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# Arab English Language Teaching Candidates Climbing the IELTS Mountain: A Qualitatively Driven Hermeneutic Phenomenology Study

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## Arab English Language Teaching Candidates Climbing the IELTS Mountain: A Qualitatively Driven Hermeneutic Phenomenology Study

### **Abstract**

As a high-stakes international language proficiency benchmark, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) requires different and special Language Learning Strategies (LLS), which pose numerous challenges to its takers. Some Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT), have therefore, failed to achieve an overall score of Band 6 on the IELTS as a language proficiency requirement and a condition mandated by the Ministry of Education for selecting English language teachers among. This qualitatively driven hermeneutic phenomenology study, hence, discusses this issue from an ideological perspective. The study triangulates data from semi-structured interviews made with six fourth-year ELT Student Teachers (STs) at SQU and the pertinent literature. The critical discussion revealed various ideologies about the powerful impact of the IELTS on the STs' English language development. The findings have important implications for the practices of the teachers in the Omani ELT school system and elsewhere.

### **Keywords**

IELTS, Language Learning Strategies, English Language Teaching, Student Teachers, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Ideologies

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## Arab English Language Teaching Candidates Climbing the IELTS Mountain: A Qualitatively Driven Hermeneutic Phenomenology Study

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*As a high-stakes international language proficiency benchmark, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) requires different and special Language Learning Strategies (LLS), which pose numerous challenges to its takers. Some Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) majoring in English Language Teaching (ELT), have therefore, failed to achieve an overall score of Band 6 on the IELTS as a language proficiency requirement and a condition mandated by the Ministry of Education for selecting English language teachers among. This qualitatively driven hermeneutic phenomenology study, hence, discusses this issue from an ideological perspective. The study triangulates data from semi-structured interviews made with six fourth-year ELT Student Teachers (STs) at SQU and the pertinent literature. The critical discussion revealed various ideologies about the powerful impact of the IELTS on the STs' English language development. The findings have important implications for the practices of the teachers in the Omani ELT school system and elsewhere. Keywords: IELTS, Language Learning Strategies, English Language Teaching, Student Teachers, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Ideologies*

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### English and English Language Teaching Today

No one can dispute the importance of the English language today as a global lingua franca and a fundamental tool for achieving different purposes. It has established, developed, and legitimized its power through the support it has been receiving from the USA and UK throughout the contemporary history. Globalization, or “Americanization,” to Phillipson (2008), has a linguistic dimension manifested in the new imperialism and neoliberal empire led by the Americans and English as an ideologically initiated project by UK and continued by the USA to promote English as a product and process. Phillipson (2008) wrote that “linguistic capital, its acquisition and investment, is a prime example of symbolic power in use” (p. 29) and that “language is a central dimension of ideological control, perpetuating the subordination of colonial times into the present” (p. 10).

Millions of individuals thus learn English for employment and economic development (Johnson, 2009; Roshid & Chowdhury, 2013; Seargeant, 2012) to achieve the required proficiency in the globalization-orchestrated and led era by the USA. Competence in the target language is a prerequisite for Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) at present (Gan, 2012, 2013; Mullock, 2003; Richards, 2009, 2010; Shin, 2008; Taqi, Al-Nouh, & Akbar, 2014; Tuzel & Akcan, 2009) to help provide quality teaching and to positively affect students' learning and development through good communication. In fact, Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, and Major (2014) associated effective teaching with deep knowledge of the subject matter and stress that “. . . when teachers' knowledge falls below a certain level it is a significant impediment to students' learning” (p. 2). This is particularly the case after the inception of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which has redefined and

reconceptualized English Language Teaching (ELT) and placed substantial linguistic demands on teachers.

ELT has thus evolved and developed over the last 50 years or so and CLT has been sitting at the peak of this development for decades now. Teachers are more conscious about their level and the challenges awaiting them within and beyond the classroom, as students today are different from those found 20-30 years ago. This is especially the case with the speedy spread of communications and media technology, which provide variable exposure to the uses and users of the language and its cultures leading to confirming its uncontested supremacy and position as the world's first international language.

### **English and ELT in Oman**

As a developing country, the Sultanate of Oman could not resist the powerful current of English and its politically and economically powerful and imperial promoters. This led Oman to accept English as its only official foreign language and instrument for national development in 1970. English has become one of the distinct necessities of life in the Sultanate. The Omani government thus decided in 1998 to revolutionize and introduce a new educational system—The Basic Education System (BES)—to help rectify the prevailing unsatisfactory and disappointing status quo of ELT prior to that time (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012). The BES implements a CLT-based approach. Teachers were trained to understand the new philosophy underlying the innovation, new textbooks were produced, and sophisticated educational technology was incorporated into the system to expand students' exposure to and practice of the target language.

### **The Context of the Problem**

One of the persisting problems the Omani ELT system has experienced for the past 4 decades or so has been the linguistically inadequate graduates of the Omani ELT school system, which includes the Omani Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) graduate teachers (Moates, 2006). The linguistic inadequacies shown by SQU graduate teachers drove the Omani MOE to pursue an internationally recognized benchmark to define those teachers' language level. A decision was made by the Ministry of Education to set Band 6 on the academic International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as an official standard for its ELT job candidates graduating from SQU—the only and largest national training institution of English language teachers inland.

### **The Ideology of the IELTS**

The British-created, disseminated, and sustained standardized and high-stakes IELTS emerged in the late 1990s. Its emergence “coincided with a shift in language testing from grammar focus to more of a communicative focus” (Freimuth, 2013, p. 13). More than 2 million candidates in over 130 countries and in over 8000 institutions/organizations worldwide take the test every year. It has become today the world's leading assessment tool and ultimate determining instrument for gauging NNESTs' language proficiency in Oman and worldwide. Al-Issa (2006) criticized Oman, an oil-producing country in the Gulf with minimum human resources, for being culturally dependent on a former empire and colonial power like the UK with advanced and diverse human, economic, scientific, and technological resources and economic and political interests in the Third World countries in general.

Thus, one distinct aspect of linguistic imperialism today is the IELTS (Khan, 2009). Phillipson (2002) considered a test like the IELTS as the tool of spreading the “new

international crusade” promoted by the politically and economically motivated Anglo-American collaboration and partnership, which firmly consolidated linguistic hegemony and imperialism as a part of the overall powerful “cultural imperialism” weapon (Phillipson, 2008).

As a meritocratic testing tool, the IELTS has become a benchmark for success and language proficiency and “a key transnational achievement arena” (Templer, 2004, p. 191) for competitiveness, which lies at the heart of the individual students’ socialization process. According to Templer (2004), the IELTS has additionally become a fundamental part of the cultural capital of English and the marketization, commercialization, and industrialization of ELT today and one of the UK’s huge assets and a great indication of the global educational policy hegemony that has transformed knowledge into a commodity (Templer, 2004). As a high-stakes test, the IELTS, to Templer (2004), infected teaching and implanted ideology through the washback effect manifested in the private coaching courses and huge variety of teaching and self-study materials.

Different researchers (Freimuth, 2013; Hawkey, 2005; Khan, 2006; Moore, Morton, & Price, 2012) found different elements of cultural bias and inappropriateness in the IELTS leading it to being threatening and lacking user-friendliness. The test was further found and criticized for not being suitable for the candidates due to the different socio-cultural and educational factors that govern the different candidates’ respective contexts. Such bias had embedded ideologies, promoted a specific literacy socialization approach, and had a variable degree of washback effect on students’ learning.

However, the scores of SQU ELT Student Teachers (STs) have varied over the past years. While some achieved as high as Band 7.5 on the IELTS, others have managed as low as Band 5.5, which has hampered their professional future. The literature on the IELTS (Chowdhury, 2009; Ying, 2011) showed that the IELTS requires different and special Language Learning Strategies (LLS), which pose more challenges to its takers.

### **Language Learning Strategies**

LLS are arguably one of the most researched areas in ELT due to the important role they play in foreign/second language learning. The pertinent literature defined LLS as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 1990, p. 8).

In her seminal work on LLS, Rubin (1987) divided LLS into “direct” and “indirect.” Direct strategies include metacognitive and cognitive strategies, while indirect strategies include communicative and social strategies. According to Rubin (1987), learners use three types of strategies that contribute either directly or indirectly to their language learning. These are Learning Strategies, Communication Strategies, and Social Strategies.

Learning Strategies are divided into cognitive and metacognitive and contribute directly to the language system created by the language learner. Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or measures learners take to learn or solve problems, which involve direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Rubin (1987) identified memorization, monitoring, practice, deductive reasoning, clarification/verification, and guessing/inductive inferencing as cognitive learning strategies that contribute directly to language learning.

Metacognitive strategies, which have been found to be used more than the other strategies by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students due to their stronger impact on language proficiency development in contexts with limited exposure to the target language (Azar & Saeidi, 2013; Ghadirzadeh, Hashtroudi, & Shokri, 2013; Javid, Al-Thubaiti, & Uthman, 2013; Rahimi, Riazi, & Saif, 2008), are used to supervise, control, or self-direct

language learning (Rubin, 1987). Rubin found that they involve different procedures: planning, prioritizing, setting goals, and self-management.

Communication strategies emphasize the communication process through conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying the speaker's intentions. Social strategies are activities that facilitate learners' exposure to opportunities that can substantially help knowledge practice. A frequently used strategy here is using one's linguistic or communicative knowledge to remain in the conversation.

Social strategies are activities in which learners are exposed to the opportunities that can be substantially helpful to practice their knowledge. According to Rubin (1987), these strategies' contribution to learning is indirect since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using the target language.

According to Griffiths (2003), LLS theory rests on a number of premises. One of them is that language learning is a cognitive process and learning occurs through interaction, which redefines the role of the learner as a dynamic and active meaning constructor. Moreover, LLS are learnt, which allows learners to choose the appropriate strategies with teachers in a strong position to facilitate their development and raise awareness about their importance and encouraging their use. In his review of the literature about LLS, Zare (2012) found that LLS aid language proficiency and "facilitate the acquisition, storage, retrieval or use of information" (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper, & Russo, 1985, p. 23). In another review of the pertinent literature, Tseng (2005) found that

Language learning strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of language learning. Language learning strategies give language teachers valuable clues about how their students assess the situation, plan, select appropriate skills so as to understand, learn, or remember new input presented in the language classroom. (p. 324)

Good strategy instruction, as reviewed by Iverson (2005), thus should be explicit, integrated and task-based, individualized, promotes learner autonomy, and deals with affective factors. It is, hence, important for teachers to understand that a one-size-fits-all instructional approach is very likely to fail, especially because students are different individuals, who bring different knowledge, experiences, expectations, needs, and interests about foreign/second language learning to their respective contexts. Alternatively, Oxford (2003) suggested that a choice of "the best version of the communicative approach that contains a combined focus on form and fluency. . . allows for deliberate, creative variety to meet the needs of all students in the class" (p. 16). Furthermore, Oxford (2003) suggested that teachers can collect data about their students' LLS use through "self-report surveys, observations, interviews, learner journals, dialogue journals, think aloud techniques, and other measures" (p. 15), as such techniques have the power to disclose significant research results that can help teachers understand their students better and orient their instruction and raise their awareness about their styles, strategies, preferences, and possible biases (Oxford, 2003).

Griffiths (2003) stressed that not all LLS are suitable for all learners, since learners vary and since LLS are governed by various factors. According to Oxford and Ehrman (1993), aptitude, motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, age, gender, cultural background, stage of learning, language learning goals, previous language learning experience, career or academic specialization, language learning styles, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) versus English as a Second Language (ESL) settings are factors that affect a learner's choice of LLS. Reflection on and conscious choice and orchestrated use of a large number and wide range of appropriate and well-tailored combinations of LLS for active involvement, therefore, leads certain language learners to improve their target language

proficiency and enjoy a high level of self-efficacy and success (Oxford, 1999) and be labelled as “good,” “effective,” and “successful” due to being independent, self-regulated, and actively involved in language learning and their ability to solve problems pertinent to their learning, regardless of the methods or teaching techniques they encounter (Oxford, 1999; Zare, 2012).

### **Significance of the Study**

This qualitatively driven hermeneutic phenomenology study documents the different ideologies as embedded in the different discourses about the different strategies required for succeeding in the IELTS. The study has significant implications for the teachers’ practices in the Omani ELT school system. The discussion has further important implications for other ELT regional and international contexts similar to Oman’s. A survey of the published literature has thus shown that this research is a unique and pioneering endeavor in its design and approach.

### **Research Question**

In this hermeneutic phenomenology driven study we seek to discover, deeply understand, describe, and interpret the essential features, hidden meaning, and essence of a conscious experience of six Omani ELT STs about a complex phenomenon and “intense common experience” (Merriam, 2009) of performing on the IELTS. Our research thus attempts to answer the following question: What ideologies inform the views of the different SQU STs about the learning strategies required to succeed in the IELTS?

The way this “compelling” and “rigorous” (Mason, 2006) question is framed serves to uncover the informants’ ideologies about taking the IELTS and obtaining the scores appearing in Table 1 below. Ideologies evolve out of specific social contexts. Either shared or individually produced, they are conceptual maps and normative clusters that allow generating multiple realities about and perspectives on a selected phenomenon and conscious production of meaning and convert social life into natural reality. They require understanding and interpretation and are manifested in different people’s discourses. Language, especially of the interview (van Manen, 2007), which represents the world and is centrally linked to making and interpreting meaning in hermeneutic phenomenology, reveals the “being,” facilitates understanding the phenomenon, and clarifies a pedagogical phenomenon like the one under investigation in this study, for example, to “inform,” “reform,” “transform,” “perform,” and “pre-form” the relationship between being and practice (van Manen, 2007).

Ideologies are thus constructed as a result of exposure to different experiences, events, and contexts, as it is the case with the 6 informants in this study. Some ideologies are well-grounded in reality, biased, and reflect the experiences of certain individuals or particular groups in a particular context. Therefore, and within the context of this study, ideologies about taking the IELTS can be either harmonious or conflicting and similar or different when compared and contrasted within the group of the 6 participating informants when considering their overall and each Band scores on the IELTS as appearing in Table 1.

Besides, research (Al-Issa, 2015) has shown that studies that examine ELT-related ideologies in the Sultanate of Oman are few, although ideological investigation has the power to introduce a new cultural, economic, political, and social dimension about ELT planning and policy. It can additionally reveal how ELT is theorized and practiced in Oman and what thinking directs and controls the actions behind it, which have significant implications for ELT reform (Al-Issa, 2015).

Answering the research question will help us understand the skills and knowledge and type of literacy required for taking the IELTS stemming from the informants’ experiences and conceptions of the life world. As Applied Linguists first and foremost interested in advancing

ELT theory and practice in Oman, we too, have our experiences, conceptions, perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and conscious and layered reflections about the skills and knowledge that determine and drive success in the IELTS, at least from the point of view of the Ministry of Education, which can have important implications for ELT theory and practice at schools and SQU. Our access to data sources like the informants' statements and vast pertinent literature will help us construct our report that would invite our readers to enter the world of this existing complex phenomenon. Success in the IELTS, as defined by the Ministry of Education, requires competence in certain skills and knowledge and a certain level of literacy, which when taken together, will reflect our orientations, beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about achieving the required score in a social, educational, pedagogic, linguistic, and cultural phenomenon like the IELTS.

## Methodology

### Research Design

In this study we adopt a hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology methodology to data collection and explication. As a research method, phenomenology in general is rigorous and critical (Streubert-Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). It can help to unveil and generate the learning strategies required to succeed in the IELTS and to suggest complexities for further future research. Hermeneutic phenomenology was found particularly useful when applied to pedagogy and education (Smith, Flowers, & Larken, 2009; van Manen, 1997).

Therefore, quantitative data has an important place in this hermeneutic phenomenology to help capture the essence, enrich our experiences, and broaden our lived realities about the connections governing the multi-dimensionality and complexity of the topic in question. Using this methodology, we are encouraged to think constructively, reflexively, reflectively, creatively, and innovatively to generate rich data and explore new "situational contours and contexts of social processes" (Mason, 2006, p. 16). It remains a "micro" lens that leads to better knowing the "macro" experience (Mason, 2006).

The function of the quantitative data in this study is further limited and its prime aim is to complement the qualitative evidence (Creswell & Clark, 2007), as qualitative data will dominate and drive this study (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003). This is due to the powerful analytical, explanatory, and exploratory edge of the qualitative research to claim analytical generalization and/or theorization beyond the local and contextual phenomenon or case of the Omani STs under scrutiny leading to drawing implications and developing cross-contextual generalizations and theorizations (Mason, 2006).

### Data Sources

The major source of data collection in this hermeneutic phenomenological study is from the informants who are 6 SQU ELT STs. "Typical sample sizes for phenomenological studies range from 1 to 10 persons" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1375). Similarly, Boyd (2001) regards 2 to 10 participants as sufficient to reach saturation.

There were 58 students in their fourth-year at the College of Education at SQU who have been studying English for over 15 years. They all took the academic version of the IELTS and scored variably overall and in each skill. Since this study is funded by SQU, they were told that they would be reimbursed for taking the IELTS, provided they agree to take the IELTS and provide the researchers with the full details of their results.

Six out of the 58 STs were selected purposively to be interviewed in this exploratory investigation, where no initial hypotheses guide the investigation (see Table 1). Purposive



selection was made on the basis of the informants' notably variable overall band scores from the IELTS and their band scores in each language skill, which allows for the generation of more compelling stories and conflicting and diverse ideologies.

The 6 informants agreed to be interviewed after taking the test and signing a letter of consent vetted by the Deanship of Research at SQU. Since in phenomenological studies the participants are the ". . . only legitimate source of data," their views are considered as "fact" (Goulding, 2005, p. 302). Each interview lasted 30 minutes on average.

The two main and broad questions leading to ". . . a textual description and a structural description of the experience, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants" (Creswell, 2007, p. 61), which constituted the semi-structured interviews, were,

1. What would you have done differently in order to obtain a higher band if you had the chance to re-study your major?
2. What are your plans for increasing your IELTS score before graduation?

Following Groenewald (2004), we inquired into the informants' experiences and ideologies about using the most appropriate LLS to obtain a better score on the IELTS. The IELTS has become a norm for success for English language users in general and teachers in particular. The worldwide spread of English at present as a language that serves multiple purposes necessitates its communicative use and helps develop independent language learners and users. To achieve this aim, the IELTS stresses a certain culturally-based and biased set of LLS that help language mastery around the world, but which are largely absent from an ELT educational system like Oman's.

**Table 1**  
*IELTS Scores of the Study Informants*

ST. No.	Overall Band Score	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
1	7.5	7.5	8	8	7
2	7.5	7	7	8	7
3	6	6	5.5	6	5.5
4	6	5.5	6	6	5.5
5	5.5	5	5.5	6	5.5
6	5.5	5.5	4.5	5.5	5.5

We sent the informants a request for participation in the study in which we briefly described the research topic and clearly stated that the informants' participation is voluntary and that they have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time they wish. The letter also clarified that the interaction during the interview session would be taped on a digital MP3 recorder and that its content will be transcribed and analyzed by the researchers themselves. The letter additionally stressed that the informants' identity would not be revealed to anyone.

Upon acceptance to be interviewed, each of the informants was given a copy of the interview protocol letter which explained the aim of the research and his/her role in it and assured them about the confidentiality of the information they provided.

We conducted the interviews in English and then transcribed them. Each interview was conducted on a separate day after fixing an appointment with the informants within 10 days after they took the IELTS. All informants welcomed being interviewed and showed ample flexibility and cooperation. None of the informants complained about the use of the MP3 recorder or felt that it was intrusive in any way.

## Data Explication

We immersed ourselves in the data through reading it several times attending to each interview's essential features (e.g., cognitive, metacognitive, and social LLS) and keeping the research question in mind (Elo & Kyngas, 2007). We focused on understanding the meaning of experience by searching for analytical units (e.g., direct and indirect LLS), engaging with the data interpretively, with less emphasis on the essences that are important to descriptive phenomenology. We adopted an inductive approach due to a lack of former knowledge about the phenomenon (Elo & Kyngas, 2007) and moved in a "hermeneutic circle" (Langdrige 2007), between part of the text and the whole of the text, to establish truth by discovering the most appropriate LLS for achieving Band 6 on the IELTS and interpreting them. Through this process, we tried to understand the informants' statements as experts about their comparable orientations to the IELTS LLS experience along with our understanding of each individual statement. As Applied Linguists and former students ourselves, we consciously and retrospectively reflected upon the IELTS LLS experience and used our backgrounds and creativity to construct an evocative description of the experience and inform and add value to our interpretation of the discovered meanings (van Manen, 1997, 2007).

As soon as we collected the data, we started to try and make sense of it by being intensely involved and absorbed in the phenomenon. In hermeneutic phenomenology, data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously. We transcribed the recorded interviews to help organize them. This helped us familiarize ourselves with the STs' ideologies and discourses and the pertinent literature.

We adopted an inductive latent content analysis approach to data explication, moving from texts to codes and from codes to theory and where the underlying meaning is anchored in the deep structures of the interview texts. We repeatedly read the informants' narratives identifying "sampling units" (Krippendorff, 2004) as in "practice," for example, and "recording units" (Krippendorff, 2004), as in Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies and Social Strategies, for example, and relating to IELTS LLS and comparing and contrasting the phenomenon under investigation. We identified two significant and recurring topics or "context units" (Krippendorff, 2004) – Direct LLS and Indirect LLS, which became the primary category labels or context units. It is noteworthy that all analysis units stemmed from the pertinent literature on LLS. When had analyzed all of our data, we started writing our detailed report to illustrate the relationships between the clustered recurrent meaningful units of analysis and larger relevant ideas.

It is noteworthy that the pertinent literature on LLS will be used as additional knowledge for two reasons. First, to influence the data analysis. Second, to enhance data validity and credibility and ensure that the topic of interest is explored through a variety of lenses to allow for a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The pertinent literature entails all sorts of information that form a rich and a fertile basis or source of data for this paper.

## Findings

### Direct LLS

**Cognitive and metacognitive strategies.** Informants #2, #5, and #1 respectively addressed the strategies required for succeeding in the IELTS from a test-wisness strategy perspective and believed that it could contribute to improving the candidate's scores. They additionally mentioned practice. However, each one of them considered it differently and in relation to his/her score on the IELTS. Informant #2, who in spite of scoring 7.5 on the IELTS

and 7 on reading, said that *if I want to improve my score, maybe practicing time management in studying for the test and reading more about test taking strategies could help.*

Informants #5 and #1 respectively viewed practice from a different perspective and in relation to their test scores. Informant #5 is a low achiever, who achieved an overall Band of 5.5 and scored below 6 in three out of the four skills.

*I try to prepare for the examination and try to do activities and practice to be at the right skill so that I can do my best to improve my language in a short period . . . I'll try to make a schedule to improve my language. (Informant #5)*

By contrast, Informant #1, who is a test-wise student and who achieved an overall Band 7.5 on the IELTS and Band 8 on Reading and Speaking, decided to narrate his experience about how he had achieved this very high band in reading stressing the role of practice as a key to success.

*More practice I guess. Practice the IELTS exam more. Put myself in the same setting of an IELTS exam. I did this when practicing reading before I go to the IELTS exam. I remember I had a watch and I timed myself to have one hour. I did it actually in one hour (Informant #1)*

Interestingly, Informant #1, who scored Band 7.5, turned his attention to a different kind of advanced metacognitive strategy, one which is pertinent to reading and which reflects his self-reflective and higher-order executive thinking skills that determined his success. Unlike informants #3 and #5, he does not see the IELTS as threatening. He scored 8 in Reading and firmly believes that adopting skimming and scanning as practice strategies and test-taking strategies to unlock some of the IELTS Reading test secrets helped him reap the fruit.

*For example, the reading, will you begin with the first passage or the last passage? How will you read? Will you read the passage and the questions, or will you read the questions and find the answers only? We need to practice for the exam. Yes, we mostly have the techniques and the ideas about reading and writing. You will need to practice before the test, at least a week before the test.*

Another concept of metacognitive development is found in the next informant's statement. Informant #5, who scored an overall Band 5.5 in the IELTS and 5.5 in writing, believed free writing, as in diary writing, and monitoring his production, would help him improve his writing skill.

*The practice in writing is also important. I'll try to do free writing so that my writing skill will improve. I started writing my diaries again and I see where the mistakes are. I want to be more focused next time.*

## **Indirect LLS**

**Social strategies.** Informant #5 turned his attention to an important source of authentic English. He is instrumentally and extrinsically motivated. He decided to find a native speaker of English to interact with him/her to improve his speaking. He clearly believes that conversing with a native speaker would earn him a better score in Speaking than the one he had already achieved (6). He said . . . *Actually to improve my speaking skill I'll try to meet a foreigner whose mother tongue is English so that I practice my speaking.*

The dominant contributory role of the English language native speaker to the STs' English language proficiency was conceptualized differently this time. The next two informants turned their attention to a different type of social strategy to increase their exposure to and contact with the native speaker. This time it was through watching Hollywood films. The next two informants mentioned movies as a potential means for and source of contributing to improving their listening. Informant #5, who scored 5 in Listening thought that the exposure coming from Hollywood movies would help him improve his score next time.

*We have to improve. We have to listen to English, so that our language improves. I'll watch English movies so that my listening will be improved . . . Watching some programs, watching movies as entertainment and as to improve my language. (Informant #5)*

Informant #1, who achieved 7.5 in Listening, initiated contact with the native speaker and Hollywood long before taking the IELTS. His integrative and intrinsic motivation towards the target language led him to embrace the right LLS and excel in the IELTS.

*The amount of exposure to the language! From my first day here at SQU it wasn't enough for me to listen to the instructor in English. So, I started to watch like movies and programs and before I got to SQU, it was very helpful in understanding even the culture behind the language, because I remember at the beginning of my journey of watching those programs like comedy Friends and so on. At the beginning they were laughing and I was asking what they were laughing at. So, then after a certain time, I started to realize and understand the joke. So, now I'm laughing with them and it helped also in understanding the language of the instructors, because it's real English, not bookish English; the English that they use in everyday communication. (Informant #1)*

The next two informants mentioned reading books as indirect metacognitive LLS. Informant #5 scored 5.5 in Reading and decided to resort to organizational planning and embrace a LLS that would help him achieve a better score next time he decided to take the test. He said that . . . *We have to read. I made a plan at summer to improve by reading some books. I'll try to read books and I'll try to limit the time so that my reading skill will improve.* Informant #3 mentioned reading books too as a tool that would earn her a higher score in Reading than the relatively low one (5.5) she had already achieved. She developed the belief that reading English books will help her achieve her aim. *Actually I decided to do my IELTS again, because I want to see will it be just 6 or above. I think it was a fault because I didn't do well. I started reading books.* This informant is rating reading books highly and establishing a very close link between success in the IELTS and scoring Band 6 on the one hand and reading books on the other hand. In other words, she is considering English-medium books as facilitators for guaranteeing achieving the required band in the IELTS due to the type of language (authentic) and other IELTS-related culturally-biased knowledge they present.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In this qualitatively driven hermeneutic phenomenology study we critically investigate what discourses and ideologies inform the views of the different SQU ELT STs about the LLS required to succeed in the IELTS. The results indicate that the informants hold different ideologies about the LLS that govern achieving Band 6 in the IELTS, which have been divided into direct and indirect with each one divided into sub-strategies, which reflects the complexity

of this high-stake international test and the cognitive, metacognitive, and social demands laid on its candidates.

This is consistent with the findings reported by Chowdhury (2009) and Ying (2011). As a package, the IELTS comes with a different set of LLS that students need to master to become proficient in English. STs at SQU are, therefore, an underprivileged and minority group due to being forced to take such a high-stakes test like the IELTS, which demands candidates to be exposed to and establish contact with language and knowledge beyond what is strictly found in the mandated textbook and given to students for assessment purposes. This situation necessitates that teachers in the Omani ELT system become textbook slaves and test slaves, which has negatively impacted the students' motivation, attitudes, and behavior and disturbed the philosophy of the BES and CLT (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2012).

Furthermore, the findings reveal that the IELTS has a powerful degree of washback effect on the STs, leading them to embrace certain direct cognitive and metacognitive LLS like practicing and indirect social LLS like maximizing exposure to and contact with the target language depending on their different personalities and motivation. The IELTS positive washback effect further extends to cover the deliberate and conscious choices of certain direct cognitive and metacognitive LLS to make their learning easier, faster, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to a new situation. According to Danica (2012), "motivation incorporates attitudes, purpose, and time management" (p. 8), and the choice of time management, as a learning strategy, helps prepare for the IELTS easier, faster, and more effectively.

In addition, the IELTS here is powerfully driving informant #3 and #5 "means-autonomy-instrumental" motivations (Carreira, 2005) to perform and succeed in an EFL context like the Omani one, where domains of language practice are few. Hence, a high-stakes test like the IELTS is transforming these anxious informants into more autonomous ones with the ability to choose appropriate LLS to improve their proficiency, which according to Wenden (1991), makes them "good" language learners. As good language learners, and according to Wenden (1991), they also have insights to their own learning styles and preferences and choose to practice to succeed.

Practice, according to Danica (2012), incorporates memory and contact with new information, enhances retaining new information, and affects performance. Practice of the four language skills, if meaningful, as it is the case with establishing contact with the culture of the target language as a powerful source of motivation, can have a long-lasting effect on a student's memory, knowledge, and language proficiency. In other words, memorization is not simply confined to remembering language and other knowledge for the sake of answering memory and textbook-based exam questions and then forgetting that knowledge, as it is the case with tests in the Omani ELT system (Al-Issa, 2014). Knowledge here derives from largely equally significant multiple sources, is infinite and does not have boundaries, is renewable, diverse, questionable and negotiable, and meaningful and relevant as it contributes to preparing candidates for a high-stakes international test like the IELTS. Memory is thus a part of the overall complex communicative language use device and system, rather than a dominant and controlling factor that oppresses and suppresses and marginalizes linguistic creativity and innovation and facilitates parroting and copying, as it is the case in the Omani ELT system (Al-Issa, 2014).

An additional finding is the role of "means-autonomy-integrative" motivation (Carreira, 2005) in contributing to the high achievement of Informant #1. English is a global lingua franca today and its hegemony facilitates its cultural imperialism. However, research shows students in Oman lack autonomy and integrative motivation due to reasons pertinent to the teachers' qualifications and students' negativity and lacking a purpose to learn English, which negatively affects students' self-confidence and interest in the language and increases

their anxiety (Al-Mahrooqi, Abrar-UI-Hassan, & Asante, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2014).

It is interesting to note that none of the informants mentioned anything related to communication strategies. This could mean that Speaking is the least problematic skill. This is evident as five out of the six informants scored 6 or above in Speaking, which means they can process communication, get their meanings across, and clarify their intentions without any difficulties.

In conclusion, despite its complexity, the numerous challenges it poses to its candidates, and its cultural bias, the IELTS has been found to have a powerful washback effect on SQU STs' choices of the right LLS leading to English language proficiency development in a system where EFL-development oriented LLS hardly have a place and where ELT is characterized as boring, meaningless, rigid, controlled, strictly directed and guided, and ideologically-governed, and where students' knowledge and individual differences are marginalized, which impedes their development as good, autonomous, active, and self-regulated foreign language learners.

### Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Regardless of the results reached, we believe this study provides insights into the LLS required by Omani students to perform well on the IELTS. It enriches our knowledge and understanding about the reasons underlying the failure of some STs to satisfy the recruitment requirement set by the Omani Ministry of Education. The LLS discussed in this study are thus by no means exhaustive and the findings and discussions presented are rather suggestive than conclusive as the findings do not represent all STs. A pursuit of more in-depth qualitative and quantitative studies from different contexts may yield more results about the use and importance of more LLS. Besides, as qualitatively-designed and driven with a limited number of participants, this study does not allow for generalizability.

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