

**ТЕОРИЯ И МЕТОДИКА ОБУЧЕНИЯ И ВОСПИТАНИЯ (ПО ОБЛАСТЯМ И УРОВНЯМ ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ) /
THEORY AND METHODS OF TEACHING AND UPBRINGING (BY AREAS AND LEVELS OF EDUCATION)**

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**IELTS EXAM AS AN INDICATOR OF CHANGES IN ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING AT A UNIVERSITY
LEVEL**

Research article

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Abstract

The article discusses current incentives of technical students to study English and achieve tangible results through the lenses of internal IELTS exam. After the formal IELTS exam board left Russia, NUST MISIS set up its own exam centre, which administered the final exam at the end of the English course in compliance with all international standards. However, although all requirements were observed, the internal exam did not result in receiving a formal certificate. The data from the pilot 2023 year demonstrated a sharp decline in B2/C1 levels as compared to 2019, with a parallel growth in the number of absentees. Having anticipated this situation, the authors conducted a survey on students' motivation two months in advance of the exam. The comparison of willingness of 1st and 4th year students to take internal and external IELTS revealed similar trends, with less than half in both years admitted that that needed an internal exam, but 63 and 67% would welcome the opportunity to get a formal certificate. This lack of motivation led to an increasing proportion of students not coming to the exam (about 37% in 2023), where low-level students predominated and among those who started from B2, only 10% were absent. The main motivational factor for advanced students was future career, and many respondents also mentioned interest and enjoyment of studying a foreign language. Grades did not play any important role in both groups. The results might indicate that in current circumstances, the choice should be made in favour of a flexible curriculum, which takes into account students' proficiency and motivation.

Keywords: IELTS, proficiency levels, motivation, engineering students, assessment.

**МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ ЭКЗАМЕН IELTS КАК ИНДИКАТОР ИЗМЕНЕНИЙ В ПРЕПОДАВАНИИ
АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА В ВУЗЕ**

Научная статья

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются мотивационные факторы к изучению английского языка для студентов технических специальностей через призму внутреннего экзамена IELTS.

После того как официальный центр по приему IELTS покинул Россию, в НИТУ «МИСиС» был создан собственный экзаменационный центр для организации итогового экзамена по окончании курса английского языка. Экзамен проводился в соответствии со всеми международными стандартами, но итоговым документом был вузовский сертификат. Данные пилотного 2023 года продемонстрировали резкое снижение уровней B2/C1 по сравнению с 2019 годом, при параллельном росте количества не пришедших на экзамен студентов. Предвидя такую ситуацию, авторы за два месяца до экзамена провели опрос о мотивации студентов. Сравнение готовности студентов 1-го и 4-го курсов сдать внутренний и внешний IELTS выявило схожие тенденции: менее половины респондентов признали необходимость внутреннего экзамена, однако 63 и 67% приветствовали бы возможность получить формальный сертификат. Отсутствие мотивации привело к увеличению доли студентов, не пришедших на экзамен (около 37% в 2023 году), где преобладали студенты с низким уровнем знаний, а среди тех, кто начинал с B2, отсутствовало лишь 10%. Основным мотивационным фактором для студентов старших курсов была будущая карьера, также многие респонденты отметили интерес и удовольствие от изучения иностранного языка. Оценки не играли важной роли в мотивации в обеих группах. Результаты могут свидетельствовать о том, что в нынешних условиях выбор следует сделать в пользу гибкой учебной программы, учитывающей уровень подготовки и мотивацию студентов.

Ключевые слова: IELTS, уровни владения языком, мотивация, студенты инженерных специальностей, оценивание.

Introduction

IELTS is an internationally recognized English-language exam, which plays a role of a gatekeeper in tertiary education [1], [2]. Although in Russia the language of instruction for engineering students is mainly Russian, a few universities with a profound English language program have a compulsory IELTS exam as summative assessment in the course [3] or a prerequisite to study at a foreign partner university [4]. It serves several purposes, such as an objective CEFR-based grade (band), academic test tasks and clear criteria for assessment [5].

NUST MISIS has been running IELTS as a final exam since 2014, with all engineering students taking it in the 4th year of their bachelor studies. All the results up to 2021 have been carefully recorded, analysed and described [6].

Since 2021, there has been much turbulence in English studies, and it has had a dramatic effect on the learning environment. Winters 2021 and 2022 were the times of COVID-19 pandemic, so no large scale testing was possible. However, as a certified IELTS Students International test center accepted candidates in small parties for an online test (called *external exam hereafter*), we were able to obtain an objective picture regarding at least B2 and C1 levels. In 2022, IELTS testing center suspended its operations in Russia, and no valid results were collected. Nowadays, getting an official certificate is only possible provided a candidate travels abroad [7].

In 2023 with the establishment of an in-house IELTS testing center at MISIS, all the 4th year students were required to take the exam online under strict supervision (hereafter called *internal exam*). Obviously, the test results in 2023 are objective and reliable again. Other changes the university has made in the weight of IELTS in the student's final grade. If before 2019 passing the exam on an admissible grade was announced as a prerequisite of completing the English language program, starting from 2018 IELTS grade was just converted into score points in the seventh semester, ranging from 10 to 20 out of 100.

In our evaluation of students' success in mastering English we stated that it depends on many factors, such as their initial level of English proficiency, the number of contact hours [7], [8] and, above all, students' motivation to demonstrate high results.

Motivation is widely acknowledged as a significant factor in learning, alongside with hard work, effective study strategies and supportive environment [9], [10], [11]. As Dörnyei [12, P. 117] claims, "motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process". According to this scientist, an important feature of learners' motivation is its impermanence and variability.

There is a common agreement that motivation can be of two kinds [13]. Intrinsic motivation comes from the enjoyment of encountering the foreign language inside and outside the classroom. The sense of accomplishment might also be a powerful factor affecting the willingness to learn. However, an engineering student in his or her final years of bachelor degree studies is a "conscientious consumer" [9, P. 62], who carefully evaluates the achieved result against time and effort put into it. Different researches who studied washback effect of international exams on teaching learning noted its controversial nature [14], [15], where clear goals and explicitly taught skills have a beneficial effect on motivation, but the rigid format and repetition of the same tasks impedes creativity and ignores development of other useful skills. Samorodova [3] analysed the survey conducted among students majoring in STEM disciplines and humanities and reported that 93% increased motivation through development of critical thinking skills, ability to analyse and presents statistical data and academic writing. However, some needs, especially the ones related to creativity, were neglected.

The aforementioned research was conducted in 2015, at the time when the opportunity to get an official certificate confirming the level of English proficiency used to be a strong extrinsic motivator, regardless of a real or potential need to have it in order to study abroad or work in a foreign company in Russia. Since the time when IELTS center suspended its work in Russia, such opportunities became limited, although language centers provide assistance in obtaining the official certificate abroad [7]. Another factor is obtaining a grade and get a graduation diploma, but it also depends on a current situation and attitude in each particular university.

This paper presents the students' achievements in the English language program in dynamics from a pre-covid and pre-official IELTS-leaving Russia period to the current year. As the decline in the proportion of B2/C1 students was obvious, as well as the exam attendance, the authors conducted a survey of the 1st and 4th engineering bachelors to get some insight into motivational and demotivational factors affecting the program. These findings may help English language course designers better adapt programs to the current situation.

Research methods and principles

Before 2020 all technical students at NUST MISIS took IELTS in paper format in two separate streams. Those who demonstrated good enough results in a mock IELTS test (Band 5.0 and higher) were admitted for an external exam, while the others did the same format exam, but internally and not resulting in an official IELTS certificate. Since 2018, getting a threshold grade ceased to be compulsory, and the result was assessed as 10 or 20 points in the total semester grade.

After the introduction of in-house IELTS test centre in 2023 all students took the internal exam online in the MISIS premises under teachers' strict supervision. The valid IELTS certificate was not available any longer, so the value of the exam scores was still just 20 points to the semester grade. At the beginning of the final semester, all 4th year students were placed in groups corresponding to their level at the moment – Book 4.5; Book 5.5 and Book 6.5.

Prior to the exam, which took place in January, in November we conducted a survey among the 1st and 4th year students to get insight into their attitudes and motivation. An interviewer visited classes and asked all students present to complete a Google form with four questions anonymously. All questions were in Russian so that students with poor command of English could also participate. The responses from 302 out of 1064 students in the 4th year and 262 out of 1323 students in the 1st year were used for the estimations and analysis.

The questions under scrutiny in this paper were:

1. Is it necessary to have an internal but standardised exam at the end of the course? Choose *Yes, No or Hard to say*.
2. If you could take an official certified exam, would you use this opportunity?
Choose *Yes, No or Hard to say*.

3. Specify the reason for taking/not taking part in IELTS and obtain a certificate if given the opportunity. Choose one option:

- need the certificate for further studies or career;
- need diploma credits;
- have a low level of English;
- am not interested;
- find it hard to say.

4. What motivates you to study English? (an open-ended question).

Main results

The results of the most successful (2019) and the current (2023) year internal IELTS exams are shown in fig. 1. Despite the fact that initial levels in 2020 were almost twice as high as in 2016, with 66% and 35% B1/B2 respectively, there was a noticeable decline by 24% in B2/C1 levels at the final exam. Parallel to this, a much higher proportion of 4th year students did not attend the exam.

The overwhelming majority of those who chose not to attend IELTS had studied by a low-level book (fig. 2), advanced students accounted for only 10% of all absentees.

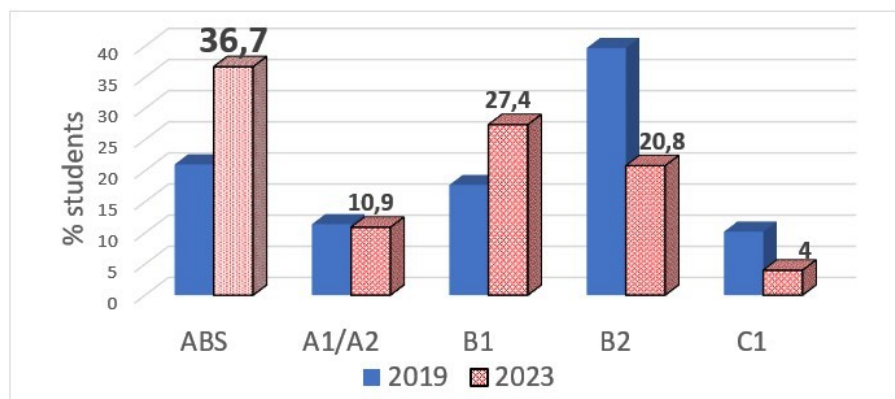


Figure 1 - IELTS results in 2023 as compared to 2019

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These data might suggest that even the internal IELTS exam result is an asset for a graduate student, provided that the band is high. If a student assumes that the chances of passing it successfully are low, and the maximum reward for attendance could be 5 or 10% of the grade in the semester, they abstain from sitting it.

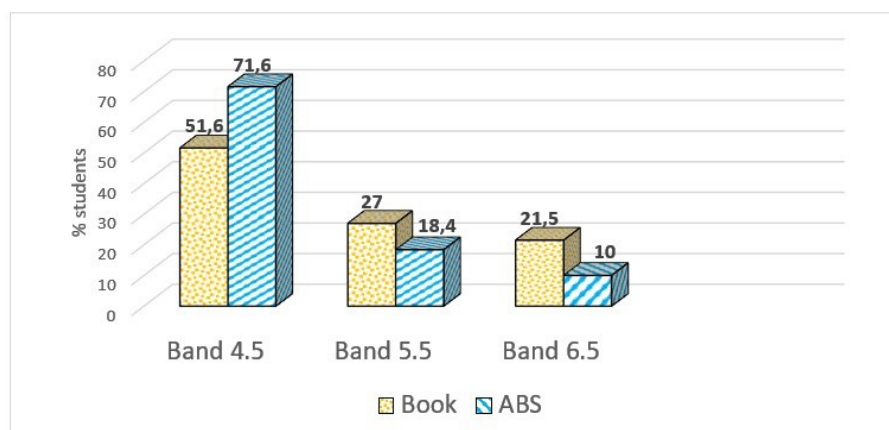


Figure 2 - Absentees by level

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The data prompted us to assume that low results in the final test could mean that now students did not see explicit incentive to work hard on their English and pass IELTS successfully. The survey conducted during class hours gives some insight into the 1st and 4th year students' attitude to the exam at the end of the four-year long English course. As can be seen from Table 1, the majority of the 4th year students do not see the need for internal IELTS (51%), while most of them would welcome the chance to get a formal IELTS certificate (63%).

The 1st year bachelors have a more positive attitude to the exam, with just 31% negative answers, but the trend is the same. The percentage of enthusiastic students is higher if formal IELTS is possible. It is interesting to note that even freshers are not absolutely sure that IELTS is absolutely needed (table 1).

Table 1 - Students' incentives to take internal and external IELTS, by year of studies

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Students' incentives to take internal and external IELTS, by year of studies.	1 st year		4 th year	
	Internal IELTS	External IELTS	Internal IELTS	External IELTS
YES	41	67	28	63
NO	31	12	51	26
HARD TO SAY	28	21	21	11

At the time of the survey, we did not know how many students would attend the internal exam and what bands they would get, but in the questionnaire they were offered several options for attending or skipping the exam. They had to choose one reason among the following:

I am not interested; I have a low level; I need a certificate for my future studies or career; I need good grades in my diploma; It is hard to say. The results shown in figure 3 indicate that low level students aiming at IELTS Band 4.5 were not interested in taking the exam (almost 60% altogether), although they might have realised that it would be beneficial for their future professional life. Conversely, for advanced students studying by a C1 book, further studies and career took the lead (80% of all responses). Quite unexpectedly, grades did not play any significant role in students' motivation, with only Book 5.5 demonstrating noticeable proportion among all four factors.

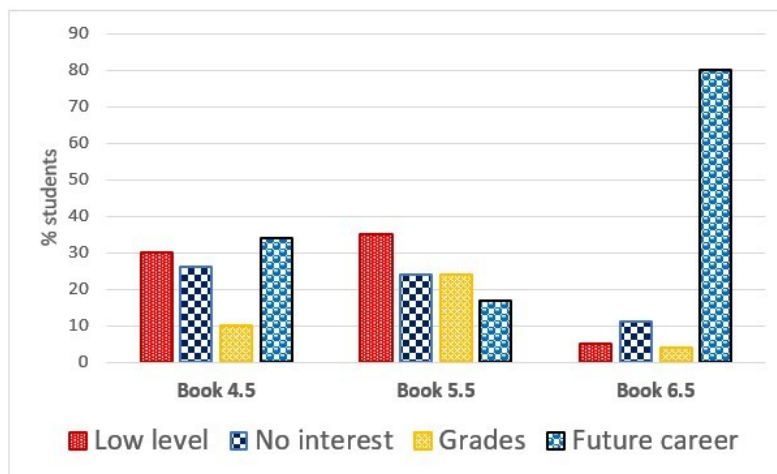


Figure 3 - Reasons for taking or not taking internal IELTS

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These findings suggest that the success of the program depends primarily on engineering students' motivation to study English. According to the survey conducted among both the 1st and the 4th year students, the main motivators are future career (50% and 35%, accordingly) and interest (40% and 38%). The replies noted that respondents intended to use English for reading scientific articles, "becoming part of international scientific community", "building professional relationships", or that they just assumed that good command of English was a valuable asset for their career.

"Interest" is a broad concept that implies different interpretations. Some wrote that it is "love and interest in learning foreign languages", or the ability to communicate in English while travelling abroad, others wanted to play games, read a book or watch films in the original. Another reason for studying English was that "English broadens horizons" and is an "essential soft skill".

Grades again played a minor role in students' motivation, with only 4% and 9% of respondents mentioning them. On the whole, graduate students were less motivated to study English as compared to freshers because of two main reasons:

1. *At an institute related to engineering sciences, the workload is already more than heavy, even without English classes in the 4th year. We have to work on a graduation paper, start building a career, attend extra classes on hard skills. In my opinion,*

such a detailed and in-depth study of the English language is impractical and takes too much effort and time, which is not enough by definition, in the senior year.

2. The last three semesters have already destroyed my interest. The classes turned into a regular repetition of all parts of IELTS in turn, without any new information. If before it could have been justified by the opportunity at the end to receive an official exam certificate at the university, now it's just tormenting.

Conclusion

Having a final exam administered in strict compliance with international standards is a great asset for NUST MISIS English language program, enabling to measure its efficiency in dynamics. All recent changes in learning environment have resulted in a noticeable decline in IELTS results in 2023 as compared to 2019. The main objective reason for this trend is a current status of the IELTS exam, when an official certificate confirming the level of proficiency is unavailable. Although the university retained the whole procedure and started to issue in-house documents, their value for students evidently decreased.

It is a well-known fact that motivation plays a crucial role in learning, especially when adults are concerned. According to our survey, 4th year students are fully aware of how to set priorities in their graduate year, and engineering subjects together with getting work experience take precedence over other interests and obligations.

These findings might mean that it is time to rethink the ultimate goals of the English language program and make it more flexible to accommodate the current reality. As there are students who are strongly motivated to master the foreign language for their future studies, career or outside interests, they must be provided with the opportunity to do an advanced course and take an external exam somewhere abroad. For low-motivated students, taking IELTS might not be necessary, and their studies should be focused on English as a soft skill. Such program flexibility could lead to a more rational use of teaching resources and greater students' satisfaction.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Рецензия

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

Review

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