

Scoring better in

By Nadeem A

LANGUAGE certification exams can be extremely important for students who want to study abroad. Universities and in some cases embassies require Pakistani students to demonstrate proficiency in the language of instruction at the university for which the study visa is being sought.

The preferred test for admission to British, Australian and even many European universities is the IELTS test (International English Language Testing System) conducted by the British Council in Pakistan. Due to wider recognition of this test for both academic and immigration purposes, there has been a remarkable growth in demand for it. Hence, institutes offering coaching and preparatory courses in IELTS have sprung up all over the country. A score of seven or above is normally required for admission to overseas universities. Unfortunately, not many students manage to get such high marks.

There are lots of guide books available in the local market. They claim to contain short cut and tips for doing well in the exams but so far their efficacy remains unproved. Despite all of this, applicants who want to sit for the IELTS test will find a long waiting list to secure a seat in the test, which by the way is conducted every week and in all four provincial capitals. A student seeking a place for a test now will have to wait for at least two months.

This is not all. One can imagine the money the test generates for the British Council since it charges a fee to administer the test. This is not the only expense a student has to

incur. Since most also want some kind of coaching, they enroll for several months in the numerous institutes that offer IELTS classes and end up paying several thousand rupees. In many cases, these institutes do not have the teachers to properly coach the students but that does not make too much of a difference because the demand for such classes is consistently very high.

For the benefit of those who wish to sit for this exam, let me explain the test as easily as I can. A bit first about its structure. It is actually made up of several tests, with each module prepared by the University of Cambridge's ESL (English as a second language) examiners. The portions test the examinee's listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and are all administered in a single sitting. Help material in the form of sample tests along with actual examiners' comments and reports are available in the market and that is another way to get a fair idea of the structure of the test.

I shall now try to analyze each component of the test and highlight the skills required for doing well in it. The listening part is generally taken casually by students for various reasons. Many think that listening to English and understanding it is not really a major problem. They say they are keen listeners of the BBC and can understand someone speaking in a British accent.

Unfortunately, this section is not that simple and goes beyond testing students on the information they hear. The content of the listening part of the exam is items arranged in order of increasing difficulty, with every next part requiring more concentration and comprehension than the previous one.

Another thing to note is that listening is

not treated as a separate skill. Rather, the student has to first read the text, and at the same time listen to the recording, comprehend it and then fill the required information in the space provided in the answer booklet.



Illustration by Felica

Furthermore, there is considerable risk of making a mistake since sometimes the student is required to write down not more than two or three words, and if he or she does then there is no extra reward for it. So students should be well aware of the fact that the test increases in difficulty it pro-