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INTERNATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXAM PREPARATION

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У статті порушено проблему підготовки до міжнародних іспитів з англійської мови. Висвітлено структуру та зміст міжнародних іспитів: IELTS, Cambridge General Tests, BEC. Здійснено узагальнення технік успішного складання кожної з частин тестів: аудіювання, читання, говоріння та письма.

Ключові слова: підготовка до міжнародних іспитів з англійської мови, зміст міжнародних іспитів з англійської мови, навчання академічного письма, форми роботи з академічними текстами.

В статье затронута проблема подготовки к международным экзаменам по английскому языку. Освещены структура и содержание международных экзаменов: IELTS, Cambridge General Tests, BEC. Осуществлено обобщение техник успешной сдачи каждой из частей экзаменов: аудирования, чтения, говорения и письма.

Ключевые слова: подготовка к международным экзаменам по английскому языку, содержание международных экзаменов по английскому языку, обучение академическому письму, формы работы с академическими текстами.

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The article deals with the issue of international English language exam preparation. The structure and content of the international exams: IELTS, Cambridge General Tests, BEC has been revealed. Essential tips for each part of tests: listening, reading, writing and speaking have been generalized.

Key words: international English language exam preparation, nature and structure of international English language exams, teaching academic writing, teaching academic reading.

The rationale. In the modern world, a good command of an English language is not just an extra credential, but also a requisite requirement for students and professionals joining a global community. To be eligible to apply for a job or a university degree abroad, one has to demonstrate the decent level of fluency and accuracy of English. Moreover, in Ukraine the government adopted the law obliging applicants for doctorate degrees, state authorities etc. to acquire at least B2 level. There are several tests that measure user's ability to use a language. The IELTS test is the world's most popular English language test for higher education and global migration. The TOEFL one takes the second place, since it is recognized in the USA and Canada, whereas the IELTS test is accepted worldwide. Cambridge and Pearson tests are becoming the main competitors of IELTS and TOEFL, but so far, they are recognized in Britain and some European countries. The BEC test estimates user's competence in the field of business and finance. Given the fact that even a good speaker can fail a test due to lack of proper preparation to the very test, awareness of the test mode, it is necessary to pay close attention to tests' makeup and thorough training.

Overview of recent publications. Significant contributions in terms of how to ac-

quire a higher score during a test have been made by R. Brown, P. Cullen, A. Jurascheck, J. Moore, L. Richards, M. Terry, J. Wilson, hosts and anchormen on Engvid, Canguroo English websites to name a few. Additionally, useful tips can be procured on British Council and Cambridge Exams websites. IELTS, BEC and other General English Cambridge tests have a similar structure and examiners have uniform requirements.

The challenge though is that newbie test takers are clueless in search of excellent preparation materials and subsequently are likely to fail a test unless they pounce on an experienced teacher. Even if they get so lucky to come across a decent website, video watching can be time-consuming, as quite often videos overlap, hosts ramble a lot until they get to the point.

The aim. Therefore, the article aims to provide a summary of the vital tips concerning preparation for international exams on an English language. The paper is going to cover all four sections (Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking) with a particular focus on Writing Section for Academic IELTS, since it is the most daunting part and a great deal of people get confused as for what they have to write at all.

The delivery of the main data. In the Listening part test-takers must be certain they comply with the instructions, that means they



have to read the instructions carefully and be sure how many words or/ and numbers they are required to write in an answer sheet. It occurs very often that being in stressful circumstances people write more words than they have to and thus lose points. Besides, spelling is essential, as even if one puts the correct word but is it misspelt, the answer is not counted. As soon as a test-taker is allowed to open the question sheets, it is advised to read the instructions straight away, underline/circle the quantity of words/numbers to fill in, scan the questions of the first section and again underline key words and try to predict answers. That means to realize what one should be looking for: which part of speech, what topical category, singular or plural form, proper or common noun, cardinal or ordinal numeral, etc. The same must be done in respect of other sections, but only when you are done with the previous sections. One of the most common mistakes test-takers make is that they use the time in between listening not for scanning the next section, but for checking the previous one. Ten extra minutes will be given in the end of the listening part to transfer the answers to an answer sheet and to check everything [8, p. 10].

Test-takers are urged to beware of tricks and traps [4, p. 5]. Firstly, very often there are so called negatives in the audios, which might be bewildering. For instance, a speaker says, 'I would like to book two return tickets for 17th June. Oh no, no, it skipped my mind that I will be engaged on this day. Let it be 19th June.' So, a test-taker is ready to put the first answer, but then correction goes. Secondly, you will never hear a question phrase word by word. Audio paraphrases the written text using synonyms, like reservation – booking, luggage – baggage, vacation – holiday etc. One should bear in mind, that s/he must not extrapolate the answers, they will be pronounced, often clearly and loudly.

All the questions are arranged in a chronological order as they appear in the audio. It might happen that you miss the answer; in this case, the most important thing is not to panic and always keep in mind the next question for not to lose the track. Some teachers advise to concentrate solely on listening rather than listening, reading and answering questions at the same time when you deal with section 4. It is underpinned by the following: as you get to section 4, which is an extract from an academic lecture, you actually do not have time to read all the questions carefully and then in a rush incapable simultaneously to comprehend a lecture, read the questions, analyze and answer. Therefore, it is more feasible to focus on listening and memorizing the gist

and, when the audio is over, to fill in the gaps [7, p. 10].

There are several approaches to tackling the reading part. First and foremost, a test-taker should learn before taking a real test is to habituate to processing lengthy academic texts in the given timeframe. This can be achieved by repetitive practicing. It is of vital importance not to get absorbed into a text while reading. Oftentimes test-takers start reading every word, rereading every sentence several times thereby losing precious time. Skimming and scanning techniques are advised to be applied instead [2, p.18]. The point is that the reading part of any international test, be it IELTS, CAE, BEC, FCE etc., assesses the user's ability to find the necessary information in little or no time.

Depending on a person's individual learning style and a frame of mind, the examiners advise to follow one of three possible ways to work on the reading part [6; 7].

The first one suggests the following sequence of steps: a test-taker reads the entire passage and then gets to processing the questions. This method is workable with people who are fast readers and capable of retaining the data for a long time, while answering the questions they will know where to get back in the passage and find the answer.

The second approach is to go straight to the questions. Firstly, you need to figure out what type of task you are dealing with, whether it is a TRUE – FALSE-NOT GIVEN, Matching, Gap filling, Paragraph Heading task, and underline the key words or ideas in the questions. Subsequently you need to skim the paragraph to grasp the gist of it. The difficulty with the reading part is that, unlike the listening part, questions do not always go in the chronological order and the answers can be scattered around the text.

The third approach is considered to be the most challenging and the most productive in the same time. That is to summarize each paragraph by itself. To do so you need to look carefully only at the first sentence, since in the good writing that is the topic sentence, which provides the main idea of the paragraph, whereas all the rest will just support it and it has to be skimmed. Thus you will comprehend the essence of the paragraph and won't waste the time. Having skimmed the passage, find (underline/circle) the key words or phrases and write a one-sentence summary of the passage on the margins. Subsequently you move to the questions and apply the same skimming and finding key words approach. The passage below illustrates this approach: you may see the topic sentence and the key words (underlined) and a summary:



The phonograph eventually evolved into the commercially viable phonograph. [TOPIC SENTENCE] Thomas Edison discovered in 1878 a way to record sound onto soft, impressionable material, such as tin-foil, lead, or wax. This could then be played again with an amplifier to reproduce the original sounds. However, it was not until 1887 that this discovery was used to record sound on a disc, thereby creating a medium that could be mass-produced. Emile Berliner discovered that instead of tracing the stylus over a rotating cylinder as had been done until then, the same impressions could be made onto a flat disc. Rather than varying the groove depth, he had the stylus etch the vibrations horizontally inside a groove of constant depth. The resulting disc could then be reproduced by a molding process without destroying the original... {summary: a new medium}

This making a summary approach is particularly useful for such type of questions as: matching the passages with headings, TRUE – FALSE-NOT GIVEN . It should be mentioned that TRUE-FALSE-NOT GIVEN type of questions is integral for the IELTS Reading part and very common to other Cambridge tests. To tackle it efficiently, a test-taker has to be certain s/he is aware what each statement means. TRUE should be put if a passage contains information mentioned in the statement. For instance,

...This increase in cyber crime has alarmed may experts... [the passage]

Cyber crime is on the rise [statement]

We scan the passage, underline the key words, paying attention to the synonyms and see whether there is any contradiction or identity. Therefore it is TRUE.

FALSE is applicable when a statement contradicts the facts or idea from the passage. For instance:

...The first personal computer was invented in 1970s. [passage]

Personal computers were first invented in 1990s [statement] FALSE

Some people in Canada like to eat pudding [passage]

Pudding is always eaten by Canadians [statement] FALSE

Finally NOT GIVEN must be chosen if there is no information in the passage concerning the statement.

Although once eradicated from Toronto bed bugs have made a comeback and now considered one of the leading pests in the city [passage]

Rats are the most common nuisance Torontonians face [statement] – NOT GIVEN, as we have no info pertaining to rats.

In case there is a Fill in Gaps task, where a reader is required to fill in the missing information using the text for reading, it is essential to keep in mind that the gaps have to be filled exclusively with the words from the text, not any not related to the text, but appropriate – to the mind of a test-taker, words [8, p. 11].

The Writing part is deemed to be the most daunting part. Therefore this section of the article aims to go in minutiae on the essential tips for the writing assignment. Despite the fact that tasks vary depending on the test, they all feature the common requirements. In the General IELTS Writing Part, one has to write a letter (invitation, appreciation, complaint, enquiry etc.) and an essay, whereas in the Academic IELTS instead of a letter you must describe a graph/a table/a diagram. The same task formats go with BEC and Cambridge General English tests, where you are supposed to write a report on the data provided in a graph, table, diagram, or a notification letter, an essay etc.

The first and foremost in any writing is the ability to do what they ask, i.e. to meet the requirement as for the lengths – 150 words and 250 words for the task one and two respectively, to cover all the points included in the question card. While checking an examiner will tick what a test-taker has covered, and in case of failure, s/he will lose the points. What is more, every task is assessed separately and the second task carries twice more points than the first one, hence you are allowed more time on it. In addition, examiners look at clearance and cohesion, grammar complexity, vocabulary range, spelling accuracy [5, p. 30].

Chances are that test-takers get low marks in the writing part, because they get anxious when they see a table, diagram being clueless how to tackle this part, hence spend too much time on it and consequently cannot set aside enough time for an essay.

In the IELTS Writing Part 1 a test-taker is required to describe a bar graph, a pie chart, a line graph, two of these, a flow chart or a table.

One type of question in Task 1 is to write about a graph, which shows trends that change over time. Allsop J. urges to arrange it in the following way: write an introduction to the topic of the graph in your own words; give an overview of the main ideas in the graph; describe the most important changes and numbers [1, p. 40].

To reword the introduction a test-taker can deploy the following phrases:

this line graph shows/ represents/ demonstrates/ highlights/ illustrates.../ how many



people/how much/the number of/the amount of/ the data about...;

this table lists/ shows the change in sales between 1990-1998/ differences/ incidence/ prevalence in... over a (ten) year period/ from...to/

According to the chart...

It can be seen from the chart that...

Dealing with paragraph 2, namely writing a general overview of the main trends and most important information in the graph, a test-taker should have to employ the expressions like:

There was a significant upward trend in...../ there was a downward trend in.../ the... remain stable.

As soon as we have described the main trend, we can detail the changes, using the relevant verbs, adjectives and adverbs:

Decrease/ double/ treble/ drop/ fall/ go down/ go up/ grow/ halve/ improve/ increase/ jump/ plummet/ plunge/ rise/ rocket/ shoot up/ soar/ surge/ fluctuate/ vary/ be volatile/ level off/ hit/ reach a peak/ dip/ recover/ remain stable/ hit a through/ worsen; considerably/ dramatically/ gradually/ marginally/ negligibly/ rapidly/ remarkably/ sharply/ significantly/ slightly/ steadily/ strikingly/.

Examiners recommend not to speak about trends individually, but rather put them into a lump, consider anomalies and go into details, spend more words on differences than on similarities [1; 3; 5; 8]. If we compare five different countries, we should not say A is doing this, B is doing this, instead we have to say, A, B and C are doing this.

While describing a pie chart, it is essential to know how to talk about the numbers, for instance: rent makes up / accounts for 10% of the .../ half of .../ two -thirds / three-thirds are / a third / a quarter / a fifth / a sixth of the living expenses are rent. In addition, one can add words to be more specific and to boost a mark: exactly, precisely, around, approximately, nearly, close to, roughly 40%, slightly above, just over 40%, slightly below, just under – 45%, a small fraction, a small percentage, a small number, the lowest percentage, a very small proportion of the total is... See the example below:

According to the chart, coffee makes up the lowest percentage of the total.

Coffee makes up the lowest percentage of the total at 2 cups.

If a test-taker has to compare to charts, in paragraph 1 it is essential to describe separately two charts, then in paragraph 2 go to comparison of them by means of talking about similar trends and major differences. Similarly, if one speaks about a flow chart, s/he needs to identify the start, the finish, and the milestones.

The next point to consider is essay writing. The most popular essay types are advantages and disadvantages essays, problem and solution essays, opinion essays.

Brown R. points out that organizing an advantages and disadvantages essay a test-taker must adhere to the following pattern: an introduction to the topic; two advantages to the situation and clear examples; two disadvantages and good support of these; a short conclusion with a personal overall opinion [5, p. 89].

To draw up a good problem and solution essay, test-takers will need to write an introduction to the topic, three causes of the problem and explain them, giving examples where possible; describe three solutions to deal with the problem; write a short conclusion which gives the writer's view about the topic.

Finally, an opinion essay should comply with the next framework: an introduction to the topic, which clearly states a writer's opinion on the subject; two main points to support the opinion and write about them with examples; one alternative opinion and give examples; a short conclusion to summarize the main points and re-state the opinion.

The last, but not the least, complicated part of a test is the Speaking Part. In the IELTS tests a native speaker interviews candidates individually, the test is recorded, and qualified examiners assess answers afterwards. The Cambridge tests, i.e. BEC, CAE, FCE, CPE are taken in pairs or threes when there is an extra candidate left. There are two examiners: the interlocutor is the examiner who speaks to a test-taker and asks the questions, whereas the other examiner observes and marks an applicant. It should be noted that the interlocutor contributes to the marking process by awarding one overall mark.

In either case, a test consists of three parts: the interview, the long turn and the two-way discussion. Examiners use detailed performance descriptors when assessing the Speaking tests, these band descriptors describe performance in five categories: task achievement; coherence and cohesion; lexical resource; grammar range and accuracy; and pronunciation [2-4].

The qualified examiners advise to avoid giving short, uncommunicative replies. For example, if an examiner asks, "Where are you from?" a test-taker should not reply, "I am from the Netherlands" and stop on that. S/he has to expand saying, "It is 35 kilometers north of Amsterdam. It is a modern city but with a lot of history and a lovely place to live". Alternatively, as long as it is a Yes-No question, like, "Do you like sports?" one should have to provide a lengthy reply, a kind of: "I am not re-



ally interested in playing sports. I fancy watching sport on TV and I really enjoyed keeping up with the Olympics recently” [9, p. 25]

In the second part, test-takers are given one minute to prepare, which is crucial to be used efficiently. A. Bazin points out that during this time applicants have to write key words or make mind maps of connected words. Besides, they ought to start the talk by introducing the topic and outlining the points to be covered, then make sure to reveal all the issues stated in the examination card [1, p. 9]. When there are two or several test-takers participating in the discussion, it is highly recommended not to interrupt one another, allowing each speaker to express himself/herself.

Conclusion. International tests do not merely assess the range of vocabulary and grammar, but rather language competence that is the ability to communicate efficiently, to comprehend an interlocutor, to process, analyze big volumes of data, and subsequently promptly find answers to questions, come up with sensible creative solutions, and think on the feet. Therefore, these very skills are of paramount importance to acquire.

Teaching young learners the abovementioned competences requires thorough les-

son planning and search of more elaborate pedagogy.

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