

# The Revision of the [ IELTS Speaking Test ]

## ► Background

One of the strengths of IELTS since its inception in 1989 has been the willingness of the IELTS partners (The British Council, IDP Education Australia: IELTS Australia, and UCLES) regularly to review and revise IELTS in the light of developments in language testing theory and opportunities afforded by technological advances and changes in perceptions from learners, teachers and test users.

A number of modifications were made to the IELTS Reading, Writing and Listening Modules in April 1995, but no changes were made at that time to the Speaking Module. One reason was that a number of investigations into the IELTS Speaking Test were still in progress at the time of the 1995 revision; the results of these studies and the likely direction of changes were still unknown. In addition, revising a face-to-face speaking test involves not only revision of the test materials but also a major logistical exercise to retrain oral examiners and revise test delivery systems. As a result, a revision of the IELTS Speaking Module was postponed until a more appropriate time.

The IELTS Speaking Test has been undergoing a process of review and revision since 1998 and the revised format of the Speaking Test is scheduled for introduction in July 2001. As the partner responsible for test development, UCLES has been managing the IELTS Speaking Test Revision Project in close consultation with the other partners. The process is guided by the UCLES Test Development/Revision Methodology and is being undertaken according to a detailed project plan.

The project has concentrated on the following areas:

- developing a clearer specification of tasks, e.g. in terms of input and expected candidate output, and the revision of the tasks themselves for some phases of the test
- the introduction of an examiner frame to increase standardisation of test management
- revision of the rating scale to ensure that the descriptors match more closely the output from candidates in relation to the specified tasks

The following features of the test will remain unchanged:

- the one-to-one format (i.e. one candidate and one examiner, with audio recordings for checking and for monitoring)
- the overall test length
- the multi-phase approach

## ► Timetable

The revision timetable divides into 5 phases as follows:

### **Phase 1 Consultation, initial planning and design (May-Dec 1998)**

The formal revision process began in 1998 with consideration of the need to revise the IELTS Speaking Test and a review of the various constraints involved. Initial discussions were informed by a survey of theoretical and empirical studies associated

with the IELTS Speaking Module conducted between 1992 and 1998; studies on the speaking components of other examinations were also taken into account. A Working Party was established to begin drawing up a revised content specification and sample tasks for trialling. A series of consultation meetings with experts in the field of oral assessment and with IELTS Chief Examiners, Senior Examiners and IELTS Administrators was held in the United Kingdom and Australia to review the outcomes and make recommendations for improvements.

## **Phase 2 Development (Jan-June 1999)**

Further trialling of the revised test format was carried out in Australia and the interviews were recorded onto audio cassette for analysis. In addition, further sets of test materials were commissioned. A second Working Party was set up to review the current assessment criteria and rating scale for Speaking and to begin the process of re-drafting. The revised scale was trialled against the revised test format to refine both instruments further.

## **Phase 3 Validation (July 1999- Sept 2000)**

Several validation studies have been undertaken over the past year to investigate and confirm:

- the feasibility of test format
- the relationship between task features and candidate output
- the suitability of the examiner frame
- the appropriateness of the revised assessment criteria
- the functioning of the revised rating scale
- the comparability between the current and new scales

## **Phase 4 Implementation (Oct 2000-June 2001)**

Following the production of new examiner training materials for IELTS, the British Council and IELTS Australia, in collaboration with UCLES EFL, will initiate a phased approach to the worldwide retraining of all IELTS examiners from October 2000.

## **Phase 5 Operational (from July 2001)**

On the completion of IELTS examiner training, the revised IELTS Speaking Test will be operational throughout the world from July 2001.

The various stages of the IELTS Speaking Test Revision Project will be written up in detail and published as chapters in a volume in the Studies in Language Testing series, produced jointly by UCLES and Cambridge University Press, available in 2001.

# **Some frequently asked questions**

## **What will the revised IELTS Speaking Test look like?**

The revised test is divided into 3 main parts. Each part fulfils a specific function in terms of interaction pattern, task input and candidate output.

In Part 1 the candidate answers general questions about themselves, their homes/families, their jobs/studies, their interests, and a range of similar familiar topic areas. This part lasts between four and five minutes.

In Part 2 the candidate is given a verbal prompt on a card and is asked to talk on a particular topic. The candidate has one minute's preparation time before speaking at length, for between one and two minutes. The examiner then asks one or two follow-up questions.

In Part 3 the examiner and candidate engage in a discussion of more abstract issues and concepts which are thematically linked to the topic prompt in Part 2. The discussion lasts between four and five minutes.

The overall structure of the revised test is summarised below.

Part	Nature of interaction	Timing
<b>Part 1</b> Introduction and Interview	Examiner introduces him/herself and confirms candidate's identity. Examiner interviews candidate using verbal questions based on familiar topic frames.	<b>4-5 minutes</b>
<b>Part 2</b> Individual long turn	Examiner asks candidate to speak for 1-2 minutes on a particular topic based on written input in the form of a general instruction and content-focused prompts. Examiner asks one or two questions at the end of the long turn.	<b>3-4 minutes (incl. 1 minute preparation time)</b>
<b>Part 3</b> Two-way discussion	Examiner invites candidate to participate in discussion of more abstract nature, based on verbal questions thematically linked to Part 2 prompt.	<b>4-5 minutes</b>

## Why has the Speaking Test been designed in this way?

The results of various studies over recent years suggest that examiners, candidates and IELTS administrators have sometimes experienced problems with the functioning and management of Phases 2, 3 and 4 in the existing IELTS Speaking Test. In addition, with the increased number of General Training candidates, it is appropriate to include more tasks suitable for this range of test-takers.

The IELTS Speaking Test format has been revised to take account of these considerations and also to reflect our improved understanding of test and task design for assessing spoken language ability. For this reason, the revised test includes an opportunity for candidates to speak at length on a familiar topic (an individual long turn) and to have a short time to gather their thoughts and plan what they want to say.

## Will there be a range of test materials?

Yes, a bank of tasks for each of the three parts will be available at any one time to maintain test security. New material will be added every 6 months.

## Are there different Speaking Tests for Academic and General Training candidates?

No, both Academic and General Training candidates follow the same format for all parts of the Speaking Test. All the tasks are designed to be accessible to all candidates.

## What is an examiner frame?

An examiner frame is a script for the examiner's role in the conversation with the candidate; it guides the management of the revised IELTS Speaking Test as it progresses through each of the 3 parts. The wording of the examiner frame is carefully controlled in Parts 1 and 2 of the Speaking Test to ensure that all candidates receive the same input delivered in the same manner. In Part 3 of the test the frame is looser and the examiner can accommodate their language to the level of the candidate being examined.

## Why is an examiner frame being introduced?

The examiner frame is used for the purpose of standardisation, to maintain the prescribed timing and format of the test. It helps to ensure that all candidates are treated fairly and equally. Deviation from the script may introduce easier or more difficult language, or can change the focus of a task. Examiners for IELTS are required to assess proficiency across a wide range of ability. The use of a frame provides support for lower level candidates while still allowing higher level candidates the chance to demonstrate their proficiency. The examiner frame for IELTS has been developed on the basis of what happens during the current IELTS Speaking Test and has also been informed by UCLES' extensive experience of speaking test development for other examinations.

## Will the approach to assessment change?

The current global rating scale for IELTS will be replaced with 4 analytical subscales: Fluency and Coherence; Lexical Resource; Grammatical Range and Accuracy; and Pronunciation. Descriptors for each of these criteria are provided across nine bands. Examiners award a subscore on each criterion and the four subscores are averaged to provide a final band score for Speaking.

## Will this mean a change to the administration/processing of the Speaking Test?

The subscores awarded by the Examiner will be captured on an IELTS Speaking Test mark sheet which will be produced for each candidate by the computerised test administration system (EFLCOMMS). EFLCOMMS will convert these scores to a Speaking Band Score which will be reported on the Test Report Form.

## When will sample materials for the revised Speaking Test be available?

An outline of the revised test format will be included in the January 2001 edition of the IELTS Handbook. Sample Speaking Test materials, including examples on audio tape of candidate performances, will be available as part of the IELTS Specimen Materials from March 2001.

## Will current IELTS Examiners need to be retrained to administer the revised Speaking Test?

Yes, over 1000 existing IELTS Examiners will need to be retrained in more than 100 countries around the world.

## How will IELTS Examiners be retrained?

The British Council and IELTS Australia, with support from UCLES, will co-ordinate a programme of Examiner training seminars worldwide. Familiarisation with the revised Speaking Test will initially be provided through an Induction Video sent to all IELTS centres for use among their Examiners. This will be followed by face-to-face Examiner retraining sessions conducted in IELTS centres by qualified IELTS Trainers. The bulk of Examiner retraining will take place between January and June 2001. Individual BC and IDP centres will receive more details of this programme over the coming months.

## Will IELTS Examiners need to recertificate before examining for the revised test?

No, after July 2001 IELTS Examiners will no longer need to undergo a recertification process for the Speaking Module every two years. Instead, they will be required to attend a Co-ordination (or standardisation) session at least once every 2 years and their performance in a live test will be monitored and evaluated once in a 2-year period. All IELTS Examiners will be part of a global network of regionally-based IELTS Examiner teams, supported and supervised by IELTS Team Leaders and Senior Team Leaders who will be responsible for carrying out Training, Co-ordination and Monitoring activities.

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