

The IELTS Speaking Test: Analysing Culture Bias

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Abstract

IELTS is an internationally recognized English language proficiency test. Despite this, the test is perceived to have embedded cultural biases in its structure. This paper will focus on the speaking module of the IELTS and highlight some of these features. The purpose is to raise awareness of such issues amongst test designers.

INTRODUCTION

IELTS, the International English Language Testing System, aims to assess the language proficiency of non-native speakers of English and tests their listening, reading, writing and speaking skills for academic and vocational purposes.

This paper examines the speaking module of the IELTS test. With my background of test administration, combined with my experience as an IELTS examiner, I have observed that there are subtle cultural biases towards Western culture and norms of behaviour in the speaking test content. This small scale study explores and analyzes the cultural bias inherent in the terminology, vocabulary, topics and question patterns of the speaking test. It is argued that the presence of these unfamiliar features make the test confusing and difficult for non-native and local candidates who have no exposure to foreign cultural norms of speaking, exchange and interaction. This has a negative impact on the candidates and their oral performance is affected. This in turn has implications for test designers and is an issue which needs attention.

The paper is presented in four sections. Section one presents the context and background of the study. It describes the IELTS speaking test module and also provides a brief literature review. Section two describes the study. Section three presents the findings of the study followed by a brief discussion. The final section highlights the implications for IELTS oral testing and draws attention to the limitations of the study.

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

In Bangladesh IELTS testing is conducted by both the British Council and IDP Education Australia: IELTS Australia centres and these are based in the capital city Dhaka. Off site testing is also conducted by these centres in different parts of Bangladesh, e.g. Chittagong, Sylhet, Rajshahi and Comilla. In Bangladesh, annually, approximately 12,000 candidates sit for the IELTS test from both the centres. Academic Module (AC) candidates make up between 75 to 80 percent (approximately) and General Training (GT) module candidates make up between 15 to 18 percent (approximately). 95% of the candidates are male and 5% female (oral communication with IELTS administrators of both centres). According to the Annual Review Report (2002) Bangladesh occupies the 8th position for Academic Module candidates out of the top 25 locations in which IELTS tests were taken and the 22nd position for General Training Module candidates.

IELTS is considered an important and crucial test for Bangladeshi candidates because it gives them access to a world of opportunities. It is a prerequisite for admission into university, further and higher education, employment and immigration. In Bangladesh, the main IELTS user groups can be divided into four categories:

IELTS for Postgraduate Studies/Higher Education

These are candidates who have completed their undergraduate programme of study in the country and are eager to pursue a post graduate degree course and obtain a Master's degree from a foreign university. Professionals, e.g. doctors and lawyers, require IELTS for professional registration. Doctors need IELTS to sit for the PLAB test and for applying to the UK medical Council. Candidates who want a PhD in any discipline also need to sit for the IELTS test.

This is the first category of IELTS users in Bangladesh. The majority of the candidates in Bangladesh sit for the IELTS test with the purpose of undertaking postgraduate study or for pursuing higher education. Approximately 90% of the candidates are Academic Module (AC) candidates seeking post graduate degrees or professional registration. Under this category some candidates sit for the IELTS test because they have been awarded a scholarship and IELTS is a requirement. Others who self-finance themselves also need the IELTS score as an admission prerequisite.

IELTS for Undergraduate Study

These are candidates who have passed their Higher Secondary Certificate exam (HSC) or Ordinary/Advanced levels (O & A levels) and are eager to seek admission into an undergraduate course/ degree course abroad.

This second category of IELTS users in Bangladesh seek admission into undergraduate courses in foreign universities. Currently in Bangladesh there is a marked preference to go to Australia for undergraduate study, partly due to low tuition fees and cost of living and partly due to immigration opportunities. IELTS is not only an entry requirement for admission into university but is also a visa requirement for going to Australia.

IELTS for Immigration Purposes

The third category of IELTS users in Bangladesh consists of those who need it for immigration purposes. Candidates sit for the IELTS test in order to migrate to countries like Australia, UK, Canada, New Zealand and USA. In 1998 the Australian government decided to use the IELTS test for immigration purposes and ever since there has been an increased demand for IELTS in Bangladesh particularly in the General Training (GT) category. Some candidates are also interested in seeking jobs abroad.

IELTS for Personal Reasons or Self-Assessment Purposes

These are candidates who sit for the test in order to assess their level of English. This last category of users need IELTS for personal reasons and for self evaluation. These comprise a very small percentage of the candidates in Bangladesh.

English in Bangladesh has a foreign/second language status. The majority of the candidates who opt for the IELTS test have had 12 years of formal English instruction at school. Despite this long acquaintance with English, their general proficiency level is low. A study undertaken by the British Council (Raynor, 1995) indicates that the competence level of university entrants in Bangladesh is Band 3 (Restricted) on the English Speaking Union Scale whereas the target is Band 6 (Competent). In particular, students' speaking skills are not developed at all because speaking skills are never taught and tested and are not part of the curriculum. Moreover, significant differences exist in the English performance of candidates from rural and urban areas. Students living in the rural areas and remote parts of Bangladesh have very little or no exposure to real-life practical English. The level of schooling is low and people are generally not well-off. They are linguistically backward and, as a result, unable to comprehend and produce proper English. Hence their performance in any oral test is not up to the mark.

It is to be noted that education in Bangladesh, as in much of Asia, operates in a "transmissional, teacher centred and examination oriented teaching culture" (Barnes and Shemilt, 1974, cited in Penington, 1995:707). Cortazzi and Jin (1999), commenting about the role of culture in Asian contexts, maintain that Chinese children are socialized into a culture of learning in which there is a strong emphasis on memory, imitation and repetitive practice. This culture of learning is also present in Bangladesh.

Ballard and Clanchey, (1991: 8) describe a similar situation (which can be applied to the Bangladeshi educational scenario) and contend that "in many Asian and South Asian countries, learning strategies often entail memorization and imitation, resulting in an approach to knowledge that encourages the conservation of existing knowledge". On the other hand, they maintain that many western cultures encourage a speculative or critical approach to learning, resulting in an extension of existing knowledge. Because of this, in many Western cultures writers are encouraged to present their opinion on a particular topic as they speculate about the various possibilities contained in the issue. This is important information and can help to partly explain why learners in Bangladesh in general, and IELTS candidates in particular, are unable to speculate or give their opinion successfully on a topic in the speaking test.

In Bangladesh the teacher is the authority figure in the classroom and the teacher-student relationship is formal. The teaching and learning pattern is traditional and teacher centred. The Western learner centred and speculative approach is alien to Bangladeshi learners. Students in Bangladesh have not learned to evaluate or deliver opinions or critical judgements because their teacher's opinion is regarded as final and is respected as the ultimate. Students are not familiar with the Western concept of knowledge being

constantly open to extension, revision and change. Moreover, Western interaction patterns are different from Asian modes of interaction and hence alien to Bangladeshi learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

I would like to embed my study within the parameters of insights drawn from a number of fields. Particularly, I wish to approach this study from a sociolinguistic/intercultural perspective and base my literature review on the work of Coleman and of Holliday.

My point of departure for this paper is the concept of *culture*. I begin with a definition of culture and use it as a springboard for further discussion. The word ‘culture’ in its traditional sense is seen as the “social milieu that provides a group with a shared construction of reality, a tradition and a recipe for action. The rules of culture are transmitted through a learning process either tacit or conscious” (Berry et al. 1992). The definition of culture implies that a group needs to have a shared construction of reality.

Turning to the IELTS process of testing we find that two major groups are involved and both groups have their own, different, construction of reality. These two groups are:

- 1) The test designers, and
- 2) The candidates/test takers.

Both, the test designers and the candidates have their own, shared construction of reality. But do these two shared constructions meet or is there a mismatch?

To understand this, we turn to Coleman (1996) who, drawing upon Street’s (1984) distinction between autonomous and ideological attitudes, observes that the ideological approach is culturally embedded and recognizes the significance of the socialization process in the construction of the meaning of literacy for members of the society. Coleman argues for a non-universal and ideological approach and contends that “an ideological approach contrasted with the autonomous approach allows us to consider the possibility that every society creates its own meaning”. This approach is broad and flexible and recognizes the extraordinary diversity of human behaviour and achievement.

Coleman (1996) observes that pervasive social attitudes to knowledge, authority and tradition distinguish one culture from another and favour particular styles of learning. He continues further and comments that the classroom reflects the values of society in many subtle ways. He adds that, in a society that emphasizes respect for the past and for the authority of the teacher, the behaviour of both teachers and students will mirror these values. A society that rewards independence and individuality will produce a very different classroom etiquette. Mary Muchri (in Coleman, 1996: 129-130) points out that “institutional and national cultures are important not just in fostering certain attitudes in students but also in the actual interpretation of questions in the examination”.

Holliday (1994) identifies two basic contexts:

- English language education technologies based in Britain, Australasia and North America (BANA), and
- Tertiary, secondary and primary (TESEP) local contexts of the rest of the world.

According to Holliday, (1994) there are two basic types of professional academic-culture in teacher groups – Collectionism and Integrationism (Holliday, 1994; see Bernstein, 1971). Holliday argues that the BANA technologies are instrumentally oriented and integrationist, i.e., skills-based, discovery-oriented, collaborative pedagogy. The TESEP technologies are collectionist, i.e., didactic, content-based pedagogy. He observes that the BANA group is commercial in its approach, is based abroad and has used integrationism as a means of expansion into the TESEP territory.

The test designers belong to the BANA group which has essentially an integrationist-collaborative approach to education. The candidates in the local contexts fall under the umbrella of the TESEP group. The professional academic culture of the TESEP teacher group is collectionist (Holliday, 1994) and as mentioned earlier has a didactic approach to education. The question arises again whether there a mismatch between these two groups. If there is, does this affect the validity of the test?

Bangladeshi candidates are a product of the TESEP culture, i.e., the traditional educational ethos. No creative lateral thinking has been cultivated and memorization and regurgitation are the strategies at work. These learners, when they sit for the test, are at a loss to make sense of western values and customs and as a result do not perform satisfactorily. Cultural knowledge is important and Weir (1990) points out that successful performance in the speaking test depends on a number of factors including background or cultural knowledge.

My argument is that there is a gap between the cultures of the two groups and there is a perceived mismatch. Since the members of the BANA group design the test, there may be culturally sensitive areas which may have been overlooked by them inadvertently. This oversight disadvantages the candidates in the local context. If IELTS is labelled as an International test, these grey areas need to be considered. We need to consider our students, their needs and level, and the cultural and educational background and make the test-user friendly and less threatening.

The IELTS Speaking Test

The revised speaking test format for IELTS was introduced in July 2001. The duration of the IELTS speaking test is between 11 to 14 minutes and consists of an oral interview between the candidate and an examiner. All interviews are recorded. The speaking test is taken, at the discretion of the test centre, seven days before or after the other three modules.

There are three parts of the speaking test. In Part 1 candidates are asked questions on general and familiar topics. For example, they have to answer questions about themselves, their homes/families, hobbies/interests, their jobs/studies and a range of similar topics. The first part lasts from 4-5 minutes. (IELTS Information for Candidates, 2005)

In Part 2 candidates are given a verbal prompt on a task card and have to speak on one topic for 1 to 2 minutes. They have one minute preparation time. Part two lasts from 3 to 4 minutes.

Part 3 is a two way discussion between the examiner and the candidate and lasts for 4 to 5 minutes. In this section candidates have to speak on two to three questions related to one topic. Candidates are usually asked to give opinions or suggestions about a topic. They are also asked to compare, contrast, evaluate and speculate about a topic. In the speaking module candidates are assessed on four assessment criteria: fluency and coherence, lexical resources, grammatical ability and pronunciation.

THE STUDY

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to investigate and assess whether the IELTS speaking test has subtle cultural biases embedded in its structure, vocabulary patterns and methodology.

The purpose of this study is not to criticize the test constructors but to make test designers aware of some of the issues and to provide feedback from a local context. Feedback from test users should not be overlooked because important information may be picked up (Alderson, Clapham and Wall, 1995: 221).

Rationale for the Study

This study was motivated by the conviction that very little research has been conducted on analyzing the cultural bias in the IELTS speaking test and the findings would provide important information to test designers. To my knowledge the study is unique in the sense that no previous study has been undertaken to assess cultural bias in the IELTS speaking test in the Bangladeshi context.

Methodology

Initially it was decided that data would be gathered from IELTS examiners in Bangladesh through interviews and focus group discussions. However, after informal discussion with IELTS administrators of both centres and considering the time constraints and the busy schedule of the examiners, it was decided that examiners would fill out questionnaires

and follow-up focus group discussions would be arranged. Examiners who had some free time and were willing would be interviewed. The items/questions on the questionnaire were discussed with two expatriate and one local examiner during the preparation stage. Some minor changes and additions were made based on their comments. A qualitative approach was used to analyze the findings.

Questionnaires were distributed to local and expatriate examiners at both IELTS testing centres (BC& IDP) in Dhaka. Completed questionnaires were collected from 16 examiners and strict confidentiality was maintained in relation to the data collected. Table 1 gives the breakdown of examiner participants involved in the study:

Table 1: Number Of Examiners Who Participated In The Study: N=16

	Total	Male	Female	Local	Expatriate
BC	8	0	8	7	1
IDP	8	2	6	6	2

Examiners were asked to respond to ten (10) questions about the IELTS Speaking test. The focus of the questions was on the following:

- questions they preferred and questions they avoided.
- questions they rephrased/substituted to accommodate local customs and language.
- vocabulary items they perceived posed difficulties for the candidates.
- if they left out parts of any question and used some questions more often than others.
- if they consciously kept the local culture in mind while selecting tasks from Part 2 of the speaking test.
- the most challenging tasks for Bangladeshi candidates in Part 2
- main difficulties for candidates in the discussion section (Part 3)
- situations when candidates have been embarrassed or felt awkward
- questions which they felt were culturally inappropriate, culturally appropriate, exhibited knowledge of local culture, had religious implications, required understanding of topic and, posed problems of terminology and vocabulary.

FINDINGS

Examiner responses were collected, collated and analyzed qualitatively to see what the major impressions on this issue were. The findings are summarized briefly below:

Topics Preferred

The majority of the respondents stated that they chose the topics which they considered would be easy for candidates to understand and respond to. They reported that they chose those topics which they felt:

- require less rephrasing.
- candidates have more to say about
- candidates can identify with and relate to
- were perceived to be interesting to candidates.

Most examiners reported that selection of questions in Part 1 depended on the age of the candidate. In general examiners mentioned that they preferred asking questions related to *jobs or studies* because these seem to elicit more ready and detailed responses. They also observed that topics relating to personal information would appear familiar in an Anglo-centric culture but sometimes these questions confused local candidates because they were unable to respond in an appropriate manner.

One expatriate examiner commented that she chose topics based on the gender of the candidates. She reported, “I find men and women differ in their comfort levels with certain questions”. The most preferred topics were the ones relating to *family, spending time, personal decision and giving things to other people*.

Some examiners stated that the sub-questions relating to topics in Part 3 were selected based on candidates’ level of fluency because the questions became increasingly difficult in that part.

Topics Avoided

In general, the examiners commented that they avoided certain topics for the following reasons:

- poor language proficiency level of the candidates
- perception that candidates did not understand certain topics
- topics not common in Bangladeshi culture
- difficult topics
- confusing topics

According to the examiners the topics (from Part 1 & Part 2) most frequently and repeatedly avoided were those relating to the *Western way of life, health, outings and humour*.

The topic ‘*animals*’ is apparently a very easy one but most examiners stated that they avoid this topic. It is assumed that the reason is partly cultural, because although we do

have animals around us (e.g. cows, goats, buffaloes, cats and dogs, etc), and we do use them for agricultural purposes, people in general do not give any special importance to animals. In fact people are not generally interested in pets. Bangladeshis hardly keep pets. Even stray dogs and cats do not draw sympathy. There is no culture of friendship with animals and in general people are not sensitive towards them as in the West. Therefore, candidates find it hard to talk about this topic. In addition, since most people in the country are not financially well off and struggle to feed themselves and their families, they cannot think of keeping a pet and feeding an extra mouth.

One expatriate examiner commented that Bangladeshis do not make a distinction between *holidays* and *weekends*. For Bangladeshis '*Holidays*' are Fridays, the official day off in Bangladesh. The average Bangladeshi cannot afford to and does not travel much and hence examiners either avoided the question or substituted 'vacation' for '*holiday*'.

Local examiners and one expatriate examiner objected to the topic '*physical activities*' as being an alien topic, although the text adds 'doing exercise' to help candidates understand the notion of '*keep fit*'. Examiners complained that the terminology used is very unfamiliar and commented that there is very little awareness about the fitness culture which is relatively a new concept for Bangladeshis. This is a western concept which has been borrowed and currently very many people are not aware of it and hence candidates struggle to understand the question. They observe that candidates from rural parts of Bangladesh cannot relate to the topic. Therefore the candidates look blank when asked to talk about the 'physical fitness activities available in their area'. We have to be aware that in an underdeveloped country there are other pressing matters than keeping fit.

One examiner notes that one particular form of recreation, i.e. '*music*', is also not a familiar topic for most Bangladeshis because many people do not have music in their lives. The majority are struggling to keep body and soul together, so in general, candidates have very little material to talk about. The concept of '*solitude*' is also an abstract and alien concept as far as Bangladeshis are concerned. Bangladeshi city and village dwellers are never alone. They can't relate to this concept.

Another topic related to the abstract concept of '*peace*' has also been identified as difficult by most examiners. Examiners noted that candidates really struggle to say something on this topic. The notion of '*peaceful*' is significant when used in a scenario of bustle, stress and traffic. This is rather difficult for many who live within narrow constraints and may never have thought of '*peace*' as a relative alternative.

All local examiners and one expatriate examiner commented that the topic related to *humour* is an impossible topic and they avoid it. One examiner exclaimed, "I feel one minute preparation time is not enough for candidates to gather their thoughts on such an unusual and difficult topic". Moreover, when laughter is absent from the lives of the majority of people because their lives are steeped in poverty, reflecting and extending on these kinds of topics are perceived to be a joke.

One local examiner commented that she consciously avoided some of the above mentioned topics with candidates who came from the rural parts of the country because she perceived that they would have difficulties handling these topics because these are not common in our culture and they have had no exposure to the norms and conventions of Western culture. Candidates from urban areas have had more exposure to the target language and hence are in a better position to answer these questions.

Local examiners pointed out that some topics are too abstract and unfamiliar for lower proficiency groups. In Part 1 questions about '*sense of time*', and in Part 2, about '*distant time*', are not easy to handle and talk about. Two local examiners reported they avoided asking candidates about '*distant time*' because experience has shown candidates cannot say much about this topic. One expatriate examiner remarked, "I don't usually ask candidates about *activities related to distant time* in general, because a lot of younger candidates don't understand or see the point of looking back".

An expatriate examiner commented that she avoided topics related to '*sports*' because she perceived it to be sexist in the Bangladeshi context and is a topic which her experience has told her 'most women can't discuss thoroughly'. The same examiner observed that the topic asking candidates to speak about '*manufactured commodities*', "seems too Western to me".

Difficult Vocabulary Items

The most frequent vocabulary items which pose difficulties were:

- Weekends
- Wedding
- Wear a watch
- Keep-fit activities
- Gift
- Event
- Holiday
- Urban noise
- Time too fast/too slow
- Souvenir
- Ageing population
- As opposed to
- Career advice

Most of the vocabulary items identified above by examiners are alien to our cultural background. For example, let us take the lexical item '*ageing population*'. One expatriate examiner commented that in Bangladesh the old people are not a separate group so candidates are lost and puzzled when asked to talk about it.

The average Bangladeshi has hardly been out of the country and therefore cannot relate to the Western concept of souvenirs. The word ‘*souvenir*’ to a majority of the candidates, especially those from remote parts of Bangladesh, is therefore an alien and unfamiliar concept.

A majority of the examiners reported that they substitute an easy or familiar word for a difficult one.

Vocabulary Items Generally Rephrased/Substituted

Following is the list of words frequently substituted by examiners (Table 2)

Table 2: List Of Words Frequently Substituted By Examiners

Original Word/Words	Rephrased/ substituted Word/Words
Wedding	marriage ceremony
Career	Profession, job
Extended family	combined , joint family
Gift	Present
Keep-fit	Physical exercise
Going out in the evenings	Go outside
Nuclear family	Single family
Watch	Wrist watch
Holiday	Vacation

The respondents commented that on a routine basis they rephrased or substituted the original lexical items because most candidates looked blank or asked for repetition or rephrasing on hearing the original items. Some would plainly say that they did not understand the question.

Parts And Bits Of Questions Left Out

Most of the examiners reported that they omitted the second part of particular questions because they found them to be confusing for the candidates (e.g., “*are you happy to do that?*”? “*Is that all right ?*”). One examiner commented that “the word ‘*happy*’ completely throws off the candidate unless he/she is linguistically highly proficient and conversant with Western norms of politeness. “I normally avoid this bit. Culturally I feel our candidates do not need this bit of Western politeness (which, instead of putting them at ease, actually makes them feel that they are being asked another question which they must answer) and they tend to say, “Yes”, I am happy” without comprehending and understanding the intent of the question”.

One local examiner provides another explanation for candidates not relating to the second part of the question. She draws attention to the culture of the Bangladeshi classroom. She goes on to say, “we have a traditional teacher-centered classroom where the teacher is on a high pedestal and there is formal distance between the teacher and the learner. This sudden informal and friendly question “*Are you happy to do that?*” in an exam setting confuses the candidate and he/she misunderstands the whole pragmatic force of the utterance and looks bewildered and confused”. Therefore the majority of the local examiners left out the supplementary questions (e.g. “*Are you happy to do that?*”; “*Is it all right?*”) because it posed difficulties for the candidates.

Another expatriate examiner specifically stated that she usually left out the part “*Is that all right?*” Her argument is that this part appeals to the Western sensitiveness about the possibility of personal problems. However, in Bangladesh it simply confuses the candidate and they ask to repeat that part of the question.

Most local examiners reported that they chose questions keeping in mind not only what they perceived to be easier topics but also the cultural nuances that might impede performance in an already stressful situation.

One expatriate examiner commented that she leaves out one or two questions of a topic in Part 1 because she finds some questions ridiculous and some too sophisticated for the average Bangladeshi candidate. Another examiner believes that comparison questions on certain topics in Part 3 are difficult for Bangladeshi candidates to understand and handle because of underlying cultural assumptions. For example, a comparison of the way parents supported adult children in the past with the present would be relevant in the West. However, the extended family culture in Bangladesh and the relationships between parents and children, no matter how old, hardly changes. Hence it is confusing and not culturally appropriate.

In general the impression is that some topics and concepts are too biased, abstract and unfamiliar for lower proficiency level candidates.

Task Cards Used Frequently In Part 2

70% of the examiners expressed the fact that they used questions in Phase 2 based on a number of criteria. They stated that selection of tasks depended on:

- the type of candidate, e.g., strong or weak
- familiarity of topic
- the linguistic ability and cognitive level of the candidates

The topics/task cards that appeared to be the most frequently used by examiners in Part 2 were the ones related to:

- personal experiences
- events that actually take place in candidates' worlds

Examiners generally reported that they kept in mind the level of the candidate in choosing a task card. They would choose a task card depending on what they thought the candidate would be able to answer, but selection sometimes is also based on gender and culture as there are some tasks which are easier for Bangladeshis and for men to answer.

One expatriate examiner reported, "I keep in mind the local culture but also consider age, gender, experience and background. The context has to be kept in mind. Some topics work better than others. Personal topics seem to go well".

A majority of the examiners agreed that the topic '*childhood*' is universal and seems to work well. The overall comment seems to be that since Bangladeshi lives are bound in home and family, candidates enjoy talking about these things.

Some examiners showed their bias towards gender and age and profession by choosing particular topics. One examiner categorically mentioned that she uses a certain topic only with older candidates; some commented that they use serious topics with professionals and working groups, topics related to physical events with males and topics associated with family matters with older females.

Examiners commented that since the aim is to make candidates speak there is no point trapping them with difficult questions and making them feel uncomfortable. That is why they avoid unfamiliar questions and try to choose common topics which they feel candidates are familiar and comfortable with.

Challenging Part 2 Task Cards

According to examiner responses the tasks relating to *equipmen and, architecture* and topics relating to the abstract concepts of *humour, peace and relics* appear to be most challenging for Bangladeshi candidates.

Examiners commented that it is challenging for candidates to speak at length on these topics with just a minute to prepare their speech. They contend that time constraints, unfamiliar topics as well as insufficient background information regarding these topics make the topic difficult to tackle.

Difficulties In Part 3

Answering questions about opinions, analysis and philosophical perspectives, as opposed to facts, often proves tough for local candidates. It requires a higher level of thinking and

expression of complex thoughts, interpreting information and dealing with nuances. Considering many candidates' educational background/ training and exposure to English, this can be stressful and challenging.

Non-understanding of certain lexis, e.g. *'holiday'*, and *'present'*, etc. make candidates speak off the point. It is felt that candidates find it extremely difficult to extend, extrapolate and give examples in the third part of the test. This is because they have not learned to do so in their school/college years and are not familiar with these types of questions.

If candidates are of a low level, they fail in Phase 3 because the questions are too difficult. "Some questions have a cultural bias and the topics are too Eurocentric, e.g. *censorship, marketing and parental roles*", says one expatriate examiner. Another examiner commented, "In general forming opinions and evaluating are difficult in our traditional, top-down society".

Candidates seem to find it quite difficult to coherently express ideas on more general and abstract topics. This is because they rarely have the opportunity to express their own opinions in the course of their formal education. They have little experience expressing opinions. They are restricted by their view that you shouldn't disagree with a teacher (examiner).

Awkward/embarrassing Situations

Examiners talked about some awkward situations when candidates responded in a manner which reflected implicit cultural nuances. In some cases examiners reported that candidates became emotional, triggered by the test topic, and broke down in tears. One examiner commented that a veil covered female did not feel at ease talking about *'clothes'*. Certain candidates with devout family backgrounds did not feel comfortable talking about *'music'* and *'entertainment'*.

Some of the responses revealed that candidates are sometimes in a dilemma as the topics being discussed seem strange to them because of their background. The case of the *'reluctant housewives'* (examiner's words) appears to be cultural; they seemed to know the answers but were unable to articulate their views because in their culture "women are supposed to listen and not talk". Examiners felt that non-professional females appeared less vocal.

Cultural Issues

Examiners were asked to identify which topics raised cultural issues for them and to indicate which of the topics were culturally appropriate (CA), culturally inappropriate (CI), whether the topic had religious implications (RC), required knowledge of local

culture (LC), required understanding of the topic (UT) or had to do with understanding of vocabulary and terminology (V/T). Analysis reveals the following (Table 3):

Table 3: Analysis of Cultural Issues

	Cultural Issues					
	CA	CI	LC	RC	UT	T/V
Topics (f)	7	8	5	3	5	7

Seven of the topics were considered to be culturally appropriate (CA). Eight of the topics were regarded to be culturally inappropriate (CI). Another seven topics were regarded to be difficult with regard to vocabulary/terminology used (U/T). Five were considered to require knowledge of local culture (LC), three needed to take into account religious considerations (RC) and another 5 topics posed difficulties of understanding the topic (UT). It was perceived that cultural issues are significant and difficult and unfamiliar vocabulary is problematic.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of responses from the examiners reveals that candidates in Bangladesh have difficulty with certain questions and tasks in the IELTS speaking test which assume background knowledge and vocabulary beyond their range of experience and exposure.

The findings show that there are a certain number of topics and vocabulary items in the speaking test which pose difficulties for Bangladeshi candidates. Some of the topics on the test have been identified as unusual, uncommon and unfamiliar. It is argued that these vocabulary items and topics reflect Western concepts and patterns of interaction and are not culturally appropriate for local candidates. This makes the task difficult for them and affects their performance on the test.

Skehan (2004) states that it is possible to identify positive and negative factors in any oral performance. According to him 'familiar tasks' achieve 'greater accuracy. He states that "task difficulty relates to a number of factors including abstract or unfamiliar information and complex retrieval" (p.17). In this study respondents have identified topics which are abstract and related to unfamiliar information. On the issue of 'complex retrieval', it may be said that the existing schema of the majority of candidates in Bangladesh are set within different and fixed parameters and therefore retrieval becomes difficult. Findings of the study disclose the fact that the majority of local examiners perceive that the average candidate in Bangladesh does not have the necessary background schema and

therefore lacks the imagination, information or language to talk about certain topics. These topics are also perceived to be culturally not very appropriate.

Vocabulary is clearly an important aspect of the construct of language proficiency and is an aspect which Cambridge ESOL is interested in testing (Schmitt, 2004). The vocabulary items identified by examiners were problematic for local candidates. Most candidates had trouble understanding these vocabulary items as these do not exist in their linguistic and cultural repertoire. For example, as mentioned earlier, the words ‘*souvenir*’ and ‘*holiday*’ are difficult to talk about. If candidates were taking a vocabulary quiz, they would perhaps match the word ‘*holiday*’ with ‘*time off work*’. But the task is much more complex because they need a schema to handle the question efficiently. They fail to relate to and expand on these terms because there is hardly a culture of taking ‘*holidays*’ and buying ‘*souvenirs*’ in Bangladesh. The concept is almost nonexistent. People in Bangladesh do not travel much and there is practically no tourism culture. Hence there is no terminology to accompany such activities. Only the elite section of society, maybe 5% of the total population, engages in these activities. We should not be oblivious to the fact that “culture is embedded in the language itself, particularly in the semantics of language” (Mackay, 2000:100). From the above findings it can be said that some of the language used in the test is not connected to the culture of some of the centres, where it is used as a L2.

As mentioned in the section on findings the questions in the first part of the test, e.g. “*are you happy to do that*”, have been criticized by a majority of the local examiners as not only being redundant but also confusing. They have reported that they avoid this bit because there is formal distance between the teacher and the student in Asian educational contexts and there are set beliefs about traditional roles of teachers and students. These questions reflect an approach to learning which has reference to Western cultural norms (i.e. teacher as friend). It is felt that the test needs to consider the local culture on teaching and learning.

The above discussed sample questions in the IELTS speaking test reflect a certain amount of cultural bias in the test. Some of the questions draw heavily on the target culture. When the candidates face a question in the speaking test which does not represent their cultural expectations and norms they are intimidated and lost. As pointed out by examiners some of the International target culture topics used in the test confuse the candidates. They are puzzled by the question and have difficulty comprehending it because they do not have access to supplementary information needed to explain some of the cultural information and nuances. We find that sometimes quite fluent and mature speakers, particularly government officials/ bureaucrats, perform quite badly because of the cultural nuances underlying some of the speaking test tasks. IELTS is an International test and so let us not test candidates on the cultural norms of interaction of one particular language.

In Bangladesh candidates are not familiar with discourse conventions. The main difficulty is the idea of continuity in the discourse. Candidates find it hard to deal with

sub-questions as separate items and answer them in an isolated manner. As mentioned earlier, often they cannot form and convey any opinion. There are comparison and contrast questions in the third part which they fail to handle properly. Comparisons may be cognitively treated but grammatical forms/lexis of comparison are not used. The greatest problem is in the area of speculation, and candidates usually answer through suggestions/recommendations (should/must do). They cannot focus on the question and answer to the point. A majority of the examiners felt that speculating about changes in the future was the most challenging question in Part 3 for local candidates.

Findings show that there are a number of culturally inappropriate topics, vocabulary items and phrases that are alien and tend to confuse the candidates. In addition to the stressful situation this adds to their burden. If we relate these findings to the literature reviewed in the beginning regarding the culture of teaching and learning, I would agree that Bangladeshi IELTS candidates are at a disadvantage at present. Examiners reported that they avoided certain topics and refrained from asking certain questions. Reflecting on this issue and standing back as examiners, the question arises that if examiners are restricting and limiting the questions on the test, is the test effective? The local examiners want to meet the test requirements and want to be fair to the candidates too.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST

Some implications for the IELTS speaking test are highlighted below:

- Further systematic studies need to examine the impact of the IELTS speaking test in various contexts. An important issue to consider is: Does the cultural bias affect the validity of the test?
- The testing body might need to reconsider its use of some of the speaking test items. It would be worth considering ways which test the same type of knowledge but do not disadvantage any group. Some suggestions could be to perhaps modify the language and maybe make the questions on the test a bit more neutral. Examiners are tied to frames and it is understandable that this unity and control is required for reliability purposes. However, these frames should not be rigid.
- Testers need to look at the issue of cultural bias more seriously, and maybe isolate questions which disadvantage Non-western candidates. Further research is needed to isolate the Anglicized phrases and topics on the test. In this way western influences on test content may be identified.

LIMITATIONS

This is a small scale, initial and descriptive study. The study has a number of limitations. Firstly, it was difficult to gather data due to the time constraints and busy schedule of the examiners and the unfavourable political climate of the country (*unexpected closures and hartals*). Secondly, many British Council examiners could not be contacted personally due to unscheduled holidays. The questions on the questionnaire were limited by the need for test security. The range of topics and open discussion of topics was also constrained for security reasons. It was difficult to camouflage the topics and discuss them overtly in writing.

Data was elicited mainly through questionnaires. Follow-up interviews and focus group discussions could be conducted with only a limited number of examiners. Moreover, it is to be noted that feedback from only one category of test users was sought, i.e. data was collected only from examiners. It would be interesting to know what test designers and administrators have to say on this issue. It would also be useful to get the candidates' perspectives on this matter. In addition, questions from the full range of speaking test folders were not discussed, once again due to security reasons. Finally, the sample size is admittedly small and perhaps the results cannot be generalized but it does raise important questions which need to be taken seriously by testing authorities and test designers.

CONCLUSION

This study was not commissioned and is an exploratory study of the perceptions of a small group of IELTS examiners in Bangladesh. As mentioned earlier, no previous study about the IELTS speaking test has been carried out to date in the Bangladeshi context. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness about subtle cultural issues inherent in the speaking test and to provide feedback from a local context. It is hoped that some of the findings can inform test development and research in the IELTS.

It is recognized that it would be very difficult to produce topics which are appropriate for all candidates worldwide. Nevertheless, there is a strong need to presuppose sensitivity to the educational and cultural context. It is fair that language should not only be taught but also tested in a manner consistent with local contexts. Test designers therefore need to consider the social, cultural and educational environment of the users and adapt the test accordingly.

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