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Global English Language Tests Review Series

IELTS's flawed assessment rubrics:

A focus on band 6.5 for speaking and writing

Exposure Draft Number 8

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IELTS Review Series

This document is the eighth exposure draft in a series that conducts a critical review of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and other global language tests. The scope of this project discusses the pedagogical design and the administrative regime of global English language examinations such as the IELTS.

Historical context

The IELTS assessment is the most popular English language exam for higher education and migration purposes (Cambridge English, 2017a, NP). On its home page, the IELTS (2017b, NP) organization states that “IELTS is the high-stakes English test for study, migration or work.” In 2015, around 2.7 million people sat for this high-stakes examination in more than 140 countries (Conestoga, 2017, NP).

IELTS (2017d, NP) reports that citizens of the following 40 countries were the top “country of origin” of its examinees in 2015:

Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, China (People's Republic of), Colombia, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Islamic Republic of, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Republic of, Kuwait, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Philippines, Qatar, Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates, United States of America, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam.

Most of IELTS’s fee paying clients are citizens of ‘developing economies’ or ‘economies in transition’ as defined by the United Nations (United Nations, 2016, p. 160). Business data for ‘country of origin’ is not yet available for 2016.

Business model

The IELTS organization is a collaborative joint venture that administers the IELTS exam.

Table 1 summarizes the service-delivery structure of these three entities.

Table 1:
IELTS consortium partners: business model

| Member | Status | Source |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| British Council | “a public corporation (in accounting terms)” | British Council (2017j, NP) |
| Cambridge Assessment (Brand) | A “non-teaching department of the University of Cambridge” | Cambridge Assessment Group (2017a, NP) |
| IDP Education Limited | A for-profit corporation that is listed on the Australian Stock Exchange. | IDP Education Australia (2017, p. 6) |

Revenue

The total annual revenue and financial surpluses/profits earned by members of the IELTS consortium for delivering IELTS goods and services is not disclosed in their Annual Financial Reports. Members of the IELTS consortium report their IELTS revenues as a component of a consolidated revenue item (British Council, 2017b, p. 60; Cambridge Assessment Group, 2015b, p. 7; IDP Education Australia, 2017, p. 17).

Members of the IELTS's consortium and their authorized agents charge registrants a commercial fee to sit the IELTS exam. IELTS charges a standard fee by test center location.

IELTS does not offer a fee waiver or a reduced fee schedule for those who live in a state of “income poverty” as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2016, p. 160).

Table 2, overleaf, shows the fees schedule in six selected countries as at March, 2017. This data set contains a member nation from each continent, including the Indian subcontinent.

Table 2:**Selected IELTS registration fees by country****As at March 2017**

| Country | (a) Commercial Fee | (b) USD | (c) GDP USD Per capita | (b)/(c) Cost Per capita |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Ghana | GHS980 | \$216 | \$1,388 | 15.6% |
| India | Rupees 11,300 | \$173 | \$1,587 | 10.9% |
| China | RMB 1, 960 | \$284 | \$7,617 | 3.7% |
| Brazil | BRL800 | \$277 | \$11,387 | 2.4% |
| United Kingdom | GBP200 (Immigration) | \$247 | \$46,461 | 0.5% |
| USA | USD\$235 | \$235 | \$54,306 | 0.4% |

Sources:

British Council (2017c; 2017d; 2017i; 2017l; 2017n; IELTS, 2017c).

(b) Bank of Canada (2017); (c) United Nations (2017).

Impartiality

The Global English Language Tests Review (GELTR) aims to provide an objective review of the scholarly design and global administration of the IELTS examination and substitute global English language tests such as Pearson, TOEIC and TOEFL. This series aims to complement the IELTS “Research Report” series published by IELTS.

Independence

In contrast to IELTS’s Research Report series, the GELTR is not subject to editorial amendments imposed by IELTS’s employees or its affiliates. Furthermore, in contrast to IELTS’s Research Report series, none of the costs involved in preparing and disseminating the GELTR are funded by the IELTS organization or its member partners.

Objective

This Exposure Draft provides a pedagogical critique of IELTS’s flawed assessment rubrics. Part of my discussion centers on the differences between what is required to earn a band score of 6.5 and a band score of 7.0 for speaking and writing. Speaking and writing are the only English language skills where the band score awarded by IELTS is subjective, *i.e.*, it is a personal/professional opinion that can vary between examiners.

IELTS band 6.5 and band 7.0 attract more critical discussion on the Internet among IELTS's aggrieved fee-paying clients than any other band score.

IELTS band 7.0 is the band score where skilled migrants to Australia and Canada earn bonus points that hundreds of thousands of IELTS's test takers aim to achieve each year.

Those who do not achieve this band score (or equivalent via another testing company) must pay for another English language test until they receive this band score.

For this reason, it is essential that IELTS prioritizes and publicizes a deep review of how it determines whether a test component is a band 6.5 score or a band 7.0 score.

Table 3

Comparing skilled migration English language requirements

| Country | IELTS 6 and IELTS 6.5 | IELTS 7 |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Canada | 4 points for speaking, reading, writing. Listening scores 4 points for bands 6.0 to 7.0 | 5 points for speaking, reading and writing. Listening scores 4 points for band 6.0 to 7.0 |
| Australia | zero bonus points. Applicants must score at least Band 6.0 for all four language skills. | 10 bonus points if attained for all four language skills. |

Australian Government (2017); Canadian Government (2017).

Primary evidence

Figure 1

IELTS's flawed and subjective assessment rubrics: Writing task 1

IELTS TASK 1 Writing band descriptors (public version)

| Band | Task Achievement | Coherence and Cohesion | Lexical Resource | Grammatical Range and Accuracy |
|------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> fully satisfies all the requirements of the task clearly presents a fully developed response | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention skilfully manages paragraphing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips' |
| 8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> covers all requirements of the task sufficiently presents, highlights and illustrates key features/bullet points clearly and appropriately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> sequences information and ideas logically manages all aspects of cohesion well uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a wide range of vocabulary fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings skilfully uses uncommon lexical items but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation produces rare errors in spelling and/or word formation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a wide range of structures the majority of sentences are error-free makes only very occasional errors or inappropriacies |
| 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> covers the requirements of the task (Academic) presents a clear overview of main trends, differences or stages (General Training) presents a clear purpose, with the tone consistent and appropriate clearly presents and highlights key features/bullet points but could be more fully extended | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> logically organises information and ideas; there is clear progression throughout uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under-/over-use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision uses less common lexical items with some awareness of style and collocation may produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a variety of complex structures produces frequent error-free sentences has good control of grammar and punctuation but may make a few errors |
| 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> addresses the requirements of the task (Academic) presents an overview with information appropriately selected (General Training) presents a purpose that is generally clear; there may be inconsistencies in tone presents and adequately highlights key features/bullet points but details may be irrelevant, inappropriate or inaccurate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical may not always use referencing clearly or appropriately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy makes some errors in spelling and/or word formation, but they do not impede communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a mix of simple and complex sentence forms makes some errors in grammar and punctuation but they rarely reduce communication |

Source: British Council (2017f)

Rubrics are reproduced under the fair use in education copyright exemption provision (Australian Government, 2005).

Figure 2

IELTS's flawed and subjective assessment rubrics: Writing task 2

IELTS TASK 2 Writing band descriptors (public version)

| Band | Task Achievement | Coherence and Cohesion | Lexical Resource | Grammatical Range and Accuracy |
|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ fully addresses all parts of the task ▪ presents a fully developed position in answer to the question with relevant, fully extended and well supported ideas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention ▪ skilfully manages paragraphing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses a wide range of vocabulary with very natural and sophisticated control of lexical features; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses a wide range of structures with full flexibility and accuracy; rare minor errors occur only as 'slips' |
| 8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ sufficiently addresses all parts of the task ▪ presents a well-developed response to the question with relevant, extended and supported ideas | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ sequences information and ideas ▪ logically ▪ manages all aspects of cohesion well ▪ uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses a wide range of vocabulary ▪ fluently and flexibly to convey precise meanings ▪ skilfully uses uncommon lexical items but there may be occasional inaccuracies in word choice and collocation ▪ produces rare errors in spelling and/or word formation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses a wide range of structures ▪ the majority of sentences are error-free ▪ makes only very occasional errors or inappropriacies |
| 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ addresses all parts of the task ▪ presents a clear position throughout the response ▪ presents, extends and supports main ideas, but there may be a tendency to overgeneralise and/or supporting ideas may lack focus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ logically organises information and ideas; there is clear progression throughout ▪ uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under-/over-use ▪ presents a clear central topic within each paragraph | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision ▪ uses less common lexical items with some awareness of style and collocation ▪ may produce occasional errors in word choice, spelling and/or word formation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses a variety of complex structures ▪ produces frequent error-free sentences ▪ has good control of grammar and punctuation but may make a few errors |
| 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ addresses all parts of the task although some parts may be more fully covered than others ▪ presents a relevant position although the conclusions may become unclear or repetitive ▪ presents relevant main ideas but some may be inadequately developed/unclear | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression ▪ uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical ▪ may not always use referencing clearly or appropriately ▪ uses paragraphing, but not always logically | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses an adequate range of vocabulary for the task ▪ attempts to use less common vocabulary but with some inaccuracy ▪ makes some errors in spelling and/or word formation, but they do not impede communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ uses a mix of simple and complex sentence forms ▪ makes some errors in grammar and punctuation but they rarely reduce communication |

Source: British Council (2017g)

Figure 3

IELTS's flawed and subjective assessment rubrics: speaking

IELTS Speaking band descriptors (public version)

| Band | Fluency and Coherence | Lexical Resource | Lexical Resource | Pronunciation |
|------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaks fluently with only rare repetition or self correction; any hesitation is content-related rather than to find words or grammar speaks coherently with fully appropriate cohesive features develops topics fully and appropriately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses vocabulary with full flexibility and precision in all topics uses idiomatic language naturally and accurately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a full range of structures naturally and appropriately produces consistently accurate structures apart from 'slips' characteristic of native speaker speech | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety sustains flexible use of features throughout is effortless to understand |
| 8 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaks fluently with only occasional repetition or self-correction; hesitation is usually content-related and only rarely to search for language develops topics coherently and appropriately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a wide vocabulary resource readily and flexibly to convey precise meaning uses less common and idiomatic vocabulary skilfully, with occasional inaccuracies uses paraphrase effectively as required | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a wide range of structures flexibly produces a majority of error-free sentences with only very occasional inappropriacies or basic/non-systematic errors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a wide range of pronunciation features sustains flexible use of features, with only occasional lapses is easy to understand throughout; L1 accent has minimal effect on intelligibility |
| 7 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> speaks at length without noticeable effort or loss of coherence may demonstrate language-related hesitation at times, or some repetition and/or self-correction uses a range of connectives and discourse markers with some flexibility | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses vocabulary resource flexibly to discuss a variety of topics uses some less common and idiomatic vocabulary and shows some awareness of style and collocation, with some inappropriate choices uses paraphrase effectively | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a range of complex structures with some flexibility frequently produces error-free sentences, though some grammatical mistakes persist | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> shows all the positive features of Band 6 and some, but not all, of the positive features of Band 8 |
| 6 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is willing to speak at length, though may lose coherence at times due to occasional repetition, self-correction or hesitation uses a range of connectives and discourse markers but not always appropriately | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> has a wide enough vocabulary to discuss topics at length and make meaning clear in spite of inappropriacies generally paraphrases successfully | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a mix of simple and complex structures, but with limited flexibility may make frequent mistakes with complex structures, though these rarely cause comprehension problems | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> uses a range of pronunciation features with mixed control shows some effective use of features but this is not sustained can generally be understood throughout, though mispronunciation of individual words or sounds reduces clarity at times |

Source: British Council (2017h)

Overview

I argue that IELTS's speaking and writing assessment rubrics contains two major design flaws. First, the rubrics exclusively favors the use of subjective criteria over the use of criteria that may be measured objectively. Second, the band score descriptors do not always place speakers' and writer's skills into a discrete band score descriptor.

Subjectivity and objectivity

All assessment criteria shown in Figures 1, 2 and 3 are subjective. The score awarded may vary by examiner. IELTS may switch from using an assessment rubric that is exclusively subjective and incorporate multiple objective criteria.

Examples of criteria that can be measured objectively in the writing assessments include:

- Not meeting minimum word limits imposed
- The frequency of correct and erroneous spelling
- The frequency of the correct use of 'large' words (*e.g.* six or more letters)
- Credit for including an introductory/overview paragraph as required.

Examples of objective criteria in the speaking examination include the imposition of a penalty if the examinee:

- Is unable to meet a minimum time limit imposed
- Does not cease speaking within (*e.g.*) three seconds of an examiner indicating that that the maximum time limit for answering the question has been reached.

IELTS may also award a uniform credit score if the minimum speaking time is achieved.

Disjointed assessment rubrics

IELTS do not use a discrete assessment system for any of its grade score rubrics. Table 4 shows an example of how IELTS's assessment rubrics contain classifications which are near-identical across four band score descriptors.

Table 4

IELTS's non-discrete assessment rubrics: Task Achievement

| Band score | IELTS TASK 1 Writing band descriptors (public version) |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | Fully satisfies all the requirements of the task. |
| 8 | Covers all requirements of the task sufficiently. |
| 7 | Covers the requirements of the task. |
| 6 | Addresses the requirements of the task. |

Text in this table is cited *verbatim* from IELTS's assessment rubric.

Source: British Council (2017f)

The inclusion of Table 5 serves to illustrate the frequent repetition of virtually identical assessment criteria throughout IELTS’s subjective marking rubrics.

Band scores 7 and 8 in Table 5 are virtually indistinguishable. The word ‘successfully’ has a stronger connotation of advanced language proficiency than the word ‘effectively’. Yet a speaker who is generally “successful” receives the lowest band score of the three options shown in Table 5.

Table 5

IELTS’s non-discrete assessment rubrics: Lexical resource

| Band score | IELTS Speaking band descriptors (public version) |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 8 | Uses paraphrase effectively as required. |
| 7 | Uses paraphrase effectively. |
| 6 | Generally paraphrases successfully. |

Text in this table is cited *verbatim* from IELTS’s assessment rubric.

Source, British Council 2017 (h)

Table 6 shows how IELTS's subjective assessment rubrics separate evaluative criteria across the band scores that are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Table 6

IELTS's non-discrete assessment rubrics: Task achievement

| Band score | IELTS TASK 2 Writing band descriptors (public version) |
|-------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 6 | Addresses all parts of the task although some parts may be more fully covered than others. |
| 5 | Addresses the task only partially; the format may be inappropriate in places. |

Text in this table is cited *verbatim* from IELTS's assessment rubric.

Source, British Council (2017g)

The band descriptors in Table 6 show how an examinee's performance against certain criteria is not mutually exclusive. In this example, an examinee that partially addresses the task (*i.e.* band 5) may also address parts of the task more fully than others, notwithstanding their incomplete answer.

Discrete assessment rubric

Tables 7, 8 and 9 illustrate how IELTS can construct discrete assessment categories that vastly improve its current set of subjective rubrics, *i.e.* for speaking and writing.

Table 7 is an example of an assessment rubric that uses objective criteria to place an examinee's performance for a language skill in one band score only. This example illustrates the assessment of a candidate's written English language spelling skills.

Table 7

An example of a discrete objective assessment rubric: Writing task 1 and 2

| IELTS band score | Spelling: 200-word short discussion task |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | Spells 0 to two words incorrectly. |
| 8 | Spells 3 to 20 words incorrectly. |
| 7 | Spells approximately three quarters of all words correctly.* |
| 6 | Spells approximately two thirds of all words correctly. |
| 5 | Spells approximately half of all words correctly. |
| 4 | Spells 40 to 94 words correctly. |
| 3 | Spells 30 to 39 words correctly. |
| 2 | Spells 10 to 29 words correctly. |
| 1 | Spells less than 10 words correctly. |
| 0 | Does not attempt the task. |

* A person who spells 30 words incorrectly may be awarded band score 7.5

Table 8
An example of a discrete assessment rubric: writing task 2

| Band score | IELTS writing task 2: Task achievement |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9 | Addresses all parts of the question without flaws. |
| 8 | Contains one flaw: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The absence of supporting ideas • Overgeneralization of discussion • Repetitive discussion • Ideas are listed but not developed via discussion • <i>Etcetera.</i> |
| 7 | Contains two flaws: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The absence of supporting ideas • Overgeneralization of discussion • Repetitive discussion • Ideas are listed but not developed via discussion • <i>Etcetera.</i> |
| 6 | Contains three flaws: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The absence of supporting ideas • Overgeneralization of discussion • Repetitive discussion • Ideas are listed but not developed via discussion • <i>Etcetera.</i> |

Table 9
An example of a discrete assessment rubric: Writing task 1

| Band Score | Task achievement | Coherence and Cohesion | Vocabulary | Grammar |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7 | Exceeds the minimum technical requirements. Offers two data illustration examples that are relevant. | Uses cohesive devices correctly for approximately three quarters of the written text. | Uses an advanced range of vocabulary, and this is adequate for the task. | Only uses complex sentences and does so adequately. |
| 6 | Achieves the minimum technical requirements. Offers one data illustration example that is relevant. | Uses cohesive devices correctly for approximately two thirds of the written text. | Uses a limited range of vocabulary, and this is adequate for the task. | Attempts complex sentences and these tend to be as accurate as simple sentences. |
| 5 | Barely achieves the minimum technical requirements and does not offer relevant data illustration examples. | Uses cohesive devices correctly for approximately half of the written text. | Uses a limited range of vocabulary, and this is minimally adequate for the task. | Attempts complex sentences and these tend to be less accurate than simple sentences. |

Table 10

An example of a discrete assessment rubric: Speaking

| Band Score | Fluency and coherence | Vocabulary | Structure | Pronunciation |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 7 | Produces simple speech fluently and complex communication does not cause fluency problems. | Attempts to use paraphrases and makes errors two or three times. | Produces basic sentence forms with accuracy and makes errors two or three times. | Uses an advanced range of pronunciation features and makes errors two or three times. |
| 6 | Produces simple speech fluently, but more complex communication causes fluency problems on a few occasions. | Attempts to use paraphrases and makes errors for approximately one quarter of the total instances that paraphrases are used. | Produces basic sentence forms with accuracy for approximately three quarters of all sentences. | Uses an advanced range of pronunciation features for approximately three quarters of their spoken structures. |
| 5 | Produces simple speech fluently, but more complex communication causes fluency problems in about half of all instances. | Attempts to use paraphrases and makes errors for approximately half of the total instances that paraphrases are used. | Produces basic sentence forms with accuracy for approximately half of all sentences. | Uses an advanced range of pronunciation features for approximately half of their spoken structures. |

General

This section discusses a raft of other pedagogical design flaws that persist in IELTS's subjective assessment rubrics.

Transparency

IELTS use abstract sentences to discuss assessment criteria in the public version of its assessment rubrics. Exposure Draft One in this series discusses in detail my grave concerns concerning my strong suspicion that IELTS maintains internal assessment rubrics (Jericho, 2017). I suspect that IELTS use abstract text to publicize its assessment criteria because the internal rubrics contain significantly more detail.

Ambiguity

Multiple band descriptors in IELTS's subjective assessment rubrics are difficult to comprehend. For example, consider this descriptor for Writing Task 2, band score 7 for the Lexical Resource component of the rubric:

“uses a sufficient range of vocabulary to allow some flexibility and precision”

How does a writer allow for some flexibility and precision in their vocabulary? This ambiguity concerns me, as it is the band score that many of IELTS's customers require to earn maximum bonus points for a skilled migration visa for Australia and Canada.

In the same vein, I am concerned with the pronunciation criteria published by IELTS for band 7 of its speaking assessment:

“shows all the positive features of Band 6 and some, but
not all, of the positive features of Band 8”

What is the meaning of the word ‘some’ in this context? The use of the word ‘all’ in the same passage is suggestive that there is a close association to near-perfection. However, the word ‘some’ in the literal sense implies multiple, *i.e.*, a minimum of two. Such ambiguities in IELTS's subjective assessments must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Minimum word limit imposed on writing tasks

IELTS's writing task 1 and writing task 2 impose a minimum word count of 150 words and 250 words respectively (British Council, 2017e). Anecdotal evidence suggests that IELTS impose a penalty on those who do not meet the minimum word limit imposed. For example, I cite the advice posted by former IELTS examiners on their IELTS coaching websites that engage with IELTS test-takers on their discussion boards (*e.g.* IELTS Liz, 2017c).

I call for IELTS to publicize the size of the penalty, if any, that it imposes on those who do not meet the minimum word limit imposed. I also call for IELTS to inform its fee-paying clients which rubric category this penalty may relate to, *e.g.*, Task Achievement.

Minimum time limit imposed on speaking sections

The speaking components of the IELTS exam imposes a minimum and maximum time limit for each sub-section of the exam as follows:

Three sections

The Speaking test is made up of three sections:

| Section | Duration | Information |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Part 1 Introduction and interview | 4-5 minutes | The examiner will introduce him or herself and ask you to introduce yourself and confirm your identity. The examiner will ask you general questions on familiar topics, <i>e.g.</i> home, family, work, studies and interests. This section should help you relax and talk naturally. |
| Part 2 Individual long turn | 3-4 minutes | The examiner will give you a task card which asks you to talk about a particular topic, including points to include in your talk. You will be given one minute to prepare and make notes. You will then be asked to talk for 1-2 minutes on the topic. You will not be interrupted during this time, so it is important to keep talking. The examiner will then ask you one or two questions on the same topic. |
| Part 3 Two-way discussion | 4-5 minutes | The examiner will ask you further questions which are connected to the topic of Part 2. These questions are designed to give you an opportunity to discuss more abstract issues and ideas. |

Source: British Council (2017m)

Anecdotal evidence suggests that IELTS's examiners deduct a penalty on those who do not meet the minimum time limit imposed and this negative score is attributed to the 'fluency' category. As evidence, I cite the advice posted by former IELTS examiners on their IELTS coaching websites that engage with IELTS test-takers on their discussion boards (e.g. IELTS Liz, 2015a; 2015b).

I call for IELTS to publicly state what penalty score, if any, it imposes on those who do not meet the minimum time limit imposed. If there are a range of penalties dependent on the size of the violation, this information should be disclosed publicly.

Half marks

It is possible for candidates to receive half mark band scores in each test component. For example, a speaker may be awarded a band score of 6.5 for their vocabulary:

You will receive IELTS scores based on each for the four skills on a scale of 1 – 9, and you will also be awarded an overall band score. You can score whole (e.g., 5.0, 6.0, 7.0) or half (e.g., 5.5, 6.5, 7.5) bands in each part of the test (British Council, 2017e).

IELTS do not offer information that explains why and how an examiner may award half scores. For example, the difference between a band score of 6.5 and 7.0 is not publicized (British Council, 2017e).

Carte blanche to fail candidates without written justification

IELTS's examiners reserve the right to award band score zero for a so-called 'perfect' answer that contains all traits of a band score 9 response, if the examiner merely suspects that an answer has been memorized (British Council 2017f, p. 2; 2017g, p. 2). The examiner is not required to provide any evidence to the test-taker to justify their subjective opinion and extreme action. IELTS reserve the right to cancel any test-takers examination scores without providing written reasons to their fee-paying clients (British Council, 2017a).

IELTS's is a very high-stakes exam. This draconian policy has the potential for abuse by an unconscionable rogue examiner who aims to maximize revenue earned at the local branch office level. It can also be abused by rogue examiners who seek to discriminate against a candidate because of factors such as the test-takers age, race, gender or religion.

Conclusion

Writing assessments is not easy. I argue that the numerous structural design flaws that persist in IELTS's subjective assessment rubrics are relatively easy to eradicate. IELTS should eliminate multiple subjective criteria and switch to objective criteria. It should use rubrics that clearly place an achievement in one band score matrix only. IELTS should publish the internal copy of its assessment rubric. It should not allow its examiners carte blanche to award a score of zero without justification for a high-stakes global exam.

For comment

I welcome members of the public to provide constructive feedback on this exposure draft. You may provide this feedback in confidence or request to have this uploaded on the School's website or GELTR's website.

Initial distribution list

IELTS instructors; IELTS stakeholders (global); Former IELTS test-takers; IELTS registrants; IELTS research academics; Former IELTS staff; IELTS staff; Education Minister, Canada; Education Minister, United Kingdom.

Primary evidence

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