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ANALYSIS OF A TEST OR ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE FOR IELTS SPEAKING TEST

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Abstract: *This paper is aimed at analysing the assessment procedure for speaking component of the high-stake test of standard repute, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). An attempt is made to report the test tasks/test construct, test procedure, its rater(s) and rating criteria, reckon its strengths and in last determine its weaknesses if any.*

Key Words: *IELTS Speaking, Test Tasks, Test Construct, Rating Criteria, Direct Interview, Raters Training and Re-certification*

Introduction

In this age of competition and technological growth to which Morrow (1979 as cited in Fulcher, 2000) attributes "the Promised Land" (p. 69), the measurement of competence level of individuals plays a significant role for providing them equal opportunities and due share in every walk of life. Our lives today therefore have been relying at large on tests of various kinds and of their results. Tests are labeled as low or high stakes on the basis of levels at which these are administered. We have been put on tests since very beginning, tests at classrooms, school or at college levels are called low-stakes tests and those at national or international level for admission in university or for jobs are called high-stakes tests. As Chalhoub-Deville & Turner, (2000) underline that the results of these high-stakes tests significantly influence one's life.

In regards to language testing, the IELTS, for instance, is similarly high-stakes because the test score is used to determine if one's English abilities are adequate for university-level instruction in the countries where English is the only medium of instruction. Moreover, whether one has qualifications from an overseas university or not could be one significant determinant in deciding if he or she is offered a job or admitted to a higher level institution.

Since its launching in 1989, IELTS has proved itself as a test of repute in academic and vocational English. It has been jointly ventured by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the British Council and IDP Australia. IELTS varies in its kinds for the purposes it is taken. IELTS general training format focuses on the survival skills essential for the social purposes or for the secondary education, whereas, the academic format of

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the IELTS assesses preparedness to study in the English medium higher education. From the traditional four skills listening and speaking assessments for both general and academic formats are same but reading and writing for academic format are more inclined to academic side, hence complex as compared to general format (details are given at appendix- A). The tests are task-based, and are designed to reflect the sort of tasks candidates are likely to encounter in real life situation. The length of IELTS is approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes. A band score is awarded for each of the four modules on the standard band scale ranging from 0, where the test was not attempted, to a maximum of 9. The global band is calculated from the average of the band scores of each module, and this is reported on a scale at 0.5 intervals (See appendix- B).

The IELTS Speaking module involves a face-to-face or direct speaking test in the form of a short interview of 11 to 15 minutes between the test-taker and one examiner. The examiner follows a predefined script throughout the speaking test. The interview is divided into three parts. In the first section (4 to 6 minutes) candidates are asked to talk about themselves and their interests and to answer questions on familiar topic areas. In the second section (3 to 4 minutes) the candidates talk about a topic suggested on a prompt card. The candidate is asked to prepare for one minute or so and then speak for between one to two minutes with a few cross questions at the end. In the third section (4 to 5 minutes), the candidate has the opportunity to discuss issues of a more abstract nature. These issues or topics are based and linked to part two. As the rating for speaking test is done by one examiner however, interviews are recorded in case they need to be double marked (follow appendix-C for details). Speaking and writing are examiner-marked unlike to the reading and listening which are marked by the computer and are rated as whole bands only: 4.0, 5.0, and 6.0. In practice this means that a student has the opportunity to improve by one or more whole bands in writing and speaking. Assessment criteria for the speaking test are based upon the following four features:

Fluency and Coherence: This refers to the test-takers' ability to talk with normal levels of continuity, speech rate and effort, and to link ideas and language together in coherent, connected speech.

Lexical Resource: This refers to the range of vocabulary the test-taker can use and how clearly meanings and attitudes can be expressed. This includes the range of words used and the ability to use fillers by expressing the idea in a different way.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy: This refers to the range of structures available to the test-taker and how accurately and appropriately s/he can use them. Its assessment is based on the length and complexity of utterances as well as the effect of grammatical errors on communication.

Pronunciation: This refers to the test-takers' ability to produce comprehensible utterances and to use a range of pronunciation features to communicate meaning. Its assessment is based on how clear the candidate is to the listener and to what extent his/her language is influenced by the L1.

STRENGTHS OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST

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One of the major strengths of IELTS speaking test is the ongoing research on the various aspects of test. IELTS administration recognizes the need to address concerns on test validity and reliability, content/construct and face-validity, rating and raters. Therefore, it will be absolutely unfair to say that after its revised version in July, 2001 on the basis of the studies of Lazaraton, (2002), the administration has just stopped its interest for more research on the test but rather many researchers have been encouraged to explore possibilities for more improvements in the revised version and test material keeping in view the ground realities vis-à-vis all the stakeholders involved in the test. Research from various researchers regarding this is commendable for example Read and Nation (2002) have investigated vocabulary use by candidates in the IELTS speaking test by measuring lexical output, variation and sophistication, as well as the use of formulaic language, this study explored the possibilities for the new research dimension which has been addressed by Brown (2003) in her following study wherein she examines the rating process in the revised IELTS speaking test and emphasizes on the need of raters training. This is a short list from a great deal of research on IELTS speaking component which reflects the dynamic approach of IELTS administration.

Another major strength of the speaking test in the similar context is its emphasis on monitoring and standardization, the raters training and re-certification after every two years which is great approach for maintaining the credibility and validity of the test, as validity according to Fulcher, (2003) is not a one-time activity but rather an ongoing process. As Chalhoub-Deville & Turner (2000) point out that IELTS differs from the Cambridge exams in that published reports recognize the need to address reliability and validity and include information to address it. They refer to the IELTS manuals which describe a detailed approach to the certification of interviewers/assessors for the speaking test and raters for the writing component that requires re-certification procedures every two years. This process of training raters they call it as a commendable effort (for details please follow appendix-D & E at the end).

The very format of IELTS speaking test, the direct interview is its key strength if compared to other speaking test formats such as indirect and semi-direct interviews. As Ingram Wylie (1996 as cited in Brown, 2003) entail three most outstanding features of direct interview which are active participants in the conversational exchange, opportunity to produce extended speech, and candidates' chance to respond at length. Qian (2009) identifies another salient characteristic of interview which is its high authenticity through near authentic oral communication between the examiner and the examinee. However, there are some concerns over subjectivity and biasness on the part of examiner of the test as compared to objective semi-direct interview by computer which might need some more investigation into the issue.

WEAKNESSES OF THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST

Since IELTS has recognized itself as the international test of repute, therefore, weakness sounds a very harsh term for the test. However, researchers have shown some concerns over the parts of the test either being the stakeholders themselves or as neutral analysts. The list of those concerns is given bellow:

One of the major concerns on IELTS speaking component is pertaining to the connection between the test score and test taker's academic performance which is found inconsistent by

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some of the studies. Bayliss and Ingram (2006) identify the connection between the test score and academic performance of the candidate, though, the study investigated some inconsistent results however, those might be due to other variables that could influence the academic success and the fact is IELTS only measure language proficiency. Lumley and O'Sullivan (2005) endorse this point as they found that performance in language test tasks can be influenced by a wide range of features, which can interact unpredictably with characteristics of individual test-takers.

Another concern is raised by Issitt (2008) that the speaking component of the IELTS test probably provokes more anxiety than the paper sections. As the test takers' are examined individually and they have to perform in a short time, often after having waited nervously for their appointment. It seems reasonable that candidates could easily underperform if they let the situation frustrate them. It is indeed a genuine point that needs to be investigated.

Cronjé (2009) shows concern over the cultural constraints of the test takers and examiners. He suspects that if test-takers cannot express well in the language of the assessor, and if the assessor is not familiar with the cultural constraints within which students operate, it is difficult for the assessor to collect evidence of adequate performance. Furthermore, he inquires that "How could we assess fairly a group of students with whom we did not share a common first language, or a common culture? Or more concisely, how did the instructors and students create common understanding across language and cultural barriers? " (p. 70).

Cronjé (2009) has another concern regarding the criteria scales used for rating Writing and Speaking in IELTS. He identifies that the information regarding these two components on rating as provided are insufficient and the information on how ratings are converted to band scores is missing. Such information, he believes, is important to test-users and helps in the interpretation of the ratings obtained (see appendix-F for the details).

Khan (2006) has raised serious concerns over the element of biasness in IELTS speaking assessment. In her study from Bangladesh context she has investigated and assessed that the IELTS speaking test has subtle cultural biases embedded in its structure, vocabulary patterns and methodology, background knowledge and vocabulary beyond the test-takers' range of experience and exposure. She further validates her point by citing Skehan (2004) who states that it is possible to identify positive and negative factors in any oral performance. According to him 'familiar tasks' achieve 'greater accuracy. Moreover, he states that "task difficulty relates to a number of factors including abstract or unfamiliar information and complex retrieval" (p. 75). The same could be true for India and Pakistan where the education system is almost the similar as identified in Bangladesh, so the test-takers there too face the same cultural constrains and their result have been heavily affected. This raises some serious concerns over construct validity of the test. For Morrow, (1982 as cited in Fulcher, 2003) the key criterion in identifying a good test is that it looks like a good one, the input appears to be authentic, and the task or item type mirrors an act of communication in the real world.

One more concern on the revised IELTS speaking component is that it follows a predefined script for the test interview which makes it less communicative. As the examiner follows a

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structured format for the interview, test-takers do not get enough opportunity to express themselves fully and as result their performance might be affected overall.

Only one rater for IELTS speaking component makes it more subjective and suspects an element of biasness on the part of examiner. Subjectivity in speaking assessment has been historically treated as contentious factor. Therefore, it is suggested that the conditional second rater may be made compulsory in IELTS speaking, which would further increase its credibility and remove the concerns of test takers. Myself being a test-taker of IELTS have the same experience. In my first attempt, my score in speaking component was band (8) and in my second attempt I met a very elderly examiner, her complex interviewer-style made me nervous during the test and as result my score for speaking went down from previous 8 to 7. Brown (2003) too in this regard has therefore emphasized the need for more examiner training.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, due to the growing demand of communicative competence in the world of work and academics, speaking skill will receive a larger measure of attention from the educational community, within the next decade. The speaking component of IELTS certainly sets a benchmark in speaking assessment. However, the recent studies have shown some concerns mainly pertaining to the cultural constraints and construct validity, interviewers' styles, and number of rater (s) for the test, structured interview, subjective and biased factors in interview which needs some more investigation to increase further, the validity of the test. I being the stakeholder (test-taker) in the IELTS wish and hope that the information contained here will be of use to those individuals charged with the responsibility of developing a program of assessing IELTS speaking.

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Websites used

• IELTS website – www.ielts.org; includes detailed information on test performance

• IELTS Teaching Resource – www.CambridgeESOL.org/teach/IELTS

• Many articles on IELTS research and related issues have been published in Cambridge ESOL's Research Notes publication, available online at www.CambridgeESOL.org/research

IELTS Homepage: Ensuring quality and fairness in international testing. Available at: http://www.ielts.org/ accessed 20April 2011.

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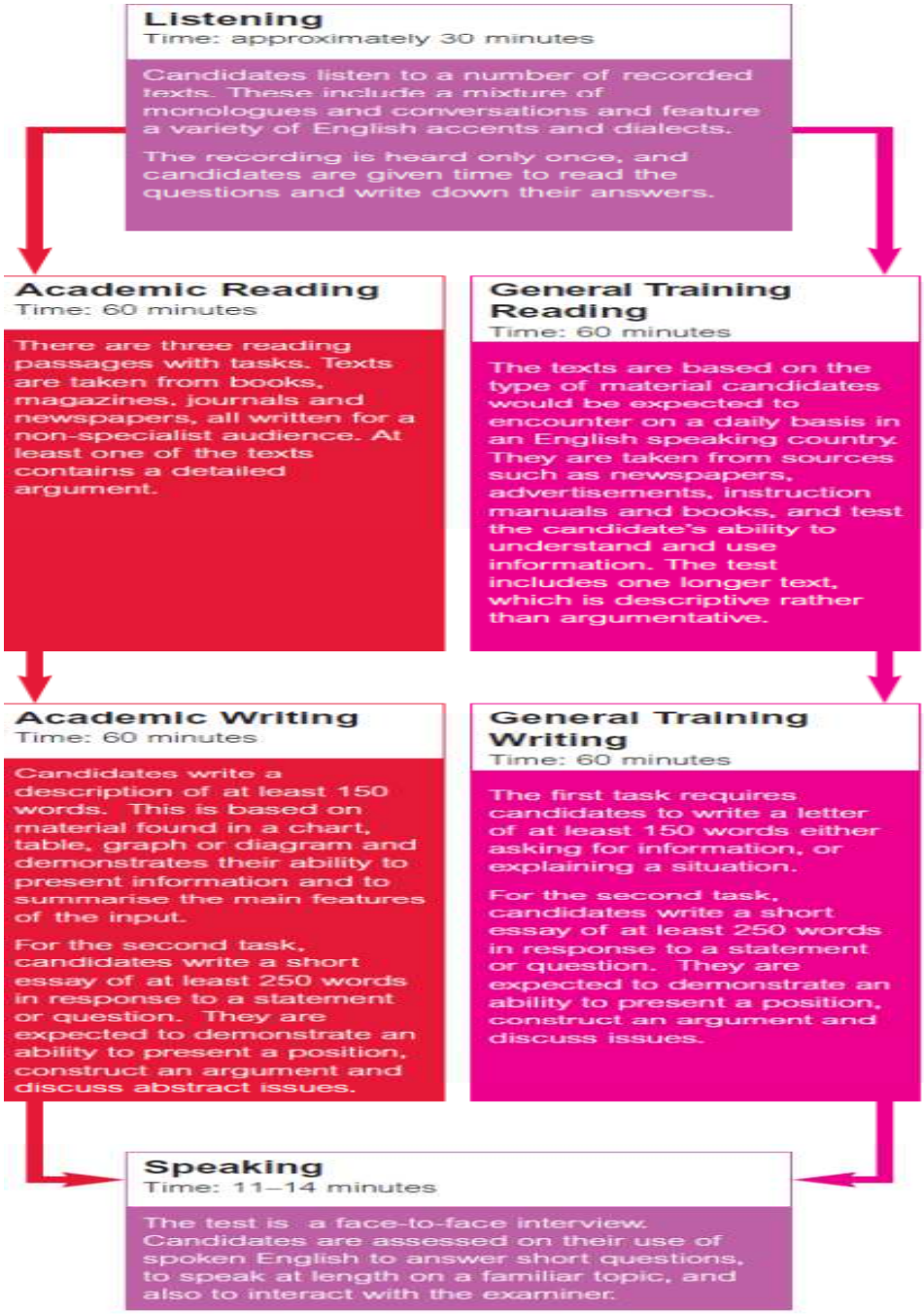
APPENDICES

Appendix (A)



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Appendix (B)

The IELTS nine-band scale

9	Expert user	Has fully operational command of the language: appropriate, accurate and fluent with complete understanding.
8	Very good user	Has fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriacies. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex detailed argumentation well.
7	Good user	Has operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally handles complex language well and understands detailed reasoning.
6	Competent user	Has generally effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriacies and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
5	Modest user	Has partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations, though is likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in own field.
4	Limited user	Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Has frequent problems in understanding and expression. Is not able to use complex language.
3	Extremely limited user	Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication occur.
2	Intermittent user	No real communication is possible except for the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in familiar situations and to meet immediate needs. Has great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
1	Non user	Essentially has no ability to use the language beyond possibly a few isolated words.
0	Did not attempt the test	No assessable information provided.

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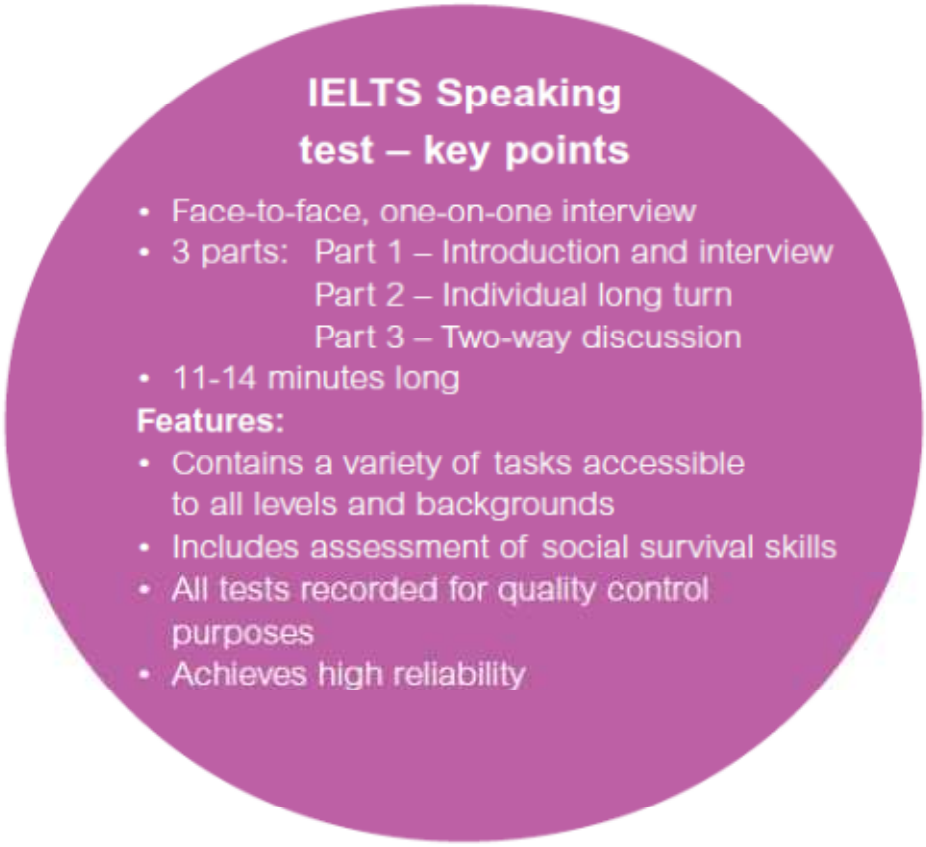
Appendix (C)



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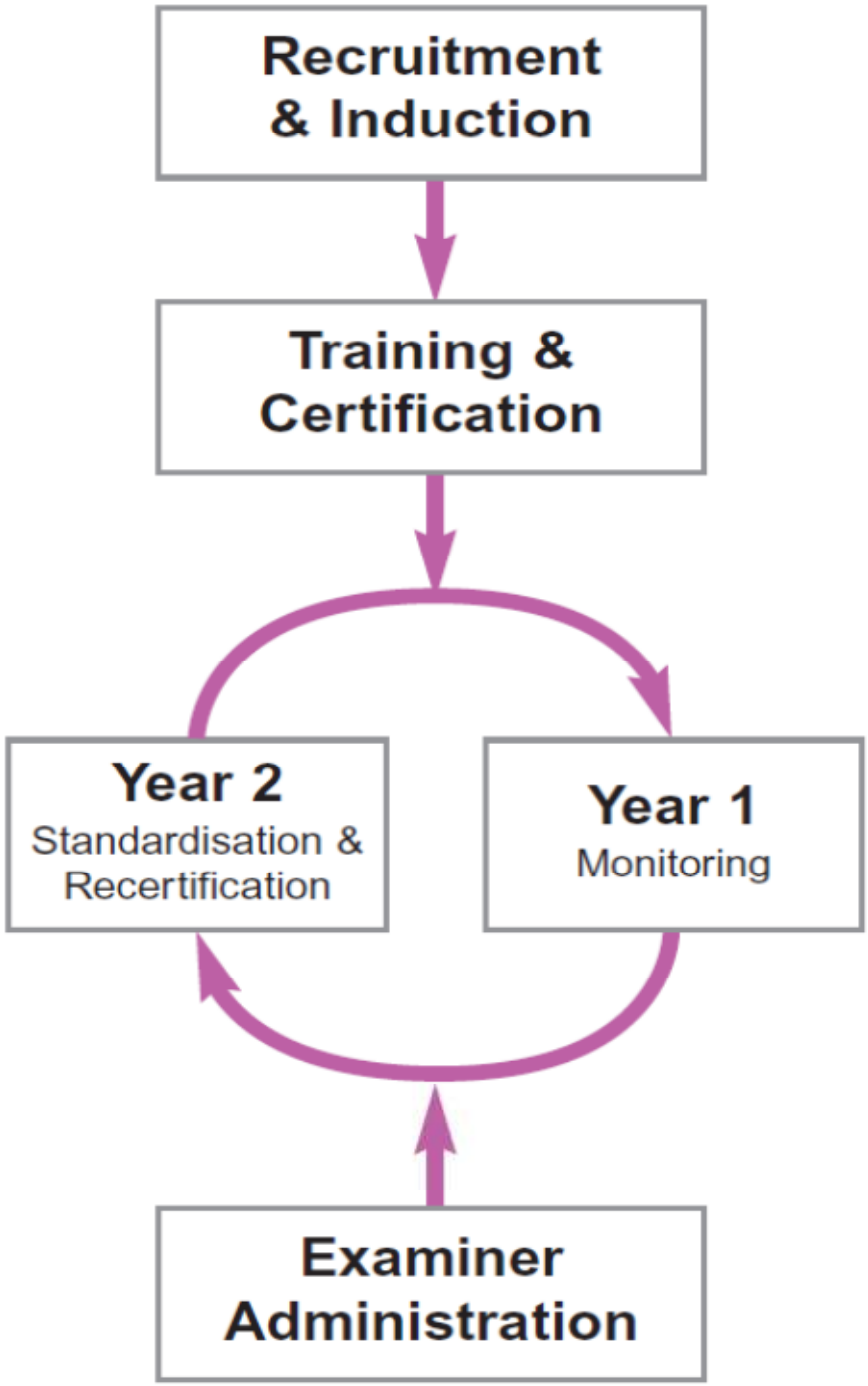
Appendix (D)



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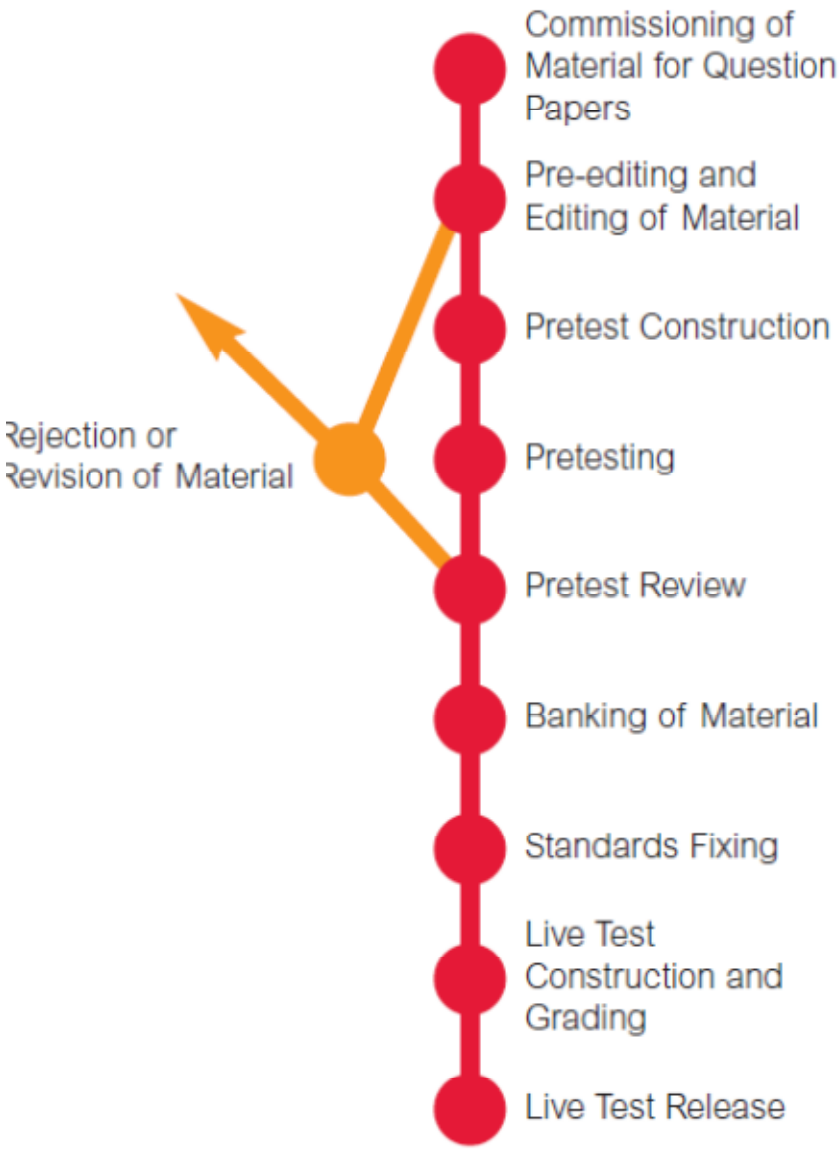
Appendix (E)



The question paper production process for IELTS