Action plan for IELTS

Book Review

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Action plan for IELTS [1] (Academic Version), authored by Vanessa Jakeman and Clare McDowell, is a self-study preparation textbook. The book has been designed for test-takers of 'Academic Version' at intermediate level or higher. It includes an audio CD-ROM/cassette supplement. This book can be used by both instructors and test-takers inside and outside of the classroom.

Throughout this resource, the action plan for IELTS mainly comprises five parts; 'Listening', 'Academic Reading', 'Academic Writing', 'Speaking', and one complete Practice Test. Except for the Practice Test, each part starts with an introduction followed by subsequent sections as presented in the actual test. Each section provides side annotations and hints to clarify frequently asked questions as much as possible. The side annotations and hints are important, because the information they provide can help reduce test-takers' anxiety and tensions especially in the day of the test. An answer key and scripts to the recorded parts are provided at the end of the book. Finally, the users of the book are provided with IELTS Reading and Listening sample answer sheets.

First, 'Listening' part begins with a detailed explanation of the actual test. For example, in the form of a live conversation in answering to a Frequently Asked Question (FAQ), the users are informed that IELTS Listening test comprises four sections. Then, the nature of each section is explained. A picture of a real test setting authenticates this part. Side notes and annotations help users to gain an insight into the test. A brief overview informs users about listening question types, action to be taken and key points. Then, helpful illustrations and different contrasts of violet, which are for the purpose of distinguishing important points, are provided to illustrate and explain each section. The social purpose of each section has been put forward so that users can have a

sense and understanding of each section. Also, guidelines in different pages under the title of 'Action plan' provide test-takers with significant information to do better in the test.

However, the only downsides to 'Listening' part are: (a) explanation of marking can be confusing. For example, Jakeman and McDowell (2014) have provided contradicting answers in replying to "How is the listening test marked?" (pp. 7-8 and 11) and (b) modification, categorization and introduction of different sections in 'Listening' part by the use of words with negative connotation such as; "… harder…" (p. 15), "… more difficult…" (p. 20), and "… the hardest…" (p. 25) can have negative psychological effects on test-takers, which may lead to anxiety and negative attitude, especially, in those test-takers whose first language is not English. This, in turn, may result in test-takers' underachievement in the real test.

Second, the 'Reading' part has significant features. For example, different Question Types and Practice Tasks are clearly named and explained and elaborated upon in eye soothing light paling violet boxes. Also, prospective test-takers are guided to write their answers appropriately. This guide is important, because some test-takers lose marks simply as a result of (a) answering questions inappropriately while finding the correct answer, or (b) writing their correct answers in the answer sheet, inappropriately. Another important point is elaboration on the difference between 'YES / NO / NOT GIVEN' and 'TRUE / FALSE / NOT GIVEN' Questions. These questions are normally confusing, because most test-takers get confused when associating the type of questions and their interpretation in terms of the writer's perspective and the factual information in the text (e.g. pp. 39 and 47). As a result, test-takers simply lose marks in these areas and underachieve in the real test. In addition, there are some on spot language teaching in this part. For example, the annotations and action plans lead users to promote and

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[1] International English Language Testing System

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enhance their syntactic and semantic skills deductively. However, unlike the 'Listening' test in which test-takers are allotted 10 minutes to transfer answers to the answer sheet (if the answers have been written in the question booklet) there is no transfer time in the 'Reading' test (also, mentioned in the left side note of p. 30). So, in contrast to the right side note of p. 30, it would seem better if the test-takers were advised to write their answers directly in their 'Reading' answer sheets to avoid the risk of losing their 'Reading' scores completely as it has happened in some occasions.

Next, the 'Writing' part is first introduced, and then explained. Written language features as considered by the assessor (e.g. structure, organization, vocabulary and grammar range and appropriateness) are all explained in well-managed tables. Frequently Asked Questions are all attended to and answered appropriately. Next, a variety of possible sorts of graphs or diagrams for 'Writing Task1' are explored by means of illustrations. Different illustrations are well organized and clarified by the use of violet contrast diversity.

A distinguished feature of the 'Writing' part is that the exercises are followed by elaboration on written language features. The exercises, which are usually of the gap-fill variety, can also be utilized for language learning purposes. So, through the study of the diversity of possible 'Writing Task 1' questions, prospective test-takers can be hopeful to achieve well in this part of the test. The same style of elaboration is followed for 'Academic Writing Task 2'. However, one interesting instructive feature of the side notes presented in the explanation of 'Writing Task 2' is elaboration on the lexical structure of the key words in the specimen prompt.

Finally, in the 'Speaking' part, the purposes of the three parts of the test have been explained respectively. Authentic pictures have been used to illustrate the participants, processes and circumstances. Criteria for assessment based on features of language (i.e. Fluency and Cohesiveness and Vocabulary and Grammar and Accuracy, and Pronunciation) have been interpreted. Frequently Asked Questions have been appropriately explained and answered. In side notes, first, the process of 'Speaking' test has been explained and, in the following pages, plenty of examples have been provided.

In short, 'Action Plan for IELTS' is a very useful book for those who are required to sit for IELTS test for 'Academic' purposes. The book provides test-takers with significant information and techniques and hints in order to be insightful about the test and achieve well in the real test. However, the use of such terms as "more difficult" (e.g. p. 90) can, negatively, influence test-takers and lead to their underachievement in the real test. It might be more constructive if such terms as 'comprehensive elaboration is needed' were used. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that IELTS test is only a means of assessing test-takers' level of language proficiency. So, test-takers are advised to try and gain mastery over the English language with respect to its social and 'Academic' purposes.

REFERENCE

Jakeman, V., & McDowell, C. (2014). Action plan for IELTS (9th ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.