

Preparing for the IELTS test with Holmesglen Institute of TAFE

The speaking component

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

The interview has four main sections:

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

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

The interview: section one

Task description

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

Sample questions

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

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

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

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

Typical questions for this stage of the test might be:

It says on your CV that you are interested in ... Could you tell me why you like it?

How often do you ...?

With whom? Where?

Why are you taking the IELTS test?

Is this your hometown?

If not:

Tell me about the place you come from.

Would you rather live here or there?

Tell me how the public transport system in your hometown compares with here.

If yes:

What do you like about living here?

Are there any bad points about this place?

Strategies for approaching the task

Firstly, you should be very careful what you write on your CV as this could be the basis for the discussion in this part of the test and may influence the interviewer's choice of topics for the second part of the test as well.

Remember that one of the aims of this section is to get you talking freely so that the interviewer can assess your level of English. The interviewer wants you to talk about something you are interested in so that you will perform your best. It is for this reason that you are asked to write down some information about yourself that the interviewer can use as a basis for the questions.

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

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

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

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

The interview: section two

Task description

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

Sample questions

It is not possible to predict what topics may be discussed at this point in the interview; however, some standard topics are:

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

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

What is being tested is your ability to:

- ◆ take longer turns in a conversation
- ◆ give information involving description and explanation

Strategies for approaching the task

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

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

The interview: section three

Task description

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

What is being tested is your ability to:

- ◆ use a question form correctly
- ◆ use a variety of question words
- ◆ ask questions politely

Sample questions

The examiner says:

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

Interview card

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

Title of course?
How long?
Location?
Purpose?
Cost?

Strategies for approaching the task

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

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

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

Marianne, I'd like to ask you some questions about your course, if that's all right.

(Interviewer responds by nodding agreement or saying 'Certainly. What's the name of the course?')

2. Use embedded questions. For example:

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

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

Could you tell me what is the name of the course?

The interview: section four

Task description

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

Sample questions

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

What is being tested is your ability to:

- ◆ give in-depth answers to questions about your future
- ◆ use the language of speculation
- ◆ explain and defend your actions, plans, assumptions, predictions, reasons etc

Strategies for approaching the task

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

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

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

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

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

Interviewer: How did you decide to become an engineer?

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

Be prepared to speculate about the future:

I hope to ...

I'm hoping to ...

I'd like to ...

If possible I'd like to ...

I plan to ...

I've always dreamed of ...

I assume that ...

I'm assuming that ...

I expect that ...