

By David Park

How fast can you improve your English?

If you're like the large majority of Chinese candidates doing the academic version of IELTS (International English Language Testing System), you're aiming to get an overall band score of 6.0, 6.5 or 7.0.

How well do test takers do? It may surprise you, but most candidates in China don't get the score they want.

The average band score in China is about 5.5, which is below what candidates usually require to study at an overseas university. Depending on the university and the course, an overall score between 6.0 and 8.0 is usually required for admission. In 2007, just 20% of Chinese candidates got an overall score of 6.0, and only 16% got higher.

Preparation time

Research into IELTS has found that it usually takes many months to improve candidates' English to the band score they require.

The research revealed that around 300 hours of full-time study (18 hours or more a week) is needed to lift the average candidate's overall band score from 5.5 to 6.0. Surprisingly, longer than 300 hours of full-time study is needed to move from 6.0 to 6.5, or from 6.5 to 7.0.

That means the average Chinese candidate - with a band score of 5.5 - could need up to seven to nine months full-time study to get an overall score of 6.5.

As for the individual language skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking), the greatest gain can be expected in the listening test. However, the score for the reading test is likely to show the lowest level of improvement.

Of course, all of the above periods are *averages*. Some candidates need less time to get the overall improvements shown, while others need even more time. The research established that the actual improvement individual candidates can expect depends on five factors:

- ◆ **Motivation.** Highly motivated candidates are much more likely to increase their overall score than less enthusiastic candidates.
- ◆ **The value given to English.** Candidates who believe having an excellent level of English is important for their future academic studies or career are likely to make greater gains in their overall score. Conversely, candidates who just regard IELTS as a test they have

to "pass" to get into university are less likely to show significant improvements.

- ◆ **Confidence.** Candidates who lack confidence, who are fearful of using English or who are anxious will probably need much more time to improve their overall score.
- ◆ **Age.** Older candidates definitely need more time to improve their overall score than people in their twenties.

Through my teaching work, I've noticed that candidates in their mid- to late teens also often need more time to prepare. This is because they tend to have limited knowledge of the types of social issues candidates have to talk or write about in the academic version of the exam. For example:

- the effects of having an increasing number of people living longer than ever before;
 - the factors contributing to rising levels of stress in society; or
 - the impact of technological change.
- ◆ **Focus.** Some candidates retaking IELTS only work on improving the one or two skills for which they got an unsatisfactory score. However, while the scores for those skill areas may improve, there's usually a fall in their scores for the neglected skill areas. As a result, their overall score doesn't rise.

Suggestions

To do well in IELTS, you need to:

- ◆ **Establish your current level of English.** Get your language level assessed objectively. Take expert advice from people who specialise in IELTS.
- ◆ **Ensure you allow enough time.** Realistic planning is essential. The sooner you get your current language level objectively assessed, the sooner you can start preparing for the exam.

University agents will inform you that you must do IELTS as part of the university application process. However, to get your business, some agents try to make it seem easy to improve English language skills to university level. In fact, university agents are usually not able to determine how much preparation

time you, personally, will need.

You should therefore take the initiative and get your language assessed by IELTS exam experts at the same time as you start talking to university agents.

◆ **Have an appropriate preparation programme.** To maximise your chances of success, your preparation must include a mix of:

- **Language development.** Work on your grammar and vocabulary, and all four language skills.
- **Test-taking skills development.** There's little point working on test-taking skills before your English is at Intermediate level. Once it is, find out as much as you can about IELTS (i.e., its structure, the question types and how you're assessed).

Then, get training in IELTS exam techniques. Do as much practice in all four modules of the

exam as you can - even if you think you're already good enough in some areas.

- **Private study.** Revise any course work. Read any English language newspapers (including online versions), magazines and books that interest you. Develop and review your vocabulary. Listen to English movies.
- **Targets.** Each day, aim to read in English for at least 15 minutes, and listen to at least 15 minutes of English on TV or the Internet. Increase these times as your English improves. Set targets for other areas of private study, too.
- **Practice.** Because it's essential to use English in order to improve your English, take every opportunity to use English out of class. Also, force yourself to think in English. Don't waste valuable time and energy by translating back and forth between Chinese and English.

David Park designs & teaches IELTS courses for individuals & groups.
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