A Comparative Study Between the Test of Spoken English (TSE) and the IELTS Interview with Respect to their Authenticity

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to investigate the nature of authenticity in two interviews: the interview section of the TOEFL (TSE) and the speaking module of the IELTS. After defining the term authenticity based on Bachman (1990) , and Bachman and Palmer (1996) it is argued that the IELTS interview is a more authentic test than the TSE. This is done in two ways. First, by using Bachman and Palmer's framework of test task characteristics, it is demonstrated that the IELTS interview test tasks are more similar to the features of target language use contexts. Second, by collecting data from a number of participants who took both tests, it is found that the IELTS interview replicates real life performance more than the TSE.

Introduction

As two well-established international examinations, both the TOEFL and the IELTS are now widely used in many countries of the world. Teachers as well as university professors have trusted these two exams for a long time on the grounds that they are both valid and reliable measures of their students' level of proficiency in English as a foreign language.

An important section of both the TOEFL and the IELTS is the spoken part in which the students are given a chance to demonstrate their spoken ability in English. The interview section of the TOEFL is called the Test of Spoken

English, and the interview section of the IELTS is known as the speaking module. However, for the purpose of brevity from now on the former will be referred to as the TSE and the later as the IELTS interview.

This study aims to evaluate both the TSE and the IELTS interview in terms of authenticity – a much debated term in both language teaching and language testing in recent years. As Spence-Brown (2001) rightly observes, "over the last few decades there has been a growing concern to ensure that language tests reflect the use of language in the 'real world' as well as the knowledge of language as a system. One catchword for this concern is 'authenticity', which has become firmly established as a central concern in test design and test validation" (p.463). Likewise, Hoekje and Linnell (1994) citing Spolsky (1985) argue that "statistical validity alone can no longer qualify a test as a good language test; that in some important sense, the test must be *authentic* [emphasis added] as well as statistically viable" (p.122).

As a final remark, to emphasize once more how authenticity in language testing has become a matter of paramount importance in recent years, it is interesting to note that one rather long chapter of Bachman's classic *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing* is fully devoted to this issue. Similarly, Bachman and Palmer (1996) regard authenticity as one of the six important qualities of a useful language test.

Based on the above arguments, this paper is devoted to the concept of authenticity. In the following sections, a brief overview of the historical development of this term will be highlighted.

Authenticity in Language Teaching

In its traditional sense *authenticity*, i.e. the use of authentic materials in language teaching classes grew out of dissatisfaction with artificial, decontextualized pattern drills of the audio-lingual method in language teaching. Observing that the majority of the students who had learned a foreign language through audio-lingual classes were not able to use it in real life situations, language teaching professionals in the late 1970's and early 1980's advocated the use of authentic materials as an important principle of communicative language teaching (Johnson and Morrow 1981; Littlewood 1981). Authentic materials according to Terry (1998) include print materials, videotapes, satellite broadcasts, audio recordings, film, etc. which are produced for any purpose other than language teaching. As I just mentioned, about two decades ago there were a number of language teaching theoreticians who were firmly of the opinion that using these materials would lead to a truly communicative classroom. However, even at that time there were other scholars like H.G. Widdowson who argued that authentic texts do not necessarily guarantee authentic language teaching. Widdowson (1978, p.80) drew a scholarly distinction between the terms *authenticity* and *genuineness.*

> Genuineness is a characteristic of the passage itself and is an absolute quality. Authenticity is a characteristic of the relationship between the passage and the reader and has to do with appropriate response.

Thus according to Widdowson, newspaper articles, extracts from novel and short stories, radio broadcasts, etc. are genuine materials, but not necessarily authentic.

Authenticity in view of Widdowson (1979) "is not a quality residing in instances of language but as a quality which is bestowed upon them, created by the response of the receiver. Authenticity... is a function of the interaction between the reader/ hearer and the text which incorporates the intentions of the writer/speaker" (p.165). Thus as Widdowson argues authenticity does not lie in texts; rather it is something which should be created as a result of interaction between the texts and the students. Hence it is possible, at times, that the language presented to students is *genuine,* but as "it does not engage native speaker response it cannot be realized as *authentic* [emphasis added] discourse" (Widdowson 1990, p.45).

Having argued how authenticity in language teaching is defined in recent years from a Widdowsonian point of view, it is time now to explore its role in language testing.

Authenticity in Language Testing

Published in 1990, Bachman's classic *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing* has been an influential work on our current understanding of authenticity in language testing. In this book Bachman talks about two major approaches in defining authenticity: the "real-life" (RL) approach and the "interactional/ability" (IA) approach.

> The RL approach defines authenticity as the extent to which test performance replicates some specified non-test language performance (Bachman 1990, p.301).

Based on this approach an authentic language test is one which indicates how similar a test taker's performance is to what he is likely to do in a real-life situation. In other words, the more similar a test task is to what happens in real life the more authentic it will be. This approach to authenticity,

however, has been sort of criticized by Spolsky (1985) who observes that no test setting exactly resembles its real-life counterpart. He thus concludes that "any language test is by its very nature inauthentic, abnormal language behavior, for the test taker is being asked not to answer a question giving information but to display knowledge or skill" (p.39).

The second approach to defining test authenticity, i.e. the IA approach is a function of interaction between the language user, the context, and the discourse. Thus an authentic test in this sense is one that involves the test taker to fully benefit from his communicative abilities as well as contextual cues to cope with a given test task. As Lewkowicz (2000) observes, in defining authenticity in this way Bachman seems to have built on the ideas previously proposed by Widdowson.

In dealing with this controversial issue, Bachman does not stop here. He and his collegue, Palmer, later modify their interpretation of authenticity by distinguishing it from another term which they call interactiveness (Bachman and Palmer 1996). Seen from a new perspective, Bachman and Palmer (*ibid*) define authenticity as "the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a target language use (TLU) task" (p.23). In other words, the more we can demonstrate that performance on a language test corresponds to language use in a specific domain, the more authentic our language test in question will be. Authenticity in this sense, according to Bachman and Palmer, is important in two ways. First, it enables us to investigate the extent to which score interpretations generalize beyond performance on the test to non-test language use situations. This links authenticity to construct validation, for in construct validation we are concerned with the generalizability of test score. Second, it affects the way test takers perceive a given test, and hence

can facilitate the test taking process. This is quite easy to imagine. As a simple example, we can think of the reaction of a candidate applying for a position as a steward on international flights to translating a business letter used as a test to qualify him for this job!

As mentioned before Bachman and Palmer (1996) draw a distinction between authenticity and interactiveness. They define interactiveness as the extent to which a test taker's individual characteristics such as his language ability, topical knowledge etc. is involved with the test task itself. However, as the primary goal of this paper is to investigate the authenticity of TSE and the IELTS interview based on Bachman's (1990) RL approach and Bachman and Palmer (1996) I will not extend the present discussion to the concept of interactiveness.

Now that the framework for evaluating the authenticity of the TSE and the IELTS interview has become clear, it is time to formulate the two research questions of this study as follows:

1) To what extent do characteristics of the TSE and the IELTS interview test tasks correspond to the features of target language use contexts?

2) To what extent does performance on the TSE and the IELTS interview replicate real-life language performance?

Before making any attempt to answer these two questions, I think it would be better to familiarize ourselves with characteristics of test tasks in these two interviews and then judge about their authenticity.

Test of Spoken English (TSE)

As I mentioned in the introduction of this paper, the TSE is the interview component of the TOEFL. According to ETS (2001), the TSE is an audio-

taped test of oral communication in English, which consists of 12 items, each of which requires test takers to perform a particular speech act. Some of these speech activities include narrating, recommending, persuading, etc. The test starts with three unscored practice questions, which help the test takers to warm up for the test and adjust the recording equipment if necessary.

The test items are grouped into five sections. The first section contains questions about a map in the test booklet; the second is related to a picture sequence; the third is based on topics of general interest; the fourth concerns a simple graph; and finally, the last section is related to a revised schedule printed in the booklet. The time allowed for the tasks varies between 30 and 90 seconds (Luoma, 2001). A copy of an original TSE taken from ETS (2001) appears in Appendix A.

The IELTS Interview

The IELTS interview according to Jakeman and McDowell (2000) is a conversation between a candidate and an examiner and takes some 10 to 15 minutes. There are five sections which are as follows:

i. **Introduction.** In this section both the candidate and the examiner introduce themselves and the candidate is encouraged to talk briefly about his/her life, home, work and interests.

ii. **Extended Discourse.** In this section the candidate is encouraged to speak at length about some familiar topic of general interest or of relevance to their culture, place of living or country origin. This will involve explanation, description or narration.

iii. Elicitation. In this section the candidate is given a task card with some information on it and is encouraged to take the initiative and ask questions either to elicit information or to solve a problem.

iv. Speculation and Attitudes. In this section the candidate is encouraged to talk about his/her future plans and proposed course of study. Alternatively the examiner may choose to return to a topic mentioned earlier.

v. Conclusion. In this section the interview is brought to an end.

A copy of an IELTS interview appears in Appendix B.

Now that these two interviews have been introduced, it is time to address the two research questions which were previously formed.

Correspondence between Test Tasks and Target Language Use Domain

In order to answer the first question, i.e. to what extent do characteristics of the TSE and the IELTS interview test tasks correspond to the features of target language use contexts, I will use Bachman and Palmer's framework of language task characteristics, which in Bachman (1990) was referred to as test method facets. This framework refers to five main dimensions of a test as follows:

1. The testing environment (e.g. familiarity of place and equipment as well as time of testing).

2. The test rubrics (e.g. test organization, time allocation and instructions).

3. The input presented to the test taker (e.g. the format and the nature of language used).

4. The nature of the expected response (e.g. the format and the nature of language elicited).

5. The relationship between the input and the response (e.g. reciprocal or nonreciprocal or adaptive).

Below I will provide a brief analysis of these two interviews in terms of dimensions 2 through 5.

The first dimension along which the TSE and the IELTS interview vary is related to the characteristics of the test rubrics. In the TSE timing is fixed, i.e. for each question the test takers have a limited time to answer varying between 30 and 90 seconds. In the IELTS interview, however, the timing is not fixed, and hence the test taker is not under the pressure of saying something in as short as 30 seconds or as long as 90 seconds. Thus with respect to this first facet, the IELTS interview appears to be more authentic in nature than the TSE.

The second dimension along which these two tests vary is the nature of the input which is presented to the test takers. The TSE is an audio tape mediated test. The input the test takers receive is, as Bachman (1990) puts it, "Canned" human input. In the IELTS interview, however, the face-to-face format provides "live" human input from the interviewer, who determines the structure of the interview. Thus with respect to this second facet, again the IELTS interview seems to be more authentic than the TSE.

The third dimension to consider is the type of response expected from the test takers. Due to the limited time available to the test takers to answer each question in the TSE, their responses would be short chunks which at times might not even be complete. In the IELTS interview since the test takers are not pressed for time, we can assume that they will be encouraged to produce larger language chunks. Besides, one section of the IELTS

interview is designed in such a way that it allows test takers to ask their interlocutor some questions on a given topic. None of the five sections of the TSE gives this chance to the test takers. Thus with respect to this third facet, the IELTS interview again seems to be more authentic than its counterpart.

The last dimension to be discussed is the relationship between the input and the expected response. Seen in this light, a test could be either reciprocal, nonreciprocal or adaptive. As Bachman (1990) puts it, a reciprocal test is one "in which the test taker's response affects subsequent input, and in which the test taker receives feedback on the relevance and occurrence of his answer" (p.150). In light of this observation, the TSE is a nonreciprocal test in which the input is not influenced by the response and besides, the test taker does not get any feedback on his performance. The IELTS interview, on the other hand, is a reciprocal test in which the two important features of interaction and feedback are available. Thus with respect to this last facet, again we can argue that the IELTS interview is more authentic than the TSE. The following table summarizes what was discussed above.

Test method facets	TSE	IELTS Interview
Test organization	Fixed timing	Flexible timing
Input	Canned human input	Live human input
Expected response	Short chunks of discourse	Long chunks of discourse
Relationship between input and response	Nonreciprocal	Reciprocal

In order to answer the second research question, i.e. to what extent does performance on the TSE and the IELTS interview replicate real-life

language performance, the following qualitative, small-scaled study was conducted.

Method

Subjects

The participants in this study were 21 young sophomore students (11 females and 10 males) studying English at Allameh Tabataba'i University. These participants were all my students and volunteered to take part in this study of their own volition.

Procedure

The data for this study was collected through seven interview sessions which I had with the participants of this study. In each session three students were interviewed. In order not to make them biased about their attitude to each of the two interviews, I did not mention which interview belongs to which international test. Thus the TSE was referred to as interview No. 1 and the IELTS interview as interview No.2. The TSE questions were recorded on a tape*, so in this way I tried to create a simulated condition similar to what goes in an actual TSE. The following is a description of what went on in each interview session.

At the outset, I had a chat with each of the participants of the study in which I informed them about what they were expected to do. First I had them take part in the TSE. After telling them they were going to participate in an audio-taped interview of oral proficiency, I played the tape and they answered the questions by following the instructions on the tape. After that there was a short break during which most of the participants complained about the limited time they had to answer each question. Next, I conducted the second interview, i.e. the IELTS interview in a live, face-to-face

manner. Having done this I had the participant leave the classroom, go to an adjoining room and answer a number of questions. While he/she was busy answering these questions, I called the next student in and followed the above-mentioned procedure. The questions which the participants were asked are as follows:

1) Which of these two interviews is more similar to what you are usually expected to do in real life, i.e. a non-test situation? Why?

2) Which interview is a better indicator of your ability in spoken English?

3) What are the strong points and weak points of each interview? Please list as many points as you can.

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* I am indebted to Mr. G.R. Salahi, one of my best colleagues, who took the troublesome task of taping the TSE questions with extreme care.

Findings

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the findings of this study will mostly be reported in the form of quotations collected from the participants' responses. What follows below is a gist of how the participants reacted to these two interviews.

With respect to the first question, i.e. which of the two interviews is more similar to real life, 18 participants had unanimously responded that the IELTS interview is a better replica of real life situations. The other three participants' responses were somewhat ambiguous as if they had not understood the question well. In this respect one of the participants said:

> The one which I spoke and answered questions [He means
> the IELTS interview] directly to the interviewer. Because I
> feel less nervous and also if I don't get the picture in one
> part I can inquire for more description. And also I can
> think better in this situation and answer better.

Another participant had favored the IELTS interview as it allows the interviewees to use gestures and body language. Here is his response:

> I think the first one isn't as natural as the second is. In the
> second one we see most of questions which are used in
> real life and being the interviewer [he means the presence
> of the interviewer] helps it. In the second one we can
> transfer some of our goals by helping gesture and physical
> signal.

With respect to the second question, i.e. which interview is a better indicator of one's ability in spoken English again the majority of the participants (19 of them) had favored the IELTS interview. One of the participants had probably had a similar experience. In response to the second question he said:

> The real one again which you talk to a real person instead
> of a cassette player. I once had an interview on a tape but I
> couldn't talk well and enough because you see there's
> nobody in front of you. It's like you're talking to the wall.
> So I prefer to take [the second] kind of interview.

Another participant in this respect responds like this:

> The second one because I have more freedom in choosing
> the words and subjects. You can say a lot about a book
> [she is referring to one section of the IELTS interview in

which they were expected to ask some questions about a book] and you can express yourself and your ideas in a more appropriate way. Because in my opinion the main purpose of language is to communicate and express your thoughts and emotions.

With respect to the third question, i.e. the strong points and weak points of each interview the findings were rather amazing. For instance, some of the participants argued that the audio-taped interview is stressful, yet some others had an opposite opinion. That is, they said that having a face-to-face interview might make them embarrassed, especially if they cannot answer a question. However, apart from this point, the majority of the participants were of the opinion that a strong point of the IELTS interview is that it gives the interviewees a chance to seek clarification if they do not understand something well. Excluding the case of providing a less stressful testing situation, which was observed by some of the participants with respect to the TSE, there were no other considerable strong points commended about it.

Summary and Conclusion

I started this paper – aiming to compare the authenticity of the TSE and the IELTS interview – with a rather lengthy discussion on the concept of authenticity both in language Teaching and language Testing. In defining authenticity in language testing I drew on two most frequently quoted sources, i.e. Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996). In doing so, two research questions were formed, (a) to what extent do characteristics of these two interviews correspond to the features of target language use

contexts?, and (b) to what extent does performance on these two interviews replicate real-life language performance?

In order to answer the first question, Bachman and Palmer's (1996) framework of language task characteristics was used to compare these two interviews in terms of their rubrics, input, expected response, and the relationship between input and response. The result of this comparison revealed that the IELTS interview is more authentic than the TSE in terms of these four test characteristics. In terms of test organization, the TSE has a fixed timing, whereas the IELTS interview enjoys a fixable timing. The TSE is conducted through "canned" human input, while the IELTS interview benefits from "live" human input. The test takers in the TSE produce short chunks of discourse, yet in the IELTS interview they produce long chunks of discourse. And finally, in the TSE the two important elements of interaction and feedback are non-existent in the process of conversation between the interlocutors, but in the IELTS interview both are present. So the conclusion that can be simply drawn is that the features of test tasks in the IELTS interview are more lifelike and hence this exam is more authentic in terms of its test task characteristics.

In reply to the second question, I attempted to gather some data from a number of university level students. These students took part in both the TSE and the IELTS interview and afterwards they wrote their impression about them. The analysis of their written answers revealed that the majority of the students favored the IELTS interview in that it resembles real life performance far more than its counterpart. Below is a summary of how the participants reacted to the TSE.

- the tape is played only once, so the test takers do not have a chance to seek clarification if they miss a point.

– Lack of interaction makes the interview very boring.

– Ambiguity in what the test taker is supposed to do in certain cases definitely affects their performance.

And this is a summary of how the participants reacted to the IELTS interview.

– The interview session is more friendly and humanistic.

– The test taker is allowed to ask a question if he does not understand something.

– The test taker is not under the pressure of time limitation.

– The test taker can use gestures and body language to make himself better understood.

The only negative point which was mentioned about the IELTS interview by some of the participants was the probable embarrassment that some test takers might undergo if they did not know the answer to a question.

One point that should be acknowledged at the end of this paper is that due to the limited number of participants in this study and due to its qualitative nature, the findings of this study do not represent anything other than the subjective views of these participants. Thus the findings do not have enough generalizability, yet they shed light on and give insight into an area of language testing which is becoming increasingly popular.

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Appendix A   Sample of Test of Spoken English (TSE)

The TSE test is designed to measure proficiency in communicating in spoken English. Because spoken language proficiency can be achieved only after a relatively long period of study and much practice, an attempt to study English for the first time shortly before taking the test will not be very helpful.

To help you become familiar with the TSE test, practice questions from a sample test are provided below.

ON THE DAY OF THE TEST

On the day of the test, you will be given a test book and asked to listen to and read the general directions before you begin. It is a good idea to become familiar with the directions before the day of the test. The practice questions below are similar but not identical to questions you will find in the actual test. Therefore, responses to these practice questions may not be acceptable on an actual test. During the TSE test your responses will be recorded on tape. It might be helpful to record your practice responses on tape, then listen to hear how your speech actually sounds.

GENERAL DIRECTIONS

In the Test of Spoken English, you will be able to demonstrate how well you speak English. The test will last approximately 20 minutes. You will be asked questions by an interviewer on tape. The questions are printed in the test book and the time you will have to answer each one is printed in parentheses after each question. You are encouraged to answer the questions as completely as possible in the time allowed. While most of the questions on the test may not appear to be directly related to your academic or professional field, each question is designed to tell the raters about your oral language ability. The raters will evaluate how well you communicate in English.

As you speak, your voice will be recorded. Your score for the test will be based on your speech sample. Be sure to speak loudly enough for the machine to record clearly what you say. Do not stop your tape recorder at any time during the test unless you are told to do so by the test supervisor. If you have a problem with your tape recorder, notify the test supervisor immediately.

TSE PRACTICE QUESTIONS*

First, the interviewer will ask you three questions. These questions are for practice and will not be scored, but it is important that you answer them.

Sample questions

What is the ID number on the cover of your test book? (10 seconds)

What is the weather like today? (10 seconds)

What are your plans for the rest of the day? (10 seconds)

Then the test will begin. Be sure to speak clearly and say as much as you can in responding to each question.

Imagine that we are colleagues. The map below is of a neighboring town that you have suggested I visit. You will have 30 seconds to study the map. Then I'll ask you some questions about it.
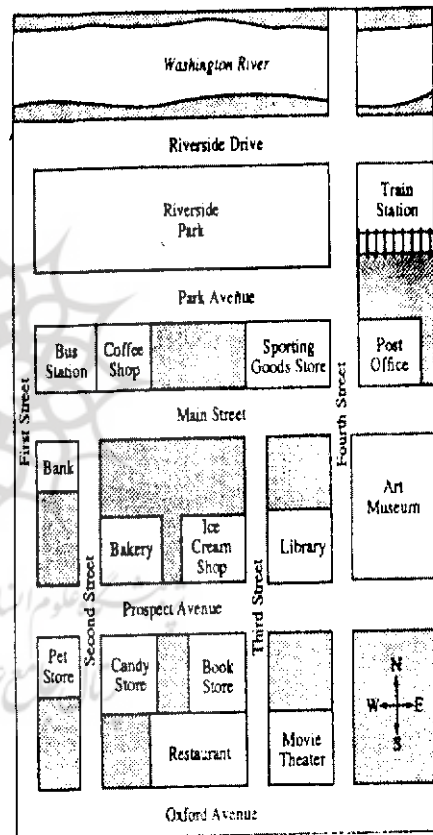
1. Choose one place on the map that you think I should visit and give me some reasons why you recommend this place. (30 seconds)

2. I'd like to see a movie. Please give me directions from the bus station to the movie theater. (30 seconds)

3. One of your favorite movies is playing at the theater. Please tell me about the movie and why you like it. (60 seconds)

Now please look at the six pictures below. I'd like you to tell me the story that the pictures show, starting with picture number 1 and going through picture number 6. Please take one minute to look at the pictures and think about the story. Do not begin the story until you are told to do so.
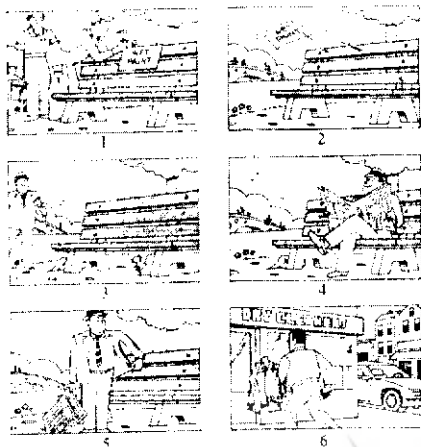

4. Tell me the story that the pictures show. (60 seconds)

5. What could the painters have done to prevent this? (30 seconds)

6. Imagine that this happened to you. After you have taken the suit to the dry cleaners, you find out that you need to wear the suit the next morning. The dry cleaning service usually takes two days. Call the dry cleaners and try to persuade them to have the suit ready later today. (45 seconds)

7. The man in the pictures is reading a newspaper. Both newspapers and television news programs can be good sources of information about current events. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these sources? (60 seconds)

Now I'd like to hear your ideas about several topics. Be sure to say as much as you can in responding to each question. After I ask each question, you may take a few seconds to prepare your answer, and then begin speaking when you're ready.

8. Many people enjoy visiting zoos and seeing the animals. Other people believe that animals should not be taken from their natural surroundings and put into zoos. I'd like to know what you think about this issue. (60 seconds)

9. I'm not familiar with your field of study. Select a term used frequently in your field and define it for me. (60 seconds)

10. The graph below presents the actual and projected percentage of the world population living in cities from 1950 to 2010. Tell me about the information given in the graph. (60 seconds)
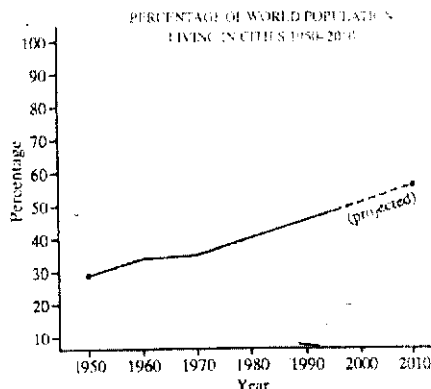
11. What might this information mean for the future? (45 seconds)

12. Now imagine that you are the president of the Forest City Historical Society. A trip to Washington, D.C. has been organized for the members of the society. At the last meeting you gave out a schedule for the trip, but there have been some changes. You must remind the members about the details of the trip and tell them about the changes indicated on the schedule. In your presentation do not just read the information printed, but present it as if you were talking to a group of people. You will have one minute to plan your presentation. Do not begin speaking until you are told to do so.

FOREST CITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
TRIP TO WASHINGTON, D.C.

Date: Saturday, April ~~5~~ 12

Transportation: Chartered Bus

Depart: 8:00 ~~8:30~~ a.m. — Community Center parking lot

Itinerary: 10:30 a.m. — Guided Tour of White House
12:30 p.m. — Lunch* - Rock Creek Park
3:00 p.m. — National Museum of History and Technology (lecture - 4:00 p.m.) *Capitol Inn*
6:30 p.m. — Dinner - ~~Embassy Restaurant~~ Georgetown

Return: 10:00 p.m. (approximately)

Cost: ~~$20.00~~ (excluding admissions and dinner) $25.00

* Bring your own

(90 seconds)

Appendix B   Sample of the IELTS Interview

Section I. Would you please introduce yourself, telling me something about your life, work, interests, etc.

Section II. Give full answers to the following questions.

> i) Are traffic congestion and traffic jams a problem in your hometown?
>
> ii) Is your government trying to reduce the number of cars in city centers in your country? If so, how?
>
> iii) What other ways could governments use to try to reduce the number of cars in city centers?
>
> iv) In your opinion, what is the best way? Why?

Section III. The candidate is to find out as much information as possible about buying a book.

Candidate's cue card:

BUYING A BOOK

Your teacher recommended a good English language writing book to assist students with written work.

Ask the examiner about:
the level of the book
the title
the authors
the cost
place of purchase
extras – cassettes, answers

Information for the Examiner:

the level of the book .... It is valuable for students preparing for university entrance and for advanced learners of English.

the title.. "Writing Academic English" or another text you know of

the authors .... by Walton and Hague

the cost .... around $ 40/£20

place of purchase .... Name a suitable bookshop in the town.

extras – cassettes, answers .... There is no cassette as it is only a writing book. It does not provide answers, but the teacher could help with corrections.

Section IV. Would you mind telling me something about your future plans?

Section V. Concluding remarks. Giving feedback to the interviewee.