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Research Paper

## Engagement Techniques in Language Testing: An Analysis of TOEFL & IELTS Reading Texts Through the Appraisal Model

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### Abstract

This research examines engagement strategies in TOEFL and IELTS reading passages through the lens of the Appraisal model. The study investigates how engagement resources, such as dialogic contraction and expansion, enhance interaction between the text and examinees. The study deploys a qualitative content analysis approach, focusing primarily on the Engagement subsystem of the Appraisal model inside various reading texts from the TOEFL iBT and IELTS academic examinations. The study makes a detailed comparison, highlighting the ways in which the two tests use resources differently and similarly, and assessing the implications for test-takers' critical engagement. Based on Martin and White's (2005) framework, the findings show that both tests use a variety of engagement techniques to help test-takers' comprehension. Nonetheless, the IELTS reading passages demonstrate a greater number of dialogic expansion approaches, enabling a more complex reader response, whereas TOEFL passages typically favour dialogic contraction to emphasise particular interpretations. The results show that while comprehension skills are necessary for both tests, their capacity to elicit critical engagement varies, which aligns with particular goals in academic language assessment.

**Keywords:** Engagement System; The Appraisal Model; Language Testing; IELTS and TOEFL Test; Reading Texts.

### 1. Introduction

Language assessment has long been essential for evaluating learners' readiness for academic or professional opportunities in English-speaking environments. Tests like the TOEFL iBT, administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS), and IELTS Academic, provided by Cambridge Assessment English, the British Council, and IDP Education, are internationally recognised for assessing key language competencies required for education, employment, and immigration.

Although both tests aim to evaluate language proficiency, they differ in format and target users. TOEFL focuses on academic English through a computer-based format and is predominantly recognised in the United States. In contrast, IELTS serves academic and general purposes and is widely accepted in the UK, Canada, and Australia (ETS, 2023; IELTS, 2023).

Both assessments include reading components that require more than basic comprehension. Test-takers must also demonstrate the ability to interpret, analyse, and critique texts, skills vital for academic success. TOEFL reading tasks assess understanding of university-level texts, focusing on factual information, inference, and linguistic intent (ETS, 2023). IELTS reading tasks span various text types, including descriptive and argumentative (Karbalaei, 2015).

In these reading sections, engagement resources test the examinees' ability to interpret diverse perspectives, implicit meanings, and inferential content. Techniques like dialogic expansion (introducing alternative views) and dialogic contraction (limiting or rejecting alternatives) demand deeper interaction with the material. Sari and Alyousef (2024) show that such engagement features, when analysed through the Appraisal model, can reveal how well test-takers manage complex texts.

Roza (2019) explores challenges teachers face in preparing students for TOEFL and IELTS reading tasks, noting a mismatch between test-taking strategies and critical reading. Instruction often emphasises locating details and answering questions accurately, while neglecting deeper engagement with the text. As a result, students may struggle with demanding academic passages. Roza underscores the need for teaching engagement strategies to better support critical thinking beyond surface-level comprehension.

Despite the critical role of engagement in reading, few studies have analysed how it is linguistically constructed in the tests themselves. Roza (2019) highlights the gap between test strategies and the analytical reading needed in academic settings. While Appraisal theory has been used to study evaluative language in other contexts, its engagement subsystem remains underexplored in standardised reading tests like TOEFL and IELTS.

This study addresses that gap by analysing the reading texts of TOEFL and IELTS through the Appraisal model's engagement subsystem. Proposed by Martin and White (2005), the model expands Halliday's (1995) concepts of "mode" and "modality" within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Grounded in the interpersonal metafunction, the engagement subsystem examines how language includes or excludes alternative voices and positions, influencing the reader to align with or oppose the writer's stance.

The literature review that follows provides context for this investigation by examining the theoretical underpinnings of the Appraisal model, specifically its engagement system, and reviewing pertinent studies on engagement tactics in language assessment.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Overview of Engagement in Language Assessment

Language assessment is essential for evaluating competency, especially for non-native speakers seeking admission to academic or professional environments in English-speaking nations. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are among the most recognised competence assessments. Both assessments aim to evaluate a broad range of language abilities, with reading texts being a crucial element. In these texts, examinees must be able to understand, analyse, and interact with scholarly writings (ETS, 2023; IELTS, 2023). The engagement techniques employed in these reading texts are noteworthy as they demonstrate the test-taker's capacity for critical engagement with the text, navigation of many perspectives, and inference of meaning beyond the literal one (Martin & White, 2005).

The Appraisal model, proposed by Martin and White (2005), provides a valuable framework for analysing these evaluative dimensions. Based on SFL, the Appraisal model explores how language conveys attitudes, values, and stance. It consists of three subsystems: Attitude, Graduation, and Engagement. While Attitude focuses on emotional positioning and Graduation on intensity or force, the Engagement subsystem examines how language includes or excludes alternative voices and guides the reader's stance toward the text.

Engagement resources may be dialogically expansive, inviting multiple perspectives, or dialogically contractive, limiting or rejecting alternative views. These mechanisms prompt readers to align with or challenge the position expressed in a text. Such engagement features are essential for fostering higher-order thinking in academic reading contexts. Sari and Alyousef (2024), applying the Appraisal model to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) reading assessments for EFL and ESL learners, found a notable reliance on heteroglossic (multiple-voiced) and contractive resources. Their findings show that engagement strategies help learners distinguish authorial stance, evaluate language choices, and develop critical reading skills.

Conversely, the present study focuses on dialogic expansion and contraction in global assessments such as TOEFL and IELTS. It explores how these reading texts position test-takers to interact with diverse perspectives, contributing to an understanding of how critical literacy is embedded in international language testing.

The use of interactional resources by writers to shape meaning and engage readers is central to the Appraisal model. These resources help guide readers through evaluative language in texts such as those used in TOEFL and IELTS, influencing how they interpret meaning and react to stance. Hall and Sheyholislami (2013) show how these linguistic strategies similarly apply to reading comprehension, though studied in the context of ESL essay ratings. They argue that

the use of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation reflects the writer's stance and helps readers process and evaluate the material more deeply.

## 2.2. Strategies for Engagement in TOEFL Reading

The TOEFL iBT reading section presents academic passages of approximately 700 words, each followed by a series of questions designed to assess test-takers' reading comprehension and analytical proficiency. These questions target basic understanding and more advanced cognitive operations such as application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. According to Fitria (2024), these questions are crafted to test students' ability to grasp text organisation, interpret complex ideas, and assess the author's intent, which goes beyond simple comprehension.

TOEFL reading section questions sometimes require test-takers to identify the presentation of numerous voices or views, especially in dialogically expansive sections. These questions often require readers to infer or derive meaning from subtle linguistic cues. Engagement techniques in the reading passages are designed to evaluate the test-taker's critical thinking capacity, which is essential in academic contexts where multiple perspectives must be considered.

Alavi and Bordbar (2012) present a comparable viewpoint in their TOEFL iBT reading strategies study. They argue that while many test-takers focus primarily on answering multiple-choice questions efficiently, they may not engage deeply with the text. Their findings underscore that understanding how engagement resources function in reading passages could enhance test-takers' performance by fostering a more critical and interactive reading approach. This objective aligns with the goals of the Appraisal model, which seeks to analyse how language positions readers to either align with or challenge the content.

The TOEFL exam does not overtly teach these engagement techniques, but their implicit presence in the reading passages demands that test-takers apply them. These strategies, such as recognising the author's stance or detecting implicit contrast and evaluation, are integral to dialogic expansion or contraction, concepts central to the Engagement subsystem of the Appraisal model. TOEFL assesses how test-takers interpret authorial intent and alternative viewpoints and evaluates their readiness for university-level academic discourse.

## 2.3. Strategies for Engagement in IELTS Reading

Similar to the TOEFL, the IELTS Academic Reading test includes excerpts from academic works like books, journals, and newspapers. Each of the three sections that make up the test includes a text followed by a range of questions. These questions evaluate a range of abilities, including comprehension of the main idea, identification of specific details, inference of implicit meanings, and evaluation of arguments.

IELTS reading questions often utilise dialogically expansive interaction tools, incorporating multiple viewpoints, arguments, or perspectives within a single passage (IDP Education, n.d.). These tools are intended to foster critical reading by requiring test-takers to evaluate and navigate various voices or stances in the text. For instance, a passage may present contrasting opinions, prompting test-takers to synthesise these differences and determine how they relate to the posed question. This form of engagement mirrors academic reading tasks, where identifying the relationships between ideas is essential (Baghaei et al., 2020).

Nguyen and Le (2024) observed that the implicit logic, technical vocabulary, and cultural references in IELTS texts demand active engagement and higher-order thinking. These features often use engagement resources that encourage the reader to critically analyse and respond to textual information, a key component of academic literacy. In a similar study, Roza (2019) highlights how crucial it is to give students critical reading abilities to interact with such difficult material in both IELTS and TOEFL contexts. This reinforces the need for strategies that allow learners to engage deeply with complex texts.

Nosrati (2015), in a study focused on IELTS General Training examinees, found that while some techniques helped test-takers answer factual or surface-level questions, they often fell short when deeper comprehension was required. In particular, test-takers found it difficult to determine authorial stance, deduce meaning, or comprehend the logical connections between concepts. This result highlights a serious issue with IELTS preparation: test-takers might put accuracy and speed ahead of in-depth study of the subject.

IELTS's Academic module requires a deeper engagement with reading material. Candidates must evaluate different points of view, evaluate arguments, and interpret underlying meanings, tasks that closely align with the

objectives of the Appraisal model. This model, in particular the Engagement subsystem, clarifies how texts influence readers to accept or reject particular points of view. As such, IELTS reading tasks serve as a platform for testing the kind of dialogic negotiation and critical interpretation that are central to academic success.

This study examines the use of engagement resources in TOEFL and IELTS reading passages in light of the importance of critical engagement in reading comprehension. It aims to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the TOEFL and IELTS reading passages deploy engagement resources, as identified in the Appraisal model?
2. To what extent are the TOEFL and IELTS reading texts similar or different in terms of the use of engagement resources?

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Theoretical Framework

This research employs a qualitative content analysis method, concentrating specifically on the Engagement subsystem of the Appraisal model. The Appraisal model, proposed by Martin and White (2005), is developed within SFL.

The study aims to scrutinize the reading passages through detailed analysis. Consequently, MAXQDA 2024 will serve as a tool to systematically annotate engagement resources within a selected sample of texts from the TOEFL iBT Reading and IELTS Academic Reading sections.

Based on the Appraisal framework, this analysis will focus on identifying instances of dialogic expansion and dialogic contraction, as outlined by Martin and White (2005). Engagement resources will be categorized primarily into two main types:

1. Dialogic expansion: This denotes language mechanisms that facilitate the expression of diverse perspectives. Examples encompass hedging (e.g., "might," "could") and modality (e.g., "possibly," "likely") (Martin & White, 2005).
2. Dialogic contraction: This is a language resource which restricts or negates other perspectives, frequently via definitive statements (e.g., "it is certain that") or rejections (e.g., "it is incorrect to assert that") (Martin & White, 2005).

#### 3.2. Data Collection

This study will utilise reading texts from the TOEFL iBT and IELTS Academic assessments. Six reading texts from each exam will be chosen for analysis. The texts will be derived from official practice materials, specifically those released by Educational Testing Service (ETS) for TOEFL and Cambridge University Press for IELTS. The criteria for selecting the reading passages will encompass:

1. Diversity of academic disciplines: The chosen texts will encompass a wide collection of subjects, including the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and technology, to guarantee a representative sample.
2. The texts shall possess comparable length (about 600-800 words each) and difficulty to maintain uniformity between the two assessments.
3. Engagement potential: Texts including diverse perspectives, implicit arguments, or necessitating inferential reasoning will be prioritised, since they are expected to use greater engagement resources.

#### 3.3. Data Analysis Tools

This study systematically examined engagement resources in TOEFL and IELTS reading texts using MAXQDA 2024 as the primary data analysis tool. MAXQDA is a powerful software tool for qualitative and mixed-methods research with both automated and manual coding options. It makes annotating dialogic expansion and contraction features easy using the Appraisal framework. A thorough examination of how interactional resources are employed in the reading passages was made possible by its user-friendly interface and sophisticated features, including code frequency analysis, visual coding outputs, and simple retrieval of coded segments. Data analysis that was reliable, systematic, and consistent was guaranteed by this tool (VERBI Software, 2024).

### 3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

This study used Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal framework to qualitatively analyse engagement strategies in TOEFL and IELTS reading texts using MAXQDA 2024. By effectively annotating and coding dialogic expansion and contraction features, the software made it possible to systematically analyse how test materials incorporate interactional resources to influence reader engagement. The combination of automated and manual coding guaranteed textual consistency and analytical accuracy.

Six academic reading excerpts from official TOEFL iBT and IELTS Academic materials made up the dataset. The roughly 700-word TOEFL texts evaluate comprehension, inference, and text analysis abilities while reflecting university-level material (ETS, 2023). The 600-word IELTS passages, which are taken from authentic academic sources, assess the ability to find information, identify important concepts, and decipher implicit meaning (IELTS, 2023). These texts provided a representative corpus for assessing engagement resources in high-stakes reading assessments.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Expand Resources

This section examines the use of expand engagement resources in order to answer the first research question of the study. The application of engagement strategies via "Expand Resources" is a crucial element in the construction of IELTS and TOEFL reading passages. Expand resources serve to increase reader engagement with the discussion by presenting a variety of perspectives, entertaining possibilities, and inviting alternative points of view (Martin & White, 2005). This branch is divided into four categories: entertain, which pertains to the use of modals and hedging to present possibilities; attribute, which involves quoting or citing external sources to share accountability for an idea; acknowledge, which signifies a neutral recognition of another perspective; and distance, which establishes a separation from external sources to indicate disagreement. Table 1 demonstrates significant differences in how IELTS and TOEFL texts employ these techniques, shedding light on the varied engagement strategies embedded in these high-stakes tests.

Table 1. *Engagement: Expand Resources between IELTS and TOEFL*

Expand Branches	IELTS Text	TOEFL Text	Total
Entertain	62.50%	37.50%	100.00%
Attribute	0%	0%	0%
Acknowledge	100.00%	0%	100.00%
Distance	0%	0%	0%

### 4.2. Contract Resources

The first research question is also addressed in this section by looking at contract engagement resources, which will be further examined in the frequency analysis that follows. Contract Resources are essential to engagement strategies since they dictate how a text suppresses or rejects opposing views, limits alternative points of view, and supports the author's position. The resources delineated in the model to facilitate the constriction of dialogic space by regulating the extent to which alternative input is recognised or embraced by the writer. Table 2 presents a comprehensive comparison of the use of Contract Resources in IELTS and TOEFL selected texts, under the categories of proclaim, endorse, pronounce, concur, disclaim, counter, and deny.

Table 2. *Engagement: Contract Resources between IELTS and TOEFL*

Contract Branches	IELTS Text	TOEFL Text	Total
Proclaim	0%	0%	0%
Endorse	0%	0%	0%
Pronounce	50.00%	50.00%	100.00%
Concur	71.40%	28.60%	100.00%
Disclaim	0%	0%	0%
Counter	48.40%	51.60%	100.00%
Deny	36.80%	63.20%	100.00%
Proclaim	0%	0%	0%

### 4.3. Overall Balance

The balance of engagement resources in IELTS and TOEFL reading texts provides a comprehensive perspective on the engagement strategies employed by these assessments. Table 3 summarises the results from Tables 1 and 2, offering a comprehensive comparison of the total engagement resources utilised in both exams.

Table 3. *The Overall Balance of Engagement Resources between IELTS and TOEFL*

Overall	IELTS Text	TOEFL Text	Total
SUM	49.61	50.39	100.00

### 4.4. Frequency of Engagement Resources

The frequency table provides a helpful guide to the various dialogic styles used in IELTS and TOEFL reading texts (see Table 4). These numerical patterns reflect the assessment goals and pedagogical orientation of each exam, as well as stylistic preferences. The IELTS feature "acknowledge" only occurs six times, indicating a conscious effort to present outside opinions objectively. IELTS uses "entertain" resources ten times, whereas TOEFL uses "deny" more often (14 times) than IELTS (7). Lastly, "counter" expressions appear on both tests, with TOEFL (23) having a little more of them than IELTS (19).

Table 4. *Frequency of Engagement Resources in IELTS and TOEFL Reading Texts*

Engagement Resource	IELTS Frequency	TOEFL Frequency
Acknowledge	6	0
Entertain	10	3
Deny	7	14
Counter	19	23

## 5. Discussion

There are notable distinctions between how the TOEFL and IELTS reading texts support reader interaction when compared to engagement resources. The word "entertain" is used more frequently in IELTS texts (62.5%) than in the TOEFL (37.5%). This is consistent with research by Nguyen and Le (2024), who contend that IELTS texts frequently offer intricate, ambiguous concepts subject to interpretation. These dialogically expansive approaches, which emphasise negotiation and potentiality, reflect what Martin and White (2005) refer to as heteroglossic discourse, which fosters critical thinking and receptivity to different points of view.

This dialogic orientation is further supported by "acknowledge" (100%) being the only word used in IELTS texts. IELTS encourages test-takers to assess other people's viewpoints by impartially referencing outside sources. This is in line with the findings of Sari and Alyousef (2024), who stress that these kinds of resources expand the reader's range of interpretation. Alavi and Bordbar (2012), who noted TOEFL's emphasis on factual understanding, support the distinction that TOEFL completely omits the word "acknowledge," implying a more monologic approach that might put comprehension above critique.

Due to the standardised nature of high-stakes exams, where subjective positioning is minimised for fairness, both tests avoid using "attribute" or "distance" (cf. ETS, 2023; IELTS, 2023). This lack, however, suggests a standard limitation in encouraging clear stance differentiation.

Building on this observation, one noteworthy similarity is the equal usage of "pronounce" (50%) in both the TOEFL and IELTS, which suggests that both tests use explicit authorial claims to direct the reader's comprehension, an expected aspect of academic test design, according to Fitria (2024). However, the disparity is more noticeable when it comes to how other Contract resources are allocated. IELTS shows a higher propensity to "concur" (71.4%), indicating agreement with specific points of view and promoting consensus and clarity. On the other hand, the TOEFL favours "counter" (51.6%) and "deny" (63.2%), suggesting a more contrast-driven, argumentative approach. This corroborates Roza's (2019) finding that logical analysis and refutation skills are frequently emphasised in TOEFL preparation.

To further illustrate these quantitative patterns, the function of engagement resources across TOEFL and IELTS reading texts was investigated in this study, with a focus on the words "pronounce," "concur," "counter," and "deny." Although the numerical data offered a preliminary summary of frequency patterns, such as the balanced appearance of

"pronounce" (50 percent each) and the greater usage of "counter" in the TOEFL, these quantitative findings were reinforced by qualitative examination of real text passages.

For instance, the IELTS text *"Many experts believe that environmental degradation is a direct result of industrial activity"* exemplifies "pronounce" through a compelling authorial assertion supported by expert consensus. Comparably, the IELTS passage *"Most researchers agree that urbanisation brings both challenges and opportunities"* exemplifies "concur," placing the author in line with a more general academic viewpoint. The reader's impression of objectivity and inclusivity is improved by these uses, which demonstrate IELTS' propensity to build credibility through consensus.

In contrast, engagement markers are typically used in TOEFL texts for more argumentative purposes. As an example of "counter," the sentence *"Although some argue that technological advancement leads to job loss, this view is overly simplistic"* demonstrates how the TOEFL uses concessive structures to challenge opposing viewpoints. An additional example of "deny" that emphasises critical assessment of opposing viewpoints is *"Claims that climate change is not caused by humans have been widely discredited."* These examples show how TOEFL reading texts frequently steer readers towards a preferred interpretation by anticipatorily addressing and rejecting opposing viewpoints.

As a result, the inclusion of these textual excerpts reveals discursive tendencies in each test as well as supporting the numerical patterns observed. The TOEFL texts are more persuasive and evaluative, whereas the IELTS texts seem more cooperative and explanatory. These techniques support their more general educational goals: TOEFL prepares students for assertive, critical academic writing in U.S. institutions, while IELTS promotes a measured, academic tone for global contexts.

As a result, these variations point to essentially different pedagogical philosophies: TOEFL encourages evaluative accuracy and critical thinking, whereas IELTS tends towards inclusive, interpretive reasoning. As stated by White (2003), these engagement patterns influence the reader's cognitive and evaluative interaction with texts. Whereas TOEFL promotes logical coherence through dialogic contraction, IELTS cultivates interpretive flexibility through dialogic expansion.

Nevertheless, although they employ different approaches, both tests successfully engage test-takers despite these differences. The TOEFL's use of "deny" and "counter" encourages analytical rigour, whereas IELTS's reliance on "entertain" and "acknowledge" fosters openness to opposing viewpoints. These results emphasise how crucial it is to match test design to test takers' reading preferences and styles. According to Nosrati (2015) and IDP Education (2025), knowing engagement strategies enhances pedagogical practices in exam preparation and informs test development.

In summary, the TOEFL and IELTS make meaningful use of engagement strategies, even in different ways. The TOEFL takes a more contractive, argument-centred approach, whereas IELTS encourages dialogic expansion and interpretive openness. These different rhetorical techniques reflect their varying educational goals and cognitive requirements, which ultimately influence how readers comprehend and engage with scholarly texts.

## 6. Conclusion

This study aimed to compare and contrast the two testing systems by analysing the scope and type of engagement resources in IELTS and TOEFL reading texts using the Appraisal model as a guide. Despite having different rhetorical orientations, the results show that the TOEFL and IELTS significantly use engagement strategies.

While the frequency and distribution of particular subtypes vary, it is clear from the first research question that both tests use engagement resources to influence reader-text interaction. Dialogic expansion is preferred in IELTS, primarily through the words "entertain" (62.5%) and "acknowledge" (100%). These decisions focus on interpretive openness, enabling test-takers to interact with various viewpoints. In contrast, the TOEFL exhibits a higher dependence on dialogic contraction, particularly through the use of "deny" (63.2%) and "counter" (51.6%), which encourages logical reasoning and the critical assessment of opposing viewpoints.

The analysis validates both convergence and divergence in response to the second research question. The fact that both tests use "pronounce" equally (50%) suggests they have similar academic expectations, but their general engagement strategies are very different. The TOEFL encourages monologic, argument-driven comprehension, while IELTS encourages heteroglossic, inclusive reasoning.

In the end, these results demonstrate that the TOEFL and IELTS have distinct pedagogical purposes. The TOEFL emphasises analytical clarity and argumentative structure, whereas IELTS promotes interpretive reading and open-ended thinking. Knowing these divergent engagement strategies can help teachers, curriculum developers, and test-takers match preparation methods and teaching strategies to the particular requirements of each exam.

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### Information on Informed Consent or any Data Privacy Statements

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### Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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