

THE WASHBACK EFFECTS OF IELTS TEST AS A GRADUATION PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENT ON LEARNING MOTIVATION OF STUDENTS IN BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract: This study investigates the motivational washback effects of IELTS as a graduation proficiency requirement in three business and economics universities in Hanoi. Drawing on washback theory and expectancy-value perspectives, the study examines how students' perceptions of test difficulty, test stakes, and test utility relate to learning motivation. A survey was administered to 339 undergraduates across three universities. Reliability and validity were confirmed through Cronbach's alpha and exploratory factor analysis. Multiple regression analysis revealed that perceived test utility was the strongest determinant of learning motivation, while perceived test difficulty exerted a modest positive effect. In contrast, perceived test stakes did not independently predict motivation once utility was controlled. The findings suggest that motivational washback depends less on institutional pressure and more on students' internalized perception of the test's practical value. The study extends washback research beyond English-major cohorts and provides implications for assessment policy in higher education.

Keywords: IELTS test, washback effect, learning motivation.

Received: 07/01/2026

Reviewed: 09/02/2026

Accepted for publication: 12/02/2026

I. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency has become a crucial competency in the context of globalization, particularly in business and economics sectors where international communication is essential. In Vietnam, many universities have adopted IELTS as a graduation proficiency requirement, with required band scores ranging from 5.0 to 7.0 depending on program type. As a high-stakes international assessment, IELTS directly affects students' academic progression and employment prospects.

High-stakes tests are widely recognized to produce washback effects, referring to their influence on teaching and learning processes (Alderson & Wall, 1993). While washback may promote goal-oriented effort, it may also lead to anxiety and test-focused learning. Existing research on IELTS washback reports inconsistent findings. Some studies highlight positive motivational effects driven by perceived utility, whereas others emphasize stress and limited intrinsic engagement.

In Vietnam, empirical studies on IELTS washback have primarily focused on English-major students. This narrow focus limits understanding of how IELTS operates in broader disciplinary contexts where English is not the core specialization. Therefore, this study investigates the motivational washback of IELTS as a graduation requirement among students in business and economics universities.

The study addresses the following questions:

(i) How do students in business and economics universities perceive IELTS as a graduation proficiency requirement in terms of difficulty, stakes, and utility?

(ii) To what extent do perceived test difficulty, perceived test stakes, and perceived test utility influence students' learning motivation?

II. RESEARCH CONTENT

2.1. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Washback refers to the influence of tests on teaching and learning and forms part of consequential validity (Shohamy, 2001). Research indicates that high-stakes assessments shape learners' motivation and strategies, though outcomes vary across contexts.

International IELTS studies report mixed results. Green (2007) argues that IELTS preparation often promotes exam-oriented learning, while Li Dong (2018) finds that IELTS enhances short-term motivation by clarifying learning goals. Ma and Meadows (2023) report both motivational gains and emotional pressure. Comparative studies suggest that high stakes alone do not guarantee sustained engagement.

In Vietnam, Nguyen Thanh Minh (2025) identified perceived utility as the strongest predictor of motivation, whereas Nguyen Huu Thanh Minh (2023) found increased anxiety without significant motivational enhancement. Notably, these studies focused on English-major cohorts only.

Guided by washback theory and expectancy-value perspectives, the present study conceptualizes three perceived test factors difficulty, stakes, and utility as determinants of motivational washback, and the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. There is a negative relationship between

perceived test difficulty and learning motivation.

H2. There is a positive relationship between perceived test stakes and learning motivation.

H3. There is a positive relationship between perceived test utility and learning motivation.

2.2. Methodology

A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed. Data were collected from 339 undergraduate students across three business and economics universities in Hanoi. Participants included both English-major (Business English) and non-English-major students.

A structured questionnaire measured four constructs: perceived test difficulty, perceived test stakes, perceived test utility, and learning motivation using a five-point Likert scale. Reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha (α ranging from .853 to .906). Exploratory factor analysis supported a three-factor structure explaining 55.7% of total variance ($KMO = .935$; $p < .001$).

Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses were conducted using SPSS.

2.3. Results

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations

Variable	Means	Standard Deviations	1	2	3
1. Motivation	3.736	.642	—		
2. Test difficulty	3.536	.69	.372**	—	
3. Test utility	3.860	.59	.621**	.340**	—
4. Test stakes	3.820	.60	.466**	.373**	.661**

Descriptive Findings

Students reported relatively high levels of perceived utility ($M = 3.86$) and stakes ($M = 3.82$), and moderate perceived difficulty ($M = 3.54$). Learning motivation was also moderately high ($M = 3.74$).

Overall, these findings suggest that IELTS is viewed not merely as an external obligation but as both a meaningful and academically demanding requirement within the examined university context. Notably, although difficulty is moderately perceived, motivation remains high, preliminarily suggesting that difficulty may not function as a purely demotivating factor in this context.

Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 1, all variables were positively and significantly correlated ($p < .001$). Learning motivation showed the strongest

association with perceived test utility ($r = .621$), followed by test stakes ($r = .466$) and test difficulty ($r = .372$). These findings indicate that students who perceive IELTS as useful, consequential, and challenging tend to report higher motivation.

Among the predictors, perceived utility and stakes were most strongly correlated ($r = .661$), while correlations between stakes and difficulty ($r = .373$) and between utility and difficulty ($r = .340$) were moderate to weak. None of the coefficients exceeded .80, suggesting no serious multicollinearity concerns.

Result of multiple regression analysis in Table 2 further confirmed that the overall model was significant, $F(3, 335) = 79.819$, $p < .001$, explaining 41.2% of the variance in learning motivation (Adjusted $R^2 = .412$), indicating substantial explanatory power.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Results

Independent Variable	B	Std. Error	β	t	p	VIF
Test Difficulty	.152	.040	.172	3.800	< .001	1.183
Test Utility	.532	.057	.527	9.398	< .001	1.809
Test Stakes	.052	.055	.053	.940	.348	1.858

Perceived test utility emerged as the strongest predictor of learning motivation ($\beta = .527$, $p < .001$), indicating a substantial positive influence when other variables were controlled. Perceived test difficulty also showed a significant but smaller positive effect ($\beta = .172$, $p < .001$). In contrast, perceived test stakes

did not independently predict motivation ($\beta = .053$, $p = .348$), suggesting its effect diminishes when utility and difficulty are considered. VIF values (1.183–1.858) indicated no multicollinearity concerns.

The regression results provide empirical evidence for two of the three proposed relationships.

Table 3. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Result
H1	Rejected (Positive Effect)
H2	Not Supported
H3	Supported

2.4. Discussion

The findings reveal a clear hierarchy among perceived IELTS factors. Perceived utility is the dominant driver of motivational washback. This aligns with Li Dong (2018) and Nguyen Thanh Minh (2025), supporting expectancy-value theory that when students perceive high practical value, motivation increases.

Contrary to expectations, perceived difficulty demonstrated a small positive effect rather than a negative one. This suggests that in this context, difficulty may function as a motivating challenge rather than a discouraging barrier. This partially diverges from Nguyen Huu Thanh Minh (2023), who reported stronger anxiety effects among English majors. The inclusion of diverse academic backgrounds in the present study may explain this variation.

Perceived stakes, although correlated with motivation, lost significance when utility was controlled. This indicates that external pressure alone does not independently sustain motivation; rather, stakes may operate indirectly through perceived usefulness.

Overall, the findings suggest that motivational washback is shaped less by high stakes and more by students' internalized perception of the test value.

III. CONCLUSION

This study examined the motivational washback of IELTS as a graduation proficiency requirement in business and economics universities. Perceived test utility emerged as the most influential factor shaping learning motivation, followed by a modest positive effect of perceived difficulty. Perceived stakes did not independently predict motivation.

These results indicate that motivational washback depends more on perceived value than on institutional pressure alone. By extending the analysis beyond English-major cohorts, this study contributes to a more context-sensitive understanding of IELTS washback in higher education.

For universities implementing IELTS as a graduation requirement, the findings highlight the importance of emphasizing the practical and professional relevance of the test in fostering constructive learning engagement.

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