

Review of IELTS Speaking Test

Yiqi Wang

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
of the University of Toronto

Author Note

This paper was written to submit to Prof. Alister Cumming as Assignment 1 (Test Review) of CTL3013 Language Assessment, in Winter 2015.

The social and historical context, content and purpose of IELTS

IELTS became operational in 1989, which was the result of ELTS (English Language Testing System) revision project, accepting the recommendation of the ELTS Validation Report (Criper and Davies 1988) for a compromise ‘between practicality and maximum-predictive power’. The word ‘international’ in the title International English Language Testing System (IELTS) took account of the involvement from 1987 of the Australian International Development Program (IDP). Thereafter, the test (IELTS) has been managed by the triumvirate of the British Council (which has been running their own IELTS centres), IDP, which has been running Australian IELTS centres and produces 50% of the material for inclusion in the test, and UCLES (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate), which has been commissioning writing of the test material, produces the completed test and provided centres with administration and training materials for the Speaking and Writing subtests so that these tests could be locally marked.

After several revisions in the following 25 years, the current IELTS is divided into four subtests. Each candidate takes two general subtests, Listening and Speaking, and a module comprising two specialized subtests, Reading and Writing. The general components test general English while the modules test skills in particular areas suited to the candidate’s chosen course of study. The tests are taken in this order- Reading(55 minutes), Writing(45 minutes), Listening(30 minutes), Speaking (11-14 minutes). The test purpose is to assess the proficiency in English of candidates seeking entry to UK, Australian and Canadian higher education: General Training Module extends the reach of IELTS to candidates entering upper secondary schools, wishing to undertake a training programme or applying for immigration.

A revision project for the IELTS Speaking Test was launched in 1998 and the revised IELTS Speaking Test was introduced in July 2001. IELTS Speaking Tests are encounters between one candidate and one examiner and are designed to take between 11 and 14 minutes. There are three main parts. Each part fulfils a specific function in terms of interaction pattern, task input and candidate output.

Part 1 (Introduction): candidates answer general questions about themselves, their homes/families, their jobs/studies, their interests, and a range of familiar topic areas. The examiner introduces him/herself and confirms the candidate's identity. The examiner interviews the candidate using verbal questions selected from familiar topic frames. This part lasts between four and five minutes.

Part 2 (Individual long turn): the candidate is given a verbal prompt on a card and is asked to talk on a particular topic. The candidate has one minute to prepare before speaking at length, for between one and two minutes. The examiner then asks one or two rounding-off questions.

Part 3 (Two-way discussion): 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 construct assessed

As a spoken language proficiency Test, the construct of speaking part of IELTS is composed of 4 factors: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range & accuracy and pronunciation.

Fluency and Coherence refers to the ability to talk with normal levels of continuity, rate and effort and to link ideas and language together to form coherent, connected speech. The key indicators of fluency are speech rate and speech continuity. For coherence, the key indicators are logical sequencing of sentences, clear marking of stages in a discussion, narration or argument, and the use of cohesive devices (e.g connectors, pronouns and conjunctions) within and between sentences.

Lexical Resource refers to the range of vocabulary the candidate can use and the precision with which meanings and attitudes can be expressed. The key indicators are the variety of words used, the adequacy and appropriacy of the words used and the ability to circumlocute (get round a vocabulary gap by using other words) with or without noticeable hesitation.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy refers to the range and the accurate and appropriate use of the candidate's grammatical resource. The key indicators of grammatical range are the length and complexity of the spoken sentences, the appropriate use of subordinate clauses, and variety of sentence structures, and the ability to move elements around for information focus. The key indicators of grammatical accuracy are the number of grammatical errors in a given amount of speech and the communicative effect of error.

Pronunciation refers to the capacity to produce comprehensible speech in fulfilling the speaking test requirements. The key indicators will be the amount of strain caused to the listener, the amount of unintelligible speech and the noticeability of L1 influence.

The validity of the assessment, the criticisms and suggestions

IELTS is a common example of high-stake standardized test which impacts on its candidature and test users. The validity of IELTS is widely and almost totally trusted.

Examiners of IELTS Speaking Test receive detailed directives in order to maximize test reliability and validity. The most relevant and important instructions to examiners are as follows: “Standardization plays a crucial role in the successful management of the IELTS Speaking Test.” (Instructions to IELTS Examiners, p 11). “The IELTS Speaking Test involves the use of an examiner frame which is a script that must be followed (original emphasis)... Stick to the rubrics – do not deviate in any way... If asked to repeat rubrics, do not rephrase in any way... Do not make any unsolicited comments or offer comments on performance.” (IELTS Examiner Training Material 2001, p 5). “The wording of the frame is carefully controlled. in Parts 1 and 2 of the Speaking Test to ensure that all candidates receive similar input delivered in the same manner. In Part 3, the frame is less controlled so that the examiner’s language can be accommodated to the level of the candidate being examined. In all parts of the Test, examiners are asked to follow the frame in delivering the script... Examiners should refrain from making unscripted comments or asides.” (Instructions to IELTS Examiners p 5). Detailed performance descriptors have been developed which describe spoken performance at the nine IELTS bands, based on the criteria listed in IELTS Handbook. Scores are reported by bands.

Ongoing researches also ensures that the test is functioning as intended and identifies any relevant issues, however, flaws still exist in the test.

Context of speaking test in academic module needs to be representative of the academic discourse and the included linguistic variation in an academic context. In my opinion, speaking

test in academic module aims to emphasize on test-takers' integrated skills to evaluate their ability for communicating with other interlocutors in academic settings, thus should address general style of English in an academic setting.

In the case of Part 1 questions and Part 2 rounding-off questions which may be answered with yes or no, a follow-up question should always be scripted in the instructions. But this is not always the case at present. If they are not followed up, candidates do not have the opportunity to display their ability to develop a topic. It is further recommended that examiners should always ask scripted why/why not? follow-up questions (provided they cohere with the flow of the conversation) as otherwise the candidates may not develop that particular topic.

Examples of how examiner behaviour can compromise test validity. Although the vast majority of examiners do follow instructions and briefs, some occasionally do not. It is important that they should, since they may otherwise give an advantage or disadvantage to some candidates. Examiner training could include examples of examiners failing to follow instructions with respect to repair, repetition, explaining vocabulary, assisting candidates, follow-up questions and evaluation. These examples would demonstrate how this can compromise test validity.

Introduce a new Part 4 for candidates to develop topic in a two-way discussion
Taking an overview of topic development in the Speaking Test as a whole, a problem is that it is almost entirely one-sided. Candidates have little or no opportunity to display their ability to introduce and manage topic development, ask questions or manage turn-taking. The clear empirical evidence is that Part 3 currently does not generate two-way discussion as was originally envisaged. My recommendation is to add a very short Part 4

after the end of Part 3, which might last for two or three minutes. This part would specifically avoid the examiner asking any questions at all. Rather, the candidate would have the opportunity to lead a discussion and to ask the examiner topic-related questions. Part 4 could start in a number of ways. The examiner could introduce a topic by making an observation which the candidate can then follow up by asking a question. The observation would be related to topics previously discussed, e.g. 'I went to play tennis last week' or 'I went to China last year on holiday'. The candidate would ask questions about this and take on the development of the topic. Alternatively, the candidate could be instructed to ask the examiner questions about topics previously discussed, or could be allowed to introduce a topic of their own choice. Such a Part 4 would give candidates the chance to take a more active role and to develop topic in a different way. It would also allow a part of the Speaking Test to have a closer correspondence with interaction in university small-group settings, in which students are encouraged to ask questions and develop topics.

References

http://ielts.org/researchers/history_of_ielts.aspx

Davies, A. (2008). *Assessing academic English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seedhouse, P, Harris, A, Naeb, R and Stünel, E. (2014). *The relationship between speaking features and band descriptors: A mixed methods study*. IELTS Research Reports Online Series No.2, 2014

Seedhouse, P and Harris, A. (2008). *Topic development in the IELTS Speaking Test*. IELTS Research Reports Volume 12

Zahedi, K and Shamsaee, S. (2012). *Viability of construct validity of the speaking*

modules of international language examinations (IELTS vs. TOEFL iBT): evidence from Iranian test-takers. Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2012