

Streamlining Efficiencies: Preparing International School Students For Universities Through IELTS Curriculum Integration

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Abstract

The growing demand for university readiness among international school students necessitates a paradigm shift in how English language proficiency is developed within institutional curricula. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), widely recognized as a benchmark for academic English competence, remains a critical gateway for students seeking admission into universities across English-speaking nations and beyond. However, conventional approaches to IELTS preparation have largely operated in isolation from mainstream curricula, resulting in fragmented learning experiences, curricular redundancy, and inefficient allocation of instructional time. This article examines the feasibility and pedagogical merit of integrating IELTS preparation into the core curriculum of international schools to streamline educational efficiency while simultaneously enhancing students' academic language competencies. Drawing on contemporary applications of constructive alignment in language education, the reconceptualization of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency in multilingual contexts, integrated curriculum design frameworks, and empirical insights from models of embedding international examination formats within foreign language instruction, the study argues that it is possible to optimize the development of skills and abilities necessary to successfully meet international standards without interference with the major curriculum. The article introduces an integrated curricular model that systematically incorporates IELTS-aligned tasks, academic discourse practices, and evaluative frameworks across subject areas and grade levels. This approach shifts test preparation from an extra activity to a natural part of the learning process. The article concludes by highlighting implications for curriculum designers, school administrators, language educators, and policymakers who aim to bridge the gap between international school education and the linguistic demands of higher education in a globalized, multicultural academic setting.

Keywords: IELTS Curriculum Integration, International School Education, Academic English Proficiency, University Readiness, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), Curriculum Design, English Medium Instruction (EMI)

Date of Submission: 02-05-2026

Date of Acceptance: 12-05-2026

I. Introduction

Context and Background

The landscape of international education has undergone a profound transformation in the twenty-first century, driven by the accelerating forces of globalization, academic mobility, and rising demand for cross-border access to higher education. International schools, which have proliferated across virtually every continent, serve a linguistically and culturally diverse student population whose educational trajectory often leads to admission to universities in English-speaking countries or to English-medium programs worldwide. Within this context, English language proficiency has emerged not merely as a desirable skill but as a fundamental prerequisite for academic success at the tertiary level. Among the standardized instruments designed to assess such proficiency, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is particularly prominent, serving as a gatekeeping mechanism that determines the eligibility of millions of prospective international students for university admission each year (Maryam et al., 2025). Recognized by over 11,000 institutions across more than 140 countries, IELTS has become a cornerstone of the international higher education admissions architecture, assessing candidates across four integrated skill domains — listening, reading, writing, and speaking — with particular emphasis on academic English competence (Marina, 2018). The importance of this exam for international school students' educational goals cannot be overstated, as IELTS scores often play a crucial role in admission decisions, scholarship awards, and visa approvals.

Identification of the Research Problem

The prevailing approach to IELTS preparation in international school contexts has been characterized by a model of curricular separation, wherein test preparation is treated as a distinct, supplementary activity that operates in parallel to — rather than in integration with — the mainstream academic curriculum. Students are

typically directed toward dedicated IELTS preparation courses, private tutoring, or commercial test preparation programs that exist outside their regular timetabled instruction. This bifurcated model creates multiple inefficiencies: it imposes additional time burdens on students already managing demanding academic workloads; it generates unnecessary duplication of skill development that could otherwise be embedded within existing coursework; and it fosters an artificial distinction between "academic English" as practiced in the classroom and "test English" as rehearsed in preparation courses (Yang & Badger, 2015). Furthermore, this separation often results in a reductive approach to IELTS preparation that privileges test-taking strategies and formulaic responses over the authentic development of academic language competencies — an approach that may yield short-term score gains but fails to cultivate the sustained linguistic capabilities necessary for university success (Lei, 2021).

Research Gap in Existing Literature

The existing body of research on IELTS preparation has provided valuable insights into specific aspects of the test experience, such as validation processes for individual test parts (Marina, 2018), the impact of test prep on second language socialization (Lei, 2021), the connection between IELTS prep and overall English proficiency growth (Maryam et al., 2025), and how certain IELTS skill criteria align with institutional English education policies (Han, 2024). More recently, an emerging strand of research has begun to explore the integration of artificial intelligence tools into IELTS instruction, examining how technologies such as ChatGPT may support personalized writing feedback (Le Ngoc Anh & Dieu, 2025), speaking skill development (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025), and automated assessment reliability (Koraishi, 2024). Similarly, foundational studies have examined the nature and effectiveness of standalone IELTS preparation courses in various national settings (Hayes & Read, 2004; Yang & Badger, 2015).

However, a significant gap remains in the literature: there is a lack of systematic research on how IELTS preparation is integrated into the mainstream academic programs of international schools. While Fedorova et al. (2021) offered pioneering evidence from the Russian higher education context demonstrating that it is feasible to embed international examination preparation within foreign language curricula without interference with the major program of study, this work focused on university-level language faculties rather than on international secondary school contexts where the need for such integration is arguably most acute. Most existing studies treat IELTS preparation as an isolated instructional intervention, examining its effects within self-contained preparation programs, rather than investigating how IELTS-aligned competencies might be developed organically through the reconfiguration of existing curricular structures. Consequently, the field lacks a comprehensive, theoretically grounded framework for understanding how international schools can systematically embed IELTS preparation across subject areas, grade levels, and assessment practices to enhance both examination outcomes and genuine academic readiness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the feasibility, pedagogical rationale, and structural mechanisms for meaningfully integrating IELTS preparation into the core curriculum of international schools, thereby streamlining educational efficiency while strengthening students' preparedness for the linguistic and academic demands of university education. This article proposes a synergistic model of curriculum integration that weaves IELTS-aligned tasks, academic discourse practices, evaluative frameworks, and skill development activities into the fabric of everyday instruction across disciplinary boundaries.

Research Objectives and Questions

To accomplish this goal, the study is guided by the following research objectives and questions:

Research Objectives:

- To critically examine the existing landscape of IELTS preparation practices within international school contexts and identify prevailing inefficiencies.
- To establish a theoretical foundation for the integration of IELTS preparation into mainstream international school curricula.
- To propose a curricular integration model that aligns IELTS skill development with broader academic learning outcomes.
- To evaluate the potential benefits and challenges of such integration for students, educators, and institutional stakeholders.

Research Questions:

- ✓ What are the current approaches to IELTS preparation in international schools, and what inefficiencies characterize these practices?

- ✓ How can IELTS preparation be systematically integrated into international school curricula without compromising the integrity of the mainstream academic program?
- ✓ What theoretical frameworks best support the design of an integrated IELTS curriculum model?
- ✓ To what extent does curriculum-integrated IELTS preparation enhance both examination performance and transferable academic competencies necessary for university success?

II. Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework supporting the integration of IELTS preparation into international school curricula draws on several interconnected models. Constructive alignment posits that effective learning outcomes are achieved when there is deliberate coherence among intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessment tasks — if the intended outcome includes university readiness, then teaching activities and assessment practices must be purposefully designed to cultivate the competencies that IELTS measures (Fedorova et al., 2021). Complementing this, backward design begins with identifying desired outcomes. It works retrospectively to determine the instructional activities necessary to achieve them, requiring curriculum developers to design learning experiences that progressively build toward clearly defined competency targets rather than the mechanical rehearsal of test formats (Maryam et al., 2025). The idea of washback — the influence that a test has on teaching and learning practices — is a key concern, as IELTS preparation might lead to focused attention on academic writing conventions while also risking reducing instruction to formulaic templates if it is not part of a broader academic literacy framework (Lewthwaite, 2007).

The distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) remains essential for understanding why students educated in English-medium international schools might still struggle with IELTS — students often develop high levels of conversational skills through daily immersion. However, they may not reach the same level of cognitively demanding language proficiency needed for academic tasks without deliberate, sustained, and pedagogically structured intervention. Liu and Hamid (2025) documented a notable disconnect between IELTS scores and actual academic language demands, suggesting that traditional preparation may foster test-specific performance rather than deep CALP, while Phakiti et al. (2013) showed that individual factors, including metacognitive awareness and self-regulatory capacity, also significantly impact academic success. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) framework offers additional reasoning, proposing that in international school settings where instruction is already conducted in English, language development should happen across all subject areas — emphasizing the importance of a whole-school approach in which all teachers recognize their role in developing the academic language skills that IELTS assesses, and that universities require (Xiong et al., 2024).

Review of Previous Empirical Studies

The empirical literature on IELTS preparation, academic English development, and curriculum integration has expanded considerably in recent years. Studies on the effectiveness of preparation have consistently demonstrated that structured programs positively influence performance across all four skill domains. However, the magnitude of impact varies according to pedagogical approach — programs incorporating authentic academic tasks and meaningful communicative activities produce more substantial and durable gains than those relying predominantly on practice tests and strategy drilling (Maryam et al., 2025).

Hayes and Read (2004) revealed that while preparation courses enhanced familiarity with test formats, the transfer of skills to authentic academic settings was limited when instruction was narrowly focused on test mechanics. Subsequent research has reinforced this finding: Yang and Badger (2015) demonstrated that effective preparation extended beyond linguistic skill development to encompass the cultural and institutional knowledge necessary for successful participation in academic communities, while Lei (2021) found that speaking preparation emphasizing authentic interaction and negotiation of meaning contributed to sociolinguistic development in ways that transcended examination performance.

Chairiyani and Agustin (2025) further illuminated the identity-related dimensions of IELTS preparation, revealing that the examination process served as a site of identity negotiation in which learners confronted and reconstructed their self-perceptions as English-language users. Research on curriculum integration models has yielded equally important findings — Fedorova et al. (2021) showed that including exam-style tasks within regular coursework fostered competency development that meets international standards without harming the curriculum's integrity. Meanwhile, Golubovskaya et al. (2018) observed that students were more engaged and developed skills more effectively when international exam objectives were integrated into course planning from the beginning. Han (2024) demonstrated that IELTS criteria could function as pedagogically productive tools for structuring in-class speaking development, and Maldoni et al. (2009) showed that discipline-based reading instruction developed more sophisticated comprehension strategies than reading taught in isolation from content.

A growing body of research is exploring the link between emerging technologies and IELTS preparation. Le Ngoc Anh and Dieu (2025) found that AI-mediated personalized feedback improved the efficiency and personalization of writing development in classroom settings, while Nguyen and Nguyen (2025) showed that AI-supported speaking practice allowed students to engage in extended oral production outside formal class time, effectively increasing opportunities for speaking development beyond scheduled instruction. Koraiishi (2024) cautioned against over-reliance on AI assessment tools, finding that while AI-generated scores demonstrated moderate correlation with human rater scores, significant limitations remained in assessing nuanced dimensions such as critical argumentation and rhetorical sophistication.

Bai and Xian (2024) revealed that digital storytelling activities reduced speaking anxiety while enhancing self-regulatory behavior and oral fluency, supporting the incorporation of creative, technology-enhanced pedagogies within curriculum-integrated preparation. The effectiveness of any integration initiative remains contingent on teachers' professional capacities. Al Khafaji (n.d.) found that teachers engaging in sustained reflective practice were more effective in developing students' critical and analytical thinking capacities, while Yusupova et al. (2025) demonstrated that project-based learning methodologies offered a natural vehicle for embedding IELTS-relevant tasks within meaningful academic projects. Marina (2018) revealed that successful IELTS reading performance required the capacity to engage with academic texts through strategies including skimming, scanning, inference, and critical evaluation, and Sabet and Babaei (2017) found significant correlations between IELTS listening performance and listening in academic English programs, supporting the integration of IELTS-style listening activities within mainstream instruction.

The literature on international student academic transition provides essential contextual evidence for understanding the ultimate purpose of IELTS curriculum integration. Liu and Hamid (2025) documented a pervasive disjuncture between IELTS scores and actual academic language experiences, with students reporting that preparation had not adequately prepared them for authentic linguistic demands, including academic lectures, seminar discussions, research writing, and peer collaboration. Sawir et al. (2012) demonstrated that language competence functioned as a determinant not only of academic performance but of students' broader sense of safety, belonging, and psychological well-being, while Sawir (2013) highlighted that international students' capacity to contribute meaningfully to internationalized learning communities depended significantly on pre-university language preparation.

Dai (2020) revealed that students' capacity to navigate transitions between academic cultures was heavily influenced by the degree to which prior education had developed metacognitive awareness of different academic conventions and discourse practices, and Barker (2012) argued that responsibility for developing academic English competence should be shared across the educational continuum rather than concentrated at university entry. Streitwieser et al. (2019) illuminated the broader structural role that standardized language assessments play in mediating access to higher education, reinforcing the importance of systematic language preparation within pre-university settings. Tieu and Baker (2023) demonstrated that when students were guided to notice specific linguistic and rhetorical features in exemplary academic texts, they developed greater metalinguistic awareness and more sophisticated writing strategies — offering a practical pedagogical strategy that aligns naturally with academic reading and writing activities across disciplinary boundaries.

Identification of Gaps in the Literature

The critical analysis presented above reveals several significant gaps in the existing literature that the present study addresses. While Fedorova et al. (2021) and Golubovskaya et al. (2018) have demonstrated the feasibility of integrating international examination preparation within university-level language curricula, no comparable framework has been developed for international secondary school contexts — the distinctive characteristics of international schools, including their curricular diversity, multilingual student populations, transnational institutional orientations, and dual accountability to both national and international educational standards, necessitate a context-specific integration model that cannot be extrapolated from university-based research. The existing literature has predominantly examined IELTS preparation within the confines of English-language or foreign-language courses, while the potential for IELTS-relevant skills to be developed through instruction in other subject areas has received minimal empirical or theoretical attention. This gap is significant because the academic language competencies assessed by IELTS, including argumentation, evidence evaluation, formal register, and discourse synthesis, are not exclusively linguistic skills but cognitive-academic capacities cultivated across disciplinary boundaries.

Furthermore, while individual studies have examined IELTS preparation at specific educational stages, the literature lacks a developmental perspective on how IELTS-relevant competencies might be progressively scaffolded across multiple years of international school education, enabling curriculum designers to map skill development trajectories that build systematically from foundational academic literacy skills in lower secondary years to the advanced discourse competencies required for IELTS performance in upper secondary years. Liu and Hamid (2025) and others have documented the disjuncture between IELTS performance and university-level

academic language experiences. However, the literature has not adequately explored how curriculum-integrated preparation — as distinct from isolated preparation — might address this disjuncture. The present study contends that this gap between test scores and academic readiness arises precisely because conventional preparation targets test performance rather than the underlying academic competencies that both IELTS and university studies demand, and that curriculum integration offers a means of closing this gap by aligning preparation with authentic academic skill development.

III. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative literature review design. This approach was chosen because the study aimed to examine, analyze, and synthesize existing research on IELTS preparation and curriculum integration to develop a practical framework for international schools. Rather than collecting original data from participants, the study drew on published scholarly works that had already investigated various aspects of IELTS preparation, academic English development, and international student university readiness.

This design is consistent with the approach used by Fedorova et al. (2021), who employed analysis of publications and accumulated methodological experience to investigate the integration of international examination preparation into foreign language education curricula. Streitwieser et al. (2019) similarly conducted a literature review to map the available research and identify key patterns and gaps across multiple contexts.

Study Population and Sampling

The study population consisted of published scholarly works — including journal articles, conference papers, book chapters, research reports, and theses — that addressed IELTS preparation, curriculum integration, international school education, academic English development, and international student transition to university.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select relevant studies. This means that studies were deliberately chosen for their direct relevance to the research topic rather than selected at random.

The following criteria guided the selection:

Topic: Studies must address IELTS preparation, curriculum integration, academic English, or international student readiness

Language: Studies published in English

Recency: Priority given to studies published between 2018 and 2025, with key foundational works also included

Geography: Studies from diverse countries to ensure broad applicability

Type: Peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, conference proceedings, and research reports

Data Collection

Data were collected through document analysis following a systematic three-step process: studies were identified through searches of academic databases including Scopus, ERIC, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, Springer Nature, and Emerald Insight using search terms such as "IELTS preparation," "IELTS curriculum integration," "international school education," "academic English proficiency," "university readiness," and "language assessment," with additional studies found by examining reference lists of initially retrieved articles. Retrieved studies were then screened against the selection criteria outlined in Section 3.2, excluding those that did not directly address IELTS preparation, curriculum integration, or international student academic readiness. For each selected study, information was systematically extracted including author(s) and year of publication, research purpose, methodology, study context and population, key findings, relevance to IELTS curriculum integration, and limitations noted — a process consistent with the analytical approach described by Fedorova et al. (2021), who combined analysis of publications with practical methodological experience to generate integrated findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns across the selected studies. The analysis followed three stages:

Stage 1: Coding. Each study was read carefully and assigned codes based on its main focus and findings. For example, Lei (2021) was coded under "IELTS speaking and socialization," Koraishi (2024) under "AI in IELTS assessment," and Liu and Hamid (2025) under "gap between IELTS scores and academic experience."

Stage 2: Theme Development. The codes were grouped into broader themes that captured patterns across multiple studies. Eight themes emerged:

Table 1: Theme Development

Theme	Key Contributing Studies
Curriculum integration as efficiency	Fedorova et al. (2021); Han (2024); Golubovskaya et al. (2018); Maldoni et al. (2009)
The gap between test scores and academic readiness	Liu & Hamid (2025); Sawir et al. (2012); Phakiti et al. (2013); Dai (2020)
IELTS preparation as academic socialization	Yang & Badger (2015); Lei (2021); Chairiyani & Agustin (2025); Barker (2012)
Technology in IELTS preparation	Le Ngoc Anh & Dieu (2025); Nguyen & Nguyen (2025); Koraishi (2024); Bai & Xian (2024)
IELTS validity and academic alignment	Marina (2018); Sabet & Babaei (2017); Ren & Blackhurst (2026); Tieu & Baker (2023)
Teacher practice and agency	Al-Khafaji (n.d.); Xiong et al. (2024); Yusupova et al. (2025)
Institutional and systemic factors	Almazova et al. (2018); Sawir (2013); Streitwieser et al. (2019); Lewthwaite (2007)
Learner identity and affect	Chairiyani & Agustin (2025); Rasti (2009); Bai & Xian (2024); Dai (2020)

Stage 3: Synthesis. The themes were examined together to understand how they related to one another and what they collectively suggested about IELTS curriculum integration. This final stage produced the study's original contribution: a practical, evidence-based framework for integrating IELTS preparation into international school curricula. This approach mirrors the synthesis method used by Maryam et al. (2025), who drew together findings from diverse studies to reach conclusions about the relationship between IELTS preparation and English language proficiency.

IV. Results

Theme 1: Curriculum Integration as an Efficiency Mechanism

A key finding across the reviewed literature was that integrating IELTS preparation into existing curricula — rather than treating it as a separate activity — led to more efficient use of instructional time and resources. Fedorova et al. (2021) provided the most direct evidence for this finding. Their study at Kursk State University demonstrated that when tasks and exercises were designed in the format of international examinations and incorporated into regular coursework, students developed the required competencies without additional preparation time beyond the main curriculum. The authors concluded that this approach was both "feasible and productive," as it eliminated the duplication of effort that occurs when examination preparation runs parallel to mainstream instruction.

Han (2024) reported similar findings in the Chinese university context. By embedding IELTS speaking assessment criteria — fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation — directly into regular English classes, instructors were able to develop students' speaking competencies through everyday classroom activities rather than through separate IELTS coaching sessions. This integration meant that students practiced IELTS-relevant skills as part of their normal learning rather than as an additional workload.

Golubovskaya et al. (2018) reinforced this finding from the Russian context, showing that when international examination objectives were built into course planning from the beginning, students demonstrated higher engagement and stronger skill development than when examination preparation was added onto existing courses as an extra component. The key insight from their study was that integration works best when it is planned from the outset rather than retrofitted into an established curriculum.

Maldoni et al. (2009) offered evidence from a different angle, demonstrating that discipline-based reading activities could serve a dual purpose — advancing subject knowledge while simultaneously developing the academic reading skills assessed by IELTS. Their study showed that students who practiced reading within their subject areas developed more effective comprehension strategies than those who practiced reading in isolation. This finding is significant because it demonstrates that IELTS skill development does not need to compete with content learning — the two can be achieved through the same instructional activities.

Thematic Distribution Across Studies

The thematic analysis produced eight distinct themes. Table 2 presents the distribution of these themes across the reviewed studies, showing how frequently each theme appeared and which studies contributed to it.

Table 2: Thematic Distribution Across Reviewed Studies

Theme	Frequency (n)	Key Contributing Studies
1. Curriculum integration as efficiency	4	Fedorova et al. (2021); Han (2024); Golubovskaya et al. (2018); Maldoni et al. (2009)
2. Gap between test scores and academic readiness	4	Liu & Hamid (2025); Sawir et al. (2012); Phakiti et al. (2013); Dai (2020)
3. IELTS preparation as academic socialization	4	Yang & Badger (2015); Lei (2021); Chairiyani & Agustin (2025); Barker (2012)

4. Technology-enhanced IELTS development	4	Le Ngoc Anh & Dieu (2025); Nguyen & Nguyen (2025); Koraishi (2024); Bai & Xian (2024)
5. IELTS validity and academic alignment	4	Marina (2018); Sabet & Babaei (2017); Ren & Blackhurst (2026); Tieu & Baker (2023)
6. Teacher practice and agency	3	Al-Khafaji (n.d.); Xiong et al. (2024); Yusupova et al. (2025)
7. Institutional and systemic factors	4	Almazova et al. (2018); Sawir (2013); Streitwieser et al. (2019); Lewthwaite (2007)
8. Learner identity and affect	4	Chairiyani & Agustin (2025); Rasti (2009); Bai & Xian (2024); Dai (2020)

Theme 3: IELTS Preparation as Academic Socialization

Several studies found that effective IELTS preparation served a broader purpose than test readiness — it functioned as a form of academic socialization, helping students understand and adapt to the expectations, norms, and practices of academic communities. Yang and Badger (2015) were among the first to articulate this finding, demonstrating that IELTS preparation courses supported students not only in developing language skills but also in acquiring the cultural and institutional knowledge necessary for participation in academic life. Their study showed that the most effective preparation programs went beyond teaching test techniques to introduce students to academic conventions such as referencing, formal argumentation, and scholarly communication.

Theme 4: Technology-Enhanced IELTS Skill Development

The reviewed literature revealed a growing body of evidence supporting the use of technology — particularly artificial intelligence — to enhance IELTS skill development within educational settings. Le Ngoc Anh and Dieu (2025) investigated teachers' perspectives on the use of AI tools in IELTS writing instruction. They found that AI-supported personalized feedback improved both the efficiency and quality of writing development. Teachers reported that AI tools enabled them to provide more frequent and more specific feedback to individual students, which was particularly valuable in large classes where individual attention was limited.

Theme 5: IELTS Validity and Alignment with Academic Demands

Several studies examined whether IELTS tasks genuinely reflect the academic skills that students need at university — a question of critical importance for curriculum integration. Marina (2018) investigated the validation process within the IELTS reading component. She found that IELTS reading tasks required students to employ a range of academic reading strategies, including skimming, scanning, inference, and critical evaluation. These skills closely correspond to the reading demands of university study, supporting the argument that IELTS reading preparation can be meaningfully aligned with broader academic reading instruction.

Theme 6: Teacher Practice and Agency

The effectiveness of IELTS curriculum integration was found to depend significantly on teachers' skills, beliefs, and professional practices. The study found that teachers who regularly reflected on their teaching methods were more effective at developing students' critical and analytical thinking skills, which are directly relevant to IELTS tasks that require evaluation, comparison, and argumentation. Students in the study also expressed a preference for teachers who connected IELTS skill development to broader academic and intellectual goals rather than treating preparation as mechanical test drilling.

Theme 7: Institutional and Systemic Factors

The reviewed literature identified several institutional and systemic factors that influence the success of IELTS preparation and, by extension, the feasibility of curriculum integration. Almazova et al. (2018) investigated the integration of online and offline education in preparing students for global academic mobility. Their study found that effective preparation for international academic participation required a systemic, institution-wide approach rather than reliance on individual courses or programs. This finding supports the argument that IELTS curriculum integration should be a whole-school initiative rather than the responsibility of individual teachers or departments.

Theme 8: Learner Identity and Affect

The final theme to emerge from the analysis concerned the personal and emotional dimensions of IELTS preparation—an area often overlooked in discussions focused on test scores and curriculum design. Chairiyani and Agustin (2025) explored the intersection of language learning and identity in IELTS preparation, finding that the examination experience prompted learners to negotiate their identities as English-language users. For some students, IELTS preparation was a source of empowerment and confidence; for others, it triggered anxiety and self-doubt. This finding highlights the importance of creating supportive learning environments within curriculum-integrated IELTS preparation.

V. Discussion

This section interprets the findings presented in the results, explains their significance in relation to the research questions, compares them with existing literature, and discusses their practical implications. The discussion is organized around four areas: interpretation of the key findings, comparison with previous research, implications for practice and policy, and limitations of the study.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The results of this study produced eight themes and five overarching patterns, all pointing toward a central conclusion: integrating IELTS preparation into the mainstream curriculum of international schools is not only feasible but also more effective than the conventional approach of treating IELTS preparation as a separate, standalone activity. This subsection interprets the most significant findings in relation to the four research questions that guided the study.

Research Question 1: What are the current approaches to IELTS preparation in international schools, and what inefficiencies characterize these practices?

The findings revealed that the dominant approach to IELTS preparation across the reviewed literature remains standalone preparation — reported in 40.0% of the studies (Table 2). This approach treats IELTS as a separate goal that requires its own dedicated courses, materials, and instructional time, independent of the regular curriculum. The inefficiencies of this approach were evident across multiple studies. Fedorova et al. (2021) identified duplication of effort when examination preparation runs alongside regular coursework, with students essentially learning the same skills — academic writing, formal speaking, analytical reading — in two separate contexts. Golubovskaya et al. (2018) found that when examination preparation was added to existing courses as an afterthought rather than built in from the start, student engagement was lower and skill development was weaker.

The most significant inefficiency identified was the gap between test scores and academic readiness (Table 3). While standalone preparation was generally effective at improving IELTS scores (positive findings in 8 studies), it was considerably less effective at developing genuine academic readiness (negative or concerning findings in 5 studies) and at ensuring successful transfer to university contexts (negative or concerning findings in 5 studies). This means that the current dominant approach achieves its immediate goal — a satisfactory band score — but often fails to achieve the ultimate goal — a student who is genuinely prepared for university study. Liu and Hamid (2025) clearly captured this inefficiency through the voices of international students in Australia, who reported that their IELTS preparation had not equipped them for the real demands of academic life.

Research Question 2: How can IELTS preparation be systematically integrated into international school curricula without compromising the integrity of the mainstream academic program?

The findings offer clear evidence that integration is achievable without compromising the main curriculum. Fedorova et al. (2021) demonstrated this directly, showing that when tasks were designed in the format of international examinations and offered within regular coursework, students met international standards without disrupting the major program of study. The key mechanism identified was alignment — ensuring that IELTS skill objectives correspond to existing learning outcomes rather than competing with them.

Han (2024) showed how this works in practice for speaking skills. By embedding IELTS speaking criteria into regular English classes, instructors did not add new content but rather reframed existing speaking activities in line with IELTS standards. Similarly, Maldoni et al. (2009) demonstrated that academic reading development could be achieved through discipline-based reading activities that simultaneously advanced subject knowledge and IELTS-relevant comprehension skills. In both cases, integration did not require additional instructional time — it required a different approach to using the time already available.

Research Question 3: What theoretical frameworks best support the design of an integrated IELTS curriculum model?

Although this study drew exclusively on evidence from the reviewed literature rather than from external theoretical sources, the findings revealed several principles that function as the theoretical foundation for curriculum integration.

The first principle is alignment between learning outcomes, instruction, and assessment. This principle was most clearly demonstrated by Fedorova et al. (2021) and Han (2024), whose studies showed that when IELTS assessment criteria are used to inform — not replace — the design of classroom activities, learning becomes more focused and efficient. The second principle is the distinction between surface-level test skills and deep academic competencies. Liu and Hamid (2025) and Phakiti et al. (2013) demonstrated that students can achieve IELTS scores without developing the deeper competencies — metacognition, self-regulation, and academic discourse — that actually determine university success. This distinction implies that curriculum integration must target deep competencies rather than merely test formats.

The third principle is academic socialization as a goal of language preparation. Yang and Badger (2015) and Lei (2021) showed that effective IELTS preparation goes beyond language to encompass the cultural, institutional, and communicative knowledge needed to participate in academic communities. This principle positions IELTS preparation as part of a broader developmental process rather than a narrow test-focused activity.

The fourth principle is technology as a supplement, not a substitute. Le Ngoc Anh and Dieu (2025), Nguyen and Nguyen (2025), and Koraishi (2024) collectively demonstrated that AI tools can enhance IELTS skill development but cannot replace the depth of human instruction and assessment. This principle ensures that curriculum integration models incorporate technology strategically without becoming dependent on it.

Research Question 4: To what extent does curriculum-integrated IELTS preparation enhance both examination performance and transferable academic competencies necessary for university success?

The evidence from the reviewed studies strongly supports the proposition that curriculum-integrated IELTS preparation enhances both test performance and broader academic competencies — and does so more effectively than standalone preparation. This is the most important finding of the study.

Beyond test performance, the findings revealed that curriculum integration cultivates transferable academic skills that standalone preparation typically neglects. These include critical thinking and analytical reasoning (Al-Khafaji, n.d.), metalinguistic awareness and academic writing strategies (Tieu & Baker, 2023), self-regulation and emotional resilience (Bai & Xian, 2024), academic discourse competence and scholarly communication (Yang & Badger, 2015), and the capacity to navigate different academic cultures and expectations (Dai, 2020; Barker, 2012). These skills are not only essential for IELTS performance but also for long-term academic success at university, making curriculum integration a more efficient and more effective preparation strategy than conventional standalone approaches.

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study are consistent with and extend several lines of existing research.

The finding that standalone IELTS preparation improves test scores but does not reliably develop academic readiness is consistent with earlier observations by Hayes and Read (2004), who found that preparation courses in New Zealand enhanced familiarity with test formats but produced limited transfer to authentic academic settings. The present study extends this finding by identifying curriculum integration as a specific mechanism for addressing the transfer gap — a solution Hayes and Read did not explore.

The finding that IELTS preparation can serve as academic socialization aligns with and extends Yang and Badger's (2015) work on IELTS and academic socialization. While Yang and Badger examined this process in standalone preparation courses, the present study argues that the socialization function is strengthened when IELTS preparation is embedded within the broader curriculum, where students encounter academic practices across disciplines rather than solely in dedicated language classes.

The identification of teacher agency as a critical factor in IELTS preparation effectiveness is consistent with Xiong et al. (2024), who demonstrated the significant influence of teachers' decisions on the quality of academic English environments, and with Al-Khafaji (n.d.), who linked teacher reflectivity to student thinking ability. The present study extends these findings by positioning teacher development as a necessary precondition for curriculum integration — not merely a desirable addition.

The evidence regarding AI tools in IELTS preparation builds upon and qualifies the emerging findings of Le Ngoc Anh and Dieu (2025), Nguyen and Nguyen (2025), and Koraishi (2024). While these studies examined AI within dedicated IELTS courses, the present study proposes that AI tools can play a specific role in curriculum-integrated models — providing personalized practice and feedback that extend the reach of classroom instruction without requiring additional teaching hours.

The finding that institutional and systemic factors shape the feasibility of IELTS preparation complements Almazova et al. (2018), who argued for institution-wide approaches to academic mobility preparation, and Lewthwaite (2007), who demonstrated that institutional context determines whether IELTS washback is positive or negative. The present study integrates these insights into the proposed model by positioning institutional commitment as the outermost layer of the integration framework — the condition that enables or constrains everything else.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for international school administrators, curriculum designers, language educators, and policymakers. The results indicate that IELTS curriculum integration should be treated as a whole-school initiative rather than the sole responsibility of the English language department, with school administrators allocating resources for teacher development, creating policies that support cross-curricular language development, and establishing assessment practices that recognize the dual goals of subject learning and academic English development (Almazova et al., 2018).

For curriculum designers, the finding that integration outperforms isolation has direct implications — rather than creating separate IELTS preparation courses, designers should map IELTS skill requirements onto existing subject learning outcomes and identify natural points of alignment, as the academic reading skills assessed by IELTS — skimming, scanning, inference, and critical evaluation (Marina, 2018) — are the same skills required for engagement with subject-area texts, and the academic writing competencies — argumentation, coherence, and evidence use — correspond to the writing demands of multiple subject areas (Maldoni et al., 2009; Fedorova et al., 2021).

Progressive scaffolding suggests that curriculum designers should develop skill progression maps tracing IELTS-relevant competencies from lower secondary through upper secondary levels, ensuring students build academic English competencies gradually rather than encountering them abruptly in a standalone preparation course (Sabet & Babaei, 2017; Tieu & Baker, 2023; Maryam et al., 2025). The evidence further indicates that all subject-area teachers in international schools should receive professional development in academic language awareness, understanding how the language demands of their subjects relate to the competencies assessed by IELTS (Xiong et al., 2024), while English language teachers specifically should shift from teaching IELTS as a test to teaching through IELTS as a framework — Han (2024) demonstrated that IELTS speaking criteria can function as pedagogically productive tools for structuring everyday speaking development. Yusupova et al. (2025) demonstrated that project-based learning approaches equip teachers to design authentic learning experiences that naturally incorporate IELTS-relevant skills.

VI. Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

The current dominant approach to IELTS preparation in international schools is inefficient — most institutions treat IELTS preparation as a separate activity that runs alongside the main curriculum, creating duplication of effort, additional time pressure on students, and a disconnect between classroom learning and test readiness (Fedorova et al., 2021; Golubovskaya et al., 2018), wasting instructional resources by teaching the same academic skills in two separate contexts when they could be developed through one.

The evidence consistently demonstrated that achieving a satisfactory IELTS band score does not mean a student is prepared for university — students who prepared through standalone courses could pass the test but still faced challenges with the real demands of academic life, including understanding lectures, writing research papers, participating in discussions, and adapting to new academic cultures (Liu & Hamid, 2025; Phakiti et al., 2013; Sawir et al., 2012; Dai, 2020). This reveals a gap between test scores and actual academic readiness that traditional preparation does not address.

Studies that examined integrated approaches reported stronger skill development, higher student engagement, and more durable learning were all achieved without disrupting the main academic program (Fedorova et al., 2021; Han, 2024; Maldoni et al., 2009). Integration works because it targets the same academic skills that both IELTS and university studies require, including critical thinking, formal argumentation, evidence evaluation, and academic discourse, through everyday classroom activities rather than through separate test coaching.

Successful curriculum integration is not simply a teaching technique but a systemic initiative requiring action at three levels: institutional commitment (policy, resources, administration), instructional capacity (teacher development, curricular alignment, cross-curricular embedding, progressive scaffolding), and learner experience (academic socialization, technology support, affective wellbeing). The proposed Curriculum Integration Model captures these three levels and shows how they interact to produce the desired outcomes of IELTS score achievement and authentic academic readiness.

Contribution of the Study

This study makes three specific contributions to the field. First, it addresses a significant gap in the existing literature. While previous studies have examined IELTS preparation within standalone courses (Hayes & Read, 2004; Yang & Badger, 2015) and within university-level language programs (Fedorova et al., 2021; Han, 2024), no prior research has developed a comprehensive framework for integrating IELTS preparation into the curriculum of international secondary schools. This study fills that void by proposing an eight-component Curriculum Integration Model specifically designed for the international school context.

Second, the study challenges the idea that IELTS preparation and mainstream curriculum are competing priorities — the evidence shows that the academic skills assessed by IELTS, including analytical reading (Marina, 2018), academic listening (Sabet & Babaei, 2017), structured writing (Tieu & Baker, 2023), and formal speaking (Han, 2024), are the same skills that international school curricula are already designed to develop. This means that preparing students for IELTS and providing quality education are not different goals but the same, and integrating the curriculum is the most effective way to accomplish both.

Third, the study consolidates research from various areas — IELTS preparation, curriculum design, international student transition, teacher development, technology in language education, and learner identity — into a single, cohesive framework. It demonstrates how these fields are interconnected and why they must be considered together for successful IELTS curriculum integration.

VII. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are offered:

For International School Administrators:

Adopt IELTS curriculum integration as a whole-school policy rather than leaving it to individual teachers or departments (Almazova et al., 2018)

Allocate resources for teacher professional development focused on academic language awareness and IELTS-integrated instruction (Yusupova et al., 2025)

Establish cross-departmental collaboration so that subject-area teachers and language teachers work together on academic English development (Xiong et al., 2024)

For Curriculum Designers:

Map IELTS skill requirements onto existing subject learning outcomes to identify natural points of integration (Fedorova et al., 2021)

Design progressive skill development pathways that build IELTS-relevant competencies gradually across grade levels rather than concentrating preparation in the final year (Maryam et al., 2025)

Incorporate IELTS-style tasks — academic essays, source-based reading, formal presentations, lecture comprehension — as regular assessment activities within subject courses (Maldoni et al., 2009)

For Teachers:

Use IELTS criteria as instructional frameworks for everyday classroom activities, not as test-drilling checklists (Han, 2024)

Engage in reflective practice to continuously improve the connection between subject teaching and academic language development (Al-Khafaji, n.d.)

Integrate AI tools and digital resources as supplementary practice instruments while maintaining human-led instruction and assessment for complex academic skills (Le Ngoc Anh & Dieu, 2025; Koraisi, 2024)

Final Statement

The central argument of this study is straightforward: international schools can better prepare their students for IELTS by integrating IELTS preparation into the curriculum they already teach, rather than running separate preparation programs alongside it. The skills that IELTS assesses are not foreign to the international school curriculum — they are academic reading, academic writing, academic listening, and academic speaking. These are the same skills that a good education develops every day. When international schools recognize this alignment and design their curricula accordingly, they do not just prepare students for a test — they prepare them for university, for professional life, and for meaningful participation in the global academic community.

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