

INTERNATIONAL TESTS OF PROFICINCY IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

TOFEL and IELTS are the most popular and systematic international tests of competence in English. They are mandatory for many jobs and scholarships. Both of them test all the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The paper traces similarities and differences between the two tests. Both the tests have been in existence for a number of years and have been evolving over the years. TOFEL is a fully internet-based test, whereas there is a strong human element in IELTS. In TOFEL there are some additional passages in listening and reading section, which are not graded and which are treated as experimental material for future tests. This is not found in the case of IELTS. For the writing test of IELTS, there are two modules—Academic and General. The entire TOFEL test is intended for academic purposes. The TOFEL score are holistic ones, whereas IELTS has componential marking. A lot of research is being conducted on both of them in order to update them.

Key Words: International, TOFELE, IELTS

Introduction

With the growth of globalization and internationalization, the role of English as a universal language has gained supreme importance. Job-seekers and students aspiring to pursue higher education in institutions of repute, particularly in English-speaking countries, are required to prove their basic competence in English. The purpose behind this is to ensure that they have no linguistic difficulties in carrying out their jobs efficiently or successfully completing their educational programmes. In some cases, even housewives wishing to stay in English-speaking countries for more than six months are required to produce a certificate of competence in English. Sometimes employers and authorities issuing the visa insist on such a certificate.

In the light of this situation, there is a growing need for standardized valid and reliable tests of competence in English, which are accepted world-wide. These tests need to confirm that people have enough competence in the four basic skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing- in order to satisfy the demands of their professional and personal lives in an English-speaking country.

The Rules of Both Tests

Two such prestigious tests are TOEFL- Test of English as a Foreign Language and IELTS- International English Language Testing System. Both the tests have been in existence for a number of years and there has been evolution in both the tests over the years. IELTS started much later after the introduction of TOEFL. Many countries now regard these two tests as alternatives to each other. TOEFL is universally recognized as a standard test of competence. IELTS is considered to be mandatory in most universities in UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada etc. and is also acceptable in some American universities.

Both TOEFL and IELTS test all four basic language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing. An attempt is made to test these four skills in life-like situations in academic or general contexts created during tests. TOEFL is an internet-based test, which examines the candidates' ability to understand and use English for academic purposes. The choice of passages and tasks is determined by the academic context. The listening section of TOEFL tests candidates' listening comprehension using specimens of spoken English, which are typical of interactions and academic speeches on college campuses. The speaking section tests candidates' ability to speak in English in academic contexts. The reading section assesses the candidates' reading comprehension using passages similar to those in college textbooks. The writing section tests candidates' ability to write essays similar to those which are written in different college courses. The listening section of IELTS involves listening to dialogues and lectures arranged in the increasing order of difficulty. The speaking section has a live interaction with examiner for 11-14 minutes. The reading section tests candidates' ability to read and understand passages on general topics. The writing section has two modules—Academic and General and each has a short task and a long task.

The listening section of TOEFL is intended to test candidates' ability to understand spoken English used interactions and speeches in academic contexts. TOEFL has two formats for this section. In the short format, candidates listen to two conversations, two lectures and two discussions, whereas in the long format, they listen to three specimens of each. However, only two specimens of each are graded and the others are experimental materials for future tests. Candidates listen to each passage only once and they can make notes while listening, which are not graded. They need to answer multiple choice questions and they are given 20 minutes for the short format and 30 minutes for the long format.

The listening test of IELTS consists of four main sections having increasing difficulty levels and these sections are divided into two or three sub-sections each. Candidates are allowed to read questions before the beginning of each sub-section. The listening test has the total duration of 40 minutes. The first two sections have a dialogue and a monologue dealing with social situations. Section three consists of a conversation in an academic context. Section four consists of a lecture on a general academic subject. Candidates can listen to these extracts only once and are required to answer multiple choice questions.

There are remarkable similarities between the listening test of TOEFL and IELTS. In both the tests, candidates can listen to spoken material only once and are required to answer multiple choice questions. In both the tests, they listen to lectures and conversations, but only in TOEFL, they listen to discussions on some topics. The duration of IELTS listening test is longer (i.e. 40 minutes) than that of TOEFL listening test.

In TOEFL the speaking section assesses the candidate's ability to communicate in English in the academic contexts. Candidates are asked to respond to six questions. The questions expect them to listen and respond to a question, conversation, talk or lecture. The prompts and questions are presented only once. The reading passages and questions appear on the screen, but instructions are orally given. In different questions, candidates are asked to speak about a personal experience and a personal preference. In questions three and four they read a short passage and listen to a speaker and relate the two and express their opinion. In question 5, they are asked to listen to a conversation and explain the problem and solutions stated. In question 6, they are asked to listen to an academic lecture and give its summary. In case of each question, candidates have 15-20 seconds to prepare and 45-60 seconds to respond. The whole test takes about 20 minutes. They are evaluated on the basis of fluency and accuracy of content. The speaking section is rated on the holistic scale 0-4 by human raters.

In IELTS, there is a face-to-face interaction with an examiner for 11-14 minutes. There are three parts of the test. In the first part the candidate is asked to give basic information about himself/herself like the name, the place he/she comes from, information about where he/she lives or about his/her job or studies. Then he/she is asked four questions each on two topics. This part takes 4-5 minutes. In the second part the candidate is given a task card with a topic and a few questions on the topic. He/she is given one minute to prepare and make notes and then he/she is expected to talk for two minutes. This part takes 3-4 minutes. In part three the examiner asks more general impersonal and abstract questions on the topic in task two. This part takes 4-5 minutes. Each test is recorded and the performance is scored with reference to

four criteria—fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy and pronunciation. The candidate's performance is rated on the scale 0-9.

It is clear from the last two paragraphs that the TOEFL speaking test examines both reading comprehension and listening comprehension in addition to the skill of speaking, whereas IELTS assesses only the speaking skill. The TOEFL speaking test is longer in duration than the IELTS test. The TOEFL test is fully computerized, whereas the IELTS TEST is personalized. In IELTS, in the first two parts, the materials are standardized and uniform and in part three the examiner has a certain amount of freedom to carry on the conversation. In TOEFL, since the questions are totally predetermined, there is no scope for it and examiners are advised to select prompts according to the candidates' level of competence. TOEFL has holistic marking, whereas IELTS has componential marking.

The reading section of TOEFL examines the candidates' ability to understand reading passages representing those found in college textbooks. All the reading passages are presented in one complete section so that it is possible for candidates to go back and forth in the passages. Each passage is about 700 words long. In the short format for the reading test, there are three passages, whereas in the long format there are four passages. There are 12-14 questions on each passage. Candidates are allowed to make notes, which are not graded. All the questions are multiple choice questions. Candidates are expected to spend 20 minutes for reading a passage and answering questions based on it. The passages are in the areas of natural sciences, social sciences, humanities or arts. Technical terms in the passage are explained in the glossary. Candidates are required to use their skills of skimming and scanning and fast reading. The questions deal with vocabulary, inference, references, paraphrase, classification, summary etc.

The reading section of IELTS tests the candidates' ability to read and understand passages of general interest taken from newspaper, magazines, journals etc. The tests are presented in the increasing order of difficulty and technical terms are explained in the glossary. There are three reading passages with questions before or after them. In all, there are 40 questions. The test examines candidates' skills of intensive reading, skimming and scanning and making inferences and predictions. Time management is of vital importance and candidates are given 60 minutes for the test. There are multiple choice questions, short answer questions, sentence completion questions, classification questions, matching questions and questions involving labels in a diagram etc.

Both TOEFL and IELTS examine various sub-skills like intensive reading, skimming, making inferences and prediction, and making summaries. In both the tests there are three reading passages (though in the long format of TOEFL, there are four passages) and the duration of the test is 60 minutes (though in the long format of TOEFL, it is 80 minutes). A major difference between TOEFL and IELTS is that in TOEFL there are passages from natural sciences, social sciences, humanities and art, which can typically appear in college textbook. In IELTS, however, there are passages of general interest taken from newspapers, magazines and journals. In IELTS, unlike in TOEFL, passages are arranged in the increasing order of difficulty. Another major difference is that in TOEFL there are only multiple choice questions, whereas in IELTS, in addition to multiple choice questions, there are short answer questions, sentence completion questions and questions involving actives like classification, matching and labeling.

The writing section of TOEFL expects candidates to write two essays similar to those that students need to write in college courses. The two types of essays are labeled the Integrated essay and Independent essay. In the former, they need to read an academic passage on the screen and listen to a lecture on the same topic. The idea in the two may or may not be the same and candidates are expected to include information from both of them. They are allowed to make notes, which are not graded, but which can be used while writing the essay. They are given 20 minutes for this and they are expected to write 150-225 words. In the latter, they read a question dealing with a familiar topic and express their opinion on it. The topic may refer to a place, person, possession or situation. Sometimes they are asked to explain both the sides of the issue and express their opinion. They are given 30 minutes for the task and are expected to write 300-350 words. The essays are assessed in terms of relevance, clarity of position, organization and logical connectedness and range of vocabulary and grammar by both human and computer raters.

In IELTS, there are two modules for the test in the skill of writing---Academic and General. The Academic module is required for candidates who are going to pursue higher education or take up jobs in which higher linguistic skills are involved. The General module is intended for candidates going in for mechanical jobs or other jobs not involving higher linguistic skills. In both the modules there are two tasks. The first task is supposed to take 20 minutes and candidates are expected to fulfill the task in 150 words. The second task is supposed to take 40 minutes and is to be completed in 250 words. In the Academic module task one involves transfer of information. The question paper contains a table, graph or pic-chart giving statistical and other kinds of information and candidates are expected to write a report based on it. The answer is expected to contain an overview and candidates are expected to comment

on the general trends observed in the diagram. In this task information is transferred from the visual form into a descriptive form. In the General module candidates are asked to write a formal or semi-formal letter on the given topic and they are expected to deal with three points given. Task two in both the modules expects students to write an essay on the given topic. The topic usually consists of a statement followed by one or two questions. The topic is such that it is possible to have two opposite points of view about the topic. Candidates are expected to explain both the points of view and give their own opinion. They are also asked to give examples from day-to-day life and their experiences as well. Candidates' writing skills are assessed with reference to four criteria---task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource and grammatical range and accuracy.

As far as the test of writing is concerned, TOEFL has the same standardized test for everyone, but IELTS has two modules-General and Academic. TOEFL comes close to the Academic module of IELTS. Both TOEFL and IELTS consist of two tasks. In TOEFL both the tasks are essays, whereas in IELTS the first task involves transfer of information or letter writing and the second one is an essay. The first essay in TOEFL indirectly tests reading comprehension and listening comprehension as well and therefore, it is more complex than task 1 of IELTS. The word limits in TOEFL are greater than in IELTS. The word limit for task 1 in IELTS is the minimum requirement for the Integrated Essay in TOEFL, i.e. 150 words. The Independent Essay of TOEFL is longer (300-350) than task 2 of IELTS (250 words). The criteria for assessment are similar in TOEFL and IELTS, but TOEFL involves global assessment of the essays involving those criteria. In IELTS, there are four heads under which the candidates are given score separately and the maximum score under each is 9. In TOEFL, it is 5. In IELTS, for each score, there is a detailed specification of the candidate's proficiency with reference to each head. The TOEFL score is a holistic one, whereas IELTS implements componential scoring and it may be considered to be more reliable and valid.

Conclusion

The foregoing paragraphs make it clear that the two most popular and recognized tests of English---TOEFL and IELTS--- offer a reliable indication of candidates' competence in all four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. A major difference between the two is that TOEFL is fully internet-based test, whereas IELTS has a perceivable human element. The speaking test of OEFL involves both reading comprehension and listening comprehension in addition to the skill of speaking, whereas in IELTS there is a live interaction

with the examiner, though most of the materials used by the speaking examiner is standardized and predetermined. Both the TOEFL and IELTS speaking tests are evaluated by human examiners. The writing test of TOEFL also involves reading comprehension and listening comprehension in addition to the skill of writing, because the prompts are minimal. The TOEFL writing test is assessed by both human and computer raters, whereas the IELTS writing test is assessed exclusively by human examiners. The TOEFL tests of speaking and writing are more complex in nature because they test more than one skill, whereas the IELTS focuses on individual skills only. TOEFL also has some additional passages for testing which are not rated and they are used as experimental materials for future tests. IELTS does not use any such materials. The speaking section of TOEFL is rated on holistic scale of 0-4, but the writing section is rated on the holistic scale of 0-5. In IELTS there is a scale of 0-9. The TOEFL score is a holistic one, whereas IELTS uses componential scoring. A lot of research is being conducted on both TOEFL and IELTS and there are periodic revisions in both of them. Both the tests are highly reliable and prestigious.

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