

Ielts Listening: Teaching Listening Skills in the Classroom

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Abstract. *The authors present a successful instructional experience in teaching IELTS English to learners with low language proficiency. The study begins by examining the role and relevance of the IELTS examination within the context of university education. It then explores the stages of the listening comprehension process in order to gain deeper insight into the cognitive mechanisms involved in understanding spoken language. Particular attention is given to the concept of testwiseness, or test management skills, and its significance in effective test preparation. The researchers further investigate whether explicit instruction in testwiseness can foster the development of universal metacognitive skills and consequently enhance learners' performance in the IELTS listening component. The study identifies common difficulties faced by learners, analyzes how these challenges correspond to different phases of the listening process, and discusses possible ways to anticipate, prevent, and overcome such obstacles. A wide range of strategies and techniques aimed at developing test management skills is examined.*

The conclusions of the study are drawn from a two-year longitudinal experiment conducted with university students enrolled in the course, including participants from both experimental and control groups. During the experiment, the proposed instructional principles were systematically implemented in classroom practice. Data collected through monitoring, oral interviews, interim assessments, and final pilot exam results demonstrated the considerable effectiveness of both individual strategies and the course as a whole. Comparative analysis revealed that, despite initially lower levels of English proficiency, students in the experimental group ultimately achieved higher levels of test-related listening skills than those in the control group. The practical recommendations and instructional guidelines derived from this research may be widely applied in teaching practice, particularly by educators engaged in short-term preparation of low-level learners for international language examinations.

Key words: *teaching for international exams, testwiseness, listening process, IELTS.*

The idea of integrating international language test preparation into the language instruction component of federally supported higher education programs in Russia has a long and complex background that merits brief consideration. It is not widely recognized that English has long been a compulsory element of educational standards across universities in both the Soviet and post-Soviet educational systems. For several decades, foreign language instruction at non-linguistic universities relied predominantly on the grammar–translation method, which fostered traditions of language learning aimed primarily at reading and comprehending professionally oriented texts. However, in recent years, increased globalization and intensified international communication across various fields have contributed to the growing prominence of communicative approaches to foreign language teaching in schools and universities. Within academic communities, this shift has generated a strong demand for developing language competence that supports professional interaction and collaboration.

In response to these developments, leading educational institutions in Moscow have undertaken efforts to align their language instruction with internationally recognized academic and methodological standards. One notable outcome of this trend has been the incorporation of major Cambridge examination formats into the Unified State Examination for secondary school graduates. Similarly, several leading universities have begun to integrate preparation for international language assessments into their curricula in order to remain competitive and to provide graduates with linguistic skills necessary for participation in global academic and professional environments. As a result, teaching language assessment tests has become an important means of supporting students' scientific and professional development. This raises a critical question regarding the most effective ways to incorporate exam preparation courses within standard university programs.

From a theoretical perspective, multiple approaches can be adopted to ensure the coherent integration of exam preparation into higher education curricula. To illustrate this, a conceptual framework can be proposed that demonstrates the relationships between potential course components or instructional modules and internationally recognized test formats, which represent the most probable learning outcomes.

It should be noted that the proportion and role of the ESP (English for Specific Purposes) component within the course may vary depending on the type of programme selected. Students who previously studied Business English, for instance, may prefer to continue with a professionally oriented ESP track, such as preparation courses for ILEC or ICFE, or customized "English for ..." programmes tailored to a specific field of specialization. In contrast, learners whose prior training was predominantly focused on academic language skills are more likely to pursue objectives related to academic communication, such as writing a graduation thesis in English or delivering an oral presentation based on their research topic.

There is little doubt that the proposed course content model, which includes IELTS as a compulsory outcome by the second academic year, can be regarded as effective and pedagogically justified. Practical experience has demonstrated its potential benefits for students' overall language development and their readiness to function in an international academic and professional environment. However, alongside its advantages, this model also poses considerable challenges, particularly for learners with an elementary level of proficiency (A1 or below). Such students are required to master general language structures, develop the four core language skills, and simultaneously become acquainted with the specific requirements and formats of an international standardized test.

Within the framework of the experiment conducted as part of this research, a group of students was identified whose prior exposure to English was extremely limited. Some of them had not studied English at school at all, while others had only participated in brief, fragmented training courses. This category of learners, commonly referred to as the "zero group," represented a significant pedagogical risk. Nevertheless, the teaching staff deliberately accepted this challenge and designed a two-year experimental IELTS-oriented programme specifically for these students.

The implementation of this course not only tested the feasibility of integrating international test preparation into the basic university curriculum for low-level learners, but also served as the foundation for the present study. The experience gained during this process highlighted a number of methodological and practical issues, which ultimately shaped the research questions addressed in this paper.

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It is widely acknowledged that the ability to understand and accurately process spoken input constitutes a cornerstone of overall foreign language competence. Nevertheless, assessing listening proficiency and identifying the mechanisms through which it is formed and developed remains a complex task, particularly in comparison with the evaluation of productive skills such as speaking and writing. This difficulty can largely be explained by the cognitive nature of listening, which operates under significant constraints, as it "occurs within limited capacity working memory" [3, p. 182].

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by test takers in the listening component, it is essential to view listening comprehension as a psychological and cognitive process rather than a purely linguistic one. In his work on cognitive psychology, G. Anderson distinguishes three principal stages of listening comprehension: perception, parsing, and utilization [4]. During the perception stage, listeners initially receive and temporarily store the incoming speech signal as a continuous stream of phonemes. At the parsing stage, these auditory signals are segmented and transformed into meaningful linguistic units, such as words and phrases. Finally, at the utilization stage, listeners construct a mental representation of the message, which may involve either encoding the newly acquired information into memory or relating it to previously stored knowledge and experiences.

A complementary perspective is offered by G. Buck, who emphasizes the dynamic interaction between different levels of processing involved in listening comprehension. According to Buck, phonetic and phonemic information to which the listener is directly exposed—representing the lower, or bottom-up, level of processing—continuously interacts with the listener's schematic and world knowledge, which constitutes the higher, or top-down, level. This model highlights listening as an interactive process in which neither bottom-up nor top-down processing can function effectively in isolation. The acoustic signals perceived by the listener are interpreted through the activation of existing cognitive schemas, while background knowledge is, in turn, shaped and refined by the incoming auditory input [5].

In the experimental part of the study we chose to develop the curricula for both groups with the main difference in the additional part of the programme – two hours weekly. Here, a number of selected sources along with the authentic past papers and customized testing materials were put to good use.

In conclusion, listening comprehension is a central component of foreign language competence and a complex skill that requires the integration of cognitive, linguistic, and schematic knowledge. The

process involves multiple stages, including perception, parsing, and utilization, through which learners transform auditory signals into meaningful understanding. The interaction between bottom-up processing, driven by phonetic and phonemic input, and top-down processing, informed by prior knowledge and cognitive schemas, underscores the intricacy of listening as a skill that is simultaneously receptive and interpretive. For language instructors and test designers, this highlights the necessity of adopting teaching and assessment approaches that account for both the cognitive mechanisms of listening and the challenges faced by learners, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as IELTS and other international language assessments. Future research and instructional design should continue to explore strategies that bridge the gap between theory and practice, enhancing learners' capacity to comprehend, retain, and apply spoken language effectively.

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