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Investigating Perceptions and Preferences for TOEFL iBT and IELTS Tests in  
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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
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## Abstract

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL iBT) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) both have varying degrees of acceptance worldwide. Studies conducted to explore stakeholders' beliefs and attitudes towards these tests suggest that test takers' voices can provide valuable information about the tests. This mixed method research aims to examine Armenian test takers' perceptions about these tests, in order to gain insights on tests from different perspectives and serve as a basis for stakeholders to make further improvements and grow exams' market share. The findings of the study are based on data collected through three surveys with TOEFL iBT and IELTS test intenders and test takers, and interviews with people who had taken both tests. The 453 participants are pupils from state and private high schools, university students, teachers, tutors, and others with different profiles. The results of the study show that the TOEFL iBT test is at the height of its popularity in Armenia, compared to the IELTS test which needs publicity. The attitudes toward the IELTS test sections, particularly listening and speaking, are more positive than those toward the TOEFL iBT test. The main misunderstandings are connected with the assumptions that TOEFL iBT is accepted in much more institutions worldwide than IELTS, and that the tests use American and British varieties of English, instead of the reported Standardized English.

*Keywords:* IELTS, TOEFL iBT, perceptions, attitudes

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The number of IELTS and TOEFL iBT test takers is growing all over the world day by day. Armenia is not an exception, as an increasingly big number of people take these tests pursuing educational and professional, licensing and certification or other personal purposes. In Armenia, the TOEFL iBT test is administered at several universities and private language centers, and the IELTS test is administered only at the British Council. The sample was gathered by the cooperation with all the possible centers and universities that agreed to take part in this research study. The study is based on test intenders' perceptions and test takers' testing experiences.

Previously no studies have been carried out to identify the triggers of preferences of IELTS and TOEFL iBT test takers in Armenia, to find out the basic channels of information that test takers receive information on the tests, observe test takers' and intenders' profile differences and reveal the attitudes toward the TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests in Armenia. So far few studies have been conducted to investigate test takers' opinions on tests from various perspectives, but the same studies prove that customers' voices can provide worthwhile information on the tests for the stakeholders (Coleman, Starfield & Hagan, 2003; Ginther & Elder, 2014; Gu & So, 2015; Hyatt, 2013, Liying & DeLuca, 2011; Malone & Montee, 2014; Rasti, 2009; Suryaningsih, 2014; Xi, 2010).

Meanwhile, research suggests that stakeholders need to understand customers' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about the tests so as to be able to keep pace with the demands and maintain high standards, as long as tests crucially impact test takers' lives (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 2000; Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007; Kunnan, 2012).

Thus, this is the first study in the Armenian context in general that aims to touch upon all the issues mentioned above. The significance of this study lies in the stakeholders' need to reveal

customers' understandings and attitudes toward the tests that assumedly affect their choices of the tests in order to improve the quality of test administration and to grow exam volumes and market share in Armenia.

In this mixed methods research, the following questions are addressed that need to be answered:

1. What are (if any) the differences between TOEFL iBT and IELTS intender and test taker profiles?
2. What are the main sources and channels of information on the tests?
3. What are the main reasons for test takers and intenders choosing TOEFL iBT over IELTS or IELTS over TOEFL iBT?
4. What are (if any) customers' perceptions and misperceptions about IELTS and TOEFL iBT (popular beliefs/ misbeliefs)?

The next chapter will cover the relevant literature on customers' and stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes toward TOEFL iBT, IELTS, and other high stakes tests. The third chapter will describe the methodology and introduce the participants, instruments, as well as the data collection and analysis procedures of this study. The fourth chapter will present and discuss the results of the study. The findings, implications, and limitations of the study and suggestions for further research will be discussed in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The aim of this study is to investigate test takers' voices about tests that can provide valuable feedback and insights on tests from different perspectives and serve as a basis for stakeholders to make further improvements. In this chapter, the literature relevant to this study will be reviewed. The subsequent sections will touch upon the notion of high stakes language testing, provide a general introduction to the IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests, and discuss some studies conducted to explore the stakeholders' perceptions and beliefs about the various dimensions of the two tests.

### **2.1. High-Stakes Language Testing**

Testing language proficiency for different purposes has become an important aspect in almost all professional spheres. As noted by Bachman (2011), the purposes that tests are intended to serve are crucial, so this should be taken into account when developing language tests and interpreting their results. This means that tests play decisive functions as stakeholders base their choices on test scores, which in their turn impact the lives of test takers, "and when these consequences radically alter test takers' major career path or life event, such tests are termed high-stakes tests" (Kunnan, 2012, p.1). The term "high stakes" was first used in the 1980s to describe tests that would notably affect test-takers' future lives. Up to nowadays, the term bears the same concept, as consequences of high-stakes tests can carry decisive functions and may or may not be beneficial or desirable (Klinger & Luce-Kapler, 2007). Hence, the outcome of tests, presented by grades or such special distinctions as pass/fail, somehow result in classification, which can bring forth significant results for test takers.

There may be various uses of language tests, but in most cases, language tests are used for educational purposes to evaluate test-takers' language proficiency in order to make decisions. For instance, there are tests for entrance and graduation purposes, for professional licensing,

certification, and other reasons. Consequently, certain considerations and acknowledged assumptions should be made to justify a test usage and its further results. With this consistent intention series of steps are set for test administration and scoring. Due to the standards used for administration and scoring purposes, which are meant to maintain fairness and equality, the tests are called standardized. If the tests are standardized, it means that the results are comparable across individuals and institutions and interpreted on an international scale (Kunnan, 2012, Bachman, 2011, Testing - Standardized Tests And High-stakes Assessment, 2018).

Furthermore, according to Kunnan (2012), many high-stakes tests are considered standardized if they are administered to test takers in testing centers, under standardized conditions. The standards refer to not only test services and administration, but also the test content, scoring and results reporting. Nevertheless, the author claims that not all high-stakes tests can be considered standardized, bringing examples of high-stakes tests for country citizenship and immigration (2012).

However, high-stakes standardized language testing cannot escape criticism concerning its scoring reliability, the absence of their systematic validation, the necessity of comprehensive test evaluations and independent authorities to review the tests, and such (Kunnan, 2012). Despite this, there are quite powerful safeguards that can reduce negative commentary. Among these safeguards, the simplest possible are relying on core principles of language testing suggested by Bachman and Palmer (1996), referring to standards for educational and language testing proposed by AERA, APA, and NCME (1999), dealing with codes of ethics presented by ILTA (2000) as guidelines for test production, administration, scoring, and results interpretation. Alternatively, within the frames of ethics, Hamp-Lyons (2000) introduces the notions of social, professional and individual responsibilities of the stakeholders of large-scale tests as they have a

great impact on all the test takers' individual, professional and social lives. As the author mentions, goals and values vary from stakeholder to stakeholder, and, although their competition is getting more and more intense, they still need to question "what they do and how they do it: this is what I mean when I refer to ethical language testing" (p.581).

## **2.2. Introduction to IELTS and TOEFL Tests**

High-stakes standardized language tests have always been in the center of attention of linguists and test administrators, and, consequently, there have been major developments in language testing, particularly concerning IELTS (International English Language Testing System) and TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) that are the most popular standardized English language tests taken and accepted all around the world. As stated by Leung and Lewkowicz (2006), TOEFL and IELTS are "almost household names in professional circles" (p. 212). Both of these tests have histories that go back more than 40 years. These tests have been through many changes, especially for the last 15 years, and the main aim is still to measure test takers' language proficiency in the best way possible. Henceforth, various studies were conducted to explore the power of these two tests in the society, and the attitude of people towards the tests.

Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) was developed in the early 1960s by the National Council on the Testing English as a Foreign Language. In 1965, the College Board and Educational Testing Service (ETS) assumed joint responsibility for the testing program. It was aimed to assess the English proficiency of nonnative speakers who were seeking admissions into universities, colleges or other institutions where the language of instruction was English. At the very beginning the test was launched in a paper-based format, then it evolved into a computer-

based test and, in 2005, the internet-based version of TOEFL was developed (TOEFL iBT Research, insight TOEFL program history, 2006).

Nowadays, there are two formats of the TOEFL test conducted by ETS: Paper-Based Testing (PBT) and Internet-Based Testing (iBT) (Alderson, 2009). TOEFL iBT came to replace the TOEFL computer-based test (CBT) in 2005. These two tests are different not only in format but also in content and in the skills they are to assess. Currently, TOEFL iBT lasts for about four hours, and it consists of four sections, with 30 marks available for each section (total 120 marks). While the earliest version of TOEFL, i.e., CBT variant assessed only reading, listening and writing skills, the newer TOEFL iBT measures applicants' all four language skills that are necessary for everyday academic life (Alderson, 2009; Sawaki, Stricker, & Oranje, 2009). Regarding content, the TOEFL iBT Reading section, which is multiple-choice-only, measures test-takers' ability to understand reading passages about the given topic. The Listening section measures test takers' comprehension and their ability to synthesize information on the same topic from different sources. The Speaking section measures test-takers' ability to express their opinions on a chosen subject/given text. In the Writing section, test-takers should write two essays based on a given topic and a lecture. The aim is to assess the organization, grammar, and vocabulary of the writing (Alderson, 2009; ets.org). Overall, as stated in TOEFL iBT Research, insight TOEFL program history, the construct of TOEFL iBT aimed to measure the "communicative competence - the ability to put language knowledge to use in relevant contexts" (2006, p. 4.). Overall, more than 10,000 colleges, universities, institutions and various agencies in more than 130 countries recognize the TOEFL iBT.

The other high-stakes standardized language test that is accepted worldwide is the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). At the very beginning IELTS was

known as ELTS (English Language Testing Service), first introduced in the late 1970s, as a language test for specific purposes (O'Sullivan, 2012, cited in Suryaningsih, 2014). It was developed to replace English Proficiency Test Battery (EPTB) created by the joint efforts of the British Council and the University of Birmingham in 1963. This was a standardized language test, which measured only reading and listening skills of the test takers who wanted to apply to colleges and universities in the United Kingdom (IELTS, 2017). Initially, ELTS proposed six modules generated from different disciplines for specific purposes: life sciences, social studies, physical sciences, technology, medicine, and general academic. Further on, the number of modules was reduced to three. In 1995, specific modules were extracted for the test to fit applicants' various academic backgrounds, hence becoming international. Instead, all the test takers had the same content in their tests, with the only choice of either academic or general training test options. Further changes were done concerning the scheduling of the speaking section and several more concerning the assessment of the four sections (O'Sullivan, 2012, cited in Suryaningsih, 2014).

Nowadays, there are two versions of IELTS. The Academic IELTS test is for higher educational purposes or professional registration, and the General Training test is for secondary education, training programs, employment or emigration. The two tests are different regarding content and context, but the allocated time, test format and score reporting are the same. The total test lasts for about two hours and 45 minutes and a nine-band scale is used to evaluate each section. In case of both IELTS tests, all the sections except the Speaking component are to be completed on the same day, and there are no breaks in between the components. The Speaking unit is usually completed a week before or after the test. Overall, IELTS is available at more than 1,100 places all around the world (IELTS, 2017).



### **2.3. Studies on Stakeholders' and Test Takers' Perceptions of IELTS and TOEFL iBT Tests**

Various aspects of the TOEFL iBT and IELTS high-stakes language tests have been studied so far, and the questions of their power in society and the impact on test-takers' lives is proved to be indisputable. Gu and So (2015) suggest seven factors that influence these high-stakes tests' global perception: "test preparation, registration, cost, administration, score report, score use, and marketing" (p.19). Furthermore, Templer (2004) brings forward the idea that the scores provided by TOEFL and IELTS "have assumed a prime classificatory (and disciplinary) function" (p. 189). Nevertheless, he states that there are more complex issues that need to be addressed in research.

One of the much-discussed questions concerning these high stakes tests is the British and American variety of English tested on the exams: with TOEFL iBT imposing American standard, and IELTS imposing British standard (Templer, 2004). Hamid's (2014) study notes the following:

The demographic dominance of 'non-native' speakers of English and the growing recognition of world Englishes (WE) call for critical examinations of varieties of English underpinning international proficiency tests. Expectedly, there has been an ongoing debate between those who argue for British and American norms and those who argue for all English norms including WE in international tests. (p. 263)

The author further assures that Englishes not only potentially influence language tests, but they also shape the characteristics of test takers, that are assumedly relevant to "the design, administration, and consequences of tests" (Hamid, 2014, p. 264). Hence it can be inferred that

maintaining language standards for social-ethical and practical-communicative reasons is crucial, as this is what influences test-takers' attitudes and perceptions about the tests, which shape general reputation of tests.

TOEFL iBT and IELTS are considered to be the most widely recognized and accepted tests worldwide, so investigating stakeholders' and test-takers' attitudes and perceptions about the tests tends to be researched in language testing and assessment only for the last decade or more. Although the studies conducted so far are not that many, they do imply the importance of participants' feedback on language testing, suggesting that both stakeholders' and test takers' opinions can serve as a valuable source of information for further improvement of the tests.

According to a small-scale study within one educational context, focusing on high stakes English language tests, including TOEFL iBT and IELTS, described test takers' experiences within the following eight categories that are interconnected and interdependent: "(a) test administration and testing conditions, (b) timing, (c) test structure and content, (d) scoring effects, (e) preparation and test-taking strategies, (f) test purpose, (g) psychological factors, and (h) external factors and test consequences" (Liyong & Deluca, 2011, pp. 109-110). As it is established by Liyong & Deluca (2011), all these eight categories are considered to be threats to test validity, and they believe that "it is necessary to examine how test-takers view testing events, and how their experiences contribute to test validity" (p. 108). Additionally, an approach proposed by Xi (2010) asserts that fairness is an "aspect of validity," as "anything that weakens fairness compromises the validity of a test" (p. 147).

This issue of validity and fairness was also addressed by Murray, Riazi, and Cross (2012) who stated that test-takers' attitudes toward tests might have a significant effect on test validity. Suryaningsih (2014) supported this idea, stating that test takers' voices about tests are important,

and their perceptions are interconnected with construct validity. The research done by Suryaningsih (2014) brought forth the following three aspects of IELTS and TOEFL tests that the participants perceived differently: on the tests (e.g., the environment and the technology), in the tests (e.g., the tasks and the time), and the effects of the tests" (p. 86). It can be inferred that there are three general aspects of IELTS and TOEFL tests that participants worldwide perceive differently: a) recognition (i.e., brand awareness, institutional requirements, test acceptance and other); b) format and perceived chances of success (i.e., ease of receiving good results, the format and methods of testing, test day experience, the fairness of the assessment, ease of registration and other); and c) services and location (e.g., quality of administration/service, the location of test venues, frequency of the exam, price sensitivity and other). These all are reasons for one test to be preferred over another (Ginther & Elder, 2014).

Additionally, Malone and Montee (2014) suggest that culture and origin also shape and impact beliefs on TOEFL iBT test. The participants of their study were German, Saudi Arabian, and South Korean students, and according to the results, culture and the country of origin are "consistent with significant differences in beliefs" (p. 34). In the meantime, Ginther and Elder (2014) raised the question whether general perceptions of tests impact the preference of TOEFL iBT over IELTS and the preference of IELTS over TOEFL iBT respectively at Purdue and Melbourne Universities, and revealed that neither of the institutions displayed a dominating preference for the tests, "expressing distrust of the information that all such tests provide" (p.26).

Based on perceptions about TOEFL iBT and IELTS, researchers have so far reported both positive and negative attitudes towards the two tests. The findings of several studies revealed that TOEFL iBT tends to be perceived negatively in most of the above-mentioned categories (Suryaningsih, 2014) because of several issues connected with computer literacy and

eye fatigue (Noubandegani, 2012; Stricker & Attali, 2010). Earlier, another study was done by Stricker, Wilder & Rock (2004) to evaluate test takers' familiarity with computers and their acceptance of the computer-based version of the TOEFL. Surveys, conducted with participants from in Buenos Aires, Cairo, and Frankfurt, showed almost the same moderately positive attitudes toward the TOEFL, with slight computer anxiety, but overall acceptance of computer-based testing.

Further research asserted that IELTS is perceived more positively from student perspective in Australian, UK and Chinese tertiary institutions (Coleman, Starfield & Hagan, 2003; Hyatt, 2013). Interestingly, studies conducted in the Iranian context suggest that Iranians express positive attitudes toward both tests (Hosseini, Hosseini, & Roudbari, 2013; Poorsoti & Asl, 2015; Soureshjani, Riahipour, & Safikhani, 2015). Furthermore, Poorsoti and Asl (2015) claim that there is no significant relationship between test takers' attitudes toward TOEFL iBT and their scores; instead, only environmental factors, according to the test takers, are related to the amount of success in the test. Interestingly, Rasti (2009) noted that participants' perceptions of IELTS were positive, and there were no significant relationships between test takers' attitudes about IELTS and their characteristics (gender, age, and educational background). Additionally, Soureshjani, Riahipour, and Safikhani (2015) revealed that Iranians' attitudes toward TOEFL iBT did not vary according to gender.

All in all, although few studies were conducted to observe test takers perceptions, beliefs and attitudes toward the TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests, the literature above suggests that test takers' voices about tests can provide valuable feedback and insights on tests from different perspectives and serve as a basis for test developers and administrators to make further improvements.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The present study is a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research, that aimed to investigate the IELTS and TOEFL iBT test takers' and intenders' perceptions and attitudes toward the tests in Armenia. The research questions of this study are repeated for the ease of reference:

1. What are (if any) the differences between TOEFL iBT and IELTS intender and test taker profiles?
2. What are the main sources and channels of information on the tests?
3. What are the main reasons for test takers and intenders choosing TOEFL iBT over IELTS or IELTS over TOEFL iBT?
4. What are (if any) customers' perceptions and misperceptions about IELTS and TOEFL iBT (popular beliefs/ misbeliefs)?

The underlying assumption was that there should be three aspects of the tests that test takers in Armenia base their choices: test recognition, test format, and testing services and environment. The participants were initially divided into three groups for whom corresponding surveys were designed: (a) a survey for IELTS/TOEFL iBT intenders (including those not decided on the test yet), (b) a survey for IELTS test takers, and (c) a survey for TOEFL iBT test takers. During the data collection, several people reported having taken both of the tests, so a decision was made to have semi-structured interviews with those who had already taken both IELTS and TOEFL iBT.

This chapter is composed of four sections. In the first section, instruments used for the research will be presented. In the second section, the sampling procedure and the participants of the study will be described. The third section will provide information on

data collection process. The final section will discuss how the collected data were analyzed.

### **3.1. Instruments**

The data were collected through three different questionnaires for the three sample groups and semi-structured interviews with those who had taken both tests. The following subsections provide a detailed description of each instrument.

#### **3.1.1. Questionnaires**

Initially, one questionnaire was designed and adapted to the three target groups: questionnaire for IELTS/TOEFL iBT intenders (including those not decided on the test yet), IELTS test takers, and TOEFL iBT test takers. The questionnaire for IELTS/TOEFL iBT intenders (see Appendix A) consisted of fifteen multiple choice questions designed to investigate on what basis the test takers prefer IELTS over TOEFL iBT and vice versa and to check beliefs and misunderstandings concerning the two tests. The separate questionnaires for IELTS and TOEFL iBT test takers (see Appendices B and C) consisted of sixteen multiple choice questions to find out the main triggers of test preferences and observe the global evaluations of the tests' four sections aimed to measure the four skills.

The surveys begin with questions of demographic nature on a participant's age, gender, educational background and current affiliation in order to find out differences (if any) between TOEFL iBT and IELTS intender profiles. The question items regarding test takers' profiles were adapted from Malone and Montee's (2014) study. Question items regarding the three aspects of the test were taken from Ginther, and Elder's (2014) study and the global evaluation items in the surveys for IELTS and TOEFL iBT test takers were taken from Stricker and Attali's (2010) research.

In the three surveys, some questions required a single answer while some suggested selecting all the options that applied. The questions also had the “Other (please specify)” option for the respondents to provide variants that were not included in the questionnaire. All the questionnaires started with a brief description on the aim of the study and included a consent form informing that their participation was anonymous, voluntary, and confidential (see Appendices A, B, and C). The questionnaires were in English, as the English proficiency level of the people who were asked to fill out the surveys was enough to understand and answer the questions properly.

### **3.1.2. Interviews**

The necessity of interviews with people who took both TOEFL iBT and IELTS emerged during the survey. The interviews were conducted to follow up on specific information about test takers’ testing experiences, their perceptions and beliefs about the tests, the extent to which the two tests are perceived as similar or different and the main reasons for their choices connected with tests’ preferences.

The individual interviews were conducted in English with six people who had taken both IELTS and TOEFL iBT: four interviews with current university students doing their Bachelor studies took place at locations convenient for the participants, and the other two with tutors who had taken both tests were conducted via telephone because of time constraints. The participants were assured that the interviews were anonymous and confidential.

The interview segments and questions (see Appendix D) were retrieved from the Master’s thesis ‘Students’ perceptions of international English language testing system (IELTS) and test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) tests’ authored by

Suryaningsih (2014). The first two segments consisted of the same set of questions which were about their attitudes toward TOEFL iBT and IELTS respectively, and the third one included questions comparing both of the tests. The questions were modified in order to meet the needs of this research. The interviews lasted for about twenty minutes and were recorded and transcribed right after each interview.

### **3.2. Participants**

This study focused on stakeholder beliefs and perceptions about the TOEFL iBT and IELTS, examining the factors that affect test takers' preferences when choosing the tests. The sample included pupils from public and private high schools, students from state and private universities and colleges, and others with different profiles. The total number of the participants was 453, who were native Armenians. The target groups were: a) IELTS/TOEFL iBT intenders and those not decided on the test yet (188 participants); b) IELTS test takers (118 participants); c) TOEFL iBT test takers (141 participants); and d) Both TOEFL iBT and IELTS test takers (6 participants). The participants had intermediate and above knowledge of English and were aware of the TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests.

### **3.3. Data Collection Procedure**

This study used maximum variation and snowball methods sampling in order to have a big number of representatives from all the possible groups that intended to take IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests or had already taken either of the tests and both of them. In order to have a higher response rate, surveys were administered using both hardcopy and online delivery formats. Before being released, the three surveys were piloted on small sample groups. The results of the piloting revealed several technical issues such as typo



errors and the need to have the choice of several options for the question number nine, as long as the two-third of the respondents selected more than one variant (the two-third of the respondents selected more than one option of the question number nine, so after the piloting this question suggested selecting all the options that would apply). As long as no critical issues were found after the piloting, the results were included in the outcome.

Aiming to reach the target number of respondents, firstly the social networking Web site Facebook was used to distribute the three surveys. Secondly, requests to participate in the study were emailed to three private high school administrations. Only one of them did not express interest to take part in the survey. One school preferred online versions of the surveys, and the other advised to distribute hard copies to their students to have the needed number of respondents. Thirdly, to include respondents from public schools and people with various backgrounds and occupations, hard copies of the questionnaires were distributed through three popular local language centers and private tutors offering TOEFL iBT and IELTS preparatory courses, to provide a sufficient response rate from this sample group.

Afterward, colleagues and acquaintances from three state universities helped to have former and current BA and MA students and all the possible candidates fitting the inclusion criteria complete either hard copy or online surveys. Meanwhile, the British Council of Armenia and several program chairs at the American University of Armenia also took part in the research providing respondents for the target sample groups. The final phase of data collection included semi-structured individual interviews with six participants who reported having taken both TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests right during the surveys administration and expressed willingness to provide more detailed information

on their experiences connected with the tests. Overall, because of the indirect methods used to find participants (e.g., Facebook), it was impossible to calculate the response rate.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

The data collected for this study were both quantitative, from the three questionnaires, and qualitative, from the interviews. In order to analyze the quantitative data, the MS Office Excel and Google forms were used.

For the qualitative data analysis, the interviews conducted with the six participants were first transcribed, and then analyzed according to the common themes. The results of the surveys and interviews provided a big amount of data to address the four research questions.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to investigate possible differences in tests takers' profiles, the most common and preferable channels of information on IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests in Armenia, the key factors that Armenian test takers rely on while choosing either IELTS or TOEFL iBT tests, as well as Armenian test takers' general attitudes and understandings/misunderstandings about the two tests.

The study was conducted with 453 participants from state and private high schools, colleges and universities, testing centers, other institutions, and individuals. The data was collected through a 15-item survey for TOEFL iBT and IELTS intenders (see Appendix A), separate but similar 16-item questionnaires for TOEFL iBT and IELTS test takers (see Appendices B and C) and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix D) with six people who had taken both tests. The items on the questionnaire were designed in a multiple choice and checklists formats, containing a variant for a more specific response.

The three surveys aimed to find possible differences in test takers' and intenders' profiles, their perceptions, and attitudes toward the test and the most popular sources of information on the tests in Armenia. Additionally, the survey for test takers contained four general evaluation items to explore the efficacy of TOEFL iBT/IELTS in testing reading, listening, speaking and writing skills as perceived by test takers. The levels of evaluation were divided into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral.

With the same purposes, follow-up interviews were conducted with six participants that had taken both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests. The semi-structured interviews centered on the participant's responses to the main topics presented in the

questionnaire and included additional questions about the respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward the two tests.

The interviews also aimed to observe test takers attitudes toward the two tests' distinctive characteristics and peculiarities that affected their general beliefs about the tests. For the most part, the interviewees dealt with a single topic while responding to a question or a prompt, and they occasionally shifted the content category to elaborate on the idea expressed by them.

The findings are exemplified with corresponding extracts from the interviews, to illustrate the main ideas and beliefs of the respondents. The pseudonyms are used to refer to the respondents: Tom, Jack, Julia, Sally for the students, and Alan and Ella for the tutors. The excerpts taken from the interviews express the interviewees' original opinions.

The findings of the research are analyzed in this chapter according to four research questions. The first section aims to answer the RQ 1 and show the differences (if any) between test intenders and takers educational backgrounds and profiles, discussing the findings of demographic questions. The second section addresses the RQ 2 and discusses the data of the next five questions, which were to find out the most widespread sources of information about the tests. Additionally, data on the dates of testing and some more details of test intenders' and takers' plans and aims of taking the tests were collected. The third section explores the results of the questions, which investigated the reasons for both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests' preferences regarding test recognition, format, and services, thus addressing the RQ 3. Complementary data was collected through the last four questions in the surveys for TOEFL iBT and IELTS test takers, which were general evaluation items observing test takers' attitudes towards the tests.

This all, together with the results of interviews and the other survey for test intenders provided rich data to answer the RQ 4 in the fourth section.

#### **4.1. RQ 1: What are (if any) the Differences between TOEFL iBT and IELTS Intender and Test Taker Profiles?**

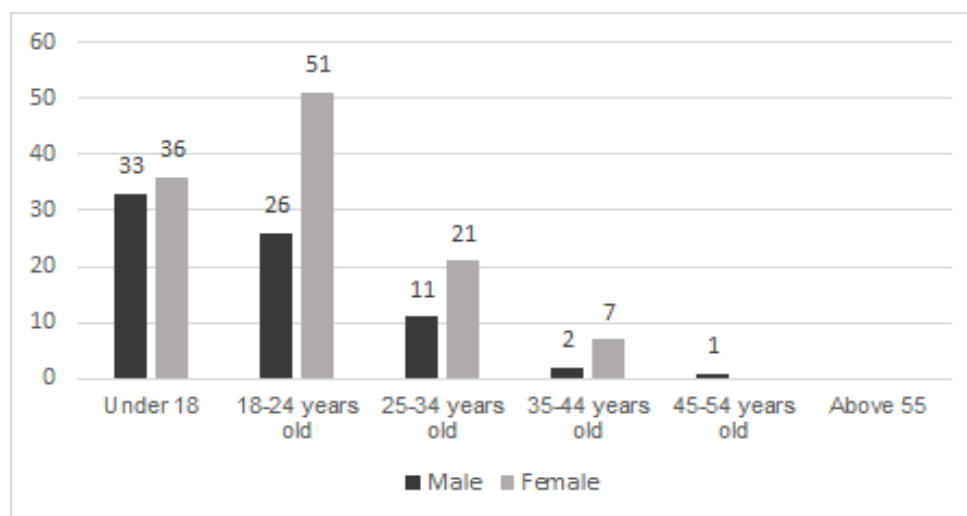
To answer the first research question, the survey data of test intenders, test takers and interviewees were analyzed, and parallels were drawn with the reviewed literature. The results are presented according to each sample group in the next subsections.

##### **4.1.1. Survey with Test Intenders**

A total of 188 participants, 60.6% (N=114) were females, and 39.4% (N=74) were males.

Figure 1 shows the numbers of male and female intenders according to age groups. It is clear from Figure 1 that the response rate is the highest in the first two age groups.

Although the number of female respondents exceeds in four age groups, the number of participants under 18 is balanced among males and females. The lowest response rate is provided by the age group of 45-54, and there are no responses from the last age group.



*Figure 1.* The numerical frequency of test intenders' responses according to age and gender.

Further on, profile characteristics of the test intenders and not decided yet on the test were compiled regarding their educational background and the level of current studies or other affiliations. The frequency of responses to these items is presented in numbers and percentages in Table 1.

Table 1

*The Highest Level of Education and Current Level of Study of Test Intenders*

Themes	Response categories	Frequency	%
The highest level of education	Secondary school diploma	74	39.4
	High school/college diploma	34	18.1
	Undergraduate degree	38	20.2
	Graduate degree	42	22.3
	Other	0	0
The current level of study	High school/college	72	38.3
	Undergraduate level	43	22.9
	Graduate level	49	26.1
	I am not a student	14	7.4
	Other	10	5.3
Total N		188	

As Table1 indicates, there are respondents with all the backgrounds mentioned in the items. Most of the participants, i.e., 42%, stated about having completed higher

education. The subsequent biggest part of the sample, i.e., 39.35% of test candidates, reported having a secondary school diploma. At the same time, a bigger number of university students (49% of the sample) took part in the survey than current students from public and private high schools and colleges. People, who choose to specify their answers, mentioned about being teachers, lecturers, and tutors. Overall, a balanced number of participants from all the target groups took part in the survey, except those who reported not being students.

#### 4.1.2. Survey with Test Takers

Of 259 respondents, 54.4% (N=141) took part in the survey for TOEFL iBT test takers, and 45.6% (N=118) participated in the survey for IELTS test takers. Overall, 41.7% male and 58.3% participants completed the surveys. Figure 2 distributes the numerical frequency of male and female participants according to age groups and the taken test.

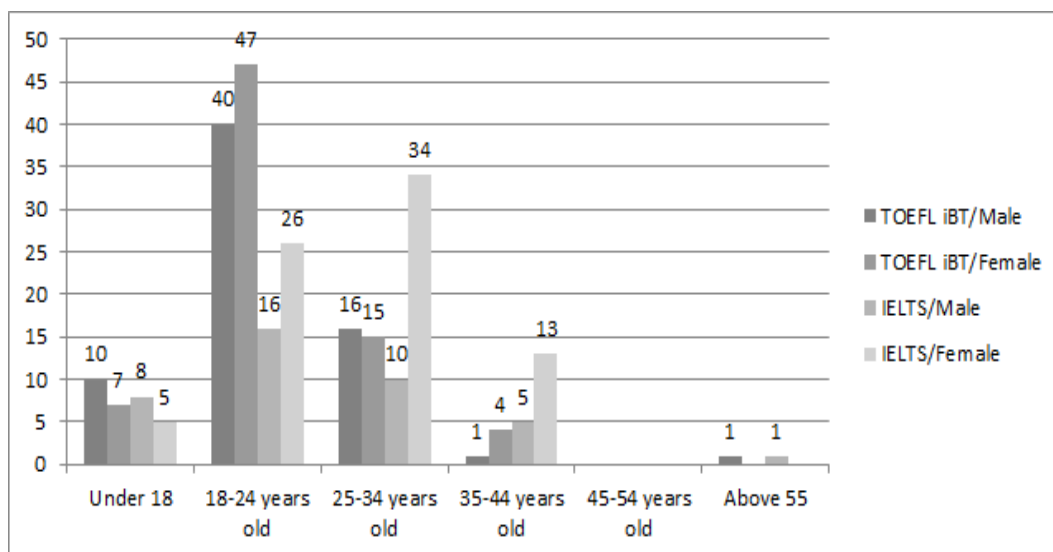


Figure 2. The numerical frequency of the two surveys' respondents according to gender and age groups.

As Figure 2 indicates, 18-24 years old participants provide the highest response rate in the surveys (49.8%). The second highest number of responses is provided by 25-34 years old test takers (29%). The groups of under 18 and 35-44 years old have moderately balanced response rates: 6.6% TOEFL iBT and 5% IELTS test takers. There was one male participant per each survey aged above 55, and no participants from the 45-55 years old group.

The surveys asked two more demographic questions concerning the participants' educational backgrounds and current level of studies or position (see Table 2). As Table 2 shows, almost equal number of the participants reported having completed undergraduate (35.9%) and graduate (35.5 %) degrees as the highest level of education. The rest 28.6% had high or secondary school diplomas. The respondents were also asked about their current studies or positions; overall, a bigger number of IELTS takers reported about not being students, contrary to TOEFL iBT takers, who were mostly current undergraduate and graduate students.

#### **4.2. RQ 2: What are the Main Sources and Channels of Information on the Tests?**

To answer the second research question, the survey data of test intenders, test takers and interviewees were analyzed, and parallels were drawn with the reviewed literature. The results are presented according to each sample group in the next subsections.

##### **4.2.1. Survey with Test Intenders**

The survey further on questioned test intenders about test preferences, the reasons for planning to take the tests and their estimated dates (if applicable), and most



importantly, to find out the main channels of communication that candidates use to receive information on both IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests. Questions number six, seven

Table 2

*The Highest Level of Education and Current Level of Study of Test Takers*

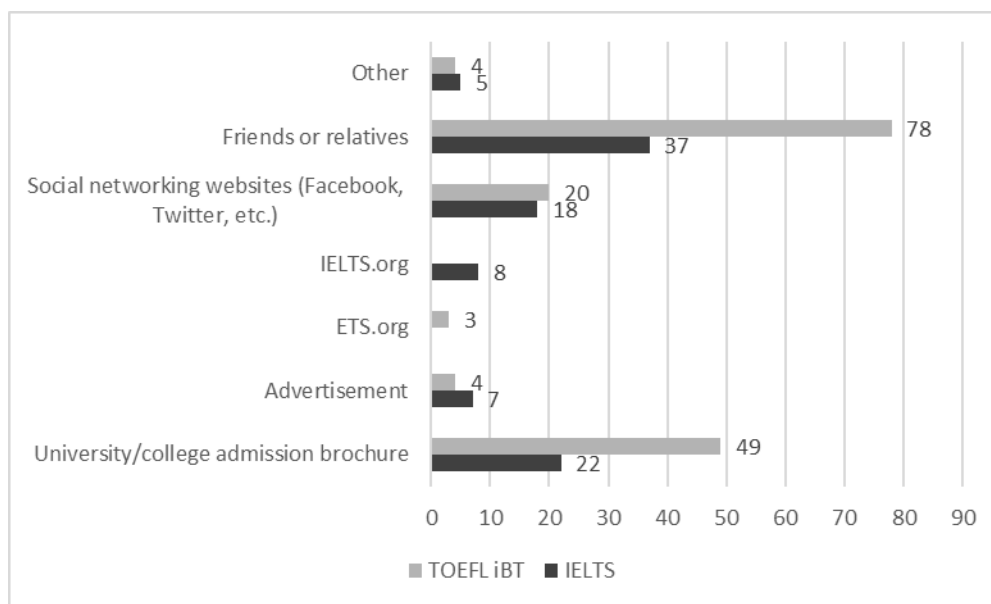
Themes	Response categories	TOEFL IBT		IELTS		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Highest level of education	High/ secondary school diploma	46	32.6	28	23.7	74	28.6
	College/undergraduate degree	58	41.1	34	28.8	92	35.5
	Graduate degree	37	26.2	56	47.5	93	35.9
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0
Current level of study	High school/college	6	4.2	4	3.4	10	3.9
	Undergraduate level	42	29.8	27	22.9	69	26.6
	Graduate level	75	53.2	28	23.7	103	39.8
	I am not a student	18	12.8	59	50	77	29.7
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total N		141		118		259	

and eight (see Appendix A) allowed choosing multiple answers. More than the half of the participants, i.e., 60.6% initially preferred to take TOEFL iBT, and the rest 39.4 % preferred IELTS. Overall, 66% of participants (N=123) reported having decided to take

the test within the next 12 months, 21.4% of them (N=41) was not sure about the dates, and the remaining 12.6% (N=23) did not plan to take the test within a year.

The survey next asked about the reasons for planning to take either TOEFL iBT or IELTS (see Figure 2). More than half of the respondents, i.e., 57.4% (N=108) planned to take one of the tests seeking admission into educational establishments. Meanwhile, 30.3% (N=57) of test candidates aimed to take a test for getting a better job. The options of getting licensing/certification and personal fulfillment were chosen by 20.7 % (N=39) and 26.1% (N=49) of test intenders respectively. Only five candidates (2.7%) reported choosing IELTS for immigration purposes.

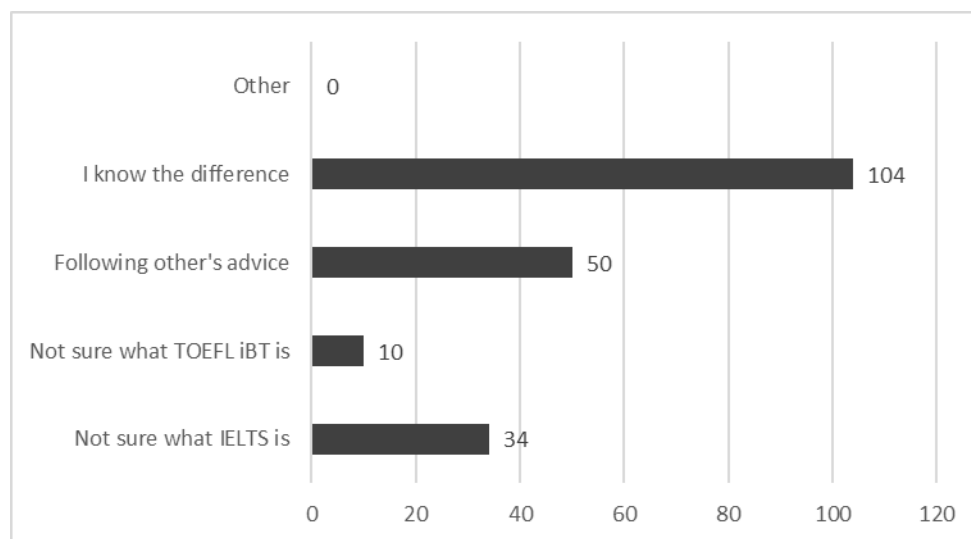
Furthermore, the survey asked the participants about the reasons for planning to take TOEFL iBT or IELTS (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* The numerical frequency of test intenders' responses about the sources of information.

Figure 3 indicates that the primary channels of communication were test intenders' relatives or friends (61.2%). Of 188 respondents, 37.8% first heard about TOEFL iBT and IELTS from a university brochure and 20.2% people learned about the test from social networking sites. Interestingly more people reported IELTS.org (4.3%) as a source than ETS.org. The option *other* (4.3%) contained such sources of information as the British Council (N=2), education fairs (N=2), and high schools (N=2).

The participants also responded to the question about the possible reasons for considering taking IELTS over TOEFL iBT or vice versa (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4.* The numerical frequency of test intenders' responses about the reasons for test preference.

It is necessary to highlight that a greater part of the sample, i.e., 18.1%, reported not being sure about what IELTS was, and meanwhile, only 5.3% was not aware what TOEFL iBT was. Additionally, 55.3% of the respondents knew the difference between the two tests, and 26.6% of the participants reported following others' advice relying on their experiences. One person specified that only TOEFL iBT could be funded by the

government, and 3.7% of respondents expressed the idea that a greater number of people were taking TOEFL iBT, because it had much more acceptance all over the world than IELTS, according to them.

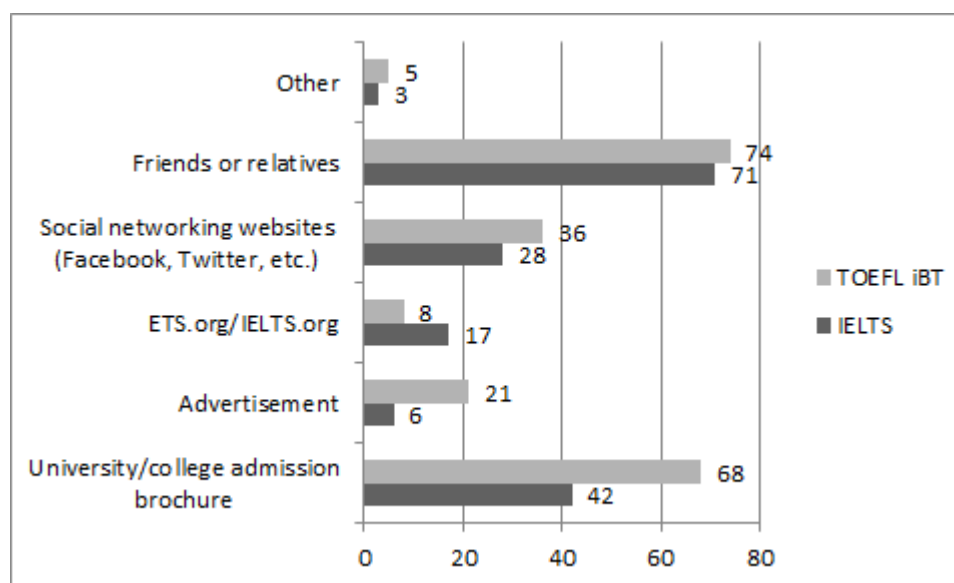
To understand whether test intenders' doubts could affect their preferences, the next survey item asked about which of the test the participants would like to take. More than half of the respondents (55.3%) reported preferring TOEFL iBT. IELTS was chosen by 25.5% of test intenders, and the rest (19.2%) had not decided yet on the test. Hence it may be inferred people in general do not have sufficient information about the IELTS test, and obviously, a greater number of people choose TOEFL iBT relying on its general popularity.

#### **4.2.2. Survey with Test Takers**

The survey next asked the test takers about the purposes for taking the tests, the sources of information on the tests and more specific details about their testing dates. Questions number six, seven and eight (see Appendices B and C) allowed choosing multiple answers. At first, 89% of IELTS test takers and 82.3 % of TOEFL iBT test takers reported having taken the test within the last two years, and the rest had taken the test within the last five years. Then, the respondents were asked about aims for taking the TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests. The majority of respondents (78%) took the test for university admission purposes. More IELTS test takers (28.8%) than TOEFL iBT test takers (10%) reported personal fulfillment as a reason for taking the test. On the contrary, more TOEFL iBT test takers (19%) took the test for licencing/certification and better job seeking purposes than IELTS test takers (13%). The options *employer/school*

*requirement* were the least chosen (4.6% and 7.3% respectively). Six percent (N=7) of IELTS takers reported immigration as a reason for their choice.

The survey further asked about the ways test takers had learned about the test (see Figure 5). Similar to test intenders, the biggest number of test takers (101.5%) first learned about the test from their relatives or friends. Meanwhile, 42.5 % of respondents had learned about the tests from university/college brochures and 24% from social networking websites. Three IELTS test takers specified their sources as *from teacher*, *from immigration* and *the British Council*. Further, almost the same amount of IELTS (18.5%) and TOEFL iBT (17.8%) test takers admitted that they had considered taking one test over the other before taking the test. However, it is noteworthy that more TOEFL iBT (36.7%) than IELTS (27%) test takers were sure about their choices on the test.



*Figure 5.* The numerical frequency of test takers' responses about the sources of information.

To investigate what factors affected the participants' confidence or hesitation concerning their choices, the next question proposed several options (see Figure 6). As Figure 6 displays, a significant number of TOEFL iBT test takers (25%) reported about not being sure what IELTS was, and, on the contrary, only 3.9% of IELTS takers did not know what TOEFL iBT was. More than half of the sample (51%) reported knowing the difference, and 23.6% of the respondents had followed others' advice. Of IELTS test takers, 4.6% specified such answers as a *job requirement, for immigration and exam schedule*. Hence, it may be inferred that the perceived advantage of IELTS over TOEFL iBT, according to the participants, is that IELTS is recognized for immigration purposes.

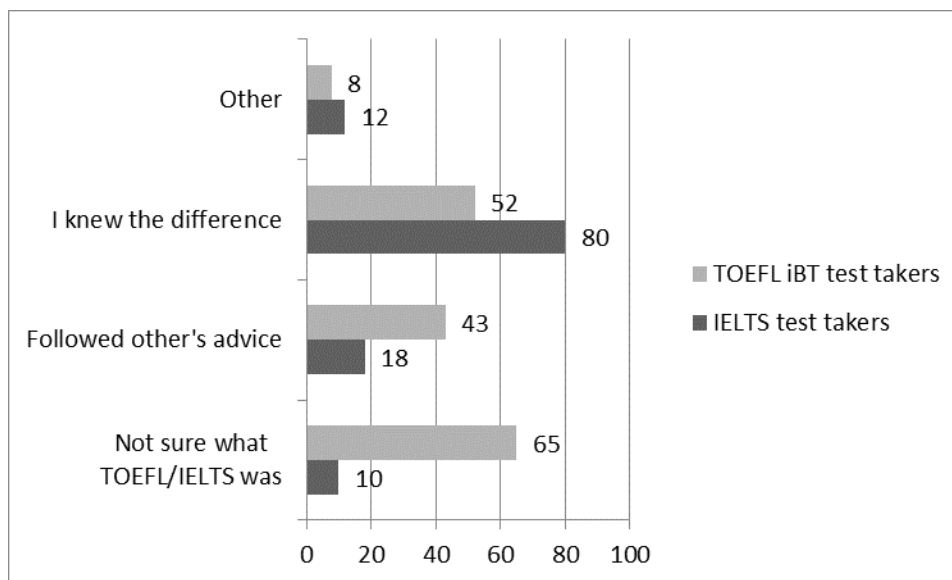


Figure 6. The numerical frequency of test takers' responses about the reasons for test preference.

#### 4.2.3. Interviews with both TOEFL iBT and IELTS Test Takers

After the demographic questions, the interviewees were asked to mention the sources they learned about the tests from, the dates and the reasons of taking the tests.

The four students reported having taken the tests within the last four years, and tutors within the last seven years. Three students took the TOEFL iBT test with university admission purposes, and failed, so they took the IELTS test and succeeded. Although the other student got a high grade on the TOEFL iBT test and got admitted to the university, he additionally took IELTS seeking university admission in Britain for future. The two tutors reported having taken the tests for personal fulfillment and job certification.

Further, the participants were asked to mention the first and preferred sources of information on tests. The students reported having learned about the tests from social sites, friends and university admission brochures, and having trusted other's advice while choosing to take the TOEFL iBT test, also because of not being sure what IELTS was. Two tutors reported being aware of the two tests and noted their colleagues as the main channels of communication to receive information on the tests.

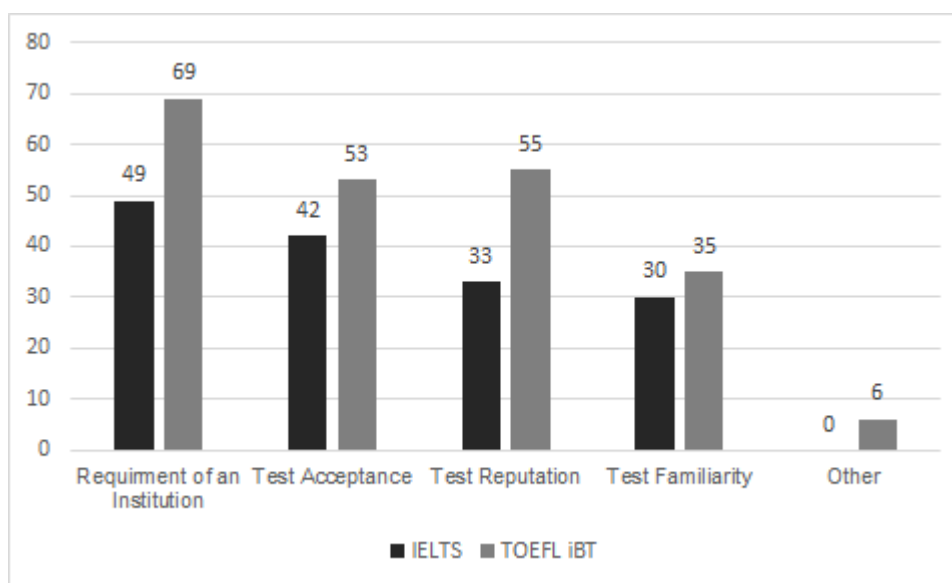
### **4.3. RQ 3: What are the Main Reasons for Test Takers and Intenders Choosing TOEFL iBT over IELTS or IELTS over TOEFL iBT?**

To answer the third research question, the survey data of test intenders, test takers and interviewees were analyzed, and parallels were drawn with the reviewed literature. The results are presented according to each sample group in the next subsections.

#### **4.3.1. Survey with Test Intenders**

The last six survey items (see Appendix A) asked the participants to explain reasons for their test preferences, and accepted multiple (including *other*) answers. The series of reasons were grouped regarding test acceptance and recognition, test format and test services. The way these questions were set up made it possible to determine which test the participants referred to when answering the questions.

First, the participants were asked about reasons for preference regarding test acceptance and recognition (see Figure 7). Figure 7 shows the participants preferences for both TOEFL iBT and IELTS regarding test recognition. It is noteworthy to mention, that given all the segments of this question total 218 test intenders reported preferring TOEFL iBT over IELTS, and 154 people reported choosing IELTS over TOEFL iBT. In case of both tests, the largest number of participants (62.8%) made a choice based on institutional requirements of the tests. Worldwide test acceptance (28.2%) and test reputation (29.3%) were considered important by most TOEFL iBT intenders, and at the same time, 22.3% and 17.5% of IELTS intenders preferred the two items respectively.



*Figure 7.* The numerical frequency of test intenders' preferences regarding test recognition.

Almost equal significance was given to the total familiarity with the two tests. Six people expressed their preference for TOEFL iBT mentioning about its worldwide



popularity and knowing more familiar people who had taken or planned to take the TOEFL iBT test.

When asked about test format preferences (see Figure 8), again TOEFL iBT received a bigger number of test intenders' voices.

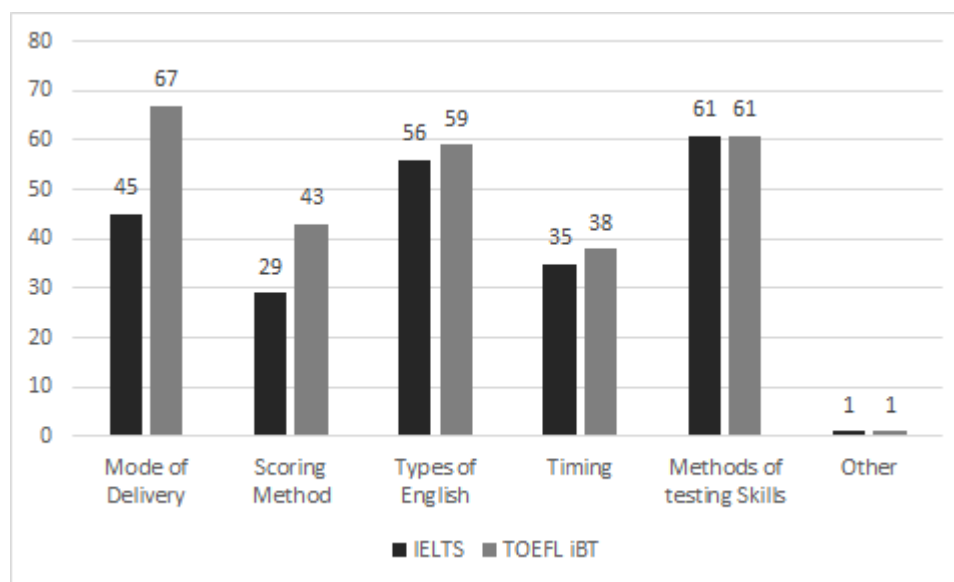
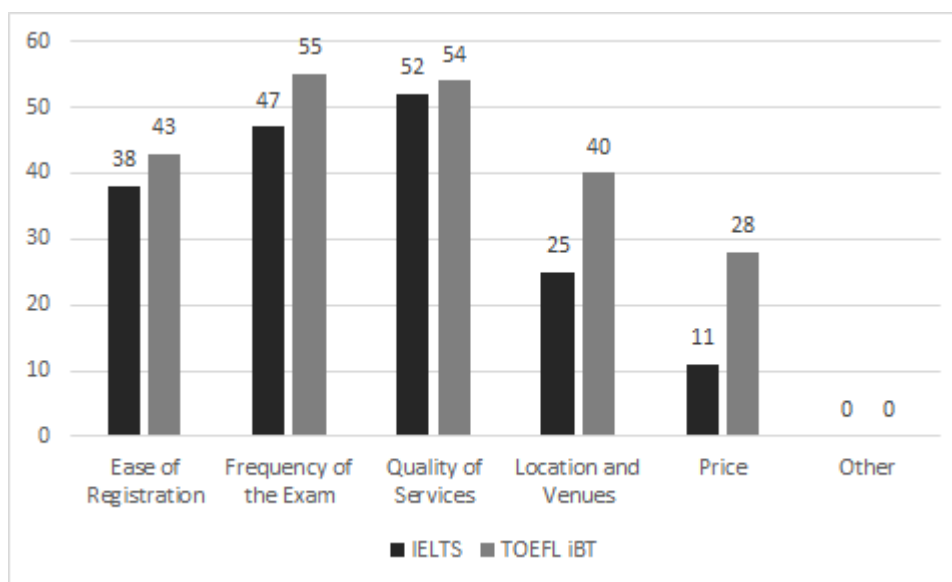


Figure 8. The numerical frequency of test intenders' preferences regarding test format.

As Figure 8 shows, the response *methods of testing skills* mattered for equal number of participants for each test (total 64.9%). Meanwhile, scoring methods of TOEFL iBT were preferred by more intenders (22.9%) than those of IELTS (15.4%). Timing affected test intenders preferences almost equally (total 38.8%). Furthermore, the option regarding the American and British varieties of English was included to investigate whether there was an assumed difference of English accents used in the tests.

Overall, 59.6% of test takers provided data for these items. Accordingly, 59 TOEFL iBT intenders preferred American English (31.4%), and 53 IELTS candidates chose British English (28.2%).

The results of the last question on test preference based on its services and administration are presented in Figure 9.



*Figure 9.* The numerical frequency of test intenders' preferences regarding test services.

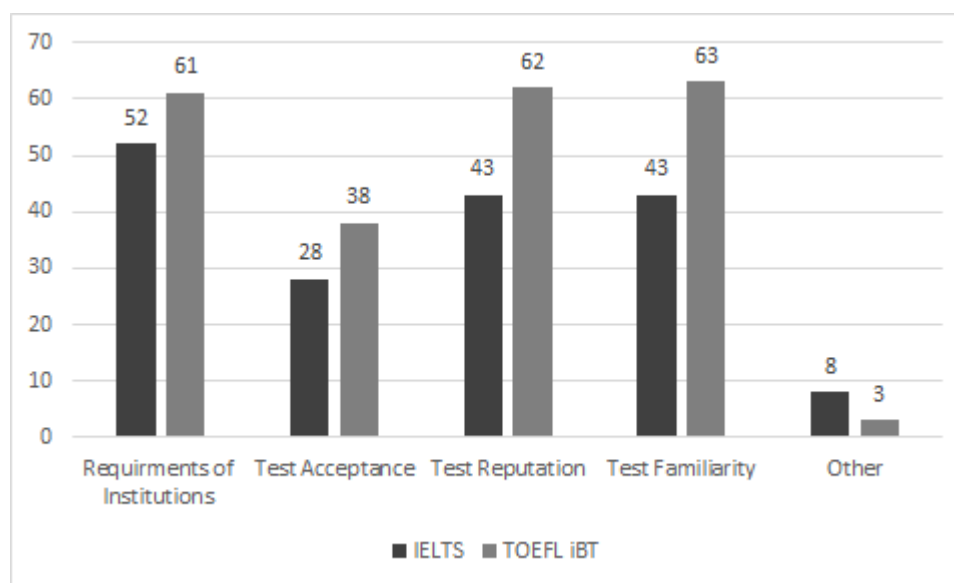
As described in Figure 9, the response rate for TOEFL iBT was higher than for IELTS. Quality of services (based on others' experiences) and exam frequency matters most for the participants: 56.4% and 54.2% respectively. Overall, 20.7% (N=39) of respondents considered the price to be a decisive function, given that in Armenia TOEFL iBT is approximately five dollars cheaper than IELTS. Ease of registration gathered a balanced number of responses for the two tests (total 43%). At the same time, more TOEFL iBT (21.3%) than IELTS intenders (5.9%) considered locations and test venues

be important factors, given the fact that TOEFL iBT exams are held at several universities and testing centers, while IELTS is administered only at the British Council.

#### 4.3.2. Survey with Test Takers

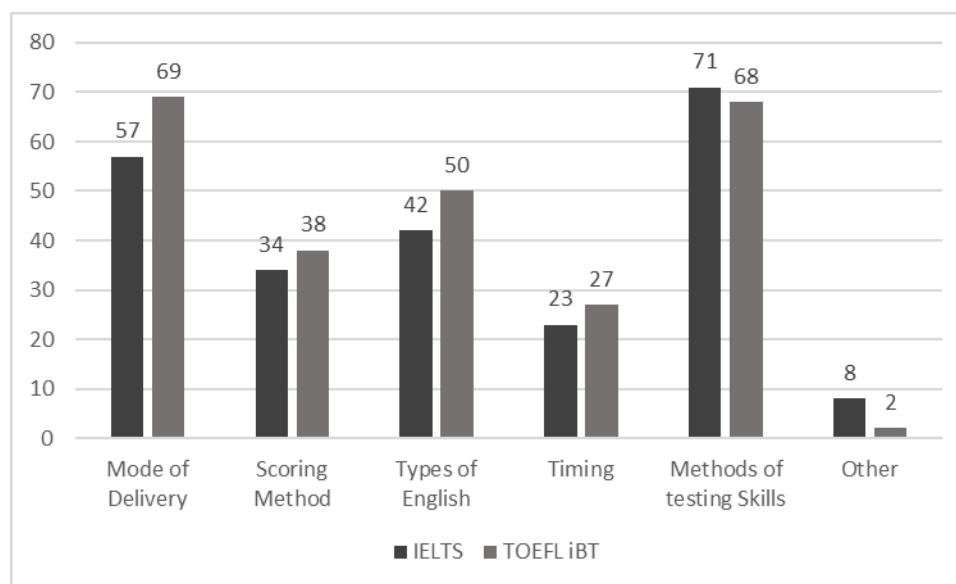
The next three survey items in both questionnaires (see Appendices B and C) asked the participants to explain reasons for their test preferences according to three themes, and accepted multiple (including *other*) answers. The series of reasons were grouped regarding test acceptance and recognition, test format and test services.

The first question inquired information on preference regarding test recognition (see Figure 10). As Figure 10 displays, for the majority of the respondents (43.6%), the requirement of the institution they were applying to was a crucial factor. Interestingly, equal numbers of TOEFL iBT (44%) and IELTS (36.4%) test takers considered the familiarity of the tests and their worldwide popularity be important in their choices.



*Figure 10.* The numerical frequency of test takers' preferences regarding test recognition.

The respondents were next asked about the format of the tests. Figure 11 shows the summary of responses of TOEFL iBT and IELTS test takers. As indicated in Figure 11, more than half of IELTS test takers (60.2%) preferred the methods of testing, compared with 48.2% of TOEFL iBT test takers. For an almost equal number of participants from the two surveys, mode of delivery, types of English, timing and scoring

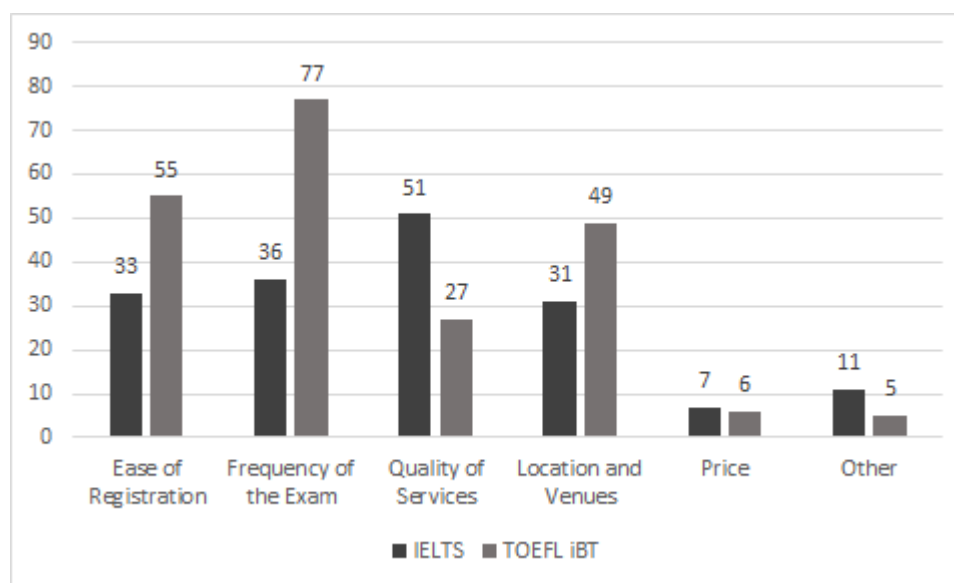


*Figure 11.* The numerical frequency of test takers' preferences regarding test services.

methods were important criteria to rely on. Overall, mode of delivery and methods of testing skills were most preferred options for half of 259 participants. For 3.9 % of the participants, test format did not play a role when choosing a test, as claimed by themselves.

Further, the participants were asked about test services and administration (see Figure 12). As Figure 12 reveals, the frequency of the exam in case of TOEFL iBT test was the most significant variable for 54.6% of TOEFL iBT test takers. Meanwhile,

43.2% of IELTS test takers chose the quality of test services and administration as important criteria. Since the participants relied on their personal experiences, it can be assumed that the quality of IELTS test administration was much more preferred than the one of the TOEFL iBT test. Overall, 5% of the respondents considered the price to be a decisive function, given that in Armenia IELTS costs five dollars more than TOEFL iBT. Ease of registration mattered most for 39% of TOEFL iBT test takers, and this feature was preferable only for 27% of IELTS test takers. What is more, similar to the results of the survey with test intenders, for more TOEFL iBT test takers (34.8%) locations and test venues was a decisive criteria than for IELTS test takers (26%), given that in Armenia TOEFL iBT exams are held at a number of different places, while IELTS is administered only at the British Council.



*Figure 12.* The numerical frequency of test takers' preferences regarding test services.

Aiming to explore test takers' individual perceptions about the perceived efficacy and fairness of the two tests, the last four survey items were general evaluations of the four sections of the TOEFL iBT and IELTS test (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Percentage and Numerical Distributions of Test Takers' Responses to Global Evaluation Items*

Items	TOEFL iBT (N=144)			IELTS (N=118)		
	Agree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)	% (N)
The test gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to read English.	60.3 (85)	25.5 (36)	14.2 (20)	60.2 (71)	9.3 (1)	30.5 (36)
The test gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to understand spoken English.	63.8 (90)	24.1 (34)	12.1 (17)	75.4 (89)	10.2 (12)	14.4 (17)
The test gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to write in English.	66.7 (94)	20.6 (29)	12.8 (18)	67.8 (80)	10.2 (12)	22 (26)
The test gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to speak English.	56 (79)	27.7 (39)	16.3 (23)	75.4 (89)	8.5 (10)	16.1 (19)

As Table 3 indicates, there were three options for each statement: agree, disagree, and not sure. The summary of the results shows, that this study aslo supports Suryaningsih's (2014) finding that morepositive attitudes about the sections of IELTS

were expressed than those about the TOEFL iBT test sections. It is noteworthy to mention that attitudes about the IELTS speaking and listening sections, mostly received positive feedback, contrary to the same sections of the TOEFL iBT test. Similar to the findings of the studies done by Malone and Montee (2014) and Stricker and Attali (2010), the participants were least positive toward the speaking section of TOEFL iBT. Interestingly, positive attitudes were equally expressed toward the writing and reading sections of both tests. Although a bigger number of participants reacted negatively to the TOEFL iBT sections than to those of the IELTS test, many more IELTS than TOEFL iBT test takers were not sure about the efficacy of the sections.

#### **4.3.3. Interviews with both TOEFL iBT and IELTS Test Takers**

This section provides a detailed description of six Armenian test takers' perceptions of the TOEFL iBT test. The respondents were four students and two tutors who had taken both TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests.

In the interviews, all participants were providing answers based on their TOEFL iBT and IELTS testing experiences. The interviews began with the discussion about TOEFL iBT. When asked to tell some characteristics of their experiences, the participants indicated several factors concerning the testing environment and the quality of administration. Five interviewees complained about the noise that was caused by a big number of test takers in one room. The noise caused by others' speeches and movements hindered them to concentrate on their test. Interestingly, this finding aligns with the studies done by Suryaningsih (2014) and Puspawati (2012) (as cited in Suryaningsih, 2014). For the four students a four- hour language test was too much as they mentioned

about never being exposed to such long-lasting tests. Additionally, they claimed ten-minute-break to be too less to recover energy and prepare for the productive sections.

Tom: “Armenian students do not have enough experience to take four-hour long test, especially via computers, it is tiring.” (personal communication, March 5, 2018)

Interestingly, none of the respondents mentioned about technology-related anxiety or difficulties, and they reported to be used to sitting in front of the screen for a long time.

On the contrary, all the six participants were satisfied with IELTS testing conditions, and they expressed exceptionally positive attitudes towards the IELTS test administration and services. Again, this finding was similar to the finding of the research by Suryaningsih (2014). Timing was not an issue, as they argued that time allocated to each section was completely reasonable and convenient.

Tom: I think I did not have problems with timing because I had taken a longer test, so this was more convenient, maybe that is why I managed properly.” (personal communication, March 5, 2018)

The paper-based format was the most favorable characteristic of the test, as it can be inferred from the conversations. No other factors concerning the mode of delivery were mentioned by the participants, except the speaking section. All the four students liked the way of testing speaking by humans and on another day.

Speaking about negative and positive impressions, the participants discussed the four sections of the test. For the female participants, TOEFL iBT readings were very complicated and tricky, uninteresting and staffed with too much information.



Sally: “I did not know biology or other science, but there are such reading passages that are not interesting, and I do not understand why they are used and what they check.” (personal communication, March 6, 2018)

Ella: “To read interesting texts would be better, as you will not get bored or stressed that much because it is tiring to read about things that would interest specialists of the specific field.” (personal communication, March 15, 2018)

On the contrary, the three male participants did not mention any negative or positive experience with TOEFL iBT reading passages. Interestingly, participants had neutral attitudes toward the reading section of IELTS. The section that gained most positive feedback was the listening section in IELTS. They believed it to be the most effective and easiest section that brings additional scores as it was considered more logical and interesting when compared to TOEFL iBT’s listening which was the most stressful for the respondents.

Jack: “IELTS listening section was logical and easier than the one of TOEFL, because even if you skip and miss some parts, you still can logically infer the right answers. You can expect what you’d hear, so you are somehow prepared.” (personal communication, March 12, 2018)

Contrastively, most of the negative impressions expressed by the participants were connected with the listening section of TOEFL iBT. As it is told by the five participants, the listening sections were disturbed by other test takers completing their speaking sections. They also found it to be too much loaded with information, tricky details that they considered to be unimportant trifles.

Julia: “When I was doing my listening, others did speaking, and it is very much disturbing, and because of it I scored very low on listening, even lower than I was expecting.” (personal communication, March 10, 2018)

Ella: “When you listen for an hour, your mind becomes really numb, and it is distracting as you fail to concentrate to remember or take notes. The time to think after listening is not enough for such amount of information to be digested.” (personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Further on, the students expressed a positive attitude toward TOEFL iBT writing and did not mention any specific factor concerning the writing section. Meantime, negative impressions were expressed mainly concerning the figure description in the writing section of IELTS. The participants did not get the point of that task, as it was time-consuming for them. They also mentioned about the spelling differences in American and British accents that they had to pay attention to, in order not to make a mistake.

Interestingly, all the four students expressed negative impressions related to the speaking sections in TOEFL iBT. Three students claimed to have failed the speaking parts because they found it silly to speak in front of the computer. They believed the speaking part to be artificial, annoying and especially tiresome after two sections.

Jack: I didn't like speaking part because you don't feel anything, it's stressing. You do not have pretty much time to think what to talk afterward. I completely think that it was very artificial. I was artificially using words to score high, and it worked. I think it did not matter whether

you are speaking on the topic or not; you are just speaking to show some cool words. (personal communication, March 12, 2018)

As far as the tutors are concerned, they liked the speaking part in TOEFL iBT, as according to them it was more authentic and similar to real-life performance. They found it easier to speak in front of the computer, as there is no human factor that can play a role in grading.

At the same time, the students liked the speaking section of IELTS more. They claimed their speech during the interaction with interviewers to be very natural and calm. They liked that the examiners were reacting and responding to their opinions, interacting positively and kindly, developing a pleasant and trustful atmosphere.

Jack: “I liked the speaking part. It was a natural discussion, she would ask, and I would answer and give my opinion, and sometimes she expressed her ideas, we agreed and even laughed, it was a normal conversation.”(personal communication, March 12, 2018)

Julia: “I liked it when my speaking was some days later as I escaped double stress, you have time to get calm and prepare. Also speaking to people was better. They were kind, and they were responding, you know that you are speaking to someone who understands you, so you become confident.” (personal communication, March 10, 2018)

On the contrary, the two tutors believed the speaking section on IELTS to be not properly and fairly structured, which makes it more difficult and hindered by a human factor.

Alan: “In case of IELTS, they grade speaking not fairly, as not only me, but other good speakers of English receive low somehow, I do not understand why. Also my speaker was definitely not a native English. Possibly, there is inattention of the interviewer who may be tired and pay less attention to the answers, and the human factor, sympathy can possibly play a role.” (personal communication, March 15, 2018)

They also mentioned the advantage of the speech and writing to be checked and graded by native speakers.

Alan: “I liked the idea of testing speaking via computer, as I think it is an advantage when your speaking and writing are checked in the USA by natives, as it is undoubtedly fair.” (personal communication, March 10, 2018)

The concluding point to be noted is that IELTS gained more positive attitudes than TOEFL iBT by 259 test takers and six interviewees, regarding test format, four sections and mode of delivery. These results reinforce Stricker and Attali's (2010) belief that attitudes toward tests differ by geographic area and test sections.

#### **4.4 RQ 4: What are (if any) customers' Perceptions and Misperceptions about IELTS and TOEFL iBT (popular beliefs/ misbeliefs)?**

To answer the first research question, the survey data of test intenders, test takers and interviewees were analyzed, and parallels were drawn with the reviewed literature. Similar to the findings of the study by Liying and DeLuca (2011), who found a significant relationship between test structure, content, and test administration/conditions, this study revealed that these factors inarguably affect test performance. Additionally,

this research corroborates Liying and DeLuca's findings (2011), that testing experiences shape beliefs about the tests.

As the findings of the study show, the most common idea among 453 research participants, was that TOEFL iBT was accepted in more institutions worldwide than IELTS and it was more popular as many more people were believed to take not only in Armenia but all over the world. This was clearly depicted in the choices and open-ended answers of the three surveys' participants and six interviewees.

Julia: “Information on TOEFL is bombarded here. Many people prefer TOEFL because of its popularity as an American standard, which is believed to be the best.” (personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Tom: “Although I see that much more people take TOEFL, I think it is only because of the popularity, I mean TOEFL’s marketing, as it is like all American goods are better and more popular.” (personal communication, March 5, 2018)

The most common belief about the two tests, according to the six interviewees was that the two tests require memory and practiced technical skills. Most respondents had an opinion that well developed time management techniques are the foremost factor for success.

Ella: “You can be tense during the two tests because of the lack of time, as time management is a huge problem because you have very little time to think and to answer for a longer time frame. The success in these tests is mostly the matter of skills, and that is it.” (personal communication, March 15, 2018)

Further, when the participants were asked whether they felt some differences concerning the accents of English used in the tests, the two tutors claimed that it was the main misperception about the two tests in the Armenian context, as the two tests use the standardized variety of English.

Alan: “There is that standard English, but IELTS uses British English more, but TOEFL also uses British English, so it is not the matter of Englishes, this is just a common misunderstanding.” (personal communication, March 10, 2018)

Additionally, the four students stated surely that American English was used in TOEFL iBT and British English was used in IELTS.

Sally: “American and British English were very obvious not only in listening but in writing, I mean spelling.” (personal communication, March 6, 2018)

Jack: “It was pretty obvious, very obvious that TOEFL used American English. Personally I like British accent, but American English is easier to understand. I easily differentiated this and I can say for sure there is difference in English used in the tests.” (personal communication, March 12, 2018)

This finding about the English accents was the most striking similarity between the three survey participants and the interviewees.

Interestingly, another common belief was connected with the speaking sections of the tests. Unlike the speaking section in the TOEFL iBT test which was claimed to be artificial and uncomfortable, the separate speaking examination of IELTS was most

preferred by the four students. They liked human interaction and natural communication. Four respondents mentioned about the attraction and sympathy factors, assuming that it affected their score, but for others it may be quite opposite.

Tom: “In my case the woman who was taking my speaking liked me obviously, I felt the sympathy. So it may be a benefit or a disadvantage.”

(personal communication, March 12, 2018)

Interestingly, the two tutors preferred the format of testing speaking via computer, as it is in TOEFL iBT, claiming that it is unbiased unlike speaking examination of IELTS.

Almost all the participants discussed several issues connected with writing, and expressed some beliefs and considering them to be common among test takers. In case of TOEFL iBT, the test takers claimed that it required simple sentences but more content than the word limit mentioned in the instructions, assuming that it would guarantee a higher score. On the contrary, they believed IELTS to require more complex sentences and unique words for a high score.

When asked about their preference on the tests, the two male students chose IELTS, but interestingly, found TOEFL iBT fairer than IELTS. The other two females preferred IELTS, believing it to be fairer than TOEFL iBT, explaining that their scores matter in their choices as they were admitted to university due to IELTS. The two tutors preferred and would advise TOEFL iBT, considering it more authentic. Meanwhile they argued that that from the linguistic perspective, IELTS is more preferable as it measures English proficiency better than TOEFL iBT does. Interestingly, this finding aligns with Rasti's (2009) and Suryaningsih's (2014) research, where the participants claimed IELST

to measure their English language proficiency. The other four participants claimed that they would advise others to take IELTS if need be, as it was much easier to get a passing grade in IELTS than in TOEFL iBT.

One general drawback was mentioned about the two tests by the interviewees, who were sure that other test takers would support their idea. They believed that if someone had enough academic knowledge to pass the tests, the grade should be valid at least for five years and more.

Another interesting point to note is that the four students were sure that the results of TOEFL iBT showed their real English proficiency, even though three of them did not get a passing grade for the admission to the university. Similar to the two tutors, they were prone to think that TOEFL iBT mostly checked time management and strategic skills, rather than language proficiency. Interestingly, this finding was congruous with a similar finding by Suryaningsih (2014). The interviewees were satisfied with their results of IELTS tests, and all of them believed that contrary to TOEFL iBT, IELTS checked their language knowledge more than logic or other technical skills.

Overall, all these perceptions, beliefs and misbeliefs by Armenian test intenders and test takers may also be affected by the participants' culture and origin, as Malone and Montee suggest (2014), that beliefs differ across national and cultural contexts.



## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The present study was set up to investigate the reasons for Armenian test takers' preferences of TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests. The research questions were formulated to find possible differences in test takers' and intenders' profiles, their perceptions and attitudes toward the test, the ways through which people learn about the tests in Armenia, and general beliefs and misunderstandings connected with the tests. The data were collected through three questionnaires and interviews, to answer the following research questions:

1. What are (if any) the differences between TOEFL iBT and IELTS intender and test taker profiles?
5. What are the main sources and channels of information on the tests?
2. What are the main reasons for test takers and intenders choosing TOEFL iBT over IELTS or IELTS over TOEFL iBT?
3. What are (if any) customers' perceptions and misperceptions about IELTS and TOEFL iBT (popular beliefs/ misbeliefs)?

The section followed immediately presents the implications and limitations of the study. Finally, suggestions for further research are made.

### **5.1. Implications**

The 453 respondents answered several demographic questions on gender, age, educational background, and current educational level or affiliation. Overall, more female respondents took part in the survey. Most of the participants belonged to the age groups of 18-24 and 25-34 years old. It is worthy of noting, that most of the TOEFL iBT takers were undergraduate and graduate students that more IELTS test takers reported about not

being students, so it may be implied that this response rate is due to the General format of IELTS test used for immigration purposes. This idea was further confirmed through the participants' specified open-ended answers.

The demographic questions were followed by a question about the sources of information on the test (see Appendix E i and E ii). Overall, the first and most frequent sources of information were participants' relatives and friends, university and college brochures, and social networks, as opposed to relevant sites that are to provide and spread information on the tests (e.g., the British Council website, ets.org and ielts.org websites).

Further, the reasons for participants' preferences were classified according to test recognition, test format, and test services (see Appendix E iii, E iv and E v). In case of test intenders, TOEFL iBT was preferred over IELTS regarding all the three categories and their segments (see Figures 4, 5 and 6) except differences in the methods of testing: equal preferences were given to this segment of the question. Meantime, in case of TOEFL iBT and IELTS test takers (see Figures 11, 12 and 13), there were no significant differences between preferences regarding test recognition. Instead, for TOEFL test takers, the frequency of the exam and variability of test venues was a decisive function to base their choices on. At the same time, more IELTS test takers claimed the quality of administration to play an important role for them. As far as the test format is concerned, methods of testing were important for more than the half of IELTS test takers. As mentioned by the interviewees, the speaking and listening sections of IELTS were the most preferred by Armenian test takers.

The analysis of quantitative and qualitative data revealed that the TOEFL iBT test is much more popular than the IELTS test according to the test takers and intenders.

According to the participants, the number of institutions accepting TOEFL iBT is bigger, than those of IELTS, so consequently TOEFL iBT is more popular than IELTS in participants' opinions. So this can be the main reason why the tendency of taking TOEFL iBT is much higher. Moreover, many more people reported about not being sure what IELTS was. Hence, there is lack of necessary information on IELTS tests that would fully present the essence of the test and its acceptance all around the world.

The research also found that there is a common misbelief about American and British varieties of English used in the tests. Moreover, it is clear that the country of test origin makes intenders believe that either American or British English is used in the tests. To the interviewees' minds, the differences of American and British accents are obvious.

The surveys for IELTS and TOEFL iBT test takers contained four more evaluation items for the four sections of the tests, which aimed to observe general attitudes toward the tests. Although the findings showed that the IELTS test received more positive attitudes regarding its sections than TOEFL iBT, Armenian test takers questioned the efficacy of the tests to check language proficiency.

Overall, the implications and suggestions are mainly relevant to the British Council in Armenia, as the stakeholder of this research, which aimed to explore the reasons why people take or do not take IELTS. The data revealed the fact that people do not make a choice on the tests based on equal information on the tests. This information was used to come to conclusions what should be done. It is necessary to provide and spread more detailed information on IELTS, present the intents, format of the test and its acceptance/popularity all around the world, meanwhile highlighting about the Standard English used in the test.

## **5.2. Limitations of the Study**

Given the time constraints, this study had to be conducted only in Yerevan and with participants recruited through only several private and public high schools and universities. Another limitation was that only test takers' perceptions and attitudes need to be studied within the frames of this research project, so test administrators and test trainers did not take part in the study. The last limitation of the study is the small number of interviews with those who took both IELTS and TOEFL, as it was not possible to have interviews with all the participants because of time constraints.

## **5.3. Suggestions for Further Research**

This study can serve as a basis for further research, which could collect additional data in the form of test scores and look into possible correlations between test scores and perceived test efficacy. The same study can be conducted in regions to find out the extent of awareness about the test and attitudes towards them. Additionally, it would be interesting to look for gender-based differences in test preferences and attitudes. In further research, the attitudes of administrators and test trainers can be explored to draw parallels and compare beliefs of all possible stakeholders.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A

**Survey for IELTS/TOEFL iBT Intenders**

Please, fill out this multiple choice anonymous questionnaire that will take you 3 minutes to complete. This is a research study conducted by an MA student from the American University of Armenia. This research aims to gain insights on test takers' attitudes and perceptions about IELTS and TOEFL iBT in Armenia. Your opinions are very important for this project. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**1. What is your age?**

- Under 18
- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- Above 55

**2. What is your gender?**

- Male
- Female

**3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?**

- Secondary school diploma
- High school/College diploma
- Undergraduate degree (Bachelor's)
- Graduate degree (Master's, Doctoral, etc.)
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**4. At which level are you currently studying?**

- High school/College
- Undergraduate level (Bachelor's)
- Graduate level (Master's, Doctoral, etc.)
- I'm not a student
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Are you thinking of taking TOEFL iBT or IELTS within the next 12 months?**

- Yes

- No

**6. Why are you going to take TOEFL iBT or IELTS? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- Seeking admission into colleges/universities
- Seeking licensing or certification in a career field
- Seeking a better job
- Requirement from current school
- Requirement from current employer
- Personal fulfillment
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Where did you first learn about the TOEFL iBT/IELTS test? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- University/college admission brochure
- Advertisement
- ETS.org
- IELTS.org
- Social networking websites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Friends or relatives
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Why or why not have you considered taking the IELTS over the TOEFL iBT test, or vice versa? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- Not sure what IELTS is
- Not sure what TOEFL is
- Followed others' advice
- I know the difference between IELTS and TOEFL

**9. Which test are you planning to take?**

- IELTS
- TOEFL iBT
- Not sure yet

**10. Regarding recognition I would prefer IELTS based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Requirement of the institution I am applying to

- Test acceptance in my country and worldwide
- General reputation of the test
- General familiarity with the test
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**11. Regarding recognition I would prefer TOEFL iBT based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Requirement of the institution you are applying to
- Test acceptance in your country and worldwide
- General reputation of the test
- General familiarity with the test
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**12. Regarding format I would prefer IELTS based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Mode of delivery (paper and pencil)
- Scoring method
- British English
- Timing (2 hours and 45 minutes)
- Method of testing reading, listening and writing on the same day with no breaks, and speaking on another day by humans
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**13. Regarding format I would prefer TOEFL iBT based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Mode of delivery (online)
- Scoring method
- American English
- Timing (4 hours)
- Method of testing reading, listening, writing and speaking by a computer on the same day with a 10 minute break
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**14. Regarding services and environment I would prefer IELTS based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Ease of registration
- Frequency of the exam
- Quality of administration and service (based on others' opinions)
- Location and availability of test venues
- Price
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

- **15. Regarding services and environment I would prefer TOEFL iBT based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**
- Ease of registration
- Frequency of the exam
- Quality of administration and service (based on others' opinions)
- Location and availability of test venues
- Price
- Other (please specify)\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

**Survey for IELTS Test Takers**

Please, fill out this multiple choice anonymous questionnaire that will take you 3 minutes to complete. This is a research study conducted by an MA student from the American University of Armenia. This research aims to gain insights on test takers' attitudes and perceptions about IELTS and TOEFL iBT in Armenia. Your opinions are very important for this project. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**1. What is your age?**

- Under 18
- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- Above 55

**2. What is your gender?**

- Male
- Female

**3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?**

- Secondary school diploma
- High school/College diploma
- Undergraduate degree (Bachelor's)
- Graduate degree (Master's, Doctoral, etc.)
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**4. At which level are you currently studying?**

- High school/College
- Undergraduate level (Bachelor's)
- Graduate level (Master's, Doctoral, etc.)
- I'm not a student
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Did you take IELTS within the last 2 years?**

- Yes
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Why did you take IELTS? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- Seeking admission into colleges/universities
- Seeking licensing or certification in a career field
- Seeking a better job
- Requirement from current school
- Requirement from current employer
- Personal fulfillment
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Where did you first learn about IELTS? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- University/college admission brochure
- Advertisement
- IELTS.org
- Social networking websites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Friends or relatives
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Had you considered taking the TOEFL iBT over the IELTS test before you took the test?**

- Yes
- No

**9. Why did you prefer IELTS over TOEFL iBT? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- Not sure what TOEFL iBT was
- Followed others' advice
- I knew the difference between IELTS and TOEFL iBT
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Regarding recognition I preferred IELTS based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Requirement of the institution I was applying to
- Test acceptance in my country and worldwide
- General reputation of the test
- General familiarity with the test
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**11. Regarding format I preferred IELTS based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Mode of delivery (paper and pencil)
- Scoring method
- British English
- Timing (2 hours and 45 minutes)

- Method of testing reading, listening and writing on the same day with no breaks, and speaking on another day by humans
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**12. Regarding services and environment I preferred IELTS based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Ease of registration
- Frequency of the exam
- Quality of administration and service (based on others' opinions)
- Location and availability of test venues
- Price
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**13. The IELTS gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to read English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**14. The IELTS gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to understand spoken English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**15. The IELTS gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to write in English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**16. The IELTS gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to speak English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

## Appendix C

**Survey for TOEFL iBT Test Takers**

Please, fill out this multiple choice anonymous questionnaire that will take you 3 minutes to complete. This is a research study conducted by an MA student from the American University of Armenia. This research aims to gain insights on test takers' attitudes and perceptions about IELTS and TOEFL iBT in Armenia. Your opinions are very important for this project. Thank you for your time and consideration.

**1. What is your age?**

- Under 18
- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- Above 55

**2. What is your gender?**

- Male
- Female

**3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?**

- Secondary school diploma
- High school/College diploma
- Undergraduate degree (Bachelor's)
- Graduate degree (Master's, Doctoral, etc.)
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**4. At which level are you currently studying?**

- High school/College
- Undergraduate level (Bachelor's)
- Graduate level (Master's, Doctoral, etc.)
- I'm not a student
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Did you take TOEFL iBT or IELTS within the last 2 years?**

- Yes
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**6. Why did you take TOEFL iBT? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**



- Seeking admission into colleges/universities
- Seeking licensing or certification in a career field
- Seeking a better job
- Requirement from current school
- Requirement from current employer
- Personal fulfillment
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Where did you first learn about TOEFL iBT? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- University/college admission brochure
- Advertisement
- ETS.org
- Social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
- Friends or relatives
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**8. Had you considered taking the IELTS over the TOEFL iBT test before you took the test?**

- Yes
- No

**9. Why did you prefer TOEFL iBT over IELTS? (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.)**

- Not sure what IELTS was
- Followed others' advice
- I knew the difference between IELTS and TOEFL iBT
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Regarding recognition I preferred TOEFL iBT based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Requirement of the institution I was applying to
- Test acceptance in my country and worldwide
- General reputation of the test
- General familiarity with the test
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**11. Regarding format I preferred TOEFL iBT based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Mode of delivery (online)
- Scoring method
- American English
- Timing (4 hours)

- Method of testing reading, listening, writing and speaking by a computer on the same day with a 10 minute break
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**12. Regarding services and environment I preferred TOEFL iBT based on the... (SELECT ALL THAT APPLY).**

- Ease of registration
- Frequency of the exam
- Quality of administration and service (based on others' opinions)
- Location and availability of test venues
- Price
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**13. The TOEFL iBT gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to read English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**14. The TOEFL iBT gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to understand spoken English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**15. The TOEFL iBT gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to write in English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**16. The TOEFL iBT gave me a good opportunity to demonstrate my ability to speak English.**

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

## Appendix D

**Interview for both IELTS and TOEFL iBT Test Takers**TOEFL iBT test

I would like you to think carefully about the TOEFL iBT test.

1. Could you tell about several things that characterize your experience of TOEFL iBT test?
2. Could you describe them as detailed as you can?
3. Could you please provide positive and negative impressions on TOEFL iBT test (such as what you liked and disliked about the test)?
4. If you want to add anything to your remarks please mention it.

IELTS test

I would like you to think carefully about the IELTS test.

5. Could you tell about several things that characterize your experience of the IELTS test?
6. Could you describe them as detailed as you can?
7. Could you please provide positive and negative impressions on the IELTS test (such as what you liked and disliked about the test)?
8. If you want to add anything to your remarks please mention it.

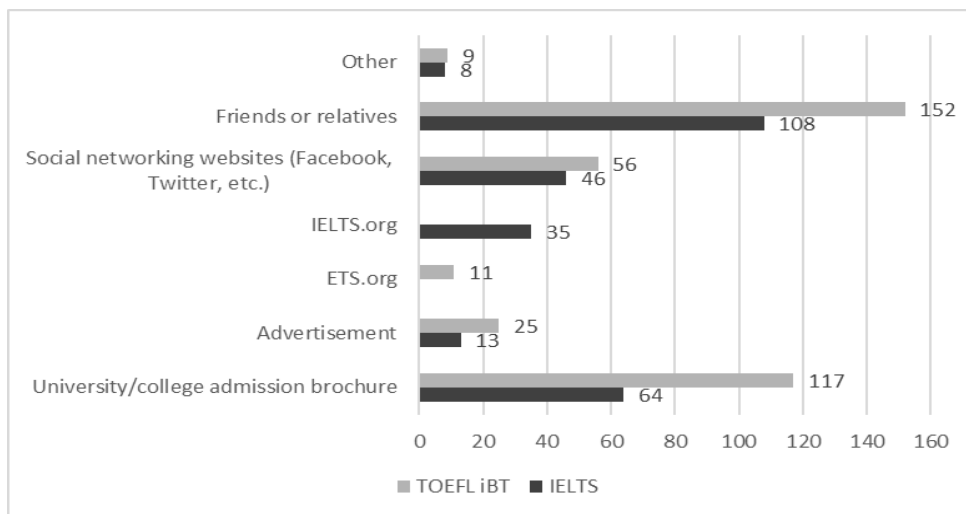
Comparing IELTS and TOEFL iBT tests

9. Based on your perception, how are these two tests different? Or how are these two tests similar?
10. In your opinion, which test is fairer? Could you explain why?
11. Would you please tell me which test you prefer? Could you explain why?
12. If you were to advise someone to take one of the tests, which one would you advise and why?

## Appendix E

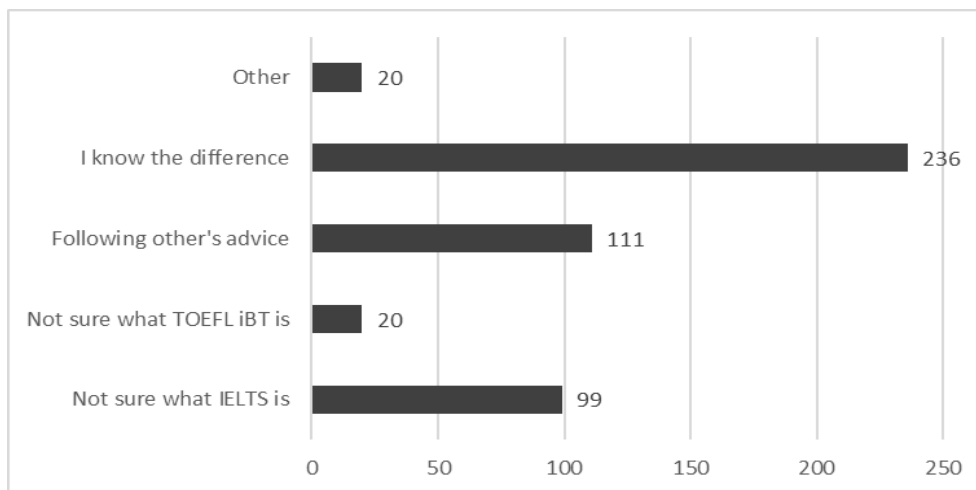
## Figures

i.



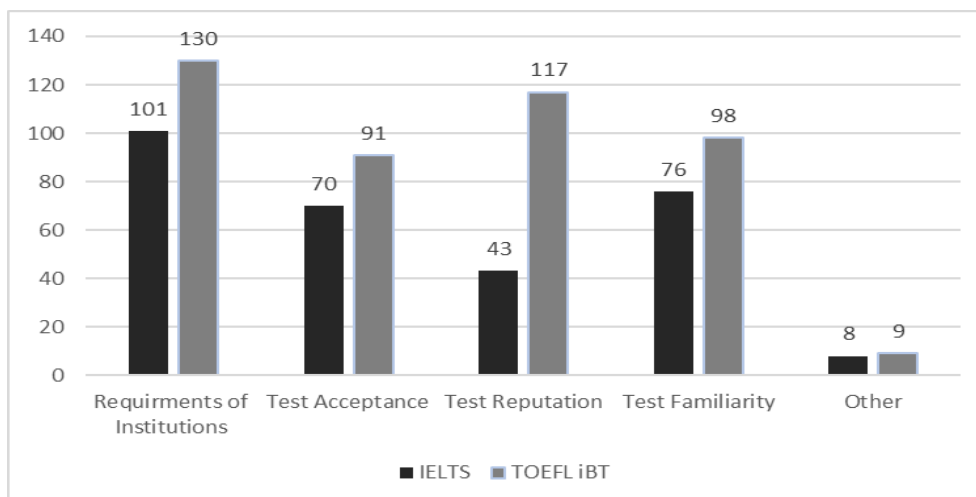
*Figure 13.* The numerical frequency of test takers' and intenders' responses about the sources of information.

ii.



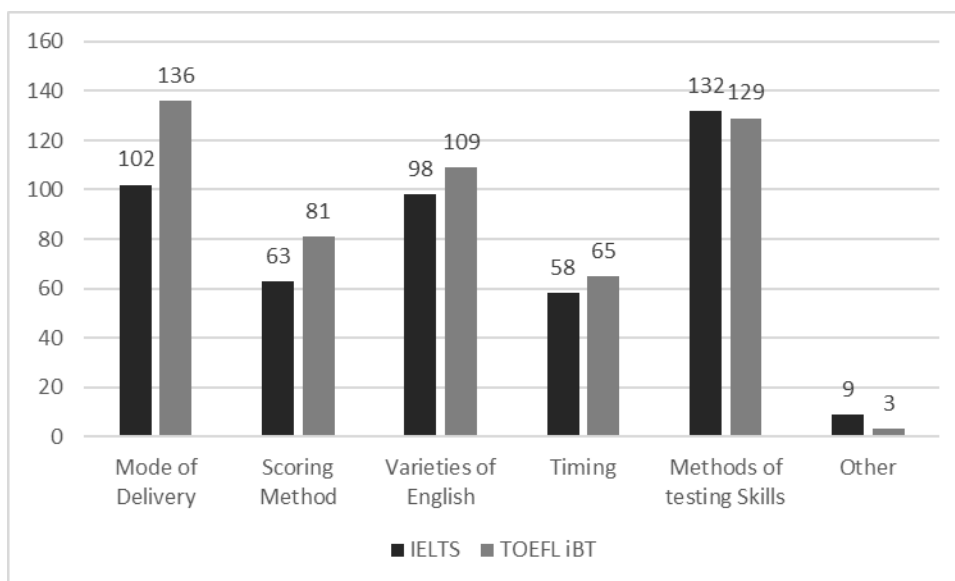
*Figure 14.* The numerical frequency of test takers' and intenders' responses about the reasons for test preference.

iii.



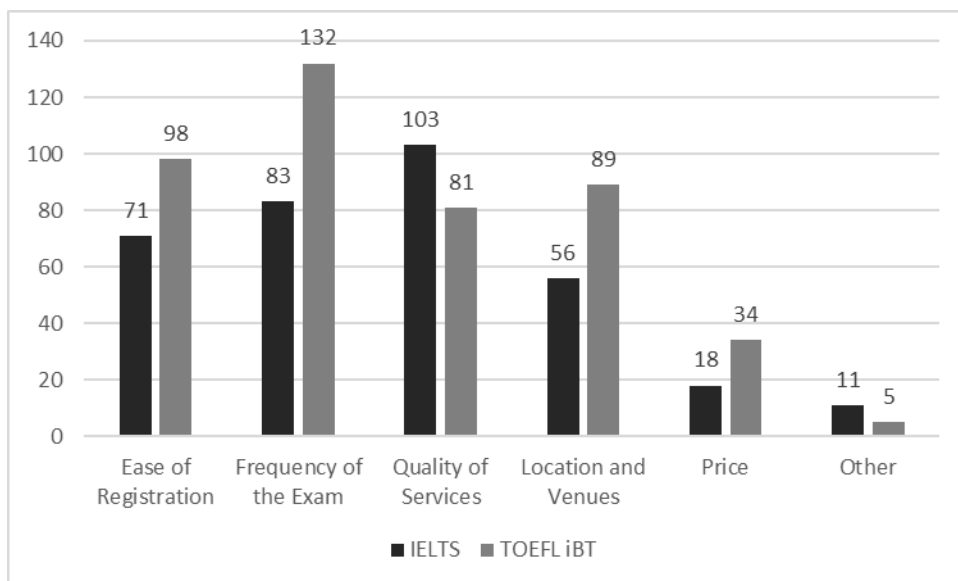
*Figure 15.* The numerical frequency of test takers' and intenders' preferences regarding test recognition.

iv.



*Figure 16.* The numerical frequency of test takers' and intenders' preferences regarding test services.

v.



*Figure 17.* The numerical frequency of test takers' and intenders' preferences regarding test services.