

IELTS Research Reports Online Series

Investigating test preparation practices:
Reducing risks



Phil Chappell, Lynda Yates and Phil Benson

Investigating test preparation practices: Reducing risks

This paper examines the test preparation experiences among IELTS test-takers: what they know about the test, and the strategies and activities they undertake to improve their skills. The study involved two stages: 1) a questionnaire administered to over 750 candidates from 80 different countries; and 2) in-depth interviews with 27 respondents. The report discusses implications for stakeholders to consider in counteracting potential negative attitudes, and better supporting test-takers as they prepare for the IELTS test.

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Introduction

This study by Chappell, Yates and Benson was conducted with support from the IELTS partners (British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia and Cambridge English Language Assessment), as part of the IELTS joint-funded research program. Research funded by the British Council and IDP: IELTS Australia under this program complement those conducted or commissioned by Cambridge English Language Assessment, and together inform the ongoing validation and improvement of IELTS.

A significant body of research has been produced since the joint-funded research program started in 1995, with over 120 empirical studies receiving grant funding. After undergoing a process of peer review and revision, many of the studies have been published in academic journals, in several IELTS-focused volumes in the *Studies in Language Testing* series (<http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/silt>), and in *IELTS Research Reports*. Since 2012, in order to facilitate timely access, individual research reports have been made available on the IELTS website immediately after completing the peer review and revision process.

This new mixed methods study of IELTS candidates from across Australia contributes to our knowledge of the largest group of IELTS stakeholders – the test-takers themselves.

Chappell, Yates and Benson investigate test-taker attitudes to, and familiarity with, the exam. Importantly, the report provides rich qualitative data on the types of test preparation activities test-takers engage in, both intentionally inside the classroom, and incidentally in the real world (and it would be fascinating to have more detailed description of the latter in a future study).

The majority of IELTS participants in this study are highly educated, have taken the test at least twice, and generally consider it to be fit for purpose. However, negative attitudes found were: a lack of understanding about the types of language functions assessed; incomprehension of score fluctuation over multiple attempts; and frustration that the required band scores be obtained in a single sitting.

The multitude of test preparation practices shown in this study reflects a range of both learning styles and contextual factors. What is clear though, and is indicated also by prior studies, is that it is essential to provide transparent detailed information to test-takers and test users on the test format, the test construct and success criteria with reference to the Band Descriptors. This would enable test-takers to assess their readiness for the exam and to personalise a realistic preparation schedule to increase their chances of success.

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Investigating test preparation practices: Reducing risks

Abstract

Standardised language tests can have a crucial and long-lasting impact on the study, work and life trajectories of globally mobile people.

Test companies, therefore, have a responsibility to ensure that potential candidates have access to the right kind of information about their test so that they can prepare adequately and provide a snapshot of their proficiency that is reliable and has face-validity. Failure to do this can spawn negative attitudes and demotivate test-takers. However, there has been insufficient documented evidence to-date of the range of test preparation experiences among IELTS test-takers: what they know about the test, how they prepare to use test-taking strategies or the activities they undertake in their daily lives to improve their English in preparation for the test. This report addresses these questions.

The study involved two stages. First, a questionnaire with a series of questions about test-taker experiences with IELTS Test preparation was administered to over 750 candidates from more than 80 different countries of origin. Twenty-seven of those respondents were then interviewed in-depth to further explore their responses.

The report includes a discussion of a range of factors that impact on preparation for, and perceptions of, the Test, and concludes with some implications for all stakeholders to consider in the interest of counteracting potential negative attitudes, and better supporting test-takers as they prepare for the test.

Authors' biodata

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Phil Chappell is an active researcher in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, focusing on many aspects of English language teaching and learning. His most recent research has included investigating international language students' out-of-class language learning in Australia. He has ongoing interests in the quality of English language classroom talk and language teacher cognition. His past IELTS project investigated the nature of IELTS Test preparation courses in Australia. He has publications in international TESOL and Applied Linguistics journals, and a book and book chapters through major publishers. Phil is the immediate past Executive Editor of the *English Australia Journal*.

Lynda Yates

Lynda Yates' research interests include adult TESOL, spoken discourse and workplace communication, particularly as they relate to transnational professionals. She has a strong commitment to impact and the translation of research findings into practice. Past projects have included a series of Commonwealth-funded investigations into migrant English language learning in the community, as well as projects on the communication skills of international medical graduates, international student language learning and an IELTS-funded project on the assessment of pronunciation.

Phil Benson

Phil Benson's main research expertise is in English language learning and teaching, and especially in learner autonomy and informal out-of-class learning. His current research agenda focuses on the language learning environments and experiences of international students in Australia. He has produced more than 100 publications on autonomy, out-of-class language learning and study abroad. His methodological expertise is in the areas of qualitative research, narrative inquiry and interviewing, on which he has published a number of books and papers.



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1 Introduction

Standardised English language tests are a rite of passage for many internationally mobile global citizens wishing to make Australia their temporary or permanent home. These tests are used for a multitude of purposes: to support applications for entry to vocational and higher education courses; to apply for professional registration or accreditation; and to support applications for a variety of visa categories to remain in Australia. It is not uncommon for people to take these tests on several occasions for different purposes as they negotiate their pathway from student to professional to permanent resident.

IELTS is one of the preferred tests for government agencies, secondary, tertiary and vocational education providers, professional registration and accreditation agencies, and other stakeholders who require test scores in order to make gatekeeping decisions. Test centres are located in most large cities, and the IELTS Test can be taken regularly and re-taken frequently until the desired band scores are attained. It would be fair to say that IELTS has a significant impact on many internationally mobile global citizens' lives in Australia for a period of weeks, months and, as we found in this study, even years.

1.1 The test preparation imperative

Test companies, such as IELTS, have an obligation to provide information on test preparation. With regards to test fairness, the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing states that 'test-takers have the right to adequate information to help them properly prepare for a test' (AERA, APA & NCME, 2014, p. 133). This is also reflected in Kunnan's (2000) taxonomy of access issues, as related to test fairness, with a specific focus on familiarity with the test format (short answer, written letter, etc.) and medium (paper-based versus computer-based). If test-takers do not have information about the format of the test, the type of questions they will be asked, the criteria for assigning band scores, and strategies to successfully complete the language test tasks, they are at risk of not performing to their true potential. This underscores the importance of documenting the experiences test-takers have of preparing their language proficiency, knowledge and awareness of best language test-taking practices to better understand the impact the test has on their lives.

A test-taker population with a diversity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds – IELTS lists 40 language backgrounds (IELTS, 2017) – brings to the Test Day a wide range of experiences of test-taking and language learning. Test-takers also have varied expectations about tests in general, and English language tests in particular. This diversity of experiences and expectations can lead to doubt, confusion, lack of confidence and anxiety (Winke & Lim, 2014). These negative affective outcomes can have an adverse impact on test performance (Suryaningsih, 2014; Winke & Lim, 2014), which can be alleviated through familiarising themselves with the test format and good test-taking practices (Stankov, Lee, Luo & Hogan, 2012). As recently noted by Gardiner and Howlett (2016), familiarity with test formats and test items are essential for reducing anxiety and improving test score validity in standardised language tests.

1.2 Test preparation: developing language proficiency and test-taking strategies

Test preparation activities can target development in two areas: 1) language proficiency; and 2) test-taking strategies. For this study, we view language proficiency as having three distinct dimensions: social, professional and academic. The types of communication that we use in everyday life are distinguished from those required for academic studies, which differ again from those required in professional communication.



Depending on the module taken, IELTS test-takers are required to demonstrate proficiency in one or more of these communicative domains. A further important aspect of language proficiency is knowledge about language, including knowledge and awareness of the variety of everyday, academic and professional genres, text organisation, discourse semantics, and language at the level of clause, word and expression (phonemes and graphemes) (Chappell & Moore, 2012).

Test-taking strategies include strategies that support self-management of the test situation, such as keeping calm, and time management, as well as strategies that support meaningful responses to test items, such as scanning a text for key words that match with words in a reading task prompt. Being unprepared in either of these areas can mean that test-takers are at risk of not performing to their full potential and of needing to take the test again. Being unprepared in both areas puts test-takers at risk of engaging in repeated test-taking without significant improvement in band scores, and at not achieving their desired pathways in life. Moreover, repeatedly failing to achieve desired scores can result in anxiety and other negative emotional outcomes, which, as stated above, have a negative impact on future test performance.

2 Background

2.1 Test preparation activities

A study conducted by Mickan and Motteram (2006) used a face-to-face survey to collect biographical details and test preparation practices from a relatively small number (N=78) of participants. This was followed up with a semi-longitudinal case study of 10 of those participants in which their test preparation practices were documented over several weeks. They found that IELTS candidates engaged in a variety of test preparation activities, such as enrolling in a language course, undertaking self-directed language learning, enrolling in a test-preparation course, seeking the advice of successful test-takers, accessing official IELTS Test preparation materials online (practice tests, information about test format), doing focused reading, seeking advice from library tutors, and more. Significantly, this study revealed that 80% of test-takers did not attend English lessons to prepare for the test (although it is unclear what type of lessons these were, or whether they were test preparation lessons). One can assume that a portion of these candidates felt that they could improve their language and test-taking skills in domains of life other than the language classroom. Self-directed activities reported in the study included practising with sample tests, reading newspapers, using IELTS preparation websites (e.g. 51ielts.com), hiring a private tutor, listening to the radio, and watching TV.

A recent study (O'Sullivan, Dunn & Berry, 2019) involved an international survey on test preparation preferences and found a similar range of activities to Mickan and Motteram (2006), noting that preferences and activities did not differ substantially in the different regions under investigation (the Middle East, East and Southeast Asia, and Central and South America). This study, together with Mickan and Motteram's provides valuable baseline data on test preparation practices. The present study builds on their work through an in-depth investigation of attitudes, beliefs and practices associated with test preparation for the IELTS Test.

2.2 Test-taking strategies

There is strong evidence to suggest that test-takers who develop appropriate test-taking strategies, whether in a formal course or by other means, achieve better results than those who do not (Amer, 1993; Cohen, 2013). However, it should be noted that Winke and Lim (2014) speculate that extensive preparation may not have a significant impact on test scores, noting that this area needs further research.



Additionally, there is still room for research to determine the extent of the impact on test performance (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Cohen, 2007).

Test-management strategies are useful in the self-management of the test situation and providing meaningful responses to test items and tasks (Cohen, 2014). Examples include focusing one's thoughts and behaviours on the test-at-hand (Winke & Lim, 2014), or outlining an essay before writing the response (Cohen, 2014). Test-takers who lack a repertoire of test-taking and test-management strategies appropriate for a particular test are at a distinct disadvantage compared to those who have developed the skills in applying those strategies (Rogers and Yang, 1996; Yang, 2000; Winke & Lim, 2014).

Test-wiseness refers to the ability to apply appropriate and effective test-taking strategies that relate directly to the test format. For example, the ability to make use of grammatical clues that may be nested in a multiple-choice test item in order to choose the correct response. Test-wiseness strategies are undesirable due to their construct-irrelevancy (Cohen, 2014); that is, test-takers' responses are independent of the linguistic knowledge or skills being tested.

It is likely that there are some test-takers who do not believe or understand that even minimal test preparation can have a positive impact on their test outcomes. Indeed, we know from an ongoing online questionnaire on Macquarie University's IELTS Test Centre website that there are cohorts of test-takers who do not undertake any test preparation at all (Harris, personal communication). These may include not only those who do not improve their test performance over multiple occasions, but also those who are new to the demands of IELTS testing, or who have recently experienced the Test for the first time. We are not aware of any studies that have investigated reasons for test-takers' lack of preparation. It may be that they do not feel the need to do any preparation because their everyday lives afford them the opportunities for rich and diverse language experiences, or that their daily routines and settings provide them with information about the Test and how to develop their proficiency in ways that are beneficial for taking the Test. Findings from the current study help fill this gap in our knowledge of test-taker's attitudes toward test preparation.

2.3 Test preparation in, and out of, class

The evidence for the influence of test preparation courses on test scores is conflicting. While some studies conclude that preparation courses focusing on test-taking strategies can be beneficial (e.g. Brown, 1998), others suggest little or no benefit (Celestine & Ming, 1999). Similarly, some studies indicate that a general English intensive course or an academic English intensive course of the type found in many ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses) college curricula around Australia and popular with international students on pathways to vocational and higher education (Chappell, Bodis & Jackson, 2015), can be advantageous (e.g. Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003). Others, however, show no benefit (Ngyuen, 2008). Test-takers, particularly those already in the workforce, may lack the time, inclination, awareness, and/or financial resources to attend formal courses aimed at test preparation or improving language proficiency. Although there are many other opportunities for test-takers to prepare for the test outside of formal classroom study, we lack data on the extent to which test-takers avail themselves of opportunities for self-directed test preparation.

Further, there are many and varied situations that arise during the course of a day that test-takers could potentially use to develop their English language proficiency and knowledge about the IELTS Test. Two recent Australian studies (Chappell, Benson & Yates, 2018; Benson, Chappell & Yates, 2018) highlighted how factors in an international language student's environment can support or hinder their opportunities to use and learn English in meaningful ways. Factors such as home living arrangements, relationships at work, friendship networks and where students spend their free time



influenced the quality of their interactions in English and thus impacted their language proficiency development. While some had opportunities for rich and extended opportunities to engage with others in English, others were restricted to simple, transactional interactions in hospitality or retail jobs. Studies of the opportunities for migrants to use and develop their English is similarly varied (Yates et al 2015; Yates, 2011). These environmental factors are also likely to impact the English language development of IELTS test-takers.

To investigate how candidates exploit everyday opportunities that arise in the course of their daily routines to practise for the test and develop their language proficiency prior to taking the test, it is useful to take an environmental approach (Barron, 2006; 2010). From this perspective, learning emerges from interaction between the learner and human and material resources in their environments (Barron, 2006; Toohey, Dagenais, Fodor, Hof, Nunez & Singh, 2015; van Lier, 2004;). Learners are seen as having a unique history of language learning and use, and individual experiences of perceiving and interacting with environmental resources as 'affordances' for learning (Gibson 1979). From this perspective, IELTS Test preparation practices are shaped by test-takers' access to resources in their environments, including online resources, which is in turn shaped by test-takers' attitudes, beliefs and established practices based on prior experiences of language learning and test-taking, and by the circumstances of their everyday lives.

A significant implication of Winke and Lim's (2014) investigation is that test companies should be acutely aware of the preparation practices undertaken by their clients:

[W]e believe it is not clear if the testing companies monitor levels of practice (no practice, practice through free materials, practice through purchased materials and/or courses), nor does it appear that testing companies monitor the impact of different types of practice on scores. (p. 20)

This overview of existing research suggests a clear need to investigate IELTS test-takers' preparation practices, as well as their knowledge, attitudes, opinions and beliefs associated with the Test and test preparation.

2.4 Terminology

- **Test preparation practices** refer to the entire set of activities involved in preparing for the IELTS Test.
- **Test preparation activities** refer to activities that test-takers undertake before taking a test to improve their language proficiency and/or practice or to develop the ability to use test-taking strategies while taking the test.
- **Test-taking strategies** refer to plans of action aimed at maximising test outcomes without hindering construct relevancy. They include strategies that support self-management of the test situation, such as keeping calm, and time management, as well as strategies that support meaningful responses to test items, such as scanning a text for key words that match with words in a reading task prompt.

3 Research methodology

3.1 Research questions

The overall research question is framed as:

What is the nature of candidates' knowledge of, attitudes towards and preparation for the IELTS Test?

Specific research questions (numbered) and sub-questions used for data collection (lettered) are:

- RQ1. What is the nature of candidates' knowledge of, and attitudes towards, preparing for the Test?
- What are candidates' attitudes towards the IELTS Test?
 - What are candidates' attitudes toward IELTS Test preparation?
 - What do candidates know about test preparation?
 - What do candidates do to prepare for the Test?
- RQ2. What is the nature of candidates' knowledge of test-taking strategies and how do they prepare them?
- What test-taking strategies do candidates know?
 - How do candidates prepare how to use test-taking strategies?
- RQ3: What do candidates do in their daily lives to improve their English and how do these activities help them with the IELTS Test?
- What activities do they do in daily life to improve their English?
 - In what ways do they think these activities help(ed) with the IELTS Test?
 - How do candidates think their daily English use supports or hinders their success with the IELTS Test?

3.2 Research design and method

A sequential equal weight mixed methods design (QUAN → QUAL) (Riazi & Candlin, 2014) was used:

- quantitative data (questionnaire) collected to address the above questions among a large population of test-takers (N=758)
- qualitative data (interviews) collected to explore key themes emerging from the questionnaire responses and seek richer data on participants' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, knowledge and actual practices related to IELTS Test preparation (N=27).

3.2.1. Stage 1: Questionnaires

A questionnaire delivered online and face-to-face structured interviews were chosen to allow for the collection of data from a large number of respondents in a systematic and controlled manner. The online questionnaire (see Appendix A) was developed using questions adapted from previous questionnaires (Mickan & Motteram, 2006; Wall & Horák, 2006; Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003). It was trialled in face-to-face mode (as face-to-face structured interviews) to optimise the wording of the questionnaire at Macquarie University's North Ryde IELTS Test Centre on 10/2/18 and 3/3/18. Seventy-nine structured interviews using the questionnaire were administered on these two dates.



Participants were advised at the beginning and end of the morning written test that a team of interviewers would be available at the site before, during and after the afternoon speaking tests. A team of six researchers conducted the face-to-face structured interviews on each day. Some minor adjustments were made to the questions and the structure of the questionnaire before it was set on an online questionnaire platform (Qualtrics).

Recruitment for the online questionnaire was made with the assistance of the IDP/ IELTS team in Melbourne and Canberra. IELTS Australia identified in its database of test-takers all people Australia-wide who had taken an IELTS Test between 01/01/15 and 31/03/18, and also all people Australia-wide who had booked an IELTS Test, with a test date after 27/03/18. A total of 11,600 emails were sent inviting test-takers to take part in the questionnaire. This resulted in 679 responses to the online questionnaire between 27/3/18 and 9/5/18. Together with the face-to-face structured interviews, this gave a total of 758 questionnaire respondents.

The questionnaire yielded primarily quantitative data which were analysed descriptively using the data analysis tools in Qualtrics. Qualtrics is an online questionnaire package that allows for questionnaire design, pilot testing, administration, and reporting. The quantitative data reported in this report were generated from Qualtrics in a variety of forms and then summarised for reporting purposes. The responses to open-ended questions were analysed qualitatively through thematic analysis using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Data from the questionnaires administered in online and face-to-face modes were combined after a comparison revealed that responses from both groups were largely similar.

3.2.2. Stage 2: Interviews

We planned to recruit a range of test-takers (N=30) for interview based on their responses to the questionnaire (criterion sampling), but this systematic sampling strategy proved problematic and was abandoned in favour of sending bulk emails over a period of two months. Positive responses were received from 27 participants.

Interviews were aimed at understanding more about the participants' attitudes towards IELTS in general, their beliefs about test-preparation, and their actual preparation practices. In addition, we sought an understanding of how they engaged in their different day-to-day settings with language-learning opportunities and opportunities to prepare for the test. The interview protocol (Appendix B) was designed around the questionnaire items. Interviews were conducted by a research assistant. Most interviews were conducted using audio-visual communication technology, although several were conducted in person, between the first week of July and the second week of October (reflecting the length of time to recruit enough participants). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a third party, and then checked by the research team.

Transcripts and audio files were loaded into NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Each interviewee was first coded as a case. Following this, each case was analysed by creating parent nodes for each of the three research questions, and then sub nodes for the data collection questions. Further sub nodes were created based on emerging themes. Notes containing salient comments about each case using key words were added to the cases and then coded. Two researchers read through the coding to ensure moderation of the themes.

3.2.3 Ethical considerations

Approval to conduct the study was granted by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC, Human Sciences & Humanities), reference number 5201701121.

4 Findings

Data reported in this section are drawn from both the online and face-to-face questionnaires and the interviews. Depending on whether respondents were deliberately filtered out of answering the question, or chose not to respond, the total sample size varies by question.

4.1 General data from questionnaire respondents

4.1.1 Demographics

A total of 679 respondents attempted the questionnaire. Half (50%) of respondents identified as female, 48% male, 0.3% transgender and 1.7% unstated. A vast majority (86%) of respondents were 40 years or younger in age (Table 1).

Table 1: Age ranges of questionnaire respondents

AGE RANGE	PERCENT
16–20 years	3.91%
21–30 years	50.1%
31–40 years	35.8%
41–50 years	8.6%
51–60 years	1.3%
Over 60 years	0.1%

4.1.2 Country of origin

Questionnaire participants stated 80 different countries of origin (Table 2).

Table 2: Questionnaire respondents' countries of origins

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	PERCENT
China	18.89%
India	11.05%
Philippines	4.63%
Viet Nam	4.10%
Brazil	3.74%
Nepal	3.57%
Colombia	3.39%
Italy	3.03%
Indonesia	2.85%
Republic of Korea	2.85%
Malaysia	2.67%
Hong Kong (S.A.R.)	2.32%
Pakistan	1.96%
South Korea	1.96%
South Africa	1.78%
Nigeria	1.60%
Thailand	1.60%
Bangladesh	1.43%
Islamic Republic of Iran	1.43%
France	1.25%
Sri Lanka	1.25%
Zimbabwe	1.25%
Germany	1.07%
Kenya	1.07%
Spain	1.07%
Other (55 countries)	18.19%



4.1.3 Other countries of residence

Fifty-eight percent of respondents stated that they had resided in countries other than their country of origin and Australia (Table 3).

Table 3: Questionnaire respondents' countries of residence other than country of birth and Australia

COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE	PERCENT
China	11.14%
India	7.34%
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	7.07%
United States of America	5.16%
Philippines	3.80%
Singapore	3.53%
Germany	2.99%
Malaysia	2.99%
Indonesia	2.72%
Nepal	2.72%
South Africa	2.45%
Viet Nam	2.45%
Hong Kong (S.A.R.)	2.17%
Japan	2.17%
Thailand	1.90%
Brazil	1.63%
Italy	1.63%
New Zealand	1.63%
Turkey	1.63%
Bangladesh	1.36%
Canada	1.36%
France	1.36%
Ireland	1.36%
Netherlands	1.36%
United Arab Emirates	1.36%
Austria	1.09%
Nigeria	1.09%
Pakistan	1.09%
Papua New Guinea	1.09%
Other (42 countries)	20.36%

4.1.4 Education and English language learning

Overall, the respondents were well educated, with over two-thirds holding a bachelor's or master's degree.

- Less than high school degree: 1.1%
- High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED): 12.3%
- Some college but no degree: 5.9%
- Associate degree in college (2-year): 6.8%
- Bachelor's degree in college (4-year): 39.7%
- Master's degree: 29.2%
- Doctoral degree: 2.2%
- Professional degree (JD, MD): 2.9%



More than half (53%) of respondents had studied English for eight years or more and almost the same number (51%) had studied English in primary or high school. Of the remaining participants, 26% studied at college or university, 10% in private lessons, and 11% in a language school.

The types of English language courses reported were:

- General English: 32.6%
- IELTS preparation: 27.7%
- English for Academic Purposes: 16.3%
- English for Direct Entry to university or college: 7.4%
- Business English: 3.4%
- None: 10.6%
- Other (Cambridge English certificate courses (CAE, FCE), ISL, Self-study, Academic writing via MOOC, YouTube videos): 2.0%

4.1.5 IELTS Test-taking experience

A majority of respondents (54%) intended to take the IELTS Test at some time after completing the questionnaire. Among these respondents, 53% stated they would take the Academic Test and 47% the General Training Test.

A vast majority of respondents (81%) had taken the Test at least twice; 28.4% had taken the Test five times or more, as shown on the list below.

- 2 times: 32.1%
- 3 times: 27.0%
- 4 times: 12.5%
- 5 times: 12.0%
- 6 times: 7.4%
- 7 times: 1.4%
- 8 times: 2.5%
- 9 times: 1.7%
- 10 times: 0.5%
- More than 10 times: 2.9%

4.1.6 Reasons for taking the IELTS Test

Over half the respondents gave reasons for requiring particular band scores that were related to immigration or permanent residency. One quarter of respondents needed their scores to enter a course of study, while 15.8% required the scores for professional qualification/registration, as shown below.

- To qualify for a visa for immigration to Australia: 30.2%
- To qualify for a visa for immigration to another country: 3.5%
- To qualify for permanent residency in Australia: 20.1%
- To gain a professional qualification/registration: 15.8%
- To enter a course of study: 24.7%
- Other: 5.8%



4.2 Test preparation: knowledge, attitudes and practices

4.2.1 Attitudes toward IELTS Test

Research question 1a: What are candidates' attitudes towards the IELTS Test?

As might be expected, attitudes to the Test among participants varied. Almost half (13/27) of the interviewees made positive comments about the Test, and nearly all (22/27) made negative comments. Many of the positive comments focused on its face validity as a test of skills in English, for example:

The IELTS Test in general, I think it's generally a great way to test people's academic responses to the English language in general. (Ian¹)

I think it's a very good test. It's testing your different ability regarding to reading and listening, writing and speaking. (Sam)

Others commented on its role in providing a benchmark in English language skill.

So I think to me personally IELTS is about – is like a certification where you know how well you can speak a particular language or how well you understand English, so this is an ability to improve your English so you can see yourself where you stand. (Dean)

It's not really hard, it's not even – really easy either. They've just for the test, it will be skill you use, English for different skills. So from what I think, if you have major English skills, so you will do the IELTS, yeah. (Anna)

However, in both the questionnaire responses and the interviews, doubts were expressed about the effectiveness of the Test in measuring English language proficiency in daily language use. While Ian, a university student, felt that IELTS tested language that was very similar to the kind of academic English (essays and short answers) he used in school and later at university, others were less confident that it targeted language that was useful for them. Dean, for example, wondered why people who sounded like native speakers were 'not getting top score'.

It doesn't really show that the participants can't communicate with other people fluently in daily basic. (Q²)

Yes, [preparation for the test is important] but it doesn't show your true English ability. (Q)

A major cause of concern was the inconsistency of scores obtained over repeated tests. Fifteen of the interviewees were unhappy about the variability in their scores on repeated sittings, particularly if they had received their target score in one skill on one test and not on another. They had difficulty understanding why their scores should vary in this way and tended to attribute this to inconsistency in the test, examiners or testing process. In addition, there was some negative comment on the fact that some major recognising institutions who use the test scores for admissions stipulate that all required band scores be gained in a single sitting of the test. Some participants felt that this was unfair since, in their view, it should be possible for them to accept that a candidate has met the requirements if they meet the required band score in each skill over more than one test. The need to repeatedly take the test angered or demotivated several of the interviewees, leading some to switch to competitors they saw as providing an easier test.

I've been getting 7 sometimes in writing and then getting 5.5 in writing, 8.5 in speaking and getting 6 in speaking, it's like what the hell is going on? (Hannah)

This is worst system of assessing one's skill and knowledge. It is all about ripping off the test-takers systematically. The method is not fair at all. (Q)

1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants. A name appearing at the end of a quotation refers to an interview participant.

2. Q identifies a reference to an open-ended response to a questionnaire prompt.



Interviewees also commented on general issues such as the need to go to a large test centre, the inauthenticity of the time pressures, frustrations about the lack of feedback, discrepancies between advice from teachers and the scores received and the choice of topics for the test components. In relation to specific sub-components of the test, the issue of subjectivity and an apparent variability between examiners of the speaking component was raised, as were concerns that the listening component tested concentration more than listening. However, it was the writing component in particular that provoked negative comment among the interviewees (19/27). These included criticism of the format as outmoded, such as the demand for letter-writing, serial test-takers' frustration at not understanding what they were doing wrong and difficulty interpreting the grading criteria, summed up by Hari:

I honestly just wanted to reiterate that writing is difficult. [...] I hope it actually like changes the criteria it's currently using for writing to actually measure what it's supposed to measure and not just, oh you didn't say these words and you didn't follow these things that are not normally followed in a normal writing setting, so I think it should be more authentic, I guess. (Hari)

4.2.2 Attitudes toward and knowledge about IELTS Test preparation

Research questions 1b and 1c: What are candidates' attitudes toward IELTS Test preparation? What do candidates know about test preparation?

The vast majority of respondents who answered a question on test preparation and familiarity with the test format saw them as being crucial (95.7% of questionnaire respondents and 23 of the 27 interviewees). Reasons given by the few questionnaire respondents who felt that preparation was not needed related to the perception that the test is about English proficiency.

If one is proficient in English and the English language then there is no need to prepare. To study by parrot fashion does not make one proficient in the English language (Q).

One interviewee felt that preparation was less important for the General Training Test, and a native-speaker felt it was not important at his level of proficiency. Others suggested that external variables, such as being nervous, actually have a bigger impact on results:

It is a moment.. you can practise as much as you want but if your so nervous then it doesn't make a difference. For some people is practising good I guess. I took the test where I'm up to (Q).

There are lots of variables that could influence your performance on the test. Some people take lessons, courses and even private classes but on the test they don't get good results. (Q)

Seven interviewees reported that preparation was important, but it had not helped them achieve their desired band scores.

In general, however, there was a strong feeling that preparation of some kind was useful (23/27 interviewees acknowledged this). As Mary commented:

I mean the test is not like the way – like it's not like day-to-day speaking or anything. (Mary)



Victor's and Tom's experiences illustrated a need for even quite advanced learners of English to prepare:

Because I had been a teacher of English for quite some time I did not actually prepare for it. I was confident that well I've been teaching English, I should know but to my surprise I got a low score. (Victor)

You need to have a solid understanding what you are getting yourself into or else you'll definitely struggle so yeah, prepare yourself [.....] You can't just rock up to an exam and just like you know expect to do well. (Tom).

There were some (7/27 interviewees) who felt that it was important to prepare for the Test, yet despite undertaking a variety of preparation activities, they felt frustrated that they were not achieving their desired band scores. Alexis failed to achieve her desired Writing Test band score despite investing 'pretty much a thousand dollars' on private tuition for her writing. Although her tutor gave her feedback on practice tests she had written, including an estimate of a band score, and despite being aware of the importance of text organisation for the Writing Test, she failed to achieve her desired result. This led to her confusion about what kind of preparation is good preparation, and has also led to negative attitudes toward IELTS, especially in relation to feedback.

The worst part about IELTS is that you cannot go to the centre where you did your IELTS Test and ask for the writing and see what you actually did wrong and why you got a 6 instead of a 7. So I couldn't see my mistakes, I just had to guess so. (Alexis)

Similarly, despite Cathy having a private tutor to help with her writing, and being told that her grammar and vocabulary had improved, she failed to get beyond band score 5. This led her to think of alternative pathways into her desired PhD program other than English language proficiency. Cathy stated her scepticism that using test-taking strategies works for everyone, as she found that skimming the reading text for words related to the questions did not help her perform well on the Reading Test.

4.2.3 Test preparation activities

Research question 1d: What do candidates do to prepare for the test?

To answer the question: *What things should people do to prepare for the IELTS Test?*, respondents were invited to select from a list of common test preparation activities. All appeared to be popular, in particular test practice with sample tests (Table 4).

Table 4: Test preparation activities favoured by questionnaire respondents

ACTIVITIES	PERCENT	COUNT
Practise taking the Test with sample tests	23.8%	418
Read books or articles in English	16.9%	297
Watch videos online of teachers' tips	15.3%	268
Speak to fluent English speakers	15.1%	265
Take IELTS preparation classes	13.9%	243
Watch TV in English	13.2%	232
Other	1.7%	30

Two additional categories of activities emerged from the 'Other' responses in the questionnaire:

Self-study

- Individual writing practice
- Searching for, and practising, different writing and speaking topics
- Time management practice
- Understanding the test structure of the test, types of questions and the timing
- Free online preparation courses



Get help from others

- Professional IELTS teachers (to assess level and identify mistakes)
- Tips from friends/family who have taken the Test
- Checking practice writing with peers
- Speaking with peers at same level of speaking skill

The interviewees reported knowledge of preparation activities ranging from the very general to understanding the specific requirements of the Test and focusing on the development of language proficiency itself. Routine general considerations such as time-management, controlling nerves and even how to plan food intake and toilet breaks were seen as part of preparation, and the importance of sleeping, and eating well was also mentioned. The specifics of the test format itself elicited consistent comment, including the overall format of the test and the order of sub-tests. The type of texts and questions used in the reading and listening tests, which are likely to be the most difficult, and the general progression from those of a more general nature to the more specific question were mentioned. Familiarisation with different accents and the ability to listen for specific items and write as you listen were noted as important preparation for the listening component, and understanding the scoring system, task types and how to write a concise essay were mentioned as important in the writing component.

Some commented that exam skills and time management were crucial:

That's [time management and exam skills] the most important part rather than the knowledge of English itself. (Ian)

So I mean that the test type is really very exam oriented, very question type oriented so is much better for the students if they are practice the question type a lot before taking the real exam, rather than just studying general English or just studying general communication costs. (Tanh)

Practice was seen as key to handling the pressures of the test situation by both questionnaire respondents (23.8%) and interviewees (24/27), although the ways in which they did this varied.

Practice is the key and you need to have a mock that you have to practise the test, really like the – you have to see the full test and see how it goes. (Amanda)

It's not just about English, it's about the way you present. In case of listening and reading it's all practice, particularly re types of questions and what to expect etc., in case of speaking and writing it's both English plus the way you present your ideas in written or spoken format. (Hannah)

4.2.4 Knowledge of test-taking strategies

Research question 2a: What test-taking strategies do candidates know?

Questionnaire respondents were provided the following closed question with prompt: *Test strategies are ways of answering questions and being successful in a test. Do you know any test strategies?*

Although the concept of a test-taking strategy was provided, 49% of respondents who responded to a questionnaire item on knowledge of test-taking strategies reported not knowing any. Of those who reported knowledge of test-taking strategies, 56% said they had prepared and practised strategies for their previous test, and 78% said they would do so for their next test; 22% said they would not prepare and practice those strategies for their forthcoming test.



Reasons for not preparing and practising varied, including: “don’t need to” and “don’t know how”, to reasons for wanting to be “assessed genuinely” rather than “pretending to be an English speaker”. Another reason was the belief that their competency level did not require the use of test-taking strategies. Finally, some simply did not have the time to prepare any strategies.

Respondents who said that they had knowledge of test-taking strategies were provided with the following open-ended question: *What test strategies do you know?*. These, together with responses obtained from 20 of the 27 interviewees (i.e. those who spoke about a range of strategies upon being prompted by the interviewer) have been categorised in Table 5.

Table 5: Test-taking strategies

CATEGORY	STRATEGIES
General Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be familiar with the format of the test. • Manage your time.
Strategies for Writing Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read question carefully. • Organise/structure text appropriately. • Plan before starting to write. • Use appropriate sentence-level grammar. • Complete task two first. • Manage time carefully for each section. • Support your arguments with examples.
Strategies for Reading Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use knowledge of paragraph structure. • Read all questions before reading the texts. • Use skimming and scanning. • Know how to answer different question types. • Highlight key words. • Scan for highlighted key words. • Match sections of the text with the test questions. • Manage stress by acknowledging that the whole text does not need to be understood. • Guess unknown answers. • Identify synonyms that match meaning between the question and the text. • Use first two sentences of a paragraph to identify its main idea. • Manage time carefully.
Strategies for Listening Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read questions first. • Read questions first and predict answers. • Take notes while listening. • Skip questions you cannot answer. • Highlight key words. • Use gaps between texts to read ahead for key words. • Focus on listening for the answer to the questions. • Spell accurately, and check spelling afterwards. • Know that the listening text becomes more complex toward the end. • Focus and maintain concentration on the text.
Strategies for Speaking Tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manage your affective state: relax/be natural/be calm/be confident. • Make eye contact with the examiner. • Speak clearly/avoid pronunciation errors. • Use range of vocabulary. • Explain/elaborate. • Ask examiner for clarification. • Use fillers (e.g. “that’s an interesting question”) to avoid pausing. • Remain focused on displaying your speaking skills and language knowledge. • Use past, present and future tenses, and active and passive voice (in parts 2 and 3).



While not as exhaustive as the 'tips' available on the official IELTS Australia test tip videos web page (IELTS Test Tip Videos, n.d.), there is considerable overlap. Not all tips were useful ones, however. One strategy for Listening Tasks, namely, 'skip questions you cannot answer', contradicts advice given by IELTS, 'Don't leave any blanks or gaps on your answer sheet. Provide answers for every question even if you have to make a guess' (Five top tips to improve your listening, n.d.). Further, a small sub-group of these could be considered test-wiseness strategies: Complete task two first; Use past, present and future tenses, and active and passive voice (in parts 2 and 3); Guess unknown answers. Notably these are the only mention in this study of knowledge of and/or use of test-wiseness strategies.

However, while participants were able to articulate a wide range of test-taking strategies, they did not always provide details on how they used them when preparing for the test.

Several interviewees (7/27) displayed an apparent lack of knowledge about test-taking strategies. For example, Dean did not appear aware of any strategies apart from writing: "I try to first brainstorm for a minute or two, just to make sure what ideas I can put in this topic", but for "reading I don't know what kind of strategies works, same for speaking and listening, so just for writing I think I brainstorm a bit". Fred acknowledged that his failure to achieve the desired band scores was due not getting "proper training" and failing to "know how the system work". Jami was unhappy with her Speaking Test result but said that she had no idea what the assessment criteria were. Quoc stated the belief that a "native English speaker" did not need to do any preparation, but international students did. Tom felt that "with writing, you just practice, that's all". Truc was quite candid in her lack of knowledge of strategies:

Yeah, no, I just do the test right from the beginning to the end. For the writing part I did spend more time in task 2 so my strategy. Yeah but other than that I don't really have any strategy for reading, speaking or reading or listening. (Truc)

4.2.5 Preparation of test-taking strategies for the sub tests

Research question 2b: How do candidates prepare to use test-taking strategies?

Interviewees were asked to answer the following prompt:
Tell me about what you do to prepare yourself to take the IELTS Test.

Their responses are reported above. Interviewers were instructed to then "Ask for examples, ask for elaboration, prompt for each skill, prompt for general strategies and specific strategies." The following findings relate to what respondents told us about how they prepared their test-taking strategies. It should be noted that while participants were able to articulate a wide range of test-taking strategies (Table 5), there were far fewer mentions among interviewees, even when prompted by the interviewer, of how and whether they actually prepared these. This can be partly explained by the rhetorical nature of the interview – participants at times talked more about test-preparation activities in general as they related to each of the sections of the test and less about the specific strategies they practiced (if any) during those activities. At other times, they talked about the importance of test-taking strategies and how they used those strategies during the test, without articulating exactly how it was that they practised using them in order to prepare for the test.

Then there were those who simply did not know any strategies. In her first test, Alexis "didn't do anything to get ready, I just did it", however when she received her results, she realised that she needed to prepare for her future test. However, it was evident from her interview that she never really developed a deep knowledge of test-taking strategies. This was also the case with Anna and Hari. On the other hand, Gabby did not prepare any strategies because she felt that her proficiency level was sufficient to achieve her desired band scores, which, in fact, ended up being correct.



One interviewee, Marianne, simply did not have time to prepare any strategies, and one, Truc, simply did not know any strategies to prepare.

In general, the following were the main types of test preparation activities that the interviewees stated they used to practise test-taking strategies:

- practising strategies while using practice tests
- researching the test and planning strategies for each section
- practising time management while using practice tests
- practice using language forms important for the speaking and writing tests.

4.2.5.1 Listening test

To prepare the strategy of using the silent gaps between audio texts to read ahead for key words in the question and predict what the speaker/s will say, Ahmed reported using practice listening tests on YouTube, an activity he learned from people who had taken the Test before. To tackle a perceived weakness in answering multiple choice listening test questions, Tanh set her own tasks and focused on listening for gist and main ideas.

Usually I listen to the tape recorder and I don't see the questions, I just listen and then I try to summarise the ideas, what they have talk about so far in the tape recorder, what they are trying to mean, what they are trying to discuss, so that's the way I practice for the multiple choice questions because I believe that if I understand the gist, if I understand the main ideas of the speaker I will answer the multiple choice questions well. (Tanh)

One of the interviewees, Tom, articulated a wealth of ideas for test preparation, test-taking strategies, and ways to prepare those strategies and felt that it was important to first 'research' the test by analysing the different sections and setting strategies for each. In this way, for example, he discovered that listening texts get more complex ('trickier') toward the end, and so he developed a test management strategy to be more attentive toward the end of the listening tasks.

While you're writing the answer you're making sure that you know subconsciously you are listening to the tape and that you don't lose the contact from that, so that's what I meant like, you know, sometimes what happens when someone starts writing and they end up losing that contact from listening and they come back to listening again and then oh, crap, I forgot, I missed that whole part there. (Tom)

4.2.5.2 Reading test

Time management appeared as a common theme among interviewees and several took a systematic approach to developing strategies for this. Tom's experience led him to reflect that "reading is basically – it's all about efficiency and it's all about time management. If there was no 60 minutes' time constraint in reading I think anybody could have done that, anybody could have entered all the answers correctly". Thus, he felt that, given the time constraints, test-taking strategies are required to successfully complete test tasks. He summed up the main strategy that he decided to practice and develop before taking the next test.

So what I was doing is every time I was thinking like you know I think each of – the first big chunky essay or whatever the storyline – they used to come in like in a six to seven paragraphs, so next to each paragraph I was writing down key notes and that definitely helped me. Every time I was reading I was looking for the key notes, what I have written next to each paragraph and I was – exactly knew, could pinpoint which paragraph to look at to transfer that question. And I was able to finish my test inside 60 minutes, I was able to finish in 50 minutes and I did have plenty of time to go over that whole thing and revise my whole entire answer sheet. (Tom)



Similarly motivated by time constraints, Tanh felt it was important to complete the three tasks in the Reading Test with enough time to read and comprehend, complete the answers in the answer sheet, and finally, to check back over all the answers. She prepared for this through several iterations of practice sessions where she set time limits and gradually reduced the allotted time.

And then the next day I try to finish in 55 minutes and then pick up with the reading test I need the time to transfer my answer to the answer sheet so I need at least five minutes, because I have the sample of the answer sheet and then I will try to transfer the answers to the answer sheet and I see how much time I need to transfer. And then in five minutes so my aim is to finish the test in 55 minutes. And then if I can do it in 55 minutes and then I will aim to finish in 50 minutes and then – so that I have time to check my answers. I have time to look back my answers and then to see. (Tanh)

Edna adopted a similar preparation regime to Tanh for developing a time management strategy for the Reading Test. She repeatedly practiced reading tests, giving herself 45 minutes to complete all tasks, leaving 15 minutes to “come back and have a look at what I’ve done. So it gives me plenty of time to actually think if I did right or not”. She felt that her reading improved “very well” after using this strategy.

Amanda focused more on developing strategies to answer different types of reading task prompts: “it’s important to be familiar with the particular type of questions”. Finding that true/false questions were often difficult for her, Amanda developed the strategy of skipping difficult questions and returning to them after answering the easier ones. She combined this strategy with guessing answers to questions she could not otherwise answer, as “there’s no wrong – no getting marks for the wrong ones, but if it’s right you get a point”.

Skimming and scanning were also practised. Cyril took a systematic approach, first, learning what the “techniques” were, and then preparing himself to use these during practice tests. Similarly, Fred practised identifying keywords in the questions, and then he would:

...scan and skim the passage and when I see the keywords I will start at that and I will go back to one sentence or – one or two sentence and I read the whole passage – the whole sentence up to the keyword and I will try the answer but it’s quite like 80% correct. That will save me time. (Fred)

Practising identifying synonyms that match meaning between the question and the text, was also noted as useful, especially in true/false questions.

In my practise sessions I found that tip usually get me – if there are 10 question, I will get nine right out of 10. (Keith)

4.2.5.3 Speaking test

Only five interviewees mentioned practising test-taking strategies for the Speaking Test. Two focused on grammatical form. Believing that using “idioms and idiomatic expressions in speaking” is an important skill to demonstrate in the Speaking Test, Tanh organised her preparation around practising speaking every day, incorporating idiomatic language “so that we can naturally use English as your own language...that’s the [Speaking Test] strategy I use...”, while Gabby memorised written texts provided by an IELTS tutor.



In preparation for the individual long turn in Part 2, Amanda, practiced speaking continuously for 15 minutes, and Hannah focused on using a “trick” learned from a teacher:

Present your ideas in a way as if you are discussing what you saw in the past, what you are currently experiencing and what your expectations are for the future so you are using present, past and future tense so you have covered all the tenses plus active voice, passive voice, ease, listening to your fluency if you're constantly speaking, if you're getting stuck somewhere. (Hannah)

A further strategy targeting the ability to fluently supply examples and supporting opinions from short articles was to organise them by topics and talking to herself (Sam).

4.2.5.4 Writing test

Despite the wealth of test-taking strategies targeting writing mentioned by questionnaire respondents and interviewees alike (refer Table 5), there were very few reports on how participants actually prepared for these. Alexis reported preparing for the challenge of the unfamiliar vocabulary required by using an essay structure provided by an IELTS tutor. She also found using linking words between paragraphs useful, even when she was not familiar with the topic. Keith and Sam also found practising essay structure useful in the belief that using the correct structure alone would earn them points.

Hari used Google to search for IELTS writing tips, and prepared specific vocabulary to use in any test, although some of the advice she followed was of questionable value and she did not seem very confident that this was a good thing to do.

When you go and Google and you know like writing tips for IELTS it always tells you to use certain words like, it's as if the IELTS exam is being checked by a computer and that if they don't see those words you won't get a tick. It's really weird but they always tell you to use – I forgot what kind of words, they are like the additionally, in conclusion, those kinds of words. And yeah I know I used them, I still don't know how to properly answer the writing test for IELTS but I think that's like the main thing. (Hari)

4.3. How candidates develop their overall language proficiency, and how they feel this helps them in the test

4.3.1 Daily English use and proficiency development

Research question 3a: What activities do they do in daily life to improve their English?

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked: *What other activities do you do in your daily life that help you to prepare for the test?* A range of activities was selected (Table 6).

Table 6: Other activities helpful for preparing for IELTS Test

ACTIVITIES	PERCENT	COUNT
Read books in English	14.5%	293
Speak English with friends	14.3%	290
Watch English-language videos	14.3%	289
Speak English at work	13.5%	274
Write English at work	11.7%	236
Listen to English-language radio	11.5%	233
Use English in my course of study	9.8%	199
Speak English at home	9.5%	193



The theme “Immersion in English language” emerged from the open-ended “other” category:

- I use English everyday just like i did before coming here.
- All of the above? My life is very much in English these days, although I didn't seek out any of the above specifically for the test. That's just my normal.
- I live in Australia. My life is in English.
- Been speaking English for 40 years of my life.
- English is my first language My workplace helps me. All English speaking.
- I only talk to people and my friends in Australia while because all of them is totally English.

This “immersion” theme also emerged from interviews. When asked the question *What activities do you do in your daily life that help you improve your English?*, nine of the 27 interviewees responded in ways that indicated they did not need to seek out opportunities to develop their English proficiency, as they were already immersed in an environment conducive to do this (emphases on “immersion” references in bold).

Constantly communicating with Aussies, the people who have that Aussie accent and Aussie – the pure Australians. Constant communication with them actually helped me a lot to improve my speaking. (Hannah)

Well, living in an English-speaking country actually helps. I use English at work. I also use English to speak with my boyfriend, to speak with my friends, to speak with my housemates so yeah, I think that's – yeah. (Hari)

Well I live in Australia so I study full-time as a medical student so I have to read a lot, I have to speak to a lot of people so that's how I improve my English, talking to friends, talking to professor, reading books, listening to lectures, yeah, that's how I prepare. (Truc)

I've been doing my job in different areas, starting from hospitality and then go to the professional. So I've been spending at least five hours every day to talk to the different people, including clients, colleagues, everyone else. And yes I also take a lot of phone calls because I was doing legal advisor, so I have to take a lot of time to listen when people complain and then give them legal advice...I think this is important and this goes to the everyday of the skills improvement rather than you just stay in home and probably just listening to some tapes and trying to understand. (Edna)

Yeah, that's the thing I usually do. You can talk to the local people. You can have a chat, have a quick chat with the people on the tram, for example. You can have a quick chat to somebody when you are waiting for the train in English, of course. I think you can look at advertisements so you can look at the English, how they are using English for advertisements. So I mean the authentic materials everywhere in Australia. So you can learn English everywhere. Yeah, I think so. (Tanh)

I talk to native speakers, I speak English a lot and I work and study in a – English-speaking environment that help me with listening and speaking. (Quoc)

I think in my daily life work is very helpful because I work with people so I have to talk to people all the time during work. And as all of – most of them are native speakers so I think it's very helpful to learn vocabularies also. (Cyril)

Definitely I'm improving my writing skills and listening sometimes because all the time other people are talking and talking. (Dean)



Other interview responses to the question: *What activities do you do in your daily life that help you improve your English?* were:

- read news, current affairs, magazines, etc.
- watch movies, listen to TV, radio, podcasts, gaming
- speak English at home
- speak English away from home
- read and/or write in English at work and/or university

4.3.2 Daily English use and the IELTS Test

Research question 3b: In what ways do they think these activities [in section 4.3.1] helped with the IELTS Test?

4.3.2.1 Reading English

Five of the 27 interviewees reported finding reading news media useful, citing its use for vocabulary, grammar and reading speed since these were the kinds of texts encountered in the Reading Test:

And for reading – well reading, I used to read newspaper and the articles were like at the same standard as the IELTS reading material. Not exactly because they were more like research materials or like reading article. Sometimes, yes some newspapers do have the same standard as the IELTS reading materials so reading, so it helped me with be familiarised with some difficult words and it also helped me with speed. So speeding – reading is very important so when you read a lot you speed reading will improve and it's very important for IELTS because you get a time limit of 60 minutes to finish three passages and answer the questions in the passage. So reading the newspaper helped me. (Amanda)

It [reading magazines] improve my vocabulary, that's one. It improve my grammar. When you read it's automatic – you automatically pick up the word, the grammar. (Fred)

4.3.2.2 Multimedia activities

Using audio-visual media to develop language proficiency was also perceived to be an effective way to prepare for the test, and over a quarter of questionnaire responses (25.8%) included watching videos and listening to radio as effective ways to prepare for the test. Radio and talk shows could help familiarise with IELTS-style topics (Amanda, Marianne), vocabulary (Ian) and develop overall language proficiency, speaking and writing performance (Hannah).

When you listen you think, thoughts come and you speak the same, you write the same, it actually affects your writing and reading a lot. I've experienced this after talking to – when I started talking to English-speaking – I mean people in English-speaking countries, Australia, there was a change in my fluency, I was more confident, I was – the – my pitch, my volume changed because I'm more confident I know what I'm speaking. (Hannah)

Use of multimedia activities was also seen as improving listening abilities and grammar. Hari felt that watching movies, listening to music, and playing online games helped with accents and reading, and also gave her practice identifying the sentence-level grammatical errors made by others and correcting them.

...really helped me with the listening part because when I started gaming I wasn't really used to different accents, I was only used to the accents that we use in The Philippines so like when you're gaming you have to like really be attentive to your other party mates so I think that really helped me with the listening part. (Hari)



It [gaming] actually also helped me with reading because like not everyone has proper grammar so reading those sentences I can like correct them in my mind and I think that became like a practice for grammar for me. (Hari)

4.3.2.3 *Speak English informally*

Some questionnaire respondents had the opportunity to speak English at home (9.5%) and found it was useful in improving overall English proficiency. It was also seen as useful specifically for the Speaking Test, as reported by three of the interviewees, both in a general sense (Jonathon) or for more specific reasons, such as fluency, avoiding spoken errors (Alexis), and vocabulary and pronunciation (Clare).

Well, speaking of course I guess like socialising and talking to my kids, I think it helps my fluency when I speak. Living at host family, I've always lived with this family and you know when I make big mistakes when I speak they correct me. (Alexis)

By talking in English every day, it has improved my vocabulary pronunciation, enunciation and a lot more and so it has improved my speaking skills a lot. (Clare)

Speaking in English in other contexts was reported as useful by nearly half of the questionnaire respondents (47.1%), and eight of the 27 interviewees. Several (Cathy, Edna, Hannah and Jonathon) found speaking English at work helped with their speaking and/or listening skills:

For speaking, I think speaking English is very important which I do a lot of practice in my casual work. I think that helps a lot. And also for IELTS Test when you go talk to people often you got a lot of improve in listening, I do believe that because I did approve a lot in my listening after I arrive in Australia and take the test like two or three years after I have the casual position in cafes. (Cathy)

Both Tanh and Tom felt that native-speaker interlocutors were the most useful, with Tanh appreciating their ability to supply insight into slang, and Tom stating the importance "to be very, very calculated in terms of choosing your friends" because their level of education affected the kind of English you could learn from them.

If you don't make friends with locals, if you're speaking to someone else who speaks in English but from a different – from a non-English-speaking background, you're not going to learn anything new, that's for sure. (Tom)

4.3.2.4 *English at work/university*

Several interviewees (7/27) saw reading and/or writing at work or university as important for improving their English. For example, Alexis valued colleagues' feedback on her "grammar and sentence structure", although she acknowledged that this was limited and may not be relevant for the Writing Test text types.

And yeah for the writing same thing, at [swimming] school I have always someone who reviews my writing, my reports, my planning, so I always have feedback and I see what I did wrong 'cause I have to fix it so that definitely helps me. But yes, in terms of my grammar and sentence structure, not essays because I don't write essays or graphs – descriptions. (Alexis)

She also found the need to read extensively at work to be beneficial.

Same for reading, like I read articles sometimes for work, I have to read staff and you know news and new laws and requirements for the after school hours care so it's a lot of reading so that's probably – yeah, probably why my reading has always been good, I've always read a lot because of my job. (Alexis)



Reading academic articles as part of university study helped Sam with both the content and the structure of texts, which was useful for the IELTS writing tasks.

When I'm actually in the test I know what – when I say the topic, oh this one, I know that, I already did – I already prepared, I already read it. So, I can just bring up my memories and I don't need to take – spend too many – too much time thinking or organising during the test because I already know how to organise my article and what kind of example I can use to support my opinion. Yeah, so I can save time because you know the time is very important, it's only one hour and you need to finish your article, yeah. (Sam)

4.3.3 Constraints on daily English use

Research question 3c: How do candidates think their daily English use supports or hinders their success with the IELTS Test?

Not everyone had the opportunity to use English in her or his daily life. Table 7 shows questionnaire responses to the question: *Is there anything about your daily life in Australia that stops you from improving your English?*

Table 7: Daily language environments: constraints on improving English proficiency

CONSTRAINTS	PERCENT	COUNT
The English I use every day is basic.	38.3%	202
I have no one to practice English with at home.	24.4%	129
I am too busy to have time to practice my English.	16.7%	88
I have no chance to use English at work.	5.3%	28

From Table 7 it can be seen that more than a third (38.3%) of respondents used only basic English in their everyday lives. A further 16.7% were too busy to practice English, and 5.3% had no chance to use English at all at work.

Interviewees' responses largely reflected these questionnaire findings. Almost half (13/27) felt they had limited opportunities to use English. Dean, for example, spoke Punjabi at home and felt that, while his regular work routine in an office offered activities that helped to improve his writing and listening skills, the scant opportunities at lunch time to practise speaking offered only basic conversation.

But yeah it's just normal, how is your day and all kinds of stuff. But you can't really start a topic, do your practice your speaking skills there. So it's just like normal day-to-day topics on the lunchtime, yeah. (Dean)

Dean summed up the effect his weekday routine had on his performance in the IELTS Test.

So I think my routine is stopping me to get a desired score. (Dean)

Alexis and Jonathon reported similar constraints at work, since they worked in an environment where their first language was spoken.

Almost one quarter of questionnaire respondents (24.4%) had no one to speak English with at home, and this was the case for many of the interviewees, who reported difficulty finding opportunities overall to practice English with others.

And I wish I could have more chance to talk to the local people, now more people, talk to them and listen to them and expose to the language environment, yeah. I think it'll be very useful for me to understand different accent. I am very happy to come and to live in Australia because here I can listen to different accents. (Tanh)



If I socialise with people more often I can improve better, yeah. (Quoc)

Difficulty finding opportunities overall to practice English with others is partially explained by having a lack of confidence with English. Anna reported being “nervous and shy” when she first came to Australia which made her reluctant to communicate with others in her community. Hari reported a similar tendency to tendency to avoid “one-on-one” conversations. For Fiona, this anxiety led her to isolate herself at home:

I started watching cartoons and the movies from 9 to 5 and I didn't want to speak with other people because I was scared and I thought maybe – you know? I didn't have enough confidence about my language, actually. (Fiona)

Perceptions of discrimination exacerbated these tendencies for Jami:

I know that it's confidential but I am Asian so sometimes there's discrimination so – and I have accent. So whenever I speak with accent and I feel a bit shy so – and I see how the look...then it's a bit hard to wanting to say because I don't want to say in front of <inaudible> because sometimes I'm very embarrassed and shy. That's why it's not improving my speaking. (Jami)

5 Discussion

5.1 Research question 1: Attitudes towards the test and test preparation

In this section we discuss our findings in relation to the three research questions.

The first question addressed candidates' attitudes towards the test and test preparation and what they know about it. Since these depend in part on attitudes to the test itself, it is worth first considering the variety of views of and attitudes towards the test reported by the candidates. These reflected a range of perceptions of the type of language and domains of language use targeted by the test, some confusion about exactly what was being measured and how this was assessed, and some negative perceptions based on how the test was used by people and institutions requiring the test scores rather than the test itself.

Some candidates demonstrated a relatively sophisticated perception of the domains of language proficiency and use that IELTS tested, particularly if they had been, or were currently, studying and could appreciate the relationship between the language and topics of the Test and the language they were using in their studies. For others, however, the Test had less face validity. There seemed to be an expectation that the Test would reflect the type of informal language they used on a daily basis. They, therefore, struggled to understand exactly what domains were being targeted and why this was relevant to them. References to the inability of candidates who ‘speak’ really well to achieve their desired band scores and the range of negative comments on the Writing section suggest that these perceptions may relate in particular to productive skills. While it is clearly unrealistic to expect all test-takers to have an in-depth understanding of the nature of language proficiency and how it may be assessed, it was also clear in our data that misunderstandings of language development, proficiency and how it is assessed in the Test can lead to negative attitudes.

Negative attitudes were fuelled also by the experience of having to sit the test multiple times if target goals were not met in a single sitting of the test. While it is understandable that test-takers may be frustrated by their inability to achieve their desired set of scores, this can be accepted as the test simply doing its job, that is, that they had not (yet) achieved the level of proficiency demanded at that band level. However, participants were confused by what appeared to them to be an inconsistency in the way in which



scores were given, particularly on the productive skills. They had difficulty understanding how a candidate could achieve different band scores on the same subtest on repeat sittings, and they tended to attribute this apparent fluctuation to the way in which examiners awarded scores rather than to the natural variation that may occur in test performance over time, in different test contexts, on different topics and in different modes.

These feelings were compounded by the requirement by some major recognising institutions who use the test scores that all four band score targets be met in a single setting of the test, that is, they would not accept that candidates had met requirements if they had achieved the required band score for each test section across different tests. Candidates who had difficulty achieving all the individual subtest band scores that they needed within a single sitting of the test resented having to take the whole test on multiple occasions in order to achieve the four required scores within the same test. The candidates tended to blame the test for this situation rather than the test score users for stipulating this requirement. Clearly, therefore, the way in which the test is used by receiving institutions also has an impact on perceptions of the test itself.

Whatever their perceptions of the test itself, however, a clear majority saw the importance of preparation for the test, supporting the findings of Amer (1993) and Cohen (2013) mentioned earlier. Test-takers reported a range of ways in which they sought to improve their time management, their understanding of how the test is structured, and the language they needed to meet their target goals. They found that practice tests were particularly useful. Even test-takers with fairly advanced proficiency could see the value of preparing for the Test, but there was some frustration that preparation activities did not always yield the desired result. Participants varied in how far they understood exactly what was required for aspects of the test. This seemed to be particularly in the case of the Writing section. Participants were not always clear about what was required or how this was to be achieved. They were sometimes frustrated by an apparent mismatch between what they were being taught by tutors and the results they achieved, and they felt a need for some for more targeted feedback on exactly what was going wrong when they did not meet their goals.

5.2 Research question 2: Candidates' knowledge about test-taking strategies and how they prepare them

Our second research question addressed what candidates know about test-taking strategies and how they prepare them. Despite their enthusiasm for preparation in general, questionnaire respondents did not seem to know much about test-taking strategies. When asked directly about what strategies they knew, nearly half of the questionnaire respondents reported that they did not know any, even though we supplied a definition to help them. Even allowing for a certain amount of questionnaire fatigue that may have occurred, this figure is somewhat surprising and suggests that this may be an area in which potential test-takers could be better informed.

Those who did report knowing strategies articulated many of those currently listed on the IELTS website and some of the interviewees gave very clear and sophisticated accounts of how they prepared them. However, while some appeared to be very well-informed on a range of strategies and how to use them, others were less so, suggesting that in-depth knowledge on exactly what they are, how they are used and how to prepare them may vary.

When we investigated what interviewees had to say about preparing strategies, they clearly found practice tests very useful. Strategies for time-management attracted comment in relation to the reading test in particular, while they had less to say about how they prepared strategies for the productive skills of speaking and writing.



Comments on the writing test, in particular, suggest less confidence among some participants in not only understanding what is expected but also in finding and practising strategies to develop their skills for this sub-test.

5.3 Research question 3: Candidates' activities in their daily lives to improve their English and test preparation

Our third research question asked what candidates do in their daily lives to improve their English and how their activities help them with the IELTS Test. It also asked whether the circumstances of candidates' everyday lives constrained or facilitated their use and learning of English. These are important questions for two reasons. Firstly, like many IELTS candidates, our interview participants all led busy working or studying lives and most did not attend formal English language classes. Their life circumstances meant that improvement of language knowledge and skills was necessarily self-directed and informal. Second, candidates who prepared test-taking strategies could use resources such as the IELTS web site and practice tests, but they did not use IELTS resources to work on their language proficiency, such as making use of the language tips, for example, 50 most commonly mispronounced words; Understanding the Aussie slang (IELTS.com.au/study-for-ielts). The question this raises is whether candidates' everyday use of English in Australia is sufficient preparation for the specific linguistic demands of the IELTS Test. These issues are discussed here from an environmental perspective.

From an environmental perspective, language skills develop through interaction between learners and the language resources they encounter in their everyday lives (van Lier, 2004). An attentive and active learner and an environment rich in language resources will be more conducive to learning than an inattentive and passive learner and an impoverished language environment. The language learning environment can also be conceptualised in two ways. On the one hand, there are the resources that are potentially available to a learner in a particular location and, on the other hand, there are the resources that are actually available and accessed day-to-day. The latter have a subjective character in that they are specific to individual learners and, in part, produced by their activity (Kashiwa & Benson, 2018). At the risk of over-simplification, we might say that for IELTS candidates living in a city such as Sydney, the learning environment consists of the English language resources available across the city, including online and media resources (Toohey, et al., 2015). However, each individual candidate accesses only a fraction of these resources that they encounter in the course of their everyday lives. Candidates' access to language learning resources is shaped by where they live, work/study, who they live and work/study with, and how they spend their leisure time in and out of the home (Benson, Chappell & Yates, 2018). They are also shaped by individual difference factors including their motivation to learn and their capacity to identify and make use of language resources in the environment.

Applying this perspective to the findings reported in Section 4.3, we discuss both the activities that participants carried out and their perceptions of constraints on their learning. Asked what they did in their daily lives (other than preparing test-taking strategies) to prepare for the test, questionnaire respondents identified a range of activities directed at language proficiency and covering the four test components of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The most frequent activities were informal: speaking to family, friends and colleagues; reading, watching and listening to media; and writing at work. Some used English as part of a course of study. We also noted the emergence of the theme of immersion in an English-language environment in phrases such as, 'my life is very much in English', 'constantly communicating with Aussies', and 'authentic materials everywhere'. However, while immersion may be a reality for some candidates, it may not be so for the majority.



It is striking that none of the items in Table 6 was selected by more than 15% of respondents. Reading books, speaking with friends, watching videos, and so on are everyday uses of language that candidates might be expected to do either in English or in a first or other language. Immersion in English would imply that all or most of these activities are done in English. The data suggest, therefore, that despite living and working or studying in Australia, the learning environments of many candidates are not conducive to English-language development; that the circumstances of their everyday lives mean that they are not 'immersed' in English.

It is equally or more striking that nearly 40% of respondents reportedly use only 'basic English', almost 25% have no one at home to speak English with, and 17% are too busy to use English to any great extent. These findings support earlier research that shows that access to opportunities to use English in Australia is often limited both for migrants (Yates et al 2015; Yates, 2011) and international students (Kashiwa & Benson, 2018; Kettle, 2005; Tran & Gomes, 2017).

An important question for candidates who live much of their everyday lives in English is whether their uses of English connect with the linguistic demands of the test and help them to prepare for it. The findings suggest that these activities connect at some points but not at others. Interviewees found that reading newspaper and magazine articles was helpful because the texts they read were similar to those used in the test. Reading was helpful more generally because it was reported to improve vocabulary and grammar. Participants also found watching and listening to media useful for the same reasons, even when the text types were dissimilar to those used in the listening component of the test. The findings on speaking and writing were less clear. Although some participants found that speaking English at home was helpful, the percentage was relatively small (9.5% of those who spoke English at home), while a higher percentage (47.1%) thought that speaking in other contexts was useful. Those who said that writing was useful mainly referred to writing at work or in a course of study, and writing on which they received feedback.

This gives an indication of the kinds of activity that candidates think are useful, rather than those that actually help. It seems likely, however, that more formal uses of English, especially in reading and writing, are of more help than informal speech and listening. This is evident from the fact that IELTS is not a test of informal English. It also suggests that the important question in regard to test preparation is not simply the degree to which candidates' environments afford opportunities to use English, but also the degree to which they afford opportunities to engage with the kinds of English that are valued by the test. It also points to a note of caution on Australia as an environment for English language development. Although Australia may offer abundant affordances for the development of informal speaking and listening skills, affordances for the development of more formal spoken and, especially, written English may be limited to those who are either in higher education or working in professions in which advanced writing skills are used.

The development of English-language proficiency may be constrained, therefore, by two aspects of candidates' environments. First, many candidates have limited access to English language resources. Second, many do have access to these resources, but they may not be of the kinds that connect with the language demands of the test. As mentioned earlier, more than a quarter of questionnaire respondents had nobody with whom they could use English at home. Others said that they had limited opportunities to use English at home. However, even those who had such opportunities were sceptical of their value. More than a third of the questionnaire respondents thought that their English-language development was hindered by the fact that their everyday language use was 'basic'. Both lack of opportunity and the limited quality of the opportunities that they did have were exacerbated, in some cases, by a sense of discrimination and candidates' sense of their own shyness or lack of initiative.



6 Conclusions and implications

It is clear from our findings that for many IELTS test-takers, preparing to take the test is not a straightforward affair. Knowledge of the nature of the Test and what is being evaluated varies widely; attitudes toward the Test range from hostile to positive; there is an adverse impact for many of having to take the Test multiple times; and knowledge of test-taking strategies varies from comprehensive to none at all for half the respondents. Many test-takers have a range of everyday opportunities to develop their language proficiency. Those opportunities that are available may not, however, be of the kind that is useful for preparing for the IELTS Test. Many are faced with a significant lack of access to everyday opportunities to use English across the four skill areas. These findings suggest several important implications.

6.1 Enhancing communication to all stakeholders

Perceptions of the test arise from a range of sources, including how it is used by institutions requiring the test scores. However, the findings suggest that the Test is at risk of reputational damage through, firstly, misperceptions of what it can and cannot do among test-takers, and secondly, the conclusions that they draw from the way it is being used by some institutions. This highlights the importance of communicating to all stakeholders as clearly as possible the nature of language proficiency and language testing in general, and how the test safeguards the quality of the benchmarks it provides. It also highlights a need for more assessment literacy training and perhaps learner training to help candidates make use of opportunities for language improvement available online

6.2 A clearer separation between the Test and how it is used by different stakeholders

Test-takers need to fully understand the difference between the test itself and how it is utilised by various recognising institutions who use the test scores. Test-takers had a tendency to blame the Test for requirements demanded by a particular institution that uses the Test as a means of assessing suitability of an applicant for employment or citizenship. This is especially important in the case of test-takers who take the Test repeatedly due to the requirement of the institution, not IELTS, that they satisfy all four band score criteria in the same test. Test-takers look to weaknesses in the Test and commercial motivations of the owners of the Test rather than other variables that affect test performance.

6.3 Not only what the strategies are but how they can be used and learned

The provision of rich examples of which strategies work well, how they can be acquired and where they might be most effectively employed would assist in addressing the responsibility that all providers have to ensure that test-takers understand their test, and also give a clear illustration of the support that IELTS offers potential candidates and thus help in countering misperceptions of the Test or how it is used. As mentioned earlier, it is imperative for test companies such as IELTS to understand what the impact of different forms of test preparation has on test outcomes (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Cohen, 2007; Winke & Lim, 2014).



6.4 The gap between everyday language use and the language demands of the test

All stakeholders, particularly IELTS and those involved in assisting test-takers to prepare, should help raise awareness of the gap between some areas of everyday language use and the language demands of the Test. Test-takers' belief that because they can speak fluently in casual conversation, they can perform well in the speaking test without preparation is evidence of misunderstandings of the Test format and the criteria for assessing speaking skills. This is also the case for the other skills, but notably so for speaking.

6.5 Support in developing language proficiency in everyday life

The notion that most test-takers enrol in a formal IELTS Test preparation course is untrue. Further, those who do take a course face the possibility of a range of pedagogical approaches, some of doubtful impact (Chappell, Bodis & Jackson, 2015). Those who are involved with assisting test-takers to prepare should give more attention to strategies for improving language proficiency in everyday life.

6.6 Engaging test-takers with the IELTS website

The range of resources across a range of media that are available on the IELTS website are largely aimed at communicating to test-takers knowledge about the Test and strategies for taking the Test. It is unclear how test-takers are making use of these resources. It would be useful to investigate how test-takers engage with the website, if at all, and how this engagement could lead to more effective test outcomes.

6.7 Opportunities for further research

This study suggests several questions that could usefully be tackled in future research:

- How do test-takers use the IELTS website to prepare for the Test?
- How can test-takers become better informed about the nature of the Test and what it measures?
- How can test-takers be encouraged to make proactive use of their environments to prepare for the test?



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Appendix A: Questionnaire questions



Introduction

Q1.1. Dear survey participant

Every year, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) does a number of studies to update and improve the test.

This current project investigates test-taking attitudes, beliefs and practices among IELTS test-takers. The aim of the project is to understand test preparation practices of different groups of test-takers, so that they can make sure the test is fair.

If you take part in this study:

- your responses will be treated as private, and only used for the study.
- it will have no effect on your IELTS test scores.

The survey has five sections and should take about fifteen minutes to complete.

Thank you very much for your time and co-operation. By continuing to the next page, you consent to take part in the questionnaire.

Yours sincerely,
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Section A: General Information

Q2.1. This section asks for general information about you.

Q2.2. Are you

female?

male?

transgender?

other - please state?

prefer not to say.

Q2.3. How old are you?

16-20

21-30

31-40

41-50

51-60

Over 60

Q2.4. Which country were you born in?

Q2.5. Have you lived in other countries (apart from Australia)?



Q2.6. Which other country/ies have you lived in? (Use Control or Command button to select multiple answers)

Afghanistan
Albania
Algeria
Andorra
Angola
Antigua and Barbuda
Argentina
Armenia
Austria
Azerbaijan

Q2.7. Which state or territory of Australia do you live in now?

Q2.8. How long have you lived there?

Section B: Education

Q3.1. **This section asks about your education.**

Q3.2. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

Q3.3. Did you learn English at school?

Yes, as a school subject.

Yes, English was the main language used all or most of the time.

No, not at all.

Other (please explain)



Q3.4. How many years have you studied English?

Q3.5. Where have you studied English? Please choose all the answers which apply to you.

Primary school

High school

Private lessons

At college

At university

A language school

Other - please state

Q3.6. What kind of English course(s) have you taken? You can choose more than one.

IELTS preparation

Business English

English for Academic Purposes

General English

English for Direct Entry to university or college

Other - please state

I have not taken any courses.



Section C1: IELTS test experiences

Q4.1. This section asks about your IELTS test experiences.

Q4.2. Have you taken the IELTS test before?

Q4.3. Have you registered for an IELTS test?

Q4.4. When did you book your IELTS test?

Q4.5. Which IELTS test will you be taking?

Section C2: IELTS test experiences

Q5.1. Which IELTS test have you taken?

Q5.2. How many previous test have you taken?



Q5.3. What band scores did you achieve on your most recent test?

Listening

Reading

Writing

Speaking

Total band score

Q5.4. What band scores do you hope to achieve on your IELTS test?

Listening

Reading

Writing

Speaking

Total band score

Q5.5. Why do you need these scores?



Section D: Planning and preparation for the IELTS test

Q6.1. **This section asks about your planning and preparation for the IELTS test.**

Q6.2. Do you think it is important for people to prepare before taking the test?

Q6.3. Why not?

Q6.4. What things should people do to prepare for the IELTS test? (you can choose more than one)

Practise taking the test with sample tests

Watch videos online of teachers' tips

Take IELTS preparation classes

Speak to fluent English speakers

Read books or articles in English

Watch TV in English

Other- please state

Q6.5.

Test strategies are ways of answering questions and being successful in a test. Do you know any test strategies?

Q6.6.

What test strategies do you know?



Q6.7. Did you prepare and practise test strategies for your previous IELTS test/s?

Yes

No

Q6.8. Which test strategies did you prepare and practise?

Q6.9. Will you prepare and practise test strategies before your upcoming IELTS test?

Yes

No

Q6.10. Which test strategies will you prepare and practise?

Q6.11. Why not?



Q6.12.

Have you taken an IELTS course to help you prepare for the test?

Q6.13. Which IELTS course have you taken? You can choose more than one answer.

An IELTS preparation course at an IELTS test centre

An IELTS preparation course at an English Language College

An IELTS preparation course online

Other - please state

Q6.14.

Do you plan to take an IELTS course to help you prepare for the upcoming test?

Q6.15. Why not?

Q6.16. Which IELTS course do you plan to take? You can choose more than one answer.

An IELTS preparation course at an IELTS test centre

An IELTS preparation course at an English Language College

An IELTS preparation course online

Other - please state



Q6.17.

Have you used any materials to prepare on your own for the test? You can choose more than one answer.

YouTube videos

IELTS sample tests

IELTS books

Websites with IELTS materials

TV/movies in English

Feedback from fluent speakers on your speaking/writing

Books or articles in English

Other - please state

Section E: Planning for the IELTS test in everyday life

Q7.1. **This section asks about preparation for the IELTS test in your everyday life.**

Q7.2.

What other activities do you do in your daily life that help you to prepare for the test? You can choose more than one answer.

Speak English at home

Speak English with friends

Watch English-language videos

Listen to English-language radio

Read books in English

Write in English at work

Speak in English at work

Use English in my course of study

Other - please state



Q7.3.

Is there anything about your daily life in Australia that stops you from improving your English?
You can choose more than one answer.

I have no-one to practice speaking English with at home

I have no chance to use English at work

The English I use everyday is basic

I am too busy to have time to practice my English

Other - please state

Q7.4. Is there anything else you would like to tell us about IELTS and test preparation?

Q7.5. Thank you for your participation!

If you would like to go in the draw to win an iPad mini please leave your contact details below.

Name	<input type="text"/>
Phone number	<input type="text"/>
Email address	<input type="text"/>
Postcode	<input type="text"/>

Q7.6. If you would like to participate in a face to face interview, where you will receive a \$50 Coles/Myer voucher, please leave your contact details below.

Name	<input type="text"/>
Phone number	<input type="text"/>
Email address	<input type="text"/>
Postcode	<input type="text"/>



Appendix B: Interview protocol

Preparation

- Ensure recording equipment is working with enough charge/battery.
- Have water available for you both.
- Ensure you have read and noted any relevant things from the participant's online questionnaire.
 - Ensure you prepare any additional questions beforehand.
- Ensure you have note-taking materials. You should make any notes that are relevant.

Briefing

- Explain the purpose of the interview: that you are interested in finding out about the participant's experiences with the IELTS Test.
- Tell the participant that we are interviewing many others about their experiences and that we want to have a better understanding of what people think about the IELTS Test, and how they approach taking the test.
- Remind the participant that the interview is being audio-recorded.
- Tell the participant that everything they say will be kept confidential and their real name will not be used in any publication of this research.
- Provide them with a consent form and give them time to sign it.
- If the interview is via the internet, this will need to be done by email prior to the interview day.
- Remind the participant that they can stop the interview at any time.

Starting the interview

- Start the voice recorder.
- Can you tell me what you think about the IELTS Test in general?
- I understand you have taken IELTS several times. Can you tell me how many times and where? (we want to know in Australia and/or overseas)
- Why do you think you have had to take the test so many times?
- Are you planning on taking it again?
 - (If yes), why do you need an IELTS score?
 - (If no), have you achieved the scores you need? (If yes, congratulate the participant!)

Attitudes toward IELTS and preparing for IELTS

- All tests are a little different to others. What do you think is important to know about the IELTS Test before you take it for the first time?
- Do you think it's important to prepare yourself before you take the test? (Why?/Why not?)
- Tell me about what you do to prepare yourself to take the IELTS Test. (Ask for examples, ask for elaboration, prompt for each skill, prompt for general strategies and specific strategies.)

Naturally-occurring opportunities to prepare and improve language skills

- What activities do you do in your daily life that help you improve your English? (Allow to answer first and then probe: watching videos at home, speaking English at work, read books in English)
- In what ways do you think these activities help(ed) you with the IELTS Test?
- Tell me about things in your daily life that stop you from improving your English. Anything that would be useful but you can't do? (Allow to answer first, then probe: not having people to speak English with, etc.)
- Tell me about anything else that you think prevents you from success with IELTS.

Ending the interview

- Tell the participant that you have no more questions.
- Ask them whether they have anything else to say. Give them enough time to consider this.
- Thank them and give them the Coles Myer gift card and have them sign receipt of the card.

- **Listen more, talk less.**
- **Follow up on what the participant says.**
- **Don't interrupt when they are talking.**
- **Use "Tell me about..." rather than "Do you...", "Are you..." etc.**
- **Ask for concrete examples where appropriate.**
- **Encourage storytelling.**
- **Limit your own interaction with the participant to asking questions.**
- **Silence is OK.**