



Evaluating Listening Tasks in IELTS Coursebooks

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Abstract

Although IELTS preparation materials often claim to promote communicative competence, there is growing concern that they prioritize test-taking strategies over the development of authentic listening skills. This study examines the communicative orientation of listening tasks in six widely used IELTS preparation coursebooks in Iran (selected based on consultations with 15 institute directors across four major cities). In this context, learners heavily rely on instructional materials due to limited access to authentic English input. Utilizing an integrated framework that synthesizes Goh's (2001) task typology with Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of communicative language ability, the study analyzed 565 listening tasks, a large sample, drawn from these internationally published IELTS coursebooks. Tasks were classified into four categories, one-way transactional, one-way interactional, two-way transactional, and two-way interactional, based on their participatory structure and communicative purpose. The findings show a clear imbalance; tasks are predominantly one-way transactional, emphasizing passive information extraction with limited opportunities for interactive engagement or pragmatic interpretation. While some coursebooks exhibit a gradual progression toward communicative authenticity across proficiency levels, others remain heavily exam-oriented. This variation reflects inconsistent support for developing real-world listening skills. In the Iranian EFL context, such a focus on non-interactive tasks may hinder learners' pragmatic and strategic competence, leaving them underprepared for academic and professional communication. The study highlights the need for more communicatively oriented materials and pedagogical strategies aligned with national curriculum goals.

Keywords: IELTS preparation materials, listening task authenticity, communicative competence, washback effects

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Introduction

High-stakes English proficiency tests, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), have a significant impact on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching practices, often leading to a greater focus on test preparation than on the development of communicative competence (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017). As a result, learners may become proficient in test-taking strategies while lacking the communicative skills necessary for academic and professional success (Cheng et al., 2004; Green, 2007; Read, 2022). This disconnect is particularly problematic in listening instruction, where authentic comprehension involves processing linguistic input, interpreting pragmatic meaning, and responding in real time, skills that require meaningful, interactive practice (Goh & Vandergrift, 2012; Rost & Brown, 2022). Nevertheless, many IELTS materials continue to prioritize discrete listening skills over the development of integrated, communicative abilities (Field, 2012; Hughes, 1989).

In Iran, this challenge is magnified by limited access to authentic English outside the classroom and a heavy reliance on commercially published IELTS preparation materials (Babae, 2017; Saif, 2021). Despite recent curriculum reforms promoting communicative language teaching (Tajeddin & Chamani, 2020), many commonly used materials remain test-driven, offering tasks that do not align with the interactional and functional demands of real-world listening (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022; Rasti, 2018). Since these textbooks often act as the *de facto* curriculum in many Iranian classrooms, they play a major role in shaping washback. Therefore, analyzing their design is not merely an evaluation of content, but a crucial step in understanding the actual mechanism of washback in everyday classroom learning.

Despite a well-established body of research on test washback (e.g., Cheng et al., 2004; Knoch et al., 2020; Saif, 2021), empirical investigations continue to rely heavily on questionnaires and interviews. As Cheng et al. (2015) note, much of the existing evidence is perception-based rather than grounded in objective analyses of instructional artifacts. A related, yet often disconnected, problem exists in research on authenticity in language assessment. A recent systematic review (Hasrol et al., 2022) indicates that while researchers often distinguish between situational and interactional authenticity, few examine the real-world Target Language Use (TLU) domains that tasks are intended to represent. The primary gap, therefore, is twofold: (1) existing washback studies rely on subjective reports rather than material analysis, and (2) the material analyses that do exist often focus on internal test-task features without systematically comparing them to real-world communicative demands.

To address these gaps, the present study adopts an integrated analytical framework that synthesizes Goh's (2001) typology of listening tasks with Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of communicative language ability.

While neither framework is sufficient alone to capture the complexity of washback in materials, together they offer a solid, two-sided approach. Goh's typology provides a necessary structural classification, categorizing tasks by participatory structure (one-way vs. two-way) and communicative function (transactional vs. interactional). However, classification alone does not equal evaluation. Therefore, Bachman and Palmer's model is employed to assess the quality of these tasks, specifically measuring their authenticity against real-world

linguistic, functional, and sociolinguistic demands. This synthesis allows for a comprehensive critique: Goh identifies the pedagogical goal, while Bachman and Palmer highlight the gap between that goal and real-world use.

The study examines six internationally published IELTS preparation coursebooks, identified through institutional surveys ($n = 15$) as the most widely used in Iran's private language institute sector. Through this integrated, theory-informed analysis, the study examines how current IELTS listening materials influence learners' communicative development. Ultimately, it aims to determine, based on empirical evidence, whether the communicative label used for these materials truly reflects meaningful interactional competence or a sophisticated form of test-wiseness.

Literature Review

From Theory to Practice: Shaping Authenticity in Listening Task Design

The shift from structuralist to communicative paradigms has significantly reshaped the design of listening tasks. In Communicative Language Teaching, authenticity extends beyond real-life topics to encompass communicative intent and interactional features (Field, 2023; Gilmore, 2007). It involves situational and interactional realism, unscripted language, cognitive engagement, and cultural relevance (Hasrol et al., 2022). Culturally-laden tasks offer an opportunity for raising cultural awareness and promoting learners' intercultural communicative competence (ICC) (Badpa & Beikian, 2025; Esmaceli et al., 2022). Listening is now viewed not as passive reception, but as an active process in which learners construct meaning within a specific context (Goh & Vandergrift, 2012).

Authentic tasks support both language development and motivation. Bouftira et al. (2022) found that interactionally authentic tasks enhance pragmatic competence, particularly in blended settings, while Gilabert et al. (2009) demonstrated that tasks requiring negotiation of meaning better prepare learners for real-life communication than traditional drills (Ballesteros Soria & van Compernelle, 2023). Consequently, scholars such as Ockey and Wagner (2018) advocate for tasks utilizing real spoken texts, varied accents, and multimedia interaction, arguing that high-stakes tests like IELTS must reflect these authentic academic and professional exchanges (Hasrol et al., 2022).

However, implementing authentic materials in high-stakes contexts poses challenges. Learners may feel overwhelmed by complex texts (Peacock, 1997), and without adequate scaffolding, beginners often struggle (Nunan, 1999). Furthermore, digital formats require nuanced classification; as Goh and Vandergrift (2012) note, a video lecture may remain a one-way transactional task, whereas an online simulation may involve two-way interaction. This complexity necessitates a rigorous framework to evaluate whether materials achieve the balance between authenticity and accessibility.

Evaluating Listening Task Authenticity: Conceptual Models and Limitations

To evaluate authenticity, researchers have proposed various frameworks, though their applicability to communicative task analysis varies. Some models, while insightful, are less suited for evaluating communicative authenticity. Buck's (2001) system emphasizes input and response formats over communicative intent.

Field's (2003) cognitive framework focuses on mental processes but overlooks the social dimensions of interaction. Similarly, Robinson's (2001) task complexity framework, though practical for gauging difficulty, often blurs the line between complexity and authenticity (Brunfaut & Révész, 2015), risking the prioritization of linguistic demands over communicative relevance.

To overcome these limitations, the present study proposes an integrated approach utilizing two complementary frameworks.

At the macro level, Bachman and Palmer's (1996) framework provides the necessary criteria for establishing situational authenticity. They conceptualize authenticity as the degree of correspondence between the characteristics of a language test task and those of a Target Language Use (TLU) domain. Their model focuses on defining the external parameters of the communicative event, specifically the physical setting, the participants' roles, and the purpose of the interaction. However, while Bachman and Palmer articulate the broad conditions necessary for authentic assessment, their framework offers limited guidance for analyzing the fine-grained procedural characteristics and psycholinguistic demands of specific pedagogical activities used in the classroom.

To address these limitations, Goh's (2001) typology is employed at the micro level to categorize the internal mechanics of the listening tasks. Drawing on the functional distinctions proposed by Brown and Yule (1983), Goh classifies activities based on participatory structure (one-way vs. two-way) and communicative function (transactional vs. interactional). This classification is essential because it serves as a proxy for cognitive difficulty; for instance, 'one-way transactional' tasks place distinct demands on learner memory and processing compared to 'two-way interactional' tasks (Goh, 2000). By integrating Goh's focus on cognitive processing with Bachman and Palmer's situational constraints, this study establishes a comprehensive framework that accounts for both the social reality of the event and the psycholinguistic reality of the learner. This dual perspective is essential for ensuring construct validity, as it prevents the validation of superficially realistic tasks, activities that look like real-world tasks on the surface but fail to elicit authentic cognitive engagement.

Gaps in the Authenticity of Listening Tasks in IELTS Commercial Coursebooks

While the construct validity of the IELTS test has been widely examined (Alavi et al., 2018; Aryadoust, 2011; Phakiti, 2016), less attention has been paid to the listening tasks in IELTS preparation coursebooks. Most research has concentrated on reading and writing (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014; Marina, 2018; Priyanti, 2017), leaving listening materials underexplored.

This gap is particularly consequential in EFL contexts, such as Iran, where learners rely heavily on coursebooks as their primary source of authentic input (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Research suggests that commercial IELTS materials often prioritize test-taking strategies, such as keyword matching, over situational and interactional authenticity (Huang & Zeng, 2025; Minh, 2025; Nguyen & Le, 2024). This emphasis fosters negative washback, where instruction focuses on surface-level

lexical cues rather than discourse comprehension (Bailey, 1996; Green, 2007; Mickan & Motteram, 2009). Empirical studies confirm that such materials often lead to exam-driven methods that fail to foster authentic listening competence (Estaji & Ghiasvand, 2021; Wen et al., 2022).

Crucially, no previous study has combined these two specific frameworks to analyze IELTS materials. Existing research often looks at textbooks too broadly or lacks a detailed method to spot specific flaws. By using Goh's typology to classify what the tasks are, and Bachman and Palmer's model to evaluate how authentic they are, this study can identify exactly where materials fail, whether the situation is unrealistic (e.g., a fake purpose) or the mental processing is too simple (e.g., a difficult text that only requires a simple answer). To address this clear methodological and theoretical gap, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the frequency distribution of listening tasks across Goh's (2001) four typological categories within the selected IELTS preparation materials?

RQ2: Are there statistically significant differences in the proportion of communicatively oriented tasks (two-way and interactional) across different coursebooks and proficiency levels?

RQ3: How do the observed task patterns align with stated pedagogical objectives, and what are the implications for communicative competence development?

Method

Research Design

This mixed-methods study examined listening tasks in IELTS preparation coursebooks using Goh's (2001) framework and Bachman and Palmer's model to assess alignment with communicative language teaching principles. Quantitative analysis addressed RQ1 and RQ2 by categorizing task types and frequencies, with a focus on two-way interactional tasks that develop real-world listening skills. Qualitative analysis for RQ3 assessed how task patterns align with the coursebooks' stated goals and their implications for the development of communicative competence.

Sampling and Corpus Selection

To address the requirement for representativeness in the Iranian EFL context, a two-stage sampling procedure was established.

Stage 1: Institutional Adoption Survey

A preliminary market survey was conducted across 15 major language institutes in four metropolitan centers (Tehran, Isfahan, Kerman, and Mashhad). These institutes represent the top tier of the private sector, collectively serving approximately 12,000 learners annually. Directors of Studies were surveyed regarding their current core IELTS curriculum. Inclusion criteria for the corpus were defined as:

1. Market Penetration: The title must be the primary coursebook in the surveyed institutes.

2. **Publisher Status:** Must be produced by a major international ELT publisher (e.g., Cambridge, Macmillan, Collins) to ensure global relevance.
3. **Currency:** Published or revised within the last 13 years (post-2012) to align with current IELTS test specifications.
4. **Proficiency range:** The books cover IELTS bands 4.0–7.5, from Pre-intermediate to Advanced levels.
5. **Listening focus:** Each coursebook must contain substantial, integral listening components rather than supplementary ones.

Stage 2: Final Corpus Selection

Based on the survey data, six coursebooks were selected. These texts span the proficiency bands 4.0–7.5, ensuring the analysis captures the progression from foundational to advanced instruction.

Table 1

Selected IELTS Preparation Coursebooks

Title	Authors	Publisher	Details
Mindset for IELTS (Foundation to Level 3)	Foundation: (Archer et al., 2017) Level 1: (Crosthwaite et al., 2017) Level 2: (De Souza, 2017) Level 3: (Archer et al., 2018)	Cambridge University Press	2017–2018; digital pack update (2023, not currently accessible in Iran)
Complete IELTS (Bands 4–5 to 6.5–7.5)	Bands 4–5: (Wyatt, 2012) Bands 5–6.5: (Brook-Hart & Jakeman, 2012) Bands 6.5–7.5: (Brook-Hart & Jakeman, 2013)	Cambridge University Press	2012–2013; new edition (July 2025, not yet available in Iran)
Collins Listening for IELTS	(Aish & Tomlinson, 2019)	HarperCollins	Revised edition, 2019
Ready for IELTS (2nd Edition)	(McCarter, 2017)	Macmillan Education	2017 (Second Edition)
IELTS Advantage: Speaking and Listening Skills	(Marks, 2017)	DELTA Publishing	Reprinted 2017
Barron's IELTS	(Lougheed, 2016)	Barron's Educational Series	2016

A total of $N = 565$ discrete listening tasks were extracted. A task was operationally defined as any pedagogical unit requiring the processing of spoken input (audio or video) to produce a measurable response. Mechanical drills (e.g., listen and repeat) and post-listening discussions without audio re-play were excluded.

Coding Manual and Operational Rules

To ensure reproducibility, we developed a clear coding protocol for classifying tasks using Goh's (2001) typology. The protocol followed a simple yes/no decision tree designed to reduce subjective judgments.

Operational Decision Rules

Determining Participatory Structure (One-Way vs. Two-Way):

Rule: Does the learner have any power to affect what the speaker says or how the interaction unfolds?

Code One-Way if: The input is pre-recorded or scripted, and the learner is a passive recipient (e.g., listening to a lecture, filling gaps).

Code Two-Way if: The task asks the learner to respond in real time to a stimulus that shifts based on their input, or to take part in a role-play where meaning is negotiated. (e.g., Ask your partner for clarification on the lecture points).

Determining Communicative Function (Transactional vs. Interactional)

Rule: Is the primary goal information transfer or social/pragmatic maintenance?

Code Transactional if: The focus is on message transmission, facts, or details (e.g., What time does the train leave?).

Code Interactional if: The focus is on interpersonal relationships, expressing feelings, or interpreting stance/pragmatics (e.g., How does the speaker feel about the proposal? or persuade your partner).

Analytical Framework

Theoretical framework: Goh's Typology

Goh's (2001) listening task typology served as the main framework, adapted for contemporary multimodal formats. This study made principled adaptations, which involved two phases:

- Phase 1: Expert review. Four applied linguistics experts reviewed the proposed adaptations. The panel included experienced IELTS instructors (minimum seven years teaching experience) with advanced TESOL training (a PhD candidate and three M.A. graduates in TEFL).
- Phase 2: Pilot testing. The refined framework was tested on 50 listening tasks from the initial coursebook survey. Two independent raters applied the typology, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. This process ensured clarity and consistency before full-scale application.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

In the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were used to show how listening task types were distributed across the four categories: one-way transactional, one-way interactional, two-way transactional, and two-way interactional. This study calculated frequencies and percentages for each category, both overall and within each coursebook, and compared the results to see whether certain books or levels leaned more toward specific task types.

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Chi-square tests of independence assessed task-type distribution differences both within series (across proficiency levels) and between series (e.g., Mindset vs. Complete IELTS). Cramér's V complemented significant χ^2 results by quantifying effect sizes, interpreted as: negligible (<0.10), weak (0.10 – 0.29), moderate (0.30 – 0.49), or strong (≥ 0.50).

Alignment with Stated Objectives

To address RQ3, this study evaluated how listening task distributions aligned with each coursebook's stated pedagogical objectives using Bachman and Palmer's (1996) communicative competence model. The analysis involved three stages:

Systematic content analysis: All coursebook introductions and teacher guides were systematically coded using *Atlas.ti 9.0* to identify explicit pedagogical claims. Objectives were categorized as (a) test-taking strategies, (b) listening skill development, (c) communicative competence development (based on Bachman & Palmer's model), or (d) mixed/unclear aims. Intercoder reliability was established through independent coding of 20% of the data (Cohen's Kappa = 0.84), resolving discrepancies through discussion and coding manual refinement. Direct quotes were extracted to ensure accurate interpretation and resolved mixed cases through collaborative review.

Alignment assessment: Task distributions were evaluated against each coursebook's stated objectives, focusing on communicative authenticity as defined by Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model. This model identifies five core components of language competence: grammatical, textual, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic. Goh's task types were mapped onto these components to assess communicative demands. One-way transactional tasks mainly target grammatical and textual competence, offering limited authenticity. One-way interactional tasks incorporate sociolinguistic elements, offering moderate authenticity. Two-way transactional tasks require functional and strategic competence, indicating higher authenticity. Two-way interactional tasks integrate functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic dimensions, representing the highest level of communicative authenticity. While all task types involve some grammatical processing, those demanding pragmatic interpretation and adaptive strategies were seen as better aligned with real-world communication and more supportive of communicative competence development.

The alignment analysis examined convergent patterns (where task distributions supported stated aims) and divergent patterns (where content exceeded or fell short of objectives). Of particular interest was positive divergence, where coursebooks included substantially more communicatively authentic tasks than their test-focused statements would predict.

Implications analysis: Finally, the study examined how alignment patterns might impact learner preparation, particularly where IELTS functions as a high-stakes gatekeeping tool. This analysis considered potential consequences of misalignment between stated objectives and actual task provision for learners' communicative development and test performance.

Reliability and validity

Inter-rater reliability

Two trained raters classified all 565 listening tasks using a structured protocol: orientation (4 hours), guided practice (20 tasks, 4 hours), and calibration (15 tasks, 82% agreement). Initial agreement for the full dataset was 79%, with Cohen's kappa of $\kappa = 0.84$ ($p < 0.001$), indicating strong reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977). All discrepancies were resolved through discussion, achieving 100% consensus. To ensure consistency across task types, the classification protocol was validated through expert review, confirming its applicability to diverse task formats, including those with multimedia elements.

Construct validity

Content validity was established through a four-member expert panel review, confirming comprehensive coverage of authenticity features aligned with Bachman and Palmer's (1996) framework. For convergent validity, three experienced IELTS instructors independently rated 100 tasks (17.7% of the dataset) for real-world authenticity on a 5-point scale. Tasks were distributed approximately equally across Goh's (2001) typology categories: two-way interactional ($n = 26$), two-way transactional ($n = 24$), one-way interactional ($n = 25$), and one-way transactional ($n = 25$). Inter-rater reliability for these ratings was high (intraclass correlation coefficient, ICC = 0.87), ensuring consistency. Mean ratings varied by category: two-way interactional ($M = 4.2$), two-way transactional ($M = 3.8$), one-way interactional ($M = 3.1$), and one-way transactional ($M = 2.3$). A one-way ANOVA confirmed significant differences across categories ($F(3,96) = 42.3$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .57$), supporting strong construct validity. The lower authenticity ratings for one-way transactional tasks, often less interactive (e.g., lectures), align with their simpler classification criteria, explaining their high reliability in task categorization despite reduced communicative realism.

Ethical considerations

This study analyzed published IELTS preparation coursebooks without human participants, requiring no IRB approval. The research adhered to academic ethical standards through properly cited excerpts for illustrative purposes, ensuring

fair use compliance. Language institutes provided voluntary, non-sensitive input to identify widely used coursebooks based on informed consent. Researchers declare no conflicts of interest or publisher affiliations, ensuring impartial analysis.

Results

Distribution of Listening Task Types (RQ1)

In response to RQ1, the analysis of 565 listening tasks from six IELTS preparation coursebooks showed a heavily skewed distribution toward one-way transactional activities. As displayed in Table 2, one-way transactional tasks made up 70.3% ($n = 397$) of all activities, which indicated a strong emphasis on non-reciprocal, information-focused listening practice.

Table 2

Distribution of Tasks by Type

Task Type	Frequency	Percentage	95% CI
One-way Transactional	397	70.3%	66.5%–74.0%
One-way Interactional	65	11.5%	8.9%–14.1%
Two-way Transactional	33	5.8%	3.9%–7.8%
Two-way Interactional	70	12.4%	9.7%–15.1%
Total	565	100%	

The remaining task types were considerably underrepresented: one-way interactional tasks made up 11.5% ($n = 65$), two-way interactional tasks 12.4% ($n = 70$), and two-way transactional tasks only 5.8% ($n = 33$). This distribution highlights a clear imbalance toward monologic, factual listening over interactive or socially focused practice.

Chi-square analysis revealed statistically significant differences in task-type distribution among coursebooks ($\chi^2 = 141.5$, $df = 15$, $p < 0.001$), though nearly all materials were dominated by one-way transactional formats. The effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.29$) indicated a moderate association between coursebook selection and task-type emphasis.

Activity-Type Distribution

Table 3 presents the five most frequently occurring listening activity types across all analyzed coursebooks. These formats collectively account for over half of the total tasks and reflect a strong emphasis on traditional test-oriented practice.

Table 3

Top Five Listening Activity Types

Activity Type	Count	Percentage
Multiple-choice	77	13.6%
Matching	66	11.6%
Fill in the Gap	61	10.8%
Pronunciation	57	10.1%
Short-Answer Questions	39	6.9%
Total	300 out of 565	53%

The top five activity types, mostly focused on assessment and comprehension, make up 53% of all 565 tasks, indicating a clear preference for test-oriented formats. Interactive tasks, such as discussion-based listening, were rare at just 2.6%.

Prevalence of Interactive Tasks (RQ2)

Regarding RQ2, the analysis revealed a clear lack of tasks that support negotiation of meaning and pragmatic understanding. Only 18.2% (n = 103) of all listening tasks involved two-way communication, including two-way transactional tasks (n = 33, 5.8%) and interactional tasks (n = 70, 12.4%). In other words, more than four-fifths of the tasks (81.8%) required no listener interaction, resulting in a predominantly passive listening experience.

From a communicative function standpoint, just 23.9% (n = 135) of tasks had interactional goals (One-way Interactional n=65, 11.5% and Two-way Interactional n=70, 12.4%), while the majority (76.1%, n = 430) were transactional. The low share of two-way interactional tasks (12.4%) is especially striking given their value for developing real-world listening skills.

Individual Coursebooks

Mindset for IELTS: The Mindset series demonstrated a progressive increase in communicative authenticity across proficiency levels, as shown in Table 4. This trend is visually summarized in Figure 1.

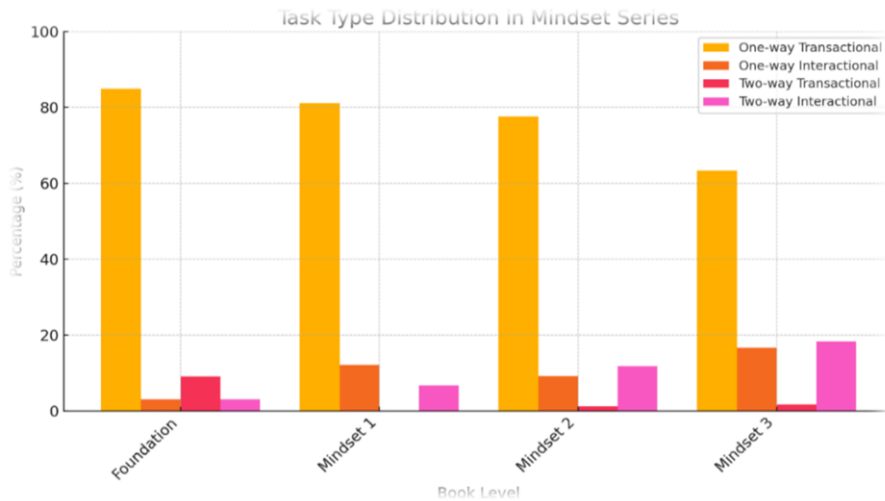
Table 4

Mindset for IELTS Task Types by Proficiency Level

Level	One-way Transactional	One-way Interactional	Two-way Transactional	Two-way Interactional	Total
Foundation	28 (84.8%)	1 (3.1%)	3 (9.1%)	1 (3.0%)	33 (100%)
Level 1	60 (81.1%)	9 (12.2%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (6.7%)	74 (100%)
Level 2	59 (77.6%)	7 (9.2%)	1 (1.3%)	9(11.8%)	76 (100%)
Level 3	38 (63.3%)	10(16.7%)	1 (1.7%)	11 (18.3%)	60 (100%)
Total	185 (76.1%)	27 (11.1%)	5 (2.0%)	26 (10.6%)	243(100%)

Figure 1

Distribution of Listening Task Types across the Mindset for the IELTS Series



Chi-square analysis showed significant differences across proficiency levels ($\chi^2 = 21.76$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.01$, Cramér's $V = 0.17$), indicating a deliberate progression toward more communicative authenticity at higher levels. The share of two-way interactional tasks rose from 3.0% at the Foundation level to 18.3% at Level 3, a six-fold increase in interactive listening practice.

Complete IELTS: The Complete IELTS series showed a descriptive increase in interactive tasks as proficiency levels rose as presented in Table 5. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of these task types across the three proficiency bands.

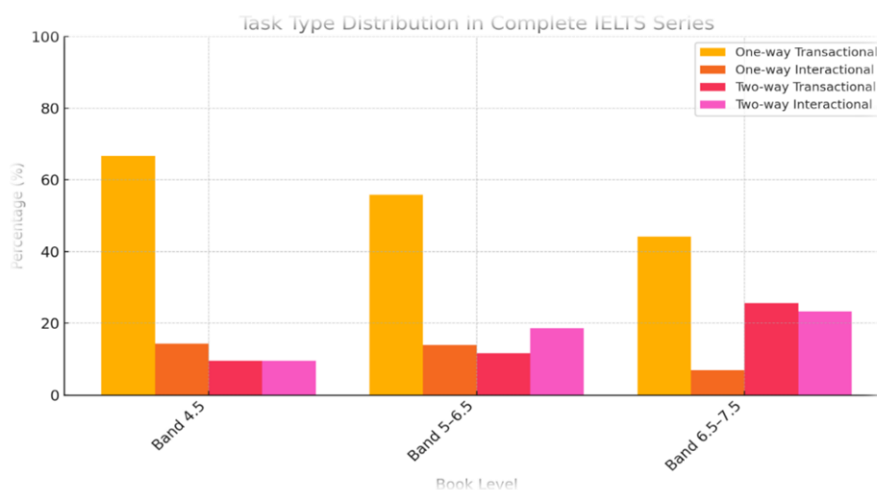
Table 5

Complete IELTS Task Types by Proficiency Levels

Band	One-way Transactional	One-way Interactional	Two-way Transactional	Two-way Interactional	Total
Band 4.5	42 (66.7%)	9 (14.3%)	6 (9.5%)	6(9.5%)	63(100%)
Band 5-6.5	24 (55.8%)	6 (14.0%)	5 (11.6%)	8(18.6%)	43 (100%)
Band 6.5-7.5	19 (44.2%)	3 (7.0%)	11 (25.6%)	10 (23.3%)	43 (100%)
Total	85 (57%)	18 (12%)	22 (14.7)	24 (16.1%)	149 (100%)

Figure 2

Distribution of Listening Task Types across the Complete IELTS Series



The combined share of two-way tasks (transactional + interactional) grew from 19.0% at Band 4.5 to 48.9% at Band 6.5–7.5. Although the chi-square test suggested a shift toward greater communicative authenticity at higher levels ($\chi^2 = 11.68$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.069$, Cramér’s $V = 0.16$), this change was not statistically significant. Despite showing the largest descriptive increase among the materials analyzed, the non-significant p-value ($p > 0.05$) means the progression cannot be considered systematic or generalizable beyond this sample. This contrasts with the significant progression observed in the Mindset series, where changes across levels were statistically significant.

The other four coursebooks displayed considerable differences in their communicative orientations:

Collins Listening for IELTS: Exhibited the most restrictive approach, with 90.4% one-way transactional tasks and no two-way activities, representing the most test-oriented profile in the corpus.

Table 6

Collins Listening for IELTS Task Types

Task Type	Count	Percentage
One-Way Transactional	75	90.4 %
One-Way Interactional	8	9.6 %
Two-Way Transactional	0	0 %
Two-Way Interactional	0	0 %
Total	83	100

Ready for IELTS: Demonstrated the highest proportion of two-way interactional tasks (41.7%), indicating the strongest commitment to communicative authenticity among individual coursebooks.

Table 7

Ready for IELTS Task Types

Task Types	Count	Percentage
One-way Transactional	9	37.5%
One-way Interactional	2	8.3%
Two-way Transactional	3	12.5%
Two-way Interactional	10	41.7%
Total	24	100.0%

Ready for IELTS had the highest proportion of two-way interactional tasks (41.7%), despite minimal focus on communicative orientation in its introduction. This suggests that stated teaching philosophy does not always align with task authenticity. In contrast, the Mindset series, though known for emphasizing real-world preparation, showed no such alignment, revealing a gap between its claims and actual content.

IELTS Advantage: It demonstrated a strong communicative focus, with 31.3% two-way interactional and 28.1% one-way interactional tasks, adding up to 59.4% interactional practice overall.

Table 8

IELTS Advantage Task Types

Combined Category	Count	Percentage
One-way transactional	13	40.62%
One-way Interactional	9	28.1%
Two-way Interactional	10	31.3%
Two-way Transactional	0	0.0%
Total	32	100.0%

Barron's IELTS: It maintained a mainly transactional focus, with 88.2% one-way transactional tasks and only 2.9% one-way interactional tasks, reflecting a strong exam-oriented approach.

Table 9

Barron's Task Types

Combined Category	Count	Percentage
One-way Transactional	30	88.2%
One-way Interactional	1	2.9%
Two-way Transactional	3	8.8%
Two-way Interactional	0	0.0%
Total	34	100.0%

Comparative Analysis

Chi-square analysis showed a significant difference in communicative authenticity between *Mindset for IELTS* and *Complete IELTS* ($\chi^2 = 28.74$, $df = 3$, $p < 0.001$), with a moderate-to-strong effect size (Cramér's $V = 0.27$). This indicates a strong link between coursebook choice and task emphasis. *Complete IELTS* had more interactional tasks, especially at advanced levels, while *Mindset* showed a gradual increase in complexity. The divergence highlights *Complete IELTS*'s stronger focus on authentic listening, despite both claiming real-world alignment, which is important for curricula valuing interactive skills.

In contrast, *Ready for IELTS* and *IELTS Advantage* showed no significant difference ($\chi^2 = 2.98$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.084$) despite *Ready for IELTS* having more two-way tasks (54.2% vs. 31.3%), likely due to the smaller sample size (total $n = 56$). Both emphasize interactional practice, but *Ready for IELTS* includes more transactional tasks, while *IELTS Advantage* lacks two-way transactional tasks.

Collins and *Barron's* were excluded due to very low two-way tasks (0% and 8.8%) and their heavy one-way transactional focus (*Collins* 83.1%, *Barron's* 88.2%), which would skew comparisons.

Mindset and *Complete IELTS* were not compared with *Ready for IELTS* or *IELTS Advantage* because the former are multi-level series with progression, while the latter are standalone volumes, making comparisons invalid.

Alignment with Stated Objectives (RQ3)

Addressing RQ3, this study utilized Bachman and Palmer's (1996) communication model and task analysis to evaluate the correspondence between stated pedagogical goals and actual task design. The findings indicate a prevalent misalignment between stated pedagogical objectives and actual task design, though the nature of this misalignment varies. While most coursebooks (such as *Mindset* and *Collins*) claim to foster communicative competence yet rely heavily on test-focused drills (negative divergence), *Ready for IELTS* demonstrated positive divergence by offering significantly more interactive practice than its exam-focused introduction promised. The detailed alignment analysis for each coursebook follows below:

Ready for IELTS:

The *Ready for IELTS* coursebook presents itself as primarily exam-focused, emphasizing systematic test preparation and general language improvement: "All four parts of the exam are systematically developed and practiced," and "The book contains a wide range of activities aimed at improving your English and developing your band score." It makes no explicit reference to communicative competence or authentic listening.

Task analysis shows strong communicative authenticity, with 54.2% of listening activities classified as two-way transactional or interactional, indicating implicit alignment with CLT principles. These tasks develop functional competence (goal-oriented negotiation) and strategic competence (clarification, turn-taking), going beyond the coursebook's exam-focused aims. This positive divergence suggests *Ready for IELTS* also supports pragmatic and interactive listening skills.

- Mindset for IELTS (Foundation to level 3)

The *Mindset for IELTS* series emphasizes exam readiness, presenting listening primarily as a receptive, test-oriented skill. Its introduction frames the content as structured preparation for test day: "MINDSET immerses you in a wide range of IELTS topics and guides you clearly through all the skills and strategies you need... Familiarize yourself with the IELTS test through authentic tasks."

However, only 12.6% (n = 31) of listening tasks across all levels are communicatively authentic (comprising 2.0% two-way transactional and 10.6% two-way interactional). While this proportion rises to 20.0% at Level 3 (n = 12), the vast majority of the series remains focused on grammatical and textual competence, evidenced by the 76.1% dominance of one-way transactional tasks. Mapped onto Bachman and Palmer's framework, support for sociolinguistic competence is limited (11.1%), and strategic competence, represented by two-way transactional tasks, is negligible at just 2.0%. This distribution reflects a clear gap between the series's claims of authenticity and the actual communicative demands of its tasks.

- *IELTS Advantage: Speaking and listening skills*

IELTS Advantage: Speaking and Listening Skills explicitly adopts an exam-focused approach, emphasizing format familiarity and strategy training: "The content of the listening section has three main features: format explanation, exam tips... and development of strategies for listening and extracting the information necessary to answer the questions."

Despite this, task analysis reveals notable communicative authenticity, with 59.4% interactional tasks, 31.3% two-way, and 28.1% one-way. According to Bachman and Palmer's framework, the coursebook shows strong sociolinguistic competence, especially in inferring speaker attitudes and context. However, the absence of two-way transactional tasks (0%) reveals a gap in functional competence, limiting preparation for real-world communication despite a more balanced interactional focus than other test-prep books.

- Barron's IELTS

The introductory description of *Barron's IELTS* states: "*IELTS consists of four sections that test the full range of English language skills... These four modules are examined in detail in this book.*"

Though covering all skills, the listening section is mainly exam-focused, with 88.2% one-way transactional tasks and no two-way interactional tasks. Two-way transactional tasks make up only 8.8%, and one-way interactional tasks just 2.9%, providing limited opportunities for real-world communication. Compared to *IELTS Advantage* (59.3% authentic tasks) and *Complete IELTS* (30.9%), *Barron's* shows the weakest alignment with communicative teaching principles.

Using Bachman and Palmer's framework, the coursebook focuses on textual competence and detail extraction. Sociolinguistic competence is minimal (2.9%), and strategic competence is absent. While this may help with test familiarity, it does not adequately develop the functional listening skills needed for academic and professional success.

- Collins Listening for IELTS

Collins Listening for IELTS presents itself as a test-focused resource: "*Units 1–11 cover the key types of questions that you find in the IELTS listening test. Every exercise is relevant to the exam.*"

This focus shows in its task distribution: 83.1% one-way transactional, with no two-way interactional or transactional tasks. Only 9.6% are one-way interactional, limiting attention to inference and speaker intent. The absence of reciprocal interaction greatly restricts communicative competence development.

According to Bachman and Palmer's framework, the coursebook emphasizes grammatical and textual competence but neglects pragmatic and strategic skills. This narrow focus on test mechanics requires instructors to provide substantial supplementary materials to develop interactive and strategic listening skills.

- Complete IELTS

The *Complete IELTS* series positions itself as an integrated skill development resource, stating: "*It teaches you the reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills that you need for the exam. It covers all the exam question types, as well as key grammar and vocabulary, which, from research into the Cambridge Learner Corpus, are known to be useful to candidates needing to achieve a high band score in the test.*"

Its exam-focused approach includes 57.1% one-way transactional tasks, with 16.1% two-way interactional and 14.8% two-way transactional tasks, totalling 30.9% communicatively authentic activities. This reflects a moderate balance, with some interaction-rich tasks supporting test preparation.

Mapped to Bachman and Palmer's framework, the coursebook demonstrates moderate functional and strategic competence, especially at higher levels, with 48.9% two-way tasks at Bands 6.5 to 7.5. Although not highlighted in the description, authentic tasks suggest underlying support for communicative

competence that teachers can build on with extra speaking and interaction activities. Overall, *Complete IELTS* partly meets its integrated skills claim by balancing exam preparation with real-world communication opportunities.

Overall, IELTS preparation materials tend to offer mostly passive, test-focused listening practice, providing limited chances for interactive, pragmatically rich experiences essential to authentic communicative competence.

Discussion

Dominance of One-way Transactional Tasks

The finding that 70.3% of the 565 analyzed listening tasks in IELTS preparation coursebooks are one-way transactional underscores a significant tension between test-oriented pedagogy and the principles of Communicative Language Teaching. This predominance, as shown in Table 2, emphasizes passive information extraction, aligning with previous research highlighting the prevalence of literal comprehension tasks in IELTS preparation contexts (Baghaei et al., 2020; Field, 2012), though the extent suggests a more evident instructional narrowing than previously documented.

From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, this distribution does not engage the cognitive processes involved in authentic listening (Rost & Brown, 2022). The dominance of one-way transactional tasks reduces listening to recognition exercises, neglecting the executive functions, predictive processing, and social cognition that are important for real-world communication. EFL learners, who rely heavily on these materials in contexts and have limited exposure to authentic English (Babae, 2017), may develop listening skills tailored to tests, but they become poorly prepared for interactive academic and professional environments. This concern is supported by research suggesting that intensive test preparation can cause considerable harm to performance on authentic listening tasks (Jalilzadeh et al., 2023; Wen et al., 2022), indicating possible negative washback effects from current teaching practices.

Scarcity of Interactive Tasks

The finding that only 18.2% of listening tasks involve two-way communication shows a significant gap in IELTS preparation materials. This shortage is concerning, given that negotiation of meaning plays a central role in second language acquisition theory (Long, 1996) and communicative language teaching practice (Thornbury, 2016). Interactive tasks give learners chances to clarify, confirm, and build understanding together, processes that are essential for developing the pragmatic skills needed in real-world communication.

The near absence of two-way transactional tasks (5.8%) is particularly important, as these activities help bridge the gap between test-focused practice and authentic communication by requiring learners to negotiate meaning toward specific goals while still focusing on information exchange. This finding highlights the importance of orienting EFL learners toward communicative acts through task planning (Ballesteros Soria & van Compernelle, 2023).

Variation among Coursebooks

The large variation in communicative authenticity among coursebooks (ranging from 0% to 54.2% authentic tasks) shows important tensions within the IELTS preparation market. The different approaches seen in Collins Listening for IELTS (90.4% one-way transactional) and Ready for IELTS (41.7% two-way interactional) reflect two distinct teaching approaches: narrow test preparation versus broader language development.

This imbalance likely reflects three market realities: test-focused materials are seen as safer investments, one-way transactional tasks are cheaper to produce, and publishers worry that innovative materials might not be seen as serious test preparation. This creates a cycle where publishers produce what sells, institutions buy what looks like 'real' test preparation, and learners get stuck with approaches that focus on form over function.

The Cambridge series (Mindset and Complete IELTS) takes a middle position, showing systematic progression toward greater communicative authenticity at higher proficiency levels. This suggests that publishers can be aware of learner needs across different proficiency levels.

Misalignment

The consistent pattern of differences between stated teaching goals and actual task distributions shows a significant gap between theory and practice. This mismatch may reflect authors' lack of awareness about how task choices align with communicative principles, market pressures favoring test-focused content, or uncertainty about balancing exam preparation with communicative development.

Conclusion

This study highlights a clear gap between the listening tasks commonly found in popular IELTS preparation coursebooks and the realities of authentic communication. Although the books differ in quality, some being highly exam-focused and others offering more interactive elements, the overall pattern is the dominance of one-way, passive information-retrieval tasks. In EFL contexts such as Iran, where learners have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, this overreliance on monologic tasks can restrict learners' development. It shows that, despite claims of promoting communicative competence, many commercial materials unintentionally encourage negative washback, prioritizing test scores over the pragmatic and strategic listening skills needed for academic and professional settings.

The findings have important implications for three main groups: teachers, material developers, and policymakers. For teachers, the lack of two-way, interactional tasks means they cannot rely solely on coursebooks. They need to build in their own activities that encourage negotiation of meaning, such as prediction tasks completed in pairs or post-listening information-gap activities. Classroom assessment practices also need to shift toward valuing interactional skills, like turn-taking and asking for clarification, rather than focusing only on getting the right answer. This reframes the during-listening stage as a space for discussion rather than silence. For material developers, there is a clear need to align content with

Communicative Language Teaching principles by using multimedia, a wider range of accents, and tasks that require back-and-forth communication. Policymakers, in turn, must recognize that communicative curriculum reforms will remain largely symbolic unless accompanied by materials that genuinely balance test preparation with skill development.

While this study provides an in-depth review of six widely used coursebooks, it focuses only on printed materials and may not represent the full range of IELTS resources available globally. Future research should include digital platforms and mobile applications, which now play a major role in learner preparation. Investigating how teachers and learners interpret and use these tasks in real classrooms could also uncover practical issues that a text-based analysis cannot reveal. In addition, longitudinal studies tracking how exposure to communicative tasks affects test performance would offer stronger evidence for the improvements recommended here.

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