

Characteristics of the IELTS Reading Comprehension: Implications for Development of EFL Reading Comprehension Instruction

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Abstract—Question type and format in reading tasks are essential characteristics that have been proven to affect students' performance. This study aims to investigate the characteristics of questions used in the IELTS reading comprehension tasks, including (1) question types and (2) question formats. The researchers collected 240 reading question items from six test modules in Barron's IELTS Preparation Test, authored by Loughheed (2016). The categorization criteria for different question types were adapted from Nuttall's (2005) taxonomy of questions. Question formats were categorized based on common question formats (Loughheed, 2013; Hughes, 2003). Data were analyzed using frequency and percentage. The findings revealed three common question types in the reading sections of IELTS preparation tests, including questions of *literal comprehension* (43.8%), questions of *reinterpretation* (43.3%), and questions of *inference* (12.9%). Five question formats were commonly used in the reading tests, including *multiple-choice* (33.3%), *identifying information* (28%), *completion* (25%), *matching* (11.7%), and *short answer* (2%). In addition, the study revealed four main patterns of question arrangement in the reading test as supplementary findings. This study discussed the characteristics of IELTS question items and patterns of question arrangement to contribute towards a more accurate interpretation of reading tasks and a prospective design for reading practice for EFL students.

Index Terms—reading question type, reading question formats, question arrangement, reading comprehension, EFL students

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is vital as it functions as a mediator for learning about a particular subject matter in higher education (Hellekjær, 2009; Darasawang, 2007). Global universities commonly require their students to read English textbooks even though the students' program is not an international program, where English is used as the language of teaching and learning (Nurie, 2017; Sholeh et al., 2019). In addition, reading is also considered a core skill for students' educational achievement.

Reading comprehension allows students to master other school tasks such as essay writing and critical reading. Reading comprehension has long been a point of focus in reading instruction (Kasim & Raicha, 2017; Fathi & Afzali, 2020) because reading comprehension is regarded as "the most basic purpose for reading, underlying and supporting most other purposes for reading" (Grabe & Stroller, 2011, p. 8). Furthermore, previous studies have also confirmed that reading proficiency positively correlates with academic achievement (Dogan et al., 2015; Nyarko et al., 2018). To satisfy a reading task's requirements, students must understand the question's scope to provide the correct answer. The content of reading task questions can be better understood by analyzing question characteristics such as question type and question format.

Previous studies have revealed a positive relationship between the knowledge of characteristics of a reading task and reading proficiency among EFL students. For example, Basaraba et al. (2013) showed that the students perceived less challenge answering *literal questions* than *inference questions* and *evaluation questions*. In the same vein, Zheng et al. (2007) found that different question formats influenced students' reading performance. That is, students' score on *multiple-choice questions* (MC) was higher than that of *constructed-response questions* (CR) and *constructed-response questions with explanations* (CRE) formats. In short, possessing knowledge about the characteristics of the reading task, including question types and question format, are beneficial for students to achieve reading proficiency. Reading teachers can implement this idea into the design and delivery of their instruction to enhance students' reading proficiency (Nagy et al., 2018; Ollennu & Etsey, 2015).

The IELTS score is recognized as proof of English language proficiency by the Ministry of Higher Education and all prestigious universities in Thailand, including King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Mahidol University,

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and Prince of Songkla University, to name a few (King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, 2018; Mahidol University, 2020; Prince of Songkla University, 2017). The recognition indicates that question items in the IELTS test are a good target for comprehension proficiency in the Thai context. Hence, the researchers chose IELTS reading questions as the target source for this study.

In this study, the researchers attempt to analyze the characteristics of questions in reading comprehension tasks for the IELTS preparation. Reading comprehension is one primary component task of the IELTS to indicate students' academic English proficiency. Therefore, it could be assumed that the characteristics of IELTS reading comprehension tests may represent a general standard of reading comprehension tasks required for EFL students. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the characteristics of questions in IELTS reading comprehension tasks, including (1) question types and (2) question formats in an IELTS preparation book.

In line with the research objective, the current study addresses two research questions as follows: 1) "What are the most common question types in IELTS reading comprehension tasks?", and 2) "What are the most common question formats in the IELTS reading comprehension?"

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Question Types

Day and Park (2005) and Nuttall (2005, as cited in Vongkrachang & Chinwonno, 2015, p. 73) clearly stated that the "category of reading questions is determined by the degree of cognitive activities such as encouragement, requirement, promotion, and demand." Based on the degree of cognitive activities, Nuttall (2005) has proposed six categories of question taxonomy as follows:

TABLE 1
SIX CATEGORIES OF READING QUESTION

Question Type	Description	Examples
1. Questions of literal comprehension	This question type requires the recall of factual information directly stated in the text. The test-takers can find the answers instantly from the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>When did Leila have an accident?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.188) • <i>What was Yusof doing when the accident happened?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.188)
2. Questions involving reinterpretation	This type of question requires students to search for factual information from more than one part of the text to find the answer. The answer might not be stated in the same language as the question.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How old was Yusof?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.188) • <i>How many children had Rahman?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.188)
3. Questions of inference	The question asks students to infer information from the passage where the answer is not directly stated text. The students have to use their background knowledge to make a logical assumption about ideas in the passage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Why was Marry proud of her son?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.188) • <i>What hypothesis is confirmed by Dr. Kettlewell's experiment in Dorset?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.188)
4. Questions of evaluation	The questions ask the readers to judge the text in terms of the writer's tone, purpose, bias, and mood.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What message is the writer trying to make about nature and the importance of individual human beings?</i> (Soars & Soars, 1996:94 as cited in Freeman, 2014)
5. Questions of personal response	These questions ask a personal reaction of students based on the text. The answer depends, predominantly, on the reader's subjective opinion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is your opinion of X's behavior?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.189) • <i>How would you feel if you were Z?</i> (Nuttall, 2005, p.189)
6. Questions concerned with how writers say what they mean	This question type asks students about the author's way of organizing the text. The question aims to help students become aware of the author's particular skill or strategy to convey information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Who is "he"?</i> (reference skill) (Nuttall, 2005, p.82) • <i>What is "one"?</i> (reference skill) (Nuttall, 2005, p.82)

B. Question Formats

In reading comprehension tasks, question items are categorized into five formats. Hughes (2003) and Lougheed (2013) proposed five formats of the questions in the reading tasks as follows:

TABLE 2
FIVE FORMATS OF READING QUESTION

Format	Description	Examples
1. Multiple Choice	Multiple-choice items consist of two components, namely the stem and the options. Students are required to read the stem (question) and choose the correct answer to the question.	Stem: <i>People who see color normally are called</i> Options: A. <i>monochromatic</i> B. <i>dichromatic</i> C. <i>trichromatic</i> D. <i>colorblind</i> (Lougheed, 2013, p.79)
2. Identifying Information (True/False Items)	The identifying information format refers to question items that ask students to identify whether the statement is true or false, based on the information provided or interpretation of the passage.	<i>Does the following statement agree with the information given in the passage?</i> • <i>The British were the first people to sell glass beads in Africa.</i> (Lougheed, 2013, p.76)
3. Matching	Matching includes two columns: list A and B. Students are required to locate specific information within the lettered column and to write the chosen letters into the prompt that relates to or matches the selected letter.	<i>Match each definition in List A with the term it defines in List B</i> List A 1It means Place of Heaven. 2It is the Portuguese name for southern Africa. List B A <i>Phoenician</i> B <i>Natal</i> (Lougheed, 2013, p.76)
4. Completion (Sentence, Notes/Chart, Summary, Note, Table, Flow-Chart)	Students are required to fill in the blank with sentences, summaries, or notes to complete the sentence, based on their comprehension of the information from the passage.	<i>Complete the summary of the reading passage below.</i> <i>People who suffer from obsessive-compulsive disorder have</i> 1..... <i>thoughts, doubts, and fears that are</i> 2..... <i>OCD suffers develop certain ways...</i> (Lougheed, 2013, p.70)
5. Short-Answer	Students answer questions, which usually relate to factual information about details in the text. This is most likely to be used with a text that contains a lot of factual information.	<i>Answer the question below. Write no more than three words for each answer.</i> 4. <i>Which country does the Zulu clan reside in?</i> 5. <i>When did the Portuguese arrive in KwaZulu-Natal?</i> (Lougheed, 2013, p.76)

C. Relevant Studies

Basaraba et al. (2013) examined the difficulty levels among three types of reading questions. The findings showed that *literal comprehension questions* ($M = -1.06$) are significantly less challenging than *inferential questions* ($M = -0.81$) and *evaluation questions* ($M = -0.52$). Gilson et al. (2014) investigated types of follow-up questions frequently used by teachers in reading classes. Their results indicated that only about 27% of questions assessed lower-level thoughts, while about 73% were for higher-level ones. Freeman (2014) identified the types of reading comprehension questions used in global EFL textbooks. The findings showed that the most widely used comprehension question types are those that require content comprehension, including 12% *literal comprehension*, 14% *reinterpretation*, and 18% *inference*. Dagostino et al. (2014) revealed three question types in reading tests for Malaysian students comprised of 40% *literal comprehension and reinterpretation questions*, 40% *inference questions*, and 20% *evaluation questions*.

Dagostino et al. (2014) further revealed that *multiple-choice* was the format of reading tests for primary and intermediate grade Malaysian readers. Zheng, Cheng, and Klinger (2007) also investigated the effects of reading comprehension question formats on the test performance of English as a second language (ESL) students and non-ESL students. The question formats were *multiple-choice* (MC) questions, *constructed-response* (CR) questions, and *constructed-response questions with explanations* (CRE). Their results revealed that the overall pattern of difficulty levels for the three question formats was the same between ESL students and non-ESL students. The investigation showed that both ESL students (59.8%) and non-ESL students (74.1%) obtained their highest mean scores for the MC question task. The ESL students (58.2%) and the non-ESL students (72.7%) also had lower scores for the CR questions. Furthermore, the *constructed-response questions with explanations* (CRE) format were the format for which both ESL students (51.5%) and non-ESL students (65.2%) scored lowest. Furthermore, Lim (2019) aimed to investigate the effects of question formats on the test scores of Chinese ESL students. TOEFL practice tests were used in this study and included two types of question format: *multiple-choice* (MC) questions and *open-ended* (OE) questions. The question format also influenced the test validity of whether the reading test properly assesses relevant reading skills or ability. The findings showed that students had higher scores for the *multiple-choice* (MC) questions in passage one ($M = 5.76$) and passage two ($M = 4.32$) than *open-ended* (OE) questions in passage one ($M = 4.55$) and in passage two ($M = 2.92$) at a significant level ($F = 19.5$, $R^2 = .10$).

In summary, previous studies showed that reading test question types and question formats are associated with levels of reading difficulty. Knowledge about test characteristics can promote students' performance in reading comprehension. The two essential components for the reading test are question type and question format. Therefore, these two components are employed as a conceptual framework in this study, as illustrated in Appendix B.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The current study follows documentary research employing content analysis. The researchers aimed to investigate the common question types and question formats in reading comprehension tests.

B. Sample Text

Permission was granted to the research team by Lougheed (2016), the book's author (see Appendix A for proof of consent), to collect and analyze reading questions from "Barron's IELTS Preparation Test Book". The book consists of six preparation modules for the IELTS reading test. Each test module includes three passages and 40 reading question items. The length of each passage is about 1,200 words. Therefore, there are about 48,000 words in total for the reading section.

C. Corpus Development

The researchers collected 240 reading question items from reading comprehension sections in "Barron's IELTS Preparation Test Book" (Lougheed, 2016). Then the researchers took pictures of all question items and options from the book and used the mobile scanner software to help digitalize text from the images. Finally, the digitalized texts were transferred to a spreadsheet program and designed into a form to analyze reading question types.

D. Research Instruments

The research instruments for the investigation in this study were as follows:

(1) A classification scheme of question types, based on Nuttall's (2005) taxonomy of question types, including *questions of literal comprehension; questions involving reinterpretation; questions of inference; questions of evaluation; questions of personal responsibility; and questions concerned with how writers say what they mean.*

(2) A classification scheme for question item formats, based on Hughes (2003) and Lougheed (2013). The categories included five major formats: *multiple choice, identifying information, matching, completion, and short-answer.*

E. Data Collection and Analysis

Three steps were taken to collect data to investigate the question types included in "Barron's IELTS Preparation Test Book" by Lougheed (2016). First, the researchers collected all 240 reading question items from six test modules posted in Barron's IELTS Preparation Test. Then the researchers used the taxonomy of question types to analyze questions in the corpus (as described in the previous section) into six different categories and five formats of questions. The patterns of question arrangement were identified based on the position of question types in the task. Finally, the researchers reported the frequencies of common types, common question formats, and patterns of reading question arrangement found in the corpus of the reading text in this study.

F. Inter-rater Reliability

The reliability of question-type findings in this study was asserted by two inter-raters, each of whom holds an MA in Applied Linguistics. Half of the 120 question items were randomly selected for the inter-raters to classify independently, using a guideline of classification schemes provided by the researchers (see Table 1). Fleiss's Kappa analysis (Landis & Koch-Kappa, 1977, as cited in Gwet, 2014, p. 124) revealed strong agreement between the inter-raters and the researchers on the classification of the question types and format ($K = .717$).

IV. RESULTS

The analysis of the 240 sample questions revealed three significant findings related to the research questions as follows:

A. Finding One: Common Question Types in the Reading Tests

The first findings showed the common question types in the reading section of the reading preparation test. Among all, 105 questions were classified as *literal comprehension* (43.8%), followed by 104 *questions involving reinterpretation* (43.3%) and 31 *questions of inference* (12.9%). None of the questions in the data set were to assess *evaluation, personal response, or how writers say what they mean.* The proportion of the question types is shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
PROPORTIONS OF QUESTION TYPES IN THE READING TESTS

Type	<i>n</i>	%
Type 1: Literal Comprehension	105	43.8
Type 2: Reinterpretation	104	43.3
Type 3: Inference	31	12.9
Type 4: Evaluation	-	-
Type 5: Personal Response	-	-
Type 6: How Writers Say What They Mean	-	-
Total	240	100.0

1. Type 1: Questions of Literal Comprehension

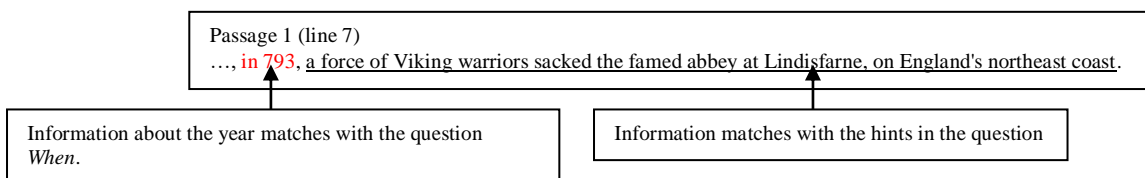
In the corpus, the *question of literal comprehension* was the most dominant question type (43.8%). This question type requires recognizing or recalling factual information explicitly stated in the text. The test takers can process answers directly from the text. A sample of literal comprehension questions is shown below:

Test 2 No. 1

When did Viking Warriors raid an abbey on the coast of England?

Explanation:

1. The word *When* is the key idea in the question asking students to search for specific information from the text about when *Viking Warriors raided an abbey in the coast of England*.
2. The hints in the question *Viking Warriors raided an abbey in the coast of England* can be found in the passage in line 7.
3. The specific information about *when* the year *in 793* is in the passage in line 7.
4. So, the information about the year *in 793* matches the question word *When*.
5. The answer to this question is directly provided in the passage, and the question is thus analyzed as *literal comprehension*.



2. Type 2: *Questions of Reinterpretation*

This study's second most frequently found question is *questions involving reinterpretation* (43.3%). The question requires test takers to search for information from different text parts, and test-takers need to restate ideas from reading passages into synonyms and paraphrased statements to select the answer in some questions. A sample of questions that were found in the corpus of this category are presented below:

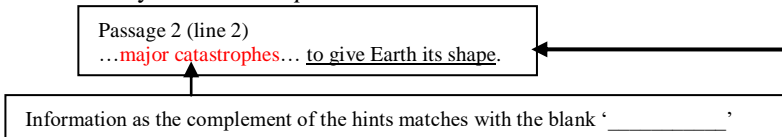
Test 2 No. 28

Complete the notes using the list of words, A-L, below.

Proposes that major 28 _____ (F. disasters) _____ have given Earth its shape.

Explanation:

1. The word *Complete* is the key idea in the question asking students to search for specific information from the text about the hints *Proposes that major _____ have given Earth its shape*. to complete the blank.
2. The hints in the question *Proposes that major _____ have given Earth its shape*. can be found in the passage in line 2.
3. The specific information, which complements *catastrophes* of the hints in the question is in the passage in line 2.
4. However, the word *catastrophes* does not directly match with the list of answer choices provided.
5. Students have to paraphrase the information *catastrophes*, which also means *Choice F. disasters*.
6. The passage provides the answer, but students have to reinterpret the information to find the best-matched choice. The question is analyzed as *reinterpretation*.



3. Type 3: *Questions of Inference*

Questions of inference (12.9%) were the least commonly found reading question type. The questions ask students to consider what is implied but not explicitly stated in the text. The students need to understand the text to make logical and conceptual inferences. A sample of questions that were found in the corpus of this category are presented below:

Test 3 No.4

Choose the correct heading for each section from the list of headings below.

4 Section D (ii. The Role of Computers)

Explanation:

1. The word *heading* is the key idea in the question asking students to read for the overall information in *section D* and make inferences of heading for the section.
2. The key information of *section D* can be found in lines 24-26.

3. The information from lines 24-26 in the passage can be inferred that *section D* is about the information *roles of computer* in the CT scanners.
4. The inference from the information in *section D* matches with *choice ii. The Role of Computers*.
5. The answer is not directly provided in the passage, but students have to find related information about the hints and make inferences to the best answer. The question is analyzed as *inference*.

Passage 3 (line 24-26) The CT scanner is made up of several computer systems , including the host computer ... One of the computers converts the raw data into an image, while another allows the technician to control the rotation of the gantry.	Key information in section D
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B. Finding Two: Common Question Formats in the Reading Tests

The investigation of this study also showed five reading question formats, including *multiple-choice*, *identifying information*, *completion*, *matching*, and *short answer*. The most frequently found format in this corpus was *multiple choice* (33.3%). Details of question formats are shown in the following table.

TABLE 4
PROPORTIONS OF QUESTION FORMATS IN READING TESTS

Format	n	%
Multiple choice	80	33.3
Identifying information	67	28.0
Completion	60	25.0
Matching	28	11.7
Short answer	5	2.0
Total	240	100.0

There were 80 reading question items found in six reading tests. The most frequently found format was *multiple-choice*, accounting for 33.3%. A sample of *multiple-choice questions* is shown below:

Test 4 No. 34

Researchers wore a mask when working with crows to _____

- A. conceal their true identity from crows.
- B. find out whether crows would recognize the mask in another situation.
- C. protect their face from aggressive crows.

The second most commonly found format in the corpus was *identifying information*, accounting for 28% of the total occurrences. A sample of *identifying information* questions found in the corpus is shown below:

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the passage?

- TRUE if the statement agrees with the information
 FALSE if the statement contradicts the information
 NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this

Test 3 No. 37

It is not certain when the big bang occurred. _____

The third most frequently found format in the corpus was *completion* (25%). For this format type, students were asked to read notes or a summary of the passage with some deleted keywords provided in the notes. Then students need to read the text and complete the blanks in the note. A sample is shown below:

Test 5 No. 28-29

Camouflage helps animals hide from both 28_____. Animals pass on their 29_____ through their genes.

The two least commonly found formats in the corpus were *matching* (11.7%) and *short answers* (2%). *Matching* questions typically ask students to match provided headings to correct sections. A sample of *Matching* items found in the corpus is shown as follows:

Test 3 No. 1-4

- | | |
|--|--|
| Sections
1. Section A
2. Section B | List of Headings
I Scanning the Brain and Chest
II The Role of Computers |
|--|--|

The following is a sample of the *short answer* format.

Test 2 No. 2

When was Eric the Red convicted of a crime?

C. Supplementary Findings: Patterns of Question Arrangement in the Tests

The following findings are extracted from findings of research question one to reveal the patterns of question item arrangement in the 18 sampled reading passages. The findings revealed four common patterns of question type arrangement in the IELTS reading preparation test, including Pattern 1: L-R-L/I (50%), Pattern 2: R-L-R (27.8%), Pattern 3: I-L/R (11.1%), and Pattern 4: L/R-I-R (11.1%). Details of question arrangement are presented in Table 5.

TABLE 5
PATTERNS OF READING QUESTION ARRANGEMENT

Pattern		Number	%
Pattern 1	L-R-L/I	9	50.0
Pattern 2	R-L-R	5	27.8
Pattern 3	I-L/R	2	11.1
Pattern 4	L/R-I-R	2	11.1
Total		18	100.0

1. Pattern 1

The most commonly found pattern in the corpus was Pattern 1: L-R-L/I accounting for 50% of the question set in 18 reading passages. The pattern L-R-L/I begins with the *literal comprehension* (L), followed by *reinterpretation* (R), and *literal comprehension* (L) or *inference* (I). The sample of this pattern is presented in Appendix C.

2. Pattern 2

Pattern 2: R-L-R (27.8%), found in five passages, was the second most dominant pattern in the corpus. The passages with the pattern 2: R-L-R begin with the *reinterpretation*, followed by *literal comprehension* and *reinterpretation*. The sample of Pattern 2 is presented in Appendix C.

3. Pattern 3 and 4

The least frequently found patterns in the corpus were Pattern 3: I-L/R and Pattern 4: L/R-I-R, accounting for 11.1% of the corpus. Pattern 3: I-L/R shows the arrangement of questions beginning with *inference* and followed by either *literal comprehension* or *reinterpretation*. In addition, Pattern 4 begins with either *literal comprehension* or *reinterpretation*, followed by *inference* and *reinterpretation*. Appendix C showed the samples of Patterns 3 and 4.

V. DISCUSSION

The discussion section is organized into three main parts: types of questions, question formats, and patterns of question arrangement in the tests.

A. Discussion of Finding One: Question Types in the Reading Tests

1. Different Proportions of Questions in the Reading Tests

The most frequently found question type in the corpus, the *literal comprehension*, asks the reader to perform a basic demonstration of cognitive ability and reading skills such as scanning information, memorizing, and recalling information to answer the question. Nuttall (2005) supports the finding of this study that the *questions of literal comprehension* are considered fundamental and essential for reading comprehension. Students are encouraged to practice this primary question type so that the knowledge about this question type complements the *reinterpretation question type* or vice versa.

Following the *literal comprehension*, the *reinterpretation questions*, the second most found question type, test the reader's ability to locate pieces of information from different parts of the passage, and sometimes the reader must interpret the ideas that are conveyed in the text and locate the corresponding choice on the test. This ability reveals the reader's genuine understanding of textual information and assesses the reader's comprehension of the passage (Day & Park, 2005). Therefore, the type of *reinterpretation questions* is always present in the IELTS reading test.

The *questions of inference*, the least found in the corpus, require the reader to perform higher cognitive abilities as they need to know what the text implies. This question type is considered more difficult for the reader than the former two types. The *inference question* items are designed to differentiate between high and low performers (Cain et al., 2001). As the *questions of inference* are more complicated, only proficient readers could select accurate answers for the questions posted. This is in line with Brown (2004), who claimed that the test items must be able to differentiate proficiencies among the test takers and the test writers always used inferential questions for this purpose (Kispal, 2008). Likewise, Basaraba et al. (2013) revealed that *inference questions* are significantly more challenging for students than *literal comprehension* and *reinterpretation questions*. Thus, it can be claimed that readers of higher proficiency always perform better on *inference questions*.

2. No Existence of Questions of Evaluation, Personal Response, and How Writers Say What They Mean

The findings showed that *evaluation questions*, *personal responses*, and *how writers say what they mean* were not found in the corpus. These are classified as higher-level questions because they ask the reader to go beyond a mere literal understanding of the passage (Basaraba et al., 2013). This claim is in line with Day & Park (2005) in that the

readers who attempt these questions must rely heavily on their thought, mood, and experience to answer such questions. In addition, these question types always call for an open-ended response. Since the responses seem very detailed, this type of grading must be concerned with *rater reliability* (Brown, 2004). Reliability refers to inconsistent scoring systems due to unclear scoring criteria and biased judgments of raters. Hughes (2003) pointed out that designers of standardized tests should consider using items permitting objective scoring because objectivity can help avoid subjective decisions on the part of the scorer, and it increases the reliability of the test. The objectivity of answers and the reliability of the marking system might also affect IELTS preparation tests; hence, to avoid the risk of rater reliability adversely affecting tests, subjective, open-ended questions are always omitted. That is why the *evaluation questions*, *personal responses*, and *how writers say what they mean* were not found in the sample texts.

Nonetheless, the findings in this study were contrastive to the study of Gilson et al. (2014), which found that 73% of follow-up questions used in the classroom were higher-level thinking, such as questions of *inference*, *evaluation*, and *personal response*. The purpose of using follow-up questions for students in the class is to assist teachers in scaffolding and promoting students' higher cognitive abilities (McConney & Perry, 2011; Oliveira, 2010). On the contrary, a standardized test (i.e., a preparation test) aims to assess students' broad proficiency and competency regarding the accuracy and fluency of using a language (Brown, 2004). Having this as the purpose of the assessment, the *questions of evaluation*, *personal response*, and *how writers say what they mean* were not found in this study.

B. Discussion of Findings Two: Question Formats in the Reading Tests

The dominant formats in the IELTS preparation tests were *multiple-choice*, *identifying information*, and *completion*. This is not surprising as these three formats are always predominant in standardized reading tests. The findings align with that of Hughes (2003), who argued that *multiple-choice items*, *identifying information*, and *completion* are the most common question formats in assessing students' language abilities. Koda (2005) further supported the notion that *multiple-choice* is perhaps the most commonly used format in standardized reading comprehension tests because it ensures objectivity. The scoring procedure of this format is consistent and straightforward; thus, the test designer chose to write the reading comprehension test items as *multiple choice*. *Identifying information* is another form of *multiple-choice* item (Hughes, 2003) as it provides objectivity in its scoring procedure.

Additionally, *completion* or *gap-filling* is another dominant format in the test. One reason why this question format is predominant might be due to its relative ease in test construction, administration, and scoring. The cloze procedure is also widely used in reading comprehension tests. To substitute for the blanks, the reader must be sensitive to semantic and syntactic constraints in each local context, regarded as a reliable indicator of reading ability (Koda, 2005).

C. Discussion of Supplementary Findings: Patterns of Question Arrangement in the Tests

1. Conventional Pattern: Literal and Reinterpretation in the Beginning Position

Pattern 1 (L-R-L/I), the most frequently found in the corpus, begins with basic questions, namely *literal comprehension* and *reinterpretation* in the second position. In line with pattern 2 (R-L-R), the questions of *reinterpretation* and *literal comprehension* are the first and second positions. The beginning positions of the questions implied the aim to practice students in processing foundation skills, namely searching, combining, and restating information or ideas in a passage, in answer these types of questions. The tasks need to assure that students can perform these basic comprehension skills before doing the more difficult question (i.e., *inference question*).

This claim is in line with what Ollennu and Etsey (2015) affirmed when they said that the position of question items affected the students' ability to do the test. Furthermore, Nagy et al. (2018) revealed that question items in later positions became more difficult for students. The effects of later item positions showed a relationship with students' lower effort in reading. This implies that the question items in the beginning positions receive out-sized reading effort and better responses while being less difficult for students. This meant that the reading preparation test designed *literal comprehension* and *reinterpretation questions* in the beginning position of the tasks with the intention of students doing these fundamental questions with a suitable level of effort and precision.

2. Unconventional Pattern: Inference in the Beginning Position

Pattern 3 (I-L/R) begins with the *inference question* in the question set. The *inference* is a more difficult question than the two former types because it requires higher skills, namely making inferences from information in a passage to answer the question (Basaraba et al., 2013; Dagostino et al., 2014). The beginning position of the *inference question* indicates the purpose of differentiating between the lower and higher proficiency readers. Low proficiency readers typically have low motivation, a more negative attitude, and increased anxiety when reading (Torudom & Taylor, 2017); hence, they might be discouraged if they were asked to complete the difficult items at the beginning. Thus, the low proficient readers need to use more effort and cognitive abilities to do the inference question at the beginning of the test, resulting in readers being exhausted and discouraged before they complete all test items.

In contrast, for high proficiency readers, who acquire inferential skills and have high motivation in reading (Torudom & Taylor, 2017; Liu, 2021), the position of the items and types might not affect their reading ability. Thus, the preparation test posits the inference in the beginning position to assess the current proficient level of the readers, and readers can practice related inferential skills for higher professional levels. This is why the author changed the position

of *literal* and *reinterpretation questions* to later positions and posited *inference questions* at the beginning of the reading task.

The claim is in line with Nagy et al. (2018), who revealed the item position (item arrangement) affected the difficulty of the test. Nevertheless, the study found that the effect of item position in the test was weaker among students with high decoding speed and reading motivation. This indicated that students' reading variables (i.e., including decoding speed and reading motivation) can vary the effects of the item position. Those with a high level of decoding speed and reading motivation received weak effects from the item position. Therefore, the study affirms that the students with a certain level of reading ability (proficiency) will be able to do the test without interference from the question position.

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on significant findings, the current study provides two important implications for students who want to develop their reading comprehension competence and the teachers who want to promote students' proficiency in academic reading comprehension.

The study showed that the common question types in the preparation tests were *questions of literal comprehension* (43.8%), *questions involving reinterpretation* (43.3%), and *questions of inference* (12.9%). Thus, students should realize that the knowledge of *literal comprehension* and *reinterpretation questions* are dominant in the reading tasks. These two types of questions ask students to demonstrate an understanding of the content of a text, which is fundamental and essential for assessing comprehension ability. The students should practice searching for information provided directly in the text for *literal comprehension questions* and searching for pieces of information from different parts of the text to interpret ideas for *questions involving reinterpretation* to strengthen their reading basics. As a result of these findings, students can know the question types corresponding with the types in the reading comprehension test.

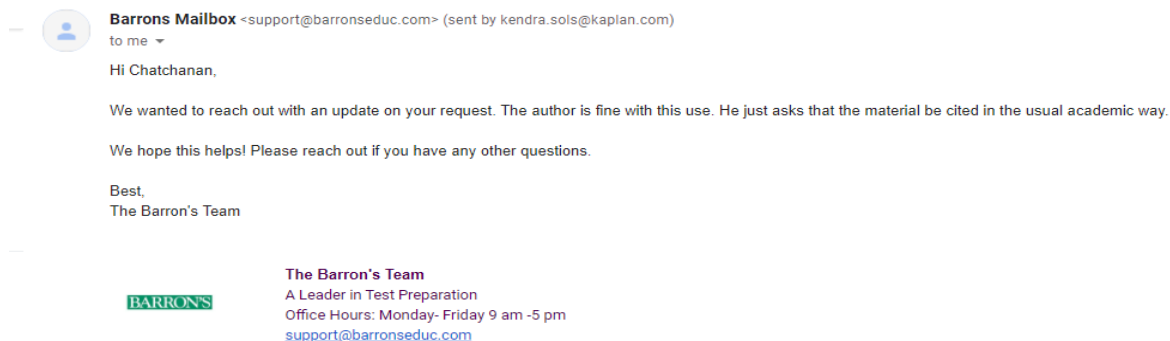
Furthermore, the findings regarding question formats suggest students should be familiar with the common question formats found in reading comprehension tests, including *multiple-choice*, *identifying information*, and *completion*. That way, students can prepare themselves with the methods to cope with the requirements of each question format. According to the findings, open-ended question formats, which are more open to indefinite answers or opinions from students, were not included in the reading preparation tests. The common question formats in this study suggest that students mainly perform the reading tests with comprehension based on the literal information in the text.

The last findings regarding patterns of reading question arrangement in the tests recommended teachers provide a set of fundamental questions, including *literal comprehension* and *reinterpretation questions*, at the beginning of the reading task (e.g., patterns 1 and 2). This allows students to process basic reading skills such as searching for specific information and interpreting ideas from the passage with a higher level of reading enjoyment and effort than the items in later positions (Nagy et al., 2018). Likewise, teachers are recommended to posit the *inference* in the beginning position of the reading task (e.g., pattern 3) to improve students' higher reading skills after students are equipped with the basic reading skills required to respond to *literal comprehension* and *reinterpretation questions*. The beginning position of the *inference* question would ensure that students can practice processing answers for the query with high effort and enjoyment, and students would not be exhausted or despaired during the *inference questions* (Nagy et al., 2018). As a result, essential reading skills for answering three main types, including *literal comprehension*, *reinterpretation*, and *inference questions* with the different item arrangement patterns, will be improved.

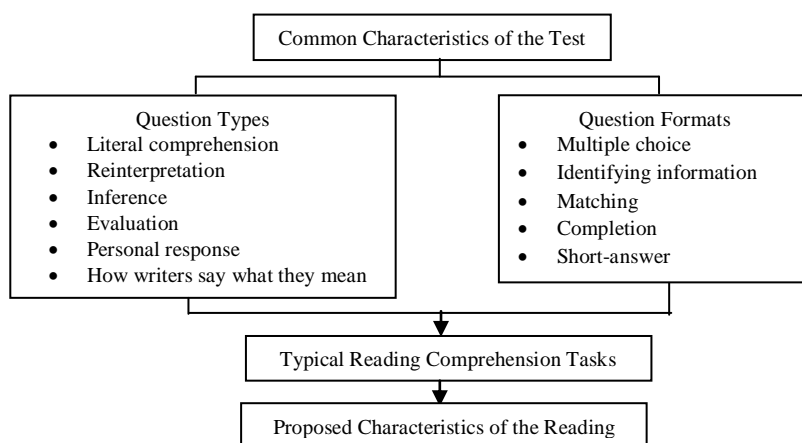
VII. SUMMARY

The current study aimed to investigate 1) question types posted in reading tasks and 2) question formats for reading tests. This investigation revealed two significant findings: (1) the three common question types in the reading sections of IELTS preparation tests, namely *questions of literal comprehension*, followed by *questions involving reinterpretation* and *questions of inference*, and (2) five-question formats in the reading tests, namely *multiple choice*, *identifying information*, *completion*, *matching*, and *short answer*. Furthermore, the study also revealed the supplementary finding of (3) four patterns of question arrangement based on data of question type from finding 1. The findings from this investigation are beneficial to students preparing themselves for a test of reading comprehension or enhancing their reading skills, while the teacher and instructional designer can use the findings to improve students' reading comprehension performance.

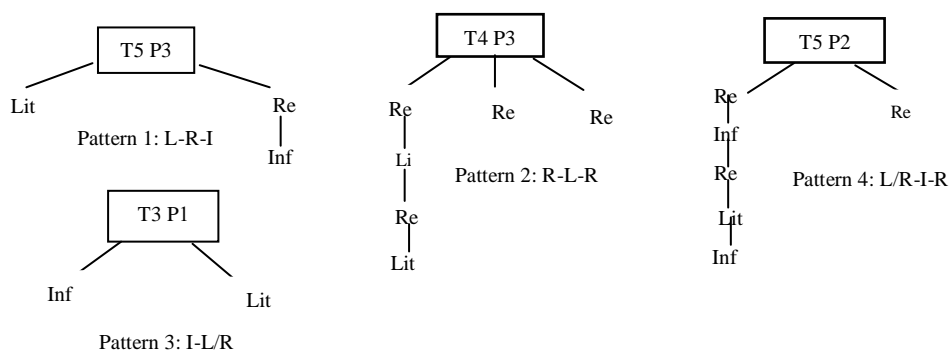
APPENDIX A. PERMISSION FOR THE USE OF BARRON’S IELTS PREPARATION TEST BOOK



APPENDIX B. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY



APPENDIX C. SAMPLES OF THE QUESTION ARRANGEMENT PATTERNS



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