Report 1

A critical analysis of selected IELTS preparation materials

December 1999

Authors

Rae Everett and Judy Colman, Project Managers,
Language Training Centre, University of New England

Abstract

Commercially produced IELTS preparation materials are becoming increasingly available for use by students in self-study programs and by teachers as classroom resources in IELTS preparation courses. This study investigated the appropriateness of the content, organisation, learning approaches and presentation of the listening and reading components of six of the most widely used of these publications.

A numerical analysis was conducted of item-types and a criterion-based evaluation of passages/texts and items. The latter used a purpose-designed set of criteria to facilitate comparisons across texts and tests. Results of analyses were tabulated, and these tables form the basis of discussion in the body of the report. Further analysis considered more subjective perspectives gained from users through student surveys and structured teacher interviews in three Australian language centres. The publications were found to provide a wide range of resources suitable both for self-study and in the classroom. A number of recommendations referring particularly to the reading texts are made, but there are also some observations made concerning the practice tests in general and the need to eliminate elements which may lead to confusion and frustration on the part of students.

The study also considered the broader issue of the role of the publications in preparing students for the IELTS and in the development of language skills in general, with particular reference to preparation for further study. The study finds that IELTS preparation materials should include more texts and tasks that would contribute to the social and academic acculturation of students. As the IELTS was found to have increasingly significant impact on teaching programs and student self-study programs, then publications purporting to prepare students for the IELTS have a responsibility to not only simulate practice tests but to also contribute positively to the development of overall language, and learning skills.

Contents

1.0   Introduction

1.1   Notes on terminology

Throughout the report the word *text* is used to refer to both listening and reading passages which constitute the core of various practice tests.

The word *test* is used to refer to complete practice tests or sections of these tests, test instructions, test passages and test questions and visual elements (eg. tables for completion tasks).

Throughout this evaluation, the term *confusing* has been used negatively, to mean that the text is not clear, while the terms *challenging, demanding* or *raised level of difficulty* indicate that the proficiency of the listener is being tested.

'*Student*' is generally interpreted as an international student, preparing for tertiary study in Australia. Students we consulted in the project, however, were all based-in Australia and undertaking IELTS preparation at an ELICOS college.

1.2   Rationale and aims

This study has been prompted by concerns voiced by teachers and students over issues related to preparation for the IELTS. Negotiating a pathway through the many IELTS preparation materials can be quite daunting for both teacher and student. Preparing for IELTS has become a major issue now that achieving the required result in the IELTS has become such a significant factor for international students attempting to demonstrate their readiness for tertiary study in Australia. More recently IELTS has also become significant for those seeking permanent resident status in Australia and New Zealand. Because the test plays such an important role in the life decisions of potential students and immigrants, it is not surprising that explicit test preparation is in demand and that test preparation materials have proliferated, both through commercial publishing channels and through IELTS preparation programs in ELICOS centres on-shore and a range of language centres off-shore. However, the language proficiency demands of these training materials has generally not been established and the appropriateness of the content, organisation, learning approaches and presentation has also not been systematically reviewed. Thirdly, the perceptions of users (students and teachers) have not been systematically collected and analysed.

This study aimed to develop an evaluation framework and criteria for reviewing a range of IELTS preparation and practice materials for the listening and reading sub-tests. The resulting framework and criteria were applied to these materials with a view to establishing the extent to which the materials parallel the demands of the IELTS test in regards to topic and content of text-types, and in structure, layout and design of question-types.

The evaluation framework takes into account the range of text features, question-types and task characteristics represented in the materials. The study also investigated the extent to which the practice tests and accompanying materials include instruction and practice in test-taking skills (eg. time management; interpreting instructions/questions), and learning strategies for the specific tasks incorporated in the listening and reading sub-tests.

The study also taps both teacher and learner perceptions of the materials and the significance of these perceptions for test outcomes. The extent to which the materials could contribute to an IELTS preparation course is also discussed. Related issues raised by the teachers interviewed are included in the discussion.

The researchers did not have access to authentic IELTS listening and reading test materials because of test security restrictions. However, they were given access to the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)* for the duration of the study. The researchers used the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)* and the *IELTS Specimen Materials* as benchmarks to compare preparation materials to authentic IELTS listening and reading tests, in terms of levels of difficulty of tasks and items and appropriateness of topics. This naturally limited the extent to which we could directly comment on equivalence between authentic tests and practice tests. However, as the *Specimen Materials* are

generally drawn from obsolete test versions, it was not entirely ineffective and did allow our comments to go beyond personal observations to relate to some more independent IELTS points of reference.

As the report developed, the option of giving it greater practical educational application emerged. This led to a decision by the Project Officer to ensure the report spoke to teachers working in the area of English-for-academic-purposes (EAP) and IELTS preparation, since they are the direct, natural consumers of information on IELTS-related materials. Assisting teachers to select materials that more closely matched their learners' needs was seen as a useful outcome of the study. However, targeting teachers' needs in this way has, to some extent, limited the more analytic and evaluative objectives with which the project began and resulted in a longer, more descriptive study.

From the aims outlined above, it should be clear that this study is concerned with a range of issues arising out of, first, the plan to analyse and evaluate IELTS preparation materials in the context of their use by teachers familiar with the publications; and, second, to investigate teacher perspectives and related discussion on issues surrounding IELTS preparation.

Testing and assessment procedures in general have been dealt with extensively in the recent literature and there is a range of articles investigating issues surrounding the IELTS, the various modules of the test, the extent to which the student's language is tested by the IELTS and the difficulties candidates may face in taking the IELTS. However, there is little written on the preparation materials and how effective the materials may be in assisting students in their preparation for the IELTS. In this study, issues involved in IELTS preparation have been investigated and hopefully some of the concerns raised will provide the impetus for further investigation and discussion.

1.3   Literature review

Before commencing the analytic aspects of the study a brief survey of publications on language assessment and language test preparation was undertaken. This survey identified key antecedents to the present study and sought approaches to materials evaluation that could inform the present study. The resulting literature review thus contextualises the current study. In the materials studied, we found no evaluation framework that could simply be adopted for this study. However, insight into constructing such a framework was gained from published discussion of principles of test design and materials development.

1.3.1   Evaluating materials

Issues relating to the task of evaluating test and test preparation materials include the fundamental issues of test-setting and identification of the skills being tested in both reading and listening tests (Hughes 1989, Nunan 1995). The study also needed to address the issue of whether preparation materials were more or less difficult than the IELTS test itself, or of equivalent difficulty. This raised the need to clarify what creates "difficulty" for readers and listeners from the IELTS target group, and what makes test items more or less difficult. A related issue in evaluating the practice tests and associated strategies is the lexical demands of the texts. A study by Khodady and Herriman (1996) demonstrates the importance of "contextual lexical knowledge". Relevant to the evaluation of the listening tests was the review of five listening textbooks by Flowerdew and Miller (1997). The development of criteria for use in evaluating second-language learning (L2) materials is outlined by Tomlinson (1998).

In this context a prior question for the study was: "How do you ensure you are testing listening/reading and not some other skill?". For both listening and reading tests, Hughes investigates some of the difficulties faced by the language tester in setting "reading and listening tasks which will result in behaviour that will demonstrate their successful completion" (1998, p.116). The macro-skills to be tested and the associated micro-skills are listed as a basis both for the setting of tests and the teaching of those skills.

1.3.1a   Reading tests

One issue for the evaluation of reading test preparation materials was clarifying the concept of how reading is best tested. Hughes suggests that "there is a case for having only items which test macro-

skills since the successful completion of these would imply command of relevant micro-skills" (p. 117). The identification of macro-skills such as "scanning the text to locate specific information; identifying examples presented in support of an argument; (and) identifying stages of an argument" (p. 117), has been included in the current investigation of the practice tests. Teaching materials and practice activities relating to the micro-skills listed by Hughes, eg. "using context to guess meanings of unfamiliar words" and "understanding relations and between parts of the text by recognising indicators in discourse" (p. 117), were found more often in the publications which focused on preparation as well as practice for the IELTS, eg. van Bemmel and Tucker (1997), Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998) and Sahanaya Lindeck and Stewart (1998). Since IELTS is a proficiency test which identifies performance across a continuum, it necessarily includes items testing both macro- and micro-skills. At the higher proficiency levels students my effectively perform macro-skill tasks, while at the lower levels they may perform only micro-skill tasks successfully. The present study was therefore interested in looking at test preparation materials from both points of view.

Discussing reading from a discourse perspective, Nunan (1995) specifies some elements of texts which make them easier to process. In regard to the content of a text, Nunan states that: "the more predictable a sequence of linguistic elements, the more readily a text will be processed" and "a second way of exploiting the relationship between linguistic and extra-linguistic worlds is to ensure not only that linguistic elements are more predictable but that the experiential content is more familiar" (p. 66). The requirement of predictability relates both to topic accessibility in educational and cultural terms, and to the degree of formality and therefore complexity of the language of texts. While the aim of the practice tests under review is obviously not to provide texts which are 'easy to process', an awareness of the factors contributing to the difficulty of the text or the task makes it easier to determine that level of difficulty. Other text variables contributing to text difficulty include "sentence structure and length, vocabulary intensity, number of new concepts introduced, and the difficulty and novelty of the subject matter" (Aslanian, cited in Nunan 1995, p. 66).

These concepts together reinforced the establishment of an evaluation criteria in the current study of "level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text", which has been used in analysing both reading and listening preparation texts.

In their study entitled 'Contextual lexical knowledge and reading comprehension: assessment and relationship', Khodady and Herriman (1996) conclude that there is a direct "positive relationship between lexical knowledge and reading comprehension" (p. 108), a conclusion underlying the importance given to the vocabulary used in the practice tests in the present study. Also significant is the authors' research in reading test item-types and the finding that "multiple choice item tests do not discriminate between less able and more able native and non-native speakers as well as definition tasks do" (p. 109). While item-types were not central to the present study, multiple-choice item-types were discussed in the teacher interviews. The count of item-types in Table 1(a-g) and 3(a-g) included a frequency count of multiple choice items. This showed wide variation in the use of this item-type both within and between the various sets of preparation materials reviewed.

1.3.1b Listening tests

In considering features of listening test preparation, the issue of relative difficulty of texts and items is again featured. With reference to listening tests, Hughes points out some of the parallels in testing reading and listening but also outlines some of the additional features of listening texts that cause problems for the listener (p. 135). For listening, as in reading, Hughes begins with a list of macro-skills, including: 'listening for specific information; obtaining the gist of what is being said; following directions; and following instructions" and continues with a list of micro-skills (p. 135).

Hughes lists a number of text-types and states that the "passages must be chosen with the test specifications in mind" (p. 136). A variety of sources and suggestions for adapting and presenting authentic texts are given. Nunan (1995, p. 27) also discusses issues involved in the presentation of authentic texts. Particularly useful is the outline of "reasonable expectations" in setting listening tests provided by Hughes (1989). The importance of "keeping items sufficiently far apart in the text" (p. 137) for candidates to have time understand and write down the first answer, and then process the next question, is important in the preparation of listening tests. Also noted by Hughes is the need to provide

markers to alert the listener to the fact that "the information called for is about to be heard" (p. 137). Both these points were incorporated in the criteria of 'Complexity of tasks' in the list of 'Test features' developed for the evaluation of the listening practice tests (see Figure 1a below).

Nunan (1995) also discusses approaches to listening comprehension and mentions elements of task-setting which make the task more meaningful to the students. Points made by Nunan in understanding the role of the listener (for example: "providing a context, enables the listener to bring knowledge from outside the text to the task of interpreting and comprehending the text itself" (p. 18)) were taken into account both in investigating the relationships between the texts and the tasks in the practice tests, and the materials provided for test preparation. Descriptions presented under 'Task characteristics' for various publications in the 'Evaluation table for the listening tests' (Appendix 2), reflect this approach to the concept of task difficulty.

In regard to the complexity of the listening tasks, Brown and Yule outline four "clusters of factors which can affect the difficulty of oral language tasks"(in Nunan 1995, p. 25). These factors relate to the speaker and the delivery of the text; the listener and the role and involvement of the listener; the content of the text including grammar, vocabulary, information structure and assumed knowledge; and the support provided, ie. pictures, diagrams and visual aids. This summary was particularly useful in investigating the difficulty of the listening texts and tasks. These "clusters of factors" are reflected in many of the descriptive comments on specific listening texts in the tables of Appendix 2 and in the discussion of issues in Section 3.0 below.

Factors affecting the difficulty of the listening tasks listed by Anderson and Lynch include: "the organisation of information; the familiarity of the topic; the explicitness and sufficiency of the information; the type of referring expressions used; and whether the text described 'static' or dynamic relationships" (in Nunan 1995, p. 25). Nunan also points out that while the text may be difficult, the task can be modified to simplify the demands on the listener. The relationship between task and text was also investigated in this study.

The construction of the item-types in the IELTS was the subject of a study by Coleman and Heap (1998), in their report on student perceptions of, and apparent misinterpretations of, the directions in the academic reading and listening sub-tests of the IELTS. The present study includes a numerical analysis of item-types in both the listening and reading modules of the practice tests. The item-types in the current study have been adapted from the item-types listed by Coleman and Heap. Conclusions drawn in their study were pertinent to the discussion of the accessibility of instructions to the students in this study, especially their recognition of the difficulty posed by inclusion a large number of item-types in the listening test, where processing time during the oral text delivery is limited (p. 71). They also emphasise the need for text rubrics to be concise, unambiguous and specific (p. 71).

1.3.1c Text-types

Hughes lists a variety of text-types but points out that the text-types are difficult to categorise because of their overlapping nature (1989, p. 118). Longer texts are certainly more likely to include multiple text-types rather than representing a single text-type. Nevertheless the concept of 'text-type' is useful in linking text purpose to text features at the level of text organisation and to linguistic features at the paragraph and sentence level. This framework can be readily applied to sub-sections of longer, mixed texts.

Feez (1998) takes a more definitive approach to text-type by listing a number of categories, ie. exchanges, forms, procedures, information texts, story texts and persuasive texts. Gerot (1995) also defines and clarifies the description of text-types from a functional grammar perspective. These explanations allow for a clearer understanding of the features of the texts under review. Nunan postulates a taxonomy of listening texts (p. 21) which enables a further categorisation of the listening texts.

In reference to the variety of texts to be found in the practice tests and preparation materials, the following statements by Hughes (1989) can be used to justify the inclusion of a wide range of text-types. Hughes states that "we do not know that the different types of texts actually present readers with

7

different tasks". Hughes continues on to assert that "the fact that we don't know is in fact a reason for wanting a range of them represented in the test" and "the appearance in the test of only a limited range of text-types will encourage the reading of a narrow range (of texts) by potential candidates" (p. 118).

Hughes lists a number of other criteria for choosing texts for reading tests (p. 119), all of which have been useful in a consideration of the texts in the practice materials. The guidelines given by Hughes (p. 120), in setting tasks highlight some of the areas examined in sections *4.2.3 Range of question types* and *4.2.5 Task complexity.*

In regard to the overall evaluation of materials, Tomlinson (1999) has given some useful guidelines. Three types of evaluation, pre-use, whilst-use and post-use evaluation, are discussed. Criteria for the evaluation of materials are suggested and the procedures for developing those criteria are outlined. While recognising that "there can be no one model framework for the evaluation of materials" (p. 11), the author points out the importance of the systematic categorisation of data. Principles outlined by Tomlinson have proved useful in the present study, especially the concept of arranging criteria into concepts "which enable generalisations to be made" (p. 12). He cites such categories for evaluating course books and this helped the present study to arrive at the idea of categories for test preparation materials. Tomlinson is also a strong advocate for the role of 'brainstorming' criteria, which was used in the present study to develop the lists in Figures 1a and 1b (below).

1.3.2 Test preparation and the development of language skills

There is much recent literature concerned with the issues of test preparation. A paper by Hayes and Watt (1998) is particularly relevant to the role of the IELTS practice materials in test preparation and the development of language skills. A study by Flowerdew and Miller (1997) highlights some of the weaknesses in current practices in teaching listening skills. Carrel and Carson (1997) outline some of the positive effects of teaching reading strategies and both Cameron (1999) and Garbutt and O'Sullivan (1996) are helpful in defining question-types and strategies. Hamp-Lyons (1999) raises issues related to the pedagogic integrity of the teaching practices involved in test preparation.

With regard to the role of the IELTS practice materials in test preparation and the development of language skills, a paper by Hayes and Watt (1998) is particularly relevant and provided some interesting points of discussion. Hayes and Watt found that, in conducting a course in exam practice with "the main focus on selecting exam practice material ... and all lessons including task analysis and some form of language focus...over the two-month program, it became increasingly obvious that the focus of the course was on testing rather than teaching" (p. 18). When assessment tasks revealed that the students were not improving in test performance Hayes and Watt concluded that in fact the learners did not have the "language competence to decode IELTS texts and complete tasks". The study lists the problems related to the initial program structure, stating that "this practice test approach of basing an IELTS exam preparation course on practice test materials was not meeting the needs of our intermediate-level students". Hayes and Watt continue on to compare a topic-based approach which "created a focus and a context for language input, allowed recycling of vocabulary, concepts and language and created an authentic environment for the use of all four skills" (p. 18).

The relatively low proficiency level of students in Hayes and Watt's program made practice tests not the most effective organising principle for their course. This was linked to the further perception that, in test preparation materials, the proliferation of topics did not allow students' lack of vocabulary and lack of general knowledge to be addressed systematically. What they instead offered their students was a topic–based EAP program which included work on test strategies and test awareness. This is a solution many programs have adopted in their concurrent attempt to meet objectively-perceived language learning needs and the more subjectively-voiced demands for test preparation. But it was an approach their students resisted and one they themselves found to be "far from perfect" (p. 20).

In the present study the decision to document level of difficulty for reading and listening texts, and to identify their topic focus, is aimed at assisting teachers to choose the most appropriate of the available practice tests for the needs of their specific classes.

1.3.2a   EAP skills and language testing

A study by Flowerdew and Miller (1997) "outlines a range of features observed in the lecture...which are important for effective understanding of lectures, but which are not dealt with adequately in the commercially available textbooks" (p. 27). The points discussed in this study were particularly relevant, especially in comparing the listening texts in Section 4 of the listening tests, as this section often consists of a lecture or semi-formal talk. The study discusses the 'micro-structuring' of lectures and the way the structures of these spoken texts differ from those found in written texts. The authors assert that authentic spoken texts contain clues to comprehension that listeners need to be taught to recognise. This cannot be achieved by listening to the scripted lectures so often found in textbooks.

Flowerdew and Miller also point out that in authentic situations students do not come to a lecture 'cold'. Textbooks, discussion and visuals during lectures provide support for the student. These observations are relevant to the discussion of how EAP and IELTS preparation classes are conducted and whether those classes focus sufficiently on preparing students for further study. The observations are also relevant to the layout of test items to provide the types of visual clues which support spoken text.

A major issue associated with test preparation is the teaching of academic reading strategies. Carrel and Carson quote several studies showing the positive effect of teaching reading strategies: "Second language learning is not simply a matter of knowing what strategy to use, but the reader must also know how to use it successfully and orchestrate its use with other strategies. It is not sufficient to know about strategies, but a reader must also be able to apply them strategically" (Andersen, cited in Carrel and Carson 1997, p. 19). This paper also emphasises the need to teach "literacy skills that are transferable to academic contexts" (p. 19).

1.3.2b   The pedagogical perspective

There is an increasing number of publications outlining strategies for IELTS reading and listening tasks. Particularly comprehensive are those by Garbutt and O' Sullivan (1996) and Cameron (1999). However, there needs be an understanding of the difference between the reading and listening strategies that help to prepare students for further study and those that are merely test-taking strategies.

Several major issues involved in testing and the teaching practices employed in test preparation have been raised and comprehensively discussed by Hamp-Lyons (1998), in the article entitled 'Ethical Test Preparation Practice: The case of TOEFL'. While the discussion is centred mainly on the TOEFL, and the materials being evaluated are TOEFL-related, points raised in the discussion are relevant to IELTS preparation courses and materials. Hamp-Lyons argues that if test preparation is to take place through "good classroom pedagogic practices" while "at the same time keeping in sight what is appropriate in test preparation practices and what the demands of the test are'", then it must be acknowledged that "the task of designing and writing test preparation textbooks would be more highly skilled and complex than even the task of designing and writing mainstream language learning textbooks" (p. 330).

Concerning TOEFL, Hamp-Lyons states that "because it is such a high-stakes test it is likely to have a powerful backwash effect" (p. 331). Similarly, the impact of IELTS and IELTS preparation on teaching programs and learners' self-study regimes is evidenced in both student and teacher feedback. Consequently the concerns raised by the author about TOEFL preparation materials should also be considered relevant in an investigation of the preparation materials which are being used to shape teaching programs and which often dominate students' self-study time.

Questions asked by Hamp-Lyons include: "Do the books contain guidance for teachers?"; "Are the learners helped to diagnose problem areas, patterns of need or even areas of strength" (p. 331); and "Can the books be used to prepare a rational syllabus" (p. 332). Other concerns include: whether the models of language being presented by the texts are models which will enable students to deal with authentic texts; and that the test preparation practices result in "true mastery" of the language rather than merely the boosting of test scores (p. 336). While there is not a significant amount of literature specifically on IELTS preparation materials, concerns such as those raised by Hamp-Lyons can be applied to the testing preparation in general and many of the issues are relevant to IELTS preparation.

The issue of whether test practice constitutes test preparation is a core issue in relation to IELTS, along with the question of when students have enough English to be deemed ready to embark on test preparation. A major reason for the proliferation of IELTS preparation courses and materials is student demand for these products but, clearly, without a sound language base, there is no framework for test preparation to build on. This was also a dilemma raised by teachers during interviews for the present study. As the use of IELTS for gate-keeping increases, the demand for test preparation from students at lower proficiency levels can be expected to rise. This study aims to help teachers take into account a broad range of features of test materials in their program planning decisions. While to date the majority of test preparation and practice materials have targeted students whose proficiency is close to university entrance level, as Hayes and Watt (1998) point out, these are not the only buyers of test preparation. Students some way below this level of proficiency also want test preparation, and teachers are being forced to undertake increasingly complex planning to accommodate these not-always complementary purposes. It may be that in future we will see separate IELTS preparation materials for Stage 1 (for those targeting an IELTS score of 5.0) and Stage 2 (for those targeting IELTS 5.5 or 6.0 and above). When the added dimension of incorporating self-study options for those not undertaking formal classes is considered, this is a very wide range of language learners and learning needs.

1.3.3   Outcomes of the literature review

In a study of this scale, with a primary audience of teachers, there has been no attempt to present a doctoral-style literature review. Rather, attention is drawn to publications pertinent to the topic of test preparation and evaluation of test preparation material. The reading materials have been used to clarify the researchers' thinking about evaluation criteria and to support the interpretations adopted here of concepts such as linguistic difficulty, task-type and range of text-types. The key questions emerging from the literature review are:

- What determines level of difficulty in reading and listening, and in reading and listening tests?

- What is the relationship between input text and test tasks?

- How can test practice/preparation complement and extend language learning?

2.0   Research methodology

2.1   Project design

This project has been designed to investigate issues surrounding the use of the published preparation materials for the academic reading and listening sections of the IELTS. An attempt has been made to analyse the selected publications systematically, with the aim of determining the range of linguistic features and practice activities provided by each publication. Teacher input and student feedback has been incorporated into the study, to gain a wider perspective on the most pertinent issues. At each step, input from the Steering Committee was also sought and served to modify or confirm project directions.

2.1.1   Selection of materials

The first step in developing this project was to obtain the IELTS preparation materials to be analysed/evaluated. To make the task manageable, and to have a coherent set of materials to review, a focus on test practice materials was selected, thus largely excluding materials designed as course books. The following is the list of IELTS preparation materials chosen by the Project Manager, in collaboration with the Project Officer. After considerable discussion, it was decided that a maximum of six publications containing a wide range of practice tests would be investigated. There were no strict criteria underpinning this decision, apart from the inclusion of a range of reading and listening practice tests in each publication. Our assessment was that these materials were wide ranging enough to enable us to conduct the study as planned. The selection was also in part the result of preliminary discussions with institutions whose teachers and students were to participate in the study. These titles emerged as readily available and frequently used in these institutions. No doubt there are others that

could have been included on these grounds but a limit to the range of the study needed to be drawn somewhere. The publications selected were:

- Deakin, G. (1996). *Practice Tests for IELTS*. Indonesia Australia Language Foundation and Hawthorn Institute of Education: Melbourne.

- Gibson, C., Rusek, W. and Swan, A. (1996). *IELTS Practice Now*. CALUSA: Adelaide.

- Jakeman, V. and McDowell, C. (1996). *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

- Sahanaya, W. and Lindeck, J. (1998). *IELTS Preparation and Practice Listening and Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Sahanaya, W. Lindeck, J. and Stewart, R. (1998). *IELTS Preparation and Practice: Reading and Writing Academic Module*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

- Todd, V. and Cameron, P. (1996). *Prepare for IELTS Academic Modules*. Insearch Language Centre, UTS: Sydney.

- van Bemmel, E. and Tucker, J. (1997). *IELTS to Success: Preparation Tips and Practice Tests*. Hawthorn Institute of Education Jacaranda Wiley Ltd: Melbourne.

- *IELTS Specimen Materials (April 1997)*. University of Cambridge, Cambridge: The British Council and IDP Education Australia.

The *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) have also been analysed, for the purpose of providing a point of comparison with the practice tests contained in the preparation materials selected. While this report also includes comments on the teaching material, in addition to the practice tests which are included in the books, the main focus of the analysis and evaluation has been on the practice tests.

The publications by Cameron (1999) and Garbutt and O'Sullivan (1996) have been taken into consideration in the discussion of strategies and test-taking skills as these are the focus of the two publications. Other publications have been excluded largely to keep the project on a manageable scale and to ensure comprehensive examination of selected materials.

2.1.2   Framework for comparison

After collecting the materials to be investigated, some preliminary listening and reading of the contents of each was done, and key areas of similarity and difference were noted. The next step was to establish a framework for the investigation and comparison of the materials. This was done by the Project Officer, in conjunction with the Project Manager and with input from the Steering Committee. The key areas for investigation of both reading and listening texts were generated and defined. Three broad categories of information were identified, namely: 'Text characteristics', 'Test features' and 'Test management strategies'. Figures 1a and 1b below list the types of information we were looking at, within each of these categories.

Figure 1a: Criteria used in discussing and comparing features of the listening practice tests and preparation materials

Text characteristics:

- Topics: range and relevance

- Range of text-types and linguistic features

- Level of difficulty relating to text delivery, pace of delivery, clarity of enunciation, and other features of oral language, which affect the students' ability to identify essential information

- Level of linguistic complexity and organisational difficulty of the text: text structure including repetitions, re-wording, summary sentences, potentially confusing contradictions, difficult or unfamiliar vocabulary and other features which assist or hinder the learner in fulfilling the task

Test features:

- Test layout: clarity of layout and consistency with *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997)

- Accessibility of instructions to students

- Reading and vocabulary demands of tasks

- Range of question-types

- Variety of task-types: the range of skills learners are required to display

- Complexity of tasks: the relationship between the text and the question and the level of skills required to complete the task

Test management strategies:

- Test-taking skills: hints and teaching points on managing the test as a whole

- Strategies for managing individual tasks: explanation of, practice exercises and teaching points focused on particular questions and task-types

- Other: other features of the book, including layout and accessibility of scripts, extra exercises, answer keys

Figure 1b: Criteria used in analysing features of the reading practice tests and preparation materials

Text characteristics:

- Topics: range and relevance
- Range of text-types and linguistic features
- Level of linguistic complexity of sentence and text structure, vocabulary contextualisation, in-text definitions, concrete or abstract concepts

Test features:

- Test layout: clarity of layout and consistency with *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997)
- Accessibility of instructions to students
- Range of question-types
- Variety of task-types: the range of skills learners are required to display
- Complexity of tasks: the relationship between the text, the question and the level of skills required to complete the task

Test management features:

- Test-taking skills: hints and teaching points on managing the test as a whole
- Strategies for managing individual tasks: explanation of, practice exercises and teaching points focused on particular question and task-type
- Other additional features of the material, including layout and accessibility of scripts, extra exercises, answer keys

The category of 'Text characteristics' was established to enable the tracking of insights relating to the focus, purpose, organisation and linguistic structure of the input material (called 'texts' in this study) for both the listening and reading practice test. Summarising the features of these texts was clearly essential to enable conclusions about their relative complexity and accessibility, as both the literature review and feedback from teachers suggested they should be. We proposed comparing the summaries between texts within individual publications, across publications and with the *IELTS Specimen Materials*. A broadly systemic-functional view of 'text' was adopted, which allowed consideration at whole-text level (eg. topic, purpose, organisational structure), and at part-text level (eg. coherence and cohesion features of paragraphs, for reading texts, or 'idea units' for listening texts). Linguistic features within and between sentences were also considered. For the listening tests, features arising from the spoken rather than written mode of the texts also to be taken into account.

Again from the literature review (especially Coleman and Heap, 1998), 'Test features' emerged as subject to variation and capable of affecting level of student performance. In particular, the language of test instructions ('rubrics') needed to be considered in terms of complexity or ambiguity and prompted consideration of sentence structure, and vocabulary and text in rubrics, as well as the text processing demands of the questions/tasks.

The term 'Test management strategies', was adopted to cover aspects of each publication which focused on test-taking skills and advice (eg. elements such as time management).

Having generated these three categories for analysis, teacher feedback was used to refine them (See Section 2.1.4 below), before they were put incorporated into the evaluation tables (see Appendices 1.0 to 3.2), which became the main tools for recording pertinent features of each test. A description of the tables and the features described can be found in the Sections **2.2 Construction and purpose of**

evaluation tables below. More details are included under Sections *2.3.1 Listening* and
2.3.2 Reading.

2.1.3 Approach to analysis of texts

The listening texts were analysed both by listening to them on cassette and reading them from the scripts provided, and the main features relating to those texts were entered into the tables. All of the listening tests contained in the books cited were examined, with a closer examination of the more challenging tasks from Sections 3 and 4 of the tests – except for one test, Practice Test One in Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998, p. 7-28), which was supported by instructions and explanations throughout. A total of 76 listening tests were studied. No attempt was made to conduct a full systemic-functional analysis of each text or all rubrics, because the sheer scale of such a task was well beyond the bounds of this study. Each script was reviewed against the criteria identified in Figure 1a (above) and features were noted for use in cross-text comparisons.

A similar procedure was carried out on the reading texts. For those publications with four or fewer reading practice tests, all the texts from those tests were read and analysed and features relating to the reading test criteria (Figure 1b), were noted. For the publications with more than four reading practice tests, ie. Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) and van Bemmel and Tucker (1997), only the first four were analysed. Thus 69 reading texts were included in the study.

Once again the omission of descriptive details for particular texts does not indicate that those features were not present but that other features were seen as more relevant to the comparisons between texts.

2.1.4 Teacher interviews

The examination of the texts was given more context by a series of teacher interviews which took place concurrently. The interviews, which were conducted over the telephone, involved a total of thirteen teachers, all of whom were experienced in teaching IELTS preparation courses and, in most cases, experienced in teaching in English for Further Studies or English for Academic Purposes programs. Teachers interviewed were from the following institutions: Insearch Education, University of Technology, Sydney; Institute of Continuing and TESOL Education, University of Queensland and La Trobe University Language Centre. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit from the teachers their opinions on the preparation materials under investigation and to discuss issues related to the IELTS preparation materials and IELTS preparation in general. Prior to the telephone interviews, participating teachers received a list of the preparation materials being evaluated and a brief outline of the topics to be discussed in the interview. (See Appendix 4 for a copy of the interview prompts.) The interviews were between 20 and 30 minutes in length. Discussion with the teachers involved in IELTS preparation was a major factor in identifying and defining the text features to be investigated and in establishing the issues for discussion.

2.1.5 Student surveys

The contact person at each institution mentioned in Section 2.1.4 arranged for class teachers to administer this survey to students in IELTS preparation programs at their centre.

A student survey was also conducted with the assistance of the three participating institutions. Fifty-two surveys were returned. The surveys sought information about the students' experiences with the practice tests and preparation materials being investigated, and their opinions as to the usefulness and the level of difficulty of the practice tests. A second survey, completed by a sub-set of 26 students comprising those who had previously taken the IELTS test, provided some interesting perspectives on the effectiveness of the preparation materials, the way the materials were being used and the perceived levels of difficulty of the practice tests compared to the IELTS test. The data collected from analysis of the range of texts, teacher comments and student surveys were integrated into discussion of key issues.

2.2 Construction and purpose of evaluation tables

It was decided that, because of the large quantity of material involved, sets of tables would be the most accessible way of displaying the features of the tests and their accompanying texts.

The first tables constructed for investigating both the listening and reading materials were adapted from the analysis of question-types used by Coleman and Heap in their *IELTS Research Report* (1998). A similar list of item-types appears in the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers* (1998). These enabled an analysis of item-types used for each test to be documented, so that their degree of conformity to the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)* and the *Specimen Materials* could be gauged. The item-types appear in the tables entitled **Numerical analysis of listening item-types** (see Appendix 2.1, **Tables 1 a-g**) and **Analysis of reading item-types** (see Appendix 3.1, **Tables 2 a-g**), which give a numerical breakdown of the item-types contained in each practice test. The information displayed in these tables is discussed in Section *3.2.4 Range of question-types* and is also considered in Section *3.2.5 Variety of task type.*

The tables entitled **Evaluation tables for listening tests** (see Appendix 2.2 **Tables 3 a-g**) and **Evaluation Tables for Reading Tests** (see Appendix 3.2 **Tables 4 a-g**) were constructed to facilitate the investigation of the texts and the characteristics specified in the table headings. The comparative information from the tables, **Numerical analysis of item-types** and **Evaluation tables for reading and listening tests,** is discussed below. Also discussed are the findings in relation to the framework for comparison generated for the study and described in Section 3.1.2 above (ie. items listed under Text characteristics, Test features and Test management strategies). Information is recorded in the **Evaluation tables** and discussed in the body of this report in relation to the criteria specified in Figure 1a (Listening tests) and Figure 1b (Reading tests).

2.3 Principles underpinning use of criteria

The approach adopted is observational rather than statistical. Linguistic items have been chosen and discussed in light of their relevance to the study. Frequency of use of items was tracked across item-types commented on, where particular items types diverged from their frequency in either the *IELTS Specimen Materials* or the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)*. Individual item-types in the practice tests were counted to establish the range of question-types available to the students and to compare these across the various texts (see **Tables 1 a-g Analysis of listening tests** and **3 a-g Analysis of reading tests**). This was tied to judgments made about the relative difficulty of particular practice tests.

The practice test publications used in this study have not been described individually within each section. Rather our aim was to discuss notable features of the texts, drawing attention to the texts which model specified features, and to make comparisons where appropriate. Relevant examples have been taken from the individual publications to illustrate the concepts being explained. Specific information of features of individual texts and preparation materials is located in the **Evaluation tables** in Appendices 1.0-3.2. These tables should not be regarded as exhaustive critiques of the individual preparation materials but as a means of comparison, and ideally as a guide for teachers in selecting materials appropriate to the class level, and the skills or strategies to be taught and practiced.

3.0 Discussion of issues related to the evaluation of individual listening texts

3.1 Text characteristics

This section should be read in conjunction with **Tables 2 a-g Evaluation tables for the listening tests** (see Appendix 2.2). It is also recommended that the tables be read before proceeding with the rest of this section.

3.1.1 Topics

The range of topics was found to be both extensive and appropriate in all practice tests. Choice of topics reflected concern for interest value, variety and relevance. Feedback from student surveys and

discussion with teachers reflected the opinion that the texts should not only be useful in practising skills but should be informative and relevant to the learner's situation. This concern is shown in the number of texts that refer to university orientation and other student issues. All the books examined contain texts relating to university life, facilities or orientation. Other topics include holiday and travel arrangements, safety and health issues, and customs regulations. There are a number of general topics included in the lectures and information texts, which provide practice in dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary. There are very few texts that could be said to be outside the probable range of student experience. The texts describing the commercialisation of science and technology (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996, p. 29-30), quality control (Sahanaya and Lindeck 1998, p. 51-52), city structure (Todd and Cameron 1996, p. 20), and marketing (Jakeman and McDowell 1994, p. 33), could be outside the range of student experience, in this context.

An issue arising from the teacher interviews concerned the teachers' preference for topics that could be used to generate student interaction and further activities in class. Topics such as personal safety in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 35) preventative medicine and causes of headaches in Todd and Cameron (1996, p. 28 and 39 respectively); the custom of shaking hands (van Bemmel and Tucker 1997, p. 56) and stress (p. 62, 63); and television programs in Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998, p. 32), appear likely to engage student interest and be useful in a broader context. While a criteria such as 'class usage' is not a feature of the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997), it is certainly a consideration for teachers choosing materials for teaching purposes.

3.1.2   Range of text-types and linguistic features

A variety of text-types was evident. All the texts were, at some level, information texts, consistent with the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997). Most practice texts consisted of the standard two dialogues and two monologues. In some cases the monologues were modified to an interview format, with an occasional question serving to break up the text and provide repetition and clarification of essential information. A progressively increasing level of difficulty, in terms of accessibility of topic and organisational structure, and complexity of linguistic features and task demands, was evident throughout the tests in most cases. However, occasionally the texts and tasks did not combine to retain this effect, an issue which is discussed in more detail in Section *3.2.6 Task complexity*.

The labelling of text-types was adapted from the text descriptions presented by Feez (1998). In her terms, the dialogues or conversations, as they are referred to in the evaluation tables, represent transactions and information-obtaining, information-sharing and information-giving texts. Monologues include short talks and lectures. Short talks were occasionally broken up by questions. Information texts, both monologues and dialogues, include description, recount, directives, comparison and explanation. Some conversation texts include the expression of preferences and there are some examples of exposition, but overall there is minimal use of discussion and opinion-type texts. The concentration on information texts, is consistent with the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997).

A particular type of text, having the purpose of giving information in a listener-friendly format, appears to have been generated in the preparation materials and is exemplified by the text in Jakeman and McDowell (1996. p. 78) in which two people can be heard exchanging all the information necessary for a listener to complete a diagram of an aluminium can. Other examples of this kind of information text include an exchange in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 26) in which a couple can be heard sharing information about book authors, titles, and dates at a booksale, and the description, in Todd and Cameron (1996, pp. 37-38), of the diagram of a lawn sprinkler. These texts vary in the extent to which they attempt to reflect features of authentic conversation, but the main feature of this text-type is the way the 'conversation' is structured to provide all the information necessary to complete the task. Further discussion of text-type can be found in Section 3.1.4 below which investigates the level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text.

3.1.3   Level of difficulty relating to text delivery

A consistent finding from student surveys was that students found the listening practice tests easier than the IELTS listening test itself. The pace of delivery was the factor most often mentioned by students and quite a range of pace of delivery is represented in the practice tests. Pace of delivery,

combined with pauses to highlight essential information, and emphasise key words and points, makes some tests considerably easier to manage than others. At the easiest end of the range are Jakeman and McDowell (1996) and Todd and Cameron (1996). Slightly more challenging as regards pace of delivery are the texts in Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998) and van Bemmel and Tucker (1997). The texts in Deakin (1996) appear for the most part of a similar level to the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997), while Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) has a range of difficulty in texts, some appearing even more demanding than the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997).

The texts also contain quite a range of accents but these, while adding to the interest value and universality of the texts, do not appear to alter the level of challenge for most students.

3.1.4   Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text

On close examination, it is clear that the texts used in practice tests have been chosen and prepared with a thorough understanding of the features which combine to simplify or raise the level of difficulty of the tasks. There is a wide range in levels throughout the practice tests. As those who are familiar with IELTS format are aware, each listening test is divided into four sections. The sections referred to here are the sections as they appear in the practice tests. There was greater similarity between the first and second sections of the practice tests, both in level and text-type, than between Sections 3 and 4, which demonstrated a wider range of topics and approaches to these topics.

3.1.4a   Length of text and use of re-statement

The transactional and social exchanges in the first two sections of the tests varied in length. While the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) contained two short exchanges in the first two sections, most of the practice tests have longer texts. Obviously, the structure of the text determines whether the length of the text makes it easier or more difficult to manage. In reference to Sections 1 and 2, long texts such as those in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996), with a large amount of information, little repetition of numbers or other details and very little elaboration of essential information, are more difficult to follow than texts in the same sections from Jakeman and McDowell (1996), and Todd and Cameron (1996), most of which contain repetitions and re-wording of essential information, or elaboration. Similar features appear in the *IELTS Specimen Material* (1997). The added information assists the listener in identifying the correct items and also allows the listener time to focus on the test items that follow. The texts in the first test in Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998) also provide repetition of essential information but subsequent texts tend to be more challenging.

3.1.4b   Authenticity of texts

Other factors affecting the difficulty of the first two sections of the tests (which consist mostly of conversations of various kinds), include the question and answer format, which has been used in most cases to highlight essential details and to clarify information. Conversely, in the social exchanges in Todd and Cameron (1996, p. 21-23), Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 17-21), van Bemmel and Tucker (1997, p. 45-48), the simulated 'authentic' nature of the texts includes contradictions and distractors. These require careful listening and a clearer understanding of the text than do tasks requiring the ability to 'hear' or 'catch' a name or number. For this reason, most informal social conversations provide more of a challenge than do the relatively straight-forward transactional tasks and some of the more formal information giving/obtaining tasks, which are semi-structured.

The conversations have obviously been created specifically for the listening tests, while, conversely, most of the reading texts have been taken or adapted from other, and in most cases, more authentic sources. As a result the conversations do tend to reflect similar characteristics, consistent with the aim of providing an informative text with as few potentially confusing elements as possible.

Most of the conversations endeavour to reflect an authentic spoken text. Some texts, well illustrated by those contained in van Bemmel and Tucker (1997), contain informal expressions and colloquialisms which for the most part help to increase the authentic nature of the text and also raise the level of difficulty of the task. The sentence structure of most of the texts is rather more formal and explicit than

authentic conversation. This is consistent with the aim of providing the information necessary for the completion of the tasks and also consistent with the texts in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997).

In relation to this point, some interesting comments were made by teachers on the benefits they had found in using materials prepared in their own institutional context. In particular, they specified some recorded interviews with academics and university administrators. These were mentioned as providing models and tasks, which both students and teachers felt provided realistic practice tasks, and which were perceived by students as more relevant to their needs.

There is no doubt that in creating tests that can be marked objectively, some of the authentic nature of the material is lost. However, the transactions and conversations in the preparation materials being explored here cover a wide range of topics, vocabulary items, question forms, ways of expressing preferences and ideas and conversation skills in general. As a result they should provide a satisfactory range from which teachers or learners may choose.

3.1.4c Monologue versus conversational format

In conversation texts, repetition and clarification in the interaction between speakers increases the accessibility of the information in the text. In regard to level of difficulty, it is interesting to compare these kinds of tasks, of which there are a wide range within the monologues in Sections 1 and 2 in some publications. The library tour monologue, for example, in Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (1998, p. 39-40) has a number of characteristics which make it more difficult than many of the conversations discussed above. These include the density of detail within the text, unfamiliar vocabulary, and information which is not repeated. These characteristics tend to make this a more difficult task, to a level consistent with the monologue in Section 2 of the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997, p. 4-6).

Some monologues are less formal and will exhibit different characteristics. For example, a message left on an answering machine will not have the same structure as a talk prepared for a guided tour. The information may be quite unstructured if the message is unprepared and unrehearsed. An illustration of this appears in the description of a household routine (Todd and Cameron 1996, p. 15-16). The random nature of the information raises the level of challenge for students.

3.1.4d Text formality and familiarity of topic

In regard to Sections 3 and 4 of the listening tests, there is more to consider in the way the tasks are combined with the text. However, there is also a wide range in the level of difficulty within the various texts. The semi-formal lecture on diet (Jakeman and McDowell 1996, p. 39), with its topic and vocabulary, straightforward text structure and predictable information, and the lecture on headaches (Todd and Cameron 1996, p. 39), with its familiar vocabulary and explanations illustrated by common examples, are considerably easier to manage than such texts as the lecture on the commercialisation of science and technology (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996, p. 29-30). The complex sentences and nominalisations, the lengthy in-text definitions and abstract concepts in this text, make this lecture considerably more challenging than most of the other texts investigated. The lecture on quality control (Sahanaya and Lindeck 1998, p. 51-52) also presents what may be an unfamiliar topic. This text has complex sentences, less accessible vocabulary and concepts and is relatively information-dense, but is simplified to a certain extent by its division into two parts, its straight-forward text structure, the presence of a clear introduction, explanation of concepts and by re-wording and summarisation.

3.1.4e Contiguity of items

It should be noted that in some texts the details are heard close together, not allowing time for the listener to write down the items or focus on the next item. According to Hughes, in designing listening tests "it is essential to keep items sufficiently far apart in the passage" and also "candidates should be warned by key words that appear both in the item and in the passage that the information called for is about to be heard" (1989 p. 136-137). While the texts and questions in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) appear for the most part to follow these guidelines, the texts in the practice tests cannot always

be said to do so. It could be surmised the more useful practice is provided by the texts that have more similar structures to the texts that students will encounter in the IELTS test.

The lecture on acid rain in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) is more academic or formal than the lectures on diet and headaches used as examples above. The cause-and-effect relationships and description of the process using limestone slurry in this lecture have the potential for presenting unfamiliar vocabulary. There is no repetition of essential information but the text and sentence structure are not complex and the key points are not particularly difficult to identify. Those texts used by Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 29-30) and by Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998, p. 51-52), mentioned previously, which do have more complex text structures and include abstract concepts and ideas could very well be considered more difficult than the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997).

3.2   Test features

The features of the tests were examined mainly in relation to the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) but also in regard to how the student and the teacher would be able to utilise the materials.

3.2.1   Test layout

While each practice test was examined for layout features, there is little to comment on, as the tests are all quite similar, both to each other and to the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997). There were some difference in the number and layout of item-types. The *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) have two to three item-types per section. Similar item-types are grouped together. The only practice tests in which similar item-types are not grouped together are those found in Deakin (1996), which have some short answers and multiple-choice questions alternating throughout particular sections. Most practice tests have one to three item-types represented per section. A number of sections in van Bemmel and Tucker (1997) contain five item-types. Tests in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) have as many as six item-types in some sections.

In regard to layout, a practice test worth noting is the first listening practice test in *IELTS Preparation and Practice* (Sahanaya and Lindeck 1998, p. 7-34). The test is interspersed with instructions and explanations of the answers and the strategies needed to arrive at those answers. There is also a number of listening exercises on which to practice specific skills. While the additions complicate the test format, they are useful in helping students think about the questions as they relate to the text and in adding a learning process not available in an unmodified model test. The subsequent practice tests in the same book more closely resemble an IELTS test format.

In general, the format of all the tests is self-explanatory and should provide excellent practice for students as they become acquainted with the range of question-types they may be confronted with.

3.2.2   Accessibility of instructions to students

The rubrics for all practice tests were very similar to those appearing in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) and ought not to cause difficulties for the learner. The investigation by Coleman and Heap of the misinterpretation of directions in the academic reading and listening sub-tests (1998, p. 56) indicates that "students were paying more attention to the actual questions than the preceding rubric". Similarly, in the practice tests any difficulties of comprehension would most likely occur in relation to the actual questions (see Section 3.2.3 for more details regarding the wording of the questions).

However, some differences do occur in the instructions and accompanying information. Some instructions are more explanatory and do provide more of a context for the listening task. For example, including the information that "the conversation is between two people in a shop which sells electronic goods" (Todd and Cameron 1996, p. 21) is more likely to "enable the listener to bring knowledge from outside the text to the task of interpreting and comprehending the task itself" (Nunan 1995, p. 18).

It may be that the provision of such information in the practice tests helps to develop more successful listeners, who are able to utilise knowledge from outside the text. Information about the text is useful in

the teaching process and students can be encouraged to practise the skills of prediction and the use of contextual clues to complete the task.

Overall, the differences in the wording of the instructions may be hardly significant. The *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) do include one question which identifies the speakers, but most questions are quite concise, relying on the format of the question to provide the necessary clarification.

3.2.3   Reading and vocabulary demands of listening tasks

The reading and vocabulary demands of almost all tasks were found to be consistent with the associated listening texts. In a significant number of cases, the way in which the questions are presented and the provision of the unfamiliar vocabulary, including proper nouns such as place names, helps to clarify the listening texts.

In some instances, questions about the speaker's purpose or the paraphrasing of concepts from the listening text raises the level of difficulty of the vocabulary and, hence, the task. In Practice Test 3, Todd and Cameron (1996, p. 34), Questions 36-38 are examples of the use of lexis not included in the text to describe the text. In this case the questions concern the speaker's purpose.

There are also a number of instances where the question contains a less common alternative to the word used in the text. In van Bemmel and Tucker (1997, p. 62) for example, the direct substitution of a less common lexical item, in this case the word 'anticipation', for the more common word 'waiting' complicates the task. It can easily be seen that a listener comprehending the text well may still be unable to select the correct answer.

Summary tasks often increase reading demands by including additional vocabulary and changing word forms. Examples include tasks found in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 34) and Sahanaya and Lindeck (1997, p. 51). These tasks require more advanced reading skills than most other question-types.

Another example of the way in which reading demands can raise the level of difficulty appears in Practice Test 4, in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 29). The rearrangement of the lexical items in the multiple-choice options necessitates the processing of the meanings of the phrases. Merely 'catching' the same words will not enable the listener to complete the task successfully. Another point for consideration is that, obviously, the tests which have several short sections of different question types, rather than only two or three, have increased reading demands. The suggestion that too many item-types "can lead to confusion/fatigue on the part of the candidates and therefore processing problems" (*IELTS Specification for Item Writers* 1998, p. 63), is recognition that a greater variety of item-types do increase the reading demands of the task (see Section 3.2.1 for more details regarding item-types). A wider range of item-types in a practice test ought only to assist learners in gaining more experience in interpreting various question-types and should also provide practice in remaining alert throughout the whole test.

In most instances, the reading and vocabulary demands of the practice tests in relation to the listening tests, are of a similar level to those of the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997). However, from the examples mentioned, factors can be identified which increase the reading demands of the questions. While this will give students practice in coping with unfamiliar and difficult vocabulary, it may also cause the learner to lose focus on the listening aspect of the task and to become overly concerned with word meanings and the use of the dictionary.

3.2.4   Range of question-types

Tables 1 a-g (See Appendix 2.1) show the range of question-types found in each practice test investigated. As mentioned in Section **2.2.3 *Reading and vocabulary demands of listening tasks***, it is not advisable for too many item-types to be represented in one section. For this reason the tests will be discussed as sets, thus giving a more comprehensive idea of the range of tasks represented. The term 'set of practice tests' refers to the 1, 2, 3, or 4 tests that were investigated in each book. There is a wide range of question-types represented in all sets and very few item-types not represented at all.

All sets of practice tests have a variety of multiple-choice items for which there is only one answer. All sets, except the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997), contain at least one form-filling activity. Most tests contain a number of short-answer questions not requiring a list. While the tests in Jakeman and McDowell (1996) have very few short answer questions not requiring a list, they do contain a lot more items in the category "notes, summary and flowchart without a choice of possible answers" than most other sets. The tests in Todd and Cameron (1996) have no task which could be classified as a "notetaking task without a choice of answers", although there are "sentence completion tasks without a choice of answers" which may be said to provide the same kind of practice. The tests in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) provide only one "notetaking and summary task", although once again the sentence completion tasks and the table (p. 28) provide similar practice.

The *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) contain a variety of task-types including a number of tables. One of the tables (p. 7) is quite challenging with the students being required to combine a number of conversational details to complete the task. There are also several discrete, short-answer questions, but no task that has been categorised as a 'summary' or 'notetaking task'.

Not all sets of tests include practice in labelling a diagram. The tests in Jakeman and McDowell provide the most practice in this area with several items involving diagrams. The category "following instructions involving a floorplan/building layout or map" is not included in all sets of practice tests, although there is quite a range of examples in the sets that do include the category. As the language involved in giving directions for following maps and building layouts tends to be quite specific, the absence of this category may be regarded as an omission.

Overall, the range of item-types for all sets of practice tests is consistent with the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) and broadly conform to the range in the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)*. Thus they should give students practise in managing a variety of rubric and question forms.

3.2.5 Variety of task-types

The fact that all items must be able to be scored objectively obviously introduces constraints in item writing. Most of the tasks in the first two sections of the practice tests consist of listening for details, including numbers, names and other specific information. The variety of the tasks consists mainly in the different listening situations the learners are confronted with, eg. face-to-face conversations, telephone conversations, a message on an answering machine, and short talks, and the different format of the questions eg. enrolment forms, a calendar, floorplans, maps, multiple choice and short answer questions.

Sections 3 and 4 of the sets of practice tests provide more variety of task-type. Some of the tasks included are 'notetaking and summarising', 'using tables for classifying information and showing relationships', 'matching lexical items with definitions', 'completing sentences' and 'listing factors and key points'. Apart from listening for the information, learners are also required to exercise skills of interpretation, paraphrasing and, very occasionally, synthesis of information.

While all sets of practice tests do provide a variety of task-types there were some individual tests in which little opportunity was given for students to choose the answers directly from the text. It may be that the effort to provide such a wide variety of tasks meant that the more straight-forward task of taking notes from the text without the help of a choice of words was overlooked in some cases. However, the variety of texts and task-types combined in all practice tests should contribute to the provision of an interesting and relevant IELTS preparation course.

3.2.6 Complexity of task

A number of the issues relating to complexity of task have already been referred to in previous sections. One of the most significant issues relating to the complexity of the task is the point made previously that the tests are designed to be marked objectively so the answers must be clearly correct or incorrect. Obviously less complex tasks, consisting mainly of listening for details and specific, clearly defined items of information in which the exact lexical term or number required is contained in the text, are more easily constructed and answered.

3.2.6a Complex tasks

There are a number of tasks that provide more of a challenge for both the item-writer and the learner. These include summary, notetaking, choosing more complex items in multiple-choice options, and in some cases selecting the correct two or three words from the text, where a choice of words in not given. In a few cases the attempt to create more complex tasks has introduced an element of confusion in the task. Teacher and student feedback has suggested some difficulties in determining the correct answers for Practice Test 2, Section 4 in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 29-30). This may be due more to the linguistic complexity of the text than the complexity of the actual task. The wording in Question 34 (p. 30) was cited in the teacher discussion of the reading and vocabulary demands of the questions. The added difficulty in interpreting the questions increases the complexity of the task.

3.2.6b Paraphrasing

Another factor adding to the complexity of the task is paraphrasing. This includes questions in which the provided word choices are a paraphrase of the text (thus requiring extra processing on the part of the listener), and also the paraphrasing the listener does in completing guided notetaking, sentence completion and similar tasks.

3.2.6c Inferencing

Complexity is also increased in tasks in which the listener is required to make inferences. A number of these tasks are identified in the **Tables 2 a-g.** Making inferences may be especially difficult in listening tasks. In listening tasks, much of the information is explicitly stated, so it may be difficult to realise immediately when an inference is needed. . Moreover, having come to that realisation, the listener may find that the information being called for has been given earlier. The learner has the double task of endeavouring to remember what has been said and focusing on the next item. Making inferences from the text is clearly a skill which needs to be practised in a variety of situations.

3.2.6d Error correction tasks

Tasks that require learners to correct the information in a written text while listening to a spoken text may be more complex than true/false tasks or short answer questions involving the same information. Practice Test 4 in Todd and Cameron contains a task in which the listener is required to compare the information in the written text, in the form of an invitation, to the information in the spoken test giving an invitation to the same event. The listener is required to make the necessary changes to the written task. A similar task is included in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997, p. 6). In these tasks the listener is required not only to decide whether the written information is correct or incorrect but also, in the case of the written information being incorrect, to remember and write down the correct details.

3.2.6e Sequencing of information

Obviously, the level of task complexity of all tasks results from the combination of text and task. The *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)* state that "items should be ordered according to the sequence in which the information appears on the tape" (p. 40). There is, however, the perception among some candidates that this is not always the case in the IELTS exam. This may justify the inclusion in practice tests of some examples of text and task combinations where questions do not follow the same sequence as the tape (see Table 2b, Topic 1.1 and Table 2c, Topic 3.3). This task characteristic does tend to lead to confusion, especially for anxious learners. In the confusion the learner may miss a disproportionate amount of the information, in which case the test will not give a true indication of the learner's proficiency in listening.

Obviously with regards to task complexity, the aim is to provide a range of tasks of varying complexity. However, care should be taken to reduce as much as possible any element of confusion. Tasks that make unreasonable demands on learners can be identified through careful trialing. According to Hughes "it is particularly important to trial extended listening tests, even if only on colleagues aware of

the potential problems" (1989, p. 135). As teachers interviewed on this issue indicated that they had found some questions ambiguous or difficult to answer, it may have been appropriate to conduct further trialing on some practice tests.

3.3 General observations on listening text characteristics and test features

In terms of 'Text characteristics', the practice listening tests reviewed here showed a variable degree of conformity to the pattern established by the *IELTS Specimen Materials* and the *IELTS Specifications (1997)*. Two features in particular represent potential difficulties for students, not found in the IELTS reference materials. These were: accessibility of topic in lectures, and the degree of structure in less formal, and generally quite authentic, spoken language such as monologues and conversations. More technical topics for lectures were generally accompanied by unfamiliar vocabulary, limited re-formulation of information and features of more formal academic delivery (eg increased use of nominalisation). More casual, conversational language, characterised by absence of the explicit, organisational pointers found in more formal texts (such as lectures), and less contextualisation of topic, introduced another kind of complexity.

In terms of 'Test features', practice tests generally closely paralleled the *IELTS Specimen Materials (1997)* and aspects of layout were unlikely to introduce unwanted issues. Some publications included specific advice or pointers for students on features of test layout. In the practice tests, no issues around accessibility of the language of the rubrics were identified, although the value of contextualising each task was noted. The use, in task specifications, of synonyms for terms in the listening texts had the potential to add complexity to the comprehension of the task. Some task-types, inevitably, were not represented in some practice tests, but across each publication, a wide range of task-types, generally consistent with the *IELTS Specifications (1997)* and the Specimen Materials was found. The requirement that listening test items be objectively assessable was seen as tending to encourage the testing of listening for specific items, sometimes at the expense of items which required demonstration of information processing skills. In some cases, the attempt to produce tasks that assess information processing across a wider range of text resulted in the introduction of more complex language and/or ambiguity.

4.0 Discussion of issues related to the evaluation of individual reading texts

4.1 Text characteristics

The characteristics of the tests that have been investigated include: the topics or themes of reading passages, with some discussion of teacher and student feedback; the range of text types and a short description of the most noticeable features of those texts; and the level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of the texts. The texts have been described in a general way with examples quoted from a variety of texts. Examples are quoted to illustrate the points being made and are not intended to provide a definitive list of the tests containing the features being described.

4.1.1 Topics

The reading practice tests were found to extend over a wide range of topics. In the selection of topics it is evident that considerable thought has been given to the issues surrounding the selection of texts for academic purposes. Naturally texts which may cause the reader offence or anxiety, texts which require specialist knowledge, are too specific in content or rely on world knowledge or knowledge outside the texts would not conform to the guidelines of an objective testing procedure. While a few texts in the publications for this study have been considered too specific or outside the range of what could be considered an academic text, in general the reading texts follow the principles for selection of topics outlined in the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers* (August 1998). The topics include passages on general science themes, the environment, health and social psychology, technological and social developments over the centuries, issues relating to developing countries, gender issues and others.

4.1.1a Teacher views on topics

Issues relating to the topics of the practice test readings were discussed in the teacher interviews. Most teachers expressed the view that there was such a wide range of topics to choose from that it was always possible to select something of interest for practice and those relating to teaching purposes. However, some teachers felt that there should be more topics particularly current and social issues which would generate discussion and follow-on activities in the classroom. This point is a valid one if students are to engage with reading activities and if the practice materials are to contribute significantly to classroom resources.

4.1.1b Less suitable topics

Texts identified as possibly too specific or outside the range of the above description include texts on the following topics: fashion trends (Todd and Cameron 1996, p. 60-64); description of various kinds of love as proposed by social psychologists; research into the way males and females carry books (van Bemmel and Tucker 1997, p. 70-74, 90-93); magazines (Sahanaya and Lindeck 1998 p. 76-79); the benefits of feeding certain types of fermented food to babies (Deakin 1996 p. 4-87); or bee-keeping (Jakeman and McDowell (1996, p. 44). This admittedly random sample of texts was selected in conjunction with remarks made by the teachers who were interviewed and serve merely as examples of texts that were thought to be difficult to place in a broader teaching context. Students also expressed concern about texts that dealt with topics they considered trivial.

However, in targeting the above mentioned topics, which may be regarded as having less relevance in the context described, it must also be recognised that certain text-types including those which reflect academic conventions and the reporting of research findings in an academic context, are represented in the list. Further discussion of text-types will be included in the following section.

4.1.2 Range of text-types and linguistic features

4.1.2a Explanatory texts

Within the range of what could be considered general academic reading, there are a limited number of text-types. The text-type recurring most frequently is the explanatory text. Often referred to as a report, this text provides a description and explanation of a natural occurrence, a development, a technique, a procedure or a process, and often includes cause and effect structures. This kind of text is ideal because the reader needs little world knowledge and the objective nature of the text fulfils the requirements of the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers,* which state that the focus of the text should be "on objective presentation of content and argument rather than on manipulating a response in the reader" (1998, p. 61). Examples of all text-types are not listed as the information can be obtained from Tables **4 a-g.**

4.1.2b Expository texts

There were also a number of expository or argumentative texts. One example of this text-type appears in the second section of the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997). While the text has been categorised as a report because it details a series of research findings, it also includes substantiation of evidence, argument and discussion. The opinion was voiced by some of the teachers interviewed that there was not enough of this type of text in the IELTS preparation materials. There are a number of texts which do include discussion and exposition but, as can be seen from the tables, some sets of reading texts contain very few discussion-type texts.

4.1.2c Mixed text-types

While the texts have been categorised as particular text-types, including reports, recounts, descriptions, scientific explanations, and expositions, additional features are also listed. In most cases the features are characteristic of the text-type but, in some cases, may represent a different text-type.

For example most reports include description and explanation but some may also include discussion or exposition. As can be seen from Tables **4 a-g**, there are quite a number of text-types represented. However, the source from which the texts have been taken must also be considered because, while two texts may fit the same general text-type, the language style of each may be quite different.

4.1.2d Style and text-type

In regard to the source from which the text is taken, obviously an extract from an encyclopedia will be completely different in style to one from *The New Scientist* or similar magazine. So while both extracts may fit the text-type of a scientific explanation and exhibit similar macro-features (ie. explanations of cause and effect, comparison and contrast and similar structures relating to the purpose of the text), the style of language will exhibit a different set of micro-features (eg. metaphor, hyperbole and, perhaps, even idiosyncratic language), which may make one text significantly more complex than another. A journal article, for instance, may be classed as a report or a description because it details a new development but an article written for a popular journal may use more 'catchy' or 'clever' language, than a paper designed for an academic context. To illustrate, I refer to the text entitled 'New Age Transport' (Sahanaya and Lindeck 1998, p. 88) taken from *The Economist* (7 October 1995). This passage, rather than starting with an introduction that clearly outlines the subject of the text, as would generally be the case in an academic text, begins with an enigmatic description and the reader is left to wonder what the 'it' is that "Looks as if it came straight from the set of *Star Wars*" (p. 88).

The point being made here is that while two texts may fall into the same category as regards text-type, different features may be evident in each. This complicates the process of teaching learners to recognise the features of certain text-types and to rely on an understanding of the relevant organisational features as an aid to comprehension. Learners must be adept at recognising features relating to text purpose and audience if they are to have a framework for approaching each text-type. Further discussion of language style will take place in the next section.

4.1.3 Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text

There was also range in the levels of linguistic complexity of the texts and, as IELTS preparation courses take place at a variety of levels, this would be expected, It is suggested in the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)* that the texts be arranged with the easiest appearing in the first section and the most difficult in the third. Most publications appeared to conform in this regard in most practice tests. Some interesting issues have been raised by the examination of the level of text complexity.

As noted above, texts were investigated for the style of language. Also explored were: the length of the text and the amount of information contained in the text; the familiarity or common nature of the concepts and context; the predictability of the information; the complexity and accessibility of the concepts; the level of difficulty of vocabulary and concepts; aids in understanding the vocabulary (eg. definitions and examples), and the complexity of text and sentence structure.

4.1.3a Style

The style of language obviously contributes significantly to the level of complexity of the text. A straight-forward explanatory style of language can be found in the texts 'Of Ducks and Duck Eggs' (van Bemmel and Tucker 1997, p. 98); 'The Value of Driver Training' (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996, p. 52); 'Migratory Beekeeping' (Jakeman and McDowell 1996, p.44); and 'Personal Time Management' (Deakin 1996 p. 35), to give a sample. This style would appear to be considerably easier for learners to come to terms with than the journalistic style of language found in such texts as 'Asia's Energy Temptation', 'New-age Transport', and 'Getting Girls On-line' (Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart 1998, p. 84-93) which can incorporate neologisms and other idiosyncratic expressions. Other texts, for example, 'Non-motorised Vehicles in Asia' (van Bemmel and Tucker 1997, p. 85); 'Refining Petroleum', and 'Garbage In, Garbage Out' (Todd and Cameron 1996, p. 52, 79) were found to have more of an academic style.

As a general rule, and according to teachers interviewed, some journal and magazine style articles with language sometimes bordering on the colloquial were seen as less appropriate for reading and test practice as the texts of a more academic nature. The text 'How to Raise a Bright Child' (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996, p. 41) with its pseudo-academic mixture of research findings and unsubstantiated advice is one example of a magazine style of article that does not exemplify features of the academic style teachers felt was most suitable for IELTS reading practice.

Another feature of journal and magazine articles is the 'trendy' language found in many of these texts. Such language may appeal to, and be easily accessible to, native speakers who naturally have a wider appreciation for the nuances of the language, but may confuse and frustrate non-native speakers. Take, for instance, this quotation from the text 'Getting Girls On-line' (Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart 1998, p. 84): "Many college women are turned off by the macho swagger of technojocks at schools like MIT, where staying awake for three days to perfect a piece of software is seen as a test of virility". The obvious question is: What reading strategy would a learner employ to 'unravel' such a piece of text and once 'unravelled' in what other context may the information, so time-consumingly gained, be applicable?

The conclusion that can be drawn is that, while language style is difficult to define and certainly impossible to separate from the other linguistic features, it does impact on the reading strategies the learners employ and on the transferability of the knowledge students take away from each text they study. Additional elements of style will be included in the discussion of other linguistic features which contribute to the complexity of the text.

4.1.3b Length of text

Teachers also commented on the length of the text. As the texts appearing in the IELTS test "will normally be around 750 words and will never exceed 1000 words" (*IELTS Specifications for Item Writers* 1998) it was apparent that many of the practice test readings are too long. However, as stated previously, the reading passages have obviously been selected with a view to authenticity and, in many cases, further abridgment would result in a loss of internal cohesion and perhaps, in some cases, context.

Many teachers felt that in the limited class time available it was difficult to study the readings intensively and deconstruct them to the students' satisfaction. Student feedback on the preparation materials also indicated that more guidance was needed in coming to terms with the reading passages.

The issue of text length is an integral aspect of the testing procedure and the task of endeavouring to test academic readiness in a single test with just three, relatively short readings. To reduce the length of the texts in the practice tests would, in many cases, reduce the number of text features, including markers which outline the broader structure of the text. It may be that if the preparation materials provided more guidance in approaching and understanding the reading texts it would be easier to deal with the longer texts in class.

The number of words in the text could not be considered significant without a consideration of the amount of information contained in the text. Some texts were noted as information dense, as can be seen in **Tables 4 a-g**. Explanatory and scientific texts were more likely to fit this description. The learner's ability to cope with the amount of information in the text would also depend on a number of other factors. The extent to which the reader is required to process the information is of course important and will be discussed in Section *3.2.5 Complexity of task*. From student feedback, it would appear that one of the most significant factors in the learner's ability to master the text, or perhaps perceived ability, was the familiarity or common nature of the context and concepts of the text.

4.1.3c Familiarity of topic

Texts categorised as familiar are those which would conceivably be part of the experience of the majority of students. There may be some discrepancy for readers from an entirely rural background or for those from a city background, acquainted with a range of technological advancements but with no experience of housing or water supply in the country. Also, it should be noted that while it may appear

that the texts describing issues in Asian countries have in most cases been described as familiar, this is not because of the assumption that a larger proportion of the learners are from Asia but because those passages concern issues which should be familiar in concept if not in location to a general student population. Among the topics listed as familiar were housing, water supply, general health issues, general science topics (eg. wind and weather, volcanic eruptions) and some agricultural and environmental issues.

4.1.3d Predictability of concepts

A factor related to the familiarity of the concepts is their predictability. Faced with the heading 'The Value of Driver Training' (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996, p. 52), the learner makes assumptions about the content of the text. For this particular text, careful reading is required to understand the results of the studies conducted. This is a particularly good example of a text that should help identify superficial reading practices. Other texts of this nature include the reading entitled 'Zoo Conservation Programmes' (Jakeman and McDowell 1996, p. 24) and the report on the risk of heart-attacks occurring on Monday mornings (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996, p. 68).

4.1.3e Complexity of concepts

The complexity of the concepts must also be considered a major factor in the learner's ability to process and come to terms with the information contained in the texts. Abstract concepts such as those contained in the texts concerning the loss of freedom for children with the introduction of private transport (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996, p. 39); the origins of Indo-European languages; the nature and resolution of workplace disputes (Deakin 1996, p. 43, 48); modern architecture; increasing work hours and loss of leisure time; and the extinction of species (Jakeman and McDowell 1996, p. 28, 48, 87) will naturally be more difficult for learners to understand than more 'concrete' or straightforward ideas, such as those in the descriptions of technological developments and processes, natural occurrences and some of those in texts enumerating advantages and disadvantages, or explaining simple cause-and-effect relationships.

4.1.3f Accessibility of concepts

The accessibility of concepts is also a point to be considered. Some complex concepts have been made more accessible than others. For example in the text 'Population Viability Analysis' (Jakeman and McDowell 1996, p. 87-88), the ideas appear complicated but the inclusion of clear examples renders the concepts more accessible to the reader. In contrast, in the text on tourism in the same publication (p. 48-49), relatively simple meanings are locked into such complex terminology and sentence structures that each part must be re-read to extract its meaning. To illustrate, the following quotation from the text has been included.

> "To service the burgeoning tourist industry, an array of professionals has developed who attempt to reproduce ever-new objects for the tourist to look at. These objects or places are located in a complex and changing hierarchy. This depends upon the interplay between, on the one hand, competition between interests involved in the provision of such objects and, on the other hand, changing class, gender and generational distinctions of taste within the potential population of visitors" (p. 49).

4.1.3g Balancing text selection

Clearly a balance must be achieved in selecting texts on the basis of the concepts dealt with. Texts similar to those found in high school science books can certainly be beneficial, as introductions to topics, but readings involving the discussion of more abstract concepts are also essential. The way in which abstract or difficult concepts are presented and whether the text helps to clarify those concepts is an important consideration. It should be kept in mind that students preparing for the IELTS often feel pressured and, in seeking to build confidence and minimise frustration, texts requiring an excessive amount of explanation to enable students to catch a glimpse of meaning should be avoided.

4.1.3h Vocabulary

Vocabulary, of course, is an important aspect of a reading text and may seem to students to be the most important part of understanding the reading. A high percentage of difficult vocabulary will obviously raise the level of challenge significantly. The **Tables 4 a-g** give some indication of the vocabulary demands of the tasks. Categorising an item of vocabulary as unfamiliar or difficult may be considered arbitrary but some lexical items are clearly less common or more likely to be used in an academic context than others. There are other factors relating to vocabulary that should be taken into consideration. These include the context in which the vocabulary appears, the in-text definitions, re-wordings or explanations, examples and/or glossaries which are included in or accompany the text.

4.1.3I Complexity of text and sentence structure

The complexity of text and sentence structure are the final aspects of the linguistic and organisational difficulty of the text which have been considered. **Tables 4 a-g** give a general description of the overall text and sentence structures. Texts described as straight-forward were those which involve mainly narration, recount, description and logical explanations. Texts divided into short paragraphs with discrete segments of information were, in most cases, regarded as uncomplicated. Texts describing more complex concepts, with references to information throughout the text and the development of ideas over larger sections of the text, were more likely to be described as complex. Texts divided into short sections with explanatory headings are certainly easier to manage, in regard to the tasks students are required to complete.

In the tables, sentence structures were referred to as complex if they involved multiple or embedded clauses, and if the references from sentence to sentence were not immediately clear. Sentences containing extended nominalisations and complex noun groups were described as either complex or complicated. Passive structures were, in most cases, described as complex. Obviously the more academic texts have a larger proportion of complex sentences while, conversely, often the text structure is more logical and more easily followed than some of the less formal texts. Obviously, students need practice over a wide range of both text and sentence structures. The assumption could be made that those texts with more readily discernible structures ought to be more useful for the teaching of reading strategies. Clearly, the many factors contributing to test complexity can only be touched on here. However, by becoming more aware of the implications of each of the factors mentioned above, teachers and learners will be more able to determine guidelines and strategies for managing individual texts.

4.2 Test features

In general the reading practice tests provide an excellent range of activities. There are a number of features concerning the test and the combination of texts and tasks, which will be discussed in the following sections. The comments are intended to raise the main issues involved.

4.2.1 Test layout

All preparation materials were similar in layout, well designed and clearly laid out. All the tests are straight-forward, with instructions easily located and associated with the set task. Sections of item-types are clearly grouped together and give very little cause for confusion.

4.2.2 Accessibility of instructions to students

Feedback from both teachers and students on tasks in the practice tests was mainly positive. There are some tasks in which students take a little longer to determine the expectations of the tasks. Such tasks tend to be those including tables and matching activities of various kinds. Most instructions, however, were found to be sufficiently explanatory with little ambiguity. In cases where the demands of the task may be more difficult to understand, for example in Todd and Cameron (1996) Practice Test 3, Questions 40-42 (p. 82), in which students are required to match misconceptions about garbage disposal with two counter-arguments for each misconception, the difficulty lies in the complexity of the

task rather than any inaccessibility of instructions. The wording of the instructions clearly demonstrates the care taken by the item-writers to make the expectations of the questions clear to the learners.

4.2.3   Range of question types

The range of question types is shown in **Tables 2 a-g**. As can be seen from the tables, each set of tests presents a wide variety of question-types. No set of practice tests has any major item-type not represented. No practice test shows fewer than five item-types and while ten is the largest number of item-types, most tests have seven or eight item-types as did the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997).

The distribution and grouping of item-types can be seen in the tables. The number of questions in each item-type ranges between one and 16. However, in most cases the item-types occur in groups of three to five. In general, the item-types appear in larger sections in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) than in most practice tests, except those in Deakin (1996).

Clearly, the sets of practice reading tests do provide a representative selection of item-types and should provide the learners with an adequate understanding of the expectations of the IELTS test.

4.2.4   Variety of task-types

The main task-types are repeated in a variety of formats throughout the sets of reading practice tests. There are a number of straight-forward tasks requiring scanning for specific information, tasks in the form of tables, cloze activities, short answer and multiple-choice questions. Tasks requiring surveying for gist or key points occur in most sets of practice tests and include the tasks of matching headings and other matching and multiple-choice questions.

A number of tasks highlight the academic nature of the text. Learners are required to use the references in the text to match writers and their viewpoints and to identify substantiating evidence or counter arguments. Practice Test 2 in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996 p. 57) includes a reading taken from a research report on 'Human-powered Pumps for African Farmers'. The task requiring the matching of a list of statements to the references in the text, focuses the student's attention on the academic nature of the text. Some tasks require an understanding of the structure of the text, either at text or sentence-level, while others focus on vocabulary meanings.

Conceptual meanings of the texts are tested in a variety of item-types. Students are required to demonstrate their understanding of comparisons, cause and effect structures and other textual relationships. A number of tasks also include graphs, diagrams and flowcharts, which require an understanding of the processes described in the texts. In addition, most sets of practice tests provide a range of open-ended questions, as well as those for which a list of options is given.

Clearly a considerable variety of task-types has been included in the texts. Not only is there a wide range of question-types, but the questions are constructed to provide a satisfactory range of task-types. The tasks have been used to focus the students' attention on the features of the text and to practice a variety of reading skills.

4.2.5   Task complexity and related features

There are many factors which combine to determine the level of task complexity. It is clear that the items in the practice tests investigated have been constructed to provide practice in managing a wide range of tasks with varying levels of complexity. Many tasks were found to be quite difficult for learners to manage and a few tasks were found to have an element of confusion. Clearly, in selecting materials, a range in the levels of complexity is essential. The following discussion aims to highlight some of the factors contributing to the difficulty of the tasks, with examples included to illustrate the ideas being discussed. The examples given are by no means exhaustive.

4.2.5a Whole vs part text

A significant factor in determining task complexity is the proportion of the text that needs to be read to determine each answer. If the information needs to be retrieved from over the whole, or a large section of, the text the task is usually more challenging than if shorter sections of the text are involved. In some texts explanatory headings have been supplied, which makes the location of information less time-consuming. In Practice Test 1 in Todd and Cameron (1996, p. 43), the headings enable the learner to move more quickly to the section of the text containing the answer. Compare this with Practice Test 3 in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 61). While the table task refers to information throughout the text, the descriptions within the text are divided into separate sections which makes the location of the information for the table quite straight-forward. In Practice Test 3 in Jakeman and McDowell (1996 pp. 69-73), however, it is more difficult to determine from which section of the text the information is to be taken. Another task in Practice Test 1 in the same publication (p. 29), and involving a table requiring information from throughout the text is made slightly easier by the chronological structure of the table and the text. Tasks in Practice Test 3 in the same publication (p. 89-90), are based on separate sections of the readings with the sections given in the instructions. In contrast, tasks in Practice Test 1. In Deakin (1996, p. 37-38), are taken from the whole text. Similarly, in the same publication, tasks in Practice Test 2 (p. 53-56), are taken from over the whole reading passage. As the constraints of time are significant in the testing procedure, the amount of text that needs to be read to answer the questions is an important factor.

4.2.5b Summary tasks

In relation to the previous point, many of the summary tasks require an overview of the whole text. An interesting summary task is given in Practice Test 3 in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 67), in which the final paragraph of the reading text has been deleted from the passage and adapted as a reading cloze task. The task demands comprehension of the whole text.

4.2.5c Tasks with 'yes', 'no', 'not given' choices

The tasks which received the most comment in the teacher interviews were those requiring the response 'yes', 'no', or 'not given'. Teachers felt they were not always well expressed. These kinds of tasks are often used to identifying the writer's viewpoint. The 'not given' element of the question raises the difficulty level of the task, and sometimes introduces significant confusion. One reason for the difficulty of this kind of task is the wording of the question. Students often find the wording unclear and are not sure whether they are required to make inferences or not. Also, to find the absence of information, students need to search a wider section of text than to find specific information or ideas. If the text itself is quite complex there may not be time to complete this task satisfactorily. There are some tasks of this kind mentioned in the **Evaluation Tables 4 a-g** as being difficult and, in some cases, confusing. It was felt that if the answers were not immediately apparent to the teacher then there was difficulty in helping the learner to understand why he/she had been unable to answer the question correctly. Tasks of this type need trialing, both to determine whether the questions are sufficiently unambiguous and whether the correct answer can be justified satisfactorily.

Obviously in constructing items, making certain the learners are able to understand the text rather than merely having the ability to use structural and grammatical clues to piece together the answers is the key responsibility. In some tasks the learner is able to identify the information required by relying on the juxtapostion of the information within the text, whereas other tasks, (e.g. Questions 23-25 in the *Specimen Materials* 1997, p. 16) require a wider understanding of the text structure.

4.2.5d Visual aids

In many practice tests, diagrams and flowcharts are used to test the learner's ability to follow a process or understand the relationships in a text. Some visuals help to clarify the text while others may be more difficult to relate to the text and may even add an extra dimension of complexity. In Practice Test 3 in Jakeman and McDowell (1996, p. 60-63), the notetaking question is in the form of a diagram which could possibly help the learner to understand the relationships in the text. The diagrams in Practice

Test 2 (p. 47), and Practice Test 4 (p. 83), in the same publication, enable the reader to visualise the process being described. A range of multiple-choice, visual tasks including: diagrams in Practice Test 3 in van Bemmel and Tucker (1997, p.88); graphs in Practice Test 1 in the same publication (p. 47-48); and flowcharts in Practice Test 3 in Deakin (1996, p. 65), provide different kinds of practice in representing the concepts in the text. The complexity of these types of tasks depends on the individual item and its relation to the text. Its clear, however, that learners need practice in visualising concepts and these kinds of activities are useful both for discussion and in the teaching process.

4.2.5e Relationships in the text

Tasks which test the reader's understanding of the relationships described in the text are often more complex than other tasks. Examples include tasks in Practice Test 2 (p. 81-84) and Practice Test 4 (p. 104-106) in van Bemmel and Tucker (1997), which focus on the correlative relationships described in the texts. An understanding of cause and effect relationships is tested by matching activities in Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (1998, p. 84-86), and multiple-choice questions in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 42). Matching tasks in Practice Test 3 in Deakin (1996, p. 68), require an understanding of positive and negative relationships. These are just a few of the tasks demanding an understanding of the relationships within the text.

Some tasks, even those which may not be described as complex, do require a more in-depth or careful reading of the text. A number of these are mentioned in **Tables 4 a-g**. A text may need to be read more carefully because of the nature of the text, as has been discussed in the previous section, or because the questions demand more discrimination. Practice Test 4 in Jakeman and McDowell (1996, p. 86), and Practice Test 1 in van Bemmel and Tucker (1997, p. 75-76), are two of the many examples of tests in which the questions and the text both need to be read carefully to determine the correct answers. In some cases, a synthesis of information is required. For example, in tasks in Practice Test 4 in Todd and Cameron (1996, p. 90), and Practice Test 3 in van Bemmel and Tucker (1997, p. 94-96), learners need to take into account information from throughout the test to answer individual questions.

4.2.5f Items requiring paraphrasing

Another element of item writing that adds to the complexity of the task is the paraphrasing of the information in the text. This applies both to the re-wording or paraphrasing of the reading text in the question and to the extent to which the learner is required to paraphrase to complete the task. Most tasks contain a certain amount of paraphrasing. Many of these are mentioned in **Tables 4 a-g**. While a reader may understand the text as it is written, he/she may not be able to make associations where the wording is quite different. The level of difficulty of the task will be affected by the extent to which the wording in the task deviates from the wording in the text.

4.2.5g Complexity of headings

Similarly, the wording of the headings in the many heading-matching tasks may significantly raise the level of complexity of the task. The brevity of many headings, often including nominalisations and passive structures, can be particularly demanding. Throughout **Tables 4 a-g** there are references to heading tasks. Some have been described as difficult, others were identified as potentially confusing. In Practice Test 4 in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 70), for example, the headings are quite brief and the information in the paragraphs tends to overlap. In Practice Test 2 in Jakeman and McDowell (1996, p. 49), the vocabulary demands of the headings are quite high. The headings in Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (1998, p. 96), contain simpler vocabulary but may not be specific enough to eliminate confusion. By comparison, the headings in Practice Test 3 in Deakin (1996, p. 69), and in Practice Test 3 in Jakeman and McDowell (1996, p. 62), are more explanatory and also, the larger number of headings to choose from in these tasks reduces the flow-on effect of wrong choices. The smaller the number of choices the more likely that one wrong choice will cause another.

Clearly, there are a number of factors involved in determining the complexity of heading-matching tasks, perhaps the most important being the interpretability of the actual headings. Once again, trialing

of these complex tasks would help to identify those that learners may find too difficult, or perhaps confusing.

4.2.5h   Open-ended tasks

In contrast to heading-matching tasks and other closed tasks such as multiple-choice, matching sentence parts and definitions, ranking and staging tasks, open-ended tasks such as discrete short-answers, sentence completion and note-taking and summary tasks provide more practice in interpreting the reading text. This is not to say these kind of tasks are more difficult. They may be more straight-forward if the choices in the closed tasks are at all ambiguous or contain difficult vocabulary. In an academic context, learners would be required to deal directly with the reading passage. Such tasks may involve a more complicated marking process, but it may be appropriate to provide more of those tasks that encourage direct access to the reading text.

4.2.5i   Academic nature of the task

There are a number of tasks that do highlight the academic nature of the task. For example, tasks in Practice Test 2 in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 62-64), focus the learner's attention on the academic conventions of the text. In the teacher interviews, the opinion was expressed that the reading texts should be more similar to those the students will encounter in an academic context. By choosing an academic text of this nature, and outlining the features of that text, learners are being guided in the skills needed to manage academic reading tasks.

4.2.5j   Effect of difficult vocabulary

A few tasks were identified as difficult because of the overall difficulty of the vocabulary. Tasks in the Practice Test 4 in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996, p. 71-73), Practice Test 3 in Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (1998, p. 88-91), Practice Test 2 in Deakin (1996, p. 43-45) and Practice Test 1 in Jakeman and McDowell (1996, p. 24-27), are a few of the tasks identified as having difficult vocabulary. If the learners are of a sufficiently high standard, tasks with difficult vocabulary should provide useful practice in dealing with those terms. However, for lower-level students the problems of dealing with difficult vocabulary may be overwhelming.

4.3   General observations on reading text characteristics and test features

The wide variation in reading texts across aspects of field, mode and tenor has been noted in the earlier discussion of reading text characteristics. Text purpose and audience tend to control aspects of style, which make a text more or less accessible to the student reader. Within the practice tests reviewed, a wide variety of styles has been noted, the more informal of which are generally less consistent with the IELTS–related text-types. A wide range of topics and themes are represented in the practice tests, and comments are provided on the relation between familiarity of topics and reading difficulty, as well as on the added complexity of more abstract topics. The combination of more abstract topics and complex, academic style makes some texts complex to the point where they may impede rather than promote test preparation.

What makes a reading tasks a useful exercise in the practice tests is clearly a complex issue. Awareness of those features contributing to the complexity of the tasks should enable teachers and learners to make appropriate choices when choosing individual or classroom activities. As can be seen, from the examples in Section 4.2 and the descriptions in the **Reading evaluation Tables 4 a-g**, there is clearly a wide range of tasks in the practice tests, of varying levels of complexity, from which to choose.

5.0   Test management features

Each of the publications under review contains additional information and IELTS preparation material to accompany the practice tests. The following section contains a short overview of the additional preparation material contained in the publications.

5.1   Test-taking skills and strategies for managing individual tasks

Each of the publications contains general information about the contents, procedure and format of the IELTS test. In each, the authors give instructions concerning the use of the books and advice on obtaining the most benefit from the book. All the publications give advice on how best to prepare for the IELTS test.

Deakin (1996, p. 4) includes a section on general test-taking strategies. The paragraph on listening strategies explains the way the listening test is conducted with advice on how to follow the listening texts. The paragraph on reading (p. 4) emphasises the importance of keeping to the recommended time limits and general advice about checking answers and other details. Also included in Deakin (p. 6) is a section summarising the key listening strategies and the key skills being tested. The reading strategies outlined are those central to the test-taking process, with emphasis on skills relating to time-management. The advice and information is clear and concise. No examples or practice exercises are included.

Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) include a user-friendly page of practical hints and instructions for the actual test day. Also included is a set of questions and answers regarding the listening and reading tests. There are no examples or practice activities before the practice tests and no guidance in managing the readings, apart from the general advice already mentioned.

Jakeman and McDowell (1996), provide the general information on test-taking skills and being prepared on the day of the test, with the requirements of each module of the test clearly laid out and explained. Also included in the answer key is an outline of the tasks and the skills being tested. For each group of questions, a suggested approach is given. These additions are both helpful for individual learners but also useful for generating discussion in class, and enabling learners and teachers to focus on appropriate reading strategies. Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998), and Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (1998), include general information about the IELTS test with particular emphasis on the instructions and how to follow them correctly. Also included are a number of practice exercises and examples with explanations of both correct and incorrect answers in the key.

Todd and Cameron (1996) contains general information about the IELTS test, advice for students on exam preparation and various practice strategies. There are a number of helpful hints regarding the day of the test and advice on using the various units of the book. There are no explanations of answers nor is there guidance in managing particular tasks.

van Bemmel and Tucker (1994) contains a general description of the test with a detailed description of each module, including the kinds of tasks students may expect to encounter. Also included are a number of practice activities for the listening and reading modules with a comprehensive outline of the skills needed to approach the various tasks. The answers to the practice activities are accompanied by explanations. There are some general hints for the reading modules, as well as some advice on dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary. The additional material is useful both for individual learners and as a basis for teaching sessions in an IELTS preparation course.

5.1.1   Other

All the publications are well laid out and include answer keys, although some of these contain occasional errors. All the publications, except for Deakin (1996,) contain tape scripts for the listening practice tests. One observation that could be made is that most of the publications would be more accessible with a more detailed contents page. If the materials are to be used as classroom resources the various items could be more quickly located if the contents page contained more details, such as reading passage titles and page numbers for modules and sections of the tests. This is especially so in the texts where the practice tests are laid out as complete tests, as in Jakeman and McDowell (1996). A useful addition in Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) is the page (p. 2) which outlines the reading test passages by number, title, theme and page number. This same publication also has a large number of reading passages providing additional practice for students.

Some difficulties were encountered in understanding the format of the first section of Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (1998). The explanation of question-types is useful and the deconstruction of the

reading passages with an attempt to enable the learner to understand why the answers are correct is particularly helpful. However, the lack of a separate answer key and the repetition of some readings, without a clear indication in the first reading that help is available for that text, may mean that some of the valuable information is overlooked.

Apart from the above observations, there were few comments to be made on the publications as a whole. Teachers obviously had their preferred publications and were familiar with those they had chosen to work with.

6.0   Teacher perspectives

As previously mentioned, 15 teachers from three different centres were interviewed (see Section 2.1.4). The interviews were semi-structured, using a set of prompts previously faxed to the participating students. The prompts for the teacher interviews can be found in Appendix 4. While the discussions mainly focused on the IELTS preparation materials, the issues raised were those central to teaching English as a second language. The teachers' most important concern was to help students prepare for the IELTS test without jeopardising the coherency and pedagogic rationale of the English language teaching program.

6.1   Teacher comments on particular materials

Teachers were asked to comment on the publications included in the study (see Section 2.1.1). As few teachers were familiar with all the publications on the list, few comparisons between the books were made. However, there were many relevant comments made on the various publications. In general, teachers tended to rely on those books they were familiar with, while at the same time, looking for new materials to add to their resources.

Teachers made particularly favourable comments about the *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS* (Jakeman and McDowell 1996), although some teachers expressed the opinion that the listening tests were a little too easy. Teachers also commented favourably on the useful strategies included in *IELTS to Success: Preparation Tips and Practice Tests* (van Bemmel and Tucker 1997) and *IELTS Preparation and Practice: Academic Reading and Writing Module* (Sahanaya and Lindeck 1998) *IELTS Preparation and Practice: Listening and Speaking Module* (Sahanaya and Lindeck and Stewart 1998).

Prepare for IELTS: Academic Modules (Todd and Cameron 1996) was also a text that teachers were familiar with and regarded as a useful and interesting resource. However, once again it was felt that the listening texts and some of the readings were not as challenging as those in the IELTS test or *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997). Not all teachers regarded the fact that the listening texts were not at a level of difficulty consistent with the IELTS or the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) as constituting a problem. This issue is more fully discussed in the section relating to learner proficiency levels (see Section 6.5). *IELTS Practice Now* (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996) received mixed comments. Some teachers found the readings both useful and interesting, especially as there is such a large number of readings ranging over a variety of topics. However, some teachers had found some of the tasks quite difficult and confusing. The listening tasks in this publication were also found to be quite difficult and one teacher claimed to have discontinued use of the book because of the difficulty of the listening passages.

Practice Tests for IELTS (Deakin 1996) was felt to be a good basic text with consistent levels of difficulty throughout the tests but obviously not as useful as a teaching resource as the texts with more explanations and strategy training activities.

A number of teachers used the *IELTS Specimen Materials* in the versions available in their own centres, as they felt this gave the students a realistic idea of the requirements of the IELTS.

The two publications not included in this study which were mentioned most positively by teachers were *IELTS: Strategies for Study* (Garbutt and O'Sullivan 1996) and *Prepare for IELTS: The IELTS Preparation Course* (Cameron 1999). Teachers expressed the opinion that the approach to teaching strategies for language learning and for managing the IELTS in both these publications was pedagogically sound and helpful to both teachers and learners.

6.2   Skills developed by IELTS preparation materials

All the teachers interviewed acknowledged the benefits of using the practice tests to provide practice for students in following instructions, developing time-management skills, and becoming less reliant on the dictionary. Clearly, the practice tests familiarise students with the test format and the general expectations of the test and help students improve their overall test-taking skills. One teacher expressed the view that the practice tests enabled the students to become 'psychologically ready' for IELTS. In developing concentration and an awareness of the demands of the test, students are less likely to become flustered on the day of the test.

However, teachers expressed concern about the futility of excessive practice without the teaching of the strategies or the language skills needed for operating in academic English. The opinion was expressed that some students "become so obsessed that they want to only focus on IELTS rather than on the language skills they need to develop and in the absence of knowing how else to prepare for the IELTS, they cling to the practice tests". Views expressed by all teachers reflected to varying degrees the concern expressed by Hayes and Watt in their investigation entitled 'An IELTS preparation course for Asian students: When practice doesn't make perfect' (1998 p. 15), ie. "simply providing students with material from IELTS practice books contributed little to their overall language development and consequent IELTS performance". This realisation by the authors led to the "development of a 350 hour course of topic-based units, consisting of activities designed to raise language awareness, develop language learning strategies, and familiarise students with the exam". Consequently, teachers tended not to rely on the materials to teach the skills they felt were needed, but chose the materials to compliment their own teaching programs. Those books with strategies for managing the tasks were regarded as useful in developing such programs.

Another concern expressed by teachers regarding the IELTS preparation materials in general was that there were too many comprehension-check activities and too few tasks aimed at helping students gain a broader understanding of the texts. This issue relates to the overall concept of test practice and is discussed in **Section 8 Summary of key issues and recommendations**.

6.3   Factors affecting teachers' choice of tasks and practice materials

Teachers were asked what factors influenced their choice of tasks and practice materials for individual teaching sessions. Choice of texts and tasks was most influenced by the range of questions and task-types included in the materials, with consideration given to the level and interests of the class. Those teachers who had developed a range of strategies they intended to teach, chose texts through which those strategies could be most successfully practised. Teachers also endeavoured to choose tasks they felt were consistent with the level of difficulty in the IELTS.

6.4   Difficult question and task types

Teachers were also asked about the question and task-types which students appeared to have the most difficulty with. No distinction was made between the practice test materials, and the specimen materials, and it appeared, from student feedback, that students also found the same question-types difficult in the IELTS. The following remarks apply to those practice test items teachers had used in class. Most teachers commented on multiple-choice questions, the choices for which are often ambiguous and in some cases have such a fine distinction that it is difficult to justify the correct answers. The choice of one answer or another often does not appear to reflect the learner's real language ability. Tasks involving the answers 'yes', 'no' or 'not given' were also regarded as difficult and often confusing. Tasks requiring the matching of headings and paragraphs were also often described as difficult and confusing.

Close and summary-type tasks were also mentioned by teachers as causing difficulty for students, but it was recognised that these kinds of tasks, when well constructed, provide valuable practice in managing the language. However, teachers felt that the tasks that were too difficult were not helpful at all and caused frustration for both students and teachers. These kinds of questions may also promote incorrect study techniques, in which students read to answer the question rather than to gain an understanding of the text. Also, teachers gave the opinion that, if the questions appear unfair or the answers unjustifiable, the students tend to lose confidence in the whole process, perhaps even

including the IELTS scores. For these reasons then, the practice tests have a responsibility to be set at the appropriate level and to be as clear and manageable as possible.

6.5   The impact of the proficiency level of the learner on IELTS preparation courses

Teachers were asked about the impact the initial proficiency level of the learner had on the learner's rate of progress and on the IELTS preparation course. Predictably, those teachers teaching classes that imposed a minimum entry level found the preparation for IELTS both more satisfactory and more successful. Most teachers were comfortable with the idea of IELTS preparation sessions consisting mainly of training in the strategies needed to manage IELTS, with few language skills included. This was particularly so in cases where the IELTS sessions were part of an Academic English Program.

Where students were not required to achieve a minimum level of English before entering the class, teachers expressed more concerns about the students with lower levels of proficiency being unable to grasp the strategies being taught. Some teachers felt that the development of some strategies at least enabled students to demonstrate the language skills they did have, but in most cases it was felt that the difficult texts confused them and eroded their confidence.

In teaching students with lower levels of proficiency, teachers felt that the easier practice tests were more useful in helping the students prepare for IELTS and in developing language skills than the more difficult tests. While there needs to be some recognition of the fact that the practice tests may not be of the same standard as the IELTS, teachers felt that such practice was more beneficial than practice on tests which may be largely incomprehensible.

6.6   Measurement of student progress

Teachers were asked how student progress was measured in IELTS preparation courses and whether the results achieved in the practice tests were consistent with the IELTS scores received by the students. Most teachers responded that in the limited time available the students were not assessed but the practice tests were often used to provide informal feedback to students. The differences in the levels of the various tests did not allow for patterns to emerge over the short time of most IELTS preparation courses but teachers indicated that those students who were comfortable with the tests and could manage most of the question-types usually perform satisfactorily in the IELTS. Students struggling with the question types and having difficulty understanding the complexities of the test were much less likely to achieve satisfactory results in the IELTS.

In general however, teachers were of the opinion that students achieved higher scores in the practice tests than in the IELTS. While it was felt by some that the practice listening tests were easier than the IELTS, in fact the higher scores achieved in practice tests may be attributable to other factors, including a more relaxed testing situation, with more explanations provided by the teacher and more time given for completion of the practice test.

Teachers expressed the opinion that IELTS preparation courses should also undertake the role of helping students to assess their own level of proficiency and to gauge their own readiness to manage the IELTS. Certainly if the materials are called 'practice tests' the students tend to put their faith in them, so the tests need to be of a sufficiently high standard.

6.7   The place of IELTS preparation materials in the broader dimension of preparing learners for further study

Teachers were asked whether they felt that IELTS preparation courses should have the broader focus of helping students to prepare for further study. The responses to this question were mixed. Most teachers felt that students did not make connections between the IELTS and further study and the study plans of the students were so varied that it was not realistic to expect IELTS texts to be relevant to the specific subjects of further study. However, some teachers did feel that the materials should include more academic texts with appropriate tasks, while others felt that more reading and listening tasks dealing with current issues should be included. Teachers felt that, considering the amount of time and energy expended in preparing for IELTS, more could be achieved in promoting the social and the academic acculturation of the students.

6.8   Other comments and suggestions

Teachers were asked to comment further on any of the issues raised previously or suggest changes for future IELTS publications. Most teachers indicated their opinion that future materials should include the strategies needed to manage individual item-types, as already mentioned in connection with the publications by Cameron (1999) and Garbutt and O'Sullivan (1996), as well as the test-taking skills already included in a number of publications. Publications could also provide more assistance in developing the language skills necessary to manage the reading texts by including more deconstruction of texts and explanation of the language features involved.

The opinion was also expressed by several teachers that the reading texts in the practice tests should be more closely related to the IELTS writing and speaking tasks. As students usually have some difficulty in generating ideas, it was felt that it would be of assistance to students if the reading texts were concerned with the same kinds of issues as the writing and speaking modules.

There was some difference in the way the practice materials were viewed by the teachers involved in language support programs at university. These teachers tended to be more critical of the reading texts and felt that more discrimination could be employed in choosing texts which could provide models for academic writing and which could be generally more relevant.

7.0   Student perspectives

7.1   Numerical information

Two student surveys were administered. The first, completed by 52 students, comprised a series of questions directed at students preparing for IELTS. The second, completed by 26 students, was a shorter set of questions, addressed to students who had already taken the IELTS (see Appendix 5). The purpose of both surveys was to elicit students' opinions of and experiences with the IELTS preparation materials. Points of interest in the first survey included: the features students looked for when choosing study materials; the way in which the materials are used by the students; students' perceptions regarding the difficulty of practice tests; students' opinions on the extent to which IELTS training should relate to further study; and students' suggestions on changes or additions which could be implemented in future publications.

The second survey was aimed at obtaining feedback on the IELTS materials from a post-IELTS point of view. Students who had already taken the IELTS were asked to: compare the results of the practice test to their IELTS scores; explain how the IELTS scores differed from the practice test scores; and comment on the practice listening and reading materials.

Of the students surveyed the main first language groups were: Chinese (30%); Indonesian (21%); Korean (17%), Japanese (9%) and Thai (9%). Of the remaining 10% of students less than 4%, ie. two students, were from non-Asian speaking countries. Almost 60% of the students were between the ages of 23 and 30, with 25% of students over 30 years of age and only 15% 22 years of age or younger.

There was a range in the length of time students had been studying in Australia and in the time they had been enrolled in their current IELTS preparation course. The length of time students reported studying in Australia varied from one month to more than eight months, with a fairly even distribution over the time periods outlined in the survey. Over 60% of students had been enrolled in their current IELTS preparation course for less than two weeks; almost 39% for five to eight weeks and only 7% for more than eight weeks.

The main reasons given for taking IELTS were for the purposes of further study. Over 90% of students were taking IELTS as a pre-requisite for entry to university, two students were planning to continue their study at TAFE, one person was taking IELTS for immigration purposes and one person to check their English level.

7.2   Students' choice of publications and practice tasks

Students were asked what they looked for when they chose IELTS practice tasks. The most important requirement for students was clear instructions. Familiar and/or interesting topics were also considered very important to students. New-looking materials and recently published materials were also rated highly. A number of other criteria were mentioned, including the organisation of the book, the level of difficulty, tasks containing exercises and books outlining strategies to manage the tasks. By far the largest number of responses, however, indicated the necessity for clear instructions and familiar or interesting topics.

7.3   Practice test conditions

Students were asked whether they did practice tests in the time-limit given, without rewinding the tape during the practice test and without the use of a dictionary. Over 75% of students indicated that they did take the practice tests under these real-test conditions. However, a number of students indicated that they extended the time for reading tests and listened to the tapes for listening tests two or three times before being able to answer the questions. Some students felt that the practice tests were a good opportunity to learn new words and language structures, which could not be done within the time limits set for the test.

7.3.1   Consistency of practice test scores

Students were asked whether their practice test scores were consistent, ie. were scores obtained in practice tests always similar? There was almost an equal number of yes/no responses to this question. Students accounted for the differences in practice scores in a number of ways. A small number of students attributed lower scores to loss of concentration and their feelings on the day. Quite a number of students indicated that familiar topics and vocabulary made some tests easier, while "others are more difficult because of lack of background knowledge or unfamiliarity about them" and also, "some tests are easier to guess".

Other comments referred to the fact that some tests were difficult to understand and "those with guide answers are clearer and easier". A small number of students indicated that they had found the speaking "too fast". It is obvious from the students' comments that they do need support and guidance, both in selecting materials and in using those materials to develop the skills they need, to perform to the best of their ability in the IELTS.

7.4   IELTS training and further study

Students were asked whether they thought that IELTS training should help them prepare for further study. Over eighty percent of students felt that the training should help them prepare for further study. None of the comments indicated that students felt the training to be useful for broader study purposes, except to the extent that it assisted their reading and writing skills. One student commented "IELTS training can only help me gain an ideal score", while a number of comments indicated that the training should be more practical. One person commented that "materials are very useful but there are sometimes materials with very strange topics". Another student wrote, "I think EAP class which I took was more useful, such as lecture class, notetaking and academic reading and writing".

Obviously, there is scope for a more academic focus to both the IELTS training courses and publications, particularly in those centres that have a large percentage of students taking IELTS for the purpose of entering university.

7.5   Students suggestions for future publications

Students were asked to suggest any additions that would make future IELTS listening and reading materials more useful in preparing for the test. Student comments were quite varied in this section, but common concerns included: the need for more listening materials, with some students feeling a need for more availability of listening materials within their centre; more guidance in managing reading tasks; and more similarity between practice tests and the IELTS.

Other issues raised were more to do with the content of the texts. Comments indicated that more "interesting and useful topics" were wanted; and "both in listening and reading materials, there should be more materials that are concerned with the latest information, such as the latest news and magazine articles", and there should be more variety to choose from. These comments appear to be more related to the materials available within the centre in question than to the selection of publications listed in this study.

Comments specifically relating to listening materials suggested that listening materials should "include some more usual talk'" and "listening materials should have more varied questions".

As we can see from the comments, concerns expressed by students are reflected in the issues discussed in the study and are similar to concerns raised by teachers.

7.6   Phase 2 Survey: Post-IELTS Viewpoint

Student comments in the second survey tended to be more focused and the materials were rated differently. In both surveys students were asked to indicate which materials from the list provided they had found most useful. In the first survey this was done by completing a table with space against each publication for them to mark materials according to the availability of the publication, their use of it and its and usefulness. In the first survey, students noted the two publications – Todd and Cameron (1998) and Jakeman and McDowell (1996) – most frequently and most positively. These two publications were also identified as being the most readily available for those students. In the second survey, in which the respondents were identified only as having already taken the IELTS, the two publications rated most highly as being useful in preparing for the IELTS were Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) and Jakeman and McDowell (1996). In this survey, students also volunteered the titles of four additional test preparation publications they had found useful.

7.6.1   Comparing practice test scores with IELTS scores

Students were asked whether the scores they had received in their IELTS test were similar to those they obtained in practice tests. Only 50% of students reported similar results in the reading module and slightly more in the listening module.

Students were asked to explain what the differences were in their scores and make comments on the practice materials, comparing the practice materials to the IELTS. Comments made by the students indicated that most students had found the listening practice tests easier than the IELTS. Other students remarked on the effect of exam conditions on the listening test. One student commented "the listening test is not clear in exam conditions", and another stated, "It is better if we can use the language lab in the listening test. It is very important!".

The reading in the practice tests was also rated as easier than the IELTS, but not to the same extent as the listening test. The publication *IELTS Practice Now* (Gibson, Rusek and Swan 1996) was singled out by one student as being "good for reading. The other books are easier than the IELTS test".

While most students had found at least some of the practice tests easier than the actual test, a number of students acknowledged the benefits of using the practice tests to prepare for IELTS. Comments included the following: "They're all good for practice"; "The materials are easier than the IELTS test but they give a very good strategy for preparing yourself".

In brief, the comments made by the students, rather than providing new or contradictory information tended to highlight such issues as: the need for guidance in managing the tests and understanding the demands of the test; the need for more focus on strategy development; the importance of an academic focus; and comparative difficulty of practice tests and the IELTS.

8.0   Summary of key issues and recommendations

A number of issues has been raised and discussed in this evaluation of the practice tests. Paramount is the issue of the place of IELTS practice materials in developing English language skills and the relation of the materials to the IELTS itself.

From one point of view, there should be no need for practice materials other than the official *IELTS Specimen Test*. However, unlike practice materials, the main function of the Specimen Materials is to model the items, texts and format of IELTS. They do not set out to be a pedagogical tool, as such. Practice materials reside more clearly in a pedagogical context and are seen as learning tools by students and teachers. Indeed the very existence of these materials is evidence of a positive educational trend, in that, used effectively, they mostly reflect educationally desirable models of reading and listening practice. However, the tendency for students to use practice tests ineffectively, in a repetitive, rote-learning process, suggests that inclusion of additional pedagogical guidance and explicit learning strategy guidance is desirable. Materials conceived as 'test preparation' resources are more likely to do this than materials conceived as 'practice' materials.

There was a satisfying process of validating the project team's insights through the teacher and learner input to the project. Issues that became most apparent in the analysis of the texts and tasks were in most cases also commented on by the teachers. However, most teachers tended to comment in a general way on the practice tests, and introduced the features of the texts in a random order throughout the interviews. By establishing a set of criteria and constructing a framework for the evaluation of the practice tests, it has been possible to establish a context for, and substantiate observations made about, the practice tests.

It is clear from the evaluation tables that the layout of the publications is generally user-friendly. The information for teachers and students about the test and on maximising the use of the practice test material is also generally sufficient and accessible. However, it is clear that some practice tests are substantially more difficult than others. The evaluation tables can be used to pinpoint the features of the texts and tasks contributing to their level of difficulty.

There is also clearly an issue of the relation between EAP programs and IELTS preparation programs, and the extent to which these are complementary. In their investigation into the methods of preparing students for IELTS, Hayes and Watt (1998) come to the conclusion that using the IELTS material in a topic-based syllabus, with additional vocabulary and skills practice in the same context, had a significantly more positive effect on the learners' progress than did using a selection of unrelated texts. Any texts which introduce students to new topics and new vocabulary may be considered useful for developing skills in coping with unfamiliar vocabulary. However, the vocabulary dimension is only one aspect of language learning. Texts which can be linked to a broader educational program and focus must be considered more appropriate in an EAP classroom, as these support more comprehensive language learning and language skills development by students. From this point of view, preparation programs organised solely on the basis of practice tests may be restricted to developing test-taking skills, at the expense of academic English skills. Teachers need to make a considered judgement as to how and how often to use practice tests in their test preparation programs.

8.1 Listening texts and tasks

In general, the topics covered by the listening texts were found to be both relevant and appropriate. A variety of text-types was included, displaying a wide-range of linguistic features. In regard to the features of individual texts, there were few criticisms. The informal structure of some texts may cause difficulties for students and some texts appeared to have quite long, unbroken sections compared to the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997). However, despite these difficult texts, from both the analysis of the texts and tasks, and feedback from teachers, it appeared that many of the listening practice tests were easier than in the IELTS listening sub-tests. The easier texts appeared to have more repetitions of essential information and the pace of delivery was often slower than in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997).

Also, there was found to be an overall lack of authentic lecture-type tasks. There were very few expository texts in which students were required to understand more abstract ideas. In the more difficult texts some abstract ideas exist, but the difficult vocabulary tends to obscure the meanings for the learners. There is definitely a need for more of the kind of lecture topics, including abstract ideas and discussion, which would be encountered on entering university study. Such texts would need to be accompanied by appropriate notetaking tasks and should have the potential to generate class discussion and interaction.

Recommendation 1

Listening practice tests can be improved by including scripts of a more normal pace of delivery with appropriate strategies to help students manage those texts.

Listening practice tests should contain more authentic lecture-type tasks with appropriate academic note-taking tasks.

8.2 Reading texts and tasks

In considering aspects of field, mode and tenor in the texts within the various practice materials evaluated in this study, it is clear that many reading texts conform to broadly accepted characteristics of academic writing and are thus providing models consistent both with texts in the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) and the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)*. These texts are also broadly consistent with texts generally encountered in reading related to university study, though not necessarily with specialist registers within specific disciplines. Further, they can form a base for effective teaching and learning activities in the IELTS preparation classroom. However, as discussed in Section 4.0, not all reading tests were found to meet the criteria.

Quite a number of texts reflected a journalistic style, the features of which were discussed earlier, rather than discussion at an academic level. While there are sufficient texts of an explanatory nature, there need to be more texts of a discussion or argumentative type, particularly as this is the kind of text students of non-English speaking background have the most difficulty in managing. The inclusion of such texts would also tend to exclude trivial topics and should generate more of the tasks appropriate to academic reading.

Recommendation 2

Reading texts for IELTS practice should be academic in both content and structure. Rather than focusing on providing a wide range of question-types, tests should focus on tasks that both extend and test the language skills students will need in their programs of further study. The topics of the texts should be suitable for EAP classes and should provide material that promotes discussion and interaction within the classroom. Students preparing to take the academic version of the IELTS usually have a serious purpose for undertaking current studies, and so should be given as much assistance as possible in their social and academic acculturation. Texts that open avenues for discussion on recent issues and topics, related to tertiary studies, constitute useful teaching resources.

8.2.1 Practice materials for training in or modelling IELTS tasks

Most recent publications contain teaching materials on listening and reading strategies. However, there is definitely a need for more guidance for both students and teachers in coming to terms with reading texts of this nature. As mentioned above, the use of the term 'practice test' serves to lead the learner away from the notion of learning new strategies and towards a less meaningful process of repetitive trialing. Strategies to manage large sections of text and an awareness of text structure are important to an understanding of the whole text and its purpose. A deconstruction of the reading texts and an explanation of the features of the texts would enable students to identify the patterns of text structure. Accompanied by an explanation of the particular reading strategies which would be appropriate for that particular text, this would be very useful in developing both strategies and language skills. From each set of readings studied, students would gain knowledge of the texts and an understanding of how best to approach them. From the discussion above, it is apparent that repetitive practice on random texts does not markedly increase learner proficiency. A coherent teaching or self-directed learning program is needed, if learners are to improve their language skills through IELTS preparation activities.

Recommendation 3

Reading practice materials should incorporate a coherent program of skills development as well as model-test passages and questions.

8.3   Assumptions made about teacher familiarity with the IELTS

All publications were found to contain a range of information about the IELTS. In general, the more recent publications contain more information about the test and the test procedure than do earlier materials. However, even for teachers and students completely unfamiliar with the test, each of the publications contains sufficient information to prepare students to manage the format and procedure of the test.

Practice tests which differ in level of difficulty from the IELTS may cause some problems for those unfamiliar with the IELTS or the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997). It may be that some acknowledgment needs to be made in the publications that the materials are intended to provide practice in various skills at various levels but may not fully replicate the level of difficulty of the IELTS.

8.4   Development process for practice materials

While the overall feedback on the practice materials and accompanying tasks was positive, there were comments on the number of tasks, particularly those accompanying the reading texts, which were found to be confusing. Both teachers and students expressed frustration over ambiguous answer choices, and answers which were not clear. Had the practice tests been thoroughly trialed in a classroom situation some of these difficulties could have been eliminated. To reduce confusion further, for tasks requiring an in-depth understanding of the text, explanations of the correct answers would be helpful to users of the materials.

Recommendation 4

All practice tests be thoroughly trialed to reduce the number of ambiguous and unclear answers.

Difficult texts, with tasks requiring a finer discrimination of meaning, should be accompanied by explanations.

9.0   Conclusion

This study has divided its attention between exploring the relation of practice materials to the IELTS test and exploring the uses of practice test materials by teachers and learners preparing for the IELTS. The former concept led to the generation and discussion of the numerical analysis of test-items (detailed in the Appendices), while the latter concept has informed much of the discussion of features of the test materials in the body of the report and the Evaluation Tables (also contained in the Appendices).

The analyses were carried out in part with a view to assisting teachers to understand the potential and shortcomings of these commercially-produced materials as test preparation vehicles. Ultimately, one does not expect the practice materials to impact on the design of the IELTS. Indeed, the *IELTS Specimen Materials* (1997) and the *IELTS Specifications for Item Writers (1998)* were used as benchmarks for the criteria discussed in this study. Nevertheless, the study has served to tease out how teachers and learners perceive the test and test preparation contribute to achieving longer term student goals of entering tertiary study and/or becoming permanent residents in Australia. The study has thus tried to speak to a diverse audience, including IELTS developers, language teachers, language materials writers, IELTS administrators and examiners, and, indirectly to a small extent, to English language learners. We hope the study has also contributed useful insights to the ongoing discussion of the relationship between language testing and language learning.

Bibliography

Brown, J. D. J. (1998). 'An Investigation into Approaches to IELTS Preparation, with particular focus on the Academic Writing Component of the Test', *IELTS Research Reports 1998,* ELICOS Association, Vol. 1, p. 20 - 37.

Cameron, P. (1999). *Prepare for IELTS: The IELTS Preparation Course,* University of Technology: Sydney.

Coleman, G. and Heap, S. (1998). 'The Misinterpretation of Directions for the Questions in the Academic Reading and Listening sub-tests of the IELTS Test', *IELTS Research Reports 1998,* ELICOS Association, Vol. 1, p. 38 - 71.

Deakin, G. (1996). *Practice Tests for IELTS.* Indonesia Australia Language Foundation and Hawthorn Institute of Education: Melbourne.

Flowerdew, J. and Miller, L. (1997). 'The Teaching of Academic Listening Comprehension and the Question of Authenticity', *English for Specific Purposes,* Vol. 16, p. 27 - 42.

Freez, S. (1998) *Text-based Syllabus Design,* NCELTR: Sydney.

Garbutt, M. and O'Sullivan, K. (1991). *IELTS Strategies for Study,* NCELTR: Sydney.

Gerot, L. (1995). *Making Sense of Text,* Antipodean Educational Enterprises: Sydney.

Gibson, C., Rusek, W. and Swan, A. (1996). *IELTS Practice Now.* CALUSA: Adelaide.

Hamp-Lyons, L. (1998). 'Ethical Test Preparation Practice: The Case of the TOEFL', *TESOL Quarterly,* Vol. 32, p. 329 - 337.

Hamp-Lyons, L. (1999). 'The Author Responds . . .' *TESOL Quarterly,* Vol. 33, p. 270 - 274.

Hayes, B. and Watt, L. (1998). 'An IELTS preparation course for Asian students: When practice doesn't make perfect', *EA Journal,* Vol 16, p. 15 - 21.

Hughes, A. (1989). 'Testing Reading', *Testing for Language Teachers,* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

IELTS Specimen Materials April 1997. University of Cambridge, The British Council and IDP Education Australia: Cambridge.

Jakeman, V. and McDowell, C. (1996). *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

McNamara, T. and Hamilton, J. (1991). 'EAP Tests as Performance Tests', *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Education Conference,* ELICOS Association: Sydney.

Mikulecky, B. S. (1990) *A Short Course in Teaching Reading Skills,* Addison-Wesley: New York.

Nunan, D. (1995). 'Reading: A Discourse Perspective', *Language Teaching Methodology,* Prentice Hall In: Englewood Cliffs, N. J.

Sahanaya, W. and Lindeck, J. (1998). *IELTS Preparation and Practice Listening and Speaking.* Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Sahanaya, W. Lindeck, J. and Stewart, R. (1998). *IELTS Preparation and Practice: Reading and Writing Academic Module.* Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Todd, V. and Cameron, P. (1996). *Prepare for IELTS Academic Modules.:* Insearch Language Centre, UTS: Sydney.

Tomlinson, B. (1999). 'Developing Criteria for Evaluating L2 Materials, *IATEFL Issues,* Issue 147, p. 10 - 13.

van Bemmel, E. and Tucker, J. (1997). *IELTS to Success: Preparation Tips and Practice Tests:* Hawthorn Institute of Education Jacaranda Wiley Ltd: Melbourne.

Wadden, P. and Hilke, R. (1999). 'Polemic Gone Astray: A Corrective to Recent Criticism of TOEFL Preparation' *TESOL Quarterly,* Vol. 33, p. 263 - 269.

Appendix 1.0

Note: Appendix 1.0, the project application, has not been reproduced in this publication, as it duplicates the outline of purpose and methodology in the body of the report. Please contact the authors for a copy of the original report and Appendices.

Appendix 2.1

Numerical analysis tables for listening item-types

Table 1a   Numerical analysis of listening item-types
          Deakin (1994). *Practice Test for IELTS.*

Item Type	Test 1	Test 2
Multiple choice: a. One possible answer	12	14
b. Multiple answers for one mark		
c. Multiple answers and one mark for each		
Filling in a form	6	9
Short answer questions: a. Discrete questions	11	8
b. Requiring a list		
Sentence completion		2
Tables		9
Notes/summary/flow chart: a. With a choice of possible answers		
b. Without choice of possible answers	6	
Labelling a diagram		
Following instructions involving a floorplan/building layout/map	6	
Correcting written information		
Matching		
True/False/NI		

Table 1b **Numerical analysis of listening item-types**
Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996). *IELTS Practice Now.*

Item Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3
Multiple choice:			
a. One possible answer	7	9	4
b. Multiple answers for one mark	2		
c. Multiple answers and one mark for each			
Filling in a form	6	6	8
Short answer questions:			
a. Discrete questions	4	11	7
b. Requiring a list			
Sentence completion	9		9
Tables	4	14	
Notes/summary/flow chart:			
a. With a choice of possible answers			
b. Without choice of possible answers			10
Labelling a diagram			
Following instructions involving a floorplan/ building layout/map	1		
Correcting written information			
Matching			
True/False/NI	7		

Table 1c **Numerical analysis of listening item-types**
Jakeman and McDowell (1996). *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS.*

Item Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Multiple choice:				
a. One possible answer	16	7	9	7
b. Multiple answers for one mark		2		
c. Multiple answers and one mark for each	3			
Filling in a form	5		6	5
Short answer questions:				
a. Discrete questions			1	
b. Requiring a list				
Sentence completion				
Tables			5	
Notes/summary/flow chart:				
a. With a choice of possible answers				
b. Without choice of possible answers	17	30	16	24
Labelling a diagram		2	5	6
Following instructions involving a floorplan/building layout/map				
Correcting written information				
Matching				
True/False/NI				

Table 1d Numerical analysis of listening item-types
Sahanaya, Lindbeck and Stewart (1998). *IELTS Preparation and Practice.*

Item Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3
Multiple choice:			
a. One possible answer		6	6
b. Multiple answers for one mark		1	
c. Multiple answers and one mark for each			2
Filling in a form		5	
Short answer questions:			
a. Discrete questions		1	5
b. Requiring a list			
Sentence completion			4
Tables		3	11
Notes/summary/flow chart:			
a. With a choice of possible answers			
b. Without choice of possible answers		14	9
Labelling a diagram			
Following instructions involving a floorplan/building layout/map			3
Correcting written information			
Matching		10	
True/False/NI			

Table 1e Numerical analysis of listening item-types
Todd and Cameron (1996). *Prepare For IELTS: Academic Modules.*

Item Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Multiple choice:				
a. One possible answer	13	9	4	6
b. Multiple answers for one mark			2	
c. Multiple answers and one mark for each				
Filling in a form	13	7	8	
Short answer questions:				
a. Discrete questions		11	6	
b. Requiring a list				
Sentence completion	3	8	4	4
Tables	2	5	6	8
Notes/summary/flow chart:				
a. With a choice of possible answers	6			10
b. Without choice of possible answers				
Labelling a diagram				5
Following instructions involving a floorplan/building layout/map	4		3	
Correcting written information			5	6
Matching				
True/False/NI				

Table 1f   Numerical analysis of listening item-types
van Bemmel and Tucker (1997). *IELTS to Success: Preparation Tips an Practice Tests.*

Item Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3
Multiple choice:			
a. One possible answer	9	7	11
b. Multiple answers for one mark			
c. Multiple answers and one mark for each	2		4
Filling in a form	4		
Short answer questions:			
a. Discrete questions	2	3	4
b. Requiring a list			
Sentence completion	4	4	3
Tables	11	16	10
Notes/summary/flow chart:			
a. Using a box for possible answers			
b. Without choice of possible answers	2	4	10
Labelling a diagram			
Following instructions involving a floorplan/building layout/map	1	1	1
Correcting written information			
Matching	6	7	
True/False/NI			

Table 1g   Numerical analysis of listening item-types
IELTS Specimen Materials (1997).

Item Type	Test 1
Multiple choice:	
a. One possible answer	5
b. Multiple answers for one mark	
c. Multiple answers and one mark for each	
Filling in a form	
Short answer questions:	
a. Discrete questions	8
b. Requiring a list	
Sentence completion	
Tables	21
Notes/summary/flow chart:	
a. With a choice of possible answers	
b. Without choice of possible answers	
Labelling a diagram	
Following instructions involving a floorplan/building layout/map	3
Correcting written information	3
Matching	
True/False/NI	

Appendix 2.2

Evaluation tables for listening tests

Table 2a   Evaluation table for listening tests
Deakin (1996). *Practice Tests for IELTS*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Introduction to university	Conversation • obtaining information; description; explanation • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery; clear enunciation	Text in large sections; not all sections clearly divided; not all key points repeated; distractors and extra information included	Mostly straight-forward tasks; summary task requires an understanding of the whole text
1.2 Parking regulations	Conversation • sharing information; personal details • informal	Easy to moderate pace of delivery	Short text sections; detailed answers and elaboration allow time for answering questions	Main task listening for details
1.3 Tourist information	Short talk • information text; description; directives • semi-formal	Easy to moderate pace of delivery; key words emphasised	Long text; few repetitions; potentially familiar vocabulary; some place names; straight-forward text and sentence structure; no contradictions or ambiguities	Listening for details and key information in sequence; map included
1.4 Introduction to university	Conversation • obtaining/giving information; directions; description; explanation	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; few repetitions; mostly familiar vocabulary; large quantity of information	Listening for details and key information in sequence; building layout included
2.1 Conversation and introductions	Conversation • description; directions • informal	Easy to moderate pace of delivery; clear enunciation	Clear questions and answers; detailed descriptions allow time to focus on items; some contradictions	Straight-forward tasks in sequence; pictures included
2.2 Buying a newspaper; education interview	Transaction/radio interview • description; explanation • semi-formal	Easy to moderate pace of delivery; clear enunciation	Large quantity of information; repetition of some details; summary of key points; question/answer format clarifies information and allows time to focus on following item; potentially familiar concepts	Listening for details and key information; some paraphrasing and interpretation of information necessary for multiple-choice items
2.3 Description of trade fair facilities	Short talk • information text; description; directives • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; repetition of key names and numbers; potentially familiar vocabulary and concepts	Listening for details and key points in sequence; words not given for completion of table task
2.4 Overseas marketing	Conversation • information sharing; descriptions; explanation • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; not all key points repeated; explanations clear and detailed; some unfamiliar vocabulary and ideas	Tasks more complex requiring careful listening; some paraphrasing and interpretation needed

Table 2b   **Evaluation table for listening tests**
Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996). *IELTS Practice Now.*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Computer facilities	Conversation • information; description; directives • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; question/answer format; large amount of information; some details close together and not repeated or elaborated on	Notetaking tasks not in sequence; listening for unfamiliar words, careful listening required
1.2 Holiday activities	Conversation/ transaction • making arrangements; discussing options; directives; description • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; contradictions and distractors; large amount of information; essential details not repeated; unfamiliar vocabulary	Need to combine separate details to obtain answers; discrimination needed in sifting information
1.3 Work-related interview	Transaction/interview • making an appointment; interview questions and answers; describing work and study experiences • formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; question/answer format simplifies task a little; some unfamiliar vocabulary; details not repeated; some elaboration; contradictions and distractors	Questions test understanding of whole text; careful listening needed to take in all the information necessary for each answer
1.4 Road safety	Interview/research report • explanation; description; comparison • formal/academic	Moderate pace of delivery	Interview has large sections of text; unfamiliar vocabulary; nominalisations and complex sentence structures; essential information not repeated	Demanding task; difficult text; understanding of relationships between items required; details close together in text
2.1 Travel arrangements/ movies	Social conversation/ transaction • discussing options, making arrangements; directions; hiring equipment • informal/semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; question and answer format provides some repetition and clarification; distractors; not all information repeated	Straight-forward tasks; difficulty related to text complexity
2.2 Book sale	Conversation • sharing information; book titles, authors and prices • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Essential information repeated; detailed text	Inferences needed; task slightly simplified by question layout
2.3 Paper recycling	Interview/report • obtaining information; description; explanation • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; extra information; question/answer format helps to clarify essential information which is not repeated; vocabulary and concepts familiar	Careful listening needed to extract information

49

Table 2b Gibson, Rusek and Swan (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
2.4 The commercialisation of science and technology	Lecture • exposition; comparison; description of trends • formal/academic	Moderate - normal pace of delivery	Long text; unfamiliar vocabulary; abstract concepts; in-text definitions quite complex; essential information elaborated on but not repeated; complex sentences and nominalisations	Mostly straight-forward tasks; listening for details
3.1 Cafeteria information/lost property	Interview • obtaining information; routines and procedures; preferences • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text in two sections; familiar vocabulary and concepts; essential information not repeated; spelling given for form filling task; extra information; a few distractors and contradictions	Straight-forward tasks; listening for details
3.2 The work of a solicitor	Interview • obtaining information; description; explanation; directives • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text simplified by question/answer format; familiar vocabulary and concepts; some elaboration; little repetition	Summary task with no words provided; careful listening and interpretation required
3.3 Customs regulations	Conversation • giving information; recount description; explanation • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text simplified by questions and clarifications; familiar vocabulary and concepts; no repetitions	Straight-forward short answer questions in sequence; text not well-exploited
3.4 Personal safety and protecting possessions	Lecture • directives; explanations • formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; no repetition of details; some elaboration; familiar vocabulary and ideas	Sentences to be completed appear in sequence and have similar structure; some answers may be obtained without reference to the text

Table 2c   Evaluation table for listening tests
Jakeman and McDowell (1996). *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS.*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Lost property description	Telephone conversation • personal information; recount; description • semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery; clear enunciation	Straight-forward question and answer text with adequate time allowed to process information; some repetition of details	Listening for details; uncomplicated tasks; pictures included
1.2 News headlines and short reports	News report • description; recount • semi-formal	Reasonably easy pace of delivery	Short text; re-wording and elaboration of headlines allows for checking of first section; straight-forward news story; details clearly explained	Paraphrasing required in both sections; words not provided for summary task
1.3 University course information	Conversation • obtaining information; directives; explanation • semi-formal	Reasonably easy pace of delivery	Longer text; repetition of details simplifies tasks; straight-forward information without contradictions or distractors	Inferences and paraphrasing required; words not given for notetaking task
1.4 University introduction – lecturers' expectations	Short talk • information text; description; directives / explanation • semi-formal	Reasonably easy pace of delivery	Medium length text; clear transition between sections; information within text easily accessible and clearly sequenced; sufficient time for completion of tasks	Some paraphrasing required; interpretation of information necessary for multiple choice items
2.1 Accommodation and courses – personal experiences	Interview • obtaining information; description; opinions; suggestions • semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery with key words emphasised	Clear, uncomplicated text and sentence structure; short sections of information clearly related to specific questions	Listening for details; notetaking tasks in sequence; words not provided
2.2 Kinds of bicycles	Short talk • information text; description; details of features and cost; advice • semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery with key words emphasised	Clear, uncomplicated text and sentence structure; short sections of information clearly related to specific questions	Listening for details; notetaking tasks in sequence; words not provided
2.3 Banana growing	Conversation • information text; report; recount; description; explanation • informal /semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery	Question/answer format highlights essential information; clear transition between sections; repetition and elaboration; mostly familiar vocabulary	Understanding of purpose of text needed; notetaking task tests understanding of key points; words not provided

Table 2c Jakeman and McDowell (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
2.4 Balanced diet	Lecture • information text; report; explanation; directives • semi-formal	Reasonably easy pace of delivery	Familiar topic and concepts; predictable information; short texts divided into clear sections	Sequenced information and explanatory diagram simplify notetaking tasks
3.1 Parking regulations/ directions	Conversation • obtaining information; directives • informal	Easy pace of delivery	Familiar topic and vocabulary; repetition of information; clear transition between sections; adequate time given to complete tasks; some contradictions and corrections within the text	Variety of tasks ; listening for details; picture included
3.2 Description of a museum	Short talk • information text; description; directives • semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery; key words emphasised	Some potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; spoken text with informal structure presents some challenges; essential information not repeated or elaborated on	Notetaking task includes variety of question forms and prompts; words not given
3.3 Marketing	Conversation • giving / eliciting information; explanation • informal	Reasonably easy pace of delivery	Long text; little repetition; question/answer form clarifies information; some complex sentences; spoken expressions may cause some difficulties; some potentially unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts	Interpretation of information required for multiple choice questions; tasks / text not in sequence; words not given for notetaking task; concepts and vocabulary provide a challenge
3.4 Space management in a supermarket	Lecture • report; description; explanation • semi-formal	Easy to moderate pace of delivery	Medium length text; sequential information follows diagram; clear explanations; some repetition and re-wording included	Listening for key words and ideas
4.1 Campus directions	Conversation • directions; directives; personal information • informal	Easy to moderate pace of delivery	Short sections of text; question/answer format; text complicated by contradictions and corrections; not all essential information repeated; sufficient time between key points to answer and focus on following item	Listening for detail; form-filling; pictures included

Table 2c Jakeman and McDowell (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
4.2 Banking information	Short talk • information text; directives; explanations • semi-formal	Easy to moderate pace of delivery	Medium length text; information in personal language with clear explanations; detailed text with large quantity of information	Listening for details; notetaking task covers entire text; words not provided
4.3 Description of an aluminium can	Conversation • information sharing; description; explanation • informal	Easy pace of delivery	Long text; spoken expressions present some difficulties; informal text structure; some repetition of key points; unfamiliar words spelled out; conversational exchanges provide clarification and reinforcement of information	Listening for key facts; diagram clarifies information; factual tasks
4.4 Introduction to sports studies	Lecture • information text; description and explanation • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery with key points emphasised	Medium length text; structured information with numbered points clearly outlined; potentially unfamiliar vocabulary explained in the text; repetitions	Notetaking task covers whole text; words not provided; paraphrasing and interpretation of information required

Table 2d   Evaluation table for listening tests
Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998). *IELTS Preparation and Practice: Listening and Speaking.*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
2.1 Library enquiries	Telephone conversation / transaction • obtaining information; directives; explanation • semi-formal	Moderate rate of delivery	Long exchange; repetition of some essential information; question/answer format simplifies identification of relevant details; some potentially unfamiliar vocabulary	Listening for details; careful listening required
2.2 Library tour	Short talk/tour guide • information text; description explanation; directives • semi-formal	Moderate rate of delivery	Text divided into two sections; essential information not repeated; details close together in text; some unfamiliar vocabulary; text provides a number of challenges	Listening for details; matching task requires careful listening
2.3 Course requirements	Conversation • information text; explanation; directives • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text divided into two sections; some unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts; complex sentence structures	Variety of tasks; matching tasks made more complex by vocabulary and concepts involved
2.4 Environ- mental problems	Lecture/report • information text; explanation; cause and effect; exposition • formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Clear text structure outlined in introduction; complex sentences and unfamiliar vocabulary; information-dense text; key points and essential information not repeated; some re-wording; key points summarised	Notetaking task exploits large section of text; words not given; demanding task
3.1 Comparing towns	Conversation • information sharing; description; comparison • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Text divided into two clear sections; question/answer format highlights essential information; some contradictions and distractors; information not repeated	Notetaking task requires some paraphrasing; careful listening and some inferences required
3.2 Stadium facilities and music program	Short talk • description; explanation; directives • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text divided into two sections; essential information not repeated or elaborated on; details close together in text; few pauses; some unfamiliar vocabulary in second part	Listening for details; careful listening required; text structure complicates task of identifying key points

Table 2d Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998) (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
3.3 Television programs and children	Conversation • information sharing; research report; description; explanation; cause/effect • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text divided into two sections; question/answer format highlights and clarifies key points; spoken expressions; unfamiliar vocabulary; most essential information not repeated; some re-wording and summarisation included	Careful listening required; interpretation of information and discrimination of meaning necessary in multiple choice items
3.4 Quality control	Lecture • information text; report; description and explanation of process • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text divided into two parts; clear structure with some complex sentences; information-dense text; unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts; concepts clearly introduced and explained; familiar examples; some re-wording and summarisation included	Notetaking task in sequence; words not provided; interpretation of information in relation to graphs; text exploited by tasks

Table 2e   Evaluation table for listening tests
Todd and Cameron (1996) *Prepare For IELTS: Academic Modules*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Leave request	Telephone exchange • requests and explanations • semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery Clear enunciation	Text contains repetitions and fillers, and a predictable sequence of questions and answers; text becomes more complex, including unfamiliar place names and wide range of information	Straight-forward listening for numbers, names and other details
1.2 Household routine	Message on an answering machine • information text; details and instructions • informal	Easy pace of delivery Clear enunciation	Long text with extra information; random points for completion of task; repetitions and re-wording	Unstructured information requires close attention of listener; simplified by choice of words available
1.3 Enrolment and course details	Telephone conversation • information text; questions, answers, explanations and advice • semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery	Information sequenced in a predictable manner; sections clearly marked; not many repetitions but other clues included	Some paraphrasing required but mostly straight-forward task of listening for details
1.4 Cities and traffic management	Academic lecture easy/moderate • information text; report; comparison/contrast; suggested solutions • formal	Easy pace of delivery	Text and sentence structure not complex; minimal unfamiliar vocabulary; in-text definitions included; some confusion is caused by unclear references in the text	Table completion task is quite difficult to follow and sentence completion task a little vague
2.1 Purchasing electronic equipment	Conversation • discussion of prices and features of equipment; making choices; making requests • informal	Easy/moderate pace of delivery	Level of difficulty heightened by 'authentic' nature of conversation and extra details; summary provided in parts; some contradictions and distractors	Listening for details
2.2 Request for class transfer	Message on answering machine • personal information; explanations; request • informal	Easy/moderate pace of delivery	Repetition of details; cues to forthcoming information; pauses; explanation clear and detailed but not all key information repeated	Listening for details; some paraphrasing required; questions of varying level of difficulty
2.3 Musical instruments	Classroom conversation/ short talk • likes and dislikes; preferences; cause and effect; comparison • informal/semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Level of difficulty raised by unfamiliar vocabulary; familiar and predictable concepts and information; answers embedded in text; elaboration but no repetition	Listening for details; summarising and notetaking
2.4 Preventative medicine and health	Lecture • exposition; directives; explanations • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Text in clear sections; some challenging vocabulary; topic and concepts familiar; uncomplicated sentence and text structure	Listening for key points; paraphrasing; summarising

Table 2e Todd and Cameron (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
3.1 Student Information	Two conversations • obtaining information; directives • semi-formal	Easy/moderate pace of delivery	Level of difficulty raised by changes to information; repetition of some details; description of floor plan has multiple steps without repetition; instructions clear; number of instructions raises level of difficulty	Listening for details
3.2 Excursion details	Short talk • giving information including dates, times, locations; directives • semi-formal	Easy pace of delivery	Short text; repetition of most essential information; extra information; distractors ; familiar vocabulary (except place name); text and sentence structure not complex	Listening for details; task/text in sequence
3.3 Hospital information	Conversation • obtaining information; directives; explanations • semi-formal	Easy/moderate pace of delivery	Clear transition between sections; added explanation gives listener time to focus on next item of information; some potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; contradictions in text raises level of difficulty	Listening for details and key points
3.4 Introduction to residential college	Lecture • historical recount; description; exposition • formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Text divided into two parts; long text; mostly familiar vocabulary; some more difficult items in second part; structure more challenging than previous texts; potentially unfamiliar concepts	Listening for details; summarising and paraphrasing
4.1 Library books – authors and topics	Conversation • sharing information • informal	Easy/moderate pace of delivery	Sudden changes of topic; elaboration rather than repetition; mostly familiar vocabulary; place names and extra information add to level of difficulty	Careful listening needed to identify correct details; inferences necessary
4.2 Details of student party and travel arrangements	Short talk • giving information; directives • semi-formal	Easy/moderate pace of delivery	Short sections of information; elaboration allows time to focus on following items; most items not repeated; familiar vocabulary and concepts; uncomplicated text and sentence structure	Combined listening and reading task is more complex than listening for details
4.3 Completing a diagram of a lawn sprinkler	Conversation • sharing information; description; directives • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Repetition of most items; some unfamiliar vocabulary; elaboration of points in first section allows time for checking; short second part is more challenging because it does not include repetitions	Task is simplified by the choice of answers and self-evident diagram labels
4.4 Causes of headaches	Lecture • exposition; explanations; directives • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; mostly familiar vocabulary and predictable information; clear explanations; familiar examples; uncomplicated text and sentence structure	Summarising and paraphrasing required; task simplified by word choices and grammatical clues

57

Table 2f   Evaluation table for listening tests
van Bemmel and Tucker (1997). *IELTS to Success: Preparation Tips and Practice Tests.*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Holiday arrangements	Conversation • negotiation; making arrangements; sharing information • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; level of difficulty raised by 'authentic' nature of text; extra information; distractors; some unfamiliar vocabulary, and names; occasional colloquialisms	Details need to be sifted from text; paraphrasing required
1.2 Orientation talk	Short talk • description; historical recount; explanation; directives • formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Text divided into medium length sections; information not repeated; some items close together in text; some elaboration of main points; extra information included	Listening for details; careful listening required to determine correct answers; pictures and building plan included
1.3 Production and consumption of coffee	Conversation • information sharing; report; comparisons • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Level of difficulty raised by length of text; question and answer format highlights essential information; main details not repeated; information given in different ways; colloquialisms included	Main task - listening for details; complicated by the need for inferences and paraphrasing
1.4 Meeting procedure	Lecture • description; explanation of procedures and roles; definitions • formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text not divided into sections; unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts; task simplified by in-text definitions; main points elaborated on but not always repeated	Paraphrasing and matching definitions required; task/text not in sequence
2.1 University orientation	Conversation • information sharing; description; directives • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text divided into sections; some contradictions and distractors; spoken expressions; key points elaborated on but not repeated; familiar vocabulary and ideas	Listening for details; some paraphrasing required; pictures and building plan included
2.2 Tourist information	Short talk • information text; description; directions; cause and effect • semi formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text divided into two sections; familiar topic and vocabulary but unfamiliar place names; most essential information repeated or elaborated on; essential information not repeated; some answers close together in text	Listening for details; not all information explicit; some inferences necessary; unfamiliar place names appear in the questons

Table 2f van Bemmel and Tucker (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
2.3 Sense of smell	Radio interview • information text; recount; description explanation; cause and effect • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; unfamiliar topic; most essential information repeated or elaborated on; question/answer format highlights key points; large quantity of information to be processed	Listening for details; careful listening required
2.4 The custom of shaking hands	Lecture • information text; description; explanation • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery; key words emphasised	Long text; familiar vocabulary and ideas; some new information; re-wording and elaboration of essential information	Questions in sequence; straight-forward information-matching task
3.1 University information	Conversation • sharing information; making arrangements; giving directions • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long text; varied topics; informal spoken expressions; contradictions and distractors; elaboration but little repetition of essential information; some unfamiliar vocabulary	Listening for detail; some inferences and paraphrasing needed
3.2 Rental information	Short talk • information text; description; cause and effect • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery	Long, detailed text; information not separated into clear sections; unfamiliar vocabulary; information-dense text	Careful listening required to sift details from long and involved text
3.3 Recycling	Conversation • information sharing; explanation; comparison • informal	Moderate pace of delivery	Question/answer format highlights and clarifies essential information; familiar topic; some unfamiliar vocabulary and concepts; not all essential information repeated	Notetaking task requires careful listening for details
3.4 Stress	Lecture • information text; description; explanation • semi-formal	Moderate pace of delivery; emphasis on key words	Medium length text divided into two sections; facts and figures close together in text, not repeated or elaborated on; familiar concepts and examples; some potentially unfamiliar information	Careful listening required to discriminate correct information; some synthesis of information necessary to complete table; variety provided by rating task

Table 2g   Evaluation table for listening tests
IELTS Specimen Materials 1997

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of difficulty relating to text delivery	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Accommodation	Conversation • obtaining information; description • semi-formal	Moderate to normal pace of delivery; names and numbers pronounced clearly	Two short texts; essential information not always repeated; potentially familiar vocabulary and concepts	Listening for details
1.2 Welcome address to convention	Short-talk • description; directives; explanation • semi-formal	Moderate to normal pace of delivery	Two short texts; directions not repeated; straight-forward text structure; some colloquial expressions; few concessions for learners in giving directions; items of essential information not close together	Listening for details; interpreting a street map; challenging task
1.3 Coffee types and prices	Conversation • information-sharing; description • semi-formal	Moderate to normal pace of delivery	Two short texts; items of information close together; some elaboration; difficulties raised by statement of differing opinions; potential for confusion in both texts; familiar vocabulary and concepts	Listening for numbers and other details; some information difficult to 'catch'
1.4 Pollution	Lecture • report; description of process; explanation • formal	Moderate pace of delivery; clear enunciation	Short text; some unfamiliar vocabulary; no repetition; essential information easily identified; text not complex	No paraphrasing or summarising required; tasks in sequence; information supplied in questions simplifies listening task

Appendix 3.1

Numerical analysis tables for reading item-types

Table 3a   Numerical analysis of reading item-types
Deakin (1994*). Practice Tests For IELTS.*

Item-Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Multiple-choice items: a. One possible answer			3	3
b. Multiple answers for one mark each	2		3	
c. Multiple answers for one mark				
Short-answer questions: a. Discrete answers	3	10	11	
b. Requiring a list				
Sentence completion a. With a choice of answers				
b. Without a choice of answers	7	4		
Table completion: a. With a choice of possible answers		2		
b. Without a choice of possible answers	4			
Diagram completion				
Notes/summary/flow charts: a. With a choice of possible answers	7	5	6	7
b. Without a choice of possible answers				
Choosing from a selection of headings: a. For the whole passage				
b. For paragraphs of sections	6	5	6	5
Identification of writer's views, attitudes, claims – yes, no, not given			6	5
Classification		6		
Matching	10	7	5	20
Sequencing a list/stages				

Table 3b   Analysis of reading item-types
Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996). *IELTS Practice Now.*

Item-Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Multiple-choice items:				
a. One possible answer	4			4
b. Multiple answers for one mark each	4		3	1
c. Multiple answers for one mark	1			
Short-answer questions:				
a. Discrete answers			10	2
b. Requiring a list				3
Sentence completion				
a. With a choice of answers	7			
b. Without a choice of answers				1
Table completion:				
a. With a choice of possible answers				
b. Without a choice of possible answers			14	
Diagram completion				
Notes/summary/flow charts:				
a. With a choice of possible answers		13	5	
b. Without a choice of possible answers	3			3
Choosing from a selection of headings:				
a. For the whole passage				1
b. For paragraphs of sections	6	4	4	9
Identification of writer's views, attitudes, claims – yes, no, not given	10	11	4	4
Classification		5		
Matching		10		12
Sequencing a list/stages	5			

Table 3c   Numerical analysis of reading item-types
Jakeman and McDowell (1996). *Cambridge Practice Tests For IELTS.*

Item-Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Multiple-choice items: a. One possible answer	3	2	3	1
b. Multiple answers for one mark each	3		4	
c. Multiple answers for one mark				
Short-answer questions: a. Discrete answers				4
b. Requiring a list				
Sentence completion a. With a choice of answers				
b. Without a choice of answers			6	3
Table completion: a. With a choice of possible answers				
b. Without a choice of possible answers	7	3		
Diagram completion		4		3
Notes/summary/flow charts: a. With a choice of possible answers	8	7	5	6
b. Without a choice of possible answers				
Choosing from a selection of headings: a. For the whole passage				
b. For paragraphs of sections		5	14	5
Identification of writer's views, attitudes, claims – yes, no, not given	7	9	6	4
Classification				
Matching	12	11		13
Sequencing a list/stages				

Table 3d   Numerical analysis of reading item-types
Sahanaya and Lindeck (1998). *Preparation and Practice.*

Item-Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3
Multiple-choice items:			
a. One possible answer	6		9
b. Multiple answers for one mark each			
c. Multiple answers for one mark			
Short-answer questions:			
a. Discrete answers	6		
b. Requiring a list			
Sentence completion			
a. With a choice of answers			3
b. Without a choice of answers		6	
Table completion:			
a. With a choice of possible answers			
b. Without a choice of possible answers			
Diagram completion			
Notes/summary/flow charts:			
a. With a choice of possible answers	8	6	
b. Without a choice of possible answers			
Choosing from a selection of headings:			
a. For the whole passage			
b. For paragraphs of sections	5	10	5
Identification of writer's views, attitudes, claims – yes, no, not given	14		6
Classification		16	
Matching		4	16
Sequencing a list/stages			

Table 3e   Numerical analysis of reading item-types
Todd and Cameron (1996). *Prepare For IELTS: Academic Modules.*

Item-Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Multiple-choice items:				
a. One possible answer	2	5	3	4
b. Multiple answers for one mark each				4
c. Multiple answers for one mark				
Short-answer questions:				
a. Discrete answers		4	3	1
b. Requiring a list				
Sentence completion				
a. With a choice of answers	6		4	
b. Without a choice of answers		5		6
Table completion:				
a. With a choice of possible answers		5		
b. Without a choice of possible answers		4		
Diagram completion	11			
Notes/summary/flow charts:				
a. With a choice of possible answers	4		3	16
b. Without a choice of possible answers			7	
Choosing from a selection of headings:				
a. For the whole passage				
b. For paragraphs of sections	4		5	
Identification of writer's views, attitudes, claims - yes, no, not given	9	12	6	4
Classification				
Matching	4	3	8	7
Sequencing a list/stages		4	3	

Table 3f   Numerical analysis of reading item-types
van Bemmel and Tucker (1997). *IELTS To Success.*

Item-Type	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4
Multiple-choice items: a. One possible answer		1	1	3
b. Multiple answers for one mark each		4	4	
c. Multiple answers for one mark				
Short-answer questions: a. Discrete answers	6		13	4
b. Requiring a list				
Sentence completion a. With a choice of answers				3
b. Without a choice of answers	3	5	3	
Table completion: a. With a choice of possible answers				
b. Without a choice of possible answers	5			
Diagram completion				
Notes/summary/flow charts: a. With a choice of possible answers		4		
b. Without a choice of possible answers		5	8	11
Choosing from a selection of headings: a. For the whole passage				1
b. For paragraphs of sections	5	6		4
Identification of writer's views, attitudes, claims – yes, no, not given	7	7	4	5
Classification				6
Matching	16	5	8	6
Sequencing a list/stages				

Table 3g   Numerical analysis of reading item-types
IELTS Specimen Materials (1997).

Item-Type	Test 1
Multiple-choice items:	
a. One possible answer	1
b. Multiple answers for one mark each	
c. Multiple answers for one mark	
Short-answer questions:	
a. Discrete answers	4
b. Requiring a list	
Sentence completion	
a. With a choice of answers	
b. Without a choice of answers	5
Table completion:	
a. With a choice of possible answers	
b. Without a choice of possible answers	6
Diagram completion	
Notes/summary/flow charts:	
a. With a choice of possible answers	
b. Without a choice of possible answers	7
Choosing from a selection of headings:	
a. For the whole passage	
b. For paragraphs of sections	5
Identification of writer's views, attitudes, claims - yes, no, not given	10
Classification	
Matching	
Sequencing a list/stages	

Appendix 3.2

Evaluation tables for reading tests

Table 4a   Evaluation table for reading tests
Deakin (1994). *Practice Tests for IELTS*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Personal time management	Report; explanation; cause and effect	Explanatory text; mostly familiar concepts; common examples; some unfamiliar vocabulary; in-text definitions; uncomplicated texts and sentence structure	Variety of tasks; paraphrasing and summarising required; key terms need to be understood; questions exploit wide range of text
1.2 Irrigation in Thailand	Report; description; explanation; advantages and disadvantage	Explanatory text; potentially familiar context and concepts; some unfamiliar vocabulary; text divided into short sections; straight-forward text and sentence structure	Variety of tasks; understanding of text required for heading selection task; scanning for details and key points included
1.3 The origins of Indo-European languages	Report; description of theoretical models; explanation; comparisons	Detailed text; unfamiliar and abstract concepts; unfamiliar vocabulary; in-text definitions; straight-forward text and sentence structure; clear references	Summary task includes choice of words; paraphrasing necessary; matching task requires understanding of terminology; challenging short answer questions
2.1 Nature and resolution of disputes	Description; explanation; discussion	Complex explanations; unfamiliar and abstract concepts; unfamiliar vocabulary; simplified by some in-text definitions; text divided into short sections; complex text and sentence structure including nominalisations	Challenging matching task; difficult vocabulary; interpretation of meanings and understanding of concepts and examples in text; text exploited by tasks
2.2 Automobiles versus public transport	Exposition; description; explanation; comparison and contrast	Long text; straight-forward predictable concepts; familiar vocabulary; uncomplicated text and sentence structure	Whole text exploited by questions; summary and paraphrasing skills tested; scanning for key points and details included; ranking task may cause some confusion
2.3 Pupil size and communication	Report on research findings; description; explanation	Short text accompanied by graphs; mostly familiar concepts; some specific vocabulary; key word 'pupil' may cause confusion; sentence and text structure not complex; graphs clarify key concepts	Variety of tasks; matching task tests understanding of relationships in text; summary task quite challenging; interpretation of graphs required

Table 4a Deakin (1994) (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
3.1 Software errors imperil lives - flaws in medical technology	Report; description of processes; recount; explanation	Long, detailed text; potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; complicated processes described; straight-forward text and sentence structure	Scanning for details; flow chart tests understanding of process description; long section of short answer questions without choice of words requires careful reading and interpretation of text
3.2 Over-fishing and its effects	Report; description; recount; explanation	Long, informative text; potentially familiar context; some specific terminology; short glossary; straight-forward text and sentence structures; graphs included	Matching task tests understanding of relationships within the text; YES/NO/NI task requires careful reading and interpretation of text
3.3 Using measurements in the Earth's crust to gauge climate changes	Report; description; recount; explanation	Long, explanatory text; potentially unfamiliar concepts; explanations given in clear, short sentences; some specialist vocabulary; text divided into short sections; sentence and text structure not complex	High-level reading and vocabulary demands for heading-matching task; summarising and paraphrasing skills required; mainly scanning for details in multiple-choice questions
4.1 Barriers to reduce/eliminate traffic noise	Report; recount; explanation; cause and effect	Straight-forward text; clear explanations clarified by diagrams; some specialist vocabulary; straight-forward text and sentence structure	Matching task requires understanding of text structure; tasks consist of two parts raising level of difficulty and increasing chances of error
4.2 Responsibilities assumed by male and female parents	Report; research findings; discussion; academic conventions	Medium-level of difficulty; mostly familiar concepts; some abstract ideas; familiar vocabulary; text divided into short sections; some long complex sentences including nominalisations	Matching task contains challenging vocabulary; understanding and interpretation of text required; text exploited by questions
4.3 The benefits of feeding certain types of fermented food to babies	Report; exposition; description of processes; explanation of cause and effect	Long, explanatory text; potentially familiar context but unfamiliar concepts; specialist and unfamiliar vocabulary not defined; clear text structure; long complex sentences	Summary task slightly simplified by choice of words and phrases given; paraphrasing required; challenging multiple choice and YES/NO/NG tasks

Table 4b   Evaluation table for reading tests
Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996). *IELTS Practice Now*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Private transport and the loss of freedom for children	Report; research findings; discussion; speculation	Reasonably complex text; discussion of abstract ideas; some difficult vocabulary; text in manageable sections; clear paragraphing and referencing within the text	Good understanding of text required to complete tasks; some confusion may occur in task requiring match of cause and effect because of limited number of correct effects
1.2 Rising sea levels	Scientific report; explanation; cause and effect; speculation and prediction	Complex, information-dense text; detailed concepts; difficult and unfamiliar vocabulary; in-text definitions and context-given meanings; challenging text in limited time	Questions relate to whole text; conceptual understanding required; challenging vocabulary in selection of headings
1.3 Paper-making and its effect on the environment	Report; cause and effect; description of processes; explanation of changes; prediction	Information-dense text; potentially unfamiliar and difficult vocabulary; past and present tenses used in explanation of complicated process; text divided into sections; complex text and sentence structure	Challenging tasks exploit whole text; paraphrasing required; understanding of process necessary; difficult to complete tasks in given time
2.1 Learning theories – raising clever children	Discussion; research findings; simplified theories; advice; opinions; magazine article	Text not difficult; mostly familiar or commonsense concepts; some specific and unfamiliar vocabulary; text divided into small sections; magazine-type mixture of reporting on research and advice and opinions	Questions exploit text; cloze activity requires good understanding of text as well as grammatical competence; task variety provided by matching theory and proponent; academic task focuses readers' attention on central issues in text
2.2 Driver training	Research report; presentation of research findings; little discussion or explanation	Straight-forward text; mostly familiar vocabulary and ideas; presentation of unpredictable results provides a challenge; some long sentences with multiple clauses but generally uncomplicated text and sentence structures	Tasks quite difficult; paraphrasing needed for selection of headings; true/false/no information task may cause some confusion; grammatical clues assist in matching statements
2.3 Alternative technology for developing countries	Research report; academic conventions; substantiation of ideas; explanation; exposition	Information-dense text; potentially familiar concepts; some difficult and specific vocabulary, simplified by context; short text, structured into paragraphs with clear referencing and uncomplicated sentence structures	Tasks require good understanding of text; true/false questions require accurate interpretation; matching statements require understanding of references; summary requires grammatical expertise and understanding of text; paraphrasing necessary
3.1 Traditional beliefs	Descriptions; generalisations; explanation of principles; cause and effect	Short, information-dense text; mostly familiar vocabulary with in-text definitions for specialist terminology; text divided into clearly defined separate topics	Tasks vary in complexity; heading-matching task requires synthesis of information; table completion requires overview of complete text

Table 4b Gibson, Rusek and Swan (1996) (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
3.2 Technological development	Newspaper report; description; recount; speculation	Detailed text; concepts not difficult or abstract; some unfamiliar vocabulary; multitude of details, figures and company names make text difficult to process	Main tasks include scanning for details and key points and true/false interpretation
3.3 Housing arrangements	Project report; description; recount explanation; advantages and disadvantages	Information-dense text in parts; text simplified by the use of specific descriptions and examples; familiar concepts; some difficult but mostly common vocabulary in familiar context; text in long sections with explanatory headings; some complex sentences	Open-ended tasks provide practice in choosing key words; some high-level vocabulary requirements in instructions; evaluative questions included; summary cloze from part of text not given-requires good understanding of whole text
4.1 The risk of heart attack	Research report; magazine style; presentation of findings; evidence supporting an argument; speculation	Text made more complicated by contradictory evidence and differing arguments; familiar vocabulary; text divided into short manageable sections; uncomplicated sentence structures	Tasks require careful reading of passage; headings require discrimination and interpretation; realistic vocabulary expectations in headings
4.2 Gender roles - traditional and modern	Report; description; explanation; exposition	Information-dense text; familiar concepts and examples; mostly familiar vocabulary; some difficult words and complex sentences; text divided into manageable sections	Difficult tasks; whole text tasks require overview of text and vocabulary interpretation; finding word meanings in context provides useful practice in coming to terms with the text; matching antonyms very difficult
4.3 Environment - The Great Barrier Reef	Report; research findings; description; explanation; cause and effect	Straight-forward text; predictable information and concepts; academic language; some difficult and potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; text structured into well-referenced paragraphs; some complex sentences	Tasks provide variety of activities; matching activity may cause some confusion; questions without a choice of answers require readers to come more directly to terms with text

71

Table 4c   Evaluation table for reading tests
Jakeman and McDowell (1996). *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS.*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Fire-lighting techniques and the development of matches	Report; description; recount; explanation	Straight-forward information-dense text; information clearly presented; concepts uncomplicated but potentially unfamiliar in parts; clear examples and explanations; some unfamiliar vocabulary; text not divided into sections; clear chronological structure; some complex sentences	Words and phrases provided for summarising and information matching tasks; paraphrasing required; tasks exploit whole text
1.2 The conservation of species in zoos	Exposition; explanation; opinion	Expository text outlining the opinion of the author; reasonably complex concepts; abstract ideas with few examples; mostly familiar vocabulary; text not divided into sections; complex sentence structures including passives and nominalisations	Variety of tasks; tasks challenging in vocabulary and concepts; understanding of writer's views and main ideas required
1.3 Developments in architecture	Report; description; explanation; cause and effect	Information-dense text; familiar concepts; some difficult and potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; complex text and sentence structures	Notetaking task without words provided covers whole text; matching cause and effects requires understanding of text
2.1 Right and left handedness	Report; description of research findings; explanation	Long, information-dense text; some unfamiliar concepts; difficult and unfamiliar vocabulary; examples of tentative conclusions and abstract ideas; text not divided into sections; long paragraphs; complex sentence structures	Matching task requires scanning for details and understanding of research findings and authors' viewpoints; multiple choice contain some difficult options vocabulary; some paraphrasing required
2.2 Beekeeping	Reports; description of processes; cause and effect	Straight-forward explanatory text; processes not complicated but potentially unfamiliar; some unfamiliar vocabulary; uncomplicated text and sentence structures	Note-taking task includes long list of word choices; diagram completion requires understanding of processes; general understanding tested in YES/NO/NG questions
2.3 Tourism	Exposition; cause and effect	Extremely challenging text; difficult, complex and abstract concepts; difficult vocabulary; text divided into sections; complex text and sentence structure; nominalisations and other complexities; potential to confuse in places	Difficult tasks; headings difficult to allocate in abstract text; YES/NO/NG questions and matching task quite challenging; requires paraphrasing

Table 4c Jakeman and McDowell (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
3.1 The compilation of dictionaries	Reports; description; explanation	Uncomplicated, descriptive text; clear explanations and examples; difficult introduction and some unfamiliar vocabulary; some in-text definitions; straight-forward text divided into sections; uncomplicated sentence structures	Allocation of headings requires understanding of main ideas; summarising and paraphrasing necessary; diagram helps to clarify text as well as test understanding of relationships within text
3.2 Underground housing	Report; description; recount; explanation; advantages and disadvantages	Long, reasonably complex text; straight-forward ideas and concepts; some potentially unfamiliar references and vocabulary; text divided into parts; uncomplicated text and sentence structure	Selection of headings requires summarising, paraphrasing and an understanding of the writer's purpose; straight-forward sentence completion tasks
3.3 The increase in work hours and the loss of leisure time	Reports/exposition; description of trends; cause and effect; explanation; argument	Expository text with some abstract ideas and terminology; some unfamiliar vocabulary; straight-forward text structure; some complex sentences including passives and nominalisations	Careful reading required for YES/NO/NG questions which cover large sections of the text; challenging vocabulary in multiple choice summarising and paraphrasing skills required
4.1 The uses of and development of glass	Report; description of trends and processes; explanation	Straight-forward text with clear explanations; some unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary; examples clarify concepts; straight-forward texts and sentence structure	Headings require summary and paraphrasing skills; diagram helps to clarify text; scanning whole text required for matching task
4.2 Career success rate for women	Report; descriptions and explanation of research findings; cause and effect	Challenging text; some abstract and unfamiliar concepts; unfamiliar and difficult vocabulary; complex sentence structures	Summary and paraphrasing skills required in first matching task; second matching task requires understanding of author's viewpoint; careful reading required for short answer questions
4.3 Factors contributing to the survival or extinction of a species	Explanation; cause and effect; discussion	Challenging text; abstract ideas simplified by clear examples; some difficult and unfamiliar vocabulary; some in-text definitions; complex text and sentence structure including passives and nominalisations	Challenging vocabulary in all tasks; matching task covers large section of text; paraphrasing and summary skills required; tasks fully exploit the reading passages

Table 4d   Evaluation table for reading tests
Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (1998). *Preparation and Practice.*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
2.1 Magazines	Historical description; description of changing trends and developments	Magazine-style language; some potential difficulties caused by specific Australian terms; no in-text definitions or glossary; some unwieldy sentence structures	Variety of tasks; heading selection task requires paraphrasing; matching exercise requires an understanding of relationships within sentences and paragraphs
2.2 Effect of radioactivity on human health	Scientific explanation; cause and effect; comparisons	Long, informative text; non-specialist scientific language; some familiar and predictable concepts; some more in-depth explanations; some potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; conflicting ideas explained; text divided into sections; some long complex sentences	Variety of tasks; paragraph headings require understanding of specific information; matching activity needs an understanding of sentences; summary task requires wider understanding of text
2.3 The development of nuclear power stations in Asia	Scientific explanation; cause and effect; exposition; speculation	Journalistic-style scientific language with some idiomatic lexical choices; long text not divided into sections; complex text and sentence structure	Challenging tasks; high-level reading demands for cause and effect matching activity; paraphrasing required
3.1 New-age transport	Description of present and future developments; speculative language	Journalistic-style language; some potentially unfamiliar concepts; some specialist computer vocabulary; text not structured into sections; some complex sentence structures and noun groups	Some paraphrasing necessary to answer multiple choice questions; detailed reading necessary to complete matching questions
3.2 Gender issues in education	Research report; anecdotal evidence; statistics; exposition	Journalistic-style; medium level of difficulty; some magazine-style expressions; text not divided into sections; text structure easily grasped; complex sentences with ccomplicated word groupings	Variety of tasks; paraphrasing necessary for multiple choice; some confusion may arise in selection of answers; inferences needed - may also cause difficulties
3.3 City-planning	Discussion of housing options; advantages and disadvantages	Journalistic-style; complex sentences containing multiple ideas; rhetorical questions; mostly familiar concepts; familiar vocabulary; text divided into manageable sections	Challenging tasks; overlapping ideas makes heading selection task quite difficult; matching phrases provides summary of key points; grammatical clues assist in determining answers

Table 4e   Evaluation table for reading tests
Todd and Cameron (1996). *Prepare For IELTS: Academic Modules.*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Winds and weather	Scientific explanation including examples; cause and effect explanations	Medium level of difficulty; straight-forward explanatory language; familiar concepts with some difficult vocabulary; common examples; glossary and in-text definitions; information-dense text divided by explanatory headings	Mostly straight-forward scanning for information tasks; diagram requires transfer of information; cloze requires some paraphrasing
1.2 Money and currency	Historical recount; explanation; cause and effect; advantages and disadvantages	Some complex concepts; mostly familiar vocabulary and examples; some specific terms not explained; short glossary included; text and sentence structure moderately complex; text divided into large sections	Careful reading required for all tasks; challenging vocabulary level in heading selection task; matching activity requires collation of information from whole text
1.3 Refining petroleum	Scientific explanation; description of process	Straight-forward explanatory language; information-dense text; detailed concepts; demanding vocabulary level; glossary included; text divided into large sections with explanatory headings	Reading for details and understanding of concepts; information to be transferred to graph; ability to follow steps in process tested; clear diagrams; sentence completion task requires understanding of sentence structure
2.1 Collision between Jupiter and a comet	Scientific explanation; recount; cause and effect; speculation	Information-dense text; magazine style language; potentially unfamiliar and demanding level of vocabulary; some in-text definitions; text not divided into sections; some complex speculative sentences	Reading for detail; tasks exploit whole text; understanding of writer's viewpoint necessary; YES/NO/NG questions quite challenging
2.2 Fashion trends over the centuries	Description; depiction of trends and developments; opinion	Information-dense text; some potentially unfamiliar and difficult vocabulary; text not divided into sections; some complex expository sentences and extensive nominalisations; slightly simplified by some familiar concepts and common examples	Tasks progress in difficulty; challenging task matching argument and evidence; tasks consistent with complexity of text

Table 4e Todd and Cameron (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
2.3 Mass production	Report; explanation; description of changing trends; description of a process	Detailed and informative text; journalistic expressions; some straight-forward and some more difficult concepts; some unfamiliar vocabulary; text not divided into sections; some complex sentences	Tasks vary in complexity; sequencing task requires understanding of process description; identification of writers' views and paraphrasing required; graph task challenging and useful for investigating trends and relationships
3.1 Public speaking	Exposition; presenting and refuting arguments; cause and effect; persuasion	Argumentative language; challenging vocabulary; uncomplicated, logical text structure; text divided into sections; some long, involved sentences	Matching task exploits whole text; paraphrasing required for all tasks; sentence completion task requires understanding of complete paragraphs
3.2 The effect of oil drilling and production on the environment	Report; explanation; description of events; cause and effect	Explanatory language; mostly straight-forward concepts; some difficult vocabulary; uncomplicated text and sentence structure; text not divided into sections	Tasks vary in difficulty; challenging matching task requires reader to process large sections of text
3.3 Research into composition of garbage	Description of research project; report on findings; recount; explanation	Clear, descriptive language; some complex ideas and unexpected trends; mostly familiar vocabulary; short glossary included; straight-forward text and sentence structure; text not divided into sections	Tasks show increasing level of difficulty; grammatical competency and understanding of text tested; matching task complex and challenging
4.1 The chemical preservation of books	Report; cause and effect; description of process	Explanatory language; unfamiliar concepts; potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; text in short paragraphs; uncomplicated text and sentence structure	Tasks demand clear understanding of processes described
4.2 The causes of and the use of drugs in the control of obesity	Report; description of medical research findings; explanation; opinion	Informal, journalistic-style; some potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; mostly familiar concepts and ideas; uncomplicated text and sentence structure	Straight-forward tasks, increasing in level of difficulty; cloze passage requires synthesis of a large portion of the text
4.3 The introduction of the aged pension in Australia	Historical recount; explanation; cause and effect; opinion	Medium level of difficulty; Australian context and political vocabulary and concepts contribute to difficulty of text; text not divided into sections; some long paragraphs and complex sentences	Tasks vary in level of difficulty; scanning for details; difficult task associating ideas philosophies and proponents

Table 4f   Evaluation table for reading tests
van Bemmel and Tucker (1997). *IELTS to Success: Preparation Tips and Practice Tests*

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
1.1 Telecommunications	Historical recount; description; explanation	Detailed text; straight-forward concepts; some unfamiliar vocabulary; uncomplicated text and sentence structures	Tasks provide good practice for speed reading and scanning for information
1.2 Description of various kinds of love as proposed by social psychologists	Report on social psychology studies; discussion of viewpoints; academic conventions	Challenging text; unfamiliar and abstract concepts; unfamiliar terminology; simplified by in-text definitions; text not divided into sections; text and sentence structure reasonably complex	Challenging tasks; diagrams and text need to be understood and matched; interpretation of terminology and understanding of concepts required
1.3 Police response to emergencies	Report; description; explanation; discussion	Short, uncomplicated text; straight-forward concepts; logical arguments; text divided into short sections; text and sentence structure not complex	Questions require careful reading of text
2.1 Relationship between employment in part-time jobs and academic achievement for high-school studies	Report on research studies; cause and effect; comparisons; academic conventions	Text details specific relationships; familiar concepts; some unpredictable results from studies; added reading demands in interpreting graphs; text, sentence and graph structure not complex	Variety of tasks requiring both scanning for details and understanding researchers' viewpoints
2.2 Research on the benefits of fish oil	Report on health research; description; explanation; cause and effect; comparisons; correlative relationships	Short, detailed text; some specialist terminology; straight-forward concepts; text and sentence structure not complex	Tasks require understanding of researcher's claims; correlative relationships need to be understood; paraphrasing and nominalisations raise level of difficulty
2.3 Non-motorised vehicles in Asia	Report; description; cause and effect; comparison; exposition	Straight-forward text; familiar concepts and context; predictable conclusions; some challenging vocabulary; text divided into short sections; some complex sentences	Straight-forward tasks cover the range of information in the text; some paraphrasing required
3.1 Building houses form earth	Report; description of developments over the years; giving reasons; advantages and disadvantages	Text not difficult or complex; familiar and predictable concepts; familiar vocabulary; text structure logical and uncomplicated	Variety of tasks exploit whole text; some summarising and paraphrasing necessary

Table 4f van Bemmel and Tucker (Continued)

Topic	Text-type and text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Task characteristics
3.2 Research in to the way males and females carry books	Report on research findings; comparisons; discussion; academic conventions	Detailed text with a number of studies quoted; descriptions of conflicting findings require careful reading; some challenging vocabulary; text not divided into sections; some complex sentences	Picture tasks test reader's ability to visualise descriptions; tasks matching the researchers and their opinions require paraphrasing, demonstrating an understanding of the theories stated and their conflicting nature
3.3 Critique of television news	Report; exposition; criticisms; comparisons; explanation	Some complex ideas; mostly familiar vocabulary; some predictable information; text not divided into sections; some complex sentences	Summary task requires synthesis of information from text; paraphrasing and interpretation of writers' and researchers' viewpoints
4.1 Breeding and raising ducks	Description; explanation; comparison	Short, uncomplicated text; straight-forward concepts; familiar vocabulary; easily accessible information	Tasks include scanning for information; summarising and paraphrasing required
4.2 Job-sharing	Report of research findings; description; explanation; advantages; examples	Medium-level of difficulty; mostly familiar concepts; familiar vocabulary; text divided into sections; some complex sentence structures	Tasks include whole text tasks and understanding the writer's views
4.3 The increasing incidence of and methods to combat malaria	Report; description of research findings; cause and effect; correlative relationships	Concepts not complex; some potentially unfamiliar vocabulary; some complex sentence structures and nominalisations	Tasks vary in level of difficulty; whole text heading-matching task tests understanding of text and sentence structure; understanding of relationships described in text required

Table 4g   Evaluation table for reading tests
IELTS Specimen Materials (1997)

Topic	Text type and Text features	Level of linguistic and organisational difficulty of text	Complexity of task
1.1 The eruption of Mt Vesuvius	Report; description; recount; explanation; cause and effect	Straight-forward text; familiar concepts and clear explanations; some unfamiliar vocabulary; text divided into sections; uncomplicated text and sentence structure	Variety of question types; scanning for details; summary and paraphrasing skills tested
1.2 The selection of employees	Report; exposition; research findings	Complex, information-dense text; abstract and unfamiliar concepts; some difficult and unfamiliar vocabulary; text divided into sections; complex sentence structure, including nominalisations	Challenging heading selection task with paraphrasing and understanding of sections required; YES/NO/NG questions test separate items of information; flow chart requires understanding of text structure
1.3 The development of film and cameras	Report; recount; description of processes; explanation	Detailed text; straight-forward concepts; some unfamiliar vocabulary; uncomplicated text structure; some complex sentence structures and complicated descriptions	Questions require careful reading; diagram requires labelling of parts and understanding the function of those parts

Appendix 4.0

Prompts for teacher interviews

Issues for discussion were listed in the letter forwarded to participating teachers before the teacher interviews.

Areas in which we are interested in obtaining feedback include the following.

- Comments on the particular materials you have used.
- The skills the IELTS preparation materials do/or do not help to develop, eg. time management, following instructions, managing unfamiliar vocabulary.
- The impact of the proficiency level of the learner on the training program.
- Measurement of student progress.
- Factors you keep in mind when choosing which particular tasks and practice materials are used.
- Your views regarding the place of IELTS preparation materials in the broader dimension of preparing learners for further study.
- Any comments of your own about the materials or suggestions for additions to future IELTS preparation materials.

Appendix 5.0

IELTS Preparation, Reading and Listening Materials

STUDENT SURVEY 1

1. **Please tick the appropriate boxes.**

    Age: ☐ < 18 yrs   ☐ 26 - 30 yrs

    ☐ 18 - 22 yrs   ☐ > 30 yrs

    ☐ 23 - 25 yrs

    Nationality: _____ **First Language:** _____

2. **What is your reason for taking the IELTS?**

    For entry to   university   ☐

    TAFE   ☐

    or other institution   _____

    For other reasons   _____

3. **How long have you been studying English in Australia?** _____

4. **When did your current IELTS preparation course begin?** _____

    day / month / year

5. **What do you look for when you choose an IELTS practise task?**
    (eg. clear instructions, colourful, new looking materials, familiar or interesting topics etc)

    _____

    _____

6.   **Do you usually do the practice tests in the time limit given, without rewinding the tape (for listening tests) and without using a dictionary?**

                                                                                Yes / No

      If not please explain how you usually use the practice reading and listening tests.

      _____

      _____

7.   **Are the scores you obtain in your practice tests always similar.   Yes / No**

      If not can you give reasons why some practice tests are easier / more difficult than others?

      _____

      _____

8.   **As well as helping you prepare for your IELTS test do you think IELTS training materials should help you prepare for further study?**

      _____

      _____

9.   **Can you suggest anything that could be added to IELTS Reading or Listening materials to make them more useful in preparing for the test?**

      _____

      _____

Appendix 6.0

IELTS Preparation, Listening and Reading Materials

STUDENT SURVEY 2

(Survey questions for students who have already taken the IELTS test)

1.   **Please give the place and date of your last IELTS test.**

    Place _____   **Date** _____

    IELTS Project Book List

    1. *Prepare for IELTS Academic Modules* by Vanessa Todd and Penny Cameron.
    Insearch Language Centre, UTS

    2. *IELTS Practice Now* by Carol Gibson, Wanda Rusck and*Success Preparation Tips
    and Practice Tests* by Eric van Bemmel and Janina Tucker. Hawthorn Institute of
    Education Jacaranda Wiley LTD

    3. *IELTS Preparation and Practice* by Wendy Sahanaya and Jeremy Lindeck. Oxford

    4. *Practice Tests for IELTS* by Greg Deakin. Indonesia Australia Language
    Foundation and Hawthorn Institute of Education

    5. *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS* by Vanessa Jakeman and Clare McDowell.
    Cambridge University Press

    6. *IELTS Specimen Materials April 1995 University of Cambridge* The British Council
    IDP Education Australia

2.   **From the book list can you write down the number of any materials you found
    particularly helpful in preparing for IELTS.**

_____

3. Can you name any other books or materials which were particularly useful to you in preparing for IELTS?

    _____

4. Approximately how many practice tests did you do before you took the IELTS test?   _____

5. Were the scores you received in your IELTS test similar to those you received in your practice tests?   _____

6. If there were any differences in either the listening or reading scores of your IELTS test to those in your practice tests can you explain what those differences were?

    _____

    _____

7. Can you make any comment on the practice listening and reading materials and how well you think they compare to the IELTS test?

    _____

    _____