

RESEARCH TITLE

**WASHBACK EFFECTS OF THE IELTS TEST AS AN EXIT
PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENT ON STUDENTS' ENGLISH
LEARNING: A CASE OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS
UNIVERSITIES IN HANOI**

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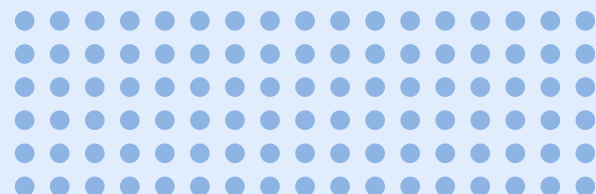
I. RATIONALE

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I. Rationale

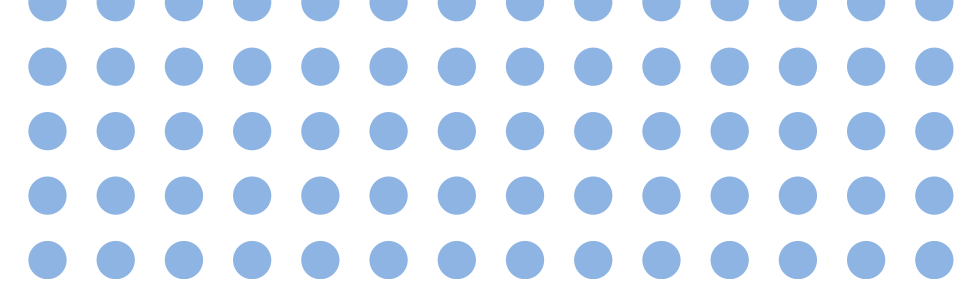
CONTEXT

- English proficiency is a core skill for global integration, important for academic and career prospects.
- Vietnamese universities have increasingly adopted international English proficiency tests (e.g., IELTS) as admission or exit requirements.
- The policy strongly impacts students' learning, motivating them to study English while causing high pressure due to the nature of IELTS test, its importance and benefits.

RESEARCH GAP

- In Vietnam, there are both academic gaps and practical concerns.
- + Existing studies may not fully represent the experiences of students in other disciplines, such as economics and business, and have largely relied on quantitative methods
- + Existing studies have inconsistent findings

I. Rationale

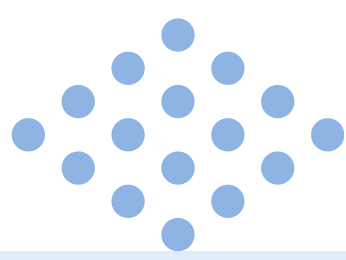


RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1. How do students in business and economics universities perceive IELTS as an exit proficiency requirement in terms of Perceived test difficulty, Perceived test stakes, and Perceived test utility?
- 2. To what extent do Perceived test difficulty, Perceived test stakes, and Perceived test utility influence students' Learning motivation?
- 3. To what extent do Perceived test difficulty, Perceived test stakes, and Perceived test utility influence students' Learning anxiety?
- 4. To what extent do Perceived test difficulty, Perceived test stakes, and Perceived test utility influence students' Restricted learning?
- 5. To what extent do Perceived test difficulty, Perceived test stakes, and Perceived test utility influence students' Holistic learning?



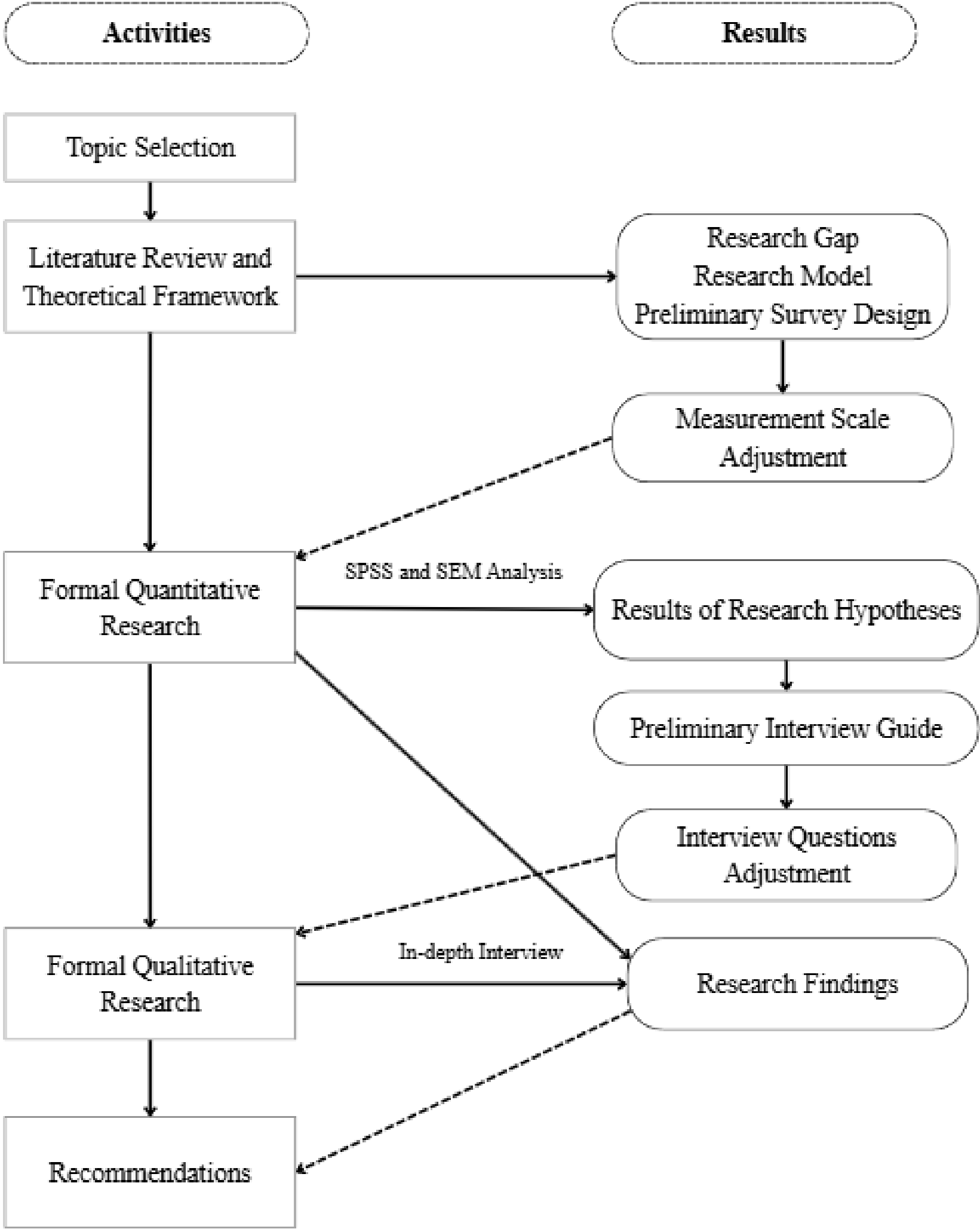
II. Research Methodology



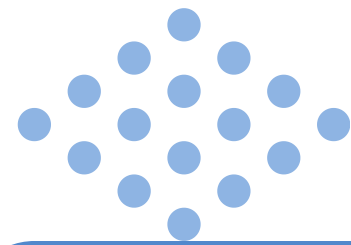
The research employs an Explanatory Sequential Design (Quantitative Research to Qualitative Research):

- Quantitative data was collected and analyzed first.
- Qualitative data from interviews to provide an in-depth explanation for statistical data.

Research process
(By research team, 2026)



II. Research Methodology



Research Scope

1. Time:

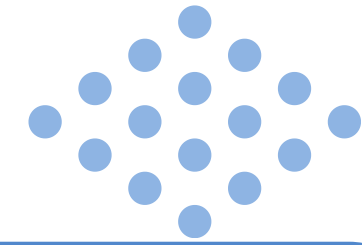
October 2025 - March 2026

2. Location:

Economics and business universities in Hanoi

3. Research Scope:

- Three perceived test factors (Test difficulty, test stakes, and test utility)
- Four learning aspects (Learning motivation, learning anxiety, restricted learning, and holistic learning)



Research Design

Explanatory Sequential Design

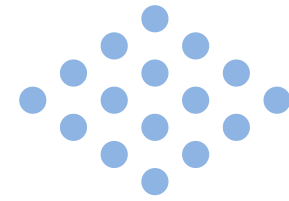
1. Quantitative Phase:

- Questionnaire adopted from Nguyen's (2023) with minor changes, comprising a total of 57 items.
- Sample of 339 students

2. Qualitative Phase:

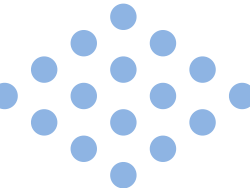
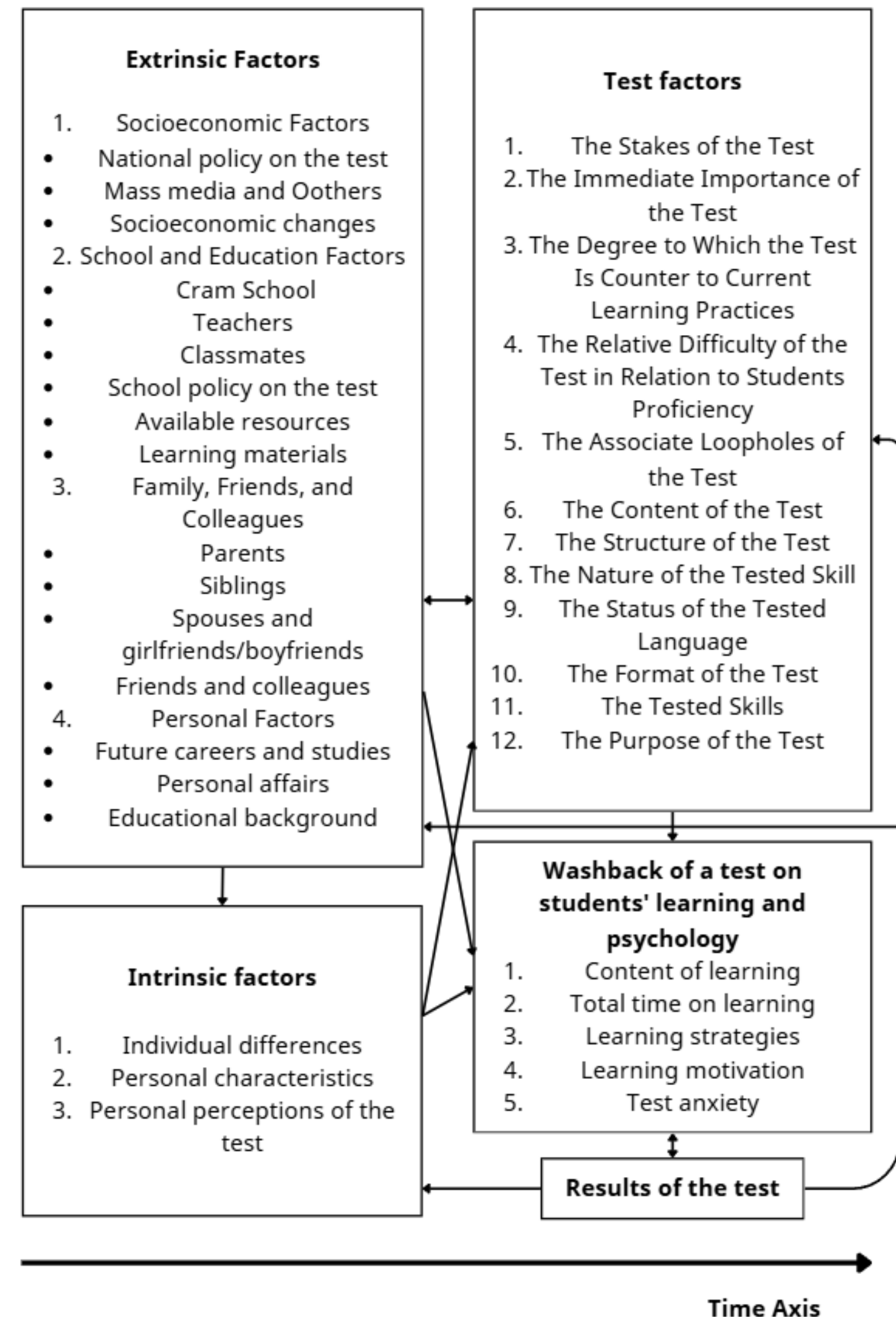
- Semi-structured Interviews
- Interview participants: 8 Students & 4 Experts

II. Research Methodology



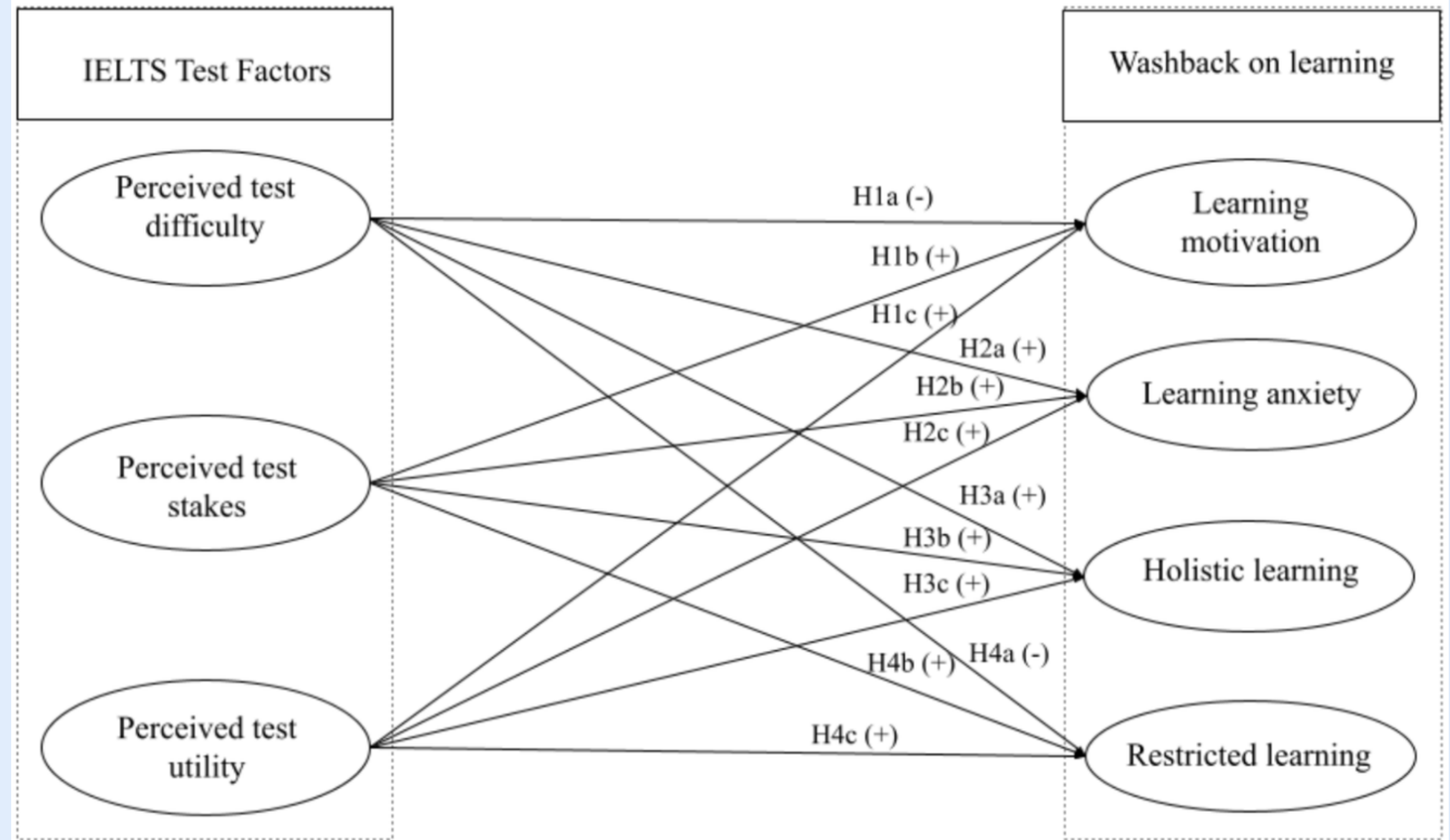
- Research model adapted from Shih (2007) who generated a new *washback model of students' learning*.
- This model includes *extrinsic*, *intrinsic*, and *test factors* to illustrate the complexity of *learning washback*.

Washback model proposed by Shih (2007)



II. Research Methodology

- Perceived test factors consist of *Perceived test difficulty*, *Perceived test stakes*, and *Perceived test utility*.
- Given 12 hypotheses about washback on four aspects of learning: **Learning motivation**, **Learning anxiety**, **Restricted learning**, and **Holistic learning**



Research model
proposed by the authors (2026)

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

Table 4.1. Summary of demographic information

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Major	English major (Business English)	181	53.4
	Non-English Major (Business, Economics)	158	46.6
Year of Study	First year	143	42.2
	Second year	50	14.7
	Third year	54	15.9
	Fourth year	84	24.8
	Other	8	2.4
Gender	Male	92	27.1
	Female	245	72.3
	Other	2	0.6
IELTS Test Experience	Met the IELTS exit proficiency requirement	202	59.6
	Taken but has not yet met the IELTS exit proficiency requirement	44	13.0
	Plan to take IELTS in the future	93	27.4
	No plan to take the IELTS test	0	0

Source: Synthesized by Research Team, 2026

Charateristics of the Sample



- The study sample included students diverse in terms of *major, year of study, gender, and IELTS test experience.*
- 339 valid responses.
- The majority of the sample:
 - Business English major
 - First year
 - Female.
 - Have met the exit proficiency requirement

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

The Result of the Scale's Reliability

Table 4.10. Reliability statistics of scales

Construct	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived test difficulty	10	0.904
Perceived test utility	10	0.906
Perceived test stakes	10	0.883
Learning motivation	10	0.863
Learning anxiety	06	0.879
Restricted learning	05	0.898
Holistic learning	06	0.847

Source: Synthesized by the Research Team

Cronbach's Alpha values for all constructs were **above 0.800**, indicating **strong internal consistency** and qualifying the data for further quantitative analysis.

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

The Result of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

From the results of EFA, the remaining items converged into seven factor groups according to the initial assumptions:

- **UTILITY:** Perceived test utility
- **STAKES:** Perceived test stakes
- **DIFFICULTY:** Perceived test difficulty
- **MOTIVATION:** Learning motivation
- **ANXIETY:** Learning anxiety
- **RESTRICTED:** Restricted learning
- **HOLISTIC:** Holistic learning

Note: Factor loading > 0.5

Independent Variables	Items	Loading	Dependent Variables	Items	Loading
Perceived Test Utility	UTILITY_5	0.822	Learning Motivation	MOTIVATION_3	0.691
	UTILITY_4	0.803		MOTIVATION_4	0.591
	UTILITY_3	0.686		MOTIVATION_1	0.516
	UTILITY_9	0.636		MOTIVATION_7	0.515
	UTILITY_7	0.604		MOTIVATION_6	0.509
	UTILITY_10	0.592	Learning Anxiety	ANXIETY_4	0.828
	UTILITY_6	0.569		ANXIETY_3	0.811
	UTILITY_8	0.552		ANXIETY_5	0.804
Perceived Test Stakes	STAKES_6	0.868		ANXIETY_6	0.698
	STAKES_8	0.767		ANXIETY_1	0.614
	STAKES_5	0.735		ANXIETY_2	0.541
	STAKES_7	0.678	Restricted Learning	RESTRICTED_2	0.814
	STAKES_3	0.591		RESTRICTED_3	0.758
	STAKES_2	0.562		RESTRICTED_5	0.747
	STAKES_4	0.556		RESTRICTED_4	0.720
Perceived Test Difficulty	DIFFICULTY_8	0.821		RESTRICTED_1	0.670
	DIFFICULTY_3	0.761	Holistic Learning	HOLISTIC_2	0.815
	DIFFICULTY_4	0.753		HOLISTIC_5	0.717
	DIFFICULTY_7	0.705		HOLISTIC_1	0.672
	DIFFICULTY_10	0.704		HOLISTIC_3	0.665
	DIFFICULTY_2	0.700		HOLISTIC_4	0.665
	DIFFICULTY_1	0.686			
	DIFFICULTY_5	0.630			
	DIFFICULTY_9	0.591			
	DIFFICULTY_6	0.552			

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

The Result of Confirmation Factor Analysis (CFA)

Construct	Item	Standardized Loading	Construct	Item	Standardized Loading
Perceived Test Difficulty	DIFF_1	0.656	Learning Motivation	MOTIVATION_1	0.517
	DIFF_2	0.679		MOTIVATION_3	0.666
	DIFF_3	0.656		MOTIVATION_4	0.695
	DIFF_4	0.705		MOTIVATION_6	0.694
	DIFF_5	0.718		MOTIVATION_7	0.710
	DIFF_6	0.681	Learning Anxiety	ANX_1	0.709
	DIFF_7	0.715		ANX_2	0.580
	DIFF_8	0.782		ANX_3	0.830
	DIFF_9	0.651		ANX_4	0.814
	DIFF_10	0.742		ANX_5	0.774
Perceived Test Stakes	STAKES_2	0.660		ANX_6	0.740
	STAKES_3	0.639	Holistic Learning	HL_1	0.710
	STAKES_4	0.663		HL_2	0.794
	STAKES_5	0.752		HL_3	0.721
	STAKES_6	0.792		HL_4	0.735
	STAKES_7	0.680		HL_5	0.734
	STAKES_8	0.724	Restricted Learning	RESTR_1	0.803
Perceived Test Utility	UTILITY_3	0.656		RESTR_2	0.825
	UTILITY_4	0.702		RESTR_3	0.788
	UTILITY_5	0.685		RESTR_4	0.775
	UTILITY_6	0.682		RESTR_5	0.802
	UTILITY_7	0.731	Standardized Regression Weights		
	UTILITY_8	0.740			
	UTILITY_9	0.695			
	UTILITY_10	0.725			

- The indicators in Table 4.13 show **acceptable reliability**, with loadings ranging from 0.517 to 0.830.
- According to Hair et al. (2010), indicator loadings should ideally exceed 0.70; however, values above 0.50 are still considered acceptable for certain studies.
- All items exceeded the 0.50 threshold → 46 items **retained** in the model.

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

The Result of Confirmation Factor Analysis (CFA)

Construct reliability and Convergent validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Perceived test difficulty	0.904	0.889	0.445
Perceived test stakes	0.871	0.872	0.531
Perceived test utility	0.889	0.876	0.469
Learning motivation	0.787	0.765	0.396
Learning anxiety	0.879	0.873	0.539
Holistic learning	0.857	0.875	0.584
Restricted learning	0.898	0.900	0.644

Source: Synthesized by the Research Team

All seven constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency:

- **Cronbach's Alpha** values ranging from 0.787 to 0.904.
- **CR values** between 0.765 and 0.900.

Satisfactory Convergent Validity (**AVE**):

- Perceived test stakes, Learning anxiety, Holistic learning, and Restricted learning > 0.50.
- Perceived test difficulty, Perceived test utility, and Learning motivation (ranging from 0.396 to 0.469)

→ **Acceptable** due to their strong composite reliability.

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

The Result of Confirmation Factor Analysis (CFA)

Construct reliability and Convergent validity

Construct	Difficulty	Stakes	Utility
Difficulty	0.667		
Stakes	0.422	0.729	
Utility	0.373	0.734	0.685

Source: Synthesized by the Research Team

- The correlation between Perceived test stakes and Perceived test utility(0.734) > the square root of AVE for Utility (0.685)
→ This overlap remains methodologically acceptable (Rönkkö and Cho, 2020).
- The measurement model demonstrates sufficient distinctiveness to proceed with structural analysis.

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

Structural model fit analysis

Fit Index	Value	Recommended	Evaluation
χ^2/df	2.073	< 3	Good
RMSEA	0.056	< 0.08	Good
CFI	0.874	> 0.90	Acceptable
TLI	0.866	> 0.90	Acceptable
GFI	0.779	> 0.90	Moderate
AGFI	0.755	> 0.90	Moderate

Source: Synthesized by the Research Team

- Primary Fit Metrics: The proposed model demonstrates a satisfactory overall fit, supported by strong primary indices with $\chi^2/\text{df} < 3.0$ and **RMSEA** < 0.06.
- Model Complexity Justification: **CFI, TLI, GFI, AGFI** < the ideal 0.90 cutoff → These remain acceptable considering the high complexity of measuring 46 observed variables across seven latent constructs.

→ The structural model fits the observed data acceptable to proceed with hypothesis testing.

III. Findings and Analysis: Quantitative Data

SEM Hypothesis Testing Results >>>>>

- 6 hypotheses were supported.
- **Perceived test utility** emerged as the strongest driver, followed by **perceived test difficulty**.
- **Perceived test stakes** were either statistically insignificant or contradicted the hypothesized directions.

Coefficient of Determination (R²) >>>

Dependent Variables	R ²
Learning motivation	0.552
Learning anxiety	0.345
Holistic learning	0.497
Restricted learning	0.294

Hypothesis	Relationship	Estimate	p-value	Standardized β	Conclusion
H1a (-)	Difficulty → Motivation	0.250	< 0.001	0.291	Not supported
H1b (+)	Stakes → Motivation	-0.167	0.030	-0.194	Not supported
H1c (+)	Utility → Motivation	0.691	< 0.001	0.725	Supported
H2a (+)	Difficulty → Anxiety	0.619	< 0.001	0.552	Supported
H2b (+)	Stakes → Anxiety	-0.266	0.009	-0.238	Not supported
H2c (+)	Utility → Anxiety	0.345	0.002	0.278	Supported
H3a (+)	Difficulty → Restricted learning	0.655	< 0.001	0.466	Supported
H3b (+)	Stakes → Restricted learning	-0.346	0.008	-0.246	Not supported
H3c (+)	Utility → Restricted learning	0.536	< 0.001	0.344	Supported
H4a (-)	Difficulty → Holistic learning	0.074	0.168	0.078	Not supported
H4b (+)	Stakes → Holistic learning	-0.191	0.022	-0.200	Not supported
H4c (+)	Utility → Holistic learning	0.858	< 0.001	0.809	Supported

Source: Results of AMOS Analysis

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

Semi-structured interviews

Table 4.20a. Demographic information of expert interview participants

Expert	Degree	Gender	Field of Expertise	Interview Format
P1	MA	Female	Education	Google Meet
P2	MA	Male	Education	In Person
P3	MA	Male	Education	Google Meet
P4	PhD	Female	Linguistics	In Person

Table 4.20b. Demographic information of student interview participants

Students	University	Major	Year of Study
S1	National Economics University	Business	Year 3
S2	Banking Academy of Vietnam	Economics	Year 2
S3	National Economics University	Business	Year 3
S4	<u>Thuongmai</u> University	Economics	Year 4
S5	National Economics University	Business	Year 2
S6	Foreign Trade University	Economics	Year 3
S7	Foreign Trade University	Business	Year 4
S8	National Economics University	Economics	Year 3

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data for the study from **February to March 2026**.
- With participants' permission, all interviews were **audio-recorded** to ensure that the data were captured accurately and completely.

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

Semi-structured interviews

>>>>> 1. Drivers of learning motivation

>>>>> 2. Learning anxiety in IELTS preparation

>>>>> 3. Restricted learning

>>>>> 4. Holistic learning

>>>>> 5. Participants' expectations and recommendations

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

1. Drivers of learning motivation

Primary drivers: Perceived test utility

- **Focus on long-term gains:** future career opportunities and study abroad.
- **Global recognition and rigor:** IELTS's international prestige, academic rigor, and standardized grading criteria.

Data from the interview

Many respondents explicitly linked their motivation to future opportunities, as reflected in statements such as *“achieving a good score can help me access better academic and career opportunities, such as studying abroad or working in international environments”* (S1, M1), *“my motivation comes from the benefits it brings, especially job opportunities”* (S2, M1). This perspective is strongly echoed by Expert 4, who notes that the intrinsic value of the exam *“serves as a great motivation for students to learn English.”* (P4, L1) because *“It is... also a very important ... to study abroad or apply for international jobs.”* (P4, V2)

Beyond immediate career gains, the motivation is further sustained by the global recognition and academic rigor of the IELTS exam (P1, V1). Expert 1 emphasizes that its international prestige across *“many countries around the world”* and its superior *“academic rigor”* compared to other tests like TOEFL (P1, V1) make it a high-value asset for students. This is supported by Expert 2, who notes that the *“...IELTS grading criteria are very standard”* and widely trusted by many universities (P2, V1).

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

1. Drivers of learning motivation

>>>>> The role of exit requirements and goal setting

Data from the interview

- **Act as an external push (Exit proficiency requirement):** create urgency and set targets, but lack lasting inspiration.

meaningful source of engagement. While several students acknowledged that the requirement provides an initial push, its influence appears limited and short-lived. For instance, participants noted that *“it reminds me ... but it is not the main reason why I want to improve my English”* (S1, M2), *“the requirement creates a sense of urgency, but it does not strongly motivate me”* (S7, M2), and *“it is something I need to complete, but not something that inspires me”* (S8, M2).

In addition, Expert 3 points out that *“determining the IELTS exit standard can serve as an orientation and create a specific goal for students' English learning”* (P3, L1), suggesting that while the requirement may feel extrinsic to

- Its impact is **largely extrinsic** and transitional, rather than sustained and internalized.

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

1. Drivers of learning motivation

>>>>> Perceived test difficulty and self-regulation

- **Difficulty as a growth driver:** Foster discipline and effort when students view them as opportunities for improvement rather than barriers for graduation.
- **Shift to intrinsic motivation:** Motivation evolves over time from meeting external requirements (e.g., exit standards) to pursuing personal, long-term goals.

Data from the interview

motivational challenge. A majority of students described difficulty as a factor that encourages greater effort and discipline, for example: “..the difficulty motivates me because it makes me aware of my weaknesses...” (S2, M3), and “I see it as a challenge that encourages me to improve my skills” (S1, M3). These data provide a nuanced explanation for quantitative results and suggest that perceived difficulty can generate productive effort when interpreted as a challenge rather than a barrier. This alignment between challenge and effort is supported by Expert 1, who emphasizes the necessity of student agency: “Students must self-recognize the necessity... from which they will strive harder.” (P1, L1).

Importantly, the data also reveal that students’ motivation is dynamic and evolving over time, transitioning from externally driven to internally driven forms, as they become more aware of its utility. This transition is evident in statements such as “over time, I rely more on my personal goals rather than the requirement itself” (S6, M4) and “my motivation becomes more about my future than just passing the requirement” (S2, M4). This shift reflects a movement from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Interviewing experts also gets relevant insights which explain that the “orientation” provided by the exit standard eventually matures into the “striving” and “self-recognition” required for long-term English proficiency (P1 & P3, L1).

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

2. Learning anxiety in IELTS preparation

>>>>> Score-related pressure

- **High-stakes graduation anxiety ?**

Although students perceive the IELTS requirement as an important source of pressure, perceived test stake does not necessarily differentiate students in terms of their anxiety levels.

- **Other factors:** high confidence may weaken the impact, test difficulty (very strong), test utility overrides formal stake (Students do perceive test stake as anxiety-relevant, but its unique contribution to anxiety becomes negligible once test utility is taken into account)

Data from the interview

For instance, participants reported that *I feel a certain level of anxiety, mainly because I am not sure whether I can achieve the required score. The pressure comes from both the difficulty of the test and its importance for graduation and future opportunities, which makes me concerned about my performance...I think I can get 5.5 or higher*” (S2, A1), and *“Yes, I do experience anxiety when preparing for IELTS, especially when I think about achieving my target score. I worry about not meeting my expectations”* “I (S1, A1). *“I aim 7.0, higher than the required for graduation 6.5 is not competitive when I apply for a job.*” (S1, A1) This perspective is consistent with expert insights, as one expert noted that *“Some final-year students... still do not have an IELTS 5.5 or 6.0... so they are certainly very worried.”* (P4, L2), while another stated that *“6.5 IELTS is already a challenge, but many students aim higher... In my university most of the students enter with an IELTS score of 5.5 or above, which means they already meet the required exit standard.”* (P3, L2).

“ My writing skills still not good so I’m abit worried. I know it’s so important uhm and IELTS high score will make my CV look better. It’s not easy but this is something I simply have to do . There’s no better choice and I still have 2 years to prepare.” (S2, A1)

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

2. Learning anxiety in IELTS preparation



Component difficulty and time pressure

- **Productive skill demands:** Writing and Speaking trigger the highest anxiety because they require simultaneous mastery of language skills, logical thinking, and complex idea organization.
- **Cognitive load under time limits:** Strict time constraints and unfamiliar topics heighten stress by hindering students' ability to structure clear, effective responses in real time.

Data from the interview

anxiety. Writing and speaking were frequently described as the most challenging sections due to their cognitive demands and real-time performance requirements. For example, students explained that *"I perceive IELTS as quite difficult, especially in the writing and speaking sections. These parts require not only language ability but also logical thinking and flexibility in expressing ideas, which makes them particularly challenging."* (S1, A2), *"The writing section is the most difficult for me because it requires structure, vocabulary, and critical thinking at the same time. I often find it hard to organize my ideas clearly within the time limit."* (S4, A2), and *"The difficulty mainly comes from time pressure and unfamiliar topics. Even when I understand the question, I sometimes struggle to respond effectively within a limited time"* (S3, A2).

This aligns with expert observations that *"They will be afraid of the IELTS test and feel the anxiety and pressure."* (P4, L2). These findings support the

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

2. Learning anxiety in IELTS preparation

>>>>> The coexistence of anxiety and motivation

- **Dual emotional impact:** Anxiety and motivation occur together:
→ Test difficulty pushes students to study harder + creates stress about their progress.

- **Double-edged role of anxiety:** Anxiety acts as a facilitator by driving effort and discipline, but also as a barrier when fear of unmet expectations causes discouragement.

Data from the interview

pressure and encouragement simultaneously. For example, students noted that *"I feel both motivated and pressured. The difficulty pushes me to study harder, but it also creates stress when I feel that my progress is not enough."* (S6, A4), *"Sometimes the difficulty motivates me because I want to overcome the challenge, but other times it makes me feel discouraged, especially when I do not achieve the results I expect."* (S3, A4), and *"I experience some anxiety, but I try to manage it by preparing consistently and seeing it as part of the learning process."* (S4, A4).

This pattern is also reflected in expert perspectives, as one expert stated that *"They will be afraid of the IELTS test and feel the anxiety and pressure."* (P4, L2), highlighting that anxiety is a common response among learners. These

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

3. Restricted learning

➤➤➤➤➤ Focus on test-taking strategies and exam formats

Data from the interview

- **Strategy-driven preparation:** Due to time constraints and target pressures, students prioritize exam tips, mock tests, and format familiarity over comprehensive English proficiency.
- **Narrowed learning scope:** Preparation becomes strictly exam-focused, directing student effort toward mastering question types rather than developing broader, long-term language skills.

in the test. For instance, they stated that *“I focus more on test-taking strategies because I want to achieve a specific score within a limited time. I spend a lot of time practicing question types and learning how to approach each section of the exam effectively.”* (S3, R1), *“I focus mostly on test-taking strategies because my main goal is to achieve the required score. I spend more time practicing exam formats and learning tips rather than improving my overall English ability.”* (S5, R1), and *“When preparing for IELTS, I spend more time doing mock tests and practicing specific exam formats, which helps me become familiar with the test but also makes my learning more exam-focused.”* (S5, R1). This pattern is consistent with expert opinion that *“Students... only like to focus on IELTS exam preparation.”* (P4, L4), indicating that learners tend to concentrate narrowly on exam-related content rather than broader language development.

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

3. Restricted learning

➤➤➤➤➤ Emphasis on score achievement over language development

Data from the interview

- **Score-oriented mindset:** Students focus strictly on hitting target scores to meet graduation thresholds rather than building general English proficiency.

- **Unsustainable, superficial learning:** While fast-tracking scores through shortcuts and targeted practice offers quick results, learners and experts agree it undermines deeper, long-term language development.

driven by outcome-oriented goals. For example, they noted that *“For me, the main goal is to achieve the required score for graduation, so I focus on what is necessary to pass the test rather than developing my English in a broader sense.”* (S5, R2), *“In practice, strategies seem more immediately useful because they help me improve my score in a shorter time, even though I know they may not contribute much to long-term language development.”* (S3, R2), and *“My learning is more focused on achieving a target score rather than fully improving my English ability.”* (S5, R2).

This tendency is also reflected in expert perspectives, as one expert pointed out that *“They tend to study ‘superficially’... This is not sustainable.”* (P4, L4), suggesting that score-oriented learning may limit deeper language development.

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

3. Restricted learning

>>>>> Reliance on practice tests and Restricted learning

Data from the interview

- **Heavy reliance on test drilling:** Students rely heavily on mock tests and repetitive practice to improve scores quickly.

instance, they explained that *"I spend a lot of time practicing mock tests and familiarizing myself with question types because I believe this is the most effective way to improve my score."* (S5, R3) and *"Practicing test formats repeatedly helps me feel more prepared for the exam, but it also means I focus less on developing broader language skills."* (S3, R3).

This aligns with expert observations that students tend to focus narrowly on exam preparation rather than broader learning processes, reinforcing the idea that

- **Restricted learning scope:** This exam-focused approach limits opportunities to develop broader and long-term language skills.

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

3. Restricted learning

Restricted learning as a response to difficulty and pressure

Data from the interview

- **Coping with Test Difficulty and Pressure:** Students use exam-focused strategies to cope with IELTS difficulty, time constraints, and score pressure.
- **Surface-level learning:** Under pressure, students prioritize test techniques over deeper learning and overall English development.
- **Adaptive response:** Restricted learning can be seen as a coping mechanism in response to anxiety and the high-stakes nature of the IELTS test.

the demands of the IELTS test. For example, student participants noted that *“The difficulty of IELTS makes me focus more on finding strategies to deal with the test rather than improving my overall English ability. It becomes more about coping with the exam than developing real skills.”* (S5, R4), *“Because the test is difficult and time is limited, I prioritize strategies that can help me handle the exam more efficiently.”* (S3, R4), and *“When I feel pressure to achieve a certain score, I tend to rely more on exam techniques rather than focusing on deeper learning.”* (S6, R4).

This pattern is supported by expert insights that students may develop surface-level learning approaches under pressure, as reflected in *“Students... only like to focus on IELTS exam preparation.”* (P4, L4). These findings explain

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

4. Holistic learning

>>>>> Balanced skill development & Practical and Academic Competence

Data from the interview

- **Balanced skill development:** IELTS encourages students to develop all four language skills, as well as vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills.

Some participants emphasized that the test structure mandates a comprehensive approach: *“IELTS requires all four skills, which helps me develop a more balanced English ability”* (S2, H1) and improves *“vocabulary, grammar, and communication skills at the same time”* (S7, H1). This student perspective is validated by Expert 4, who notes that *“exam preparation also helps them develop comprehensive English skills.”* (P4, L3).

- **Practical and academic competence:** IELTS preparation improves real-life communication while developing critical thinking and idea organization skills.

Beyond basic proficiency, students recognized the real-world relevance of the exam, noting that *“practicing speaking and writing helps me... communicate more effectively in real-life situations”* (S1, H2). Furthermore, the preparation process cultivates higher-order cognitive abilities: *“IELTS helps me improve my critical thinking and ability to organize ideas”* (S3, H4). Expert 3 reinforces this, stating that *“academic skills... such as critical thinking and multi-faceted perspective... can provide direction for students.”* (P3, L3).

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

4. Holistic learning

➤➤➤➤➤ Structured and purposeful orientation

Data from the interview

- **Structured and purposeful learning:** IELTS gives students clear goals, helping them study more systematically, identify weaknesses, and improve proactively.

The data also show a shift from unstructured learning to goal-directed discipline: *“before IELTS, I studied without a clear direction, but now I have specific goals”* (S1, H3). Students reported becoming more proactive, using the test to *“...identify weaknesses and improve them systematically.”* (S6, H4). This information was supported by Expert 3, who said that *“...IELTS exit standard can serve as an orientation and create a specific goal...”* (P3, L1).

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

5. Participants' expectations and recommendations

>>>>> Communication strengthening and awareness enhancement

Data from the interview

- **Clear communication and awareness:** Universities should provide clearer IELTS guidance and highlight its long-term academic and career benefits to reduce confusion, anxiety, and pressure.

- **Value-based motivation:** Communication should focus on the practical value of IELTS to encourage students' internal motivation rather than relying on exam pressure.

"Universities should offer more practical support, such as workshops, skill-based training, and clear learning guidance, because many students feel stressed when they do not know how to prepare effectively." (S2, P1) and "Providing clear direction on how to prepare for IELTS would help students reduce confusion and unnecessary pressure during the learning process." (S2, P1). This indicates that insufficient communication and guidance may contribute to confusion and ineffective learning approaches. This perspective is strongly supported by expert insights. As highlighted, *"The university's English learning environment exists but is not well-communicated. Freshmen are easily misled by external centers and believe university study is inadequate." (P2, R3).* Additionally, experts emphasize the importance of internal motivation, noting that *"Students must self-recognize the necessity and benefits of the IELTS exit standard, from which they will strive harder." (P1, R3).* Furthermore, communication strategies should shift from pressure to value-based messaging, as *"Consultations and promotional activities should focus on the benefits of studying subjects in English, pursuing postgraduate studies, or applying for jobs, so that these become intrinsic motivations rather than pressures." (P4, R3).*

III. Findings and Analysis: Qualitative Data

5. Participants' expectations and recommendations

>>>>> Supportive environment for learners

- **Holistic learning over exam prep:** Real-world practice (e.g., speaking clubs) promotes authentic language development rather than mere test drilling.

- **Institutionalized mentorship:** Small-group mentoring requires formal university backing, including funding, staff, and clear operational frameworks.

Data from the interview

authentic learning environments, with participants suggesting that *"I believe universities should create more opportunities for students to practice English in real contexts, such as English-speaking clubs or interactive activities, which can help reduce pressure and increase confidence."* (S3, P2) and *"Students need more chances to use English in meaningful contexts instead of only preparing for exams."* (S4, P2). These experiences are essential for moving beyond exam-focused learning toward more comprehensive language development.

Expert perspectives further reinforce this direction. For example, it is suggested that *"We can organize small student groups (weaker or same proficiency level) with a specific mentor."* (P3, R4), highlighting the role of mentorship in guiding students' learning processes. In addition, experts stress that building such environments requires institutional support, as *"Creating an environment requires clear mechanisms (feasibility, human resources, finances) and specific mechanisms for mentors' support."* (P2, R4).

IV. Recommendations



Policy implications for the universities

1. Maintain benchmark & balanced assessment

- Keep IELTS as an exit requirement.
- Avoid using IELTS as the sole indicator of overall English proficiency.

3. Provide comprehensive support systems

- Academic & tech support: Free mock tests, peer mentoring, and AI self-study tools.
- Mental health support.
- Communication campaigns: Actively promote school resources and clarify misconceptions.

2. Highlight real-world utility

- Integrate business case studies and international trade materials into the curriculum.
- Organize career seminars with alumni and recruiters (highlighting jobs, salaries, and study abroad pathways).

4. Shift from test-oriented to holistic syllabus

- Discourage teaching only IELTS exam templates.
- Balance exam format training with real-world communicative business skills.

IV. Recommendations



Implications for the students

Key focus	Recommended action
Adopt a value-driven mindset	• View IELTS as a career investment (MNC jobs, global trade, academic growth), not just a graduation barrier. • Leverage Perceived Utility to build long-term, intrinsic motivation.
Learning approach	• Avoid over-relying on exam tips, templates, and shallow test drilling (Restricted learning). • Combine exam prep with authentic language practice (business discussions, real-world communication).
Stress management	• Set realistic, step-by-step target scores and maintain daily study routines. • Actively seek peer mentoring and campus advising to lower test anxiety and avoid burnout.

V. Conclusion

Summary of key findings

- **Students' perceptions:** IELTS is viewed not merely as an external obligation, but as a meaningful and academically demanding requirement.
- **Impact of test factors:** Perceived test utility is the most important driver of psychological and learning behaviors, while Perceived test difficulty mainly increases Learning anxiety and Restricted learning. In contrast, Perceived test stakes show limited explanatory power.
- **Overall washback:** IELTS test factors exert both positive and negative effects on students' psychological and learning behavior.

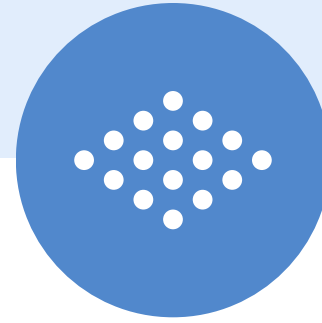
V. Conclusion

>>>>> Limitations of the study

- Limits the generalizability of the findings across broader student populations.
- Might have the risk of social desirability bias.
- Captures a snapshot of students' learning (October 2025 – March 2026).

>>>>> Recommendations for further research

- Broaden sample diversity: Diverse academic disciplines, multiple universities, and different regions.
- Longitudinal Design: Track temporal changes in motivation, anxiety, and learning behaviors before, during, and after IELTS preparation.
- Comparative Studies: Investigate institutional and contextual factors shaping test washback effects.



**THANKS FOR
LISTENING!**

