ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) PROFICIENCY ON THE RISE: ANALYSING IELTS PERFORMANCE TRENDS IN UZBEKISTAN (2020–2024)

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Abstract: This paper appraises the performances of IELTS candidates in Uzbekistan from 2020 to 2024 in order to investigate the rise of proficiency in the English language among Uzbek students. Data was collected from reliable and authentic sources of organisational websites. Analysis of data showed a proven development in language development among Uzbek students. Increased teaching facilities, government support, and people's awareness of the IELTS test and its importance. The number of students who took the IELTS test and their performance in individual band scores ranged from 5.5 to 9.0. It could be more productive and beneficial if the authorities made the best use of this rising trend. Successful candidates who have scored above 8.0 are the best teacher resource not only in the country but also in the whole world.

Keywords: English Proficiency, IELTS, IELTS Score, EFL in Uzbekistan, English in Uzbekistan,

Introduction: Crystal (2003) defined Global language as the language that is recognised by people from around the world. There are two ways for a language to be determined as a global language; the first is that a country takes English to use within the nation as an Official Language, secondly, a language can be made a priority in a country's

foreign language teaching even though the language has no official language status within the nation. Due to global villaging, major languages like English, Chinese, and Russian have gained ample importance in almost all fields like education, economy, international relations, etc. According to Bezborodova and Radjabzade (2021), English in Central Asia is considered a language of intercultural communication and a widely studied foreign language at schools and universities. The government of the republic has timely made decisions on the implementation of important language reformation, enhancing English language education among school students by recruiting international expatriate teachers to teach mainly English and some other international languages such as German, French, and Chinese and so on from all around the world. On top of that, encourage teachers' training programmes and motivate students to take international tests like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). This wise decision aligns with the national aim to equip Uzbek professionals' competitiveness on the global stage.

IELTS.ORG (2024) declared that IELTS began to help reach their potential in 1989. There are over 12500 institutions that accept IELTS qualifications as a genuine reflection of one's English proficiency. IELTS tests have taken place over 30 million times since the 1980s since the inauguration of the testing system. Every week, at least 60,000 candidates take the IELTS test to prove their English proficiency either to work abroad, study, or migrate to an English-speaking country. Candidates' ability to Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking skills are assessed in conjunction with the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

According to the British Council Uzbekistan (2021), the first bilateral agreement with the Government of Uzbekistan was first signed in October 1996, and it has been almost thirty years since the British Council Uzbekistan (BCU) started working in Uzbekistan supporting Uzbek students in various projects in collaboration with various government and non-government partners. There are a lot of test centres offering exams either on paper or on the computer in cities like Tashkent, Andijan, Bukhara, Fergana, Samarkand, Jizzakh, Kokand, Namangan, Navoiy, Nukus, Karshi, Termez, and Urgench, British Council (2024). IDP IELTS has also established a number of testing centres around the country from major cities like Tashkent, Bukhara, Andijan, Fergana, Namangan, Navoi, Nukus, Samarkand, Termez, and Urgench.

Background: Uzbekistan promotes a favourable environment for learning English in schools and universities (Rustam T. 2022). Many students dream about pursuing their studies or higher studies in one of the developed countries. Most of them are particularly interested in the USA, European countries, Korea, etc. Several state-owned and private universities have collaborated with the British Council to conduct the IELTS test. Private teaching centres have also partnered with IDP IELTS and the British Council to teach IELTS candidates and conduct tests in the centre complex. There are hundreds of private institutions around the republic teaching candidates to prepare for their IELTS tests. A considerable percentage of the past candidates who got an IELTS band score of 7 and above have either started teaching IELTS lessons or working for established IELTS teaching centres as teachers or teacher assistants. Private centres that teach IELTS around the country are equipped with modern teaching aids and comfortable equipment, as well as convenient learning environments similar to developed countries.

Purpose of the study and methodology: Almost the first question a teacher, particularly an EFL or ESL teacher, would hear at the onset from school and undergraduate students, teachers, and a majority of young university lecturers is, *"What's your IELTS score?"*. IELTS tests and the performance of IELTS have gained huge social recognition

among Uzbek students, academic staff, and employers. Parents like to boast about their child's IELTS score almost everywhere. This paper aims to analyse the trend in IELTS performance in Uzbekistan by comparing the summary of Uzbek candidates' IELTS test performances over a five-year period, starting in 2020 and ending in 2024. This paper appreciates the government's effort to improve English proficiency among the nation's population and the contribution of relevant national educational institutions and stakeholders. The necessary data was collected from various resources like the official websites of IELTS, the British Council in Uzbekistan, IDP IELTS in Uzbekistan, and reliable news websites of Uzbekistan. Classified data of the number of candidates from band score of 5.5 up to the highest band score of 9.0 over the study period. Several websites, namely Sa'dullayev (2024), Yoshlarforumi (2024), Kunu.Uz (2024) are the primary resource to collect data. Upon the completion of this careful study on the data, the study intends to contribute to the broader understanding of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) development in Uzbekistan and the current English proficiency level compared to previous years and insights for sustaining and accelerating this progressive trend. Specifically, the research addresses the trends in IELTS performance in Uzbekistan from 2020 to 2024 and possible factors that contributed to the performance of the candidates during the period. Ultimately, the findings of this study will further enhance learners' motivation to achieve yet better performances, educators, and policymakers, as well as researchers seeking ways to enhance EFL education and proficiency outcomes in Uzbekistan, and the researcher is giving an attempt to recommend anything that shall be productive in the journey of the authority to enhance English language proficiency among Uzbek students on a long-term process.

Literature Review: Bezborodova and Radjabzade (2021b) have conducted important research work on English in higher education in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and concluded that Academic professionals and students viewed better fluency in English as an opportunity for a brighter future. All the participants who took part in the study were motivated to increase their language competencies in English, but the need for more support prevailed. Uzbekistan has realised the fact that English shall help access international education, employment, and international affairs (Ashurov, 2021). Karimova (2021), highlighted the Presidential Decree of 2020 with an emphasis on improving teacher training, expanding access to English learning resources, and modernised English teaching methodologies in schools and universities. Akhmedova (2023) stated that the increasing number of registrations to take the IELTS tests in Uzbekistan shows the value and recognition IELTS gained in Uzbek society.

Specialised teacher training programme to equip teachers to best utilise innovative methodologies and technology-integrated teaching, use of digital tools for language teaching has a significant impact on improved English performance in Uzbekistan (Karimova, 2021). Online learning resources, wide-spread IELTS preparation programmes and English language media have significantly enhanced learners' easy reach to high-quality resources (Ismailov & Rahimov, 2022)

Data Analysis: According to (ielts.org, 2024), a candidate who took band '9' is considered an Expert user of the English language, while band '8' is a very good user, '7' is Good, '6' is Competent and '5' is a Modest user. Sa'dullayev (2024); Yoshlarforumi (2024); Kunu.Uz (2024), the Director of the Youth Affairs Agency, has appreciated the effort of IELTS test takers and their increased performance. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are taken from Kunu.Uz (2024), and they are in Uzbek, the national language of Uzbekistan. Figure 1 gives information about the number of candidates who took their IELTS test, their achieved band score categorised from 5.5 to 9.0, the number of candidates who sat for the exam according

to the years, and the total number of candidates given at the end. Figure 2 details the number of candidates from 2020 to 2024.



IELTS ko'rsatkichlari	2020-yil	2021-yil	2022-yil	2023-yil	2024-yil
5.5	3 596	9 200	11 703	13 509	14 006
6.0	2 924	7 403	10 516	13 050	14 248
6.5	1 811	4 728	7 210	10 071	11 006
7.0	1 073	2 991	4 496	6 862	7 616
7.5	553	1 405	2 209	3 716	4 008
8.0	181	438	818	1 470	1 490
8.5	14	50	110	273	310
9.0	-	1	-	13	22
Jami	10 152	26 216	37 062	48 964	52 706

Figure 1: IELTS Performances from 2020 to 2024; Extracted from: Kunu.Uz (2024)

Band Score Performance Analysis: The data given in the table reveals an exponential hike in the number of IELTS test-takers in Uzbekistan over the five-year tenure from 2020 to 2024. The data given in the table provides a breakdown of candidates across different IELTS band scores. The majority of the candidates achieved their results between the band score of 5.5 to 6.0. Band 5.5 candidates hiked from 3,596 in 2020 to 14,006 in 2024. Hence, band 6.0 performers grew from 2,924 to 14,248 during the same period. Candidates above 6.5 have also exhibited substantial growth, from 1,811 in 2020 to 11,006 in 2024. A band score of 7.0 increased from 1,073 in 2020 to 7,616 in 2024, and band 7.5 scores rose from 553 to 4,008 during the same period. Band 8.0 to 9.0 is the highest rank an IELTS candidate can score to prove the expert use of English in his work and academic life. Although the number seems to be a small growth, it witnesses a steady increase. Candidates who achieved an 8.0 band score have increased approximately eightfold compared to 181 in 2020, with 1,490 in 2024. A band score of 8.5 was possible to achieve for only 14 candidates in 2020, but in 2024, it turned out to be an easy score for 310 candidates, which is around twenty-two times rise. Though band 9.0 is a dream for many candidates, 22 candidates achieved a band 9.0 score in 2024 and 13 in 2023, while only one candidate got a 9.0 score in 2021 – for candidates who took IELTS in 2020 and 2022, it was hard to secure a band 9.0 score.

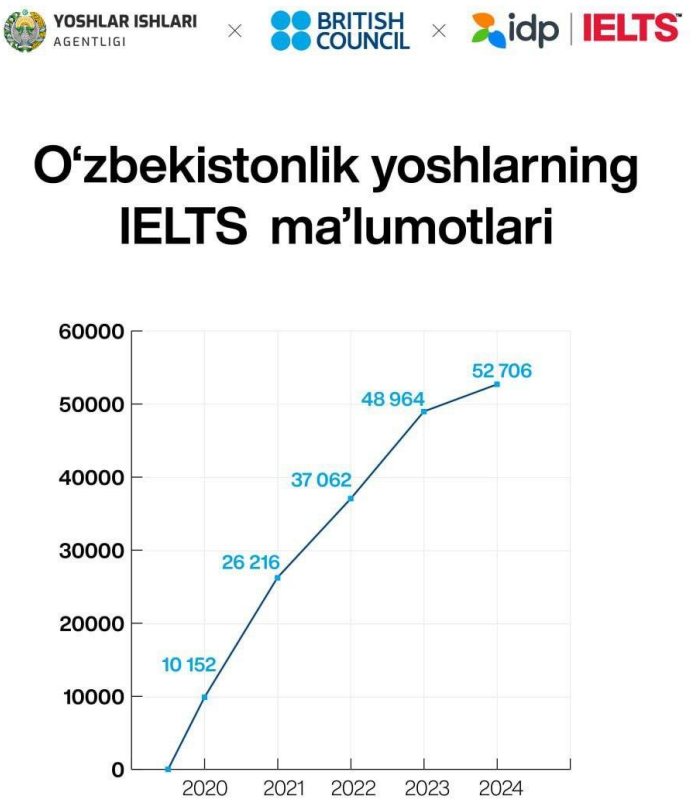


Figure 2: Number of candidates took the IELTS Test from 2020 to 2024; Extracted from: Kunu.Uz (2024)

IELTS Participation Trend (2020 – 2024): The number of candidates who took the IELTS test grew from 10,152 in 2020 to 52,706 in 2024, as shown in the table provided above in Figure 1. Comparative analysis of data between the years 2020 and 2021 witnessed a dramatic increase of 158%, with the number of test-takers jumping from 10,152 to 26,216. The consecutive years 2021 to 2022, 2022 to 2023, and 2023 to 2024 have also recorded growth of 41% (37,062), 32% (48,964), and 8% (52,706) respectively.

Specific study to overall performance about band score from 8.0, 8.5 and 9.0 shows a great improvement. While 195 candidates got 8.0 to 8.5, without 9.0 in 2020, 489 candidates belong to this category with 1 band Niner in 2021, the number of candidates of this performance kept on increasing in 2022 with 928 without Niner but 1756 and 1822 candidates fall into this level of achievement in last two years respectively 2023 and 2024. It is proved excellence of IELTS candidates in Uzbekistan.

Results and discussion: Since October 1996, when Uzbekistan invited the British Council, there have been considerable improvements in several academic and cultural aspects. According to IDP IELTS Uzbekistan (2024), each educational institution or organisation decides its own level of required band score to meet its required language competencies. Salsi (2024) detailed the IELTS score requirement for various countries such as the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, the United States, Canada, and other English-speaking countries. In summary, to enrol in university-level courses, a candidate should acquire at least 5.0 or 5.5 (CEFR B2), in courses below the university level will suffice a band score between 4.0 to 5.0 (CEFR B1) and to get work from different employers require various band score starting from 4.0 to 7.0.

Key Findings: The level of English proficiency is dramatically increasing among Uzbek candidates; 4,397 candidates secured a band score of 8.0 performers, 757 candidates achieved an 8.5 band score, and 36 band Niners from 2020 to 2024. It could be inferred that

the total number of 5,190 candidates who secured band scores of 8.0, 8.5, and 9.0 are intrinsically motivated to prove their English proficiency, these candidates can potentially be considered an inspiration to students preparing for their IELTS in 2025 and after. Many candidates who got their band score from 5.5 to 7.0 or 7.5 could probably be extrinsically motivated for their higher studies or foreign employment. The majority of the candidates scored between 5.5 to 7.5 are also equally able to score yet higher, but they targeted only within this range of scores in order for them to get admission to their university. There is a clear upward trend in the total count of all levels of Band score during all five-year tenure. Year-on-year growth is another significant key success factor that shows an upward trend in counts at almost every band score level compared to the previous year. Based on the data, further inferences could be made about the learning centres, teachers, and learning infrastructure, as well as the facilities available in Uzbekistan are skyrocketing. Students, parents, and relevant stakeholders got a great awareness of the importance of English and the significance of taking the IELTS test. The government's efforts to implement various levels of language teaching projects and motivation have started paying off. It will be possible for Uzbek people to adopt English into their daily life with a very fluent level in a decade if the performance continues to grow like this.

Discussion: The findings explicitly indicate a significant upward trend in the database throughout the tenure taken to study, which may suggest various underlying factors contributing to this rise, such as social status, motivation, learning style and so on. The dominance of lower band score falls between 5.5 and 7.5 could imply that more candidates took their IELTS to meet the requirements of their studies. These candidates belong to lower thresholds and wanted to take the IELTS only for their higher studies or employment abroad, on the other hand, those who have acquired a band score of 8 and above are potential English language teachers of Uzbekistan with essential teacher training programmes.

Recommendations: It could be useful for the authority concerned to develop a course programme to initiate a highly demanding bachelor-level study for a minimum of 18 months on Teaching English as a Foreign Language to candidates who secured an above band score of 8.0 and appoint them into a government school with good remuneration and benefits. The course duration should be more than 18 months in order that the training could be recognised by other universities for them to pursue their postgraduation studies. Existing, active state or private universities can also initiate this course programme into their faculties, so that there will not be huge monetary challenges. It is significant that the institution consults with experts and get adequate advice from those experts have a thorough and in-depth understanding of the ground-level status, and are able to work on the feasibility and productivity of the project.

The researchers could see increased benefits of training Uzbek EFL Teachers who have a natural love for their country and desire to give better education to fellow brethren. Candidates who scored above 8.0 are undoubtedly good at English, but it is not enough to be a better EFL teacher; proper training in certain subjects like Pedagogical Knowledge, Teaching Approaches, Methodologies and Techniques, Lesson Planning, Curriculum Development, English Literature, Theory of Second Language Acquisition, Classroom Management, Assessment and Evaluation Skills, Computer-Aided Language Learning knowledge, Linguistics and Language Studies, World Englishes, Research Methodologies in Language Teaching, and Teaching Practicum, and some other necessary subjects should be decided based on a proper need assessment conducted by experts and taught during the course programme.

Another important subject to include in the curriculum is Student counselling and career guidance, with special emphasis on motivating learners so that they can help students

set clear and achievable academic and life goals, create a positive and learner-friendly classroom environment, understand students' needs and interests, and so on. From another different angle, The British Council Uzbekistan (2021) has been actively supporting Uzbekistan through various projects, such as the Going Global Partnership Programme, Creative Spark Higher Education Programme, and British Contemporary Art and Culture can also inaugurate this programme and that shall yet be better for the government, students, and relevant stakeholder.

Conclusion: This study intended to investigate the rising trend of English proficiency among IELTS candidates in Uzbekistan. A five-year breakdown of IELTS results according to different levels of evaluation band scores, starting from 5.5 to 9.0, was taken from Kunu.Uz (2024). All the band score levels individually, and the total number of candidates witnessed an upward trend throughout the tenure. This upward trajectory suggests that more teaching facilities, learning aids, government support, and awareness of the importance of IELTS tests among parents and relevant stakeholders prevail well among the population of Uzbekistan. Apart from intrinsically motivated low score takers, high band score candidates, who scored 8.0 and 9.0, are the Republic's potential English teacher strength.

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