

Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of the Effect of Cultural Background in the IELTS Listening Test

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Abstract: *This study examined the effect of culturally-specific items on the performance of Arab candidates on the IELTS Listening Test. Using an online survey and focus-group discussions with 16 IELTS teachers and 32 IELTS candidates at Al Ain University in Abu Dhabi/the United Arab Emirates, the current study showed that the independent variable, i.e., 'culture' has a negative impact on the candidates' performance. The results revealed that the most culturally-loaded section of the IELTS Listening Test is Section 1, followed by Section 2, Section 3 and Section 4, respectively. The results also demonstrated that the culturally-specific items included in the Listening Test had a negative effect on the candidates' answers who were not aware of certain cultural aspects referenced in the test. The study concluded with some recommendations that aim to improve the cultural awareness of Arab candidates.*

Keywords: applied linguistics, Arab IELTS candidates, culture, IELTS listening test, language assessment

1. Introduction

The process of learning a foreign or second language involves mastering the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills help second/foreign language learners understand and use information, whether spoken or written, in the target language. There are a number of English language proficiency tests to assess the language proficiency of learners in these four domains, including the IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, and Cambridge ESOL. In the context of testing the listening skill, candidates are required to listen to a sample of spoken language, then answer questions intended to assess their understanding of what is being said. The overall objective of developing the listening skill is to improve learners' ability to comprehend verbal communication effectively and accurately in different contexts (see Hamdan and Al-Hawamdeh, 2018). Viewed as an indicator of communicative performance by teachers, educationalists and researchers, the listening test is an integral component of standardised tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Individuals who are brought up in a particular country share a structured system of communication. This system entails the use of

vocal signals and written symbols for communicating ideas, experiences and cultural beliefs. Non-native speakers of English operate within a different cultural matrix. Thus, many linguists have carefully investigated the ways in which culture affects the linguistic behaviour of a particular community (e.g., Baker, 2015; Kuo and Lai, 2006; Sun, 2007). These studies have argued that a target language is never fully learned in isolation of its cultural roots. This, according to Brown (2000: 177), indicates that: “A language is a part of culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.” Thus, modifying a test to limit the occurrence of culturally-specific items or helping candidates understand such cultural references and terms is crucial. This is because the absence of a comprehensive understanding of the interlocutor's culture may result in misinterpretations and affect the individual's communicative performance.

Several researchers (e.g., Göbel and Helmke, 2010; Kuo and Lai, 2006; Tomalin, 2008) have addressed the role of cultural understanding in the process of learning a foreign language and have suggested the integration of the target language culture into the EFL classroom. More importantly, Vernier et al. (2008) argue for teaching culture as a fifth language skill to enhance learners' cultural awareness. Based on the above, it can be argued that lack of familiarity with culturally-specific references can have a negative impact on one's language proficiency. Integrating culture in the EFL/ESL classroom enhances and develops students' linguistic understanding and interpretation of different nuances of meaning present in the target language (Altakhaineh and Zibin, 2014). Few research studies have been conducted in the relevant literature to investigate the effect of culturally-specific references on the performance of IELTS candidates in the Listening Test. The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating the ways in which a divergent cultural outlook influences the performance of Arab IELTS candidates on the Listening Test in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) context, by adopting qualitative data elicitation techniques. This study aims to provide valuable insights into one of the most widely used language proficiency tests in the world, IELTS, and into the methods of assessment used to measure the listening skills in that test. Additionally, exploring IELTS candidates' views about and experiences of the difficulties they have been facing with culturally-specific aspects of English may provide valuable feedback to the British Council, Cambridge University and IDP Australia to review some of its testing techniques and materials, which in turn, would result in a revised version of the test to obtain a less culturally biased experience to take the IELTS exam.

2. General background

2.1 The IELTS listening test

Knowledge of the English language has now become a necessity globally-- a major *lingua franca*. It is a tool for success in science and academia, in education and for global population interaction. Growing interest in studying and immigrating to the USA, Canada and the United Kingdom among other Anglophone countries by UAE citizens is reflected by the increasing demand for IELTS certification. All higher

education institutions operating in the UAE consider IELTS scores as an accurate indicator of a person's ability to pursue an academic degree. This is to a large extent because of the fact that no institute of higher education in the UAE has Arabic as its medium of instruction, although some subjects such as Arabic or Islamic Studies may be taught in Arabic (Hamid, 2014). Hence, IELTS scores are seen as a likely indicator of success in these English language-medium courses.

Figures show that IELTS is the most popular English language exam in the globe with over 3.5 million tests taken in the last year (IELTS British Council 2019). IELTS is specially designed to assess a candidate's proficiency across the four language skills mentioned in Section 1. According to Pearson (2019), IELTS is used to measure both the academic and general training levels of English proficiency, the former undertaken for admission to tertiary education, the latter usually for immigration purposes. The IELTS listening module comprises four sections and evaluates, in approximately 40 minutes, an examinee's ability to understand spoken English in different contexts. While Section 1 and 2 assess comprehension of everyday conversation, Sections 3 and 4 evaluate comprehension of academic discourse. In section 1, candidates are simulated to a real social interaction between two people and are required to extract specific information in social contexts, e.g., finding out about a product in a shop, negotiating and getting a good deal, ordering food at a restaurant, or complaining to the manager, or understanding the doctor's instructions. Section 2 has the same objective as Section 1, but the stimulus is an excerpt from a monologue in which the language used is technical and specific to the topic in question, e.g., understanding the details of a guided tour, understanding detailed information about travel, and reporting an incident to the emergency services. In Section 3, candidates are exposed to a discussion between 2, 3 or 4 people set in an academic or training context which involves the negotiation of meaning, e.g., understanding official processes, debating issues, understanding course requirements, talking about study plans. Finally, Section 4 has the same objective as Section 3, but the stimulus is a monologue on a technical or academic subject. It is a lecture or talk of general academic interest such as a university lecture. Below is a summary of the IELTS Listening topics for each section:

Table 1. IELTS listening sections including their focus, topic and number of questions

Section	Focus	Topic	Number of test questions
1	Conversational/Transactional (2 speakers)	General topic (e.g., a product, restaurant, accommodation, finding out about travel services)	10
2	Monologue/ Transactional (1 speaker)	General topic (e.g., touring, holiday plan, camping, transportation)	10

		3 Conversation/ Academic, e.g., giving information about a public event	
3	Conversation Academic/ training (2+ speakers)	Academic topic (e.g., workplace, place, ecology) a conversation in an academic setting between two students planning a research project and their tutor	10
4	Monologue Academic/ training (1 speaker)	Academic topic (e.g., history, theory, philosophy, e.g., a lecture or talk of general academic interest such as a university lecture	10

The focus of the current study is on the Listening module in the context of Arab EFL candidates sitting the IELTS test in the UAE.

2.2 Cultural awareness of the target language

Language and culture are indivisible; culture influences the ways a language is used and interpreted by a specific community. Because of such influence, communication between EFL learners and native English speakers is misled by a gap which EFL learners are sometimes unable to overcome. Previous studies have already linked the cultural aspect of language with the difficulties learners of a language face while communicating with speakers of that language (see Alptekin, 2002; Clarke et al., 2009; Altakhaineh and Zibin, 2014; Altakhaineh, AL-Tkhayneh and Rahrouh, 2019). Specifically, Altakhaineh and Zibin (2014) noted that there is clear evidence that Arab EFL learners have inadequate understanding of the interconnection of language with culture. Their study revealed that EFL learners transfer their cultural knowledge from Arabic into English, be it in speaking or writing. As a result, Altakhaineh and Zibin (2014) considered EFL learners' understanding of the implied cultural connotation of words in the target language to be of utmost importance. This understanding, they went on to say, may help EFL learners better understand what other native language speakers mean and may help them improve their communicative ability. In a similar vein, Altakhaineh, AL-Tkhayneh, and Rahrouh (2019) investigated the effect of the gender and culture of the IELTS examiner on the performance of Arab examinees on the IELTS speaking test. The study has demonstrated that the gender of the IELTS examiner can impact the performance of Arab examinees on the IELTS speaking test. The study has also shown that the examiners' cultural background had a negative effect on the responses of the Arab examinees who, being unfamiliar with the examiner's culture or customs, failed to understand certain cultural aspects related to the questions

asked in the IELTS speaking component and vice-versa. To that effect, it has been suggested that the Emirati examinees could have adopted a conservative approach when answering the examiners' questions and that the IELTS speaking examiners may have perceived the examinees as unable to converse in what he/she perceives as thoughtful and meaningful conversations.

Likewise, multiple research studies show that the cultural aspect is a significant barrier which learners of English as a foreign language encounter when communicating with native speakers. For this reason, some researchers (e.g. McDevitt, 2004; Remache, 2016) have argued that if learners of English are to communicate effectively with individuals from the English-speaking world, they need to be aware of and understand the culturally-specific references present in the native speakers' thoughts. Thus, one can argue that if non-native speakers of English are to respond effectively in a social context, then recognizing and comprehending culturally-specific references is a prerequisite. In the same way, the ability to interpret and understand culturally-induced items can be regarded as essential for effective second language acquisition. Abramson et al. (2014) see culture as a complex system of interrelated components covering language, traditions, beliefs and values that are shared by a group of people. This is to say that the culture of a speech community shapes and influences the type of interaction and behaviour patterns that occur between individuals of this community when conversing in a given social context. As described earlier, culture encompasses a wide array of components: values, customs and beliefs which form an invisible bond between individuals of a specific community. Ilter and Guzeller (2005) suggest that 'culture' can also be understood as a belief system that binds members of a society together around a set of norms, symbols and values. Following on from this, one can argue that in fact cultural conventions condition human thought and behaviour, which is to say that if we are to interact effectively with people from other cultures, then developing a knowledge of these cultural conventions becomes crucial. In the context of language learning, lack of comprehensive understanding of the interlocutor's culture may lead to communication breakdowns. Drawing on the above, Wetheim and Agar (2012: 1) assert that non-native speakers "may misinterpret their interlocutors' intentions and utterances, and their own well-meaning attempts to produce "appropriate" speech may be misinterpreted in turn." Hence, a lack of socio-cultural knowledge may negatively influence the linguistic behaviour of an individual trying to engage in a conversation with an interlocutor coming from a different cultural background. This paper addresses these ideas and attempts to determine whether the culturally-specific vocabulary of the target language embedded in the IELTS Listening Test can influence the performance of Arab EFL learners.

2.3. Studies tackling the design of the IELTS listening test

According to Aryadoust (2011) until very recently, no published research has focused exclusively on the IELTS listening module. Pakhiti (2016: 14) reiterates what Aryadoust had advanced five years earlier, that the IELTS Listening Test is the least researched of the IELTS test modules. The literature reviews relevant to

IELTS assessment of the four English language skills shows that the Listening Module is the least discussed in the body of published research. In fact, upon further investigation, most of the studies found were associated with the cognitive processing involved in the IELTS Listening Test rather than with the difficulty candidates encounter when exposed to a culture-driven spoken discourse (Nakatsuhara, Inoue, and Taylor, 2017; Phakiti, 2016).

Winke and Lim (2014) conducted a study to measure the effects of testwiseness and test-taking anxiety on candidates' performance in the IELTS Listening Test. Three groups were surveyed; one control and two treatments (63 learners in total). The findings confirmed the existence of a negative correlation between test-taking anxiety and the test-takers' listening performance. The results also showed that increased testwiseness improved test-takers' prospects of achieving a high score. The results of his findings correlated with those of Field's (2009) and Winke and Lim's (2014) studies. Furthermore, Phakiti (2016) investigated the factors that influenced test-takers' performance in terms of mental processing and the use of language while undertaking the IELTS Listening sub-tests. The results suggested that there was a positive relationship between their performance on the four sections of the test.

In the context of the IELTS listening module, being aware of the cultural aspect of the target language makes it less difficult for candidates to understand the speaker's utterances and allows for an efficient processing of meaning. Hence, it can be argued that familiarity with the cultural concepts embodied in the target language eases understanding to a great extent.

In a relevant study, Merrylees (2003) asserted that the skills needed to succeed in the IELTS listening comprehension go beyond metacognitive awareness and the employment of listening comprehension strategies. The results of the survey showed that some IELTS candidates encountered difficulty dealing with the subject matter and they unanimously agreed that the more they moved through the test, the more difficult the test became. This may be due to the existence of unfamiliar vocabulary in the last two sections of the test which is in line with the view of Adolphs and Schmitt (2003) who suggested the level of difficulty of the spoken discourse may increase if listeners are faced with infrequent lexical phrases. They also proposed that in listening comprehension, vocabulary knowledge is more important than cognitive recognition and that higher listening scores have been associated with better vocabulary knowledge (see Stæhr, 2009).

In an additional study, Farangiet et al. (2017) examined whether schema theory and dynamic assessment can be used to evaluate IELTS listening comprehension. Informed by Poehner (2008) procedures and based on Vygotskian Socio-Cultural Theory, the researchers used a pre-test-enrichment post-test interactionist procedure to undertake a dynamic assessment (DA) of learners' listening abilities and also made use of shadowing and semantic maps to examine the effectiveness of schema theory strategies in enhancing EFL learners' listening capabilities. In this two-phase study, two groups of 42 EFL participants (20 males and 22 females), a DA group and a schema theory group took part in the experiment. The DA group of participants were subjected to a pre-test-enrichment-post-test

design, whereas a pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening design was adopted for the schema theory group. Findings showed that both groups' listening abilities developed from pre- to post-test, but the schema group performed far better in the listening post-test.

In light of the current limited evidence in relation to the effect of cultural materials on the performance of IELTS candidates in the IELTS Listening Test, the present study aims to fill the existing gap in relation to the effect of cultural bias on candidates' performance. To the best of our knowledge, few studies addressed the effect of culture on EFL learners' listening comprehension in the Arab context (see for example Al-khresheh, 2020). However, no study has examined this issue in a standardised test such as the IELTS in the Arab context (cf. Hayati, 2009 and Rafie, 2016). Thus, the study aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

- 1) On the basis of the viewpoints of 16 IELTS teachers and 32 IELTS Arab candidates, which sections of the IELTS Listening Test do Arab candidates struggle with the most in terms of culturally-loaded references?
- 2) On the basis of the viewpoints of 16 IELTS teachers and 32 IELTS Arab candidates, how do culturally-specific aspects of the test affect the answers of the Arab candidates in the Listening Test?

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

Two groups of participants took part in the current study. The first group included 32 IELTS candidates who took the IELTS test at Al Ain University Testing Venue, in the UAE. The centre located in Al Ain University is run by the British Council. The study was conducted two days after the 32 participants (18 males and 14 females) had taken the IELTS test. The reason for conducting interviews as close as possible to the test date was to make sure the participants recalled the topic questions accurately and remembered the experience they went through during the IELTS Listening Test. The participants were all native Arabic speakers living in Al Ain, in the emirate of Abu Dhabi and had studied English at school and at university in Arab countries. We aimed for a sample representative of the Arab culture. This, we believe, will validate our results. Participants were asked to rate their proficiency in English. The mean age in years of the cohort was 23. Both their age and level of English could serve as an indication that the participants had encountered some aspects of the target culture. However, a number of them mentioned that they did not have a chance to communicate with native speakers of English on a regular basis. Nevertheless, and regardless of their degree of exposure to Anglo-Saxon culture, the present investigation considers such exposure as a limitation of the study.

Before taking the IELTS test, all participants took preparatory IELTS courses and a mock test, which means they were familiar with the exam design. The participants were contacted through Al Ain University Testing Venue. We used a stratified sampling methodology whereby the participant population (Arab candidates who sat for the IELTS test at Al Ain University Testing Venue) was divided into groups, then simple random sampling was used to select the

participants to be placed in the respective groups ensuring randomness of selection (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 2007). Note that the researchers ensured that the participants understood the meaning of 'culturally specific items' before answering the questions. The results of the current study are expected to be significant as far as cultural references in a standardised test, such as the IELTS, are concerned. This is because all the participants from both groups belonged to one culture, i.e., the Arab culture. This would probably make the results more valid and focused.

The second group of participants included 16 non-native English speakers (IELTS teachers who give IELTS preparatory courses in IELTS teaching centres in Al Ain (Abu Dhabi), the UAE). The IELTS teachers' nationalities were Jordanian, Syrian, Tunisian, Palestinian and Egyptian and their IELTS teaching experience inside the UAE ranged between 5-12 years. This group was recruited through personal contact. A list of 38 IELTS teachers was obtained and they were contacted randomly and asked about their willingness to take part in this study. Sixteen IELTS teachers agreed to participate. We believe that the interviewing IELTS teachers might provide insight into Arab learners' experiences regarding their preparation for taking the IELTS. Based on our experience as university professors of English language and in light of the responses given by the study participants, we observed that most Arab students favour taking IELTS preparatory courses with Arab trainers because they feel more at ease asking them questions.

3.2. Data collection procedure

The data were collected using two types of data elicitation tools, i.e., quantitative (an online survey) and qualitative (focus-group discussions). The full description of these tools is provided in the following sections:

3.2.1 Online survey

The online survey aimed to find which sections of the IELTS Listening Test are considered to contain the most significant culturally-specific items by the participants. The sections were identified based on a sample of IELTS Listening Test available on the British Council website. All the participants (N=48) were asked to rank the IELTS Listening sections on a scale from 1-3 according to how much these sections are loaded with culturally-specific items. The participants were sent the online survey two days before they were interviewed for the focus group discussions. The survey was sent to their emails and they were specifically asked to return it on the same day. Two days later, the participants were interviewed to answer questions about the cultural aspects found in the IELTS listening component. The researchers analysed the participants' responses after receiving them all, so that they can ask the participants about the rankings during the focus group discussion for triangulation purposes (see the following section). A sample of the questions of the online survey are provided in Appendix 1. For validity purposes, the online survey was piloted on 3 participants who did not take part in the study to ensure its clarity.

3.2.2 Focus group discussions

Semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with both the IELTS teachers and the candidates. It is believed that this tool enables researchers--specific to this instance--to obtain useful data from the participants, reflecting their opinions with regard to their IELTS Listening Test experience. Such data is not easily collected using quantitative data elicitation tools alone, e.g., questionnaires which provide statistics without in-depth information (cf. Cohen et al., 2013). Quantitative data is usually supported with qualitative data collected through individual interviews and focus-group discussions. According to Bernard (2011), one of the most effective methods to obtain in-depth information related to the topic under investigation is through focus group discussions, since this technique enables researchers to extract more useful information. These discussions enable researchers to obtain more insight into the participants' opinions and perceptions of a specific experience (see Quinn Patton 2015). Since this study employs both quantitative and qualitative data elicitation tools, it adopts a mixed-methods approach. In this approach the two types of data collection methods are used in the same study to complement and support each other in a process referred to as triangulation (Olsen, 2004).

Based on the above, both groups of participants (i.e., teachers and candidates) were interviewed. To facilitate the discussion, the two groups were divided into 8 sub-groups. Two groups comprising the teachers: the first one comprising 3 males and 6 females, while the second consisted of 7 males. The remaining six groups comprising the candidates consisted of 6 or 7 participants each. The interviews were conducted in two days, i.e., 4 focus-group discussions per day. The teachers were asked to reflect on their experience teaching the IELTS listening component as well as to provide their viewpoints on the IELTS Listening Test. Concerning the candidates, we focused on their opinions with regard to the topics included in the IELTS Listening Test. Thus, each group was asked specific questions about the IELTS Listening Test with specific focus on the cultural aspect. Since the interviews were semi-structured, some questions were asked to all the participants in each group, whereas others were raised in the course of discussion; hence, the name "semi-structured" (Brinkmann, 2014). A sample of the questions asked to both groups is provided in Appendix 2. Each group session was approximately one-hour long. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the data obtained were transcribed and analysed to provide answers to the two research questions. Note also that the questions used in these focus-group discussions were checked by 2 professors of Linguistics to ensure their clarity. The section that follows presents the results of this study and discusses them.

3.3. Data analysis procedure

With respect to the analysis of the responses obtained from the online survey, we followed a similar data analysis method to the one used with a Likert scale where data is analysed intervalley. This is because we asked the participants to rank the sections of the IELTS test based on the extent to which these sections are loaded with culturally-specific items on a scale from 1-3 (see Appendix 1). Thus, we

combined 1 and 2 into a single composite score and calculated the frequency of its selection by the participants (see Joshi, Kale, Chandel and Pal, 2015). The data collected through the semi-structured focus group discussions were analysed thematically, where the researchers read the scripts more than once and analysed the interviewees' responses based on recurring themes. Direct quotations were also provided to support the viewpoints of the participants (see Bryman and Burgess, 2002).

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative data analysis

This section presents the quantitative data analysis elicited from the online survey which was sent to both teachers and students. It also provides an answer to the first research question, which is concerned with the sections of the IELTS listening component with which the Arab candidates struggle the most in terms of English culturally-specific items. The results of the online survey are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Teachers' and IELTS candidates' answers regarding the most English culturally-loaded sections in the IELTS Listening component

	1	2	3	4	Total	Score
Section 1	77.78% 28	22.22% 8	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	48	38%
Section 2	22.22% 8	55.56% 20	22.22% 8	0.00% 0	48	30%
Section 3	0.00% 0	22.22% 8	66.67% 24	11.11% 4	48	21%
Section 4	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	11.11% 4	88.89% 32	48	11%

Table 2 demonstrates that Section 1 of the IELTS Listening component is the most culturally-loaded section with 38%, followed by Section 2 with 30%, then Section 3 (21%), and finally Section 4 (11%). That is, both the IELTS candidates and teachers ranked the first two sections as the ones which are loaded with culturally-specific items. Through examining samples of IELTS Listening Tests, it was observed that as far as Section 1 is concerned, there is a density of culturally-related topics, e.g., ordering food in a restaurant, booking accommodation, finding out about travel services, etc. For Section 2, the monologue discusses topics that are related to culture, e.g., holiday plans, transportation, camping, giving information about a public event, etc. These observations together with the results of the online

survey are further supported by the qualitative data analysis in the following section.

4.2. Qualitative data analysis

To triangulate our data, semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted with both IELTS candidates and teachers to obtain more insight into their viewpoints and experiences regarding the cultural aspect of the IELTS listening test. This type of data provides a potential answer to the second research question which is concerned with how culturally-specific aspects affect the answers of the Arab candidates in the IELTS Listening component. The main examples obtained from the IELTS candidates during the focus group discussions are listed in Table 3 supported with quotations from the candidates translated into English.

Table 3. IELTS candidates' comments on some culture-specific items in the Listening Test

Culture-specific items	Meaning	IELTS candidates' quotations
Post code	Alphanumeric code used to identify an address, part of a UK-wide scheme.	The post code system is not used in our country. Many people don't even know of its existence elsewhere.
Postal order	A money order designed to be sent through the post, issued by the UK Post Office	I don't know anyone living abroad to send money to. Besides, I've never sent money abroad from a bank and so I've never heard such a phrase.
Furniture insurance	Insuring furniture against theft or damage.	Honestly, I've never heard of such a thing. You can actually insure your fridge or TV set, and even your washing machine! We don't get these things insured in my country. While I was thinking about this, I realised that the speaker was reading the next question.
Drink-driving	Driving a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol	This phrase was really confusing. Drinking while driving? I thought, many people drink while they drive. However, I never thought it was about drinking alcohol. This doesn't exist in Muslim countries. Alcohol is not allowed; It's haram.
Bed and Breakfast	A bed and breakfast (typically shortened to B&B) is a small hotel or a private house in the UK that offers accommodation	This reminded me of when I was little. My mom used to bring me breakfast upon waking. Thinking of Bed and Breakfast being a small

	for a night and a morning meal at a cheap price.	hotel would have never crossed my mind.
Students Union	A building or a part of building on a college campus used by students for social, cultural and sports activities and events.	There is no such thing in my country. Students don't form unions of their own. We have the Deanship of Students Affairs for students' matters.
Fish fingers	Long small pieces of fish coated in breadcrumbs and fried or grilled.	Obviously, I knew fish don't have fingers, but I couldn't figure out what it really meant.
City Hall	The seat of local government	Clearly, this made me wonder. I thought of a house or of a building that has a hall, but a city? I wasted a lot of time trying to figure out what it was.
Not my cup of tea	Something is not to your liking.	When I heard this phrase, I was confused. The text was a monologue and yet there was this expression, 'not my cup of tea'. It took me quite a while to realize that this didn't literally mean someone's cup of tea.

Table 3 clearly shows that there were many culturally-specific references in the IELTS Listening Test which the majority of the participants found to be challenging. The existence of these culture-specific words/items probably had an effect on the concentration of many candidates during the test and, in turn, affected their answers since they pondered on them wasting precious time. In fact, most of the IELTS candidates we interviewed indicated that if such items were not there in the test, their marks in the Listening Test would have been much higher. This partially provides an answer to the second research question, taking into account IELTS candidates' perspectives on the cultural aspect of the test in question. Our focus-group discussions with the candidates and teachers provided more support to the existence of culture-specific items in the IELTS Listening Test. Due to word limitation, we discuss the most frequently mentioned topics, providing quotations from both the teachers and the IELTS candidates.

1. Post code

This example was considered one of the most challenging by the majority of the examinees and teachers who reported that such a system is not used in most, if not all, of the Arab world. For example, the UAE does not have a post code system (World Postal Code, 2020). Thus, it was very difficult for the candidates to understand that some numbers and letters meant to indicate an address in the UK. Candidates indicated that they had the impression that they were being tested on their cultural skills rather than on their listening ability. Some candidates even mentioned that because of the difficulty they encountered in the IELTS Listening

Test in relation to cultural aspects, they intend to look for training centres that offer courses on the Western culture. Below is a quote provided by C3 during the focus group discussion (see Appendix 3):

In the listening component, I was confused when the narrator started reciting some letters and numbers which were meant to indicate a post code in the UK. In the UAE, we do not use such a system! I have not even heard of it before the exam. My confusion resulted in me missing parts of the listening exam, which was very frustrating.

More than half of the teachers interviewed in our focus-group discussions indicated that it is not fair to judge candidates on a cultural aspect in the IELTS Listening Test. However, since language and culture are so intertwined and an important part of learning a language is learning its culture, they explained that more focus should be given to culture-specific items in IELTS preparatory courses in the UAE. It was also suggested by some teachers that the candidates' attitude towards learning about the Western culture was not very enthusiastic. Below is a quotation by T6:

Helping IELTS candidates in the UAE understand that the Western culture is a very important aspect to focus on in IELTS preparatory courses does not always succeed, since many candidates are more concerned about obtaining a good mark in all components to pursue a postgraduate degree abroad. You see, they are more concerned about the grammar, writing skills, vocabulary, etc. rather than cultural knowledge.

2. Postal order

This is another example of a culturally-specific reference pertaining to the UK where an individual can send money via the post. The participants believed that the IELTS test is reflective of the Anglo-Saxon world; it has not been written for their region since it includes references which are difficult for candidates outside of that world to understand or relate to. The majority of candidates stressed that including topics solely relevant to the Western world in the IELTS listening component has a negative impact on their scores. Twelve teachers out of the total 16 who were interviewed explained that their job is very difficult since there are so many language aspects which they need to explain to the candidates. This leaves insufficient time to explain the cultural aspect to them as well. In addition, given that it is an international test, such items need to be minimised. Below is a quotation provided by T3:

The IELTS exam committee needs to take into account cultural aspects when they write the exam! Some concepts which are common in the UK and other English-speaking countries, such as the postal order system are completely unknown to our students! I believe that this is unfair because this exam is meant to be an international one.

3. Furniture insurance

This example appears in a dialogue where a person calls an insurance company to inquire about an insurance policy for his/her furniture. In the Arab world, and most likely in many other parts of the world, such an insurance policy is barely heard of; therefore, this could come as a surprise to an IELTS examinee who is not familiar with this practice. Below is a quotation by C16 during the focus group discussion:

It was very strange when I heard a conversation about furniture insurance. I have never heard of such a thing here in the UAE from my friends or family.

Similar responses were produced by many IELTS candidates who took the same IELTS exam; they indicated that being asked about a very specific concept which does not exist in their culture was entirely unexpected. Thirteen out of the 16 teachers we interviewed explained that if the IELTS Listening Test must include a culturally-specific item, it could at least be something that could be understood by the candidates rather than something which is very specific and cannot be comprehended by the candidates in the UAE. Below is a quotation by T10:

I would accept referring to culturally-specific items such as Christmas for instance, but not something that the candidate would waste their time trying to figure out. This is not the point of the Listening Test at all.

4. Drink-driving

In Western countries, since drinking alcohol is allowed and is part of their culture, some people may drink while driving despite this being illegal. However, in the UAE and most Muslim countries, drinking alcohol is forbidden. Consequently, the IELTS candidates did not expect that drinking in this context referred to drinking alcoholic beverages rather than non-alcoholic ones such as water, juice, coffee, etc. (for more details see Altakhaineh and Zibin, 2014). Below is a quote provided by C12 during the focus group discussion:

After I finished the IELTS exam, I checked what 'Drink-driving' means. I had no idea that drinking refers to drinking alcohol! How am I supposed to know that?! Drinking alcohol is a rarity in my country. I believe that being what it is, the IELTS test does not really take the customs of countries other than those of the UK and the USA into account. I also believe that an international test should not let score outcomes be affected by inbuilt cultural topics.

The majority of teachers interviewed in the focus-group discussions also indicated that asking IELTS candidates about certain cultural aspects that are regarded as forbidden in the UAE culture and in many Arab countries as well could be prejudiced. This is because discussing such topics in IELTS preparatory courses can be deemed inappropriate in the UAE and may result in the dismissal of the teacher. The following is a quotation by T4:

Imagine if I start talking about drinking and other forbidden things in my preparatory courses! I could be fired just for bringing up such topics.

All in all, the majority of IELTS candidates found answering some of the Listening Test questions very challenging due to their lack of cultural awareness of and insufficient cultural background knowledge about the English language.

5. Discussion

Adopting the mixed-methods approach allowed us to provide answers to both research questions. Specifically, the results of the quantitative data analysis demonstrated that both groups of participants found Sections 1 and 2 of the IELTS Listening Test to be the most culturally-loaded ones compared to Sections 3 and 4. Hence, an answer was provided to the first research question. With regard to the second research question, the results of the qualitative data analysis showed that both IELTS candidates and teachers of IELTS preparatory courses found many aspects of the IELTS Listening Test to be culturally-specific. While the majority of IELTS candidates were mostly against the inclusion of culturally-specific items in the Listening Test due to the fact that it is supposed to be an international exam, some of the interviewed teachers indicated that language and culture cannot be separated; and thus, the IELTS Listening Test is expected to include some cultural aspects (but not very specific ones such as “furniture insurance”). In addition, both candidates and teachers were against including topics in the IELTS test that are sensitive to some cultures, e.g., the UAE culture. A similar result was found by Al-khresheh (2020), who argued that even though language and culture cannot be separated, English listening materials in Saudi Arabia should avoid topics that include Western customs and habits, such as dating and drinking alcohol. Culturally-specific topics should thus be carefully introduced to Arab IELTS candidates. Cultural bias also exists in other standardised tests such as the TOEFL. For example, Halim (2014) investigated the difficulties encountered by Indonesian EFL learners in the TOEFL and found that the candidates faced difficulties in answering many questions due to cultural bias, especially in the oral mode. The culturally-specific items included metaphors, proverbs, deixis, idiomatic expressions and some registers. A similar result was found by Ismail et al. (2019), who suggested that the Reading Test of the TOEFL contained culturally-specific references.

The teachers, unlike the majority of IELTS candidates, stressed the importance of integrating the target culture in IELTS preparatory courses to help candidates have a successful communication with speakers from Western cultures and avoid any communication breakdowns resulting from lack of cultural knowledge. This result is in line with many research studies that highlighted the importance of teaching the target culture to learners of English as a foreign language (Emitt and Komesaroff, 2003; Wang 2011; Remache, 2016; Wetheim and Agar, 2012). In addition, many studies (e.g., Hayati, 2009 and Altakhaineh and Zibin, 2014; Rafie, 2016; Altakhaineh et al., 2019) suggested that lack of awareness of the target culture by EFL learners can be counterproductive. Therefore, IELTS

preparatory courses in the UEA should include a carefully-introduced cultural component that helps candidates be aware of the cultural differences between the UAE and the West. The way the target culture is introduced is of utmost importance because it can have a substantial effect on EFL learners' first impression about speakers of English (Grant and Wong, 2018). This cultural component should be designed to contain authentic materials that aim to prepare candidates to answer questions that have culturally-specific items and to be more understanding of the differences between their culture and the target one. The material should not only be text-based, but should also include pictures, audios and videos so that it would be suitable to different types of learners, i.e., auditory and visual (see Farangiet et al., 2017). Finally, training sessions of IELTS teachers should be organised by all IELTS centres in the UAE to prepare teachers to discuss culturally-specific content in an appropriate way to Arab candidates, in general, and Emirati ones, in particular. The trainers should be aware of any stereotyping and identity prejudice in ELT materials taught to Arab EFL learners and have knowledge of theories that help teachers steer instruction in a direction away from cultural bias and discrimination (see Grant and Wong, 2018).

5. Conclusion

The study has investigated the impact of culture on the performance of Arab IELTS candidates in the Listening Test. The study adopted a mixed-methods research design to data collection and analysis, employing an online survey and semi-structured focus group discussions with 32 Arab IELTS candidates and 16 IELTS teachers. The results of the study have revealed that culture has a substantial impact on the candidates' performance in the IELTS Listening Test. Specifically, the analysis showed that Section 1 contained the highest number of culturally-specific items, followed by Section 2, Section 3 and Section 4, respectively. The results have also demonstrated that IELTS Arab candidates faced some challenges in answering the questions in Section 1 and 2 with respect to English culturally-specific items. It is recommended that further research studies need to shed more light on cultural bias in standardised tests such as the IELTS and TOEFL, focusing on other components, e.g., Reading. Raising awareness of potential cultural bias in such tests can help test designers to be more considerate of test takers who may encounter cultural bias and thus obtain low scores that do not reflect their actual level of English proficiency.

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Appendix 1

A sample of the online survey questions

Name:

Age:

Section 1 of the IELTS listening Test: You are going to hear a conversation between a hotel receptionist and a customer who has come to make a booking. Please indicate whether the recording\script has any culturally-specific items you are not familiar with on a scale from 1-3 as follows:

- 1- Section 1 heavily contains culturally-specific items.
- 2- Section 1 contains some culturally-specific items.
- 3- Section 1 does not contain culturally-specific items.

(the script of the recording) <https://www.ieltsbuddy.com/support-files/ielts-listening-test-part-1-script-booking-hotel.pdf>

For word limitation reasons, we only provided a sample of the online survey questions, yet the same procedure was followed for Sections 2, 3 and 4 of the IELTS Listening component.

Appendix 2

A sample of the questions asked during the focus group discussions with teachers and students:

Questions asked to the teachers in focus-group discussions:

1. Based on your experience in the preparatory IELTS courses, how do you generally find the Listening exam in terms of its easiness\difficulty?
2. Based on your experience in the preparatory IELTS courses, would you attribute part of its difficulty to differences in cultural reality, habits, and traditions between the West and Arab countries? Explain.
3. Could you provide examples of topics you found in the IELTS Listening exam that could be deemed as culturally-specific? Explain.
4. Based on your experience in the preparatory IELTS courses, how are the students' general attitude towards the IELTS listening exam?
5. Based on your experience in the preparatory IELTS courses, have you encountered students who faced challenges in the IELTS Listening exam as a result of cultural differences between the West and the Arab culture? Explain.
6. Based on the ranking of the sections of the IELTS listening exam, Section 1 of was found to be the most culturally-loaded section with 38%, followed by Section 2 with 30%, then Section 3 (21%), and finally Section 4 (11%), do you agree with these results? Explain.

Questions asked to the candidates in focus-group discussions:

1. Describe your experience in the IELTS Listening test? How would you describe it in terms of its easiness\difficulty?

2. Which section of the IELTS Listening test was the most challenging for you? Explain.
3. What were the topics you were asked about in each section of the IELTS Listening test?
4. Would describe any of these topics as being culturally-specific and more related to the Western culture compared to the Arab culture? Explain.
5. What are the topics that you were expecting to be asked about?
6. Based on the ranking of the sections of the IELTS listening exam, Section 1 of was found to be the most culturally-loaded section with 38%, followed by Section 2 with 30%, then Section 3 (21%), and finally Section 4 (11%), do you agree with these results? Explain.

Appendix 3

Profile of the participants

Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Age
T1	Teacher	Male	32
T2	Teacher	Male	40
T3	Teacher	Male	39
T4	Teacher	Male	44
T5	Teacher	Male	36
T6	Teacher	Male	33
T7	Teacher	Male	35
T8	Teacher	Male	41
T9	Teacher	Male	29
T10	Teacher	Male	36
T11	Teacher	Female	38
T12	Teacher	Female	41
T13	Teacher	Female	35
T14	Teacher	Female	40
T15	Teacher	Female	33
T16	Teacher	Female	34
C1	Candidate	Male	22
C2	Candidate	Male	25
C2	Candidate	Male	24
C4	Candidate	Male	21
C5	Candidate	Male	20
C6	Candidate	Male	24
C7	Candidate	Male	23
C8	Candidate	Male	22
C9	Candidate	Male	21
C10	Candidate	Male	25
C11	Candidate	Male	24

C12	Candidate	Male	22
C13	Candidate	Male	23
C14	Candidate	Male	22
C15	Candidate	Male	20
C16	Candidate	Male	22
C17	Candidate	Male	23
C18	Candidate	Male	23
C19	Candidate	Female	22
C20	Candidate	Female	21
C21	Candidate	Female	25
C22	Candidate	Female	22
C23	Candidate	Female	24
C24	Candidate	Female	23
C25	Candidate	Female	23
C26	Candidate	Female	20
C27	Candidate	Female	21
C28	Candidate	Female	24
C29	Candidate	Female	25
C30	Candidate	Female	24
C31	Candidate	Female	22
C32	Candidate	Female	21