

## TEST-TAKER PERCEPTIONS OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TESTS: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIAN EFL HIGHER EDUCATION

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### Abstract

This study examines test-taker perceptions of global and local English proficiency tests, focusing on suitability, preparation, and engagement.

Although previous studies have explored English proficiency testing from policy or outcome-based perspectives, limited research has integrated test suitability with preparation processes and emotional engagement from the learners' viewpoint. Using a basic interpretative qualitative design, data were collected through interviews with test-takers who had experience with both global and local English proficiency tests. This study contributes to language assessment research by offering an integrated learner-centered account of how experiences with global and local English proficiency tests shape test suitability, preparation processes, and emotional engagement. The findings indicate that test-takers perceived suitability as a contextual fit rather than an inherent test quality. Global tests were viewed as appropriate for international academic and professional goals due to their recognition, but were also considered demanding and emotionally challenging. In contrast, local tests were perceived as more suitable for institutional purposes due to their familiarity and alignment with the context. These perceptions shaped preparation strategies and engagement. Overall, the study highlights the central role of test-taker perceptions in shaping test experiences and suggests the need for assessment practices that balance global recognition with local relevance.

## INTRODUCTION

Although a growing body of research has examined English proficiency testing from policy, validity, and outcome-based perspectives, comparatively little attention has been given to how test-takers perceive the suitability of different English proficiency tests and how these perceptions shape their preparation processes and engagement. Much of the existing literature addresses global and local English proficiency tests separately or emphasizes their technical characteristics, leaving learners' lived experiences underexplored—particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) higher education context where both test types are used concurrently.

English proficiency testing occupies a central role in educational and professional settings, especially in EFL contexts. As noted by Raharjo (2020), English proficiency test scores are widely used in Indonesia as benchmarks for academic admission and graduation requirements, positioning these assessments as high-stakes instruments for students. Beyond academic settings, English proficiency tests also play an important role in professional environments, where effective communication is closely linked to workplace performance and career advancement (Li et al., 2020).

With increasing globalization, standardized English proficiency tests—including TOEFL®, IELTS®, and TOEIC®—have gained prominence for their international recognition and comparability. Karjo & Ronaldo (2019) explain that tests such as TOEFL iBT® and IELTS® assess the four major language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—while TOEIC® places greater emphasis on workplace communication in international contexts. Because of this broad recognition, global tests are often regarded as indicators of academic readiness and professional mobility. Nevertheless, previous research has shown that these tests may be demanding, resource-intensive, and emotionally challenging for test-takers, particularly in EFL settings (Hsieh, 2017; Anggraini & Sari, 2023).

Concerns have also been raised regarding the limited sensitivity of global standardized tests to local linguistic and cultural contexts. Abedi (2010) argues that standardized assessments may not fully capture the cultural and linguistic realities of non-native speakers, potentially leading to biased or incomplete representations of language ability. Such limitations may contribute to learners' perceptions that global tests are misaligned with their actual communicative needs, especially among students outside academically oriented programs.

In response to these concerns, many countries and higher education institutions have developed locally administered English proficiency tests tailored to specific educational and institutional contexts. Zhang (2022) defines local English proficiency tests as assessments designed and implemented within national or institutional settings to address localized

educational needs. Examples include the College English Test (CET) in China, the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP), and institutional assessments such as the Test of English Proficiency (TEP) in Indonesia. These local tests are typically aligned with local curricula and academic practices and are often perceived as more accessible by learners (Quynh, 2019; Setiawan, 2020).

Research suggests that local English proficiency tests are frequently viewed as more relevant and manageable because they reflect familiar language use and educational contexts. Waluyo (2019) notes that local tests can offer more accurate evaluations of language ability within specific cultural settings, even though their recognition may be limited beyond institutional contexts. Similarly, Hung & Huang (2019) found that culturally relevant test content can enhance learners' engagement and perceptions of fairness. However, the limited transferability of local test scores may reduce their perceived long-term value, particularly for students with international academic or professional aspirations (Chen & Squires, 2010).

Differences between global and local English proficiency tests extend beyond recognition and design to shape how learners evaluate test suitability. In this study, suitability is understood not as an inherent technical property of a test, but as a perceived fit between test demands, learners' academic backgrounds, and future goals. Prior research indicates that learners' perceptions of fairness, relevance, and difficulty influence their motivation, preparation strategies, and emotional responses to testing (Wu & Lee, 2017).

Preparation processes further differentiate learners' experiences with global and local English proficiency tests. Preparing for global tests often involves substantial financial costs and reliance on commercial preparation materials, which may increase pressure and limit access for some students (Rahma et al., 2022). In contrast, preparation for local tests is frequently supported by institutional programs and campus-based resources, making the process more familiar and manageable for learners (Rohman et al., 2019). These contrasting conditions suggest that test-takers' experiences are shaped not only by test format but also by the availability of resources and institutional support.

Importantly, learners' perceptions of test suitability and the demands of test preparation are closely linked to their engagement in English learning. When tests are perceived as relevant and aligned with learners' academic or professional goals, students tend to invest sustained effort and adopt deeper learning strategies. Conversely, tests perceived as overly demanding, unfamiliar, or misaligned may lead to heightened anxiety, surface-level preparation, and reduced motivation (Sharma, 2020).

Despite these insights, few studies have examined perceived suitability, preparation practices, and engagement as interconnected dimensions within a single learner-centered analytical framework. This gap is particularly evident in EFL higher education contexts where students are required to navigate both global and local English proficiency tests.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a learner-centered qualitative approach to examine test-taker perceptions of global and local English proficiency tests, focusing on suitability, preparation, and engagement. Drawing on the lived experiences of test-takers who have experienced both types of assessments, the study seeks to provide an integrated account of how perceptions shape test experiences. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do test-takers perceive the suitability of global English proficiency tests compared to local English proficiency tests?
2. How do test-takers perceive the preparation process for global English proficiency tests compared to local English proficiency tests?
3. In what ways do these perceptions shape test-takers' engagement, including their learning strategies, effort, and emotional experiences during test preparation?

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **English Proficiency Testing in EFL Contexts**

English proficiency testing plays an important role in assessing learners' ability to use English for academic, professional, and institutional purposes, particularly in contexts where English is learned as a foreign language. Unlike achievement tests, which are closely linked to specific curricula, proficiency tests aim to measure general language ability that can be applied across contexts (McNamara, 2001). In many EFL higher education settings, proficiency test scores are used as benchmarks for graduation, admission, and certification, giving these assessments a high-stakes character.

From a language assessment perspective, the value of a proficiency test lies not only in its technical design, but also in how its results are interpreted and used. Brown (2014) emphasizes that effective language assessment requires clarity of purpose and alignment between test constructs and test tasks. When such alignment is weak or unclear, learners may question the relevance and fairness of the test, which can influence their engagement with preparation and learning activities (Nitko & Brookhart, 2011). As a result, proficiency testing should be examined not only as a measurement tool, but also as a social and educational practice experienced by learners.

## **Global and Local English Proficiency Tests**

English proficiency tests can be broadly categorized into global standardized tests and locally developed tests, each designed to serve different purposes and contexts. Global tests such as TOEFL<sup>®</sup>, IELTS<sup>®</sup>, and TOEIC<sup>®</sup> are widely recognized as indicators of English proficiency. These tests are developed through standardized procedures and are intended to provide comparable measures of language ability across institutions and countries (Brown, 2014). TOEFL iBT<sup>®</sup> and IELTS<sup>®</sup>, for example, assess both receptive and productive skills, while TOEIC<sup>®</sup> focuses more on communication in workplace contexts (Karjo & Ronaldo, 2019a).

Due to their recognition and transferability, global tests are often associated with international academic mobility and professional advancement. However, research shows that learners often perceive these tests as demanding and challenging. Hsieh (2017) reports that unfamiliar task types and content can contribute to perceptions of difficulty, particularly among test-takers who have limited exposure to international testing formats. Financial considerations may further intensify these challenges, as test fees and preparation materials are often costly (Rahma et al., 2022). In addition, Abedi (2010) argues that standardized tests developed in Western contexts may not fully reflect the linguistic and cultural experiences of non-native speakers, raising concerns about contextual relevance.

In contrast, local English proficiency tests are developed to meet specific educational and institutional needs within particular contexts. Zhang (2022) defines local English proficiency tests as assessments designed and administered within national or institutional settings to align with local curricula and educational practices. In Indonesia, institutional tests such as the Test of English Proficiency (TEP) are commonly used as graduation requirements and are often supported by campus-based preparation programs (Rohman et al., 2019). These features make local tests more familiar and accessible to learners.

Studies suggest that local tests are frequently perceived as more manageable and relevant to immediate academic needs. Quynh (2019) notes that contextual alignment can enhance learners' confidence and sense of fairness during testing. However, local tests generally lack international recognition, which may limit their perceived long-term value for learners with aspirations for overseas study or international careers (Chen & Squires, 2010). This contrast highlights differing strengths and limitations between global and local testing systems.

## **Comparative Perspectives on Global and Local Tests**

Comparative research has examined how learners evaluate global and local English proficiency tests in relation to recognition, relevance, and accessibility. Global tests are often associated with prestige and international opportunity, which can increase their perceived importance despite concerns about difficulty and cost (Hsieh, 2017). For many learners, these tests serve as gateways to scholarships, study abroad programs, or international employment, making them both symbolically and practically significant.

At the same time, studies have shown that global tests may be perceived as misaligned with learners' actual communicative needs, particularly in non-academic or vocational contexts. Anggraini & Sari (2023) found that some learners viewed global tests such as TOEFL® as emphasizing academic language that was less relevant to their professional goals. In contrast, local tests were perceived as more closely aligned with instructional practices and everyday academic tasks, leading to stronger perceptions of fairness and practicality (Rohman et al., 2019).

These findings suggest that a balance between external recognition and contextual fit shapes learners' evaluations of test suitability. While global tests offer broader recognition, local tests better align with learners' educational experiences. Understanding this trade-off is essential for examining how different testing regimes are interpreted and valued by test-takers.

## **Test-Taker Perceptions, Preparation, and Engagement**

Test-taker perceptions play a central role in shaping how English proficiency tests function in practice. Perception involves cognitive and affective processes through which individuals interpret and evaluate their experiences (Feldman, 2015). In language testing contexts, learners' perceptions of test value, difficulty, and relevance influence their motivation, preparation strategies, and emotional engagement (Wu & Lee, 2017).

Preparation processes differ markedly between global and local tests. Preparing for global English proficiency tests often requires intensive study, familiarity with complex task formats, and access to commercial preparation materials, which may increase pressure and anxiety among learners (Meisuri et al., 2022). In contrast, preparation for local tests is frequently supported by institutional resources and integrated into campus-based programs, making the process more structured and manageable (Rohman et al., 2019).

Emotional engagement during preparation is closely linked to perceived suitability. Hung & Huang (2019) found that learners who perceived test content as relevant and fair were more motivated and confident, whereas perceptions of high difficulty and low relevance were

associated with anxiety and surface-level preparation. These emotional responses influence how learners allocate effort and adopt learning strategies, shaping their overall experience of English proficiency testing.

Taken together, previous studies indicate that differences in recognition, contextual alignment, and preparation demands shape how learners perceive and engage with English proficiency tests. However, existing research has tended to address these factors separately, leaving a limited understanding of how suitability, preparation, and engagement interact within learners' lived experiences, particularly in EFL higher education contexts where both global and local tests are used.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a basic interpretive qualitative design to explore test-takers' perceptions of global and local English proficiency tests, focusing on perceived test suitability, preparation experiences, perception-shaped learning strategies, and emotional engagement. Rather than examining test scores or performance outcomes, the study emphasized how participants interpreted and made sense of their testing experiences. This approach was adopted because it enabled in-depth exploration of participants' subjective views and personal experiences, particularly regarding perceived test relevance, difficulty, and preparation demands. Its flexible nature also allowed emerging insights to be captured during data collection and analysis.

In this study, the terms global and local English proficiency tests referred to test types rather than specific brands. Global tests included internationally recognized assessments such as TOEFL<sup>®</sup>, IELTS<sup>®</sup>, and TOEIC<sup>®</sup>, while local tests referred to assessments developed within national or institutional contexts, such as TEP, TOEP, or ELPT, which are commonly used for internal academic or certification purposes in Indonesia.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experience with the phenomenon under study. Twelve participants took part in this study, all of whom had prior experience taking both global standardized English proficiency tests and local English proficiency tests. This criterion enabled participants to make informed comparisons between the two types of tests based on direct experience. No additional demographic restrictions were imposed during participant selection. As a result, the participants represented diverse academic backgrounds, fields of study, and test-taking

histories. This diversity allowed the study to capture a range of perspectives regarding test suitability, preparation demands, and engagement. To protect participants' identities, all data were anonymized, and participants were referred to using codes (e.g., P1, P2).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were chosen to allow in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. The interview questions were designed to align directly with the three research questions and focused on three main areas: perceived test suitability, experiences of test preparation, and perception-shaped learning strategies and emotional responses.

The interviews were conducted individually, either face-to-face or through online platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure participants could express their thoughts and emotions clearly, without language barriers. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions and optional follow-up prompts. This format allowed participants to elaborate on issues they considered important while ensuring that all key constructs relevant to the study were addressed. The interview guide was reviewed by an academic advisor and piloted with one participant to check clarity and flow, and minor revisions were made before the main data collection.

### **Data Analysis**

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed an inductive, iterative process, in which patterns of meaning were identified from participants' narratives rather than predetermined categories. The analytic process began with transcription and data familiarization, followed by line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts.

Initial codes were grouped into broader categories that reflected recurring ideas related to test suitability, preparation experiences, and engagement. These categories were then reviewed and synthesized into themes aligned with the three research questions. Throughout the analysis, transcripts were repeatedly revisited to ensure that the themes remained grounded in participants' accounts and accurately represented their intended meanings.

Although only selected excerpts are presented in the Findings section, all twelve participants contributed to the development of the final themes. Quotations were selected for their clarity and relevance to the analytical points rather than for their frequency alone. To

enhance trustworthiness, analytic decisions were documented throughout the coding process, and emerging themes were continuously compared across participants to ensure consistency and coherence.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Perceived Suitability of Global and Local English Proficiency Tests**

Across interviews, participants consistently described test suitability as a matter of fit rather than as an inherent quality of a test. Suitability was evaluated based on how well a test aligned with participants' academic backgrounds, institutional requirements, and future goals. Rather than viewing global and local English proficiency tests as competing systems, participants interpreted them as serving distinct purposes in distinct contexts. Four interrelated dimensions shaped these perceptions: contextual relevance and familiarity, purpose–skill alignment, recognition and market value, and pragmatic local–global fit.

#### ***Contextual relevance and familiarity***

Participants frequently assessed test suitability by considering how closely test content reflected their academic fields and everyday learning contexts. Several participants, particularly those from non-English or non-science disciplines, perceived global tests such as TOEFL ITP or IELTS as thematically distant. Reading and listening to texts were often described as focusing on scientific or technical topics that did not correspond to participants' academic identities. One participant remarked that TOEFL vocabulary was "very far from what I usually use in my daily academic activities" (P2), while another questioned whether the TOEFL ITP measured language ability or background knowledge because its content did not align with his background in Islamic education (P9).

These perceptions echo concerns raised in previous assessment research regarding the cultural and disciplinary distance of global standardized tests (Abedi, 2010). When test content was perceived as unfamiliar, participants felt less confident and questioned the fairness of the assessment, even when they acknowledged its international recognition.

In contrast, local tests were widely perceived as more contextually relevant and familiar. Participants described local test content as closer to topics commonly encountered in Indonesian higher education, thereby reducing cognitive distance and allowing them to focus more directly on language comprehension. As one participant explained, local tests felt easier to manage because "the terms used in the test are familiar" (P9). Familiarity contributed to perceptions of fairness, as local tests were seen as better reflecting participants' lived academic

experiences. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that contextual alignment enhances learners' acceptance of assessment practices (Hung & Huang, 2019).

### ***Purpose–skill alignment***

Participants also evaluated suitability by considering whether the skills assessed matched the purpose for which the test was taken. Global tests were generally perceived as suitable when participants' goals involved international academic or professional trajectories. Tests such as IELTS and TOEFL were associated with overseas study, scholarships, and international careers, largely because they assessed a broader range of skills, including speaking and writing. For example, one participant described IELTS as a mandatory requirement for doctoral study abroad (P3), while another took IELTS specifically in preparation for a student exchange program (P4).

In these cases, suitability was not defined by ease of preparation but by alignment with future goals. This supports previous findings that global standardized tests are valued primarily for their external legitimacy and transferability rather than for contextual relevance (Alek et al., 2019).

Local tests, by contrast, were mainly perceived as suitable for fulfilling institutional requirements such as graduation or certification. Participants generally viewed tests such as TEP or TOEP as sufficient for local administrative purposes, despite recognizing their limitations. Several participants expressed concern that the absence of speaking and writing components limited local tests' ability to assess communicative competence (P1). As a result, local tests were seen as practical but constrained in scope. Similar tensions between practicality and construct coverage have been noted in studies of locally developed proficiency tests (Waluyo, 2019).

### ***Recognition, market value, and pragmatic fit***

Recognition beyond the immediate institutional context strongly influenced perceptions of suitability. Global tests were widely viewed as prestigious and transferable credentials that could be used across institutions and countries. Participants described test choice as a strategic decision shaped by anticipated future needs. One participant preferred taking a global test to avoid retaking different tests for different purposes later (P11), while another emphasized that a test's value depended on who would use the score, such as universities or immigration authorities (P1).

Local tests, in contrast, were perceived as having limited recognition beyond specific institutions. Participants noted that local test scores were often valid only within a single university and could not easily be compared across contexts. Consequently, local tests were

viewed as short-term credentials suitable for administrative compliance rather than long-term academic or professional mobility.

Importantly, participants did not frame global and local tests as mutually exclusive. Instead, they navigated between the two pragmatically, selecting the test that best matched their immediate goals and constraints. When international mobility was anticipated, global tests were perceived as a better fit; when the goal was graduation or institutional compliance, local tests were considered more efficient and sufficient. Overall, suitability emerged as a dynamic and context-dependent judgment shaped by personal goals, institutional demands, and anticipated future trajectories.

### **Perceived Preparation Processes for Global and Local English Proficiency Tests**

Participants consistently described different preparation processes for global and local English proficiency tests. These differences were shaped by perceived stakes, test demands, and available support, resulting in contrasting patterns of time investment, strategy use, and emotional involvement. Overall, preparation for global tests was characterized by longer timelines and more intensive effort, while preparation for local tests tended to be shorter, pragmatic, and efficiency-oriented.

#### ***Preparation intensity and time investment***

Preparation for global tests was commonly described as demanding and time-consuming. Participants reported allocating extended periods for study, often weeks or months in advance, to familiarize themselves with test formats, question types, and skill requirements. Several participants emphasized that preparation for tests such as IELTS or TOEFL involved sustained routines, including regular practice, repeated exposure to test materials, and targeted skill development. One participant explained that preparing for IELTS required "a long process" because each skill needed separate attention (P3), while another noted that global test preparation could not be rushed without risking poor results (P10).

In contrast, preparation for local tests was generally described as brief and task-focused. Many participants prepared only a few days before the test, relying on familiarity with test formats and prior exposure through institutional training or campus-based courses. Local test preparation was often perceived as an extension of existing academic activities rather than as a separate learning endeavor. As one participant stated, "for TEP, I didn't really prepare seriously because it felt familiar" (P9). These patterns suggest that perceived test difficulty and stakes strongly influenced how much time and effort participants invested in preparation.

### ***Preparation strategies and resource use***

Participants also described clear differences in preparation strategies. For global tests, preparation often involved external resources, such as commercial textbooks, online practice platforms, and paid preparation courses. Participants sought materials that mirrored actual test conditions, particularly for speaking and writing tasks. This reliance on external resources was frequently linked to uncertainty about test expectations and a desire to minimize risk. One participant described enrolling in a paid IELTS course to "understand what the examiners want" (P4).

Local test preparation, by contrast, relied more heavily on internal or institutional resources. Participants frequently mentioned using campus-provided materials, short briefing sessions, or previous test experiences as the primary basis for preparation. Because local tests were perceived as predictable, participants focused on reviewing familiar question types rather than developing new strategies. This finding aligns with research suggesting that familiarity with test formats encourages efficiency-oriented preparation rather than deep skill development (Rohman et al., 2019).

### ***Institutional support and perceived accessibility***

Institutional support played a significant role in shaping preparation experiences. Participants noted that their universities often facilitated preparation for local tests through preparatory classes, mock tests, or integration into graduation requirements. This support reduced uncertainty and made preparation more accessible, particularly for students with limited financial resources. As a result, local test preparation was perceived as less stressful and more manageable.

In contrast, preparation for global tests was largely self-directed. Participants reported limited institutional guidance and greater dependence on personal initiative and financial capacity. Test fees and preparation courses were frequently cited as an additional burden. These conditions contributed to perceptions of global test preparation as high-risk and high-pressure, especially when test outcomes were tied to scholarships or international study opportunities. Similar patterns have been observed in studies highlighting unequal access to global test preparation resources (Rahma et al., 2022).

### ***Perceived outcomes of preparation***

Participants reflected that those differences in preparation processes influenced not only their readiness for the test but also their broader learning experiences. Intensive preparation for global tests was often associated with perceived improvement in overall English proficiency,

particularly in productive skills. However, this perceived benefit was accompanied by fatigue and emotional strain. Conversely, preparation for local tests was viewed as sufficient for meeting immediate institutional requirements but less impactful for long-term language development.

Taken together, these findings indicate that preparation processes are shaped by test-takers' perceptions of test purpose, difficulty, and support structures. Global tests encouraged extended, resource-intensive preparation aimed at meeting external standards, while local tests promoted shorter, pragmatic preparation aligned with institutional expectations. These contrasting preparation experiences highlight how perceptions of test suitability extend beyond test choice to shape how learners allocate time, effort, and resources during preparation.

### **Perception-Shaped Engagement in Test Preparation**

Participants' engagement during test preparation was closely shaped by their perceptions of the value, difficulty, and purpose of global and local English proficiency tests. Engagement was reflected not only in observable behaviors, such as effort and study routines, but also in motivational orientation and emotional responses. Across interviews, participants consistently reported deeper and more sustained engagement when preparing for global tests, while engagement in local test preparation tended to be more pragmatic and emotionally neutral.

#### ***Motivational orientation***

Perceptions of test purpose strongly influenced participants' motivation. Global tests were associated with high personal significance because they were linked to long-term academic or professional goals, such as overseas study, scholarships, or international careers. This perceived value generated strong instrumental motivation, as participants viewed success in global tests as necessary for achieving future aspirations. Several participants also reported intrinsic motivation, expressing a desire to genuinely improve their English proficiency as they prepare for global tests.

One participant acknowledged experiencing continuous stress during IELTS preparation but framed it as a meaningful and self-chosen challenge rather than an external burden (P10). Another participant described anxiety before taking IELTS but emphasized that the pressure reflected the importance of the test for her academic plans (P3). These accounts suggest that high stakes did not reduce engagement; instead, they intensified commitment, even when preparation was emotionally demanding. This pattern aligns with research indicating that perceived test value can strengthen motivation despite increased anxiety (Hung & Huang, 2019).

In contrast, motivation for local test preparation was largely pragmatic. Participants described preparing for local tests mainly to fulfill institutional requirements, such as graduation or certification. Because the perceived consequences were limited and short-term, motivation was often extrinsic and minimal. As one participant stated, "I just needed to pass, so I didn't push myself too hard" (P9). While this approach reduced stress, it also resulted in lower personal investment in the preparation process.

### ***Effort and self-discipline***

Differences in motivation were reflected in patterns of effort and self-discipline. Preparation for global tests was commonly associated with disciplined study routines, including scheduled practice, repeated attempts at mock tests, and focused attention on weaker skills. Participants described monitoring their progress closely and adjusting strategies when results did not meet expectations. This sustained effort was often described as exhausting but necessary given the perceived difficulty and importance of global tests.

Local test preparation, by contrast, involved limited effort and flexible routines. Many participants reported reviewing materials only briefly or relying on prior familiarity with test formats. Because local tests were perceived as predictable and manageable, participants felt little need to invest extensive effort. While this approach was efficient, it also meant that preparation rarely extended beyond surface-level review. These findings echo previous research suggesting that low-stakes assessments tend to elicit minimal effort and strategic efficiency rather than deep engagement (Wu & Lee, 2017).

### ***Emotional engagement and regulation***

Emotional engagement differed markedly between global and local tests. Preparation for global tests was frequently accompanied by anxiety, pressure, and self-doubt, particularly when test outcomes were tied to high-stakes goals. Participants reported fear of failure, financial concerns about test fees, and uncertainty about meeting score requirements. However, several participants noted that emotional responses evolved. Repeated exposure to test formats and increased familiarity helped reduce anxiety and improve emotional regulation. One participant reported that nervousness disappeared by the third IELTS attempt (P11), while another explained that anxiety decreased after taking the test multiple times (P1).

Local tests, on the other hand, were associated with emotional ease from the outset. Familiar formats and lower perceived risk allowed participants to approach preparation with greater confidence and less emotional strain. As a result, emotional engagement was limited but stable. Participants rarely described strong emotional reactions to local tests, viewing them as routine academic procedures rather than personally meaningful challenges.

### ***Integrating engagement across test types***

Overall, participants' engagement during test preparation was shaped by their perceptions of test suitability and the demands of test preparation. Global tests elicited high motivation, sustained effort, and strong emotional responses due to their perceived value and stakes. Local tests, while easier to manage emotionally, generated lower levels of motivation and effort because they were perceived as administrative necessities rather than opportunities for meaningful language development.

These findings suggest that engagement is not an inherent feature of a test but rather emerges from how test-takers interpret its purpose and consequences. Perceptions of suitability influenced not only test choice and preparation strategies, but also the depth and quality of learners' engagement throughout the preparation process.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined how test-taker perceptions differentiate global and local English proficiency tests in terms of suitability, preparation, and engagement. The findings indicate that learners did not evaluate tests solely on the basis of difficulty or formal acceptance. Instead, suitability was understood as a perceived fit between the test, learners' academic backgrounds, institutional requirements, and future goals. In this sense, English proficiency tests were experienced as contextual practices shaped by personal interpretation rather than as neutral measurement tools.

Global tests were considered suitable for learners pursuing international academic or professional mobility, largely because of their broad recognition and transferability. At the same time, these tests were viewed as demanding and emotionally challenging, particularly when test content felt distant from learners' academic contexts. This finding highlights an ongoing tension between global recognition and local relevance in English proficiency testing.

Local tests, in contrast, were perceived as more suitable for institutional and administrative purposes. Learners valued their familiarity, accessibility, and alignment with local academic contexts, even while acknowledging limitations in skill coverage. These findings suggest that local tests play an important role in supporting fairness and accessibility within specific educational settings.

Across test types, perceptions of suitability were found to shape preparation processes and engagement. Tests perceived as meaningful and high-stakes encouraged intensive preparation,

strategic learning, and stronger emotional involvement, whereas tests perceived as routine requirements led to shorter, efficiency-oriented preparation and calmer engagement. Overall, test-taker perceptions functioned as a key link between test characteristics and learners' preparation experiences.

Future research may extend these findings by examining how institutional policies and assessment practices interact with learner perceptions across different educational contexts. Further studies could also explore how changes in test design or support systems influence engagement and learning outcomes over time.

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