

IELTS OR TOEFL iBT? INVESTIGATING FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE TEST DECISIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the factors influencing the choice between IELTS and TOEFL iBT among English language learners. Through a survey of 100 students, it examines the impact of marketing and advertising, preferences for paper-based versus computer-based exams, awareness of TOEFL iBT and its updates, and the influence of IELTS's popularity. Results show significant sway of marketing efforts and a divide in format preferences, with low awareness of TOEFL iBT and its recent enhancements. The study underscores the role of non-academic factors in test choice, highlighting the need for informed decision-making and diversified marketing strategies for language proficiency tests.

Keywords: IELTS, TOEFL, Exam format preference, Test awareness, Marketing influence

INTRODUCTION

The choice of an English language proficiency test is a pivotal decision for students and professionals aiming to pursue opportunities in English-speaking environments. Among various available tests, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-Based Test (TOEFL iBT) are predominant. However, there has been a noticeable inclination towards IELTS, a trend that prompts an investigation into the underlying reasons. This research paper aims to explore the factors influencing individuals' preference for IELTS over TOEFL iBT, focusing on elements such as marketing and advertising impacts, format preferences, awareness levels of the exams, and the influence of recent updates in TOEFL iBT.

Recent years have seen aggressive marketing and promotional strategies by organizations like IDP, the British Council, and various language centers for IELTS. Concurrently, changes in TOEFL iBT, including a shorter and enhanced version, have been introduced, potentially altering its appeal to test-takers. This study seeks to understand how these dynamics play a role in shaping the preferences of prospective test-takers. Recent studies, such as those by Bakri (2022), have highlighted the

evolving benchmarks in language proficiency testing, particularly concerning IELTS and TOEFL.

Methods

Participants:

The study surveyed 100 students from diverse academic backgrounds who were potential candidates for English proficiency exams. The participants were selected using a convenience sampling method from various educational institutions.

Survey Instrument:

A structured questionnaire was developed, consisting of five questions. These questions were designed to gauge the impact of marketing and advertising by major stakeholders in IELTS, preferences for paper-based versus computer-based exams, awareness of TOEFL iBT as an alternative, knowledge of recent updates in TOEFL iBT, and the influence of IELTS's popularity in decision-making. The responses were structured as multiple-choice options to facilitate quantitative analysis.

Procedure:

The survey was distributed electronically using academic networks and social media platforms. Participation was voluntary, with an emphasis on ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. Participants were provided with clear instructions and the purpose of the study was explained to ensure informed consent.

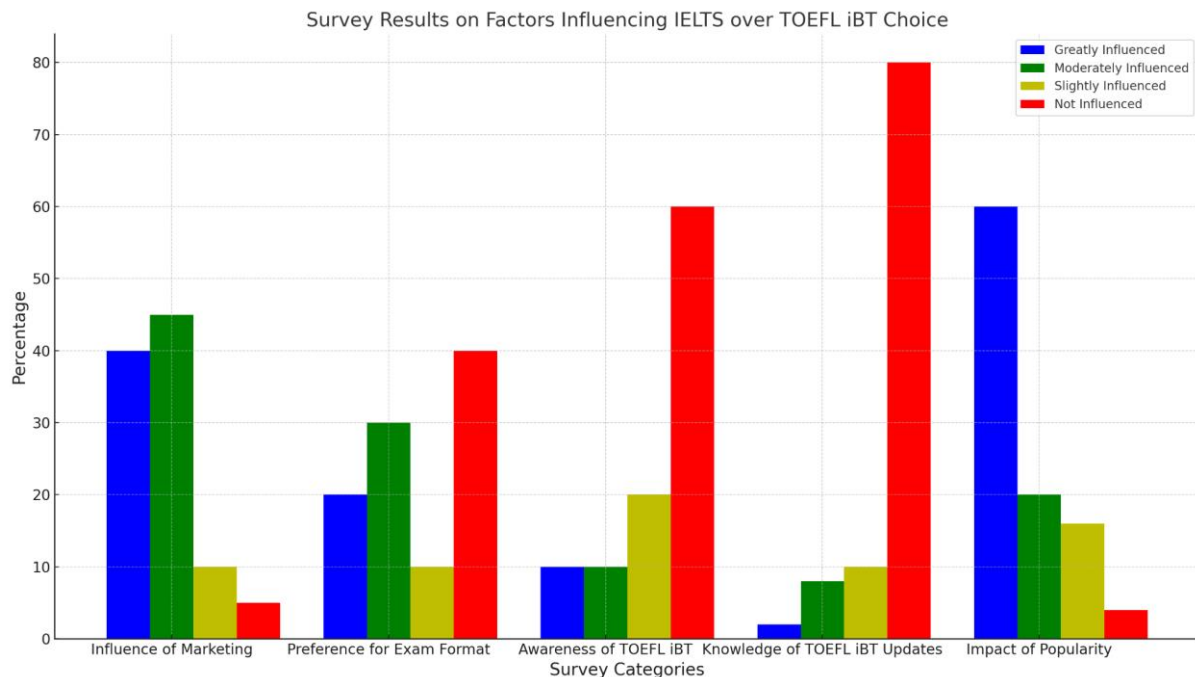
Data Analysis:

The collected data were analyzed using statistical methods. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each response option to determine trends and patterns in the participants' choices and preferences. Cross-tabulation was used to explore any correlations between different variables, such as the influence of marketing and the preference for the exam format.

The outcome of this study is expected to offer valuable insights into the factors influencing the choice of English language proficiency tests among potential test-takers, highlighting the role of non-academic factors such as marketing, format preferences, and information dissemination in this decision-making process.

Results

The survey aimed to understand various factors influencing the choice between IELTS and TOEFL iBT among prospective test-takers. The results, based on responses from 100 participants, are as follows:



Influence of Marketing and Advertising:

The marketing and advertising efforts by IDP, British Council, and language centers had a notable impact on the decision to choose IELTS over TOEFL iBT. 40% of respondents were greatly influenced, while 45% were moderately influenced. Only 5% reported no influence from these marketing efforts.

Preference for Paper-based vs. Computer-based Exams:

When considering exam formats, 20% of participants expressed a strong preference for paper-based exams, influencing their inclination towards IELTS. 30% had a slight preference for paper-based but were open to computer-based options. Interestingly, 40% preferred the computer-based format, considering both TOEFL iBT and IELTS's computer-based option.

Awareness of TOEFL iBT:

Awareness of TOEFL iBT as an alternative to IELTS was surprisingly low among respondents. 60% were not aware at all, and only 10% were very aware of TOEFL iBT.

Knowledge of TOEFL iBT Updates:

Knowledge about the recent updates in TOEFL iBT, including the introduction of the TOEFL Enhanced version, was limited among participants. 80% were not aware of these updates, and only 2% were fully aware.

Impact of Popularity and Common Preference:

The popularity and common preference for IELTS among peers and in the community had a significant influence on 60% of the respondents, while 20% were

moderately influenced. Only 4% reported that popularity did not influence their choice.

These results indicate a strong influence of marketing and advertising, along with a notable impact of social preference and familiarity on the choice of IELTS over TOEFL iBT. Additionally, the preference for specific exam formats and limited awareness of TOEFL iBT and its recent updates are significant factors affecting this decision.

Analysis and Discussion

The survey results offer a comprehensive insight into the factors influencing the preference for IELTS over TOEFL iBT among potential test-takers. This section analyzes and discusses the implications of these findings.

Influence of Marketing and Advertising:

A significant majority (85%) of the respondents were influenced to varying degrees by the marketing and advertising efforts of IDP, the British Council, and language centers. This highlights the effectiveness of targeted marketing strategies in shaping perceptions and decisions regarding language proficiency tests. As Boonsuk and Karakaş (2020) have shown, marketing strategies significantly impact student preferences for language tests. The high impact of marketing suggests that students are more likely to be swayed by visibility and promotional activities, potentially overshadowing other intrinsic qualities of the exams.

Preference for Paper-based vs. Computer-based Exams:

The split in preferences for paper-based and computer-based exams reflects the diverse needs and comfort levels of test-takers with different formats. While 20% strongly preferred paper-based exams, a significant 40% favored computer-based formats. This indicates a trend towards modern, technology-aided testing methods, possibly influenced by the digitalization of education and testing environments. However, the preference for paper-based exams among a substantial portion of the cohort underscores the need for maintaining diverse testing formats to cater to varied preferences.

Awareness of TOEFL iBT:

The low level of awareness of TOEFL iBT (60% not aware at all) is a critical finding. Umirov (2023) discusses the advancements in the Enhanced TOEFL iBT and its potential advantages over the IELTS, highlighting the need for improved

communication strategies by TOEFL. It suggests either a lack of effective marketing and information dissemination by TOEFL iBT or a dominant market presence of IELTS overshadowing its competitors. This lack of awareness can lead to a lack of informed decision-making among test-takers, who may miss out on exploring an exam that might suit their needs better.

Knowledge of TOEFL iBT Updates:

The extremely low awareness (80% not aware) of recent updates to TOEFL iBT, such as the TOEFL Enhanced version, raises concerns about the communication strategies of TOEFL. It suggests a gap in reaching out to potential candidates about significant improvements and changes that might increase the test's appeal. This lack of knowledge can reinforce the existing preferences for IELTS, further entrenching its dominance in the market.

Impact of Popularity and Common Preference:

The influence of the popularity and common preference for IELTS (60% significantly influenced) underscores the role of social factors in decision-making. Peer influence, societal trends, and the general perception of a test's value in a community can significantly sway individuals' choices. This herd mentality might lead to overlooking other viable options that might be more aligned with an individual's specific needs and circumstances.

Implications for Stakeholders:

For IELTS: The results reaffirm the effectiveness of its marketing strategies and the importance of maintaining its reputation and visibility. However, there is a need to ensure that the test's intrinsic qualities, such as its assessment methods and recognition, continue to meet the evolving needs of test-takers.

For TOEFL: There is a clear need for improved marketing and communication strategies. Raising awareness about the test, its formats, and recent updates could help TOEFL iBT gain a more competitive stance in the market.

For Educational Institutions and Language Centers: These results suggest a need to provide more comprehensive information about various test options, helping students make more informed choices.

CONCLUSION

The dominance of IELTS over TOEFL iBT, as indicated by this survey, is multifaceted, influenced significantly by marketing, societal trends, and the diversity

in test format preferences. While marketing plays a crucial role, it's essential for stakeholders to ensure that choices are also informed by comprehensive knowledge of available options, thereby fostering an environment where test-takers can select the exam that best suits their individual needs and capabilities.

Further Research

For a more comprehensive understanding of preferences for English language proficiency tests, future research should focus on:

Broader and More Diverse Participants: Expanding the participant pool to include a wider range of demographics will offer more generalizable results. A larger, more diverse sample can capture global trends and varied perspectives.

Qualitative Insights: Incorporating qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups will provide deeper insights into individual preferences and motivations, which surveys alone might not fully capture.

Comparative and Longitudinal Studies: Comparative studies involving other proficiency tests, alongside longitudinal research, would help track changing preferences and the impact of evolving educational and testing environments.

These approaches will enhance the understanding of factors influencing exam choice, aiding stakeholders in addressing the needs and preferences of test-takers more effectively.

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