Preparing for the IELTS test with Holmesglen Institute of TAFE

The speaking component

The IELTS speaking test takes between 11 and 14 minutes and is in the form of an oral interview between the candidate and an examiner. During the interview you will need to answer questions asked by the interviewer, speak at length on a topic selected by the interviewer and give and justify your opinions on a range of issues related to that topic.

The interview has three main parts:

- some general questions about yourself, your life and your interests
- a short talk on a particular topic
- a discussion of issues linked to the talk in part 2

It is important that you relax and speak as confidently as you can. Candidates who are not able to participate fully in the conversation may not achieve their potential band score. This may be because they haven’t been able to demonstrate the level of language they are capable of producing.

How the Speaking component is assessed

The aim of the test is to assess your ability to communicate effectively. The interviewer considers this ability in four different ways:

- **Fluency and Coherence**
  This measures your ability to speak without too many pauses and hesitations. It is also to do with how easily and clearly your ideas can be understood.

- **Lexical Resource**
  This refers to your use of words and the range and accuracy of the vocabulary you choose to use. Not only how you select words but also how well you use them will be considered.

- **Grammatical Range and Accuracy**
  The variety of grammar you use and how correctly you use it are both judged by the interviewer. So, the range of tenses as well as the appropriate use of them is important in all parts of the Speaking test.

- **Pronunciation**
  Here it is not only individual words but the whole sentences which are considered. The interviewer will be considering how easily they can understand what you are saying.
The interview: Part 1

Task description

Part 1 of the interview starts with an introduction in which the interviewer asks you basic questions about yourself and asks to see your identification. The interviewer will then go on to ask you further questions about yourself, your family/hometown, your job or studies and a range of similar topics areas that are familiar to you.

This section of the test lasts 4-5 minutes and in it you may need to give longer answers to questions to ensure you display your best ability.

What is being tested is your ability to:

♦ provide full answers to all questions
♦ give longer responses to some questions
♦ give information by describing and explaining

Sample questions

The interviewer will ask for general information about topics such as the following:

♦ Your country of origin
♦ Your hometown
♦ How long you have lived there
♦ What you do: work or study
♦ Your interests and future plans

It is not possible to predict what topics may be discussed at this point in the interview; however, some familiar topics related to you or your country could include:

♦ Family and family relationships
♦ Modern and traditional lifestyles
♦ Traditional or modern buildings
♦ Tourism and tourist sites
♦ Celebrations and cultural activities
♦ Schooling and the education system
♦ City and country living

The introductory section of the test will go something like this:

♦ The interviewer greets the candidate and introduces himself or herself.
♦ The interviewer asks the candidate to state his or her name clearly for the cassette and confirms the candidate’s country of origin.
♦ The interviewer then asks to see the candidate’s identification.
The remainder of Part 1 of the test will follow this format:

- The interviewer will ask the candidate set questions about your hometown or your occupation.
- The interviewer will then ask set questions about a familiar topic of general interest.
- They could ask three to five questions which will extend or develop this topic.
- The interviewer may ask the candidate about more than one topic.

Typical questions for this stage of the test might be:

- What’s your name?
- What country do you come from?
- Describe your hometown to me.
- Where do you live?
- Tell me about your family members
- What are you studying?
- What do you dislike most about your studies?
- Do you like eating in restaurants? Why?
- What type of transport do you use most? Why?
- Where would you like to go on holiday? Why?
- Tell me who you would most like to go on vacation with.

Strategies for approaching the task

Carefully consider what you know about each of the topics above. Try to think of all the questions that someone who was trying to get to know you might ask, and make sure that you have all the vocabulary you need to discuss the topics in depth. Check and practise the pronunciation of any new vocabulary. Practice extending your answers to questions.

You will perform better in the IELTS interview if your speech is fluent. You are likely to be more fluent if you have already thought about the topic and have some ideas to express. Before the test, prepare the language you will need in order to discuss topics like these. This doesn’t mean memorising or rehearsing a speech because you can never be sure
You should also be prepared to use the past, present and present perfect tenses to describe your current situation. For example, ‘I have been studying English for two years since I moved to the city’.

The interview: Part 2

Task description
Part 2 is the long turn. The examiner will give you a card with prompts relating to a particular topic. These prompts are to help you prepare a short talk of 1 to 2 minutes. You will be given a minute to organise your thoughts and you can make some notes.

The examiner will ask one or two follow up questions to finish this part of the test. Part 2 will take three to four minutes, including the one-minute preparation for your talk.

What is being tested is your ability to:

- talk at length on a topic
- develop your ideas into a talk
- use grammar correctly and speak clearly

Sample topic
The examiner tells you your topic and gives you a card like this:

Long turn card

Describe a person from your youth who had a great influence on you:

You should say:

- where you met them
- what relationship this person was to you
- what was special about them

and explain how they influenced you so much.
Strategies for approaching the task

Before the test, you need to practise talking about topics for one or two minutes, making notes appropriate to the topic beforehand, to help you.

Record yourself and then play back the recording listening to how clearly you are pronouncing and how well you select vocabulary.

You also need to practise making your notes in point-form, with abbreviations and symbols. There are many ways to do this.

1. For example: If you are preparing the talk shown in the example above: ‘Describe a person from your youth who had a great influence on you’ and you are thinking about your grandmother who was a musician and who looked after you when you were a child, taught you to play the piano, talked to you often about music and musicians and encouraged you to express your feelings through many forms of music, then your notes may look like this:

- g/mother
- musician
- taught me piano
- intro. me -> many music forms
- encouraged feelings thru music
- major influence
2. When you are giving your talk, take each point you have written and expand it into full sentences, but also add more new information. For example:

- **g/mother (or grandmother)**

  could become:

  “The person who had most influence on me was actually my father’s mother, my grandmother; she grew up in the country and moved to the city in 1965 to get a better education.”

  and

- **intro. me -> many forms of music**

  could become:

  “She opened up my life to music in its many different forms. We would make music by clapping our hands, using bottles, jars, pots and pans, anything we could use, as well as the piano. My life was full of music.”

It is very important that you use examples from your own life. These you can speak about more easily than stories you have made up or read somewhere else.

Try to relax and enjoy the experience of telling the interviewer as much interesting information about yourself as you can.
The interview: Part 3

Task description
After asking one or two follow-up questions the interviewer will lead you into an extended conversation discussing issues related to the Part 2 topic you spoke on. The interviewer will enlarge on things which were discussed in the second part of the test, possibly starting by asking you to describe something, then asking you to attempt something a little more difficult like comparing, evaluating or speculating; the questions will become a little more difficult as Part 3 proceeds. Finally, the interviewer will conclude the Speaking test by simply saying something like: “Thank you, that is the end of the Speaking test.”

What is being tested is your ability to:

♦ give in-depth answers to questions about the topic
♦ use the language of description, comparison and speculation
♦ explain and justify your opinions, assumptions, predictions, reasons etc

Sample questions
It is not possible to predict what questions will come up at this point in the test except that you can be sure that the topic will be related to your long turn topic. Some questions will arise naturally from the discussion and the information you are giving as this section progresses.

For example, consider the following sample topic:

Describe a piece of music that has had a big effect on you.

Possible related topics may be:

- Music in society
- Cultural aspects of music
- Commercialisation of music

Thus, the interviewer may start the discussion on the first related topic (Music in society) by asking you to describe how music is important to everyday life in your country. After you have talked about this, the interviewer may ask you to compare the importance of music now with how it was when your grandparents were young; and then may even go on to ask what you think will be the effects of music on future societies.
Strategies for approaching the task

Exposure yourself to everyday topics as often discussed in newspapers or on radio and TV programs. Make it your habit to read newspaper and magazine articles, particularly those that discuss issues and contain arguments and opinions. Also, listen to radio discussions like talk-back and watch interviews on current affairs programs on the television.

Not only does this give you some excellent listening practice, but it will build your background knowledge for the issues that may come up in both the Speaking and the Writing tests.

Choose an issue. Record all the vocabulary you will need to discuss that issue – note words raised in the news article or program (TV, radio, newspapers). Try to do one of these every day. When you consider an issue, decide what would be your position on the issue, especially the steps you will need to take to reach your desired position and how you would overcome any possible problems in discussing it.

Be prepared to use descriptive and comparative language, for example, in respect to the Music in society example given earlier:

“In my country, traditional music plays a more important role in society than it seems to here, in Australia. It is played at important events like festivals and official ceremonies, as well as at special occasions such as weddings and funerals.”

Practice using conditional sentences to discuss, for instance, hypothetical issues from a broad or world view; for example:

“If the world economy becomes more global, all nations will lose their cultural independence.”

or

“If the leaders of the world were to spend more money on the poor, many of the problems of global conflict would be resolved.”
Be ready to use a good range of tenses and a variety of grammar, for instance, to speculate on what may be possible in the future. For example:

**Interviewer:** What future role do you see for music in society?

**Candidate:** Well, I’d (or I’ve) always hoped that all the peoples of the world could benefit by sharing their common experience of music. In the past, there have been many examples of musicians joining forces to raise awareness of global issues that result from famine or human rights abuses.

or

**Candidate:** If different cultures could see the common features of music in other countries, they may be less fearful of each other and understand one another’s cultures better.

Be prepared to speculate about the future:

I hope that …
It’s possible that…
I can see that …
If possible, I’d like to see …
We should plan to …
It might be that …
We can assume that …
Probably, …
I expect that …
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The speaking component

The IELTS speaking test takes around 15 minutes and is in the form of an interview. The interview will most probably seem like a friendly conversation which typically covers some aspects of your past, present and future situations. The interviewer will direct the conversation through questions which mostly focus on you and your opinions.

The interview has four main sections:

♦ some general questions about yourself
♦ a discussion of topics of general interest
♦ a role play
♦ a discussion of your future plans
and a conclusion

It is important that you relax and speak as confidently as you can. Candidates who are difficult to draw into the conversation may not achieve their potential band score simply because they haven't been able to demonstrate the level of language they are capable of producing.
The interview: section one

Task description

Section One of the interview is an introduction in which the interviewer will ask you some general questions about yourself. The questions are often, but not always, based on the CV that you filled out before the test. This section of the interview aims to be like a friendly conversation in which the interviewer asks questions that are not too difficult, to try to get to know you and relax you.

Sample questions

Prior to the test, you will be asked to fill in a CV (Curriculum Vitae) which will ask for general information about topics such as the following:

♦ Your country of origin
♦ Where you learnt English
♦ How long you have been learning English
♦ Level of education achieved
♦ Interests and future plans

The first section of the test will go something like this:

♦ The interviewer greets the candidate and introduces himself or herself.
♦ The interviewer asks the candidate to state his or her name clearly for the cassette.
♦ The interviewer asks to see the candidate’s passport and CV form.

Typical questions for this stage of the test might be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It says on your CV that you are interested in … Could you tell me why you like it?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often do you …?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With whom? Where?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why are you taking the IELTS test?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is this your hometown?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If not:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about the place you come from.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you rather live here or there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me how the public transport system in your hometown compares with here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>If yes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you like about living here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any bad points about this place?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategies for approaching the task

Firstly, you should be very careful what you write on your CV as this could be the basis for the discussion in this part of the test and may influence the interviewer’s choice of topics for the second part of the test as well. Remember that one of the aims of this section is to get you talking freely so that the interviewer can assess your level of English. The interviewer wants you to talk about something you are interested in so that you will perform your best. It is for this reason that you are asked to write down some information about yourself that the interviewer can use as a basis for the questions.

One question on the CV asks you to write down your interests. Make sure that you are prepared to talk about the interests you write down here. For example, if one of your interests is scuba diving, make sure that you learn the vocabulary you need to discuss this topic in English before the test. And check the pronunciation with a native speaker of English if possible.

One candidate wrote down that she was interested in the environment, though in fact, she knew nothing about environmental issues. The interviewer, thinking that this would be a good topic to get the candidate talking freely, began to ask question after questions about the candidate’s views on various issues related to the environment. The candidate didn’t have the language to cope with the questions and also didn’t have any ideas to express about the issues. So instead of the candidate feeling relaxed from the beginning of the interview talking about a familiar topic, she felt very uncomfortable and may not have performed as well as she could as a result.

So choose carefully what you write down on the CV and prepare the language you will need to discuss these topics before the test. This does not mean that you should memorise a speech as the interviewer will immediately change the topic if s/he thinks that what you are saying is rehearsed. It would be more useful to find people with whom you can practise speaking about the topics.

You should also be prepared to use the past, present and present perfect tenses to describe your current situation. For example, ‘I have been studying English for two years since I moved to the city’.
The interview: section two

Task description
In this section the interviewer will move onto one or more topics of general interest. You may need to speak longer (take longer turns) than in the first section and you may need to describe or explain.

Sample questions
It is not possible to predict what topics may be discussed at this point in the interview; however, some standard topics are:
♦ Traditional or modern buildings in your country
♦ Tourism and tourist sites
♦ Celebrations and cultural activities
♦ Family and family relationships
♦ Schooling and the education system in your country
♦ City and country living
♦ Modern and traditional lifestyles

If the interview does not take place in your country of origin, you may be asked to compare your country’s architecture, level of tourism, culture etc with those of the country you are living in.

What is being tested is your ability to:
♦ take longer turns in a conversation
♦ give information involving description and explanation

Strategies for approaching the task
Carefully consider what you know about each of the topics above. Try to think of all the questions that someone who was trying to get to know you might ask, and make sure that you have all the vocabulary you need to discuss the topics in depth. Check and practise the pronunciation of any new vocabulary. Where there are contentious issues, try to develop an opinion.

You will perform better in the IELTS interview if your speech is fluent. And you’re likely to be more fluent if you have already thought about the topic and have some ideas to express. This doesn’t mean memorising or rehearsing a speech because you can never be sure exactly what the questions will be, and also the examiner will immediately ask a different question if s/he suspects that your answer is memorised.
The interview: section three

Task description
Section three is like a role play. The examiner will explain a situation to you and then instruct you to ask questions to find out more information. The examiner will give you a card with around six question prompts to help you make the questions. You should use the question prompts to ask all the questions on the card. Be ready to ask additional questions if the examiner invites you to, or if the examiner looks expectantly at you after you have asked all the prompted ones.

What is being tested is your ability to:
♦ use a question form correctly
♦ use a variety of question words
♦ ask questions politely

Sample questions
The examiner says:

‘I have just enrolled in a new course. You want to find out about the course. Look at this card carefully and when you’re ready begin to ask your questions.’

Interview card

The interviewer has just enrolled in a course. Ask the interviewer some questions to find out about the course.

Title of course?
How long?
Location?
Purpose?
Cost?
Strategies for approaching the task

Before the test, you need to practise making correct questions using a variety of question words appropriate to the situation.

You also need to practise making your questions polite. There are two main ways to do this.

1. Use an introductory sentence politely, asking the interviewer to give you the information. For example:

   Marianne, I’d like to ask you some questions about your course, if that’s all right.
   (Interviewer responds by nodding agreement or saying ‘Certainly. What’s the name of the course?)

2. Use embedded questions. For example:

   Could you tell me the name of the course, please?

   Notice that with embedded questions we use the statement word order, not:

   Could you tell me what is the name of the course?
The interview: section four

Task description
Using your CV as a starting point, the interviewer will ask you about your future plans. The interviewer will aim to involve you in a discussion exploring possible problems, your concerns, your expectations, your hopes and possible steps to achieving your goals.

Sample questions
It is not possible to predict what questions will come up at this point in the test except that you know that the topic will be your future. The questions will be drawn from your CV, or from what the examiner has learned about you in the earlier sections of the interview, and most will arise naturally from the discussion and the information you are giving as this section progresses.

What is being tested is your ability to:
◆ give in-depth answers to questions about your future
◆ use the language of speculation
◆ explain and defend your actions, plans, assumptions, predictions, reasons etc
Strategies for approaching the task

Carefully consider your future plans before the test. If you haven’t definitely decided what career path you will follow, then choose one plan to talk about in the interview. For example, if you haven’t decided whether you want to be an astronaut or a business man, choose one – whichever you think is the easier to talk about – and don’t bother to mention the other at the interview.

Prepare all the vocabulary you will need to discuss that career path, especially the steps you will need to take to reach your desired position and how you would overcome any possible problems.

Be prepared to use conditional sentences to discuss, for example, what you will do if you achieve your goal or you cannot achieve your goal; for example:

If I can’t go to an Australian university to study, I will have to work in my parents’ business

Be prepared to use perfect tenses to explain how you got to the situation you are in now. For example:

Interviewer: How did you decide to become an engineer?

Candidate: Well, I’d (or I’ve) always been very good at maths, so after finishing high school I …

Be prepared to speculate about the future:

I hope to …
I’m hoping to …
I’d like to …
If possible I’d like to …
I plan to …
I’ve always dreamed of …
I assume that …
I’m assuming that …
I expect that …