

**IELTS AND IESOL AS ENGLISH PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT METHODS FOR
NATIVE ARAB STUDENTS IN A HEALTH SCIENCES UNIVERSITY IN THE
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES**

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ABSTRACT: *This study compares the performance of Arab students in the IELTS and IESOL English proficiency tests. It aims at evaluating the performance of Arabs in both tests to perceive which test suits the Arab students to be able to achieve a higher score and join universities. These tests have become a major obstacle for many Arabs who cannot start their higher education without achieving a certain score required by the universities. In the U.A.E. The students are required to achieve a minimum band score of 5 in IELTS in order to join universities. Many of them may drop higher education because of the inability to score. The study was conducted in RAK Medical and Health Sciences University in The United Arab Emirates. The participants were a group of Arab students exposed to both tests. The results were compared and analyzed to examine which test resulted in a better performance. The results showed that students scored better in IESOL than IELTS. In IESOL they were able to achieve the B2 level required whereas in the IELTS none of them was able to reach that level. The maximum score reached was 4.5 which is equal to medium B1 level.*

KEYWORDS: English proficiency tests (EPTs), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), International English to Speakers of Other Languages (IESOL), non-native English speakers (NNES), Arab students, English language learners (ELLs)

INTRODUCTION

English language proficiency is a person's ability to comprehend and use English, including listening, reading, writing and speaking. A person may not have a rich vocabulary, but may have confidence in speaking and communicating very well. Therefore, vocabulary and grammar knowledge do not essentially mean that one has more English proficiency. Someone can have less vocabulary acquired, but can be a confident communicator and speaker. Therefore, that person is said to have stronger English proficiency.

English language proficiency tests evaluate the four above mentioned English language skills. These tests have become very prominent in many countries as they are used to evaluate non-native English speakers (NNES) in many fields. They are used as one of the requirements of immigration, jobs, and, most important of all, universities.

The recognized English proficiency tests are the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), the College Student English Proficiency Test (CSEPT), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), the Cambridge English for Speakers of Other Languages Exams (IESOL), and tests developed in-house by particular universities. The students are free to take whichever of the tests they choose, but they have to achieve above the A2 level defined in the Common Chapter one 16 Reference Levels outlined in the CEFR –Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

The United Arab Emirates being a multicultural community that has university students from all over the world, many students in universities are either local Emiratis, Arabs, or students whose native language is not the English language. Therefore, it was mandatory to use language proficiency tests to evaluate the different skills of English language as all the tertiary education in The United Arab Emirates is in the English language.

This testing is may be due the fact that faculties in universities perceive international students to have difficulty with speaking and writing , which can affect their academic performance (Trice, 2003). English proficiency is also very important in the UAE as it also affects social communication. Local students may resist working with international students on group projects because of their weak writing or presentation skills (Parks & Raymond, 2004).

International students who are NNES as well as locals may experience more loneliness in the premises of the university (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002) and fail to interact due to the demands of course work. Emirati or Arab students may find it difficult to create friendships with their peers who are native speakers of English or very proficient in English (Hechanova-Alampay, R., Beehr, T. A., Christiansen, N. D. and Van Horn, R. K., 2002).

Although academic and social adjustment challenges related to English proficiency and cultural differences are evident, findings are inconclusive regarding the effects of proficiency (as measured by test scores) on academic achievement (Berman & Cheng, 2001). In some cases, professors feel that Arab students or NNES difficulties with English skills negatively impact academic performance and communication, and contribute to segregation and ineffective group work (Trice, 2003).

Arabs or non-native English speakers (NNES), are challenged by academic language demands. Differences in educational systems and expectations, listening skills, professors' use of humor and examples, quantity of reading, direct writing styles, critical analyses, class participation, oral communication, and vocabulary present difficulties (Holmes, 2004).

IELTS and IESOL are from the tests that are generally used to evaluate the proficiency of the potential students who are non-native speakers of English and who will register in universities. Yet, in the UAE, IELTS is the prominent test that is used in this evaluation although both tests are international tests taken by those who are non-native English speakers and both test the person's inclusive knowledge and comprehension of the English language in all four skills. Both examinations measure a person's ability to speak, read, listen and write in English. But the IESOL includes also grammar and vocabulary evaluation. Another difference is that IELTS is measured by band scores whereas IESOL is a level based test. Yet, it cannot be denied that IELTS is more difficult and complicated.

But unfortunately, the Academic IELTS, required to register in universities, has become a great obstacle for Arab students to the extent that some students had free scholarships but were not able to join universities because they could not achieve the IELTS score of 5 required to enroll. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to identify the difference in the performance of Arab students in IELTS and IESOL tests. It also aims to investigate the difference in difficulty level in both tests and examine which of these tests is more relevant for Arab students to be able to achieve higher grades and register in universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many linguists have done a lot of developments to English proficiency tests. Test development begins with the concern that a test can be shown to produce scores that are an accurate reflection of a candidate's ability in a particular area, such as reading for specific ideas, writing a research proposal, breadth of vocabulary knowledge, or speaking in a class presentation. (Weir, 2005).

Proficiency tests were discussed by many researchers before especially after becoming one of the universities' requirements for non-native speakers of English. Also after many faculty reports on students have come to a conclusion that English language skills of non-native English students affect academic and social adjustment. They presumed that the stronger students' English skills, the fewer challenges they will face in their studies, social life, and adjustment. (Curtiss & Schaeffer, 2004). However, students may be successful academically, despite weaknesses in English, particularly if professors adjust standards and grading criteria. Interaction in the target language and culture supports acquisition, adjustment, and cultural learning. Although interaction with host country representatives alone cannot be equated with intercultural learning or understanding, the latter will not occur without it (Maureen Snow Andrade, 2009).

Several studies have proven that language flaws may not only occur in the second language (L2), but they can also occur in the mother language (L1) due to several factors. English language learners (ELLs) are overrepresented in special education programs, a problem that has persisted since its earliest documentation in the 1960s (Artiles, Trent & Palmer, 2004). In a study of within-group diversity of disproportionate representation of ELL students in special education, Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, and Higuera (2005) found that ELLs were identified as having limited proficiency in both their native language (L1) and English (L2) showed the highest rates of

identification in the special education categories investigated, were consistently overrepresented in learning disabilities and language and speech disabilities classes, and had greater chances of being placed in special education programs.

Macswan and Rolstad administered a study to show how language proficiency tests misleads us about the ability of the students. They tried to prove that even native speakers have a certain percentage of error in their native language. The results of the analysis, showed that about 93% of all participants to have a morphological error rate of 5% or less, and 97% of the study participants to have an error rate of 10% or less. Linguists assume that normal mature speakers will evidence some degree of error due to such factors as slips of the tongue and fatigue. Errors of this nature are termed “performance error,” believed to result from the failure of the linguistic performance system to execute grammatical instructions due to the interference of nonlinguistic factors. These are errors of the sort each of us makes every day, errors that we often recognize ourselves as inconsistent with our knowledge of language immediately after producing them. (Macswan & Rolstad, 2002)

This may lead to the belief that English proficiency tests are sometimes exposed to external factors that may affect the performance of the student as researchers generally estimate the range of normal error rate in typically developing mature speakers to be about 10% or less (Macswan & Rolstad, 2003), while the morphological error rate among the language- impaired tends to be considerably higher (Bedore & Leonard, 2005)

It is believed that the reason for the inability of Arab students to score in IELTS and the lack of their English proficiency is due to the fact that most of them were graduated from governmental schools that offers a quality education yet they do not pay much attention to the English language. Therefore, the school experience also has to be put in consideration when evaluating the factors affecting the proficiency of the students. One study on Arab students in a health sciences’ university showed that some of Arab students who graduated from governmental or Arabic schools may sometimes prefer having a bilingual lecturer because they may feel insecure if all the lectures were delivered in English without the intrusion of their native language. Arab students prefer to use Arabic sometimes in English classes, but not a lot. They are aware of the importance of practicing their English language and using it more frequent in their English classes more than their native language. Therefore, most Arab students feel that Arabic should be used in the class albeit judiciously for a better facilitation of language learning (Ibrahim & Lobo, 2020).

When the National Research Council panel in the USA convened to study the problem of overrepresentation, it asked whether overrepresentation of special education placements among ELLs and other minority students was due to “biological and social/contextual contributors to early development,” whether “the school experience itself” might somehow be responsible, or perhaps a combination of both (Donovan & Cross, 2002, pp. 357–359). In the case of many ELLs, it appears that the school experience itself may be responsible. Overrepresentation appears to result in important respects from institutional factors that cannot reasonably be construed as limitations or language-related disabilities inherent in the children themselves. (MacSwan, Jeff & Rolstad, Kellie. (2006))

Some researchers may not agree with the fact of introducing a simpler language proficiency test as they believe that the English language employed in universities or in the academic field is much more complex than the language used in everyday's communication. According to Cummins (2000), "Considerably less knowledge of language itself is usually required to function appropriately in interpersonal communicative situations than is required in academic situations" (p. 35), whereas academic language generally involves "much more low frequency vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and greater demands on memory, analysis, and other cognitive processes" (p. 36).

Comparing IELTS and CEFR Level tests is not original. Also conducting a research on proficiency tests and Nursing students is not original too. Muller and Daller have conducted a similar research in 2019 on Nursing students. Academic English tests were used to ascertain if international nursing students have sufficient language skills to commence their nursing degrees. This study examines the relationship between two types of English tests and the performance of forty-nine undergraduate international nursing students in their first year. IELTS, and a general English proficiency/processing speed test using a variation of the cloze-test (C-test) format were administered at the commencement of the students' course of study. At the end of one year, grade percentages were collected. It was found that both the IELTS test and the C-test were significantly correlated to both types of topic, albeit with different patterns. The two English tests were also tested for similarities in the constructs they measured, with a significant overlap found. The implications are to rethink the way English tests are applied to entry in university degrees involving a clinical component and, by extension, to direct universities to rethink how nursing students are supported during their degree. The benefits of the two testing approaches are also considered, given their performance in explaining the variance in grade outcomes (Muller & Daller 2019)

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a comparative post-test study for a non-random quota sample. The comparison between IELTS and the CEFR levels is complex as IELTS is not a level-based test, but intended to give a much extensive proficiency measure. It also uses a 9-point band scoring system; whereas CEFR consists of six levels. Thus, there will not be a one-to-one comparison between IELTS scores and CEFR levels.

An article by Taylor on test comparability explained how the different design, purpose and format of the examinations make it very difficult to give exact comparisons across tests and test scores. Candidates' aptitude and preparation for a particular type of test will also vary from individual to individual (or group to group), and some candidates are more likely to perform better in certain tests than in others. IELTS is designed to stretch across a much broader proficiency continuum. So when seeking to compare IELTS band scores with scores on other tests, it is important to bear in mind the differences in purpose, measurement scale, test format and test-taker populations for which IELTS was originally designed. (Taylor, 2004)

The hypothesis of this study was that the IESOL may be less sophisticated than the Academic IELTS as a proficiency test. Thus, it can be used as an alternative test of proficiency for some Arab students who want to enroll in universities and find it impossible to score in IELTS.

The study is a post-test retrospective study conducted on a certain program in RAK Medical and Health Sciences University called The Nursing Conversion program batch of 2018-2019. In this program, the students were introduced to scientific subjects because they were originally graduated from the literary section in high school. In addition to scientific subjects, the students were also required to pass IELTS with a minimum band score of 5 to be able to enroll in the first year of the Nursing Program,

An IELTS diagnostic test was administered at the beginning of the course that did not show any sign that these students, who were all Arabs and locals, could achieve the required IELTS score. Being unable to achieve the band score of 5 required, an IESOL exam was administered as an alternative to IELTS. The participants in this study were 40 students who were all Arabs as previously mentioned, with a local majority and with different levels of English. All of them had an IELTS test and an IESOL test. Thus, the material of this study will be the results of the students in both tests.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study is relating IELTS scores of the above mentioned Nursing Conversion Program Students to the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) Levels. In relating Nursing Conversion Program students IELTS scores, we used the mapping of the IELTS 9-band scale to the CEFR scale that is used in interrelating IELTS and other Cambridge Assessment English qualifications and CEFR. The scale is as follows:

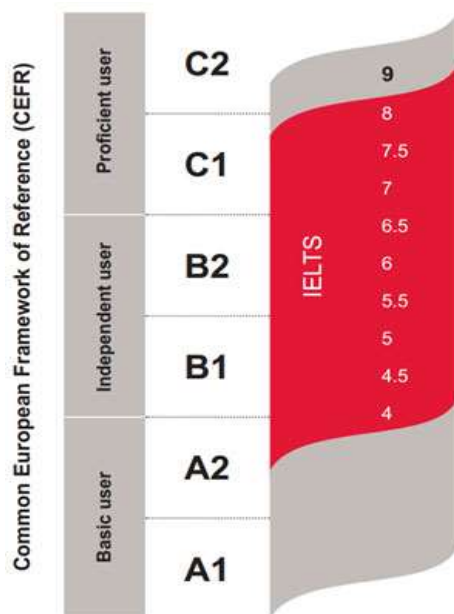


Figure 1: IELTS & CEFR Scores

<https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/teach-ielts/test-information/scores-explained>

The above band scores referred to are the overall scores and not the individual listening, reading, writing and speaking scores. To compare the results of the IELTS diagnostic test and the IESOL test, it was mandatory to convert the IELTS score from band scores to CEFR levels. It is noted in the above scale that there is no CEFR Level below the IELTS score of 4, yet as the majority of our students did not reach the IELTS score of 4 we are going to consider those less than 4 IELTS band score as A1 and A2 levels (Basic Users). The evaluation will be as follows:

IELTS Band Score	CEFR Score
1	A1 Level
2	A1 level
3	A2 level
4	A2 level
4.5	B1 level
5	B1 level
5.5	B2 level

In comparing the performance of The Nursing Conversion Program (NCP) 2019 students, we compared their IELTS scores and their IESOL CEFR levels. The number of NCP participants who had the tests were **40 students** and the results were as follows:

Only 2 students scored 4.5 = Level B1 CEFR (Independent User Level) which is equivalent to 5% .

Only 4 students scored 4 = Level B1 CEFR (Independent User Level) which is equivalent to 10%.

15 students scored 3 IELTS band score which is equal to A2 CEFR (Basic user level) which is equivalent to 37.5%.

16 students scored 2 IELTS band score which is equal to A1 CEFR (Basic User level) which is equivalent to 40%.

2 students scored 1 IELTS band score which is equal to A1 CEFR (Basic User level) which is equivalent to 5%.

1 student scored a Zero score in IELTS which is below A1 CEFR (Below Basic User level) which is equivalent to 2.5%.

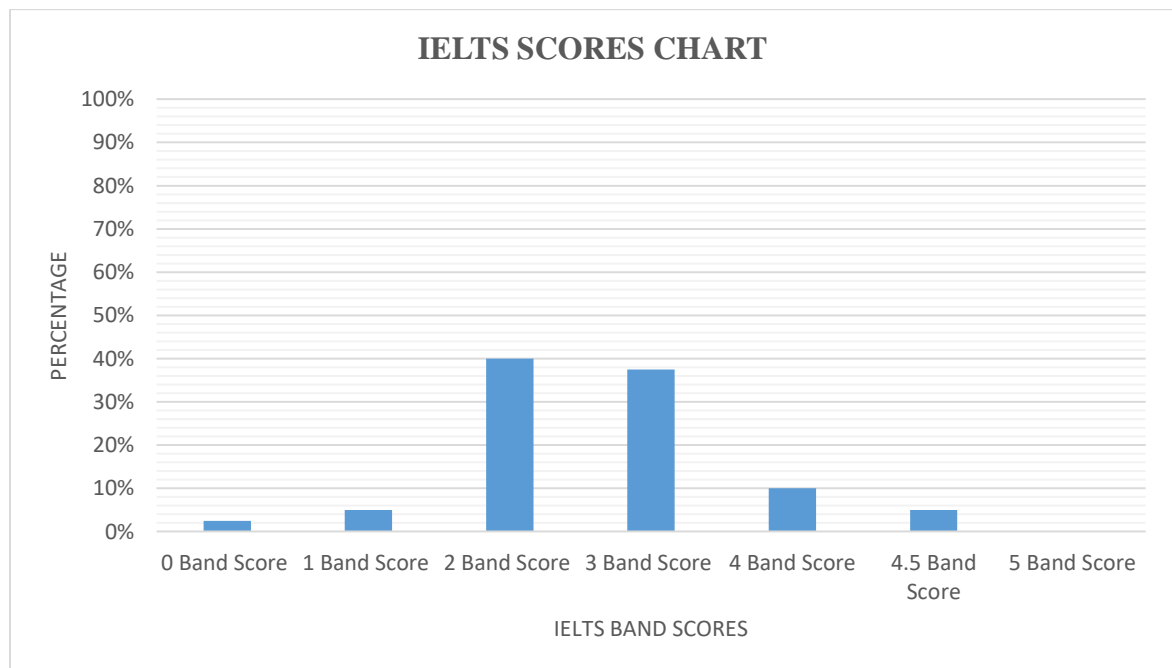


Figure 2 : IELTS Scores Chart

From the above chart , it is clear that 85% of the NCP students could reach only 2 or 3 band score of IELTS which makes it impossible for them to join any university with this

minimal score. Thus, it is mandatory to think of an alternative for IELTS. Therefore, IESOL could be a good alternative if they could score better in it. The percentage of the IESOL levels will be shown in a chart, but the IELTS scores have to be shown in CEFR levels to be able to compare it to the IESOL. The IELTS scores in CEFR levels will be as follows:

- 2.5% Below the A1 level
- 45% A1 level
- 37.5% A2 level
- 15% B1 level

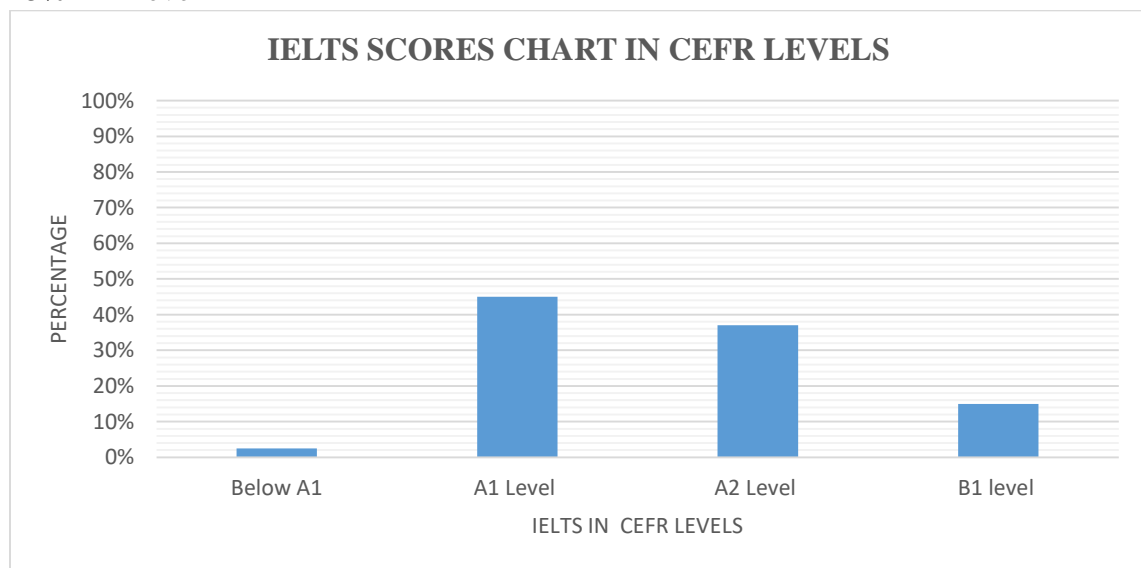


Figure 3 : IELTS Scores Chart in CEFR Levels

This chart is compared to the IESOL scores to examine if the performance of the students is better than the IELTS test.

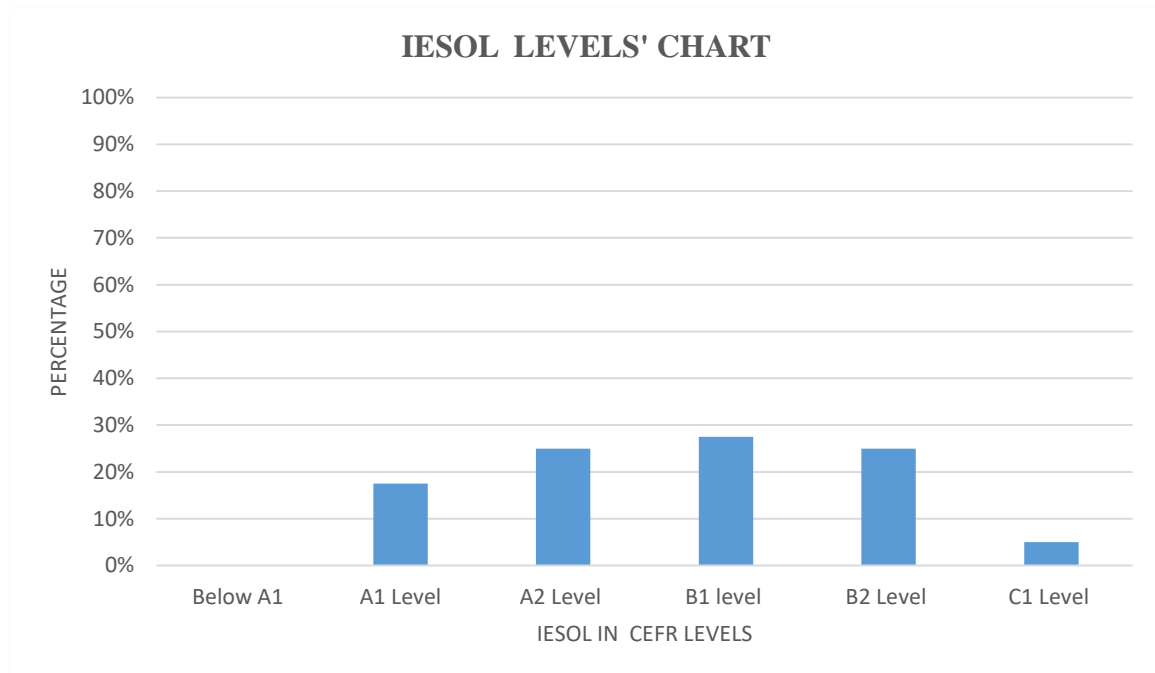


Figure 4 : IESOL Levels' Chart

In IESOL, no one is below A1 and 17.5% (7 Students) only are in A1 level. In the IELTS 45% of the students are in the A1 level which means that IELTS evaluated almost half the group as basic users. The A2 level in the IESOL is also lower than the IELTS. It is 25% (10 students) which is lower than the IELTS which is 37.5%. As the levels are elevated, the IESOL generates higher grades as the B1 reached 27.5% (11 students) which is 15% only in the IELTS. Furthermore, the B2 level of the independent user appeared in the IESOL with a satisfactory percentage of 25% (10 students) . This level did not exist in the IELTS at all. Another level that appeared in the IESOL is the C1 with a very low percentage of 5% (2 students) . Both tests can be simply compared in one chart as follows :

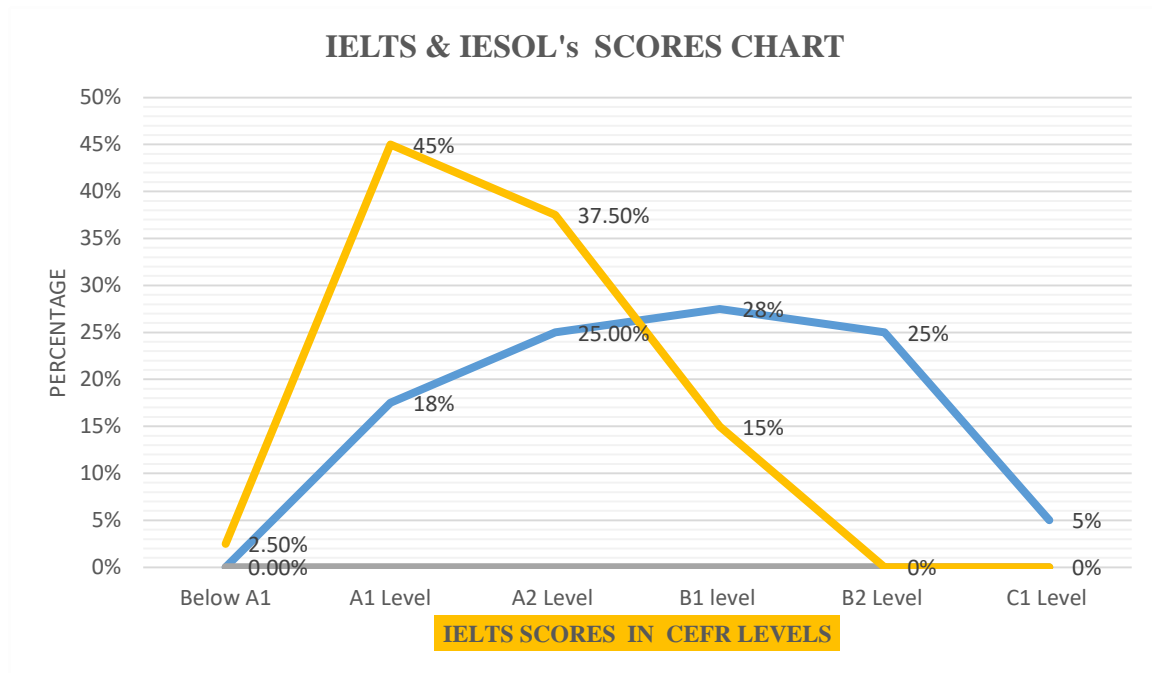


Figure 5 : IELTS & IESOL Scores Chart

The evaluation of the skills in IELTS and CEFR levels are slightly different though very close . The analyses of the scores and levels in relation to skills is as follows :

In the IELTS test 45 % of the students are A1 level, whereas in the IESOL 17.1 % of the students are at level A1 (Basic User) . In CEFR levels this is the first level of English where the student has just started learning. In the IELTS this ranges between band score of 1 (Non-user) who has no ability to use the language except few isolated words and band score of 2 (Intermittent user) which means that the user has great difficulty in understanding spoken and written English . In these levels students can listen to English and identify familiar words, but only simple phrases that are spoken plainly. They can also read and comprehend very simple sentences. As for speaking, they can speak and narrate in a simple way, but sometimes the speaker has to repeat or rephrase at a slower speed to help the listener understand what he wants to say. They can also write a short, simple note or fill simple forms with personal information like for example writing their name, nationality and address.

In the IELTS 37.5 % of the students are at level A2 (Basic User), whereas in the IESOL the percentage of this level is 25 % only. In CEFR levels, this is the second level of English that is sometimes called “elementary” as it is the foundation or the level in which the students master the basics and can communicate simple basic needs. In the IELTS this ranges between the band score of 3 (Extremely limited user) who can convey and understand only general meaning in very familiar situations with frequent interruptions in communication and band score of 4 (Limited

user) whose basic competence is limited to familiar situations and who frequently shows problems in understanding and expression and unable to use complex language. In these levels the student can listen and comprehend phrases and terminology of personal significance. They can understand their simple personal and family data. They understand things related to the area they live in like shopping .. etc. They can comprehend the main ideas in short and clear pronunciation. They can also read brief, simple writings such as posters, flyers and menus. Moreover, they can speak about simple topics and can exchange information on familiar subjects. They can interact socially but they are unable to keep a continuous conversation. The students of this level can also write short notes and messages about their necessary needs.

In the IELTS 5% only of the students were at B1 level (Independent User) whereas in the IESOL 27.5% were in the B1 level. In CEFR levels, this is the “Intermediate” level. Students in this level are beyond the basics, but still not able to work or study exclusively in English, as per the description of the CEFR levels. In IELTS, this ranges between the band score above 4, like 4.5 and band score of 5 (Modest user). This means they have a partial command of the language, and cope with overall meaning in most situations, although they are likely to make many mistakes. They also should be able to handle basic communication in their own field. This means that they can listen and comprehend the key ideas of clear usual speech on familiar issues. They can understand the main ideas when the delivery is slow and clear. They can also read and comprehend texts that contain everyday’ s words. They can understand descriptions and speak in the majority of situations. They can handle topics without preparation. They can speak about unfamiliar topics related to everyday’ s life like families, hobbies or work. They can make sentences to describe certain situations. They can argue, give opinion or narrate a story or a movie. They can also write simple related text on topics which are familiar or of personal concern. They can write personal correspondences telling experiences.

As previously mentioned, the B2 (Independent User) level did not appear at all in the IELTS whereas it appeared in the IESOL with a percentage of 25%. In the CEFR levels, this is the “upper intermediate” level or sometimes called “the confident” user level in which the user of the English language can use the language independently in different fields, but still lacks some accuracy. In IELTS, this ranges between the band score above 5.5 (Above modest user) and 6.5 (Above Competent user) who has an effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings and who can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations. At this level student can write using a wide range of vocabulary and arrange information and ideas clearly and coherently, but can still make some spelling errors. They can also speak at length using a wide range of vocabulary and make meaning clear. Can speak using variations of simple and complex sentences but with limited flexibility. Sometimes they may lose clarity and mispronounce some words.

In CEFR levels, the C2 level that appeared only in the IESOL, is the sixth level which is called “the proficient”. Sometimes it is also called “The Bilingual” which means that the user has reached the level of the native speaker. In IELTS, this is the band score of 7 (Good user) who has an

operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations. At this level, students can write and express ideas clearly using sufficient range of vocabulary using less common lexical items but may still produce occasional errors in word choice or spelling. They can also speak at length without effort or loss of cohesion. They can also use vocabulary that is less common, but sometimes choices are not appropriate. They can employ complex structures flexibly but may have some grammatical errors. (British Council ,2020).

As for the level that is below A1 the basic user, in the IELTS there is only 2.5 % which means that the student's English language in all skills is NIL, whereas in the ESOL no one was below A1. The chart below is called The Cambridge qualification chart. It illustrates what kind of education is relevant to each level.

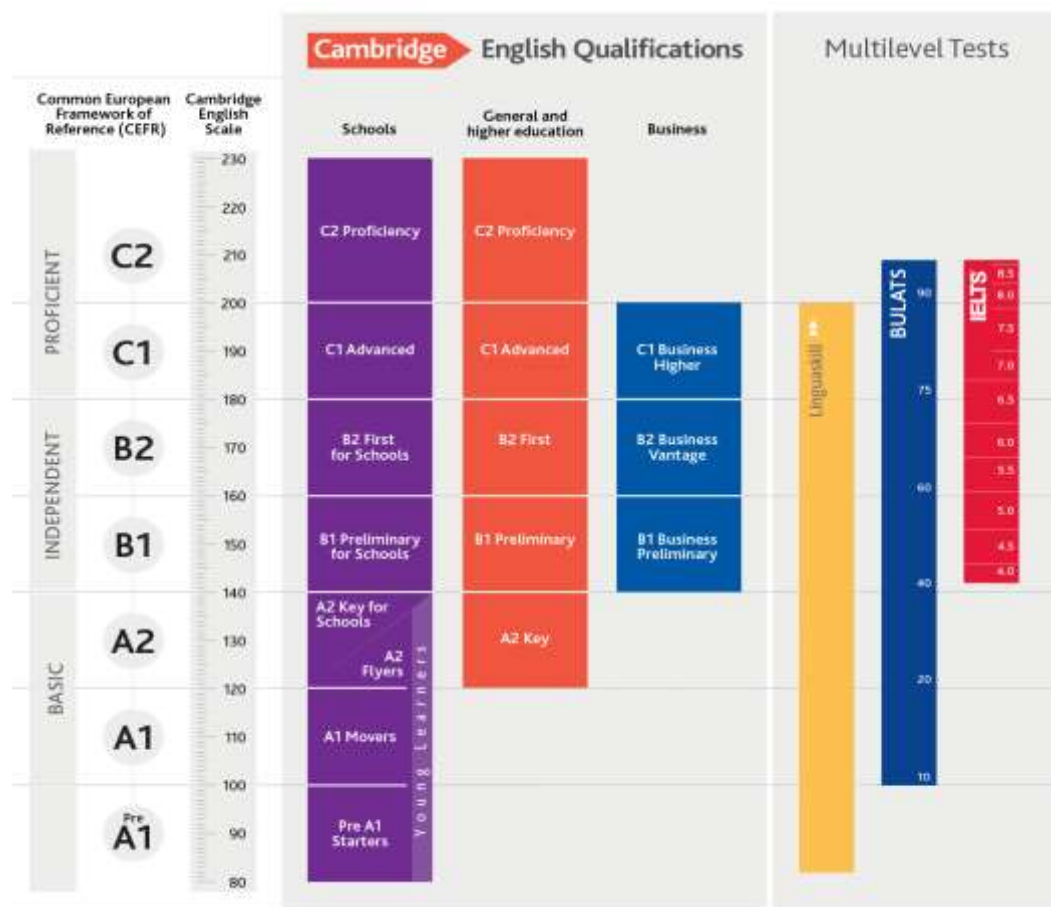


Figure 6 : The Cambridge Qualification Chart

<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/Images/cefr-diagram-december-2020.jpg>

Therefore, if we applied the above Cambridge qualification chart that illustrates the kind of test and level relevant for every type of education or business, we will find that the Nursing conversion program students level lies between the following levels:

In the IESOL test , Pre A1 starters (18 students+ 1 below A1) that is beginners' level in English which is the start of a child's language learning journey. This level is not the kind of level required for higher education. A2 Key for Schools & A2 key for general and higher education (15 students) .There are two types of tests for this level one for school-age learners and the other for adult learners and can be used for the higher education level. B1 Preliminary for schools & B1 preliminary for higher education (6 students) which shows that the students have mastered the basics needed for schools. This level can also be accepted at a higher education level

The IELTS Test score as illustrated in the chart starts with the B1 Level only since the minimum grade is 4. This score is used as preliminary for schools, higher education or business education. It is not used as a key for schools or starters. Therefore, if CEFR Levels in this chart are applied to NCP students, A2 students and B1 students are eligible for higher education (15+6 =21 students). But since the Nursing Program and other colleges require minimum an IELTS score of 5 , only Advanced B1 students and above are eligible. Similarly, if we applied IELTS scores, only the (6) B1 students are eligible , but not to the score required in the Nursing Program . Therefore, only those of advanced B1 and B2 can enroll as previously mentioned. Unfortunately, the remaining 18 students (A1+Below A1), are not eligible neither by IELTS scoring nor by CEFR levels.

CONCLUSION

The study aimed at comparing IELTS and IESOL as language proficiency tests for Arab students with the purpose of trying to solve a major problem that faces most Arab students who originally graduated from Arabic schools and were unable to join universities because of their inability to score in IELTS.

As the results show, the number of students who achieved the score of 5 in IELTS required for universities in the U.A.E. was zero. Whereas, in the IESOL, many students scored B1 and B2 level that ranges between 5 and 6.5 band score in IELTS, according to the CEFR Diagram. IESOL may be easier than IELTS, but it is still an International proficiency test that can be used as a replacement as long as the Arab students can score better in it. It is not reasonable to deprive students from higher education just because they have been given an inadequate education in English that does not reach a certain required level. What is only required is the comprehension of English language that enables the students to understand their professors, colleagues and communicate, even to a minimum. By time and communication, a student can upgrade his skills.

Communicative and professional language can be acquired by more communication on campus. Students can also enhance their language skills by practicing or joining language classes instead of being deprived of education. They can also have English in the foundation year instead of being

rejected to enroll in the university. It is stated in one study that “what most language test users really value is usually the ability to communicate in English” .(Powers, 2010).

Therefore, we can settle for the minimum abilities that Arab students have in communication and build on them. Their low proficiency will not hinder the process of learning, on the contrary, giving them more effort in classes may also benefit their peers. If students are placed in the scholarly medium, they will be able to communicate because they have to. They will also be able to write presentations, study general vocabulary, medical vocabulary and even write a research.

This is proven in the group of 2018, previous to the group that is the subject to this study, who were provisionally admitted to the university without achieving the IELTS score of 5 required for the nursing college. Most of this group could not achieve more than 4 or 4.5 IELTS band score, but they managed to communicate with their faculties who were mostly non-Arabs and can only communicate in English. These students are now in second year Nursing Program and they can manage their researches, presentations and assessments. They can also manage their practical studies in English. But the surprise is that they could manage all this, but can still not pass the IELTS. This group had the IESOL test and they all managed to achieve the B2 level. This is open for further investigations as this may lead to the hypothesis that achieving a proficiency score in IELTS is not a standard for excellence.

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