

Efficiency of teaching English vocabulary and grammar on the basis of assignments in IELTS format

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effects of teaching English vocabulary and grammar to EFL learners through the assignments in IELTS format. The authors designed a computer-based test to evaluate the efficiency of teaching English vocabulary and grammar on the basis of assignments in IELTS format. A pre-test and a post-test were the main instruments used for data collection. The participants of the study were made to do a post-test to assess their performance based on the vocabulary and grammar learning through the tasks in IELTS format. The results of t-test for correlated data proved that the training produced a positive effect on the EFL learners' results.

Key words: vocabulary teaching, grammar teaching, grammatical structures, vocabulary acquisition

Introduction

The reform of the education system as a whole and the transformation of higher education are very closely related to those alterations that take place in the country's social life, as they directly reflect the trends of society development.

Modern Russia, which has entered the international education area, is targeted at improvements in the education system, the adaptation of national characteristics of higher education to international standards and training standards. The modernization of the education system is accompanied by significant changes in the pedagogical theory and organization of the educational process aimed at implementation of innovative approaches to teaching and learning that ensure the possibility of integration of international educational standards into the education system of the Russian Federation on the basis of full-fledged relevant partnership and cooperation.

Education innovations are reflected in the integral components of the learning process: curriculum, teaching methods and the teaching process itself. Understanding the type of learning styles formed enables teachers to design materials for courses so that they are equally well understood and assimilated by all students (Kubrushko et al., 2018). The strategic goal of the national education system is to make qualifications obtained in Russia recognized worldwide, to give graduates of Russian universities, as well as young scientists and graduate students, the opportunity to continue their education or improve their qualifications in foreign educational institutions.

The development of international cooperation in the economic and political fields, the international character of scientific activity, and the collaboration of higher education institutions raise the question of improving the quality of foreign language teaching at higher education institutions. It is evident that even if a graduate or a postgraduate student has proper professional training, the degree of effectiveness of international educational exchange programs or global publication activity depends directly on the level of the language communicative competence. This competence is best developed in the context of activities or tasks where a foreign language is used for real purposes, in other words, in practical applications.

According to the Federal State Educational Standards (2009a, 2009b), students should acquire the following competencies in the field of knowledge of a foreign language:

- at the bachelor level: the ability to communicate in oral and written forms in the Russian and foreign languages; readiness to work in an international environment
- at the master level: readiness for oral and written communication for solving professional problems.

There are some approaches such as individual, systemic, communicative that offer certain ways of learning the framework of categories and concepts. However, the insufficient level of knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, which can be observed in practice among undergraduates and graduates of non-linguistic higher education institutions, hampers the development of foreign communicative competence and reduces the adequacy of the perception of international academic literature, regardless of the methods used in teaching.

Thus, IELTS tests offer students to demonstrate how grammar and vocabulary material studied during the classes can be implemented in practice, and this is the primary task of the competency-based approach.

Literature Review

The Importance of Vocabulary and Grammar

It is traditionally thought that «... grammar has primacy over vocabulary. Vocabulary items were just vehicles to explain grammatical structures. ... in most traditional textbooks, grammar comes first, and it is only later that reading and vocabulary are introduced» (Rhalmi, 2016). On the other hand, vocabulary acquisition plays a crucial role in EFL teaching because a learner with insufficient vocabulary will not perform well in every aspect of language itself. Widdowson (1990) suggests reversing the traditional pedagogic dependency, beginning with lexical items and demonstrating how they should be grammatically modified to be communicatively effective as «teaching which gives primacy to form and uses words simply as a means of exemplification actually denies the nature of grammar as a construct for the mediation of meaning». His more natural and more effective approach permeated the fact that vocabulary is the basis for the development of the four fundamental skills of language learning: reading, listening, speaking and writing. A leading linguist researcher Nation (1990) argues that «Vocabulary is not an end in itself. A rich vocabulary makes the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing easier to perform». By and large, vocabulary helps students understand others or express their ideas.

With regard to vocabulary acquisition, Wilkins (1972) claims that «. . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed». According to Lewis (1993), «fluency does not depend so much on having a set of generative grammar rules, as suggested by Chomsky, and a separate stock of words as on having rapid access to a stock of lexical chunks. In the lexical approach, lexis is central in creating meaning, and grammar plays a secondary role in managing meaning». Once students develop greater fluency and expression in English, it is essential for them to learn more productive vocabulary and to build their own personal vocabulary learning strategies. To put it differently, EFL teachers should encourage students to develop their stock of phrases and spend less time explaining grammatical structures. A large number of vocabulary items is a must for reading and presumably listening ability. It is evident that an insufficient number of familiar vocabulary items cause a problem in reading activities as the linchpin of any interpretation of the meaning of any text, without question, is the lexicon. Reading a text with most of the words learners are unfamiliar with makes it difficult for them to understand it as the lexicon is a major contributor to meaning.

It has been suggested that students often intuitively recognize that vocabulary is dominant in language acquisition. Schmitt (2010) claims that learners prefer carrying around dictionaries to bringing grammar books. Vocabulary teaching is aimed at assisting students to understand and communicate with others in English.

English vocabulary is complex, with three main aspects related to form, meaning, and use, as well as layers of meaning connected to the roots of individual words (Nation & Meara, 2010). Teaching vocabulary is not just about words; it involves lexical phrases and knowledge of English vocabulary and how to go about learning and teaching it.

Despite the fact that in a traditional teaching grammatical concepts are taught first, and then lists of key vocabulary are presented separately, grammar and vocabulary are interconnected. Hunston, Francis and Manning (1997) suggest that all words have patterns and that teachers should emphasize these patterns as a way of spurring the four crucial aspects of language learning: understanding, accuracy, fluency, and flexibility. Patterns contribute to the teaching of both grammar and vocabulary. They can form a part of any syllabus, but are most logically associated with a lexical syllabus».

Thus, the language should be considered in conjunction with the various components that make up one whole. Believing that grammar should have supremacy over other components is a mistake that needs to be corrected if we want to accurately describe how the language works and how it should be taught.

Assignments in IELTS Format Containing Relevant Vocabulary and Grammar

The analysis of the literature and Internet resources on this topic showed the availability of sufficient language resources for preparing for IELTS exam, as well as a large amount of information covering the format of this international exam. In this regard, it is advisable to be familiar with IELTS format, highlight its features, and also consider assignments in IELTS format containing relevant vocabulary and grammar.

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is an English language proficiency test that serves as a gatekeeping mechanism for students to enter an international university in the many European countries where English is used as the language of teaching, studying and communicating. The test results are reported on a band scale of 1 to 9; 1 is the lowest score, and 9 is the highest one. It comprises reading, writing, speaking and listening sections.

Multiple factors influence the candidates' success in attaining the best results. However, one particular influence is the ability to demonstrate correct and appropriate grammar, the use of a wide range of sentence types, including some complex sentence types in both speaking and writing; strong vocabulary knowledge.

Insufficient vocabulary is indeed a serious problem for most students. It complicates their listening, reading, writing, and speaking, which is the reason why much attention is given to expanding their lexicon. One of the aims of the Reading Module, therefore, is to enrich learners' vocabulary (Smirnova, 2016).

The fundamental aspects of expanding vocabulary putting in place, a principled approach have been investigated by Jelena (2018). Milton and Alexiou (2009) studied the importance of placing back into the framework vocabulary size measures to help to make the framework more robust. The skills-based criteria have the virtue of making the framework flexible and highly inclusive, and almost any course, textbook or learner should be able to find a place in the system. However, the penalty for such flexibility is that the levels become imprecise; it is often possible to place learners or textbooks at several of the CEFR levels. This potentially devalues the framework and diminishes its usefulness. Petrichcheva (2014) recommended implementing modern technologies in teaching vocabulary for IELTS. Teachers can utilize resources to tailor individual lessons while providing a platform that can assist in delivering and monitoring such lessons to a group of learners greater than a few individuals. Teachers also allocate time to practice topic-based vocabulary, emphasizing pronunciation and stress. Classes can be held in special language laboratories, where students have an opportunity of working in pairs (with the teacher monitoring electronically) or can record their verbal responses for further analyses, as well as

interact via microphone with groups of classmates, or the teacher individually. Such a facility allows exposure to a degree of authentic speech in a safe environment. Ivanova, Ivanov and Lyashenko (2017) proved the efficiency of introducing various thematic tasks that facilitate students' involvement into the work related to writing in the IELTS format: studying the collocations and completing the sentences; sentences' transformation using derivatives/synonyms/antonyms; finding the correct/incorrect words in the sentences; using the phrases in the paragraph; completing the sentences with the expressions of quantity/preposition/relative pronoun/collocations etc.; matching the expression to the definition.

Lynch and Anderson (2013) focused on the key areas of English grammar that were needed to express the ideas correctly and appropriately in academic writing. Those areas included the primary distinctions of meaning in the verb tense system, the use of modal verbs to express degrees of certainty and commitment, and alternative ways of grouping and ordering written information to highlight the flow of the argument. Ashmarina and Abdullaeva (2017) found out that the authors of IELTS textbooks included mainly grammar exercises to master students' skills of using accurately linking words, passive voice, relative clause and conditionals. Verma (2016) proposed the use of a translation method as a tool to help students learn English in the multicultural environment and strengthen their language competence.

Based on these investigations we developed a computer-based test to control students' vocabulary and grammar level and the guidelines for teaching English vocabulary and grammar on the basis of assignments in IELTS format.

Methodology

The following methods have been used in our research: theoretical (analysis of pedagogical, scientific and methodological literature on the topic of study, generalization, using inductive reasoning, hypotheses or preliminary generalizations, system analysis and synthesis, comparison, analogy, classification); empirical (observation, computer-based test was designed to test efficiency of teaching English vocabulary and grammar on the basis of assignments in IELTS format). To prove the significance of the results we conducted a t-test, using an online calculator.

The test was developed by applying the following rules:

- The test task should be set clearly, avoiding ambiguity
 - All test tasks should be aimed at monitoring the effectiveness of learning grammar and vocabulary
 - One task test is focused on checking only one aspect of knowledge
 - The test task should not reflect the subjective view
 - The test task should not contain generalizations such as "always," "sometimes," "never," "ever."
 - Such variants of answers as "Yes," "No," "All the answers are correct," "All the answers are wrong," "No correct answer," "No wrong answer" are forbidden
 - There should be no unintentional prompts in the tasks and the sample answers.
- They help to guess the right answer without having sufficient knowledge and skills. It is necessary to exclude all verbal associations that facilitate the choice of the correct answer by guessing.

The computer-based test includes different types of assignments to check the level of English vocabulary and grammar (Table 1).

Table 1: Types of test-based tasks: characteristics

Types of test-based tasks	Methodological Features	Examples
Open-ended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have a range of appropriate responses • take longer to complete • assess a range of knowledge and skills • provide information about problem-solving strategies and thinking • enable learners to demonstrate higher levels of understanding 	<p>Q: Guess the word from the definition. The first letter of the word is given.</p> <p>S: Objects, especially very old objects, of historical interest are defined as a ###.</p> <p>+: artefacts</p>
Closed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have one correct answer • can be completed quickly • assess one specific piece of knowledge, or a particular skill or procedure • provide limited information about student thinking • provide limited opportunity for students to demonstrate higher levels of understanding 	<p>Q: Choose the best word to complete the sentence.</p> <p>S: The population ... for developing countries are predicted to decrease over the next 50 years.</p> <p>-: levels</p> <p>+: figures</p> <p>-: quantities</p> <p>-: amounts</p> <p>-: numbers</p>
Matching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have one correct answer • can be completed quickly • assess logical thinking • check the associative knowledge (knowledge of the relationship between definitions and facts, authors and their works, forms and content, essence and phenomena, the relationship 	<p>S: Match the adjectives with their definitions.</p> <p>L1: dynamic</p> <p>L2: hard-working</p> <p>L3: supportive</p> <p>L4: talkative</p> <p>L5: wise</p> <p>L6:</p> <p>R1: active, energetic, forceful</p> <p>R2: characterized by hard work and perseverance</p> <p>R3: to help someone believe they can do something</p> <p>R4: friendly and open and</p>

	between various objects, properties, laws, formulas, dates) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> enable learners to demonstrate higher levels of understanding. 	willing to talk R5: having or prompted by wisdom or discernment R6: showing concern for the rights and feelings of others
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The system allows us to group different types of tests into different source sets, with different tasks of test and separate them into different test tasks.

The validity of the Computer-based test was checked by the specialist of the Testing Center of the university to assure that the tasks designed correspond to the purpose of investigation. A special application form was filled in and given to the Testing Center to avoid any technical problems during the test. The application form contained time, date and description of the test (Table 2).

Table 2: Test Description

Section	Subsection	Theme	Number of questions on the theme	Number of questions given on the theme
Control Character of the 1 st level – V1:	Control Character of the 2 nd level – V2:	Control Character of the 3 rd level – V3:		
Theme 1 IELTS Basics			47	0
Theme 2 Writing task 1	2.1 Introductory sentence		20	0
	2.2 Overview		10	0
Theme 3 Grammar	3.1 Prepositions	3.1.1 Matching	20	0
		3.1.2 Multiple choice	28	0
		3.2 Types of adverbial clause	17	0
		3.3 Phrasal verbs	10	5
		3.4 Negative affixes	25	10
		3.5 Used to, would and be/get used to	21	5
		3.6 Verb Tenses	17	5
		3.7 Conditionals	16	5
		3.8 Dealing with figures	8	0
		3.9 Relative Clause	39	5
	3.10 Adjectives	19	5	
Theme 4 Linking words			10	0
Theme 5 Vocabulary			46	10
Total:			353	50

Research Stages

This study was conducted in three stages from 2016 to 2018. The first, analytical stage (2016-2017) was devoted to justifying the relevance of the research problem, the level of its development; defining the purpose, the tasks and the hypothesis of the research; studying and analyzing scientific literature. At the second, experimental stage (2017-2018) we introduced a model of teaching English vocabulary and grammar related to IELTS topics focused on three significant aspects: form, meaning, and use; designed a computer-based test to check efficiency of teaching English vocabulary and grammar on the basis of assignments in IELTS format; proved its validity and reliability involving independent experts. At the third, generalization stage (2018), conclusions of the study are made, analysis, systematization, and generalizations of the results are presented.

Discussion and Results

When teaching English vocabulary related to IELTS topics we focused on three crucial aspects: *form*, *meaning*, and *use*. Nation (2001) suggests that the *form* of a word includes its pronunciation or spoken form, spelling or written form, and any word parts that make up this particular item such as a prefix, root, and suffix. For example, the *form* of the word *irreplaceable* can be explained through word parts: the prefix *ir-* means *negative* or *opposite*, *replace* is the root word, and *-able* is a suffix denoting that somebody or something can do something. In this example, they all go together to refer to someone or something that is too special, unusual, or valuable to replace with something or someone else, hence *irreplaceable*.

Besides, the students' attention was drawn to the receptive lexical knowledge of the *form* of the word through the following questions: What does the word sound like? What does the word look like? What parts are recognizable in this word? And productive dimension by focusing on how the word is pronounced, written and spelled and what word parts are needed to suggest the meaning. For form, meaning and use we followed both a receptive and a productive dimension stated by Nation (2001).

When guessing the meaning of the word (What meaning does this word form signal?), students should consider the concept (What is included in this concept?) and what it refers to, and the associations that come about when they think of a particular word or phrase (What other words does this make people think of?). Productive knowledge of this aspect might be generated by the following questions:

- What word form can people use to express this meaning?
- What items can the concept go with?
- What other words could people use instead of this one?

The *use* encompasses the grammatical functions of a word or expression, combinations of words that usually go with it, and constraints on its use regarding frequency, level, etc. Receptive lexical knowledge is based on the answers to the questions regarding the patterns the word occurs; the words or types of words that occur with this one; where, when, and how often people would expect to meet this word. Productive dimension refers to the questions which are as follows:

- In what patterns must this word be used?
- What words or types of words must people use with this one?
- Where, when, and how often can people use this word?

Vocabulary aims to build students' knowledge of words and phrases. Helping them learn any of these different components assists them in enhancing their English vocabulary knowledge and use.

When teaching English grammar to EFL students through the assignments in IELTS writing sections, we drew learners' attention to the accurate and flexible use of a range of grammatical structures, including complex structures. It is essential for learners to

be aware of the structures they are using. Achieving the best balance between demonstrating a range of grammar knowledge and flexibility, without allowing your language to become overly complex and difficult to read requires a lot of practice. Here are some things EFL learners can do:

- Study different grammar patterns
- Analyze model answers to see how other people use a variety of grammar
- Read and analyze texts related to common IELTS topics that students can find in English newspapers and a variety of online sources.

The main instruments that were used to collect quantitative data are a pre-test and a post-test. Vocabulary and grammar sections of the mid-term test were utilized as the post-test. The participants' assessments were based on their performance in the pre-test before the training period. After they had undergone 8-month training, they were given the post-test. The same set of questions was used both in the pre-test and the post-test to increase the validity of the tests. The results of the pre-test and post-test were compared to find out if at all teaching English vocabulary and grammar on the basis of assignments in IELTS format has produced a positive effect on the EFL learners' results.

The pre-test was aimed at assessing the students' existing vocabulary and grammar knowledge obtained during their study at school and making sure that the participants were all at the same level of language proficiency. The sample comprised a total of 40 undergraduate students studying English vocabulary and grammar through the assignments in IELTS format.

The purpose of this study was to perform an analysis that would cover the relationship between the marks in the pre-test and post-test which are the two variables considered to predict or evaluate the extent to which the training undergone by the participants was effective. The *T-Test Calculator for 2 Independent Means* was used to find out if at all, the training produced a positive effect on the EFL learners' results (Table 3).

Table 3: Results of the Pre-Test and Post-Test: Computation

Number of students ($N_1 = N_2$)	Pre-test / Treatment 1 (X)	Diff (X - M)	Sq. Diff (X - M) ²	Post-test / Treatment 2 (X)	Diff (X - M)	Sq. Diff (X - M) ²
1	52	-7.78	60.45	54	-13.75	189.06
2	50	-9.78	95.55	72	4.25	18.06
3	60	0.22	0.05	82	14.25	203.06
4	40	-19.78	391.05	42	-25.75	663.06
5	68	8.22	67.65	66	-1.75	3.06
6	60	0.22	0.05	72	4.25	18.06
7	62	2.22	4.95	64	-3.75	14.06
8	46	-13.78	189.75	72	4.25	18.06
9	50	-9.78	95.55	56	-11.75	138.06
10	70	10.22	104.55	58	-9.75	95.06
11	56	-3.78	14.25	68	0.25	0.06
12	70	10.22	104.55	62	-5.75	33.06
13	76	16.22	263.25	74	6.25	39.06
14	56	-3.78	14.25	76	8.25	68.06
15	68	8.22	67.65	78	10.25	105.06
16	54	-5.78	33.35	64	-3.75	14.06
17	70	10.22	104.55	80	12.25	150.06
18	40	-19.78	391.05	48	-19.75	390.06
19	60	0.22	0.05	44	-23.75	564.06
20	44	-15.78	248.85	72	4.25	18.06
21	85	25.22	636.30	80	12.25	150.06
22	60	0.22	0.05	86	18.25	333.06
23	54	-5.78	33.35	46	-21.75	473.06
24	50	-9.78	95.55	66	-1.75	3.06
25	50	-9.78	95.55	70	2.25	5.06
26	34	-25.78	664.35	66	-1.75	3.06
27	60	0.22	0.05	74	6.25	39.06
28	74	14.22	202.35	76	8.25	68.06
29	72	12.22	149.45	78	10.25	105.06
30	68	8.22	67.65	76	8.25	68.06
31	60	0.22	0.05	84	16.25	264.06
32	40	-19.78	391.05	62	-5.75	33.06
33	72	12.22	149.45	56	-11.75	138.06
34	72	12.22	149.45	74	6.25	39.06
35	38	-21.78	474.15	50	-17.75	315.06
36	80	20.22	409.05	76	8.25	68.06
37	88	28.22	796.65	84	16.25	264.06
38	68	8.22	67.65	76	8.25	68.06
39	82	22.22	493.95	78	10.25	105.06
40	32	-27.78	771.45	48	-19.75	390.06
		M: 59.78	SS: 7898.98		M: 67.75	SS: 5673.50

Significance Level: 0.5

Difference Scores Calculations

Treatment 1

$N_1: 40$

$df_1 = N - 1 = 40 - 1 = 39$

$M_1: 59.78$

$SS_1: 7898.98$

$s^2_1 = SS_1/(N - 1) = 7898.98/(40-1) = 202.54$

Treatment 2

$N_2: 40$

$df_2 = N - 1 = 40 - 1 = 39$

$M_2: 67.75$

$SS_2: 5673.5$

$s^2_2 = SS_2/(N - 1) = 5673.5/(40-1) = 145.47$

T-value Calculation

$s^2_p = ((df_1/(df_1 + df_2)) * s^2_1) + ((df_2/(df_2 + df_2)) * s^2_2) = ((39/78) * 202.54) + ((39/78) * 145.47) = 174.01$

$s^2_{M1} = s^2_p/N_1 = 174.01/40 = 4.35$

$s^2_{M2} = s^2_p/N_2 = 174.01/40 = 4.35$

$t = (M_1 - M_2)/\sqrt{(s^2_{M1} + s^2_{M2})} = -7.98/\sqrt{8.7} = -2.7$

The t-value is -2.70373. The p-value is .004207. The result is significant at $p < .05$.

Since H_α in the given problem is one-sided, the one-tailed test has been applied. Our obtained value of p-value =0.004207 is less than the critical value at the 0.5% level. As such, The result is significant at $p < .05$ and accordingly, H_0 should be rejected.

This has resulted in the inference that there is a positive relationship of statistical significance between the two variables (the marks scored by the students in the pre-test and post-test respectively) as proposed by the alternative hypothesis. As a result, it is concluded that the findings of the present study well demonstrated the efficiency of the training. Our conclusion is precisely the same as we would arrive at using the *t*-test for correlated data.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study are in line with many of the previous studies which have discovered the importance of English vocabulary and grammar teaching for enhancing students' learning performance, language communicative competence to be competitive in the international educational and future professional environment.

The students achieved great learning outcomes by the end of the 8-month training program based on teaching English vocabulary and grammar through the assignments in IELTS format. Findings indicate that the proposed learning strategy improved the students' vocabulary and grammar achievement.

The major limitation of this study is that the research findings are based on the practice in a single institution. A suggested future research area is to adopt the methodology developed in this project to conduct research in several universities with the purpose of obtaining a broader picture of teaching English vocabulary and grammar through the assignments in IELTS format.

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