
English Language Assessment Testing: Key Strategies for Indian Students

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Abstract

Proficiency in English language is the need of the hour in the present day scenario. It is not sufficient to have a simple degree to get into higher studies or achieve good placement in a reputed MNCs. English language Tests have grown in importance in the aspects study and work overseas. These tests determine the level of proficiency for non-native speakers, and provide a means to compare fluency among individuals. English language exams can be divided into three categories: Academic, Business and General.

Academic English Exams include IELTS, STEP, APTIS and TOEFL generally demonstrate the levels of English proficiency. Business English language exams like the TOEIC and BULATS are internationally recognized credentials required by the employers for the level of English in the workplace. General English language exams like the CPE, FCE, KET are used to demonstrate a level of English mastery.

This paper studies the significance of the current English language Testing system, preparation strategies and score bands by shedding the light on the plight of Indian students. It widely discusses the strategies of international boards like Cambridge, British Council and available resources including Apps. The study conducts simple survey on the engineering students who have taken STEP Exam. The findings are presented with an analysis of the performance of Indian students by providing the suitable suggestions. Further, it makes a comparative analysis of these different tests and provides clarity for the aspirants.

Key words: *English Language Proficiency, IELTS, STEP, APTIS, Skills and Indian students*

Introduction

Currently, English language proficiency is not a mere academic practice as it has taken broader dimensions of international testing. There are internationally acclaimed tests to gauge the candidate's English skills at the global level. IELTS among all, is the most sought after exam by the students all over the world, other tests include BEC (Business English Certificate), TOEFL, APTIS, STEP (The Standardized Test of English Proficiency) initiated by The Hindu paper and so on. This paper studies the significance of the current English language Testing system,

preparation strategies and score bands by shedding the light on the plight of Indian students. It widely discusses the strategies of international boards like Cambridge, British Council and available resources including Apps. The study conducts simple survey on the engineering students who have taken STEP Exam. The findings are presented with an analysis of the performance of Indian students by providing the suitable suggestions. Further, it makes a comparative analysis of these different tests and provides clarity for the aspirants.

The skills generally tested in all assessment tests are Grammar & vocabulary, Writing, Reading, Listening and Speaking within the time framing. These online tests are supported by software with accurate timing and functionality. These tests will create enormous opportunities to the stakeholders. They are the gate ways for the admission into post graduate programmes and recruitment process. They provide an International grading applicable almost globally.

This kind of an assessment and tests give a professional edge for students with authentication. In the present competitive world, one needs to fittest with competence. The academic competence is not just suffice. In order to grab the opportunities, the students have to an extra mile. Many Indians are going abroad for further studies and employment purposes.

Why IELTS and TOEFL Tests?

Language tests are used for many purposes in many contexts and imposed as one of the important aspects in professional life. These tests are “almost the household of the professional circle” (Leung & Lewkowics, 2006, p. 222). The IELTS and TOEFL are two tests for English as Foreign Language (EFL)/English as Second Language (ESL) learners to measure their English proficiency. The TOEFL test aims at measuring English proficiency of EFL/ESL students intending to continue their education at higher institutions. It evaluates the test takers’ English skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing regarding how they perform on academic tasks (ETS, 2013).

Shohamy (2001a) stated, “when a language is tested in a higher institution as criteria of acceptance, the symbolic power of the test and the language are enhanced significantly presenting the society with an extremely powerful tool” (p. 123). This power gives tests a strong position to determine students’ future lives. Green (2006) also stated that performance on the test may have a big impact on test-takers’ lives.

IELTS (International English Language Testing System)

The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score is accepted by medium English universities to prove that applicants have fair skills and knowledge of English in order to pursue their studies (Green, 2005). IELTS, which was previously known as ELTS (English Language Testing Service), was introduced for the first time in the early 1980s by United Kingdom (UK) test developers motivated by the possibility to create language test for specific

purposes (O’Sullivan, 2012). It is also created to replace English Proficiency Test Battery (EPTB) - a traditional multiple-choice test used by the British Council as required test for international applicants to universities and colleges in the UK-(IELTS, 2013). The original ELTS was a test for students planning to study particular disciplines. There were six modules generated from that purpose: Life Sciences, Social Studies, Physical Sciences, Technology, Medicine and General Academic (O’Sullivan, 2012). Zahedi and Shamsaei (2012) pointed out that IELTS and TOEFL tests are two examples of high-stake standardized tests which have “critical roles in determining the future life” (p. 246) of the test takers. There are three purposes of high-stake tests: “selecting people for an occupation, issuing a certificate, and permitting one to enter a higher education” (p. 264).

The structure

The test consists of four key modules - Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. The listening and Reading section will be conducted on the same day but the speaking part will be held on a different slot.

The Structure of IELTS

The Four Components	No. of Sections	Mode of Testing	Time
Listening	4	Recorded Tests Monologues Conversations by native speakers	30 minutes
Reading	3 – 40 questions	3 long passages Sentence completion True/false Find the gist	60 minutes
Writing	2 tasks	Info graphics General Essay	60 minutes
Speaking	3	1. Personal interview 2. Speak on the given topic 3. Discussion between the candidate and the examiner on the previous topic	11-14 minutes

The total test duration is for 2 hours and 45 minutes. Each module (Listening, Speaking, Writing and Reading) is scaled on a band score from 0 to 9. Most universities accept students to have a band score of at least 5.5 or above.

Recently, the IELTS official website released a demographic data report for the year 2015. This data gives a percentage wise of the band scores earned by Indian students in the International English Test.

Nationality	<4	4	4.5	5	5.5	6	6.5	7	7.5	8	8.5	9
Bangladesh	1%	2%	5%	13%	21%	21%	16%	11%	7%	4%	1%	0%
Brazil	0%	0%	1%	4%	10%	18%	21%	20%	16%	9%	2%	0%
Canada	0%	0%	1%	4%	9%	16%	20%	17%	15%	10%	7%	1%
China (People's Republic of)	1%	2%	7%	16%	24%	23%	15%	8%	3%	1%	0%	0%
Colombia	0%	1%	2%	6%	16%	23%	22%	16%	10%	4%	1%	0%
Egypt	0%	1%	4%	8%	14%	18%	18%	17%	12%	6%	1%	0%
France	0%	0%	1%	2%	8%	15%	20%	21%	19%	12%	2%	0%
Germany	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%	7%	13%	19%	24%	24%	9%	0%
Greece	0%	0%	1%	2%	7%	14%	19%	20%	21%	14%	2%	0%
Hong Kong	0%	0%	2%	6%	14%	18%	19%	18%	14%	7%	2%	0%
India	0%	2%	6%	16%	24%	21%	14%	9%	5%	2%	0%	0%

Source: www.ielts.com

As per the report, 45% of the Indians who took the exam have scored in the middle band of 5.5 and 6, a score which by IELTS standards is considered average. The only other country with a higher percentage of candidates than India in the same band, is China. Despite good institutes and learning avenues, many Indian test takers are scoring average bands in the exam.

Indian students undergo pronunciation blues in the speaking test. While many IELTS coaching institutes have agreed that the Indian accent does not impact marking of the speaking section in IELTS, pronunciation of words is an important marking parameter. For e.g. the word cucumber being pronounced as 'coo-coom-ber' or dengue pronounced as 'deng-yoo' or asthma pronounced

as 'us-th-maa'. S. Advitya, an IELTS aspirant from Mumbai, says, “During speaking training in IELTS coaching, one of one sessions are held to emphasize on the student's pronunciations. For students from non-English speaking backgrounds like me, speaking training should ideally start 6 months before the exam.” Furthermore, India, despite being a non-native English speaking country, uses the English language for all its official purposes. However, this allows room to develop many slang phrases and words (See image above) in due course of conversations. For e.g. Some coaching institutes argue that learning a new language from scratch eliminates the use of slang as opposed to for those who have been speaking the language for years and have developed slang expressions through regular conversations.

Since Indian students are writing and speaking in English with Indian accent, with not much exposure to foreign accent, it can be the cause of some penalties they may face in IELTS listening module. Let us know what these likely penalty areas are and how you can overcome these risk areas in order to achieve Band 9 in IELTS Listening. <https://www.britishcounsel.org.in/penalty-areas-for-indian-students-in-ielts-listening.html>

1. Pronunciation – Alphabets/Numbers or Singular/Plural Words

The most common penalty area that leads to incorrect answers in Section 1 of IELTS Listening is related to pronunciation. You may be facing difficulties in correctly understanding the pronunciation of carefully such as alphabets (when a speaker is spelling the name or address) or numbers (when speaker talks about phone number). Another type of pronunciation issue one can find in IELTS Listening in other Sections as well is related to singular or plural words. Many a times, it is seen that candidates do not hear it clearly whether the word is singular or plural, for example, if the speaker says “admission forms”, candidates do not concentrate properly or not able to recognize whether they need to write the word “form” with or without “s”.

Spelling Errors

One of the major issues you may face in IELTS listening section is to write the correct spelling of words spoken in the audio. While candidates are not sure about spelling of words and hence they go wrong in writing them correctly. It is also seen that there are some candidates who know the correct spelling but hurriedly, they may write them incorrectly or when they do not review properly what they have written.

For example, “accommodation” is often written mistakenly as “accommodation”

Grammar

Apart from the above penalty areas, grammar is another problem candidate face while giving IELTS Listening test. It may usually happen when you are more concentrating on the

information only and do not see the nearby words to predict the answer grammatically. For example,

All the college students are required to submit **all** thefor applying to the contest. If you see, in the above question, “all” is the word that indicates that your answer in the blank should be a plural word, not singular.

Choosing Word Instruction

Another thing is to write your answer according to the word instruction. If instruction is “NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS”, it implies that your answer should be of one word or two words. It does not imply that you have to write only two words. For example,

Question:

Write answer in **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER**

Parents willing to enjoy the..... with the students can register soon.

Audio:

Parents who are waiting to join the most-awaited holiday trip with the students can register soon.

Answer:

Holiday Trip

*Answer should be holiday trip, not most-awaited holiday trip

- **Taking the exam for granted:** IELTS is perceived as an easy exam for most takers with English speaking backgrounds. Students usually start preparing for the exam 1-2 weeks in advance. The focus of practice is usually on the writing and speaking sections, where essay type questions are asked. In this bargain, less emphasis is put on revising basic grammar rules. Sadia Siddiqui, an aspirant from Mumbai, says, “In the readings section, the questions asked tend to be misunderstood because they use synonyms or antonyms of the passage words rather than using the exact phrase from the passage. I have known friends who have got confused between use of double negatives and rhetoric sentences.” The rule is to not take either sections of the test for granted. We usually write the way we speak, and even those with fluent English could unknowingly make basic errors while speaking. Furthermore, the voice over in the listening section has British, American and Australian accents. Indians not accustomed to listening to foreign accents may misinterpret words. For e.g. the word hostile is pronounced differently in India than in the US. With the American accents, the same word may be misunderstood as 'hostel'.
- **Learning English is a process:** A few months ago, when this correspondent was visiting Chandigarh, she came across billboards in the city promising to teach English in 30 days for IELTS/TOEFL. Even in Mumbai, station walls have bills claiming to training you to speak English like an American. As much as some may find these tall claims ridiculous, there is a

section of people who fall for such misleading advertisements. There is no shortcut to learning a language. According to KIC Education (International English Test coaching institute), Mumbai, “Learning English is a process. Students cannot rote learn a few rules and use tricks to score in the IELTS. It takes daily practice to frame sentences without grammatical errors, let alone picking up a foreign accent.” For many, IELTS training begins a week or two before the exam day, but for those who want to overcome the accent and pronunciation challenges in the speaking and listening sections, must start preparing as early as 3 months before the exam.

Students' Revelations

Neetha: “one of the questions about coffee which I like it a lot, and story of coffee and talk about the coffee mineral, about one of the machines that make coffee, whenever you read , you know, it’s easy, they didn’t talk deeply about the machine of coffee, no, in the surface one,” (personal communication, November 16, 2016)

Anil: “I found it really LOVELY actually because I had to speak with someone and then he was asking me you know we use body language, you know gestures not only about you know utterances what we say, it wasn’t about you know verbalizing words, it was really an experience, I would say THIS is a speaking experience,” (personal communication, November 10, 2016)

Jyothsna: “the IELTS test:: it really measures the ability of the second language, the English language learners in four different aspects yeah reading listening and writing and speaking, but not really academically but .. I mean. They really measure in general. In general one. The ability.” (Personal communication, November 5, 2016)

IELTS - The Indian outcomes

More than 9,000 educational institutions, professional associations and governments in 135 countries recognize the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for entry into academic institutions and employment.

The number of IELTS takers is increasing in the country and especially in Hyderabad. Since its score is a admission criteria in US institutions most Indian students prefer IELTS. In Hyderabad, the test is held four days every month – one Thursday and three Saturdays.

According to Sarah Deverall India Director of IELTS Examinations, “The number of those taking the test in India has also grown over the years, with over 3,000 institutions and programmes in the USA using it as the tool to measure English language proficiency.”

(<https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/%E2%80%98In-25-years-IELTS-has-grown-in-popularity%E2%80%99/article11195054.ece>)

It is also being considered for employment, apart from academics. Two million people take the test annually across the world.

Plight of Indian students – Challenges & Strategies

Indian students are facing problems that restrict them from scoring high in the IELTS exam. They might be enrolled in a regional medium school or might lack of exposure to the advanced level of English during past studies or work experience. Students struggle to score high but it is not impossible for to achieve the dream score. Many students who come to know their weaknesses and work on them are able to overcome obstacles behind scoring high in IELTS reading module. Major barriers for Indian students in IELTS are mentioned below.

Reading Passage Quickly

Time management is a crucial factor in order to succeed in the IELTS reading exam. Due to slow reading habits, it becomes cumbersome for some students to complete all the passages on time. They read slowly and take more time to understand the passage as well as solving the questions. This can be daunting in the exam since they get 60 minutes to solve 40 questions and there is no extra time for transferring answers also. So, it is very essential to improve reading and scanning speed by reading articles from newspapers, magazines etc. and solving more practice tests.

Advanced Level Vocabulary

In the IELTS reading exam, there are many unknown words beyond the guess work. It may become quite difficult to understand the text in such a case. It may so happen that the students are not exposed to advanced vocabulary of English in the day to day life. It mainly happens in IELTS Academic reading passages where scientific language is used which is quite complex to understand. In this scenario, one should first try to learn the new words by reading newspapers and other textual materials or watch videos in foreign accent to learn new words. Secondly, it is necessary to try to guess the meaning of that word by reading the statement again carefully.

Understanding Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is the most important skill required in IELTS in all the modules but with IELTS reading, it is extremely important since it is vital to get the questions in the paraphrased form. Such statements are though same in meaning but not in words since synonyms are used and this is why it becomes confusing for the students to find answers, especially in IELTS General reading exam. While finding their answers, one can understand paraphrasing and then solve those questions.

True False Not Given Questions

The most difficult type of questions in IELTS reading are True/ False /Not Given questions. The reason is that these questions are very confusing, especially to the Indian students who find them difficult to exactly hit them right. They get confused when they first translate the statement in their local accent which does not work always, especially in tricky questions such as True False Not Given. For this, it is critical to get used to the strategies and practice such questions more and more. Once the questions are solved then it is significant analyzing them later on works wonder for the next attempt.

Summary Completion Questions

Summary completion related with the passage in IELTS reading requires paraphrasing which is difficult for Indian students. Apart from paraphrasing, synonyms are the other obstacles they face while trying to understand the question and the related passage. Again, practicing such questions, trying exercises on paraphrasing and reading a lot of textual materials such as journals, magazines, newspapers etc. is helpful.

Time factor

Indian students are not much used to this kind of exam system. They are habituated to conventional patterns. However, time management is key factor in any set up. To succeed on the IELTS, one must use time wisely. Many students do not finish at least one module. The table below shows the time challenge that is generally faced with:

Table 1

Time Factors in IELTS

Module	Total amount of time allotted	Number of questions	Time to answer each question
Listening	30 min	40	.75min
Reading	60min	40	.67min
Writing	60min	2	30
Speaking	11-14min	N/A	N/A

Source: ieltssecrets@ieltssecrets.com

Conclusions

The insight in detail presented certain challenges and mentions strategies to overcome these challenges to get succeed in IELTS or other similar Testings. The findings display the status of Indian students and they need to improve time management and vocabulary. The data shows that maximum students obtained band 5 or 6. In order to get good scores and bands, the learners must

use apps (S/W Applications) for personalized testing with crucial practice. Thus the paper presented an analysis of the performance of Indian students by providing the suitable suggestions. Further, it makes a comparative analysis of these different tests and attempted to provide clarity on the English test preparation and for academic as well as professional career progression.