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Abstract: The article investigates the strategies that examinees need to possess in order to meet the requirements for a high score in IELTS while getting prepared for the test. A deep insight into teaching speaking skills has been taken, suggesting five criteria (economics of language; redundant language; key information location; vocabulary recycling; graded language use) according to which hands-on methodological solutions for teaching speaking on the basis of special strategies (using synonymic structures on the lexical and grammatical levels; using ready-made patterns while answering questions; sampling the information in questions according to 5 question-patterns; constructing the algorithm of a patterned answer; focusing on arranging the language items rather than on answering the question and others) have been suggested.

Key words: IELTS tests, strategies, speaking skills, proficiency, test taker

Introduction

Nowadays it has become quite essential for school or university graduates to take one of those internationally accepted tests in English proficiency for various reasons (job or study opportunities, professional and career development, to name but a few). Thus, the problem of finding effective language teaching methods in this area has become significantly urgent in a variety of school and university settings.

In order to work out an effective methodology, it is necessary to look at the requirements the examinees are to meet while getting prepared for the test, which in our case is IELTS, the International English Language Testing System. It is a test for students who must demonstrate English language proficiency on an appropriate level to gain entry to universities or training programs in English-speaking countries (Bemmel, 1997).

Statement of the Problem and the Research Questions

Today new digital technologies have gained vast and extensive popularity in use, especially in assessing the knowledge and skills of students at higher educational institutions. This is caused in a great extent by the transfer to module learning pattern, in which all the scope of the information to be learnt is divided into modules, and, as a result, implies being

able to reproduce the modular portion of information. Moreover, it has become common practice to reduce the amount of the academic classroom learning time, and oppositely to increase the time allotted to self-study process of the students. In this respect, digital technologies in testing come in very handy.

But mastering the language for getting a high score on the IELTS test means the formation of a communicative competence on the level relevant to the score. In this respect, communicative competence is understood as the development of four sub-competencies according to four speech skills: speaking, writing, listening, and reading. The assessment of each sub-competency wouldn't meet any difficulties, especially with the capabilities of modern information and digital technologies, if it weren't the peculiarities of language use in the real communicative environment. These impose some problems, and their solution is seen necessary for the adequate and objective evaluation of the communicative competence formation on the level corresponding to a real native speaker of the language. That's why the IELTS test in a pen and paper version is gaining more and more validity in comparison to computer or Internet-based formats, since its assessment procedure resemble the real language use conditions to a larger extent.

One of the reasons for the growing popularity of the IELTS oral proficiency interview (in this paper a closer look is paid at the spoken component of the above mentioned communicative competence four-item model) is the task construction according to the model of a native speaker spoken proficiency. Thus, in order to develop an effective methodology of training for a successful test experience it is important to know how the test is actually marked, i.e. what criteria are employed to distinguish between native-like and non-native-like speaking competencies. The analysis of such criteria and their interpretation into guiding instructions to teaching for the IELTS test completion with the focused outcome constitute the goal and the object of this study. By our qualitative investigation we'll provide the answers to the following research questions:

- 1) What criteria are used by IELTS examiners and oral proficiency test raters?
- 2) What differences in two language systems (the English language system and a test taker's native language system, in our case – the Ukrainian language system) should be taken into account in elaborating effective strategies and techniques for teaching English for the IELTS test?

- 3) What strategies and techniques should be developed in test takers to ensure their desirable test score?

Methodology

When people sit for the IELTS test, they usually forget that the test itself is designed to assess their spoken English language proficiency level, but not the knowledge of the topic within the framework of which the question was asked or the knowledge of the language grammar rules. Thus it is important for a test taker to focus on what the IELTS examiner is looking for in the test answer. A metaphorical comparison of the IELTS test procedure and the driving test given by Mat Clark is a good illustration of this idea: “Anyone who is preparing for the test knows exactly what the driving test examiner is looking for, and they work on perfecting these particular aspects of their driving skills; they don’t simply get in the car and do some driving for an hour” (Clark, 2007, p.5).

Having an extensive experience of teaching (more than five years) and carrying assessment (more than three years) for the IELTS, we have seen a large number of examples of how the test takers miss the whole point of the speaking test requirements. They would focus mainly on answering the question, rather than showing their language ability in answering any question. So their main concern would be “Do I know the answer to the question?” instead of more important “Do I have the necessary language devices for answering this (or any other) question?”

A good example of the above mentioned misconception of the real IELTS test marking requirements would be the answer a test taker A gave to the question “What’s your favourite flower?” The answer was “My favourite flower is a tulip”. On the one hand, there seems nothing wrong with this answer – it was given correctly from the point of grammar and vocabulary, and the question was answered. This is exactly what the test taker was focused on. But our question from the language proficiency assessment is: what kind of information does this answer provide us with concerning the examinee’s spoken competency level? Our answer to this question is the following: the test taker can transform the interrogative Present Simple sentences into affirmative ones, and knows the lexical item “a tulip” when referring to flowers. But there still remains to be vague whether the test taker has the other lexical items topically related to flowers, and whether besides the Present Simple tense sentences he or she

is capable of using the other more complex (and thus considered to be appropriate for a more proficient speaker) grammar phenomena. As a result, the test taker is satisfied with the answer provided, and hopes for at least band 8 because he or she “answered” the question, thus paying attention to the main concern about the test, but the examiner gives band 5 or 5,5 (out of maximum 9) for such an answer.

Just because the test is based on the “question-answer” format, it is not correct to focus on the information content, but more approachable would be to pay more attention to the language content. The answers A and B given below demonstrate the discussed issue, with answer B to be scored much higher than answer A.

Question: “How often do you go to the cinema?”

Answer A: “Once a month”.

Answer B: “Well, to be quite honest, at present, I don’t have that much spare time to go to the cinema. But as I was a teenager I would frequent two or three times a month to such entertainment venues like the cinema or the theatre”.

There is another important issue in this respect which deserves special consideration while developing effective teaching procedures. When people speak a second (or foreign) language in most cases they are heavily affected by their first language speaking style (Comrie, 2009). But as we have seen in the given above example to get a higher score in speaking it is essential to produce native speaker style English. Since very few language speaking styles are similar, the deviation from the latter becomes a clear marking factor when deciding on the level of native-like speaking proficiency level (Comrie, 1989).

To help students be able to speak in the style of a native speaker we have done a comparative study of spoken English and spoken Ukrainian. The comparative criteria were chosen on the basis of the scientific analysis of literature (Atawneh, 1994; Brown, Yule, 1999) and the answers of Ukrainian test takers (34 adults aged 22-3; 23 females and 11 males). As a result of the study we have come up with four essential criteria which play a significant role in differentiating the spoken styles of two languages:

- a) Key information location.
- b) The use of redundant language.
- c) The use of graded language.
- d) The use of lexical items with high connotation value.

Apart from the ideas found in a number of scientific sources, one more criterion was considered – extensive use of synonyms (both on the lexical and grammatical levels) – which seems to speak for a wide variety of options available when a second language user chooses to most appropriately express his or her opinion. It is hypothesised that the more options are available the less like sudden interruptions and pauses of hesitation and thinking occur in the spoken language of the test taker.

The features common to the spoken style of any language as opposed to its written representation (e.g., variation in speed, loudness or quietness, gestures or body language, pausing and phrasing, to name but a few) are not analysed, though the knowledge and appropriate use of these affects the IELTS test score as well.

The defined criteria as seen in the scientific papers (Croft, Cruse, 2004; Foley, 1997) are taken into account by oral proficiency test raters. The more approximation to the native-like style of speaking a test taker demonstrates – which means that the test taker has fewer differences from the native speaker – the higher the score he or she gets for the speaking part at the test.

Each of the suggested criteria will be analysed.

Key information location.

According to the observation of the spoken Ukrainian discourse in the format “question-answer”, as well as our quantitative study, a typical Ukrainian (19 out of 25 people interviewed) would provide the key information in the first two sentences of their response to a “yes”/“no” question, and then would expand on the answer supplying the partner in communication with other relevant supportive information. The following is a typical pattern of the answer to one of the questions we posed to the interviewees:

A: “Could you lend me 50 hrn. I have run out of all my resources? But the salary will be given in two days, so I’ll give the money back then.”

B: (positive response) “Ok. I’ll do that. But promise to give the money back as soon as possible, because I am in the shortage of extra hrn myself. Moreover, my daughter has asked me to buy her a new dress.”

B: (negative response) “No, I can’t. I can hardly keep from hand to mouth myself. I can’t buy a new dress for my daughter. Ask Mike. He’ll probably help you.”

Having a possibility to reside in the USA for two months we carried out a similar study with the American people and identified just the opposite picture with the strategy of locating the key information in a response to “yes”/”no” questions. So the typical reply to the above provided question with money borrowing the responses looked like the following:

B: (positive response) “Well, you know, I am experiencing such a difficult period in my life, pal. They don’t pay much now because of some investment shortages at work. Children have become too demanding – they want to study and get entertained, and I have to pay for everything. Ok, I’ll give you the money, but promise to pay it back as soon as possible.”

B: (negative answer) “Well, you know, I am experiencing such a difficult period in my life, pal. They don’t pay much now because of some investment shortages at work. Children have become too demanding – they want to study and get entertained, and I have to pay for everything. Giving the money to you would mean borrowing it from somebody else. I can’t, sorry. Why don’t you ask Mike? His wallet is always thick.”

Thus it should be emphasized for Ukrainian test takers that placing the key information at the beginning of their response may potential decrease their score because this would reveal their dissimilarity with the native like style of speaking. While getting such students prepared for the IELTS test the teacher should practice the strategy of locating the key information approaching the end of the response (Fig. 1)

The differences in key information location patterns as found in the answers given by a typical Ukrainian and an American or a British are shown in Figure 1:

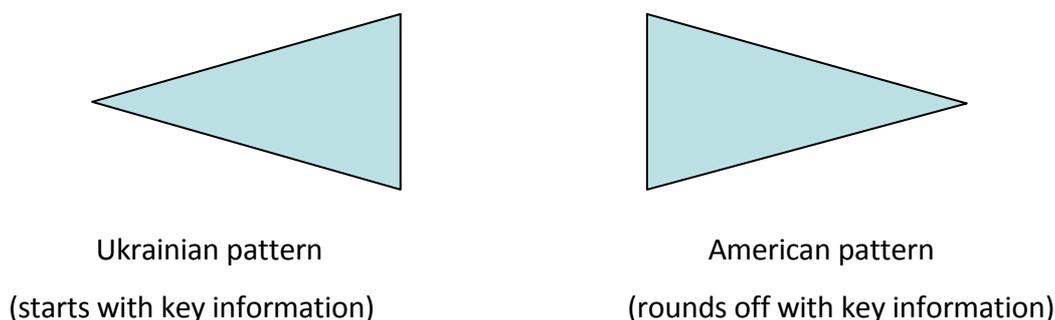


Fig. 1. Key information location patterns in Ukrainian and American responses to a “yes”/”no” questions

Below is the example of successful IELTS question response and its opposite variant.

When do you usually listen to music?

Ukrainian (time)	English (details, explanations)
At weekends or in the evening.....	Well, actually I don't have time for this activity in the morning or generally at week days, so basically I listen to music at weekends.

The use of redundant language.

As has been mentioned above, a common misconception of the performance excellence at the IELTS test is the effort of a test taker to show his or her expertise in the content information rather than in the language content, which is the object of assessment at the test.

As a result the answers sometimes look like the responses at a quiz show:

A: Where do you live?

B: I live in Kyiv.

A: What's your favourite colour?

B: It's green.

A: What kind of music do you prefer listening to?

B: Classical.

The analysis of the recorded responses given by American native speakers to typical IELTS questions illustrates the abundant use of redundant language. So an American would give the following native-like style response to the question "Where do you live?": I live in the capital of Ukraine, actually this is Kyiv. It's a marvelous city. You know, I'd never be tempted to change this place for any other city in the world.

If the latter response with its quiz-like variant is compared we can conclude they render the same message from the perspective of providing the listener with the information, but from the point of view of being closer to the native speaker style, the second response would be scored higher at the test.

In the following example a good response will be suggested from a high score standpoint with its opponent response from which all redundant language was deleted:

Answer 1. Well, my hometown London is kind of like huge you know. I mean it's actually enormous, maybe even the biggest city in Europe. So really, if you live there, it's sort of

amazing, yeah. You can do almost anything you want. Like you know, there're so many things to do, and I guess that's why I love living there.

Answer 2. My hometown London is huge, maybe the biggest city in Europe. If you live there, it's amazing. You can do anything you want. There're so many things to do, that's why I love living there.

The use of graded language.

This criterion can be explained as the ability of the speaker to use language items which help express his/ her attitude to the subject of the conversation. It is probably one of the most difficult for Ukrainian test takers among the suggested list because such speaking devices are not used in the Ukrainian spoken discourse, or are used with a much lower intensity and frequency as they are in English. For example, in order to answer the question "Do you like watching TV?" the following list of graded language items can be used by a typical American (Clark, 1997, p. 12):

- Yes, I **really** like watching TV...
- I **guess I am quite fond of** watching TV...
- **For the most part I would probably say that I quite** like watching TV...
- **To some extent I would say** I like watching TV...
- **Well, I wouldn't say** I like watching TV...
- **It's hard to say that** I like watching TV...
- **I would rather say I dislike** watching TV...

The use of lexical items with high connotation value.

Most vocabulary items in the English language can be classified into those of low and high connotation value. The latter ones are not included into the lists of the most frequently used words, and thus knowing and using such words in speech is generally interpreted by examiners as possessing the lexical competency of a high level. This results in an increase in the band score.

Thus while describing a neighbour a test taker may use such lexical items as "clever", "kind", "friendly", but their high connotation value equivalents – "witty" or "intelligent"; "kind-

hearted” or “responsive” or “soft-hearted”; “sociable” or “amiable” – will add up points to the overall performance evaluation.

Extensive use of synonyms both on the lexical and grammatical levels.

The analysis of the Ukrainian spoken discourse proves the use of similar key lexical items in the response to those that have been suggested in a question. For example, the question “Is cake delicious?” would be typically answered by a Ukrainian test taker either “Yes, it’s very delicious” or “No, it’s not delicious”. For the English language native speakers such recycling of the language of the question in their response has been rarely recorded. On the contrary, they would use lexical synonyms or would change the grammatical structure of the sentence. The samples of the question-answer patterns prove the mentioned above idea.

The use of lexical synonyms:

A: Do you like animals?

B: (positive response) When I was a child I used to take care of **all domestic animals** my grandparents kept. I would say I **adore** them.

B: (negative response) Well, I can’t say I hate **them**, but I don’t understand those people who feed their **cat** from the same spoon they have their breakfast or have six cats sharing their bedroom.

The use of grammatical synonyms:

A: What kind of music do you like listening to?

B: Well, it’s quite an interesting question, actually. Right, let me guess... Ah, classical **music gives me** a headache. I would say I **am more of a** pop music fan. There **might also be heard** some jazz tune in my apartment. I am a versatile type, you know.

As can be seen in the last response pattern, the structure “you like listening to” was not repeated in the response, but instead the reverse structure “music gives me” and a passive construction “might also be heard” have been used by the native speaker.

Discussion

The differences between the two language systems – English and Ukrainian – pose the question of taking this issue into account while constructing teaching techniques, choosing the activities while getting test takers prepared for the IELTS test. Based on the carried out study

some teaching strategies have been elaborated which proved out to be effective in our five-year practice of teaching for the IELTS test. The most productive and covering the majority of the above mentioned criteria of native-like style speaking is getting students produce as many responses as possible to one and the same question. This strategy can be practiced both with one and many students. For example, the teacher poses the question “What good points would you mention about living in your home city?” and then one student answers this question in as many ways as possible, rendering the same information but using a variety of language resources for that:

- The best thing about my home town is probably its numerous green trees planted all over the place.
- Tourists who come to visit my home town are always amazed by how green it is.
- I personally enjoy its greenery, which makes my city a healthy place to live in.

The teacher should also set the requirement of using graded language – at least one per sentence, as well as the necessary requirement of using grammatical synonymic structures in each new response.

Conclusion

In summary, it is important to emphasize the significance of a test taker’s awareness of the above mentioned factors and corresponding criteria that are used as requirements in marking the responses at the spoken test in IELTS. This should be emphasized because the students very often focus on answering the question rather than on the language proficiency while getting prepared for any language test. Thus teachers have to pay special attention to get their students prepared to meet the discussed criteria.

It also has to be admitted that the current study is still far from being conclusive. Further studies must be undertaken to eliminate the influence of stress conditions which usually decrease the level of a test taker’s performance. The problem of a special system of activities with its clear scheme or model needs thorough investigation as well. These and other issues will be the next focus of our study in the discussed vein.

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