

SURVEY

IELTS Preparation Materials

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Focusing on IELTS Reading and Writing Skills

K. O'Sullivan and J. Lindeck
NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney 2000,
139 pp., £12.50
ISBN 1864085991

A Book for IELTS

S. McCarter, J. Easton, and J. Ash
Intelligene 1999, 216 pp., £30 (inc. two
cassettes)
ISBN 0951958232

**IELTS Preparation and Practice
Reading and Writing—Academic Module**

W. Sahanaya, J. Lindeck, and R. Stewart
Oxford ANZ English, Melbourne 1998,
172 pp., £10.90
ISBN 019554093X

**IELTS Preparation and Practice
Listening and Speaking**

W. Sahanaya and J. Lindeck
Oxford ANZ English, Melbourne 1997, 97 pp.,
£10.90
ISBN 0195540956
Cassettes (2) ISBN 0194534995 £8.40

Insight into IELTS

V. Jakeman and C. McDowell
Cambridge University Press (updated edition)
2001, 192 pp., £14.00
ISBN 0521626609
Cassette ISBN 0521626609 £10.00

IELTS Speaking Preparation and Practice

C. Catt
Catt Publishing, Christchurch 2001, 84 pp.,
£9.95
ISBN 0473081156
Cassette ISBN 047308189X £8.95

Introduction

The publication of preparation books and materials for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) started slowly, but is now gathering pace. The IELTS test was originally designed for a small, specialist candidature of prospective graduate and undergraduate students, in the case of the Academic module, and vocational/occupational training students in the case of the General Training (GT) module. The purpose of the test was to assess candidates' readiness to study in the medium of English but the test producers, the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), seemed reluctant to release materials into the public domain to avoid any distortion of that assessment through intensive test preparation courses. Eventually,

however, UCLES published their own 'Specimen Materials' in order to familiarize candidates with the different task types and to reduce the number of candidates who 'spent time and money taking a test which was far too difficult for them'. (*Specimen Materials Handbook*: p.2 UCLES). It was not until 2000 that UCLES released practice test materials through the Cambridge University Press practice test book, *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS 2*. This policy change was due to the dramatic growth in the popularity of the test, and the increasing demand for more information about test specifications. IELTS' candidature had reached 212,000 by the end of 2001, and it is now expected to continue to grow at a considerable rate. The test also offers very high stakes for most candidates, since it is not only recognized as an accurate assessment of linguistic competence by institutions of Further and Higher Education in countries throughout the English-speaking world, but also by a growing number of other professional bodies. For example, the General Medical Council in the UK, and its equivalent in Australia, have adopted the academic module as a measure of linguistic competence for the practice of medicine in these countries. Similarly, the GT module has been adopted by several immigration authorities, and this has increased the GT percentage of the total IELTS candidature to 28% (*IELTS Annual Review, 2000/2001*). This overall growth is now reflected in the increasing number of IELTS preparation and practice materials published in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand.

In selecting materials to include in this survey review, the choice has been limited to those publications which aim to *train* candidates in the skills needed for successful performance in the test, as opposed to practice test publications (e.g. *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS 1 and 2*, Cambridge University Press), or the skills and grammar workbook publications (e.g. *202 Useful Exercises for IELTS*, Adams and Austen Press), although the demand for such materials gives them an important role in classrooms and learning centres. The choice has also been limited to books that are dedicated to the IELTS exam alone, rather than to reviews of books that are of general benefit to students who are studying English for academic purposes, or indeed, CD-ROMS that cover similar areas. In July 2001, UCLES replaced the speaking test with a more rigorous, structured, interview format, and revised rating scales. Not all of the publications currently available have managed to update their publications to accommodate this change, and so one of them has been included that specifically trains candidates for this new approach, to ensure full coverage of the necessary skills. This also means that publications from the UK, Australia, and New Zealand have all been included in this sample. However, I must extend my apologies to authors and publishers of other materials currently on the market that have not been included in this review.

The IELTS test seeks to assess candidates on aspects of linguistic and strategic competence across all four language skills. The listening and speaking test is the same for both Academic and General Training modules, while the writing and reading tests differ in terms of text types and levels of complexity. A chart showing the different coverage and components of each publication is given in Appendix A.

In evaluating these books, I have inevitably arrived at subjective judgements, but these are based on my experience of IELTS as an item-writer, an examiner, and a teacher of preparation classes at all levels. I have tried to focus on the desired outcomes of IELTS preparation courses for teachers and candidates. As stated above, the candidates take the test for a wide variety of purposes, since they need to achieve different bands in order to fulfil immigration, professional, or educational requirements. Consequently, unlike candidates preparing for other exams, those preparing for IELTS have a wide range of language proficiency, so materials need to be able to meet this challenge.

I have assumed that the best preparation books are those that develop the linguistic competencies that will be required of the learners in their target contexts, as well as helping them to acquire the test-taking strategies that will facilitate a good performance in the test. I have therefore used the following criteria:

- how effective will they be in promoting learning (Language Skills Development criterion)?
- how informative are they with regard to the IELTS test (Test Preparation criterion)?
- how user-friendly are they towards students and teachers (Flexibility of use and Textbook features criteria)?

The grid in Appendix B gives an evaluation of each publication based on these criteria.

Language skills development

This is the most important criterion in terms of the outcomes for the candidate in using a course of materials to prepare for the IELTS test, since the purpose in taking the test is to gain entry to an English-speaking environment for purposes of living, working, and/or studying. The test has been designed to assess the communicative and strategic competencies required in these contexts.

The selected publications certainly vary in their aims with respect to developing candidates' language skills, as opposed to their test-taking strategies, but it is legitimate to assess how well all of those which purport to prepare candidates by developing their skills actually promote such learning.

Test preparation

This criterion looks at how much information the selected publications give candidates about the exam. For example, some publications give detailed information about writing assessment criteria (e.g. *IELTS Preparation and Practice, Reading and Writing—Academic Module*) while others never mention how the tasks are assessed. However, it also looks at how well the practice activities reflect the requirements of the test (e.g. *IELTS Speaking Preparation and Practice* guides candidates step-by-step through the different sections of the new speaking test, while others have not updated this section).

Flexibility of use

This assesses how usable the materials are, and whether they can be effective both for self-access learning and classroom group learning (e.g. *A Book for IELTS* is intended for use by self-study candidates of a high

level of language proficiency, while *IELTS Speaking Preparation and Practice*, which is designed for self-study candidates at a range of levels, has combined the key with teacher's notes to aid the adaptation of materials for classroom use).

Textbook features

This looks at the immediate impact of the book in terms of appearance, the effectiveness of the lay-out, and organization. It also assesses the quality of accompanying components, e.g. cassettes.

Book-specific comments

IELTS Preparation and Practice
Reading and Writing
—Academic Module

IELTS Preparation and Practice for (Academic) Reading and Writing basically presents only test-taking strategies in the reading section. Learning tasks are structured around a classification of the different question types used in the test, and separate strategies are suggested for answering these. However, at times this can be rather confusing, as when the same task-type (matching headings and paragraphs) is used as a practice activity (using different strategies) for both 'overview' and 'specific information' questions (pp.17; 30). Strategies are usually suggested in the form of listed instructions, followed by a practice activity, then a wordy explanation on how to arrive at each of the answers. The effectiveness of some of these strategies is rather dubious, as when candidates are recommended to read the first lines of paragraphs only in order to answer overview questions. They are advised to identify one or two possible answers and then to re-read the passage in order to confirm which one is better, while at the same time looking for answers to other questions (discussion of Question 4, p. 19). The same approach is imposed on later practice activities, even though it seems to be unnecessarily time-consuming, and may induce insecurity in the candidate.

The *writing section*, by contrast, while still being closely related to the requirements of the test, includes many more systematic training activities for developing writing skills. It presents the language sets needed to describe a wide range of diagrams for Task 1 with great clarity, and gives adequate practice in using that language. It promotes good editing skills, and focuses on errors common in candidate scripts. It also encourages self-assessment and active learning in the wide range of activities and tasks used, and reflects good practice in current ELT.

The development of skills relevant for Task 2 are also well-presented, with good discussion activities on areas such as question analysis (p.138) and ideas generation (p.139). The task deals appropriately with features of argumentation, and with the appropriate organization of responses, without falling into the trap of modelling 'framing language' that candidates subsequently memorize and reproduce inappropriately in the actual test. It does not, however, cover a sufficient range of the rhetorical structures which may be required by different question rubrics in the IELTS writing tasks.

The writing section, especially for Task 1, could be used with candidates from Band 5 upwards, but the reading is more pitched at Band 6 upwards. This would be a useful core textbook for academic writing candidates, but only as supplementary practice material for the reading

skills. This and the following publication are part of a series that also includes a GT reading and writing book, but this is not included in the sample of materials under review.

What I liked about this was:

- the test information
- the timing of exercises
- the reading topics and texts
- the skills development in the writing section
- the writing practice activities
- the language support
- the focus on common candidate errors
- the skills review boxes
- the grammar review/test tips, and suggestions for further practice.

What I didn't like about this was:

- the wordy explanations in the reading section
- the decontextualized list of question types
- the recycling of the same reading passage in test and exercises.

IELTS Preparation
and Practice,
Listening and
Speaking

In *IELTS Preparation and Practice, Listening and Speaking* the speaking section is very focused on test-taking, and although it introduces topics that are still relevant for the new speaking test, the activities tend to involve rather unstructured *writing* tasks, instead of systematic oral fluency development. The main language focus is on asking questions, which is no longer tested in the revised IELTS speaking module, and the practice interviews are of the old format.

The listening section is also limited to test-taking strategies, rather than the practice of different listening skills, but the analysis of strategies needed for the test is quite thorough. However, the strategies are frequently presented via wordy 'demonstrations', or text-based explanations of how each question should be approached (e.g. p. 26), which are not easy for candidates to assimilate.

This section can be used by self-study candidates or in the classroom, where the teacher can replace the long texts that explain the answers with more lively interactions. It needs lots of supplementing, and more up to date speaking materials.

What I liked about this was:

- the systematic coverage of the listening test
- the note-taking practice on listening strategies (Ex. 3)
- the test-tip boxes
- the user-friendly cassettes
- the quality of the tests
- the layout.

What I didn't like about this was:

- the exclusive emphasis on test-taking
- the lengthy 'demonstration' sections
- the outdated speaking test information
- the design of the speaking exercises, and the lack of clear instructions.¹

Insight into IELTS

Insight into IELTS offers comprehensive training in the skills needed for all of the test papers in both modules. Here the learning tasks are oriented towards the real-life skills required by the target situation: an academic context for the Academic module, and a social-plus-training context for the GT module, rather than tasks presented as simple exam practice. The starting point of each activity is a rationale for the particular target skills, and reference to the exam tasks is in terms of how these skills are tested.

The activities in each section provide systematic training in the various micro skills, and promote active learning, for example, by requiring the students to *interact* with the texts in the reading section (e.g. by producing summaries, writing headings, writing questions that focus on key issues, etc.) and by activating the students' own awareness of the importance of context, social relationships, etc. in listening skills. The Supplementary Activities have many suggestions for extending this active approach to language resources outside the classroom, and several suggested activities that would involve more integrated skills work, promoting a more synthesizing approach to the practice of the micro skills.

This has the most thorough coverage of the skills, including those needed for the revised speaking test, and there are some good language support exercises, especially in the writing sections, e.g. the tasks on making concessions and dealing with opposing views (pp. 88–9), both of which form a part of task requirements in IELTS writing. Candidates are led through language manipulation tasks, complex sentence building, the writing of sections of a response, analysing good and bad points of a response and eventually to timed whole-practice tests. However, more practice activities for these different skills are needed.

Insight into IELTS would be a good choice as a core coursebook because of its comprehensive coverage, and because it can be used effectively with Band 5 candidates as well as Band 6 and above. Lower levels will require considerable support for the later units in each skill, and supplementary practice materials will also be needed.

What I liked about this publication was:

- the focus on language skills development
- the full coverage of skills
- how user-friendly it is
- the effective learning tasks
- the variation in the activity types
- the clarity of instructions
- the way it requires learners to be active
- the authenticity of the reading texts
- the use of full passages for the activities
- the extension activities
- the test information
- the positive attitude to the test
- the test-tips presented at key points in the text
- the test accuracy in the practice papers
- the design, the layout, and organization

the colour
the positive attitude to the test.

What I didn't like about the book was:

the visual material sometimes seems to be targeted at young adults
the lack of practice material for some of the skills
the lack of recorded models for the interview
the lack of extension activities appropriate for self-study candidates.

A Book for IELTS

A Book for IELTS takes a very different approach to preparing candidates in the lengthy reading section. A large number of these exercises are concerned with training candidates to analyse 'text organization' as an important reading skill. While it is certainly an important skill for candidates to be able to identify textual organization because of its consequences for the interpretation of the message, the activities here tend to focus on this one aspect of reading, and many other important skills and techniques are neglected. Activities tend to be extremely long, and often require candidates to classify sentences and paragraphs according to long lists of functions or strings of functions that can seem opaque and/or arbitrary. The usefulness of these activities and this whole approach seems dubious, as the level of metalanguage used, and the abstract nature of the process seems to distract the reader from the actual information being presented in the texts, rather than helping the learner to identify and access the information more easily. Moreover, the organizational analysis activities are based on very small extracts of texts, rather than on the features or conventions of longer passages, which the candidates will have to deal with. The fact that much of the 'key' consists of dense and complex explanations and discussions suggests to me that many of the exercises in this section are unlikely to promote effective learning.

The listening section consists of test information and four practice tests, while the speaking section is based on the old test format and practises information-eliciting skills that are no longer tested. The candidates are not required to generate any language themselves in the practice activities, but some useful advice about extending responses is given.

The *writing* section is mainly concerned with practice for responding to academic Task 1, with 20 of the 24 sections dealing with different diagram types. Activities focus on manipulating given language or written descriptions, and there is very little generation of language expected from candidates. This is probably due to the self-access emphasis of the book. However, language knowledge is usually assumed, rather than presented, and the dimensions of the tasks, especially for Task 2 writing, seem very daunting.

These materials are apparently designed for use with advanced level candidates who are able to work effectively on their own.

What I liked about this was:

the extensive practice tests

What I didn't like about this was:

the size of the practice exercises

the over-emphasis on text organization in the reading section
the complexity of the tasks and instructions
the density of the key
the inappropriate length of texts in the reading exercises
the over-emphasis on writing Task 1
the outdated coverage of the speaking test
the lack of language generation from the candidates
the poor printing quality
the layout and organization.

Focusing on IELTS

Focusing on IELTS covers reading and writing skills, and combines several approaches. It is very test orientated, but does try to make links to the different strategies that readers use when reading different types of discourse in everyday life (p.5). It defines an efficient and effective reader as one who can skim, scan, and read intensively according to reading purpose, and provides useful practice of these three types of reading using short texts and test questions. Within the section it differentiates between these 'strategies' and reading 'skills', though the difference is never made explicit, and in the final section all are grouped together as reading 'skills', so this use of labels does not seem helpful. The skills which are practised in the exercises are 'Understanding the words', 'Understanding what writers are doing', and 'Matching information'. These present and practise strategies for dealing with vocabulary and for recognizing the different features of both descriptive texts and written arguments. Candidates are taken through a series of examples of functions (cause and effect, comparing and contrasting, etc), which are familiar to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing tutors) and are required to analyse what the writer is doing. Unlike *A Book for IELTS*, however, these activities are suitably concise, deal with one function at a time, and usually require the candidates to engage with the text message in order to complete the task. As a result, the purpose of the exercises is clear, but there are few practice activities other than in the practice tests at the end of the section, and little active participation required from the candidate other than reading advice and answering questions.

The writing section trains candidates in both task analysis and a range of writing skills. It raises awareness of writing purpose and audience, and gives language support in appropriate places. The section covers planning, text organization, and how writers support their viewpoints. It also trains candidates in post-writing skills, such as editing and checking for relevance. The language used in the materials is occasionally misleading, as when the report in academic Task 1 is discussed as 'describing' and 'interpreting' diagrams (p. 85), which may encourage attempts to give reasons for the data, and this may be penalized as irrelevant to the task requirements.

The GT Task 1 section, which deals with letter-writing, is particularly useful for candidates and has good activities focusing on different letter types and different ways of expanding information.

These materials would be useful for both self-access and classroom teaching and seem to be pitched at Band 6 level candidates.

What I liked about this was:

the link to real life skills for reading and writing
the range of activities for writing
the language support
the learner training elements.

What I didn't like about this was:

the rather fussy icons for signalling sections
the use of very short passages/paragraphs in the reading practice activities
no focus on analysing the questions for scanning purposes
indiscriminate application of the '3-step reading strategy' e.g. for diagrams too
wordy explanations and introductions.

IELTS Speaking
Preparation and
Practice

IELTS Speaking Preparation and Practice systematically trains candidates to develop their range of spoken functions for the revised speaking test. It covers communication strategies, such as playing for time and seeking clarification, as well as strategies for conveying information, maintaining the flow, and developing fluency.

There is clear information about the test requirements and a wide range of practice activities for each of the sections, but the approach is overtly functional, and at times the metalanguage is much more complex than the simple exponents the candidate is practising (Ex. 10 and 15 pp. 14 and 16).

Training for the long turn in Part 2 of the test is very thorough and the topics are well selected. Some of the exercises for Part 3 seem more relevant for training examiners, however, as the candidates are required to manipulate the functional prompts that they would never see or hear in the test. Good examiner practice requires the interviewer to formulate questions from these, so responding to relevant questions would be more appropriate for candidates following a preparation course.

Although designed to be used in self-access mode, this book can easily be adapted for class teaching by using the teacher's notes that form part of the key. The accompanying cassette is used for listening activities, for modelling responses and turns, and for giving individuals practice in responding to recorded questions in simulated interviews. The range of uses of the cassette add variety and interest to the units, especially for the individual learner. Unfortunately the responses of interviewees on the recording seem closely scripted and lack a full range of the features of normal discourse, such as the use of fillers, rephrasing, false starts, etc., which tend to reassure candidates that their own performance doesn't have to be perfect.

The materials are appropriate for both self-access and classroom teaching, and although intended primarily for Band 6 candidates, lower levels would certainly cope with many of the units with a degree of support.

What I liked about it was:

the range of functions it covers
 the pronunciation models for new language
 the interviewer-only recordings for response practice
 the systematic training activities
 the teacher's notes
 the language extension
 the appropriate topics
 the revision unit.

What I didn't like about it was:

the 'mock' native-speaker accents on tape
 the frequent referring back to previous exercises
 the layout
 the over-frequent use of function labels.

Conclusion

As the demand for IELTS preparation materials has increased so dramatically in recent years, it is true that all of these materials reviewed here will have a place in classrooms or learning centres where potential candidates are studying. But from this review it seems clear to me that there is a need for more materials that go beyond test-taking practice and actually aim at developing the language competencies that the candidates need for their work or study destinations. The most immediate need is for updated editions that include preparation for the revised speaking test.

It is also clear to me that the strong motivation and serious purpose of IELTS candidates is taken for granted. Few of the published materials seem to be visually attractive to potential candidates—only one of the publications considered here is published in colour and benefits from the professional layout and organization that is a characteristic feature of good quality EFL materials. I feel publishers need to respond more to the growing market for IELTS preparation and to start investing in colourful, attractive, motivating publications that can help promote learning for IELTS candidates in the way they have for students preparing for other examinations.

Note

1 At the time that *IELTS Preparation and Practice, Listening and Speaking* (Oxford ANZ English) was reviewed, the second edition, which incorporates changes to the exam, had not been released. The second edition ISBNs and prices are as follows:

IELTS Preparation and Practice: Listening and Speaking 2nd. edn.

ISBN 019551629x £10.90

IELTS Preparation and Practice: Listening and Speaking Cassettes (2)

ISBN 0194574741 (2) £8.40

The reviewer

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Appendix A

Coverage and components

	IELTS Preparation and Practice for Academic Reading and Writing	IELTS Preparation and Practice for Listening and Speaking	Insight into IELTS	A Book for IELTS	Focusing on IELTS	IELTS Speaking Preparation and Practice
Level (support needed)	(5) 6+	(5) 6+	5, 6+	(6) 7+	6+	(5) 6+
Listening skill	–	✓	✓	✓	–	–
Speaking	–	(✓) old test	✓	(✓) old test	–	✓
Reading (Acad.) (GT)	✓ –	– –	✓ ✓	✓ –	✓ ✓	– –
Writing (Acad.) (GT)	✓ –	– –	✓ ✓	✓ –	✓ ✓	– –
Self-access mode	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Class mode	✓	✓	✓	–	✓	✓
Teacher's notes	–	–	✓	–	✓	–
Key	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Practice tests	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cassette	–	✓	✓	✓	–	✓

Appendix B

Evaluation: * = poor ** = adequate *** = good **** = very good

Assessment Criteria	IELTS Preparation and Practice for Academic Reading and Writing	IELTS Preparation and Practice for Listening and Speaking	Insight into IELTS	A Book for IELTS	Focusing on IELTS	IELTS Speaking Preparation and Practice
Language skills	–	**	****	*	–	–
Development	**	–	****	*	***	–
Listening	****	–	***	**	***	–
Reading	–	*	***	*	–	***
Writing						
Speaking						
Test preparation	***	*** (L) *(Sp)	***	** *(Sp)	***	***
Flexibility of use	***	**	***	*	***	***
Textbook features	***	**	****	*	**	**

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