TEACHING IELTS AND SAT READING: IDENTIFYING COMMON PATHWAYS AMID ROUTES OF DIVERGENCE.

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ABSTRACT

The need to be multi-skilled in today's world is a challenge no ESL teacher can ignore. This adaptability includes the ability to guide and prepare students for any internationally recognised English standardised test. This paper highlights a small-scale study conducted on the teaching of the IELTS Academic Reading and the SAT Critical Reading components, with the objectives of identifying the features that distinguish both tests and common core strategies that can be applied for teaching and preparing students for both tests. The procedure employed included doing qualitative and quantitative text analyses and comparing the target reading skills and teaching strategies. The effectiveness of the strategies used was evaluated based on student performance. The paper concludes by highlighting student performance analyses for both reading tests and recommending some areas for further investigation.

Introduction

In this age of globalisation, cross-disciplinary integration and inter-programme linkages, ESL teachers are confronted with many challenges. Among these is the need to be multi-skilled in order to be multi-functional, especially when it comes to teaching different kinds of reading programmes in the ESL/EFL scene. This is important not only to meet the demands of different academic disciplines and current technology but also to lend ourselves for flexible deployment. We have thus to be prepared, confident and able to teach on any ESL proficiency programme.

This paper shares a small-scale study we conducted among INTEC (International Education Centre, UiTM) students in relation to the teaching of the Reading components of the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) [Verbal]. At this point, it has to be emphasised that we are limiting our scope of study to the IELTS Academic Reading (AR) and the SAT Critical Reading (CR) components.

The questions that we framed for our investigation are:
- What are the features that distinguish the IELTS (AR) from the SAT (CR) which may require a different teaching approach or treatment?

* In spite of these differences, is it possible to arrive at a common repertoire or menu of teaching strategies which any ESL teacher can use to teach both the IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR) components effectively?

IELTS and SAT
Different Tests, Different Pathways
Students who sit for the IELTS usually have the intention to pursue their tertiary education in UK, Australian or Canadian universities. Those who take the SAT however, are usually US-bound. Apart from these divergent academic pathways for candidates taking the IELTS and SAT, it is obvious that different education systems vary in their degrees of emphasis. The IELTS marks the end of required English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learning. Whereas, US-bound students continue to take EAP courses after sitting for the SAT.

Nature of Examination Questions
IELTS (AR) questions require limited production skills and a fairly high degree of accuracy. SAT (CR), on the contrary, requires candidates to identify the best answers from 40 multiple choice questions. The IELTS encourages students to attempt all questions and make intelligent guesses. Candidates are not penalised for wrong answers (O'Sullivan & Lindeck, 2000:3). In the SAT however, each wrong answer given will result in a deduction of 0.25 of a mark to discourage guessing.

Nature of Testing Packages
IELTS (AR) passages are dictated by what undergraduates should or are expected to read. Passages included in SAT (CR), however, are raw passages which are not doctored to be reader friendly. The text, graphics and question layout of the IELTS (AR) has more white spaces in between for visual relief. In the case of the SAT (CR) the printed text is tightly compressed on 2-columned pages. Some of the SAT (CR) questions have very long and complex stems with lengthy A to D choices which require much time and reasoning to single out the correct answer.

Confidentiality
IELTS actual past year tests are not available to the public. Only a specimen pack is available from the British Council or IDP Education Australia. In contrast, SAT past year tests are published and sold.

Procedure
For our investigation, we adopted the following procedure: We started off by doing a qualitative text analysis. The objectives of this analysis were to identify

differences between
- the IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR) passages
- the question types commonly used in both tests and
- the target reading skills that students need to hone.

This was followed by a Quantitative text analysis. For this, we used the Fog Readability Index. (*Readability Tests. GNOME Documentation style guide* available at : <http:/ / developer.Gnome.Org/documents/style-guide/usability-readability.html>)

- The Fog Index can establish the density or compactness of the IELTS and SAT reading passages and
- Ascertain the number of years of ESL education that a reader needs, to understand the text.

We then proceeded to compare the Fog Index for the IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR) passages, the reading skills which students need to do well and the teaching strategies which can be used for teaching both the IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR). To obtain an assessment of the effectiveness of the strategies used, we monitored the scores our students obtained in 5 practice tests for the IELTS and 8 practice tests for the SAT (Verbal). For the SAT, we also monitored the mean number of errors students made in each of the tests and the mean scores they obtained for the Practice Tests.

Qualitative Text Analysis - IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR) Passages
Table 1 summarises the features which distinguish the IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR) passages in the areas of time allowed, number of passages, number of questions to be answered for each passage and the kinds of passages or text types that students have to read.

Table 1: Features that distinguish the IELTS (AR) and the SAT (CR) Passages

	IELTS (AR)		SAT (CR)	
Time allowed	60 minutes		50 minutes	
Total no of words	2000-2750		2500-2700	
No. of Qs per passage	Passage 1	13-14	Passage 1	6
	Passage 2	13-14	Passage 2	10
			Passage 3	13
	Passage 3	13-14	Passage 4	13
Total no of Q's	40		40	
Text Types	Academic texts, mainly articles from journals, newspapers, text books and magazines representative of reading requirements for postgraduate and undergraduate students.		Academic texts pertaining to the natural, physical and social sciences with embedded allusions, complex phraseology and intricately woven anecdotes.	
	They deal with issues of current and general interest which are of objective and informative.		Historical texts which have pronounced socio-cultural slants Passages usually reflect writers' tone/bias	
	Passages are graded in difficulty. At least one contains a detailed argument. One may have non-linear information (graphs, charts or diagrams).		General interest readings on a variety of topics.	
	A simple glossary will be appended to help students unlock technical jargon.		A double passage which presents two viewpoints on a common topic	

The tabulated findings below (Table 2) show that the IELTS (AR) questions are more varied. Each passage can have up to 4 types of questions set on it. For the SAT (CR) however, students have 40 multiple choice questions to answer. Apart from the 3 common question types (*in italics*), the IELTS (AR) and the SAT (CR) do not have the same range of questions types. Candidates who have taken the IELTS usually do not complain about the pressure of time. Most agree that the variety of questions makes it interesting and challenging. As for the SAT (CR), although the question types are not so varied, they demand much in terms of reasoning and critical thinking.

Table 2: Text Analysis – Question Types

	IELTS (AR)	SAT (CR)
Number and kinds of questions set	A mixture of multiple choice, gap-filling, matching and open questions	40 multiple choice
Question types Similarities	• *Identify main idea and supporting details* • *Infer meaning from context* • *Verify writer's credibility, views or claims*	• *Identify main idea and supporting details* • *Infer meaning from context* • *Verify writer's credibility, views or claims*
Differences	• Read tables, diagrams or graph • Label diagrams • Classify concepts • Match headings to paragraphs • Match information (cause to effect, related processes, similarities or differences etc) • Match references • Write short answers (not more than three words each) for open questions • Complete notes, tables, flow diagrams or a closed summary using not more than 3 words • Determine writer's point of view • Evaluate given statements to determine whether they are True/False or Not Stated or Yes/No or Not Given	• Detect writer's tone, stance and mood • Infer writer's attitude towards the topic/subject/person/process • Analyse text structure and organisation • Justify writer's word choice • Provide meanings of words used in context • Predict unstated outcomes

Table 3: Common and specific target reading skills for IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR)

	IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR)	
Common Target Reading Skills	• Speed reading • Scanning for global information • Skimming for specific details • Understanding main ideas and implied meaning • Understanding genre (type of writing and text organisation) • Understanding inter and intra paragraph linkers and transitional devices • Understanding writer's purpose • Understanding writer's opinion, slant and attitude • Making inferences from stated information • Inferring meanings of words from context • Identifying relationship between stated ideas • Drawing generalisations	
	IELTS (AR)	**SAT (CR)**
Specific Target Reading Skills	• Restating or paraphrasing specific information • Predicting content from given titles and headings • Determining writer's credibility or the reliability of given statements through Yes/No/Not Given or True False/Not Stated questions • Identifying ownership/source for stated information	• Reasoning and critical analysis to detect bias or differences in styles of writing • Developing and refining vocabulary skills • Evaluating differences/ similarities in treatment when reading the double passages • Predicting unstated outcomes

From Table 3, it can be seen that an identical menu of target reading skills is necessary for students to prepare them for the IELTS (AR) and the SAT (CR). Since these two tests differ in particular areas of their question formats, it is also essential to equip students with a package of specific target reading skills to help them meet the different requirements associated with these two tests.

Quantitative Text Analysis – How to Work out the Fog Readability Index

The Fog Index (*Readability Tests. GNOME Documentation style guide* available at : <http:// developer.Gnome.Org/documents/style-guide/usability-readability.html>) gives the *number of years of education* that a reader needs to understand a text. The Fog Index formula implies that short sentences written in plain English achieve a lower score than long sentences written in complex language, loaded with technical terms. Technical documentation usually aims for a Fog Index of between 10-15.

Steps to work out the Fog Index
- Count the number of words in the paragraph (W)
- Count the number of sentences in the paragraph (S)
- Count the number of hard words of 3 syllables or more (HW)
- Use the formula: (W/S + HW/W x 100) x 0.4

To calculate the average number of hard words per practice test, we followed these steps.

1. Count the number of hard words for each paragraph in every passage. Divide the total number of hard words by the number of paragraphs to obtain the overall average for each passage. (To begin with a "hard" word in our view is any word with more than 3 syllables which is not among the list of 2,000 high frequency words.)

2. Average the number of hard words for every test by totalling the mean of every passage and dividing the sum by the total number of reading passage in each test [i.e. 3 for the IELTS (AR) and 4 for SAT(CR)].

From Figure 1, it can be seen that the IELTS (AR) passages are more uniform or consistent where the number of words per sentence is concerned with an average of 18-20 words per sentence. In comparison, the SAT (CR) passages are of uneven sentence length. Some may even have 30-word long sentences! This will of course increase their density and readability index scores.
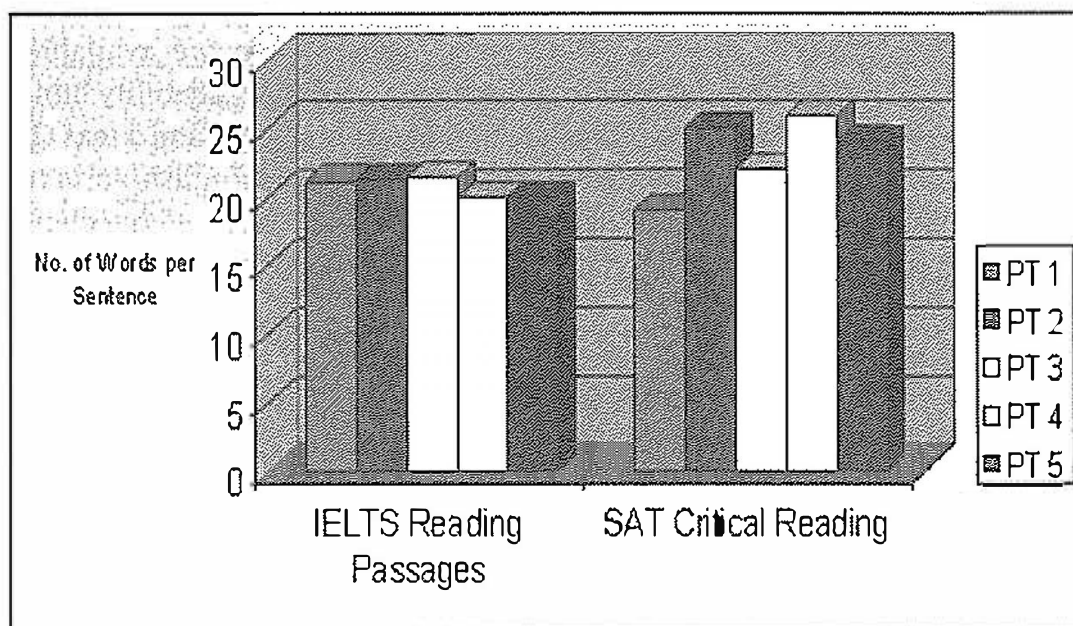
Figure 1: Text analysis: IELTS and SAT reading passages - comparison
of average number of words per sentence

The longer sentences in the SAT (CR) passages will naturally result in their having
fewer sentences. This is confirmed in the findings presented in Figure 2 below which
compares that the average number of sentences per passage for the IELTS (AR) and
SAT (CR) practice tests. Longer sentences also exert greater demands on students to
establish intra and inter-sentence relationships, the pattern of text development and
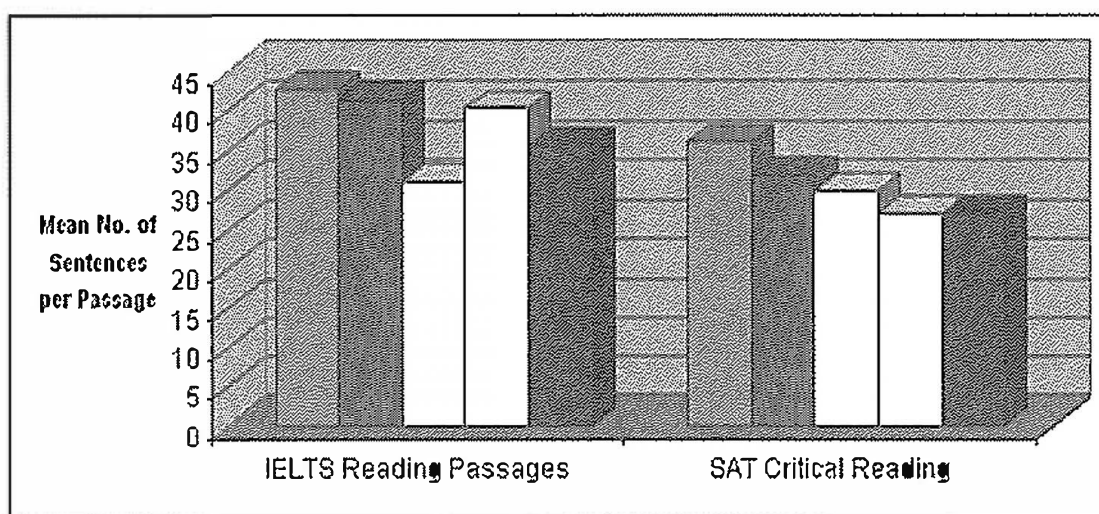meaning.

Figure 2: Text analysis: IELTS and SAT reading passages - comparison of
average number of sentences per passage for each practice test
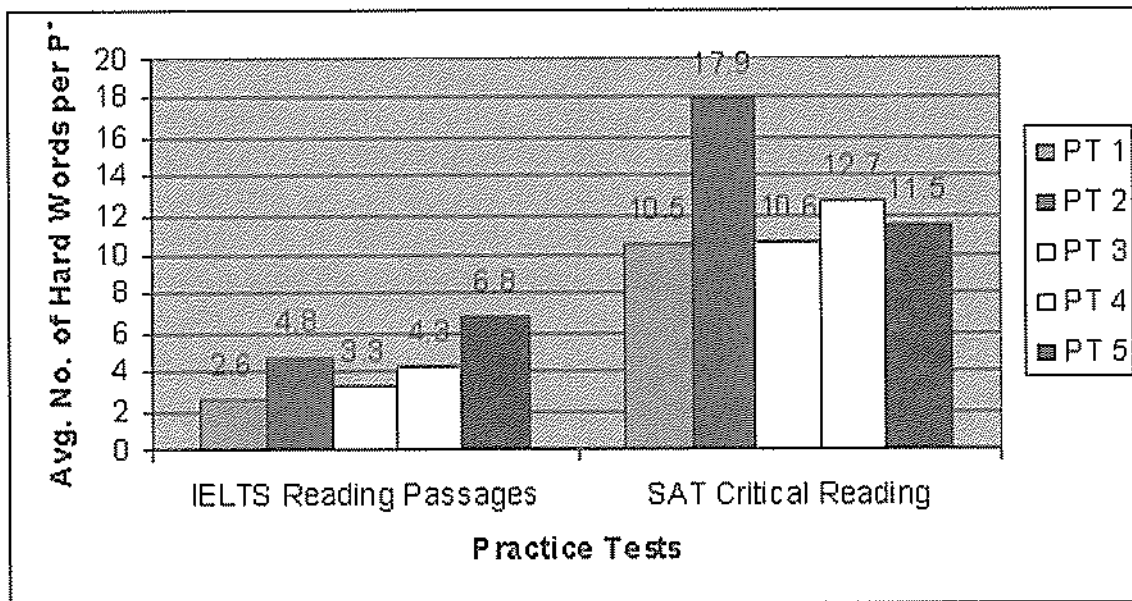
Figure 3: Text analysis: IELTS and SAT Reading passages -
comparison of average number of hard words per practice test

In the comparison of the Fog Readability Indices for IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR) passages, it can be seen that the average for SAT (CR) [13.3] is much higher than that for IELTS (AR) [10.06]. In fact, the SAT (CR) Practice Test 5 has the highest Fog Index of 15.1 which puts it in the same class of difficulty as that for technical documentation.
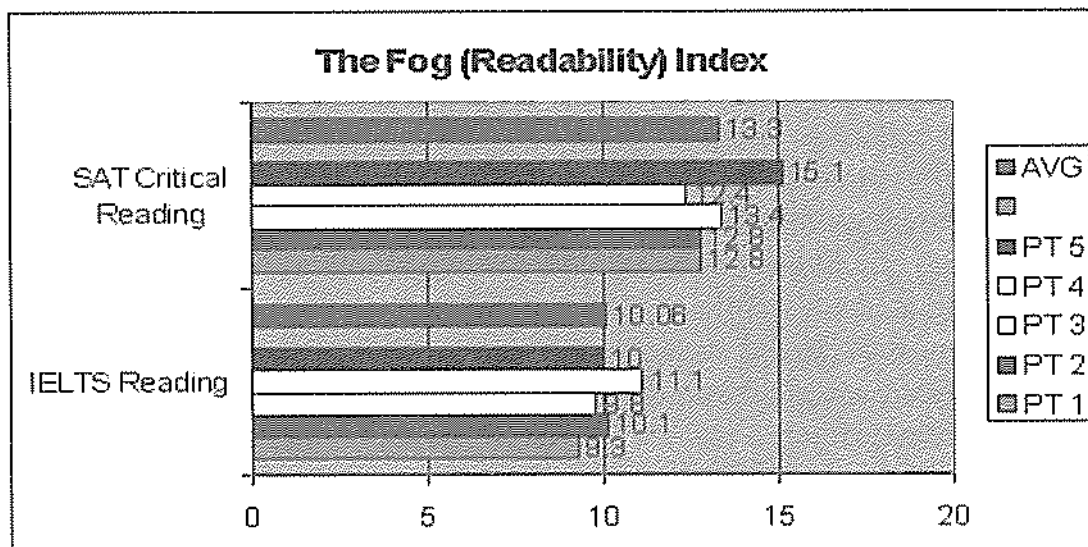

Figure 4: Text analysis: IELTS (AR) and SAT (CR) passages -
comparison of the Fog Readability Indices

Tips on How to Improve Students' Performance in the IELTS(AR)

1. To begin with, it is crucial for students to manage their time well besides being able to read efficiently and effectively. Initially, they should spend at least 2 minutes to critically preview the titles, headings, illustrations, diagrams and any print inbold
or italics.

2. They should also study key parts of each passage to see how they relate and try to establish its pattern of organisation.

3. At least 2 minutes should be spent to interpret the instructions and questions correctly. Question stems have to be carefully read and understood to determine what is required and in what form. Students do not score marks if they paraphrase and write 4 or more words when the instructions say: *"Use not more than 3 words"*.OR when they identify the right answer but present it in the form not asked for.They should not confuse count nouns with non-count ones, quantities of measurement like hectares with square miles, litres with gallons, minutes with seconds and so forth.

4. Students should be taught to identify key information (about 1 minute per question) from the text through speed reading strategies and train their eyes to move rapidly to perform 'visual gymnastics'.

5. When they are unsure of an answer, they should make a sensible guess or use strategies to work out meanings of unfamiliar or difficult words and phrases.

6. Students should always check their answers (3 minutes) to make sure that the instructions are strictly followed and to verify they are the BEST choices.

7. Lastly, they have to be very sure of Grammar and Spellings.

Tips on How to Improve Students' Performance in the SAT(CR)

1. Skimming is needed to to enable them to read quickly to elicit the main ideas.

2. Scanning is important to search for the answers. Students have approximately 45 minutes to read four different passages and to answer 40 questions so they must be able to read quickly and accurately.

3. Close reading is also essential to detect the writer's tone and stance. There are also questions that require students to determine the author's attitude towards the topic. In many cases, the author's real intention is not obvious without acareful reading of the passage.

4. Students need to hone critical thinking and analytical skills to identify paragraph development, text organisation, to work out inferences and predict unstated outcomes.

Teaching Strategies to Help Students Improve their IELTS (AR) Scores

The following strategies were used to help our students improve their IELTS (AR) scores.

- Vocabulary expansion and dictionary skills
- Language awareness exercises to develop strategies to fortify grammar, identify errors in sentence structure, complete and combine sentences and cloze techniques
- Text mapping and flow charting techniques to follow paragraph and text development
- Understanding the requirements of key question words to arrive at and provide the required answer
- Practice exercises with the Critical Thinking Guide (Jacklin, & Jacklin, 1999:5) as preparation to predict patterns of text development for reading passages.

Apart from the above, students were also encouraged to do the following:

- Write critical reviews to identify the writer's tone, style, purpose and intent from word choice, opinion and content presentation. Through these reviews, students were better equipped to evaluate supporting details – fact vs fiction/ true vs false/ stated vs implied. In the process, they also learned to evaluate the degree of the writer's credibility/belief/conviction etc
- Do demonstrations in class – research, show and explain using realia, newspaper articles, pictures, models etc.
- Plan their own extensive reading assignments. These developed writing and presentation skills through web-based research projects on current/recent breakthroughs in the medical front. These projects done in pairs or small groups exposed them to a wider net of reading sources which sparked off their creativity and helped them to establish associations which were both concrete and abstract
- Do exercises for classifying concepts through tree diagrams or hierarchical boxed charts. These enabled students to draw relevant generalisations, practise deductive and inductive thinking and to develop inferencing skills.

Teaching Strategies To Help Students Improve their SAT(CR) Scores

- Practise with SAT (CR) passages from past year papers on a weekly basis.
- Do intensive exercises to identify main and implied ideas, to identify the tone or mood of the passage from writer's choice of diction etc.
- Conduct class discussions for sharing ideas on the more difficult passages.
- Guide students to monitor their own progress by keeping an error analysis account of their own scores of every passage attempted. Passages and questions which have a high frequency of errors are explained.

- Plan on-going vocabulary work (word lists/ strategies to unlock meaning/tests) to increase students' wordpower to help them understand the passages better.
- Practise speed reading exercises. Students are encouraged to have a reading speed of around 500 w.p.m or above.
- Plan lessons in close cooperation with teachers handling the other English components like Writing, Reading and Study Skills and Language Awareness to ensure students develop their skills integratively.
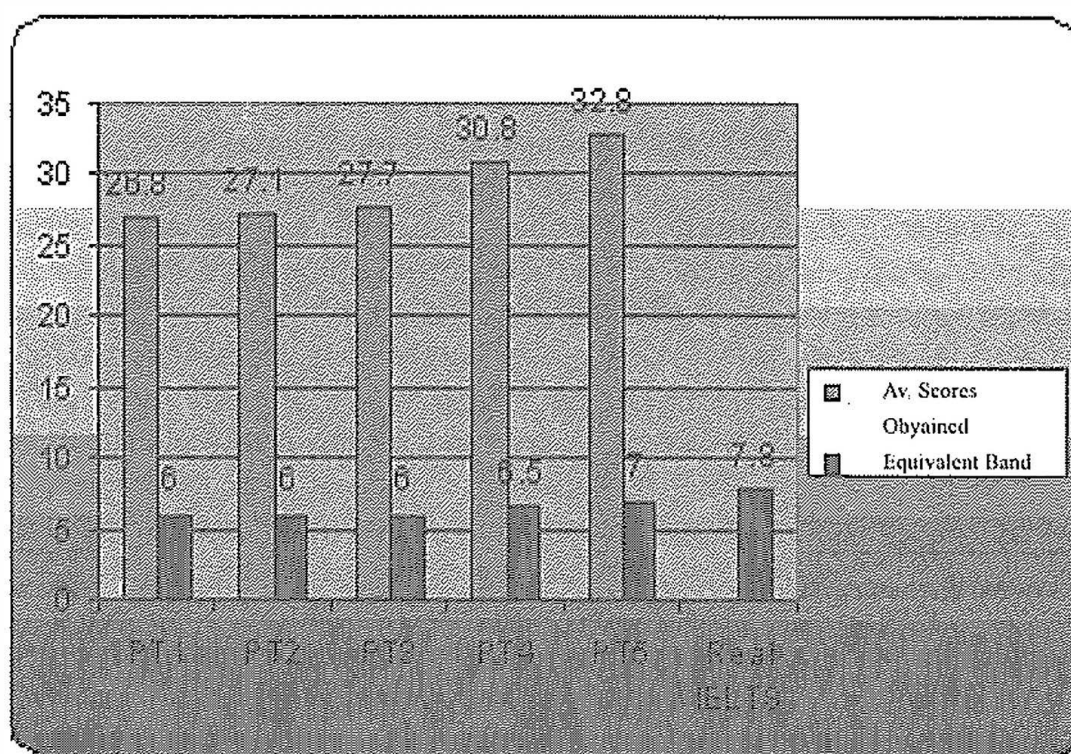
Effectiveness of Strategies Used

Figure 5: Students' performance in IELTS reading practice tests and the actual IELTS reading

As students are taken through the test preparation process, the above shows the average scores obtained in 5 Practice Tests and in the actual IELTS that they took in February 2002. For the 5 Practice Tests, out of a total possible score of 40, these are the average scores students obtained. The equivalent band scores are also shown alongside. The total possible is a Band Score of 9. It is evident from the results that

students did make considerable progress and responded well to the teaching strategies used. In fact, in the actual IELTS, out of 39 candidates, 2 scored the perfect Band 9 for Reading.

As for students' performance in the SAT, Figure 6 shows that despite a few dips in performance (Practice Tests 3, 4 and 7), students generally showed quite a sure and steady trend of improvement. In fact, from Figure 7 below, it can be seen that there was an average increase of 71 points in the performance of the four classes (8A, B, C and D) from the average Diagnostic Test score of 386.5 to the average Real SAT test score of 457.5.
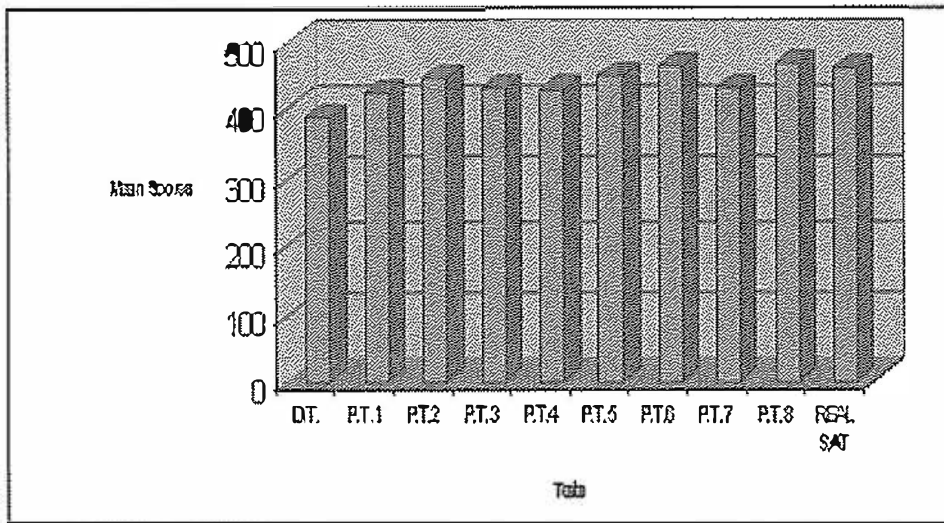

Figure 6: Students' mean scores for SAT diagnostic test, practic tests and the ectual SAT
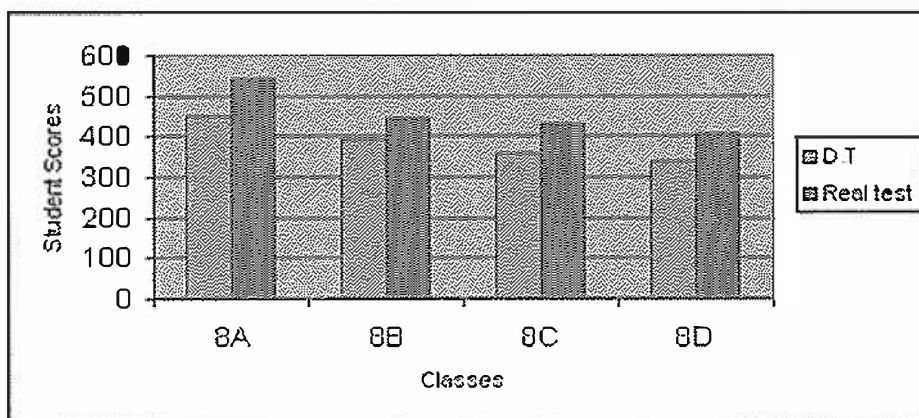

Figure 7: Student performance in the diagnostic test and the actual SAT test

Finally, when the mean number of errors students made in each of the 8 practice tests was monitored, Figures 8a and 8b show that there were noticeable error reductions in the scores of students from 8A (the better class) and 8B. In fact, the mean number of errors dropped from 26.67 (in the first practice test) to 14.47 (in the final practice test) for 8A students.As for Class 8B, the mean number of errors made also saw a drop from 26.33 (in the first practice test) to 19.37 (in the final practice test). These findings generally reflect that students were receptive of the teaching strategies used and consciously applied them to reduce their error counts.
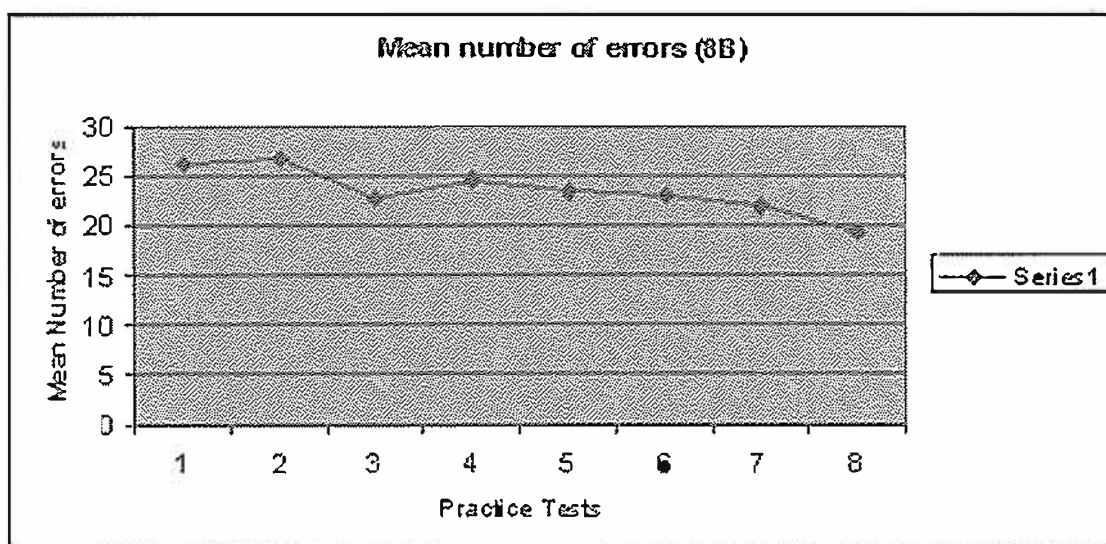

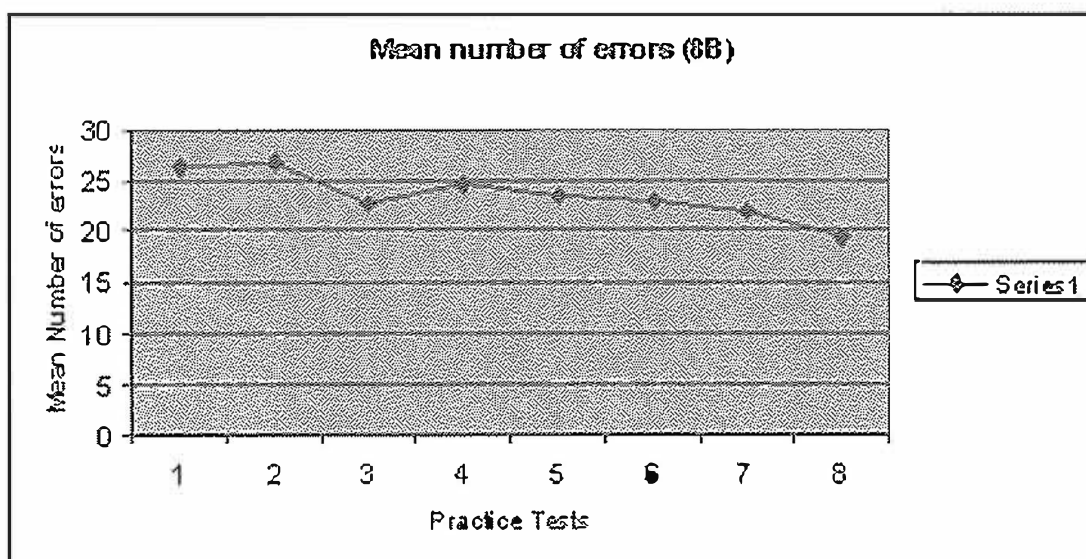Figure 8a: Mean number of errors in practice tests (8A)

Figure 8b: Mean number of errors in practice tests (8B)

Overall, our study has given us a few insights for handling these SAT (CR) examination classes:

1.   Scores will increase because students make fewer errors as they are taken through the paces. For example, in one SAT class (8A), the mean score rose from 451 to 536 (Figure 7, see Class 8A) while the number of errors made decreased as the course progressed. (Figures 8a and 8b).

2.   We need to expose students to extensive reading from a variety of difficulty levels. We also need to sensitiSze students to the text to identify the nuances of meaning and discreet messages of writer's intent.

3.   The study suggests that the Reading Study Skills (RSS) component should be specifically targeted at reading passages of similar topic range and level of difficulty. As such, there is a need to streamline the objectives of the RSS component more closely with those of the SAT (CR).

4.   Training in speed reading is very essential for rapid and efficient skimming and scanning within the set time given for each section of the SAT (CR).

5.   Training in intensive reading is also important as the answers of 2 given questions may lie within the same chunk of text.

Areas for Further Research

It will be highly relevant and interesting to find out if students who do well in the IELTS will do equally well in the SAT and vice-versa. If a correlation can be established then it may be logical to propose that admission into universities worldwide be based on either IELTS or SAT performance. This will leave students with the choice of taking the entrance exam that they are more comfortable with or the one that suits their budgets. It will also be worthwhile to investigate the correlation between student performance in the SPM 1119 English Paper and the IELTS or SAT 1 (Verbal) for the 4 language components as a longitudinal study to identify which components need more intense and formalised instruction at post-SPM level. Finally, it will be useful to investigate whether success in the IELTS and or the SAT is adequate to ensure students' academic success in their tertiary studies.

Conclusion

"Society has always expected an awful lot from its teachers, and now we are expecting even more from them."
~ Royal Bank of Canada Newsletter, Sept 2000 ~
Available at <http://www.rbs.com/community/letter/sept2000.html>

This quote taken from the Royal Bank of Canada's September 2000 Newsletter encapsulates the essence of our discussions. In teaching and preparing students for any important English examination, there are no short cuts or easy fixes as there is always a lot to be done. To groom students for tertiary studies, they have to be guided through the whole repertoire of reading skills and examination strategies. Society certainly has always expected teachers to do a lot more although the fair degree of recognition has been slow in coming so far. In this age of globalisation and multi-disciplinary integration, ESL teachers like us are indeed confronted with many challenges. We need to be multi-skilled to fit our teaching potentials into a variety of teaching settings and dimensions to respond to the expectations of academia. To teach confidently on any programme, our pool of core skills has to be constantly honed and applied with flexibility and dexterity. Above all, we need to be sensitive to what is needed on the socio-economic front and to be aware of the shifts in emphasis and focus as dictated by tests, texts and courses. With careful preparation and the will to survive and succeed, there is no doubt that every ESL teacher will be able to offer more to cope with the demands of teaching the Reading components of not only the IELTS and SAT but also those of the 1119 English, TOEFL, TOIEC, MUET and other important English examinations.

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