, Massengill-Shaw & Barry, 2010). They also compare metaphors as means by which people conceptualise and eventually come to understand their life experiences. Researchers can gain insights into how people perceive and understand complex phenomena by analysing metaphors used in language and discourse. In this context, students can use metaphors to reveal their perspectives towards IELTS.

Procedure

The researchers used purposive sampling and snowball sampling to recruit participants. Participants were recruited online via social media, mainly Facebook and Zalo (a popular social media in Vietnam). Firstly, the researchers contacted some teachers who are working in high schools in Vietnam and asked them to contact their students. Recruitment letters, informed consent with a description of the research and passive consent forms were sent to the students and their parents. Information about the research included its purpose, confidentiality, and their rights as participants. Also, the research encouraged those who joined the study to introduce their friends who were also high school students and preparing for the IELTS test.

Secondly, the researchers explained what metaphor is and how metaphor can be used in qualitative research. The researchers gave a simple definition by saying that "metaphor is the way of simulating and comparing to better understand and explain your point of view." The researchers suggested that the participants come up with their own metaphor and use the same definition each time. These explanations are conducted online, using text messages on Zalo to exchange information.

Thirdly, the researchers developed text-based questions and sent them to the participants on Zalo. The metaphor questions are:

"Can you use a metaphor to describe an IELTS certificate?"

After sending the questions, the research further explained the meaning of the questions. The question means, "What can you compare the IELTS certificate to?" Most participants could respond easily and came up with original metaphors.

The research was improved by the Research Ethics Committee of the faculty with which the authors are affiliated.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within textual data. In this study, the thematic analysis developed by Clarke & Braun (2022) was used to ana-

lyse the metaphors collected. Thematic analysis is a versatile technique that may be used in a wide range of qualitative study types.

First of all, the researchers familiarise themselves with the text messages collected, paying attention to the language usage. Secondly, initial coding for metaphors takes place. Since the sample is small, the coding was conducted by hand. Specific metaphors are noted down.

The third step involves developing initial themes by grouping related metaphors into preliminary themes. The themes are kept closely tied to the underlying metaphors. The fourth step is reviewing and refining themes. The coherence and consistency of themes are evaluated in relation to the identified metaphors. The researchers refine and adjust themes as necessary to accurately represent the metaphorical patterns. The fifth step is defining and naming metaphorical themes (umbrella metaphors), which involves developing names that capture the essence of the metaphorical patterns. The sixth step is interpreting and considering the implications and deeper meanings associated with each metaphorical theme. Finally, the researchers review the analysis to ensure accuracy and coherence, especially in the interpretation of metaphors.

Findings

In total, 51 responses were gathered from participants. Certain responses were excluded from the dataset as they do not contain any metaphorical expression. For instance, one message is written “*victory is like a maze, forcing us to find the path and be happy for choosing that path*” (the student mentioned victory, but nothing about IELTS), another is written “*IELTS certificate plays an important role in my life*” (the student mentioned IELTS, but did not compare IELTS to anything). In summary, there are 47 valid responses to the question. It is interesting to observe that several participants utilised identical metaphors, particularly when likening IELTS to a “key” or a “door.”

Among the 47 metaphors describing IELTS certificate, many responses are positive. They admit the challenging nature of the exam, but most of them emphasise its importance. Only a few of them seem negative (“*battlefield*”, “*torture*”, and “*money-sucking machine*”).

The researchers categorise the metaphors collected into seven groups, summarised in the table:

Metaphors	Umbrella metaphors
A small trophy, a crown, the finishing line	IELTS as a trophy
A travel ticket is one major step to success, the door to university early, the key to opening the door to success, the door for work, passport	IELTS as a ticket
A tool to help achieve your goals, a ladder, the ship crossed the sea, an important tool, sneakers, a smartphone, a pho (noodle soup), a queen on the chess board, a war horse, a weapon, a lifebuoy	IELTS as a tool
Rock, a beautiful, elegant and proud girl who is difficult to conquer, mathematical problem, a special cage.	IELTS as a mountain
Battlefield, debt, torture	IELTS as a battlefield
A double-edged sword, a money-sucking machine, the key that helps me “open” my thinking	Others

Table 2: Summary of the metaphors for IELTS

IELTS as a trophy

Metaphors gathered from the first group underscore the profound significance students attach to obtaining an IELTS certificate. One metaphor likens IELTS to a “trophy”, while another portrays it as the ultimate destination, akin to crossing the “finishing line”. The sentiment suggests that achieving IELTS marks a journey's end, affording the luxury of resting on laurels. Notably, one student regarded IELTS as something so meaningful to himself and perhaps his family that he compared “owning an IELTS certificate is like wearing a crown.” His explanation for this comparison was “you will be confident and shine wherever you go!”, suggesting that holding an IELTS certificate is a mark of honour, excellence, and distinction in language proficiency.

IELTS as a ticket

The metaphor “IELTS as a ticket” resonates widely, with numerous participants employing similar imagery, such as a key, a door, a ladder, a ship, or a passport. These metaphors collectively convey the notion that IELTS serves as a catalyst for students to propel themselves forward. Within this category, the metaphors underscore the belief that IELTS opens up diverse avenues for personal advancement. Many students emphasise that IELTS functions as a transformative ticket or key, unlocking doors to a brighter future, providing an array of choices, and increasing opportunities for success. Some examples are: “IELTS certificate can be considered the key to opening the door to success. This key opens up many opportunities for me to study, work and live abroad.” Those who want to study abroad said, “IELTS is like a door to the world.” IELTS seems really multi-functional: “I’ll call IELTS a master key. The reason is that possessing an IELTS certificate helps you open up many opportunities in choosing universities at home and abroad, making it easier to apply for admission.”

One participant stood out by asserting that IELTS played a transformative role in reshaping his way of thinking. He claimed that “IELTS is the key to help you “open” your thinking, specifically thinking more clearly, because this is a very important factor if you want to get high scores in Writing and Speaking.” Achieving a high score on the IELTS test requires candidates to adhere to rigorous criteria. The practice of IELTS not only aids candidates in honing their language competence but also cultivates a clearer and more coherent thought process, enabling them to produce articulate and logically structured answers. In essence, IELTS serves as a dual tool, fostering both linguistic proficiency and sharpening the capacity for clear and logical thinking.

Notably, a significant number of students strategically plan to undertake the IELTS exam early, often before the second semester of grade 12. To accomplish this, they engage in IELTS training courses at English centres or with private tutors as early as grade 10, sometimes even during their secondary school years. By successfully completing the IELTS test in grade 12 with a satisfactory band score—some even obtaining an IELTS certificate in grade 11—they alleviate concerns about their English graduation exam. Consequently, they can focus exclusively on two other subjects among the three considered for university admission. That is the reason why a grade 12 student explained: “The IELTS certificate is a door to university early because the university entrance exam is now very competitive, so if I use the graduation exam score to consider getting into the university I want, it’s absolutely not possible.”

IELTS as a tool

This represents the second most prevalent theme. Initially, the researchers considered the “ticket” group (encompassing metaphors like *ticket*, *key*, *door*, *passport*, etc.) as a form of tool. However, upon reflection, the decision was made to delineate the theme into two distinct metaphorical categories: “ticket” and “tool.” The ra-

tionale behind this separation lies in the distinction that, within the "ticket" group, participants exclusively emphasised the significant opportunities brought about by IELTS. In contrast, within the "tool" group, participants acknowledged the importance of IELTS but regarded it as just one facet. In their perspective, IELTS merely serves as a support in their lives, and to achieve success, they recognise the imperative of standing on their own two feet. Some examples are: "IELTS is like sports shoes, which helps you move more comfortably. For example, when climbing a mountain, you will reach the top faster, but without it does not mean you will not be able to reach the finish line; it will just be slower." Likewise, three participants think IELTS is "like a ladder, it helps me go higher and more firmly. Strikingly, one student thinks IELTS is a smartphone: "Smartphones, just like IELTS, are quite popular today and are used by many people... but there are also many ways to communicate without a smartphone. It is necessary but not everything."

Another student shared the same opinion: "I think of the queen on a chess board. Because the queen is a strong piece, important but not everything." Besides, she added that "English is the language serving communication purposes, while the IELTS certificate is just a milestone marking part of your English ability." This is also similar to a participant who said: "IELTS is a warhorse; you are a warrior, going into battle, you will have an advantage."

Interestingly enough, one student compared IELTS with "pho" (a kind of noodle soup in Vietnam): "Studying IELTS is like eating pho. We can totally exist without using this type of food, but it gives us a new taste... We can also eat this food to explore unusual things, but we can not abuse it or make it become a main nutriment like rice, which is a traditional food of our culture."

It is crucial to highlight that Vietnam is currently in the midst of what is colloquially termed "IELTS fever," akin to the nationwide influence of *pho*. To grasp the students' responses fully, it is essential to delve into a cultural nuance: while *pho* is considered delicious, it is not a daily staple in Vietnamese diets. Instead, rice is the ubiquitous element consumed in almost every meal. Within Vietnamese culture, a saying, "eating *pho*," implies a desire for novelty to break the monotony of daily routines. By saying, "It gives us a new taste", the student means the introduction of IELTS as a requirement for admission to universities seems a new and innovative idea.

When the student emphasises that "we cannot abuse or make it (*pho*) become a main nutriment," they convey a message cautioning against overestimating the role of IELTS. This underscores the perspective that IELTS should not overshadow or replace all other subjects in the context of the university admission process. This viewpoint contrasts the sentiment expressed by students in the first group, where owning an IELTS certificate was likened to wearing a crown, suggesting a more elevated significance.

IELTS as a mountain

Within this category, participants perceive IELTS as both a challenge and an opportunity. The arduous process of preparing for the test is acknowledged as a formidable task. However, once they have successfully overcome this challenge, it is seen as a pivotal step in ascending the ladder of success, unlocking doors to many promising opportunities. For instance: "I am like a bird flying towards freedom, flying high in the university sky. But IELTS is like a special cage, requiring you to overcome it to achieve your dreams." One male student has romanticised the process of practicing IELTS: "IELTS is like a beautiful, elegant, and proud girl who is difficult to conquer. Nevertheless, once you conquer it, you will be happy. Similarly, another participant suggested: "Perhaps IELTS is like a rock blocking my path, but I believe that when I knock that obstacle away, it will open up many paths that I can choose." Sometimes, they ask rhetorical questions: "IELTS - the thing that beats me or is it a glorious achievement?"

These metaphors indicate that IELTS poses a substantial challenge for many students, and from a psychological perspective, there is a sense of gratification derived from overcoming the challenge. While IELTS may cast the shadow of potential failure, paradoxically, it is also the very instrument that can bring them glory if successfully conquered.

IELTS as a battlefield

Participants categorised within this group perceive IELTS as a source of considerable difficulty. In contrast to the "mountain group," the metaphors employed by these participants convey a more pessimistic viewpoint. One student claimed that "IELTS is a battlefield full of sweat and tears", and some others dropped short messages such as: "IELTS is torture" or "ELTS is debt."

Two metaphors suggest that IELTS is something unattainable. For instance: "If IELTS 9.0 is my crush, I will never have it." The other student drew a vivid metaphor, likening IELTS to "Golden grapes dangling on the roof of a skyscraper," while he compared himself to the fox (in the fable "The fox and the grapes"), acknowledging the preciousness of the grapes but emphasising the challenges in reaching them.

Other metaphors

Some metaphors do not fall into any of the themes mentioned above. Therefore, the researchers classified them as "other metaphors."

For instance, out of the 51 participants, just one adopted a macro perspective on IELTS. Just as IELTS can represent both a challenge and an opportunity for an individual, this viewpoint recognises that at a broader societal level, IELTS can yield both advantages and disadvantages. He used the image of a "Double-edged sword" to describe IELTS and explained that IELTS would have both positive and negative sides: "On the positive side when universities use IELTS to enrol students, it means that many students will focus more on studying English, the English language level of Vietnamese people will go up. However, given the current social environment in Vietnam, everything related to certificates and achievements is negative. Two situations might happen: boning up for the test or buying points to buy a certificate." The participant also added his comment: "I feel that the IELTS certificate is no longer so valuable in evaluating students' ability."

Also, one participant wrote that, "IELTS is a money-sucking machine, and I am the money giver!" The metaphor "money-sucking machine" has indicated that, overall, it is exponentially costly if students decide to pursue IELTS.

In addition to those themes, certain metaphors can fall into two distinct groups simultaneously. For instance, one participant suggested that the IELTS certificate is "like a passport with no limit in quantity, but not everyone is qualified to achieve it." This metaphor aligns with both the "ticket group" and the "mountain group," signifying that IELTS serves as the key to many students' success while presenting a formidable challenge to overcome.

Discussion

Overall, the collected metaphors (*trophy, ticket, tool, mountain, battlefield*) reveal that from Vietnamese high school students' perspectives, IELTS can bring them glory, great opportunities for their future, as well as a lot of challenges and students must exert themselves to achieve the certificate with a desirable score. From the five umbrella metaphors, we can highlight the two main features of IELTS: *crucial* and *challenging*. Although the

metaphor “*double-edged sword*” means that if people attach too much importance to IELTS, it will bring some drawbacks (fraudulent and fake scores, etc.), the hidden reason behind this act is that because IELTS is important, and it is challenging to conquer, which explained why some individuals have attempted a shortcut.

IELTS is crucial

The metaphor “*IELTS as a trophy*” hints at the paramount importance of IELTS in students' perspectives, sometimes overshadowing contemplation of their future beyond acquiring a desirable score. Possessing an IELTS certificate emerges as a noteworthy accomplishment among high school students in Vietnam.

In fact, from 2023, certain universities such as Hanoi Pedagogical University, Lotus University, and Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry exclusively require an IELTS certificate for admission without factoring in performance in other subjects. This unique admission criterion implies that a grade 11 student securing an IELTS score of 6.5, for instance, would automatically gain admission to one of these universities. Such students can then enjoy their entire grade 12 without the stress of securing a position at these institutions. This circumstance elucidates why some candidates liken IELTS to a key that unlocks the door to university admission at an earlier stage.

Remarkably, when used for university admission consideration, the graduation exam ensures a maximum of 10 points—a stark contrast to the formidable influence of IELTS, which can potentially grant a candidate an impressive 15 to 16 points. Given that top-tier universities typically demand a substantial total score, some students express a sense of despondency when stating, “*If I rely on the graduation exam score for university admission to my desired institution, it's undoubtedly implausible.*”

The study reveals the perception of the pivotal importance of IELTS to high school students in Vietnam, given the context that a number of universities in Vietnam use IELTS as a requirement for admission. The role of IELTS is also emphasised in other countries in the world, and IELTS is often regarded as a “*high-staked test*” (any test used to make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or districts, most commonly for the purpose of accountability (edglossary.org, 18th August 2014)). These findings align with many studies worldwide where the importance of language tests in general and IELTS in particular has widely been discussed.

IELTS is challenging

The findings from the study also indicate that IELTS is really challenging for Vietnamese high school students. These metaphors poignantly illustrate the formidable nature of the IELTS test. One student compared IELTS to “*an ocean*”. Despite being a language test, IELTS encompasses a diverse range of academic topics that may be unfamiliar to students. Candidates are required not only to comprehend these topics but also to articulate and write about them. This multifaceted challenge is likened to “*swimming in the ocean of knowledge*”, reflecting the need to accumulate extensive topic vocabulary, along with grammatical knowledge and language skills.

Many metaphors have revealed that IELTS is regarded as a huge challenge (*rock, mountain, cage*, etc.) that students need to overcome if they want a better future in their academic journey and career path, though there exist some negative viewpoints towards the exam (*battlefield, torture, debt*). Compared with some studies in the world, this outcome seems rather different. For instance, according to Rasti (2009), IELTS test takers had favourable sentiments towards the test. According to research participants, the IELTS exam accurately assessed their “*linguistics and communicative competence*” (p. 145). Suryaningsih (2014) also found that overall, IELTS test-takers have a positive attitude towards that test. Participants in his study had good perceptions of

the topics on the IELTS exam despite not being familiar with them. They claimed that because the topic in the IELTS test was not discussed in depth, they still found it manageable.

Perhaps the explanation for this distinction is that the general English competence of Vietnamese students remains low. Vietnamese students struggle with fundamental grammar, a restricted vocabulary, and poor pronunciation. Their listening skills are considerably worse than their writing and speaking abilities, which are both extremely constrained (Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Since their English proficiency remains limited, it is understandable that many students struggle with preparing for the exam.

The costs associated with pursuing IELTS present challenges not only the students but also their families. The IELTS 2023 examination fee is set at 4,750,000 VND (approximately \$195), including a government-imposed 10% VAT rate (suckhoedoisong.vn, 30th March 2023). This cost appears exorbitant given the fact that, in the first quarter of 2023, the average monthly salary for salaried workers and employees was around 7.9 million VND (statista.com, 13th June 2023). Notably, to prepare for the test, parents often find themselves incurring additional substantial expenses by enrolling their children in English centres. Driven by the "fever" for foreign language certificates, families spare no expense, making significant investments in their children's training to achieve top scores (dantri.com.vn, 2nd June 2023).

IELTS at a macro level – every coin has two sides

As previously analysed, the perceived value of IELTS as something precious (*gold, a crown, a vital tool*, etc.) has led some individuals to resort to extreme measures to obtain the certificate with a desirable band score. Consequently, a disturbing trend of scams has emerged on the internet. In these fraudulent schemes, scammers often pose as collaborators or claim affiliations with entities responsible for organising the IELTS exam, allowing them illicit access to test questions before the official test date. In their desperation to navigate the challenges posed by the test, certain candidates seek shortcuts and are willing to spend significant amounts of money to purchase predicted test questions.

In October 2022, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) abruptly halted the organisation of the IELTS test. The rationale behind this decision was rooted in concerns that the collaborative administration of foreign language certification examinations in Vietnam did not entirely align with the established regulations governing joint examination organisations in the country. This non-compliance resulted in several adverse incidents reported by both domestic and foreign media, including instances of proxy test-taking, document fraud, and falsification of records (tuoitre.vn, 10th November 2022). However, just a week later, MOET reversed its decision and sanctioned the resumption of IELTS test administration to ensure minimal disruption for the candidates (baotintuc.vn, 17th November 2022).

Conclusion

The study endeavours to uncover the viewpoints of high school students in Vietnam regarding the IELTS test in light of the prevailing trend where most universities in Vietnam have adopted IELTS as an admission requirement. The results show that high school students have different perspectives towards IELTS. They believe that IELTS is an achievement, that it will guarantee them a brighter future, or that it merely supports them. Others think that IELTS will bring opportunities and challenges at the same time or solely a burden. These results not only contribute to the diversity of the literature but also shed light on the current state of education in Vietnam and allow conclusions to be drawn.

While IELTS encourages students to make more effort to master English, the shortcomings of using IELTS for admission should not be overlooked since it has encouraged a race in IELTS scores. Additionally, language exams have the power to classify individuals in such a way that, based on the test results, some individuals will be labelled as winners or losers, successes or failures (Shohamy, 2001). Thus, this policy seems to dig a deeper chasm between students who manage to enter universities and those who do not. Also, it might widen the gap between rich and poor in the country, since students with better family finances will gain an edge and be better able to practice IELTS in English centres compared to disadvantaged ones, given the fact that pursuing IELTS is highly costly.

Therefore, it is recommended by the researchers that universities can use IELTS for admission but should try to avoid fierce races in IELTS scores. According to Ciccarelli (2001), higher education institutions worldwide generally consider an Overall Band Score in the Academic modules of between 6.0 and 7.0 as proof of English language competency. Therefore, if no one can get an extra point even if they have an IELTS score higher than 6.5, they will focus more on other more necessary subjects for their future careers.

The study has some limitations due to the subjective nature of metaphors. Also, some metaphors are culture-specific, resulting in some difficulties in interpretation and explanation. Further studies can be conducted to see if the same findings can be obtained by repeating this study in other countries. Although, based on the findings, some suggestions have been provided to cope with the problems that high school students in Vietnam are facing, further studies can investigate the extent to which governments, parents, and schools can support students in this educational context. In addition, the researchers plan to investigate the use of IELTS as a requirement for admission in universities from the viewpoints of teachers to provide a more comprehensive picture of this educational policy in Vietnam.

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Az IELTS mint egyetemi felvételi követelmény Vietnámban: hogyan látják a középiskolás diákok az IELTS bizonyítvány szerepét

Az angolnyelv-oktatás Vietnámban jelentős figyelmet kapott az elmúlt évtizedekben. Az elmúlt években számos egyetem fogadta el a nemzetközi angol nyelvi standard tesztet, nevezetesen a Nemzetközi Angol Nyelvvizsgarendszert (IELTS) a felvételihez. Bár ennek a politikának vannak támogatói, kritikával is szembesül. Tanulmányunk a középiskolásoknak az IELTS-sel, mint az egyetemi felvételi követelményével kapcsolatos nézeteit vizsgálja Vietnámban. Módszertani eszközként metafora-elemzést alkalmaztunk, amely rávilágít arra, hogy a diákok szemszögéből az IELTS számos kihívást jelent, ugyanakkor egyidejűleg utat nyit a tanulmányi és karrierépítéshez, és elősegíti a diákok gondolkodásának átalakulását. A tanulmány rámutat továbbá, hogy bár a vietnami egyetemek fenntarthatják az IELTS felvételi követelményként való használatának szabályozását, az IELTS domináns szerepét csökkenteni kellene, hogy a középiskolai jelentkezőkre nehezedő nyomás csökkenjen.

Kulcsszavak: IELTS, középiskolás diák, magas követelményű vizsga, metafora, metaforaelemzés, Vietnám