

Is the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) for you?

By RONALDA PURITCH

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination is not widely known in Canada, but it is in the rest of the world. Only recently has its popularity increased because Immigration Canada is now using it exclusively to test the language proficiency of newcomers to this country.

The history

The system began in 1980 and it reflected the language learning and teaching theory of the day namely communicative language learning. At that time it was known as English Language Testing System (ELTS). The test became International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in 1989 when a partnership was formed between The British Council (now known as Cambridge ESOL) and International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges (now known as IDP Education Australia). Revisions were made to shorten the test and to replace the Non-Academic module with the General Training Module. By 1995 there were 43,000 people taking the IELTS test worldwide in 210 test centres.

IELTS and its partners continue to develop the test. To date the most recent revisions are to the speaking test in July 2001 and to the writing test in January 2005.¹ Also in this year a computerized version of the test was introduced at some test centres. Throughout the many changes the test has undergone, features of the earliest test remain; emphasis on the comprehension of extended texts and direct testing of oral performance by a face-to-face interview to name just two.

**IELTS has continued to grow and attract more candidates. Now, over one million people a year take this exam in 120 countries and in 500 locations. Test dates are available 4 times a month.
What it involves.**

The complete IELTS test takes 2 hours and 45 minutes and can be taken on one day or over two days. The first three tests; listening, reading and writing are all taken on one day. The speaking interview may be scheduled on that same day or on another day within 7 days of

the skills test. All candidates take the same listening and speaking test. A choice can be made between academic and general training for reading and writing tests. Academic reading and writing is for people who want to study at the university level in an English speaking country or for those who need professional registration in an English speaking country. General training is for those going to work or train vocationally in an English speaking country and is also used for immigration purposes in Canada as well as Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

A person taking the IELTS test will be given a band score reflecting their ability to use English. The band scores can range from 0 (non-user) to 9 (expert user).

How it compares to TOEFL

These two tests are often used for similar purposes; for example university entrance and professional proficiency, but to date there has not been much in the way of comparative research studies that show clear equivalence between the IELTS and TOEFL. The two tests vary in their content and approach and so it becomes more challenging to establish a relationship.

TOEFL's Internet based Test (iBT) established in 2005 remains a predominately multiple choice test for the reading and listening sections although there are some variations in the reading section. It takes 4.5 hours to complete all four sections, and the same exam is taken by everyone. Scores range from 0-120. The shorter pen and paper TOEFL is not as comprehensive. The computerized version is more popular because it allows people to receive their scores on the internet 15 days after the test.

TOEFL iBT has procedures for maintaining standardized conditions for test administration and security which are laid out in the *ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness* (ETS, 2002). In contrast to the TOEFL iBT, official IELTS results are mailed to test takers 10 days after the test. In this time all reading and listening results are collected and can be cross-referenced to speaking and writing results which are marked by locally trained examiners. These trainers are standardize every two years, as well as randomly monitored to ensure standardized performance. Oddities are double checked before scores are mailed to test takers.

There is one area that TOEFL and IELTS are similar, that is their 2 year validity. Both exams say the scores are valid for only two years as this is the accepted “safe period” beyond this time there can be rapid loss of proficiency and thus nullifying of test scores.

There are many proficiency tests on the market. IELTS is rapidly claiming more adherents by testing thousands of people a year for academic and professional purposes that are accepted worldwide; However IELTS is one of the two accepted tests for Immigration and Citizenship Canada. To take the test in Toronto there are now two providers; Conestoga College (<http://www.conestogac.on.ca/ielts/>) and Global Village Exams (<http://www.ieltstoronto.com>).

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www.englishtrainers.ca

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¹ Score processing, reporting and interpretation. www.ielts.org/teachers_researchers/