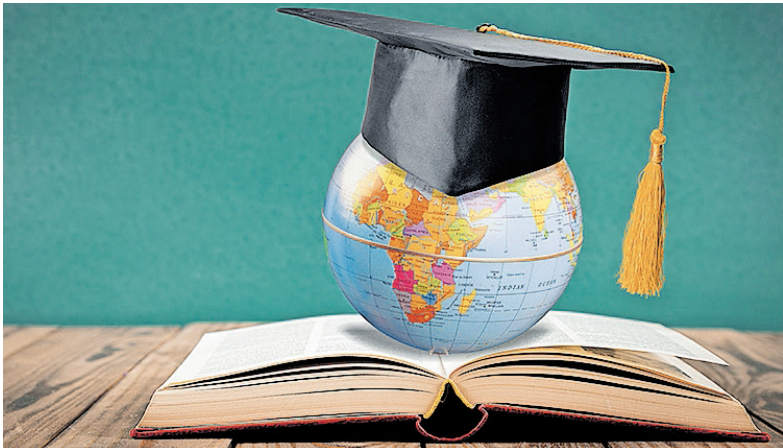


Crossing the 'English' Channel: The Technical Route

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Clearing the English language tests is a nightmare for students who want to pursue higher education abroad. It is also a hurdle for professionals who want to work in English-speaking countries. Here is an overview of the most popular English language proficiency tests for both students and professionals. An effective approach for developing language skills is also given.



For several years past, in the higher education sector in India, there has been a marked shift in student preferences from conventional programmes in the humanities and the social science towards various kinds of technical and professional training which offers distinct prospects of lucrative employment in national and transnational locations. One might take a first degree in one's area of choice and then venture abroad to better one's qualifications and job prospects. This trend has grown steadily and

manifested itself in a remarkable new development in the recent past. More and more school leavers are finding it easier nowadays to obtain work-study visas so that they can complete higher education abroad and stay back to work. The major barrier they have to clear is making the grade in the language of the host country. For Anglophone countries a number of tests have been devised to suit different requirements. The object of tests like IELTS, TOEFL, OET, PTE and GRE is to assess the candidate's ability

in listening and comprehension, spoken and written communication, as well as subject-specific screening for advanced level study and research.

The following is a brief account of a few of these screening tests, of the major indicators of aptitude and attainment, and the criteria of evaluation.

1. IELTS

IELTS (International English Language Testing System), introduced in 1989, is the ideal channel to navigate to English-speaking countries like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US where one can work, study or migrate. The test evaluates the language proficiency and comprehension of information of non-native English speakers. Some universities in non-English-speaking countries also insist on an IELTS score for programmes in English. Aspirants have to prove their mettle in four prime areas, namely, listening, reading, writing and speaking. Managed by the British Council, IDP and Cambridge University, IELTS is approved by more than 11000 employers, schools, universities and immigration bodies, including more than 3400 institutions in the US. IDP (International Development Programme) is an Australia-based organisation which took over IELTS tests in India from the British Council in 2021.

As far as high quality standards, reliability and fairness are concerned, IELTS tests are rated high across the world, irrespective of nationality, cultural contexts, gender or special needs. Test-takers can rest assured that IELTS tests is a foolproof methodology to evaluate their language skills including unique questions, double-marking and Online Results Verification Service. When there is a marked difference between the Writing and / or Speaking scores and the

same candidate's scores in Reading and Listening, there is provision for double-marking. It is to be further noted that stringent security measures are followed to ensure the integrity of IELTS results. Weak candidates can avail themselves of the Progress Check which is an official online-marked Practice test which gives their band score and feedback. Besides there are official practice materials that help candidates learn the test format and the type of questions likely to be asked. All test-takers have the same Listening and Speaking tests but different tests in Reading and Writing.

The score in IELTS mirrors one's understanding and ability to interact in English. Each immigration body or workplace has its own score requirements depending upon what you hope to do in the country. Question papers are set by experts from countries where English is the mother tongue. The test sections deal with workaday situations in life without prejudice to people of any background.

There are two categories of IELTS depending on whether you intend (1) to study, or (2) work or migrate. Those who propose to pursue their studies in English-speaking countries have to take the IELTS Academic test. For work or migration, IELTS General Training test is required. You have to check the entry requirements of the organisation before selecting the test.

IELTS for Study

Around six million students go abroad for higher studies annually. The seekers of higher education often prefer English-speaking countries where immense opportunities await those who specialise in various fields like medicine, engineering and social work.

IELTS for Work

As far as employers, professional bodies and associations around the world are



concerned, IELTS is the main yardstick in the selection of the right people. A score of 6 or above in an IELTS test can boost your prospects as a job seeker.

The Healthcare sector, invariably looks for applicants with outstanding competence in English as evidenced by high scores in the IELTS test. In certain countries, a good score in IELTS is essential for professions like accounting, engineering, law and veterinary science. In sectors like finance, government, construction, energy, aviation and tourism also IELTS score is a major criterion for selection or promotion. The UK Medical Council attaches pre-eminence to doctors from overseas having proficiency in English. Various countries, organisations and professional bodies have varying IELTS band scores and test types in the selection of employees.

IELTS for Migration

The scores required for migration vary from country to country depending on the requirements of your visa and the country you intend to migrate. For immigration you have to write the test at an approved test centre.

Australia: IELTS is the favourite English test for Australian professional organisations and accredited bodies. The Department of Home Affairs insists on IELTS for different visa categories and for permanent residence. The minimum score set for Australian immigration is 6.

Canada: Applicants for work visa, professional recognition or permanent residency in Canada are required to provide proof of their language proficiency. Universities and colleges, as well as professional organisations, have minimum language requirements for registration. There are more than 150 locations, including provincial capitals, where an IELTS test can be taken. Those who seek Canadian immigration have to check with Immigration, Refugees and Citizen-

ship Canada (IRCC).

New Zealand: Your ambition to study, work or migrate to New Zealand banks on the IELTS score. This applies to skilled workers, investors and entrepreneurs, residents from work and parent categories. Educational and professional associations in New Zealand have definitive linguistic requirements for visa as evidenced by IELTS. The minimum score required for immigration is 6.5. The 16 test locations are conveniently sited in educational institutions.



UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) approves IELTS Academic, IELTS General Training and IELTS Life Skills as proof of language proficiency. Mastery of English is imperative for applicants longing for long residence as well as study or work in the country. Scores varying from 4-7 are the requisite for migration. Those who apply for a student visa to join a bachelor or postgraduate programme, are to meet the language level fixed by the institution, evidenced by an IELTS score from one of the 1000 odd test sites worldwide.

IELTS Academic

IELTS Academic is suitable for those who want to study at a university or for professional registration in an English-speaking country. While booking the test you have to check as to which format, on paper or online, the organisation accepts. Those who sit the test at a test centre, may re-

quest to send the results to a maximum of five organisations for free, while online test-takers can request the test centre to send the results to their chosen organisations, irrespective of number, with no additional fee.

IELTS General Training

Applicants who intend to work in or migrate to English-speaking countries require IELTS General Training. The test assesses your skills in English language relevant to your social ambience. It is also essential for those who apply to study in schools or for undergraduate programmes.

IELTS Life Skills is a government-approved language test in the UK that judges one's speaking and listening skills in an everyday environment. Applicants for UK Visas and Immigration have to take this face-to-face test.

Academic Test Format - Listening Test

The Listening test evaluates your ability to follow a conversation, to discuss monologues, to digest factual details and to draw conclusions from the information gathered. It consists of four recorded monologues and conversations, and is the same for Academic and General types. A candidate has to listen to the recordings of native English speakers to be followed by answers to multiple questions. The first one is a dialogue in a social context, and the second, a monologue with a social setting. The third recording is a conversation of about four people in an educational or training background, and the fourth, an academic monologue. The recordings, made audible only once, have a diversity of accents—British, Australian, New Zealand, American and Canadian. Time allowed is 30 minutes and the questions number 40. Candidates write the answers on the question paper even as they listen, and transfer the same to

an answer sheet, for which there is provision for 10 minutes. The Listening test is assessed, without half marks or negative marks, by reliable and certified examiners, to be further checked by Cambridge English. A score conversion table is made available for the different versions of the Listening test, turning scores out of 40 into the IELTS 9-band score.

Reading Test

The Reading test comprises three sections with 40 questions. There are three texts on general topics taken from journals, books, magazines and newspapers. At least one text contains a detailed logical argument.

Different question types are used, including multiple choice, identifying information (True/False/Not Given), identifying the writer's views/claims (Yes/No/Not Given), matching information, matching of headings, features or sentence endings, sentence completion, table completion, diagram-label completion and short-answer questions.

Writing Test

This test contains two tasks. Candidates have to spend about 20 minutes on Task 1, which should be written in at least 150 words, and 40 minutes on Task 2, to be written in at least 250 words. Task 2 contributes twice as much as Task 1 to the Writing score.

In Task 1 candidates should look at a diagram or some data (in a graph, table or chart) and present the information in their own words. Assessment is on their ability to organise, present and compare data. They are required to describe the stages of a process, an object or event, or explain how something works.

In Task 2, candidates are presented with a point of view, an argument or a problem to prove their ability to find a solution to the problem, present and justify an opinion, compare and contrast



evidence and opinions, and to evaluate ideas, evidence or arguments. Ability to write in an appropriate style is also evaluated.

Speaking Test

The Speaking test assesses the candidate's communication skills, taking into account fluency and coherence, lexical resources, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. Duration of this test is between 11 and 14 minutes and it is conducted by a trained examiner. There are three parts:

Part 1: The candidate and the examiner introduce themselves. The candidate then answers general questions about himself, his family, job/studies, interests and a wide range of similar topics. This part lasts between four and five minutes.

Part 2: The candidate is given a task card with prompts and is asked to talk on a particular topic. He has one minute to prepare, including making notes before speaking, for about two minutes. The examiner then asks one or two questions on the same topic.

Part 3: The examiner and the candidate engage in a discussion of abstract issues which are thematically linked to the topic in Part 2. Duration is between four and five minutes.

Speaking Test on Video

Several IELTS test centres conduct the Speaking test via high definition video calls. The test is conducted at an official test centre having the same standard of identity verification. The video test will be the same as the face-to-face test regarding content, question format, scoring, timing and security.

Preparation for the Test

Learn about the test format and the test content including the questions and task types for each section. If you are taking the test online, download the test day

software sufficiently in advance. Online test-takers should confirm that their computer suits the system requirements of the test centre. Remember that Listening, Reading and Writing tests take 2 hours and 40 minutes, without any break between the different sections. Those who have special conditions like learning, hearing or visual difficulties, infant breeding or health-related issues, may give the test centre 6 weeks' notice for special consideration, including a modified test version.

Registering for IELTS Test

What prospective test-takers have to do first is to identify the preferred test location or choose IELTS Online. You can register and pay online, or download an application form and submit it at your test centre. The identity document you submit along with the application and the one you have to produce on the test day should be the same. The test centre will confirm your choice of writing on paper or computer ascertaining the date and time of the test, and the separate date for the Speaking test. Those who prefer IELTS Online will be assigned the date of the Speaking test before the other tests.

The request to transfer, postpone or cancel the test has to be submitted to the test centre by email early enough. The longer the delay in the submission of the request, the higher the percentage of the fee forfeited. Telephonic requests will not be entertained. Transfer from the test on paper to the test on the computer and vice versa would be charged. Those who attempt the test on paper have to provide proof of their inability to attend, if any, at least 5 days in advance before the test, failing which they will not be eligible for refund of the registration fee. Candidates writing the test on computer have to report their inability, if any, at least two days before the test.

Results

Results of IELTS on computer will be available in 3–5 days, and the same on paper, 13 days after the written test. Those who take the online test will receive the Test Report Form electronically within 6 days. The results of tests taken at centres will be sent, on request, up to five organisations, free of charge, whereas online test results will be sent to as many organisations as suggested, in an electronic format without any additional fee.

A candidate has the option to request a re-mark of the scores paying an EoR (Enquiry on Results) fee which will be refunded if there is difference in the band score.

IELTS Scale

Performance in the IELTS test will be graded on an overall 9-band score which has a two-year validity. The scores of all the four tests are averaged and rounded to the nearest half band, producing an overall band score. The bands are given as follows: Band 9 for Expert user, Band 8 for Very Good user, 7 for Good user, 6 for Competent user, 5 for Modest user and Band 4 for Limited user.

2. TOEFL

TOEFL, an acronym of the Test of English as a Foreign Language, evaluates globally one's proficiency in English vis-a-vis reading, listening, speaking and writing. TOEFL is preferred by ninety percent of US universities, while Canadian universities accept both IELTS and TOEFL. A high score in TOEFL is a stepping stone to several English-speaking countries for those who aspire to study in rated universities or work in high-grade institutions. The validity period of TOEFL score is 2 years.

TOEFL Internet Test (TOEFL iBT)

TOEFL iBT test is the most sought-after English language test for higher educa-



tion in the US and Canada. TOEFL scores are accepted by more than 12000 universities in 160 countries, including France, Germany and New Zealand as evidence of the language proficiency of non-native English speakers. The test contains a Reading section of between 54–72 minutes, a Listening section between 51–57 minutes, a Speaking section of 17 minutes and a Writing section of 50 minutes. You have the choice to select the test centre or attempt the test online at home.

TOEFL iBT Reading section contains 3–4 reading passages with 10–12 questions each, and the Listening section consisting of 3–4 lectures with 6 questions each and 2–3 conversations with 5 questions each. There is a break of 10 minutes followed by the Speaking section of 16 minutes containing one open question and 3 integrated tasks, and the Writing section which deals with one open task and one integrated task. Each section is allotted 30 marks, totalling 120 points for the whole test. In all these sections candidates have the choice to take notes. Incorrect answers will not be penalised.

TOEFL Essentials Test

This test is of 1.5 hrs duration, with four sections and an unmarked personal video statement as detailed hereunder: a Listening section comprising 30–40 questions of 21–34 minutes duration, a Reading section consisting of 30–45



questions of 22–33 minutes duration, a Writing section with 14–18 questions and two tasks lasting between 24–30 minutes, and a Speaking section containing three tasks and 19 answers of 30 minutes duration.

3. OET

Occupational English Test, better known as OET, is a fundamental requirement for overseas-trained healthcare professionals intending to register and practise in an English-speaking country. It is particularly developed to reflect workplace tasks for healthcare professions including medical, paramedical, dentistry and pharmacy. Reading and Listening tests



are the same for all aspirants for registration in 12 health-related programmes in the UK, the USA, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, Dubai, Namibia, Ukraine and Singapore.

OET is owned by Cambridge Boxhill Language Assessment Trust (CBLA). Regulators, hospitals and universities in the above countries consider OET as evidence of ability to interact effectively in English in exacting environments. The Listening test of 40 minutes grades the candidate's ability to comprehend various health-related spoken materials like patient consultations, recorded presentations or interviews on various healthcare issues. The Reading test evaluates your capacity to understand various books and periodicals, in 60 minutes. The can-

didate's ability to write a document of referral, a letter of discharge or a response to a complaint is assessed by the Writing test in 45 minutes. And the skill in communication, specific to the medical profession, is graded by the Speaking test of 20 minutes.

The validity period of the OET is two years. Organisations look for candidates who have secured an A grade (450-500 score) or at least a B (350-440) in the maiden chance itself.

How to Develop Language Skills

Effective language skills are of vital importance in all aspects of life whether you are a homemaker or businessman, employee or employer, information seeker or bargain hunter. In order to build up a successful relationship, you have to hone your skills that enable you to say what you mean and understand what others say. "Practice makes perfect" is an adage that suits the launch pad to any human endeavour.

You learn to write by writing, which is the ordering of thoughts in logical sequence and wording them in the most lucid language. "A drop of ink makes millions think", as the celebrated poet Byron rightly puts it. You have to train yourself in writing clean, plain English, avoiding jargons, clichés, slang, rhetorical flourishes and hackneyed expressions. A mixture of styles also is to be avoided. Reading newspapers and magazines as well as relevant material from social networks that interest specific segments like women, entrepreneurs, medical fraternity and sports aficionados, widen your vocabulary and powers of expression. Make a list of interesting ideas, words and expressions either in a scrapbook or on your computer, like 'bonhomie' pronounced 'bonemi' (cheerful friendship) 'ball park figure' (an approximate figure, a guesstimate), 'to get down to

brass tacks' (to discuss important matters), and 'relax into delicious indolence' (take it easy).

Nowadays professional writers favour a fairly simple 'unliterary' style, even for complex subject matter. They get to the point quickly, without beating about the bush. Similarly your sentence should announce its intention early on. But when your motive is to build up to a dramatic climax, to present a surprise story or a joke, you have to delay getting to the point. Pay attention to grammar and learn new grammatical points. A piece of writing has to be divided into paragraphs in a pleasing and stylistic way. Each paragraph break announces that one topic is over and a new one is embarked on. "Just as the sentence contains one idea in all its fullness, so the paragraph should embrace a distinct episode," writes Winston Churchill. A succession of very short sentences will grate on the reader, while overloaded straggly sentences will weigh him down. While writing interactive blogs, choice of the right words is not enough. They are also to be positioned correctly.

To practise Listening Skills candidates should listen to materials such as audiobooks, TV shows, radio broadcasts like those of the BBC and Al Jazeera, an international 24-hour language news channel, or documentaries of the British Pathe', a collection of fully digitalised news film and movies. This will give them confidence and a positive attitude that equip them to take the test in a relaxed mood. Both literal and figurative meanings of what is said or written, are to be noted. A good listener listens actively, paying attention not only to what is said, but also how it is said. He takes heed of what the other person is saying, picking up cues from their tone of voice, and non-verbal gestures including eye contact. In like manner, when an ex-



aminer assigns you a problem, you have to gather adequate information from the introduction itself, before offering solutions or jumping into conclusions. Listening exercises also help you shed anxiety and depressing thoughts that lead to poor memory and lack of attention and clarity.

Reading is the easiest way to improve your language skills, and you can practise it comfortably at home. A lot of materials like books, online newspapers and blog posts are there at your fingertip. Read up editorials and business speeches in newspapers or websites. Learn a new word a day and maintain a word bank. Websites like Merriam Webster are quite helpful in building up a rich vocabulary. Note down phrases and metaphors as well as inspiring mottos of organisations of global renown. eg. 'The best or nothing' – Mercedes Benz.

In order to develop Reading Skills, one has to practise different ways of reading a text such as skimming, scanning, speed reading and intensive reading. Desultory reading is a sheer waste of time for job seekers. One should skim through newspapers and magazines and acquire the ability to locate key information. Extensive reading of books



of literary quality facilitates the development of vocabulary and grammar, as well as identification of key words in passages.

Speaking Skills can be acquired by cultivating a normal conventional tone in everyday situations, and playing it back for improvement. There are specific voice and breathing exercises that help effective speaking. Select common IELTS topics like Education, Family, Environment, Sports, Tourism, the Internet etc. Use different tenses, different phrases and modulation of tones as required. Pronounce words properly without allowing the ends of sentences to trail off. Never ever speak in a monotone; instead, vary the stress and intonation. High-sounding and unfamiliar words and high-falutin style of speaking are to be shunned. How the Victorian Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli once took a dig at the Opposition Leader William Gladstone, is a funny example of high-falutin language: "A sophistical rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity." You also have to keep clear of fillers like 'umm' and 'yeah', filler words like 'you know', and 'basically', and fog-horns like 'uhhhhhhhh' while groping for words. Non-verbal communication like gestures and smiles also helps one to speak convincingly.

In order to improve your Speaking Skills, you should use English interactively with English-speaking friends, and if possible, with native English speakers. Chat with them frequently. Video calls and whatsapp messages are effective measures to develop good speaking and writing skills. Phone apps like Houseparty offer the facility to video call multiple friends simultaneously. Another option is to talk to yourself in the mirror and record it. Listening to the sound of your own voice helps you tackle your

accent and pronunciation, and finetune your body language. It is also a good practice to copy the professional communication style of anchors of news programmes who handle specific segments like sports. Watching movies and documentaries in English, enables you to get used to colloquial and conversational forms of the language, and to start thinking in English.

Of late we have several free language apps that assist us in improving our language skills like Rosetta Stone, Babel, and Fluent Forever.

What has been said above about language skills development mostly applies to learners at large, irrespective of professional needs and requirements. Candidates appearing for tests leading to overseas careers would do well to focus their skills on the particular format set down for each type of test. Plenty of sample material is available in print and electronic media which they may utilise in intensive self-study exercises.

The Last Word

After the Covid-induced suspension of industrial and business activity, economies worldwide are racing to pick up lost momentum, pushing up demand for personnel to fill skilled and unskilled job vacancies. Current geo-economic strategies favour free flow of capital, products and services across national boundaries. The human capital is a particularly valuable resource sought-after by countries with an open door policy. Add to these the demographic factor: decreasing birth rate in developed countries is bound to leave a gap between adolescent and aging populations, a gap that must be bridged in large part by imported labour—migrant workers, technicians and professionals. All this augurs well for job-seekers from less developed countries. ■