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Chinese Student Perceptions on English Test Preparation Courses in China

by

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Abstract

Because of high-stakes English language tests, Chinese students have strong desires to achieve success on tests, which contributes to enhancing the prosperity of the test preparation industry. This present study aimed to explore the perceptions of Chinese students on test preparation courses for two of the popular English language tests in Chinese society—the Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). The result showed that most participants valued the test preparation courses on improving their scores at different levels within a limited time. However, they also pointed out the courses focused less on English proficiency improvement. In addition, implications for English test preparation education and English language teaching were discussed in the context of Chinese students. The present study makes contributions to reflecting how Chinese students perceive two of the major English language test preparation courses in both positive and negative ways. However, more research is needed to make a stronger case.

Keywords: high-stakes English tests, test preparation, test scores, student perceptions, Chinese students, English proficiency.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Test preparation for high-stakes English language tests has attracted increasing attention in China, because there is an increasing number of Chinese students taking test preparation courses to achieve success or high scores on English language tests. Test preparation is a historically rooted and educationally accepted phenomenon in the Chinese context, which paves the way for the prosperity of test preparation courses for English language tests in China. This phenomenon dates back to the Chinese imperial examinations, which were used in China for over a thousand years to make high-stakes decisions to select government officials (Cheng, 2008). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a part of the larger language training industry, test preparation for English language tests became industrialized in China (Wang, 2007). Today, because of the continuing presence of the high-stakes consequences of tests in Chinese society, Chinese students are attracted to test preparation centers that prepare students to have a better test performance. Consequently, test preparation centers are increasingly developing and thriving (Matoush & Fu, 2012), and the test preparation for English language tests makes a significant contribution.

English language test preparation centers are established to provide dedicated courses and services to train students for various English language tests. By 2013, English language test preparation centers accounted for approximately one-third of the 141,100 commercial, educational training schools in China—around 50,000 English test preparation agencies in roughly 700 cities—ranging from small independent centers to large chains such as the New

Oriental School (Hu, 2013). Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that thousands of test preparation

centers have sprouted across China over the last three decades. The rapid expansion and

profitability of the test preparation industry can be attributed to two factors: the enormous

importance of English language education, and the high-stakes consequences of English

language tests in China. In China, achieving high scores on various English language tests is

considered critical to students' future success (Cheng, 2008). The need, to succeed in English

tests and to access further academic and life chances, is therefore expected to be a major driver

of Chinese students enrolling in test preparation courses.

However, little is known about how Chinese students perceive and value these test

preparation courses after personal experiences. In the present study, I considered the perceptions

of 14 Chinese students who enrolled in various academic programs in a United States university

through surveys and interviews. This present study examines how they perceive the test

preparation practices for the two standard English language tests—IELTS Academic and TOEFL

iBT.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will review the literature on test preparation studies to provide empirical and theoretical foundations. I will start with the key terms that define 'test preparation.' I will then review the definition and effects of high-stakes testing, and how TOEFL and IELTS maintain their dominant status as high-stakes tests. Finally, I will review the previous research on students' perceptions of test preparation.

Three Key Terms that Define Test Preparation

Coaching. The term coaching is often applied to the commercial programs in which students register outside of the school setting to prepare for tests. Coaching programs are usually used to prepare for the standardized tests with admission purposes, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), and the Test of English as a Foreign Language Internet-based test (TOEFL iBT).

Although the use of this term tends to refer to short-term training aiming at improving students' test performance, without necessarily improving students' abilities generally (Pike, 1978), coaching is seen as a representative among a wide variety of test preparation practices (Messick, 1982). It ranges from short-term training on sample test items reviewing to long-term instructions on skill development (Messick, 1982), which includes test familiarization, practice drills, motivational enhancement, test-taking strategies, and subject content knowledge and skills development.

Teaching to the test. The term is usually applied within the K-12 school settings in general. It describes classroom teachers' instructions on test content to improve students' scores on provincial or national standardized tests. These tests are usually compulsory for students to take to assess whether they have met the requirements of subject knowledge specified in the curriculum (Au, 2007).

According to the focus of teachers' instructions, teaching to the test can be defined in two ways: item teaching or curriculum teaching (Popham, 2001). Item teaching refers to teachers focusing on actual test items to increase students' test scores (such as by using retired test papers). In contrast, curriculum teaching refers to teachers establishing their instructions based on curriculum objectives sampled by the tests to improve students' test performance (Moore, 1994).

Test preparation. The term test preparation is applied to broader settings. It is defined as a variety of activities to enhance students' test performances (Moore, 1994), including reviewing content sampled by tests and practicing test-taking skills. Test preparation has been addressed in broad research fields, such as curriculum studies (Smith, 1991), educational measurement (Lai & Waltman, 2008), and language testing (Tsagari, 2012).

Compared to the specific settings and perspectives in which the previous two terms are applied, the term 'test preparation' is more inclusive. It refers to practices that help students prepare for a variety of standardized tests, such as provincial or national tests (Lai & Waltman, 2008), and tests used for admission purposes (Tsagari, 2012). In addition, this term can refer to

preparation practices both inside school settings (Deng & Carless, 2010) and outside school settings (Montgomery & Lilly, 2012).

Test preparation is defined as "any intervention procedure specifically undertaken to improve test scores, whether by improving the skills measured by the test or by improving the skills for taking the test, or both" (Messick, 1982, p. 70). Cole (1982) summarized six possible components of test preparation, including being supplied with correct answers, taking practice tests, enhancing motivation, coping with test anxiety, increasing test wiseness, and teaching test contents. These components represent a variety of activities that test-takers can pursue during their test preparations.

High-Stakes Testing

Luxia (2005) argued, "high-stakes tests are those whose results are used to make important decisions that immediately and directly affect the test-takers and other stakeholders" (p. 142) such as teachers. The wide use of test results can influence both the educational and social lives of students (Shohamy, 2001). For one thing, students' educational careers depend on test scores. For example, because what students are learning will appear in the tests and test scores reflect how students learn, the learning processes are purposively designed to deal with tests. Shohamy (2001) stated that "tests are capable of dictating to test-takers what they need to know, what they need to learn, and what they will be taught" (p. 17). For another, tests also influence students' social behaviors and attitudes. Students change their behaviors to fit the needs of tests to succeed (Shohamy, 2001). In other words, tests are perceived not only as a tool

to measure academic abilities and knowledge but also as a judgment to assess if test takers can move forward or succeed in their future life. Dooey (2008) contended that in many countries, language tests had become one of the most important requirements to enter the next level of education or professional career.

The power of language tests is not only due to their wide use and influential consequences, but also related to their features. Firstly, the testers of language tests are more powerful than test-takers (Shohamy, 2001). Testers are the people who make decisions about what to be tested, and how the test score is interpreted. Secondly, tests use the "language of numbers" (Shohamy, 2001). Shohamy (2001) stated that the "language of numbers is considered to be a symbol of objectivity, scientism, and rationalism" (p. 21). In other words, "language of numbers" possesses all aspects or features that are related to "truth, trust, legitimacy and status" (p. 22). Finally, tests incorporate an objective format, meaning that the truth comes from the testers. Tests do not allow test-takers to have their interpretation of the truth (Shohamy, 2001).

Language tests, especially for English, retain their enormous powers in Chinese society because of their high-stakes position. In response to the high-stakes status, students have to try their best to show excellent performances on the tests.

The IELTS and TOEFL as High-Stakes Tests

Zahedi and Shamsaee (2012) pointed out that there are three purposes of high-stakes tests: "selecting people for an occupation, issuing a certificate, and permitting one to enter higher education" (p. 264). The IELTS and TOEFL maintain their influential status in society not only

because these two tests were purposely designed to assess test-takers' English proficiencies, but also because their wide use has placed them as high-stakes tests that affect test-takers' future lives such as pursuing higher education and applying for jobs.

Introduction to IELTS and TOEFL Tests

TOEFL and IELTS tests were developed in the 20th century to measure test takers' English proficiency, especially for people who see English as their second or foreign language. For more than 30 years, these two tests have done many modifications to fit the needs better to measure test takers' English proficiency.

TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language). The TOEFL test was introduced by the National Council on the Testing English as a Foreign Language in 1963. The test was developed to assess non-native English speakers who intend to pursue their study in the English medium educational institutions (Taylor & Angelis, 2008, p. 41). Since 1963, the TOEFL test has evolved into three formats: a paper-based test (PBT), a computer-based test (CBT), and an Internet-based test (iBT) (Hill & Liu, 2012). In 2005, TOEFL iBT, the Internet-based test, was launched to replace the TOEFL computer-based test (CBT) (Hill & Liu, 2012). Currently, there are two formats of TOEFL test offered by Educational Testing Service (ETS): Paper-Based Testing (PBT) and Internet-Based Testing (iBT) (Taylor & Angelis, 2008).

IELTS (International English Language Testing System). The IELTS score is accepted by English medium educational institutions to prove that applicants have strong enough English skills to complete their studies or global migration (IELTS, 2018). IELTS was firstly

introduced in the early 1980s by the United Kingdom (UK) test developers (O'Sullivan, 2012).

Through several changes and improvements, a new version of the IELTS was finally launched in

2005 in some IELTS centers. IELTS has two types of tests: General and Academic IELTS. The

differences between these two are based on their contents, contexts, and purposes. The IELTS

Academic is for people who are aiming to apply for higher education or professional registration,

while IELTS General is for people who are aiming to migrate to Australia, New Zealand,

Canada, and the UK, or apply for training programs or work experience in an English-speaking

environment (IELTS, 2018). My study will only focus on the IELTS Academic, because the

purpose of the participants to take the IELTS test is for educational use.

Effects of High-Stakes Tests

Tests affect education practices, including both teaching and learning. Triplett, Barksdale,

and Leftwich (2003) stated that teachers tend to focus on materials and strategies that they

predict will help students in tests. Their primary goal is to prepare students to pass the test rather

than learning knowledge. Shohamy (2001) argued that teachers change their teaching strategies

to "help" students to get high scores in tests, because their teaching achievements will be

assessed by the students' test scores.

In addition, tests also have societal effects, because they can refer to test-takers' attitudes,

emotions, and behaviors (Shohamy, 2001). Students might feel worried or nervous to the test,

because students fear being failed in the test that will influence their educational and social lives.

Thus, they have motivations to work hard to succeed in the tests (Triplett et al., 2003).

Based on the impacts of the high-stakes tests, establishing test preparation schools and attending test preparation courses have become an overwhelming trend in China.

Effects of TOEFL and IELTS Test Preparation Courses

Empirical studies that have done to find out the effects of test preparation courses on language test score improvements cannot provide consistent results. Some studies have shown that students performed significantly better on tests after taking test preparation courses (Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003), while others found few apparent advantages (Gan, 2009). More importantly, the distinct characteristics of participants and context within test preparation practices may contribute to the various effects.

Firstly, test programs may have a relationship with the effect of test preparation practices. Most of the studies investigating the effect of test preparation courses on English tests have focused on two major testing programs, the TOEFL iBT and IELTS. Nguyen (2007) did research on the effects of preparation courses on both the TOEFL iBT Listening and the IELTS Listening tests. The IELTS Listening preparation course ran ten weeks with about 1.5-2 daily hours. The TOEFL iBT preparation course ran two weeks with 4 daily hours of training at one school and 4 weeks with 2 daily hours of training at another school. As a result, the IELTS group performed significantly better on the test than the TOEFL group, but the two TOEFL groups showed almost equal results on the TOEFL test. Nguyen concluded that the effect of test preparation courses is more apparent on the IELTS test than on the TOEFL iBT.

Secondly, different pedagogic instructions within test preparation courses may lead to different effects. Green (2007) investigated the effect of three types of preparation courses on the IELTS Writing: (1) courses specifically focusing on the IELTS test, (b) courses focusing on general academic writing, and (c) courses combining the two. Comparing the pre-test and post-test results, the author found that students in all three courses significantly improved their IELTS scores ($p < .01$), but students in the second type of courses made more improvements than the first and the third group students.

Thirdly, using appropriate training methods and strategies on test preparations will have positive effects on tests. Ward and Xu (1994) investigated the impact of preparation training on summarization skills on TOEFL iBT. After 6 weeks of instruction on summarization skills with prepared written materials, students had a 0.5 standard deviation score improvement on TOEFL iBT scores. The authors also found that students who attended summarization skills preparation courses had more of a gain on the TOEFL iBT than students who did not. Furthermore, Swain, Huang, Barkaoui, Brooks, and Lapkin (2009) investigated the effect of strategies test preparation courses provide in the speaking section of the TOEFL iBT. The authors found that the relationship between strategies and test results varied dramatically by tasks and types of strategies. Some strategies, such as self-correcting, were proved to be valid for the TOEFL iBT speaking.

Previous Research on Students' Perception of Test Preparation

Most existing studies examine test preparation from teachers' perspectives focusing on test score gains. In contrast to teachers, students reported reasons for participating in test preparation courses beyond improving their test scores. Green (2006) found that an equal percentage of students chose to take test preparation courses between achieving good scores and improving English skills and that a comparable percentage of students want to learn academic skills.

Similarly, according to the research of Ma and Cheng (2015), the instruction of test preparation courses includes familiarization with test requirements, formats, and tasks; the application of test-taking strategies; management of affect (e.g., anxiety, confidence); and strategies for improving particular English skills. These student perspectives were more diverse than the teachers' predominant perspective of focusing on test score gains.

In addition, Anthony (2006) did research on the perception of learners and teachers on IELTS preparation courses' expectations and outcomes. The results demonstrated that learner perceptions of test preparation courses' outcomes were influenced by the focus of courses that are reported by teachers, but that the relationship was not deterministic. Although test preparation courses appeared to cover a relatively small range of language skills, there was evidence that narrow preparation strategies were not driven primarily by learner expectations.

Furthermore, the research of Ma and Cheng (2015) showed that students perceived the preparation courses were useful. All the participants of this research indicated that they would

still take test preparation courses if they were given one more chance to prepare for the TOEFL

iBT, because this was the most efficient way to prepare for the test. Moreover, students value

their test preparation courses as experiences of meeting peers and gaining inspirations,

encouragement, and mental supports from teachers and peers. However, Ma and Cheng (2015)

also stated that the perceptions of TOEFL test preparation courses were different among

students, based on the factors that including both internal factors (e.g., motivations) and external

factors (e.g., length of time on preparing for the test). Similarly, Yu's study (2012) examined

Chinese students' perceived value of test preparation practices for TOEFL speaking tasks. He

found that students judged usefulness according to the frequency with which teachers used the

practices.

Finally, Pan (2016) examined the effect of learners' preferences and perceptions

regarding two approaches to test preparation on Taiwan learners, namely a test-orientated

approach and a communication-oriented approach. The results showed that test-oriented

instruction was reported by the subjects to be more efficient than communication-oriented

instruction in terms of enhancing not only test scores but also English proficiency.

Because test preparation is a historically rooted and educationally accepted phenomenon

and English tests have high-stakes impacts in the Chinese context, there is an increasing number

of Chinese students taking test preparation courses to achieve success on the English language

tests. Chinese test preparation centers claim that their courses and services are advantageous to

learners in a wide range of areas. They update courses and advertisements frequently to cater to

the needs of students. However, we have a limited understanding of how students perceive these courses after their experiences. This brings me to a query that I wish to explore. Therefore, the research question for this present study is:

How do Chinese students perceive the value of test preparation courses in China for the two standard English tests—IELTS Academic or TOEFL iBT?

In the next chapter, I will present the methodology of conducting the present study, including the overall research design, participants, recruitment process, research materials, data collection, and data analysis for the research question.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter will present the background information about the participants, the rationales in designing, conducting the survey as well as analyzing the results.

Participants

The participants for this research were 14 Chinese international students at an Upper Midwest university. The age of the participants was from 20-29 years old. Both male and female participants who were from a variety of majors and enrolled in either undergraduate or graduate programs were recruited. The criterion for recruiting participants was to ensure the participants had enrolled in either TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test preparation programs in China, so the participants could provide rich, real, and relevant information.

In addition, some personal attributes and characteristics are worth examining these Chinese participants.

It is a fact that English is the medium of instruction at this university. Therefore, Chinese international students whose first language is not English are required to demonstrate their English proficiency before being admitted. This university, in its admission requirements, accepts the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS Academic as two ways students can demonstrate their English proficiency.

Chinese students present their English proficiency at various levels. Although Chinese public schools provide compulsory English classes, the majority of the English classes are teacher-centered and Chinese-instructed. The focuses of English classes in China are mostly on

vocabulary and grammar memorizing, short passage reading comprehension, and short answer writing. However, English teaching in China focuses little on communication skills, such as listening and speaking, which limits the development of students' English proficiency at different levels.

Recruitment Process

The participant recruitment was conducted through two steps: I first sent invitation e-mails to the Chinese students at this university who were in my social network, and then used the snowball technique of asking the initial respondents to nominate potential participants. The snowball sampling method is a "chain referral sampling method that relies on referrals from initial subjects to generate additional subjects" (Johnston & Sabin, 2010, p. 38). This method was chosen because the population of the present study has specific characteristics (Cohen &Arieli, 2011), and might only be recognized by certain people. Seven Chinese students responded to the initial invitation email that they knew some qualified potential participants, and they were willing to introduce my project to them through emails or messages. The snowballing technique was the main technique that was used in this project. By using the snowball technique, 14 students (see Table 1) who enrolled in a variety of majors subsequently agreed to participate in this project. All of them had enrolled in either TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test preparation programs in China prior to taking the tests.

Table 1

Profiles of Participants' Demographic Information

	Counts	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age			M = 23	SD = 2.69
Gender				
Male	8	57		
Female	6	43		
Academic program				
Graduate	8	57		
Undergraduate	6	43		
Major				
Science and Engineering	6	43		
Business and Management	6	43		
Arts	2	14		
English study in China (years)			M = 13	SD = 2.25
Learning focus of English				
Test-based English	10	71		
Academic English	4	29		
Social English	0	0		
Length of staying in the U.S. (years)			M = 2.5	SD = 1.28
Number of IELTS takers	10	71		
Number of TOEFL takers	4	29		

Note: Academic English refers to the language used in school to help students acquire and use knowledge (Schleppegrell, 2004); Test-based English refers to the English curriculums and instructions focused on test content and strategies to improve students' test achievements.

Materials

Data collection in my study used a background survey and a follow-up semi-structured individual interview with all 14 Chinese students.

It is difficult for researchers to predict if the data collecting process would work, so the pilot testing played a significant role. Aiming to assess the feasibility and usefulness of the questions and revise them in time, I piloted every survey item and interview question in advance. I sent the two instruments to students who have experienced TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test preparation courses but are now in other countries or cities. They showed no questions or problems on understanding or answering the survey and interview questions during the piloting process, and they thought the instruments were feasible. Thus, I did not change anything after pilot testing.

Background survey. The first instrument used to collect data was a written form questionnaire—background survey (Appendix B). The background survey was given to participants before the one on one interview, to ask some demographic background characteristics, including gender, major, years of English language learning, strengths and weaknesses of English language, and relevant test preparation experiences information. The students were asked to reflect on their experience of taking particular test preparation courses, including their motivation for taking the course, their choice of course type, course duration, and the timing of taking the course. It included a total of 19 items and was administered in both English and Chinese. The background survey was designed in English and translated to Chinese to ensure there was no language difficulty in completing the survey for participants. Although both the English and Chinese versions were provided, only the English version was used in the research.

The background survey was sent to the Statistical Consulting and Research Center of St. Cloud State University to evaluate, aiming to make sure the items and format were appropriate for this research. This process allowed me to evaluate the internal validity of the survey. Following the tutor's recommendations, some items were transferred from open-ended questions to multiple-choice questions to make the data collecting process more effective.

Individual perception interview. According to Lambert (2012), interviewing is an efficient way to elicit in-depth information about someone's experience, perspectives, and opinions. Specifically, the semi-structured interview is a type of interview where the researcher is allowed to ask additional questions and discuss additional topics related to the issue discussed (Lambert, 2012). This type of interview allowed me to "pursue new lines of inquiry in response to what interviewees say" (p. 104). Moreover, "Individual interview is a process where the participants share what they know, have learned and can add dimensions to our understanding of the situation by using their own words, in his voice, with his languages and narrative" (Lichtman, 2009, p. 143). Besides, using individual interviews is because it is not only more manageable than group interviews (Beitin, 2012) relating to time constraints, it also will make the interviewee feel comfortable and relaxed (Triplet, et al., 2003).

One interview guide that included ten detailed interview questions (Appendix C) was used to collect data from participants. It aimed to elicit the students' responses to a central focus: how they perceived the value of the test preparation courses they engaged in before achieving success in their test performance. The Individual Perception Interview questions were open-

ended questions that focused on test-taking experiences, test preparation courses taking reflection and training background, and perceived value regarding these experiences in general. The information provided essential links to understanding the specific practices they performed.

Procedure and Data Collection

Once the subjects agreed to do the research by responding the e-mail, they were asked to provide their contact information other than the email address, such as Skype ID, WeChat ID (the most popular social network application in China), and phone number, in order to more efficiently connect with them.

The process of data collecting was arranged in advance, which including time arrangement, consent form preparation, and background survey printing.

Participants were met in person. Firstly, all the participants were asked to sign the consent form for the background survey and audio recording of the interview. Secondly, the students were given a detailed explanation of the process. Thirdly, each participant was given a written form questionnaire—background survey to complete and then experienced a semi-structured individual interview. The Individual Perception Interview was conducted in both English and Chinese by following the prepared interview questions. Using both English and Chinese within the interviews was aiming to make sure all the participants were able to express their opinions without any language limitations or communication barriers. Each interview took about 30-40 minutes in length for each participant. All the interviews were audio-recorded by using the researcher's iPhone Voice Memos. Finally, as a member-checking mechanism after

reviewing all the answers of background survey and Individual Perception Interview records, a 10-15 minutes interview was conducted with three of the participants online or over the telephone to clarify and further explain some information.

Data Analysis

      Background survey. Background survey data were analyzed quantitatively first to get more accurate and visual results (Tables 1 and 2). The following analysis was used to gather data and get initial findings:

- Included in the analysis were participants' demographic data: age, gender, academic program (bachelor or master), major, years of English study, learning focus(es) of English, length of staying in the U.S., number of IELTS Academic/TOEFL iBT tests-takers.

- Also analyzed were data about participants' test-taking experiences: frequency of TOEFL iBT/IELTS Academic test-taking, the score improvement after taking preparation courses, the subjects of improvement (reading/listening/writing/ speaking), and features of test preparation courses (duration, frequency of class taking per week, reasons for training school choosing).

      Second, the data of the background survey contributed to establishing themes and codes.

      Individual perception interview. Interview data were analyzed qualitatively by using inductive (data-driven) approaches (Patton, 2002). Using the inductive or data-driven approach

was to allow researchers to expand the specific units of meaning to broader categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The answers of Individual Perception Interview, combined with some codes that emerged from the survey data, were reviewed, regrouped, and relinked. In this qualitative research, coding was grounded in the data rather than being decided before the data being collected or coded. The analysis used for the data of Individual Perception Interview is called thematic analysis (Gomm, 2004), and the thematic analysis codes each conversation based on the theme.

The first step for analysis was reviewing the answers, which allowed me to be more familiar with the data (King & Horrocks, 2010). Based on the purpose of the research, it was not always the case that every utterance of each participant needed to be transcribed. Because the audio materials were simply to listen to the data, I only transcribed the features of interests for the study in the audio materials, which played an essential role in avoiding ambiguity in analyzing the content and illustrating trends. In the process of reviewing, I translated some answers to English when the utterance was in Chinese. After reviewing all of the recorded materials, I identified the meaningful segments of participants' views, then grouped the segments which report the same issue into one code, and finally labeled the code to represent the core meaning (Saldana, 2009). This process was repeated to make sure the code was the most appropriate. Finally, all of the codes were analyzed and grouped into themes according to the meanings they represent (Saldana, 2009).

Chapter IV: **Results**

Background Survey Results

Except for the demographic information (shown in Table 1), the background survey

provided data of participants' test preparation experiences, such as frequency of TOEFL

iBT/IELTS Academic test-taking, the score improvement after taking preparation courses, the

subjects of improvement (reading/listening/writing/speaking), and features of test preparation

courses (duration, frequency of class-taking per week, reasons for training school choosing).

Table 2 presents the information visually.

Table 2

Participants' Test Preparation Experience

			Count	Percentage
Number of times of	2		6	43
TOEFL/IELTS was taken	3		5	36
	1		2	14
	More than 3		1	7
Whether or not score	Yes		9	75
improves after preparation	No		3	25
courses	(n=12			
	note: except for			
	the two students			
	who only took			
	the test once)			
Improve the most on	Listening		6	50
	Speaking		3	25
	Reading		2	17
	Writing		1	8
	(n=12)			
Features of test preparation	Duration	1.<3 months	7	50
courses		2. 3-6 months	7	50
	Frequency	1. 3-4 times/week	6	42
		2. Once/week	4	29
		3. Everyday	4	29
	Type of course	1. Face-to-face classroom	7	50
		2. Face-to-face one-to-one	4	29
		3. Online	3	21
	School Choosing	1.Recommendation	6	42
		2. Popularity	5	36
		3.Advertisements	3	21

As shown in Table 2, 86% of the participants took the TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic tests more than once to achieve a satisfactory score. Except for the two students who only took the test once, 9 of the 12 (75%) participants said that they achieved higher scores after preparation courses: 50% of the students got higher scores on listening, 25% of the students achieved higher scores on speaking, 17% of the students gained improvements on reading, and 8% of the students had improvements on writing. That is, 75% of participants improved on oral English (listening and speaking) while 25% of them achieved a higher score on written English (reading and writing). All the participants chose to take test preparation courses no longer than 6 months (50% chose to take the course no longer than 3 months, 50% chose to take the course ranging from 3 to 6 months), but no one chose to attend the courses longer than 7 months. Three to four times a week was the most common frequency to take test preparation courses, which was more popular than everyday classes and weekly classes among the participants. Fifty percent of participants chose to take face-to-face small classroom training (class size of 8-20 students), which was the most popular course type among the participants. The majority of participants choosing preparation courses were based on recommendations of their friends or relatives (42%) and high popularity of test preparation centers (36%), and 3% of the students relied on advertisements to make choices.

Individual Perception Interview Results

Six themes—'professional teachers,' 'effective instructions,' 'valuable materials,' 'helpful to tests,' 'good experiences,' and 'disappointments,' were generated from the interview data.

Both advantages and disadvantages generated from interview data showed how the Chinese

students perceive test preparation courses (see Table 3).

Table 3

Findings of Perceptions on TOEFL iBT/ IELTS Academic Test Preparation Courses

Theme1		*Professional Teachers*
	Code 1	Teaching experiences
	Code 2	Education background
	Code 3	High test scores
	Code 4	Personality charm
Theme 2		*Effective Instructions*
	Code 1	Strong focus on test contents
	Code 2	Test skills and practices
Theme 3		*Valuable Materials*
	Code 1	Good for self-study and practice
	Code 2	Member-only materials
Theme 4		*Helpful to Tests*
	Code 1	Score improvement
	Code 2	Vocabulary gaining
Theme 5		*Good Experiences*
	Code 1	Making friends
	Code 2	Confidence in the tests
Theme 6		*Disappointments*
	Code 1	High price
	Code 2	Lack of English skill instructions

Table 4

Theme 1 Professional Teachers

Code 1	Teaching experiences
Code 2	Education background
Code 3	High test scores
Code 4	Personality charm

As shown in Table 4, theme 1, *Professional Teachers* included four specific codes: 'teaching experiences,' 'education background,' 'high test scores,' and 'personality charm.' These codes represented the characteristics of teachers that students perceive. All the 14 participants showed satisfaction to their teachers.

Code 1 Teaching experiences. Seven students indicated that their teachers had taught TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test preparation for a long time. Some teachers were from famous test preparation training centers, and they were very familiar with the tests and very experienced in teaching and training students. Student Si commented:

I knew my teachers were very experienced because they have taught TOEFL for 5 years. My speaking teacher was once working for a chain training school, one of the famous and largest test preparation schools in China, and she was very experienced. My friends suggested the teacher to me.

Code 2 Education background. Twelve students stated that their teachers had overseas educational backgrounds, even if the teachers had not major in English or education. The teachers who have overseas educational backgrounds are attractive because they have first-hand

educational and test-preparation experiences. They shared their overseas study and life experiences with students and used their test-taking experiences to teach students. Student Wei commented:

> I like to listen to the teachers' own study experiences rather than the textbooks because they are more useful and practical. My listening teacher was studying in the U.S.; she used her own experiences to explain how important the TOEFL score is to apply for a good university. She also provided some valuable suggestions on how she prepared TOFEL listening.

Code 3 High test scores. Except for overseas educational backgrounds, having a high score is another important determinant for students to judge teachers. Twelve students also indicated that their teachers not only took the test they were teaching very frequently to understand the trends of the tests but also gained high scores or even full marks on that module they were teaching. Nowadays, having a high score was one of the standards that test preparation centers used to hire teachers. Students were more likely to believe in a teacher who got high scores on the tests. Student Cui commented:

> Direct Citation: 我雅思阅读老师在雅思阅读考试里拿了满分，所以他肯定对雅思阅读有很多独特的见解。我很相信他。

> Translation: My IELTS reading teacher got the full mark on the IELTS reading test, so he should have much more specific perspectives on IELTS reading. I trust him.

Code 4 Personality charm. Fifty percent of students said they came to participate in the test preparation course to gain new experiences that were different from the one they had in regular school. They preferred the teachers in test preparation centers because they were humorous, and their classes were filled with exciting and vivid stories. There was a close distance between teachers and students. Students saw these teachers as friends so that they could have effective communications with these teachers. Student Hai commented, "Our class ended at 5 pm, but we often stayed at 7 or 8 pm to talk with our speaking teacher."

Table 5

Theme 2 Effective Instructions

Code 1	Strong focus on test contents
Code 2	Test skills and practices

As shown in Table 5, theme 2 *Effective Instructions* included two specific codes: 'strong focus on test contents' and 'specific test skills and heavy practices.' There is no doubt that teaching instructions and instructional contents play significant roles in determining how students perceive the courses.

Code 1 Strong focus on test contents. All the participants demonstrated that they had English classes in their regular schools. However, they were still willing to spend extra money and time to take test preparation courses outside their regular school because they thought the test preparation courses had strong focuses on the tests. They stated that regular school's English tests had different concentrations with the TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic tests. Their English

tests of regular school focus little on oral English tests, especially for speaking and communication parts. However, all the participants reported that they experienced four-module courses of reading, listening, speaking, and writing that aligned with the TOEFL iBT and IELTS Academic tests, which was more helpful to prepare the tests. Test preparation courses provided detailed illustrations of test features (e.g., test formats, scoring criteria, task items, time arrangement), statements of test tasks, and test-taking strategies. Therefore, students were more familiar with the tests after taking these classes. In addition, their English vocabulary is insufficient to pass the TOEFL iBT and IELTS Academic tests. Students were encouraged to master more 'TOEFL' or 'IELTS' vocabulary through the preparation courses.

Code 2 Specific test skills and heavy practices. All the participants stressed they had four primary teachers during the process of taking courses. Each teacher was responsible for one of the four modules (reading, listening, speaking, writing). The teachers did research and studied the changes in the modules repeatedly, to improve their teaching methods, instructions, and task skills. Student Ye said, "My reading teacher taught me how to guess some unknown words and how to skip reading to catch the most important information, which enhanced my reading speed and improved the rate of reading task accuracy." Student Te also stated：

> For TOEFL speaking, we needed to conclude both reading and listening materials, and I did not know how to take notes and express all the information within a limited time. My speaking teacher told me how to balance the time of reading and listening to gain more scores.

In addition, everyday practices were burdensome, because a lot of test skills and vocabulary need to be mastered, and a significant number of practices need to be done. Eight participants stated that they had one extra assistant teacher to check their vocabulary memorizing, assignment accomplishment, and attendance. Fifty percent of participants stated that they felt the courses were stressful because they experienced a hard time doing heavy assignments. Student Ji commented:

Direct citation: 有时候我也挺想念我们学校的英语课的，因为这些考试培训课非常累，压力也很大。我们不是在做练习就是在考试。

Translation：Sometimes I missed my regular school's English classes because these preparation courses were really stressful and made me tired. We were always practicing and testing.

Table 6

Theme 3 Valuable Materials

Code 1	Good for self-study and practice
Code 2	Member-only materials

As shown in Table 6, two codes generated theme 3 *Valuable Materials*: 'good for self-study and practice' and 'member-only materials.' The two specific reasons also represented how students perceive the test preparation courses.

Code 1 Good for self-study and practice. It was noted that materials of test preparation course centers were firmly related to the test tasks. Students who took TOEFL iBT test

preparation courses demonstrated that some of their in-class materials and after-school exercises were from the official website of the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the Official Guide, or the Test Practice Online (TPO) published by the ETS. Students believed the materials were reliable. Before going to classes, they did not know how to find useful practice materials. After the test preparation courses, the students, at least, understood how to prepare the tests more effectively themselves and how to use the valuable practice materials.

Code 2 Member-only materials. Except for conventional materials, students stressed their test preparation centers provided specific materials that were only used within the centers for members. Participants stated these internal member-only materials, including vocabularies, task exercise, task skill instructions, and task examples, were useful, reliable, and practical. Student Bo commented,

Direct citation: "我感觉去上课就是为了他们的内部资料。"

Translation: "The aim to take the preparation courses is to have their member-only materials."

Table 7

Theme 4 Helpful to Tests

Code 1	Score improvement
Code 2	Vocabulary gaining

As shown in Table 7, two codes emerged from theme 4 *Helpful to Test Preparation*: 'score improvement' and 'vocabulary gaining.'

Code 1 Score improvement. Three-fourths of the participants stated that their test scores for TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic had improved after taking test preparation courses. Even if some of the students did not approach the target scores, they got the score raised in various degrees. When asked why some of them did not have dramatic score improvements, one student stressed that the results were related to personal reasons—he did not follow the instructions of teachers or pay great efforts. Thirteen students said that they would retake preparation courses if they were preparing for the TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic tests. This is because the deep understanding of the tests, useful test strategies, and the intensive course arrangement could help them gain a higher score in a short time. Besides, five students stated that their score improvements depended on teachers' supervision from the preparation courses. Student Wei commented:

I would waste much time if I did not take test preparation courses. I would never achieve my satisfactory score because I lack self-control ability. I have little motivation to study without any guidance or supervision. I need someone to push me sometimes.

Code 2 Vocabulary gaining. Learning test strategies is the primary purpose for most students to take test preparation courses. However, eleven students stated that they had to memorize many words during the whole process of the test preparation courses. They found that vocabulary played significant roles in English learning. "Each teacher supplemented a huge amount of words on the class, and our assistant teachers tested these words every day. I believed one of the most efficient efforts I made to prepare the IELTS was memorize these words," as Student Qi commented. In addition, the students said the preparation courses taught them how to memorize a high number of words within a short time, how to arrange the time to help deepen their memorizing, and how to use these words. Student Ye commented:

> I almost memorized all the words of a vocabulary book, about 6000 words, within two and half months, following my reading teacher's instructions. That was amazing. I did not know I could do it. My reading teacher taught us many methods to memorize words and helped us make plans to finish memorizing vocabulary of the book. She tested vocabulary twice per week.

Table 8

Theme 5 Good Experiences

Code 1	Making friends
Code 2	Confidence in the tests

As shown in Table 8, theme 5 *Good Experiences* generated two codes from the data: 'making friends' and 'confidence in the tests.'

Code 1 Making friends. Three-fourths of the students demonstrated that the courses were worthwhile, because they made good friends that motivated and inspired them throughout the process of the test preparation. Some of them stated that they were still keeping in contact with each other. The students in test preparation courses had similar purposes and experiences so that they could understand and encourage each other. They could not only learn and work in peers or groups, sharing happiness and sorrows would support them psychologically in the hard time. Student Ji commented:

Direct citation: 我觉得这课太值了因为我遇见了我女朋友。我们在那段时间里相互支持和鼓励。因为她的努力，我也开始努力学习，因为我不想在考试成绩上比她落后。我相信她是其中一个让我在最终考试中拿到高分的重要原因。"

Translation: I thought the course is worthwhile because I met my girlfriend. We supported and encouraged each other at that time. I was motivated by her hard-working, and I started to study hard because I did not want to drop behind in the test. I believed she was one of the reasons to motivate me to achieve success in the test.

Code 2 Confidence in the tests. Thirteen participants stated that they were more

confident in the tests after taking test preparation courses, because they got significant

instructions and practices on familiarity with the tests and experienced numerous times of mock

tests. Student Zhi commented, "I was not sure if I could achieve the satisfactory score on the real

tests. But I knew what would be happened on the tests, which made me more confident and less

nervous."

The tables and analysis above presented valuable themes and codes that emerged from

the interview data, which demonstrated how Chinese students perceive the values or the benefits

of the TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test preparation courses. However, the participants also

pointed out some of the disappointments.

Table 9

Theme 6 Disappointments

Code 1	High price
Code 2	Lack of English skill instructions

Theme 6 *Disappointments* generated two codes from the data: 'high price' and 'lack of

English skill instructions.'

Code 1 High price. Nine students stressed that the price of the test preparation courses

was high. The costs were usually calculated in hours but different in types of courses. For

example, the face-to-face VIP class (one teacher instructs one student per class) was the most

expensive, and the prices ranged from $70 to $180 per hour. The prices were also different

among different cities and training organizations—big training centers in big cities charged

higher fees. However, even the cheapest TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test preparation

courses were more expensive than any other 'normal' English courses. Student Liu commented:

>I actually think the VIP class should be the best. If the price can be lower, I will definitely
>
>choose the VIP course next time. Because of my limited budget, I chose face-to-face
>
>classroom courses. There were eight students in my class. The time was often wasted
>
>because teachers needed to answer all the questions from different students. Even if I
>
>chose the classroom course, the price was still not low. The course costs me 13000
>
>Chinese yuan, which is equal to about 1800 U.S. dollars, for only one month.

Code 2 Lack of English skill instructions. Twelve participants stated that the contents

of the courses focused on tests rather than English proficiency improvements. Most of the

knowledge, thus, was not practical in real life. They found that their actual English skills did not

improve during the limited time. Student Rui commented:

>I still had problems with listening, speaking, and academic English after I went abroad.
>
>Sometimes I was not able to understand my professors and classmates. That was really
>
>sad. It seems that the courses did not provide me any valuable knowledge of English skill
>
>improvements within the one and a half months.

Student Cui also commented:

Direct citation: 我觉得这个课不会帮我很大程度上提高雅思的分数，因为时间太有限了，但其实我需要更多的练习。而且我觉得我应该更加努力去提高我整体的英文能力。仅仅学习考试技巧是不够的。

Translation: I don't think the course can help me improve my IELTS score on a large scale because the time is limited, but I need more practice. Besides, I think I should work harder to improve my English skills. Focusing only on test skills is not enough.

To sum up the results of the themes and codes, all the 14 participants reported the courses were valuable to experience and they were satisfied on most parts of the courses, because most of them realized the courses did help them with a higher score at a certain degree within a short time. They received inspiration from peers and teachers through taking the courses. However, they also realized if a large-scale improvement on test scores was required, short-time test preparation courses were not enough. It should be based on long-time instructions, practices, and personal efforts on English proficiency and skills improvement.

Chapter V: Discussion

Gan (2009) reported that some students who enrolled in test preparation courses had low

English proficiency or limited English learning experiences, and formal English language

instruction was not typically part of their academic studies. However, in my study, Chinese

students who had regular English classes from their primary schools to universities had sufficient

English learning experiences but still chose to take English test preparation programs. The reason

is based on the learning style of Chinese students. Hu (2002) stated that Chinese students

commonly used the four Rs learning strategy: reception, repetition, review, and reproduction.

Chinese students prefer to receive and retain the knowledge from teachers, repeatedly study to

acquire knowledge, review what they received and repeat it to consolidate and deepen

knowledge, and accurately reproduce the knowledge on the demands of teachers or tests. In my

study, the Chinese students preferred to use these same learning strategies to prepare for the

TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic tests. Importantly, the instruction of the test preparation

programs matched the four R learning strategies: the teachers passed the knowledge of the test to

the students; students were repeatedly practiced and reviewed the knowledge through heavy

assignments; finally, the students reproduced the knowledge the specific test tasks demanded.

Thus, it is reasonable to understand that taking preparation courses is an efficient way for

Chinese students to prepare English tests.

In addition, Green (2006) stated that students paid more attention to tests rather than

English skills, such as structures, formats, and the test-taking process. This is similar to my study

since the students' motivation for taking test preparation programs was to gain a satisfactory score. However, through taking test preparation courses, the students realized large-scale test score improvements must be based on English proficiency and skills improvement. This is interesting that students had an attitude shift from test strategies pursuing to knowing the importance of English skills after taking the courses.

According to Green (2006) and Anthony (2006), learner perceptions of test preparation courses' outcomes were influenced by the focus of courses that are reported by teachers. Like students stressed in my study, the students believed in their teachers because their teachers had successful educational or test-taking experiences. Therefore, teachers' instructions played significant roles in shifting students' learning attitudes.

Implications for Test Preparation Teachers

As stated in the literature review, test preparation courses have been a widespread educational phenomenon in China, which needs to be more standard to better influence learning, teaching, and testing. Therefore, test preparation studies should focus on the interrelationship among teaching, learning, and testing (Yu, 2012).

As students stated, test preparation programs that focused on test formats, structures, and items, were not useful enough to meet the long-term needs, such as communication and academic needs. Test preparation courses will be more efficient when teachers and students work to improve their English proficiency. That is, teachers should pay great attention to the relationship between test-taking strategies and English skills improvement. In my study, students

showed ample trust in their teachers. Thus, if the teachers in test preparation centers repeatedly emphasized that the need for English skills improvement was the most important strategy to increase test scores, and they kept implementing this strategy as one of the central focuses in their instruction and supervision, students' study motivations, attitudes, and ultimate test scores would be lead in more positive directions.

In addition, according to the recent study from Ma and Cheng (2015), the timeline of taking courses was closely related to students' perceptions of the value of test preparation courses. Table 10 showed the participants' length of taking preparation courses in my study.

Table 10

Length of the Preparation Courses

		Count (n = 14)	Percentage
Duration	1.< 3 months	7	50
	2. 3-6 months	7	50

As shown in Table 10, all the participants in my study chose to take test preparation courses no longer than 6 months in length (50% chose to take the course no longer than 3 months, 50% chose to take the course ranging from 3 to 6 months). However, from the interview data, the students realized a large-scale improvement in test scores should be based on long-time instructions and practices. That is because they could have more time to practice the strategies, understand the instructions, and improve their English skills. Thus, test preparation teachers should arrange the length and intensity of the courses more reasonably.

Furthermore, students have variability before they register the test preparation courses. Green (2007) emphasized that variability is demonstrated as the difference in students' understanding of test demands, resources to meet test demands, and acceptance of test demands. In my study, participants brought different knowledge of test demands. Seven students claimed that they knew nothing except for the importance of the TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test score. Five students' knowledge of the tests was from previous test-taking experiences. Two students had already been familiar with the tests from previous coaching or test preparation training experiences. There is no doubt that the students who brought a different understanding of test demands have different expectations for the test preparation courses. Thus, teachers should also do additional research on students' variabilities to balance the training focuses, in order to meet the needs and expectations of students better.

Implications for English Language Teachers

Webb and Paribakht (2015) suggest that developing vocabulary knowledge may improve standardized English test performance. The participants in my study also mentioned that vocabulary plays significant roles in improving both English proficiency and test performances. Therefore, English teachers should pay more attention to vocabulary teaching. Except for memorizing, looking for new and effective methods to help students with their vocabulary, including classroom activities, assignments, and ways of examinations, is overwhelming.

In addition, teaching in different modules is seen as valid for the students. Rather than having the 'general English class,' students should have English reading, English listening,

English writing, and English-speaking classes. For one thing, teachers could devote more energy to update and improve their teaching methods, materials, and evaluation tools, if they focus on specific modules. For another, students will be provided with more specific instructions from different module teachers, so they will have more opportunities to get different inspirations. Furthermore, studying in separate modules, students can understand their weaknesses and strengths of English, and then they can make efforts to strengthen their weaknesses.

Finally, English teachers are supposed to provide some test-related contents to students. As the students mentioned in my study, they felt more confident and less anxious after taking preparation courses, because they were provided with detailed illustrations of test features (e.g., test formats, scoring criteria, task items, time arrangement), statements of test tasks, and test-taking strategies. Winke and Lim (2014) also concluded that even short courses focusing on test format could reduce anxiety. Reducing anxiety could not only enhance confidence but also increase students' interests in English and motivation to learn English.

Chapter VI: Limitations and Further Studies

Limitations

Even if my study made contributions, it still had limitations. The first limitation was concerning the participants. The sample size for my study was relatively small, which focused on 14 Chinese students within one U.S. university, so the result could be comparatively limited. In addition, my study only focused on students who took TOEFL iBT and IELTS Academic test preparation courses. There are a significant number of other test preparation courses that can be researched, such as test preparation courses for Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT). Taking a larger group of students registered in different test preparation courses who are from other languages or cultures could significantly develop the data and validity of the results.

The second limitation was concerning the data collection process. Merely relying on the survey and interview lacked some reliabilities, because the data was solely based on the accuracy of memories and sincerity of answers and responses from the participants. Firstly, even if they all experienced TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test preparation courses, the research was not conducted right after the students' experiences. Thus, their perceptions that depended on memories might lead to limitations and cause accuracy problems. Secondly, the sincerity of the perception responses from participants was challenging to verify. Facing the survey and interview questions, students might or might not want to express their real thoughts or opinions.

Thirdly, my study lacked the connection analysis between survey and interview data. My study used quantitative methods to analyze the survey data and qualitative methods to analyze the interview data. However, it lacked the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative data, such as the correlations between the timeline and perceived values and correlations between types of training courses/ training schools and perceived values. Correlation analysis could let us better understand whether students' perceptions are associated with certain features of the courses.

Finally, based on the analysis of the survey data, it can be seen that 86% of participants took TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic test for more than once, and 75% of students stated that their scores improved. However, it is hard to know if their score improvement was from test preparation courses or the previous test experiences. Therefore, we cannot conclude that test preparation courses did help students with score improvement.

Further Studies

As discussed above, the students stated that test preparation courses in China play limited roles in improving English proficiency. However, the present study did not provide any standards for English proficiency improvement. Different participants might have different standards. Even if the test score improved, the present study provided no examinations or evaluations of the TOEFL iBT and IELTS Academic, such as authenticity, reliability, validity, and practicality of the tests. Thus, it is hard to determine if their English proficiency indeed improved or not. Further study could be conducted with not only students, but also teachers,

based on well-designed standards, tests, and evaluations of involved tests, to examine and validate the results.

In addition, as shown in Table 11, my study showed three types of test preparation courses the students took.

Table 11

Type of Preparation Courses

		Count (n = 14)	Percentage
Type of course	1. Face-to-face classroom	7	50
	2. Face-to-face one-to-one	4	29
	3. Online	3	21

It can be seen that 50% of participants chose to take face-to-face small classroom training. Except for high prices for face-to-face one-to-one courses, participants who preferred to choose classroom courses in my study stressed they could be inspired by their peers and classmates, and they appreciated information sharing and interactions with peers and teachers. However, the understandings of learning communities initiated by classmates or teachers within the classroom are limited (Potts, 2005). Further researchers could do more studies on how learning communities help students overcome challenges and difficulties and succeed in their academic studies.

Finally, all the participants in my study stated that their test preparation course teachers are from China, even though a majority of teachers have overseas educational backgrounds. However, many previous studies pointed out the native English speakers have more privileges

than non-native speakers in language teaching hiring practices: "An example of racism is the practices of hiring English teachers worldwide. It has been pointed out that native speakers of English have a privileged status in employment, a privilege that is increased by having White skin" (Kubota & Lin, 2006, p. 479). Therefore, the reason why Chinese teachers, rather than English native speakers, are more prevalent in test preparation training careers should be paid more attention to further studies and research.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

The present study researched the perceptions of Chinese students on test preparation courses for two of the famous English language tests in Chinese society—the TOEFL iBT and the IELTS Academic. Through doing surveys and interviews with the 14 participants, my study provided valuable insights that allowed us to understand the phenomenon better, and more importantly, the positive and negative perceptions students hold for the courses. These findings could provide pedagogical implications for not only test preparation teachers and educational administrators in China, but also for instructors of English programs in the United States, especially for those who are working with a high number of Chinese students. Understanding Chinese students' characteristics, experiences, needs, and perceptions, educators could better support them with English learning. The findings showed us that students valued the benefits of the test preparation courses in China from professional teachers, practical instructions, valuable material resources, and enjoyable learning experiences for improving test scores. Also, they realized that improving English proficiency should be their long-run learning goals.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

ST. CLOUD STATE
UNIVERSITY
EDUCATION FOR LIFE.

720 4th Avenue South AS 210, St. Cloud, MN 56301-4498

Name: Xue Jiang

Email: zjiang@stcloudstate.edu

IRB PROTOCOL DETERMINATION: Exempt Review

Project Title: Chinese Student's Perception of English Test Preparation Courses in China

Advisor John Madden

The Institutional Review Board has reviewed your protocol to conduct research involving human subjects. Your project has been: **APPROVED**

Please note the following important information concerning IRB projects:

- The principal investigator assumes the responsibilities for the protection of participants in this project. Any adverse events must be reported to the IRB as soon as possible (ex. research related injuries, harmful outcomes, significant withdrawal of subject population, etc.).

- For expedited or full board review, the principal investigator must submit a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated on this letter to report conclusion of the research or request an extension.

-Exempt review only requires the submission of a Continuing Review/Final Report form in advance of the expiration date indicated in this letter if an extension of time is needed.

- Approved consent forms display the official IRB stamp which documents approval and expiration dates. If a renewal is requested and approved, new consent forms will be officially stamped and reflect the new approval and expiration dates.

- The principal investigator must seek approval for any changes to the study (ex. research design, consent process, survey/interview instruments, funding source, etc.). The IRB reserves the right to review the research at any time.

If we can be of further assistance, feel free to contact the IRB at 320-308-4932 or email ResearchNow@stcloudstate.edu and please reference the SCSU IRB number when corresponding.

IRB Chair:

Dr. Benjamin Witts
Associate Professor- Applied Behavior Analysis
Department of Community Psychology,Counseling, and Family Therapy

IRB Institutional Official:

Dr. Latha Ramakrishnan
Interim Associate Provost for Research
Dean of Graduate Studies

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SCSU IRB# 1886 - 2421	**Type:** Exempt Review	**Today's Date:** 3/11/2019
1st Year Approval Date: 3/6/2019	**2nd Year Approval Date:**	**3rd Year Approval Date:**
1st Year Expiration Date:	**2nd Year Expiration Date:**	**3rd Year Expiration Date:**

Appendix B.1: Background Survey (English)

- Opening

  My name is XueJiang, and I am a Master student majoring in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at St. Cloud State University. I am currently working on my MA thesis focusing on Chinese students' perceptions of IELTS Academic or TOEFL iBT test preparation courses in China. The purpose of the survey is to gather perspectives from you, about your experiences taking the IELTS Academic or TOEFL test preparation courses and what you think about the values the courses offer.

  Questions:

1. Gender: A Male   B Female   C. Prefer not to answer

2. Age: _____

3. How many years have you studied English? _____

4. What is (are) your learning focus(s) of English? (Select all that apply)

   A．Academic English   B. test-based study

   C. Life-skill English   D. Other _____

5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your English?

   Strengths _____

   Weaknesses _____

6. How many years have you been in the USA? _____

7. What is your current educational level?

   A. Undergraduate   B. Graduate

   C. Other_____

8. What is your current major? _____

9. When did you start attending St. Cloud State University?

   A.2015 or before 2015   B. 2016

   C. 2017.   D. 2018 or after 2018

10. Which English test did you take?

A. TOEFL iBT   B. IELTS Academic

11. How many times have you taken TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic?

A. 1   B.2   C. 3.   D. 4   E. More than 4

12. Part A: If you have taken these exams more than once, did your score improve?

A. Yes.   B. No

    Part B: If yes, how many more points did you get? _____

13. Based on the four modules of TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic (reading, listening, writing, and speaking), which one(s) did you score highest and which one(s) did you score lowest? (Select all that apply)

       Higher score: A.Reading   B.Listening   C.Writing   D.Speaking

       Lower score: A.Reading   B.Listening   C.Writing   D.Speaking

14. Part A: Do you think the results of the test reflect your real English ability?

A. Yes.   B. No

    Part B: Why?

    _____

    _____

15. How long did you take the test preparation courses?

    A. Less than 3 months   B. 3-6 months

    C.7 -12 months   D. More than 12 months

16. How often did you take the course(s) (frequency)?

    A. Everyday   B. 3-4 times per week

    C. Once per week   D. Other _____

17. What type(s) of course(s) did you take? (Select all that apply)

    A. Online tutoring   B. Face-to-face one-to-one teaching

    C. Face-to-face classroom teaching   D. Other _____

18. Why did you choose this particular test preparation training school or center (Ma & Cheng, 2015)?

    (Select all that apply)

    A. Friends' recommendation   B. Popularity

    C. Advertisements   D. Other _____

19. Part A: For the four English modules (writing, speaking, listening, and reading) in TOEFL iBT or

    IELTS, which one(s) did you improve the most in from the preparation courses? (Select all that

    apply)

    A. Reading   B. Listening   C. Speaking   D.Writing

    Part B: What are the reasons?

    _____

    _____

Appendix B.2: Background Survey (Chinese)

调查问卷

我的名字叫姜雪。我是一名来自圣克劳德大学的硕士学生。我的专业是 TESOL（教母语不是英语的人学英语）。我现在在做我的硕士毕业论文。我的研究着重在中国学生是怎么评价中国市场上流行的雅思或者托福考前培训班课程的。这个调查问卷的目的是为了收集您的考前培训班上课经历已经您对这些课程的看法。

问题：

1. 性别：   A 男   B 女   C. 保密

2. 年龄: _____

3. 您学习英语几年了？ _____

4. 您英语的学习重点是什么？（可多选）

    A. 学术英语   B. 以考试为目的的英语学习

    C. 生活化的英语   D. 其他   _____

5. 您觉得您英语的优势和劣势是什么？

    优势   _____

    劣势   _____

6. 您在美国呆几年了？   _____

7. 您现在攻读的学位是什么?

    A. 本科   B. 研究生

C. 其他 _____

8. 您现在的专业是什么? _____

9. 您是哪一年加入圣克劳德大学的?

A.2015或者2015以前　　　　　B. 2016

C. 2017　　　　　　　　　　D. 2018或者2018以后

10. 您参加的是哪个英语考试?

B. TOEFL iBT（托福）　　　　　B. IELTS Academic（雅思）

11. 您参加过几次 TOEFL iBT （托福）或者 IELTS Academic（雅思）考试?

B. 1次　　　　B.2次　　　　C. 3次　　　　D. 4次或者4次以上

12. 在这几次考试中，您的成绩有所提高吗?

B. 有　　　　　　　　　B. 没有

如果有，提高了多少分呢? _____

13. 托福雅思考试中的听力，口语，阅读，写作，哪门或者哪几门您获得的分数较高?哪门或

哪几门您获得的分数较低? （可多选）

高分在: A.听力　　　　B.口语　　　　C.阅读　　　　D.写作

低分在: A.听力　　　　B.口语　　　　C.阅读　　　　D.写作

14. 您觉得您的托福或者雅思英语考试成绩反映出您真实的英语水平了吗?

B. 是的.　　　　　　　　　B. 没有

为什么?

15. 您上了多长时间的考前补习课?

   A. 不到三个月   B. 3-6个月

   B. 7-12个月   D. 多于12个月

16. 您大概去补习的频率是什么（多久去一次）?

   A. 每天   B. 每周3-4 次

   C. 一周一次   D. 其他 _____

17. 您参加的是哪种类型的课程? （可多选）

A. 网课   B. 面授一对一

B. 面授大班课   D. 其他 _____

18. 您为什么选择这种类型的课程 (Ma& Cheng, 2015)? （可多选）

   A. 朋友的推荐   B. 补习班的名气

   C. 广告   D. 其他 _____

19. 在听力，口语，阅读，写作四门科目中，哪个（些）科目是您在参加完补习班后提分了

   的? （可多选）

   A.听力   B.口语   C.阅读   D.写作

   原因是什么呢?

_____

_____

Appendix C.1: Individual Perception Interview Guide (English)

Individual Perception Interview Guide

1. Does your school offer English courses? If yes, why do you still pay extra money and time to take the test preparation courses? Between these two kinds of English courses, which one do you think is more efficient on test score improvement? Which one do you think is more efficient in English proficiency improvement? Which one you would like to attend more?

2. What were your expectations before taking the test preparation course? Do you think they were met? Why or why not (Ma& Cheng, 2015)?

3. What are the specific areas that this preparation course helped you most with? Can you provide details or examples? Why do you think they are very helpful? (ask participants to respond first and then provide more hints: Such as teacher's teaching methods, materials provided by the teachers or the school, the length of the courses, the balance of time on teachers' instructions and self-study practice, class schedule, contents, practices, strict rules, atmospheres, resources, etc.)

4. Is there anything that didn't meet your expectations that disappointed you about the course(s)? What are they and why did they disappoint you?

5. How many teachers were in your TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic preparation course(s)? What are their educational backgrounds? Were you satisfied with the performance of your

teachers? Which teacher(s) impressed you most or did you like most? Why (Ma& Cheng, 2015)?

6. Did you make friends throughout the course? Are you still friends now? Do you think they are helpful to you (study or life)? If yes, what did you benefit from them?

7. If you were preparing for the TOEFL iBT or IELTS Academic now, would you choose to take preparation courses or study by yourself? Would you choose the same or a different type of preparation course? Why (Ma& Cheng, 2015)?

8. Combined with the TOEFL iBT or IELTS score you got after taking this preparation course and the course-taking experiences, do you think this course was worth the time, money and efforts you spent and made (Ma& Cheng, 2015)?

9. Do you feel more confident in English fluency after taking the preparation courses? Can you share some specific stories with me?

10. Except for the score improvement, are there any skills or strategies you learned from the preparation courses that are still helpful with your current academic study?

● Conclusion

Thank you for coming to today's interview. Your responses will be valuable to the research I am doing. Please be assured that your responses will be confidential. Have a good day.

Appendix C.2: Individual Perception Interview Guide (Chinese)

采访稿

1. 你的学校提供英文课吗？如果提供的话，你为什么还要花额外的金钱和时间去参加英语考前培训班呢？在学校提供的英文课和英语考前培训班提供的英语课之间，你觉得哪个在提高分数上面更有效？哪个在英语能力提高上面更有效？你更喜欢上哪种课呢？

2. 在参加英语考前培训班之前，你对它的期待是什么？上过之后，你觉得它达到你的期待了吗？为什么呢(Ma& Cheng, 2015)？

3. 你觉得哪些方面是这个英语考前培训班帮助你最大的？你可以用一些例子和细节说明吗？为什么你觉得这些方面非常有帮助呢？（让参与者先自行回答，如果不知道从哪着手，就给一些小的提示：比如老师的教学方法，老师或学校提供的教材，课程的长度，老师教学和自学时间的比重安排，课程安排，课程包含的内容，练习，严格的制度，有效的学习氛围，学习资源，等等)。

4. 有没有什么期待你觉得没有被满足或者说有没有什么方面让你很失望？这些是什么呢？为什么会让你失望？

5. 你的托福或者雅思考试培训课一共有几个老师教你？他们的教育背景是什么？你对他们的表现满意吗？你最喜欢哪个老师或者说哪个老师给你留下的印象最深？为什么呢(Ma& Cheng, 2015)？

6. 在上考前培训班的期间，你有交到什么好朋友吗？你们现在还联系吗？你觉得他们在你的生活或者学习上有所帮助吗？如果有的话，你从他们身上受益了什么呢？

7. 如果你现在在准备托福或者雅思考试，你会选择上培训班还是自己学习呢？你会选择

和之前一样的课程还是换一种别的课呢？为什么呢(Ma& Cheng, 2015)？

8. 结合你的托福或者雅思考试分数还有你的考前培训班上课经历，你觉得这个课值得你

所花费的时间，金钱以及努力吗？

9. 上过英语考前补习班后，对于英文你是否更加自信了呢？

10. 除了托福或者雅思考试分数的提升，考前培训班有没有教你一些技巧或者方法在你现

在的学术学习上仍然有所帮助呢？

结尾：
谢谢您来参加今天的采访。您的回答，将对我的研究有很大的帮助。对您的信息我也一定会保密的。祝您拥有美好的一天。

Appendix D.1: Recruit Script (English)

Dear -----------,

My name is XueJiang, and I am a Master student majoring in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) at St. Cloud State University. I am currently working on my thesis which focuses on Chinese students' perceptions of IELTS Academic (International English Language Testing System) and TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign Language) test preparation courses. You are invited to participate in this research study because you have taken either IELTS Academic or TOEFL iBT preparation courses in China.

Participation in this research includes completing a background survey and do an individual interview with me. The process will take approximately 30-45 minutes where you will be asked some questions addressing the purpose of the study.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in this research, I can be reached at xjiang@stcloudstate.edu.

Thanks for your time and consideration, I am looking forward to your response.

Appendix D.2: Recruit Script (Chinese)

亲爱的 xxxxx,

我叫姜雪,来自美国生克劳德大学。我是一名 TESOL 专业的硕士生。我现在正在做我的硕士毕业论文。这是一篇关于中国学生是怎么评价中国市场上所流行的托福和雅思英语考前补习班的研究。您被邀请参与我的调查研究因为您来自中国,并且在中国参加过雅思或者托福考前补习班。

参加这次的调查研究,您将被邀请完成一份调查问卷并接受我的一个个人采访。整个过程大约 30 到 45 分钟。

如果您有任何问题关于这次调查或者有兴趣参加这次研究调查,可以联系我通过 xjiang@stcloudstate.edu.

感谢您的时间和关注,期待您的回复。