

## Different Performance of EFL University Students on TOEFL and IELTS

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### Abstract

TOEFL and IELTS are increasingly used as university admission requirements all over the world. This research investigates students' performance on these tests. The TOEFL and IELTS results during the academic years 2005-9 and 2010 -13 were analyzed. The findings showed that about 25% of students passed TOEFL, but when IELTS was used beside TOEFL, the pass rate went up to 31%, and it rose dramatically to about 52% when the IETLS cut off band score was lowered to 5.0. Furthermore, it was found that the students who earned less than 380/390 TOEFL scores on their entry were the least likely students to pass TOEFL or IELTS after having English training. Some possible reasons for the differing performance of EFL students on TOEFL and IELTS were discussed.

**Keywords:** TOEFL; IELTS; placement; proficiency criteria; pass rate

## Introduction

English is the language of instruction in many universities all over the world. Many of these universities require their EFL students to demonstrate proficiency in English as a foreign language before they can attend their academic programs. TOEFL and IELTS tests are widely used as international tests to measure the English proficiency of EFL students. Universities require different admission test scores. In general, candidates are required to score at least a 500 on TOEFL or band 5.0 on IELTS. In this study, the paper-based TOEFL and IELTS results of the University of Sharjah (UoS) students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are used as a concrete example to investigate the performance of EFL students on these two tests after attending the intensive English program (IEP) for one or two semesters. While IELTS tests were conducted inside and outside the university, TOEFL was usually administered on campus to evaluate the English language ability of new students on their entry. Scoring 500 on this test was an unattainable goal for the majority of high school graduates. Table 1 contains the details that give an overview of the TOEFL results of the students on their university entry in 2005-2009.

**Table 1. Pre-IEP TOEFL results of new students in August of the academic years 2005-2009**

	2005-6	2006-7	2007-8	2008-9	Total
Number of Students	1042	1153	1293	1431	4919
Students Got 500 or above	161 (15.5%)	139 (12.1%)	179 (13.8%)	243 (17%)	722 (14.7%)

Table 1 shows that about 15% of UoS candidates who have just graduated from high schools passed the TOEFL on their entry. This means that about 85% of them were unable to achieve a score of 500 on TOEFL, and as a result they could not enter into their Bachelor programs. Most of them chose to attend the IEP for one or two semesters so that they could improve their English and meet university language requirement. The number of teaching hours in the IEP was 25 hours a week for all levels in the years 2005-2009, but it changed to 25 hours for levels 1 and 2, and 20 hours for levels 3 and 4 in the years 2010-2013. Students were placed into one of the four English levels based on their pre-IEP-TOEFL score. Table 2 shows the exit criteria that the IEP used to send students to different levels during the investigated periods.

**Table 2. TOEFL Exit Criteria for IEP Students**

Level	Criteria followed between 2005-2009	Criteria followed between 2010-2013
Level 1	389 and below	377 and below
Level 2	390-429	380-417
Level 3	430-464	420-460
Level 4	465-499	463-497

Students were promoted from one level to another based on internal IEP tests or new TOEFL score that some of them gained during the period of attending intensive English courses.

## Using International Tests for Admission Decision Making and ESL Placement

Many universities all over the world use international proficiency tests to evaluate the English language abilities of their candidates, and they all use different admission cut off scores. We do not know if these cut off scores are based on empirical data, experience, or personal decisions. According to Coley (1999), deciding on cut off scores is left to administrators who know little about language requirements. Also, Shohamy (2001) has suggested that the minimum admission scores were probably based on political or administrative reasons rather than whether or not

these scores can discriminate between capable and incapable students. Another issue of concern is that some universities use more than one proficiency test, but the cut off scores they use do not equal each other. For example, while the TOEFL cut off score at some universities is 500, the IELTS cut off band score is 5.0. This would result in having students who meet the language requirement with a wide variation in their level of English proficiency. Of course, it is impossible to exactly equate the scores of different tests that have different contents. But based on experience and research, more reliable comparison scores of different international tests can be made available.

Although universities use TOEFL and IELTS to measure the language abilities of its candidates, the contents of the IEP courses that were served to help them pass these tests were not based on them. Syllabi were essentially designed to help students develop their communicative language skills. In addition to these intensive English courses, a TOEFL and/or IELTS preparation course might be used to develop the testing skill of students. Wall, Clapham, and Alderson (1994) mentioned that some proficiency tests such as TOEFL do not reflect the contents of the intensive English courses. As a result, it is likely that such tests may not show to what extent students developed their English skills after attending English classes. It is likely that some of the students who failed the required proficiency tests, perform well in the ESL classes they attended. Besides using TOEFL to provide evidence of students' English proficiency, it is also used as a placement test for sending students to different English levels. This seems practical, but in fact it is not free of serious misplacement problems. Kokhan (2012, p.291) has stated that "there is no particular set of either total or section scores which can be used as a reliable criterion for dividing students into ESL classes without significant misplacement." Similarly, Fox (2009) indicated that using TOEFL and IELTS for placement purposes in an English for Academic Purposes program at a Canadian university resulted in extreme variability in the levels of students within EAP classes. In order to help in minimizing the misplaced cases in the IEPs, teachers should be involved in placing students into the right levels. During the first two or three weeks of the EFL classes, and after teachers have had a chance to interact with students and involve them in some English activities, they would be able to identify some clear misplaced cases and recommend demoting or promoting them to lower or higher levels. This treatment is in line with the opinion of Green and Weir (2004), who argue that proficiency tests do not provide sufficient indications about students' language abilities. Green and Weir have suggested using other procedures to get more accurate diagnostic information. Also, Fox (2009) suggested that the misplacement problem of standardized tests can be sorted out by giving continuous diagnostic tests. It seems inevitable to avoid having misplaced students in English programs. Therefore, determining appropriate scores for placing applicants into various levels does not completely sort out the problem, but it may minimize the numbers of misplaced students.

The purposes of this study were to (1) find the TOEFL and IELTS pass rate of the EFL students after attending intensive English courses; (2) identify the least likely students to pass TOEFL or IELTS; and (3) provide guidelines for placing students into ESL classes.

## Method

### *Test-Takers*

The subjects of this study were undergraduate EFL students who studied English as a foreign language at school starting from grade one. The subjects of the years 2005-2009 were admitted to the UoS in the fall semesters directly after they graduated from high school. As for the

subjects of the years 2010-2013, the vast majority of them joined the university in fall, but few of them were accepted in spring. Male and female students attended their English classes separately under one management. The average class size was about 20 students.

### **Result Analysis**

The results were analyzed in three phases. Phase one contains the TOEFL results of the students who were pre-and-post IEP TOEFL tested and attended the IEP for one and two semesters in 2005-2009. Phase two includes IELTS together with TOEFL results of the academic years 2006-2009. In phase three TOEFL and IELTS results of the years 2010-2013 were presented.

### **Phase One: TOEFL Pass Rate**

The TOEFL data analysis of one and two semesters in the years 2005-9 was conducted. The students who were not pre-and-post IEP TOEFL tested and those who passed TOEFL within less than one month at the beginning of a semester or more than one month after a semester finished were excluded in this phase. To be able to identify the capability of students of different pre-IEP TOEFL scores to pass TOEFL after having intensive English classes, these scores were classified into intervals of 10, as can be seen in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. Post-IEP TOEFL results of the students attended the IEP for one semester (fall) in the academic years 2005-9**

Pre-IEP TOEFL Score Ranges in Intervals of Ten	Students within Pre-IEP TOEFL Ranges	Students Got 500 or above in the Post-IEP TOEFL
Below 300	0	0
300-309	0	0
310-319	2	0
320-329	3	0
330-339	14	1
340-349	31	1
350-359	57	0
360-369	106	0
370-379	137	5
380-389	147	4
390-399	228	6
400-409	179	9
410-419	206	8
420-429	176	16
430-439	175	31
440-449	125	32
450-459	106	45
460-469	119	79
470-479	79	67
480-489	59	49
490-499	48	44
Total	1997	397 (19.9%)

Table 3 shows that 19.9% of the students passed TOEFL after having intensive English courses for one semester. It also shows that the students who scored below 430 in the pre-IEP TOEFL made very little progress in the post-IEP TOEFL. Some progress was made in the ranges between 430 and 449, but the significant improvement was made starting from a score of 450. About half of the students who could not pass TOEFL in the first semester decided to continue attending the IEP for a second semester. Table 4 shows the TOEFL results of those students.

**Table 4. Post-IEP TOEFL results of the students attended the IEP for two semesters (fall and spring) in the academic years 2005-9**

Pre-IEP TOEFL Score Ranges in Intervals of Ten	Students within Pre-IEP TOEFL Ranges	Students Got 500 or above in the Post-IEP TOEFL
Below 300	0	0
300-309	0	0
310-319	1	0
320-329	0	0
330-339	4	0
340-349	9	0
350-359	15	1
360-369	50	3
370-379	63	3
380-389	65	1
390-399	106	13
400-409	81	6
410-419	93	23
420-429	81	15
430-439	69	19
440-449	40	18
450-459	22	12
460-469	10	4
470-479	4	0
480-489	1	1
490-499	0	0
Total	714	119 (16.7%)

Table 4 illustrates that 16.7% of the students who attended the IEP for two semesters passed the post-IEP TOEFL. It can be seen that the students who scored less than 390 made very little progress. Those who scored between 390 and 440 made more improvement, but those who scored 440 and above made the best progress among other students. We also see that the number of weaker students in semester two increased and the stronger ones decreased compared with the students who attended the IEP in semester one.

To assess students' progress from a different angle, TOEFL mean gains after having English training for one and two semesters were included in Table 5.

**Table 5. The pre-post IEP TOEFL means, standard deviation and gain scores after attending the IEP for one or two semesters in the academic years 2005-9**

	One semester	Two Semesters
Mean for Total Scores of the Pre-IEP TOEFL	414.9	403.7
Mean for Total Scores of the Post-IEP TOEFL	449	455.8
Mean Gain	34.1	52.1
Standard Deviation for the Total Scores of the Pre-IEP TOEFL	37.1	27.7
Standard Deviation for the Total Scores of the Post-IEP TOEFL	50.7	43.3
Difference of Standard Deviation for the Total Scores of the Pre-and Post TOEFL	13.6	15.6
Total Number of Students Sat for both the Pre-and Post TOEFL	1997	714

As it can be seen from Table 5, the average gain scores per semester declined from 34.1 in semester one to 26 in semester two. It can also be seen that the standard deviation was already significant before attending the IEP, but it dramatically increased after attending the IEP for one

or two semesters. This indicates a great deal of individual variation that increased after having English training.

The overall pass rate of EFL students who had English classes for one semester together with those who attended English courses for two semesters is 25.8%. This means that three quarters of the students could not meet the university language requirement using TOEFL as a sole proficiency criterion. Therefore, IELTS was used as an alternative criterion, hoping that this might result in better performance on standardized tests.

***Phase Two: IELTS and TOEFL Pass Rate***

The pass rates of TOEFL together with IELTS in the years 2006-2009 were identified. The passing IELTS band in this phase was 5.5 with 5.0 as the minimum band in separate skills. To have a holistic picture of the performance of EFL students, all students who attended the IEP for one and two semesters were counted irrespective whether or not they were pre-or-post IEP TOEFL tested. Table 6 includes TOEFL and IELTS results in three years.

**Table 6. Post-IEP TOEFL and IELTS pass rates of the students attended the IEP for one and two semesters in the academic years 2006-9**

	One Semester	Two Semesters
Total Number of Students Attended the IEP	2330	1097
Students Exited Based on TOEFL	296 (12.7%)	97 (8.8%)
Students Exited Based on IELTS	212 (9.1%)	118 (10.8%)
Students Exited Based on Both TOEFL and IELTS	508 (21.8%)	215 (19.6%)

It can be seen in Table 6 that after using IELTS as a second standard test, students made some improvement on their test performance. Their overall pass rate increased from 25.8% using TOEFL only in phase 1 to 31% using TOEFL and IELTS in phase 2. But this increase was not significant enough; many EFL students were still unable to achieve a score of 500 on TOEFL or a band of 5.5 on IELTS. In order to enable more students to meet the university language requirement, the cut off IELTS band was lowered to 5.0 in phase 3.

***Phase Three: TOEFL and IELTS Pass Rate after Lowering the IELTS Cut off Band Score to 5.0***

In the academic years 2010-2013 the IELTS passing band was lowered to 5.0 with no minimum in language skills. To know to what extent this modification helped in increasing the numbers of students who managed to meet the university language requirement, a further investigation was made on the TOEFL and IELTS results of these years. Table 7 includes the results of the students who passed TOEFL or IELTS within fall and spring semesters of the years 2010-2013.

**Table 7. The overall TOEFL and IELTS pass rates of the students attended the IEP in fall and spring semesters in the academic year 2010-13**

	Fall Semester	Spring Semesters
Total Number of Students Attended the IEP	1618	714
Students Passed TOEFL	84 (5.2%)	7 (1%)
Students Passed IELTS	685 (42.3%)	259 (36.3%)
Students Passed TOEFL or IELTS	769 (47.5%)	266 (37.3%)

Table 7 shows that while the number of students who achieved the required TOEFL passing score went down sharply, the pass rate on IELTS increased substantially.

It was clear that lowering the passing IELTS band made most students refrain from sitting for TOEFL and resort to IELTS that they found 'easier.' The Table illustrates that 42.3% of the students passed IELTS in the fall semester whereas only 5.2% passed TOEFL. Similarly, 36.3% of the spring semester students passed IELTS, but only 1% passed TOEFL. Taking into account that about 50% of the students of the spring semester were new students who attended the IEP in spring semester, the overall pass rate on IELTS of the students who attended the fall and/or spring semester was about 52%.

It is notable that EFL students of different levels made different amount of progress. Table 8 shows the TOEFL and IELTS pass rate of levels 1, 2, 3 and 4 in fall and spring semesters.

**Table 8. The TOEFL and IELTS pass rates of the four levels in fall and spring semesters in the academic year 2010-13**

Level	Fall Semesters			Spring Semesters		
	Number of Students	TOEFL Pass Rate	IELTS Pass Rate	Number of Students	TOEFL Pass Rate	IELTS Pass Rate
Level 1	411 (25.4%)	2 (0.5%)	50 (12.2%)	91 (12.7%)	0	9 (9.9%)
Level 2	526 (32.5%)	6 (1.1%)	209 (39.7%)	241 (33.8%)	0	46 (19.1%)
Level 3	475 (29.4%)	25 (5.3%)	305 (64.2%)	269 (37.7%)	1 (0.4%)	130 (48.3%)
Level 4	206 (12.7%)	51 (24.8%)	121 (58.7%)	113 (15.8%)	6 (5.3%)	74 (65.5%)

As it can be seen in Table 8, the students who scored below 380 on the-pre-IEP TOEFL (level 1 students) made little improvement. The Table also shows that those who scored between 380 and 420 (level 2 students) benefited a lot from the advantage of lowering the IELTS cut off band. They had a much better performance in meeting the university requirement than their counterparts in Tables 3 and 4 who sat for TOEFL only.

### Discussion

The findings of this study show that the performance of EFL students has improved when IELTS was used as second English proficiency criterion besides TOEFL, and it improved further when the IELTS cut off band was lowered to 5.0. The pass rate increased from 25.8% using TOEFL as a sole proficiency criterion in phase one to 31% using IELTS beside TOEFL in phase two. But this improvement was considered little. About two thirds of the candidates still could not meet the university language requirement. This indicates that the IELTS cut off band 5.5 as well the 500 TOEFL scores were difficult for many EFL students to achieve. Therefore, there was a persistent need to lower the admission cut off score of TOEFL and/or IELTS in order to better balance the passing and failing ratios. Modifying the IELTS passing band to 5.0 with no minimum in separate skills in phase 3 resulted in doubling the number of students who passed IELTS. The pass rate on TOEFL and IELTS in phase 3 went up dramatically to about 52%.

In the light of the findings of the current study, there were substantial differences between the performance of EFL students on TOEFL and IELTS. One of the reasons was due to the fact that IELTS band 5.0 does not equate 500 scores on TOEFL. This was reflected in the significant differences between the pass rate of TOEFL and IELTS in phase three. While 944 students scored 5.0 or above on IELTS in fall and spring semesters, only 91 students passed TOEFL. A second reason is that due to the fact that seeing more and more classmates sitting for and passing IELTS made the vast majority of the study subjects to refrain from sitting for TOEFL and taking

IELTS instead. As a result, they chose to have IELTS preparation courses besides the intensive English courses instead of TOEFL courses. Ying (2011) mentioned that an IELTS preparation program is necessary for students to give them practice and develop test skills that help students to perform better at IELTS. A third reason is that most of the subjects of this study got about 100 scores away from the required admission score which was not possible to gain in one or two semesters. On the other hand, many of the students who could not get 5.0 on IELTS in their first attempt were between 0.5 and 1.0 band away from the required passing band and this was not difficult for them to achieve in the second attempt especially after having ample practice of IELTS materials. Taylor (2011) pointed out that the students who are a band or more away from the required passing score benefit a lot from the IELTS preparation program. A fourth reason could be that mere using two different tests with different components, contents and question formats was an advantage for students who were also different in terms of language proficiency level and language skill abilities. The paper based TOEFL test used in this study consisted of three parts: listening, grammar and reading; IELTS test consisted of four parts that do not completely match with the TOEFL parts: listening, reading, writing and speaking. These differences between the two tests might serve better a wider range of students. Geranpayeh (1994) stated that British and North American English proficiency tests follow different test methods and this might affect the performance of examinees who sit for these tests. A fifth reason might be that different marking systems were followed in marking TOEFL and IELTS tests. In marking, for example, listening and reading tests, students in TOEFL were evaluated within one single score for each skill, but in IELTS students who earned different scores within a certain range of scores were given the same band. This helped the students who were at the bottom of the range to get the same band as the students who were at the top of the range.

Although about 52% of EFL students managed to meet the university language requirement, still about 48% of them failed to achieve this goal. This is a big loss, and it should be an issue of concern for all educational institutions. Golder et al. (2011) mentioned that refusing to admit immigrants in universities because of language weakness was unfair. There is a need to find other measures that can provide evidence of language proficiency of some of those students who were disadvantaged because of using international tests. One of these measures could be using their IEP results instead of relying completely on standardized tests that may not sometimes give accurate information about students' language competency. Some students do not usually perform well in international tests, but their performance is very good in English classes. Green and Weir (2004) pointed out that these standardized tests could give some information about students' language level, but they do not provide sufficient details about their abilities. Another criterion could be considering high school results that may give an important indication of students' performance when they attend universities. The study results of Seelen (2002) indicated that school-level English does not correlate with students' academic performance. The researcher recommended using overall school performance as the main university entry criterion and considered it a better predictor of students' performance than English. Considering such measures will give a final chance for more than 40% of the students who could not pass TOEFL or IELTS. However, many universities still insist on sticking to the results of the international proficiency tests and are not willing to consider any other solutions for the students who fail these tests. If this is the case then accepting the students who are unlikely to pass these tests in IEPs is a waste of time, money and effort.

Based on the TOEFL results in phase one, the students can be classified into four categories. The first one is the category of incapable students whose pre-IEP TOEFL score was below than

390. They were about a quarter of the students in this phase. They showed a lack of capacity to pass TOEFL. Only 3.8% of them passed the test within one academic year. While the overall mean gain score for two semesters was 52, the incapable students need to achieve a gain score of 110 or more which was impossible for them to do so. The second category is the limited performance students who ranged between 390 and 429. They were about 40% of the students. They made little improvement in the first semester, but when they attended the IEP for a second semester they showed some progress. About 15% of them exited the standard in one or two semesters. Again, it was still challenging for most of them to pass TOEFL. They needed to gain a TOEFL score of 70 -110 to be able to pass the test and this was much higher than the average gain score of the students in phase one. The third category is the below average students whose pre-IEP TOEFL score ranged between 430 and 449 and they were about 15% of the overall IEP students. About 33% of them passed TOEFL. They made better improvement compared to the previous category and the gain score they were required to have was closer to the average gain scores of this phase. . The fourth category is the capable students whose pre-IEP TOEFL score ranged between 450 and 499. They were about 20% of the students and their overall pass rate was 73%. The performance of this category was the best because the gain score they needed to achieve matched with the average gain score in phase one. In the light of the above, the appropriate cut off score for joining IEPs if TOEFL is used solely as proficiency criterion should not be less than 390. In fact, the TOEFL cut off score may range from 390 to 450 depending on the discretion of individual universities. In the case of using IELTS with cut off band score 5.0 and TOEFL with cut off score 500, the least capable students were level one students who got less than 380 on the pre-IEP TOEFL. They were 28.6% of the overall number of students in phase three and about 11% of them passed TOEFL or IELTS. Imposing the TOEFL scores 380/390 as a cut off score for attending intensive English courses would result in losing about a quarter of the IEP candidates. On the other hand, it would increase the pass rate from about 25% to 33% using TOEFL as a measure and 60% to 77% using IELTS and TOEFL as proficiency tests. This matches with the opinion of Des Brisay and Ready (1991) who stated that improving the pass rate in IEPs entails higher entry scores and this may result in seriously reducing the number of potential candidates.

Finally, placing students into the right English levels facilitates the teaching and learning process and makes the job of the teacher and the learner easier. Fulcher (1997) pointed out that accurate assessment of students' language abilities and placing them in the appropriate language levels is important for all academic departments. However, placing students into different English levels can never be free of mistake. Placement tests themselves have their own deficiencies. Moreover, students' performance could be different from one exam to another depending on the conditions exams were conducted under. Also, students' unfamiliarity with exams could be a disadvantage for many of them. In fact, most of the new students have never sat for an international test before joining their universities. This gives some of them a kind of an exam shock that definitely affects their performance negatively. In spite of these challenges, misplaced cases can still be minimized if an appropriate cut off score that qualifies students to attend the IEP is imposed on new students. Accepting students who are incapable to pass standardized tests is a kind of misplacement because they are simply placed in the wrong place. When the cut off score is decided on, the expected gain scores that students need to achieve should be determined. Based on the findings of this study, students are expected to achieve a TOEFL gain score of about 25-30 per semester. This may help in minimizing student misplacement into ELS classes, a problem

that Kokhan (2012) sees as inevitable: “It seems that for any score that I choose as a cut off score, there will always be a significant proportion of misplaced students.” (p.305)

Now that the TOEFL and IELTS result map of EFL students is made available, it is left to the discretion of individual educational institutions to decide where to draw the cut off line for admitting students into the IEP, admitting students into the university, and placing students into different IEP levels.

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