

A Blended Approach to Positive Washback for the IELTS Test

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With the International English Language Testing System (also known as the IELTS test) now the most widely taken English proficiency test in the world for higher education and migration purposes, there is an increasing demand for high-quality IELTS teaching. This workshop outlined three activities that IELTS teachers can use to develop both test familiarity and some of the key skills needed to perform well in the speaking and writing tests. In keeping with the conference theme of blended approaches to learning, each activity can be completed both online and offline. I also argued that each activity ought first to be completed online (via messaging app or video conference software) in order to minimize learner anxiety and ensure that the in-class version can proceed more smoothly. During the workshop, the participants were given the opportunity to perform the activities and consider how they could be used in their own teaching contexts.

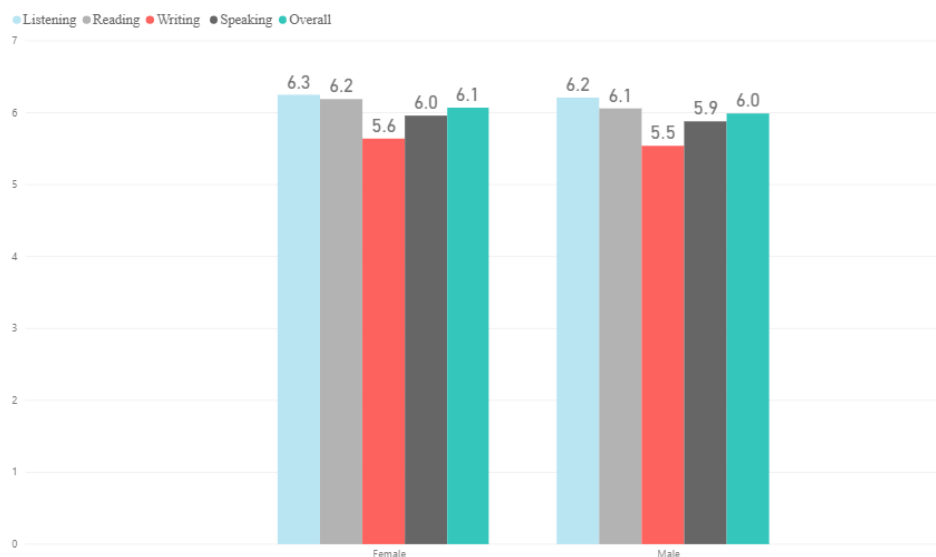
INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the International English Language Testing System (more commonly known as IELTS) has become the leading English language test for higher education and migration purposes. In 2018, for example, the number of IELTS takers worldwide reached 3.5 million in a single year (IELTS, 2019a). With such significant growth, it is not surprising that the demand for IELTS teaching has grown along with it.

Over the past 12 months, my colleagues and I in the East Asia Assessment Solutions Team (see British Council China, 2020) have been conducting IELTS Speaking and Writing workshops for teachers across the East Asia region. These workshops train teachers in how to recognize and apply the IELTS public band descriptors (see, for example, IELTS, n.d.), while also focusing on how to more effectively teach the skills required for success in the IELTS Speaking and Writing modules. Global scores for IELTS (see Figure 1) indicate that the Speaking and Writing modules pose more difficulties for test-takers than do the Reading and Listening modules, and as far as the teachers are concerned, such score discrepancies are largely related to their own lack of expertise in teaching speaking and writing skills.

FIGURE 1. Mean IELTS Performance by Gender

Academic test takers: Mean performance by gender



Note. From IELTS (2019c).

In my workshop at the Korea TESOL International Conference, I outlined three activities that target some of the major difficulties that IELTS test-takers are faced with. Each activity can first be conducted in an online environment, before then being modified for in-class settings. By taking a blended approach such as this, I proposed that confidence would be built up before in-class performance, allowing for greater efficiency when the activity is then performed in the classroom. The first activity, to be discussed after the next paragraph, relates to the IELTS Speaking test.

THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST

A Blended Approach to Improving Fluency

As I mentioned at the beginning of the workshop, IELTS teachers in China typically encourage students to use a narrow range of fixed expressions to improve their spoken production. Phrases such as “Every coin has two sides” and “With the development of ...” are common phrases used by IELTS candidates in China to conceal their lack of spoken fluency, and Chinese IELTS teachers tend not to devote much time to developing fluency in class. The washback effect of IELTS in China leads to intensive memorization of sometimes entire speeches, the content of which is clearly beyond candidates’ natural proficiency level. Moreover, IELTS classes in China are usually teacher-centered, with Chinese used to a much

greater extent than English (Badger & Yan, 2008).

Having conducted an IELTS workshop for Korean teachers of IELTS just two days before my Korea TESOL workshop, I learned that this problem is by no means confined to China. The good news for IELTS teachers is that mobile messaging apps can complement an in-class approach to fluency development. There is a plethora of messaging apps that can be chosen, from KakaoTalk in South Korea to WeChat in China, and they can all be used to develop fluency using an activity called, as I will explain, “Just a Minute.”

Activity 1: Just a Minute

Based on a popular TV and radio show of the same name, the activity Just a Minute targets the skills needed to reach higher levels of spoken fluency. By choosing a simple and familiar topic (the student’s favorite movie, for example) with a one-minute time limit (see Nation, 1989, for the importance of time limits in fluency practice), Student A speaks to Student B for one minute, uninterrupted, while Student B makes note of how many times Student A hesitates.

The teacher would first assign pairs of students to instant-message each other as part of the out-of-class activity. This would work, first, by again using a simple and familiar topic. Student A would give Student B the topic (from a list developed by the teacher) and Student B would then send a one-minute-long voice message offering their response to the topic. Student A, rather than being a passive listener, could count the number of hesitations or discourse markers, both of which are measured according to the Fluency and Coherence category in the IELTS public band descriptors. To reach Band 7 for Fluency and Coherence, for example, the candidate would need to use “a range of connectives and discourse markers with some flexibility” (IELTS, n.d.). For more advanced classes, Student A (the listener) could even provide the score they think Student B’s performance merits.

Students may question why they are participating in activities that seemingly have little relevance to the IELTS test. This is normal and something that teachers are very conscious of. Is there a way, then, to focus on the content of the IELTS Speaking test while continuing to use Just a Minute as a fluency-building activity? The answer, as it turns out, is yes, even though it may need to be extended from one minute to two.

Part 2 of the Speaking test requires candidates to speak for one to two minutes on a personal topic following one minute of preparation time. A typical example of a Part 2 topic would be “Describe a time in your life you remember well.” This is something familiar to everyone and, with a 1-to-2-minute time limit, teachers can implement the activity by using Part 2 sample questions (see IELTS-Exam.net, 2019) and an activity, Just a Minute, that students have already performed. By asking students to attempt an IELTS Part 2 question with a 1-to-2-minute time limit, they can then be given the opportunity to develop test familiarity as well as fluency and coherence.

Before outlining another activity aimed at improving performance in the IELTS Speaking test, I took a brief detour during the workshop and focused on a persistent difficulty that IELTS candidates face when taking the Academic Writing test.

IELTS ACADEMIC WRITING TEST

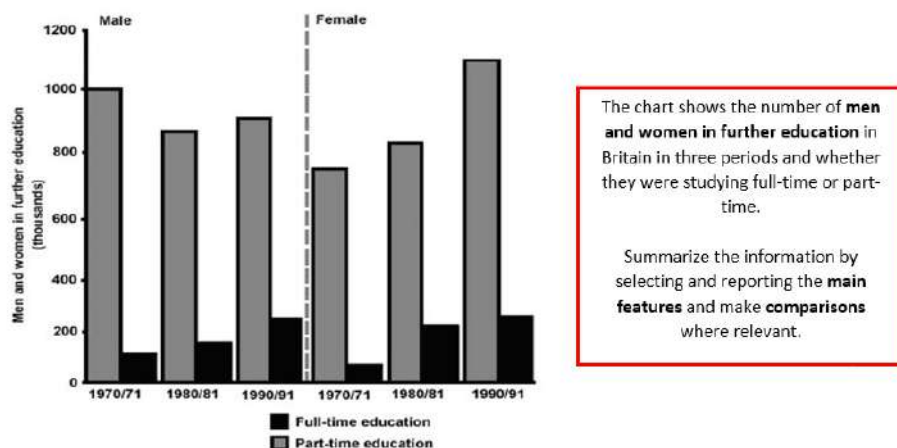
Task 1: Problems Identifying the Key Features

On Day 1 of the conference, my British Council colleague, Kate Chodzko, presented some interesting data that showed that even college-educated native speakers have difficulty achieving high scores on the Task Achievement section of Academic Writing Task 1 (Chodzko, 2019). One likely reason for this concerns the difficulty in identifying the key features of a graph or diagram, something that is essential to success in Academic Task 1. There can, and often is, disagreement surrounding whether a feature of a diagram is, in fact, a key feature or just a detail. With this in mind, an activity aimed at identifying the key features constituted the second part of my workshop. As with Part 1, blended learning can again be used.

Activity 2: Find the Key Features

Consider Figure 2, a typical example of an IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 question.

FIGURE 2. Sample Academic Writing Task 1



Note. Adapted from Recine (2017).

Rather than identifying every single detail on this chart, IELTS candidates instead need to recognize and compare trends across both data sets, in other words, the key features of the diagram. In the case of Figure 2, they would be well advised to identify and compare trends that are evident in both the “male” and “female” data sets. For example, the chart above shows:

- An increasing trend in the number of males in full-time education.
- A fluctuation in the number of males in part-time education.
- An increasing trend in the number of females in full-time education.
- An increasing trend in the number of females in part-time education.

A consistently larger number of males and females participating in part-time education, as compared with full-time education.

The activity I proposed to identify these key features works like this:

1. Student A, having been provided with several sample Task 1 questions by their teacher, sends one of these samples as a screenshot to Student B's messaging app.
2. Student B, given about 2 minutes to interpret the graph or diagram, then sends a 30-to-45-second voice message (or a text message) to Student A in which they identify what they think are the key features of the chart.
3. Following this, Student A sends their own message (either voice or text) to Student B in which they, too, identify the key details of the graph.
4. If there are any discrepancies between them, both students can send new messages in which they try to come to an agreement as to what the key features are.

Moving to an in-class setting, this online activity could simply be repeated as a pair discussion using new sample tasks, while the teacher could also assign groups to report on what they thought were the key features of the task they discussed online. It is possible, even likely, that the groups will not agree on all key features, but a discussion (in English) would make it more likely for a consensus to be reached, while also allowing for further opportunities for fluency development.

Activity 3: Examiner - Candidate Role-Play

The central thrust of our IELTS Speaking and Writing workshops is that, when building test familiarity, key skills and subskills should be targeted simultaneously. Examiner-candidate role-plays are a case in point, and I outlined this as my third activity of my Korea TESOL workshop.

There are numerous mock IELTS Speaking videos available online, for example, on *IELTS.org*. Viewing these and making note of the step-by-step process involved would build test familiarity but would not do much to focus on oral fluency. This is where role-plays can be helpful.

After asking the attendees how such role-plays might work online and offline, I made my proposal as to how they could work. For the online component, there are numerous video-sharing platforms, such as Skype, that could be used, but my recommendation was for Zoom (<https://zoom.us/>).

With its clear picture and option for recording the conversation, Zoom can be a suitable online platform for students to perform their own mock Speaking test. Using one of the sample videos on *IELTS.org* (see IELTS, 2019b), Student A could play the role of the examiner, first making note of the examiner's questions prior to the Zoom interview and then asking these questions of Student B. The interview, having been recorded, could then be sent to the teacher for feedback on the students' performance.

Moving the activity into the classroom, there are numerous ways for this activity to be extended. For example, Students A and B (as examiner and

candidate, respectively) could perform the role-play, while two more students, C and D, could rate different aspects of Student B's performance. Student C, for instance, could offer feedback on Fluency and Coherence, and Lexical Resource, while Student D could offer feedback on Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and Pronunciation. Student C could also act as a transcriber of Student A's questions, while Student D could note the key points made by Student B in their responses. Such an activity would allow for a more integrated focus on speaking, listening, and even writing.

CONCLUSIONS

With many IELTS candidates unfamiliar with the structure of the test, teaching activities ought to build test familiarity as well as develop key sub-skills of, in this case, speaking and writing. The activities discussed in this report would be transferable across different teaching contexts, for the standardized format of the IELTS test ensures that each candidate, no matter where they are located, would need to demonstrate the same core competencies to excel in the test. The technology suggested (i.e., messaging apps like KakaoTalk and WeChat) is widely available and user-friendly, with virtually all students familiar with at least one kind of instant messaging app. As a potential area of research, moreover, there remains much room to investigate the effects of this blended approach on IELTS test-taker performance.

THE AUTHOR

Christopher Redmond works as an assessment solutions consultant for the British Council's East Asia Assessment Solutions Team in Chongqing, China. He received his MA in applied linguistics and TESOL from the University of Leicester and has taught and conducted workshops in Ireland, South Korea, Japan, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and mainland China. In his role with the British Council, Christopher manages numerous assessment-related projects and provides academic support for the British Council's marketing teams across the East Asia region. He is program chair for the New Directions 2020 conference in Singapore. Email: Christopher.Redmond@britishcouncil.org.cn

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