

Tips for Teaching IELTS Writing

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Notes from the talk:

Here are the ideas from the talk. Would be great to hear any feedback – my email is: Lewis.Richards@lsi-portsmouth.co.uk

Workshop Notes:

Discussion:

- Do you teach academic writing? Who do you teach, and what type of writing?
- What problems or difficulties do you come across when teaching academic writing?
- What techniques and activities can help make academic writing more interesting for students and teachers?

To address the second point, about difficulties, there are three main issues which I think we all have to deal with when we teach academic writing:

1. A lot of the material is pretty dry.
2. Motivation in class can be a problem. Although the students have the overall motivation of needing to pass the exam to get into university, since the material (e.g. writing about graphs) is not always very exciting, students often are not as enthusiastic about studying academic writing as they are about general English, which is generally seen as being more fun.
3. Students have always studied general English, from when they started learning English as kids, right up to the moment they join an IELTS course. Therefore the material in academic writing classes is totally different from anything they have encountered before.

Over the last ten years I've come up with a few ideas and activities which make the teaching of academic writing a bit more interesting for me and my students. Below is a summary of the ideas from the presentation:

1. Personalise

You saw in the presentation a task 1 graph about hobbies. You can do lots of things to make this more interesting. For example, get students to discuss the topic of the graph:

1. ***Do you do any of these hobbies?***
2. ***Are there any of these hobbies that you aren't interested in?***
3. ***Which of these hobbies are the most popular in your country?***
4. ***Tell your partner about something you do in your free time which isn't in this graph.***

Or get the students to rank each of the hobbies, and then talk about how they feel about them:

Choose between 1 and 5 for each hobby.

1= I'm not interested in it

5= I'm really interested in it

Another option is to get your students to make up their own graphs. This is much more motivating and interesting than writing about the graph above. You saw an example in the presentation from my IELTS class. (With hobbies like 'gossiping', 'doing nothing', etc!)

2. Tailor the grammar to academic writing

In the first couple of years I was teaching IELTS, I was always really surprised to see students who were, for example, in an upper-intermediate general English class, writing essays with basic grammar mistakes in them. I couldn't work out why students whose level of grammar was so high could keep making errors in essays with tenses or grammar items they had studied lots of times before.

After a while, I realized that the problem was a lack of tailored grammar exercises, exercises specifically designed to train students in how to apply grammar items directly into writing.

Let me give you an example. I've got in front of me a (really good) upper-intermediate course book, and the grammar on these two pages is relative clauses. The students are given a typical pair of sentences, and asked to talk about the difference between them:

My brother, who is a doctor, lives in New York.

My brother who is a doctor lives in New York.

You've probably seen, and taught this kind of thing before. It's designed, obviously, to elicit the idea that the first sentence contains some extra information ('My brother lives in New York' is the main idea of the sentence, and the fact that he is a doctor is additional information about him), and the second sentence defines which brother I'm talking about (it implies I have more than one brother, and you would expect the next sentence to be something like 'However, my brother who is a teacher lives in London'). Now, nothing wrong with this, but how do students go from knowing this to producing good relative clauses in an essay?

How to tailor grammar to academic writing?

1. Decide exactly in what way we use this grammar in writing.
2. Make exercises with examples of the kind of language you will want your students to write in their essays.

So, with relative clauses, it seems to me that one of the most common types of sentence used in IELTS writing is the type which contains a relative clause at the end, to give more information or a comment on the main idea. For example:

- The most important museums are free to enter in the UK, ***which is a good idea, because it allows everyone to have access to culture.***

- If you run your own business, you can make the decisions about the company yourself, ***which means that you are in control of your working life.***

And when I started to think about which verbs are commonly-used with the relative clause, I came up with these:

means, enables people to, allows people to, gives people a chance to,..makes it possible/easy/difficult to., prevents/stops people from.., encourages people to.

Here's an exercise, based on this – try it for yourself:

Complete these sentences with a relative clause, using one of the verbs above:

1. In many countries, governments give scholarships to students from low-income families, ***which makes it possible for poorer students to go to university.***
2. House prices tend to be very expensive in big cities, which...
3. The government is going to cut the price of public transport next year, which...
4. A lot of people who own their own businesses work extremely long hours, which...

I've done this exercise lots of times with IELTS classes, and overnight students come back with essays with this type of sentence in. It's very satisfying for us as teachers, and a very effective way of helping students to improve their written grammar.

My answers were:

2. which means that it is hard for young people to get onto the property ladder.
3. which will encourage more people to leave their cars at home.
4. which means that they often don't have much time to spend with their families.

3. Write your own texts

There is a lot of good IELTS material on the market, but I often it's really useful to write my own texts to use in class.

Why?

- You can choose the language you put in the texts.
- You can make a variety of text types (e.g. chat rooms, newspaper articles, interviews)
- Once you've written a text, you can re-use it as many times as you like

You can design your text to either be a springboard for work on grammar, for example by including lots of examples of grammar in context, or use your text to teach lexis for an essay. This is what I tend to do with my texts the most.

Let's look at an example. Recently my students had to write an essay on this topic:

Many countries face rising crime, and many people believe that sending criminals to prison is the best way to reduce crime.

Do you agree that prison is the best punishment for criminals?

A very typical essay question, and getting students to come up with ideas and arguments on this topic is fairly easy. What is more difficult is getting them to use good lexis, probably because most course books deal with crime vocabulary in exercises where students learn things like different word forms about crime (e.g. to rob/a robber/robbery, etc.)

So I made up an interview with someone who believed that prison worked, and used it to introduce some chunks of language. Have a look at this text, and decide what lexis you would want your students to learn from it:

"I think the problem with society these days is that the sentences given out to criminals are too lenient. When I was a child, capital punishment was legal, and I think it was a deterrent to potential criminals. People were scared to break the law, because they knew the punishment would be severe. But these days, people get really soft punishments, like community service, which don't deter anyone from committing crime. The best way with criminals is to lock them up in prison, and throw away the key. There are too many dangerous criminals in our society. Putting them behind bars would definitely reduce the crime rate."

Joan Smith, 68

Highlighted in red are my choices. What is also great about teaching lexis for an essay through a text is that, of course, all the vocabulary is learned in context, in chunks.

*"I think the problem with society these days is that the **sentences** given out to criminals **are too lenient**. When I was a child, **capital punishment** was legal, and I think it was **a deterrent to potential criminals**. People were **scared to break the law**, because they knew the **punishment** would be **severe**. But these days, people get really **soft punishments**, like **community service**, which **don't deter anyone from committing crime**. The best way with criminals is to **lock them up in prison**, and **throw away the key**. There are too many dangerous criminals in our society. **Putting them behind bars** would definitely **reduce the crime rate**."*

You can then do some vocabulary practice exercises, like these below:

1. I think many punishments **are not strict enough.**

I think many punishments are too **I** _____

2. Prison **stops people from committing crime.**

Prison is a **d** _____ to **p** _____ criminals.

3. **Sending more criminals to prison** would reduce the crime rate.

P_____ criminals b_____ bars would reduce the crime rate.
[Answers: lenient/a deterrent to potential criminals/Putting criminals behind bars]

To make the text more interactive, you can write two short texts with opposing arguments in (i.e. the one above with the arguments in favour of prison, and then one with the arguments against), and do a jigsaw reading, where students read only one text each, and have to explain what they read to each other.

Here's a paragraph with the opposing view to the text above:

"I'm glad that Britain doesn't have such strict punishments for criminals as in the past. I think capital punishment, for example, is violent and primitive, and should not be used in a modern society. Also, I don't think capital punishment doesn't stop criminals – most criminals don't think about the consequences of their actions when they break the law. Another thing is that generally speaking, the people who commit crimes come from difficult backgrounds – either they are unemployed, or they have some family problem, which make them commit crime in desperation. Rather than sending them to jail, where they will spend time with other criminals, I think we should use other types of punishments, like community service, where they can contribute something to society. Also, we should help them with some education and training, so they can find employment."

Steve Guardian, 32

Chatroom texts

A really nice (and easy) way to make up a text is to get your friends to help you. Ask your friends, on facebook, to write in one short paragraph their views on an essay topic (e.g. 'Is prison the best punishment for criminals?')

You can then put a selection of their paragraphs together into a text. It involves very little work on the teacher's part, but produces a great range of ideas and lexis. You saw a presentation an example from my book, on the pros and cons of prison.

5.Paragraph Reformulation

In my experience, a big problem for students is knowing how to organise and flesh out their ideas into paragraphs. It may be because writing styles and conventions differ from country to country, or simply a case of not knowing what is expected in an English academic essay.

Again and again I find students don't explain and develop their ideas sufficiently. One way to deal with this is to do some reformulation of a student's essay.

Here's a paragraph, containing two arguments, from a student of mine. The English is excellent, but the ideas are not fully-developed. What I do is type up the paragraph, and then ask the students in pairs to see how the paragraph could be improved. As a class, we discuss what is missing from the paragraph, and then I ask the students to turn this into two, better-developed, paragraphs.

Topic: The pros and cons of living with your parents as an adult.

Some people argue that it is good to live with your parents as long as you can because you can take care of them, and as a result the family is much closer. Not only that, children who live at home have less responsibilities and this results in them having more free time for themselves.

55 words

Once the students have re-written it, I then show them my version, and get them to notice how I've developed the ideas (e.g. with examples, linking words, results, and so on).

Take a look:

*Some people argue that it is good to live with your parents as long as you can because you can take care of them. **In many cases**, parents need help with the household jobs, such as doing the shopping, cleaning the house or repairing things in the house. **In Spain, for instance**, it is common for people in their twenties to live at home, which means that parents get support from their children. **As a result**, the family is generally much closer than in other countries where children move out early.*

71 words

*Not only that, children who live at home have less responsibilities. Living alone means that you have to deal with a range of tasks, **such as** shopping, paying bills and so on, but if you live with your parents they tend to take care of these things. **The result is** that children who live at home can concentrate on their studies or on developing their career, **which** will give them more opportunities to be successful in the future.*

74 words

5. Error Correction

There are many ways to correct students' work, but one I like is to turn it into a betting game. After students hand in an essay, I pick out ten sentences with key errors in, and type them up, highlighting the part of the sentence which needs to be corrected.

In teams, students then have to correct each sentence, and bet between 1 and 10 points on their correction. So if they correct a sentence and feel absolutely sure about their correction, they can bet 10 points on it. If they are less sure, they bet fewer points, with a minimum of 1 for each sentence.

If they are right, they keep the points for each sentence, but if they are wrong they lose all the points. Therefore with 10 sentences to correct, the maximum points is 100, and the minimum -100.

It turns a fairly dry exercise into a competitive twenty minutes of fun. Here's an example with five sentences: bet on each one if you like:

1. If there **is** problems about the house, usually parents solve these matters.
2. For example, if you are young and you want to buy a house, **it would rather** live at home and save up money than to pay rent.
3. **Almost** people are independent from their parents when they get old.
4. Renting a house or flat is not an easy task for most **family**.
5. **I'm agree** with all arguments, but it is a personal choice, and I prefer to live alone

Answers: 1. are 2. it would be better to 3. Most 4. families 5. I agree.

Number two has more than one possible answer, which gives the teacher the opportunity to feed in other options ('it is preferable to'/'it makes more financial sense to', etc).

6.Turn dry tasks into interactive activities.

One way to do this is to turn a task into a game with dice. A good way that I like is to get students to talk about different essay topics. Here are the instructions for the game:

- Roll the dice twice.
- The first time for the topic, and the second time for how long you should speak.
- Your partner should note your ideas down.

Problem/Solution Essays:

1. What are the causes of obesity? What could the solutions be?
2. What are the causes of pollution in cities? Suggest some solutions.
3. What are the causes of stress in modern life? What could be done to reduce it?
4. What are the causes of street crime? What could the solutions be?
5. What are the causes of third world poverty? What could be done to solve this issue?
6. Generally speaking, women earn less than men. What are the causes of this, and what could the solutions be?

Times

- 1 = 45 secs
2 = 1 min
3 = 1 mins15 secs
4 = 2 min 30 secs
5 = 2 min 45 secs
6 = 2 mins

7.Model Answers

My view is that if you're going to write an academic essay or report in a foreign language, you at some point need to see a model of what is required. However, I only use model answers after students have had a go at the essay first. I also try to use the model answer in a variety of ways to improve students' grammar, lexis, cohesion and coherence.

You saw a model answer from unit 5 of IELTS Advantage, on this problem/solution essay:

'People who live in big cities face a range of problems in their daily life. What are the main problems people in cities face, and how can these problems be tackled?'

Have a look at the model answer, and think about what you would do with it. Below are some suggestions.

Suggestions:

1. Find and underline the topic sentences in the model answer.
2. Circle all the linking words and discuss with a partner what they do.
3. Write down my essay plan for me. What were my main points, and supporting ideas? This works well if you make a grid for students to complete:

Main idea	Supporting ideas
<i>High property prices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>People forced to commute</i>• <i>Example – London</i>• <i>Solution – build more cheap houses</i>

4. Find synonyms in the model answer.
5. Check the meanings of lexical items from the model answer in a dictionary.
6. Scan the model and complete the collocations:
 - (i) build _____ houses [answer 'affordable']
 - (ii) _____ ticket prices [answer 'slash']
7. Write down 10 key items from a paragraph of the model answer. Cover the model, and try to re-write the paragraph exactly as it is in the model.

For example, from paragraph 2 of the model:

Biggest – property prices – average salary – commute – London – prohibitive – cost – solve – government – housing.

Cover the model, and turn this into a full paragraph.

8.Peer Feedback

Getting our students to comment on and learn from each other's work is a really effective tool for learning, and for making marking interactive. It can either be a global exercise, where the students comment on general features ('is it long enough?', 'are the paragraphs good?; etc), or more specific, where you direct the students to things you want them to look for ('pick out 3 relative clauses', or 'find two useful collocations for your next essay'). Here are two examples:

1. IELTS Task 1 – Reader's checklist

Read your partner's task 1 writing, and make notes about these questions:

- Is the answer over 150 words?
- Has the student used good paragraphs?
- What do you like about the answer?
- What needs more work?

Give some constructive feedback to the person who wrote it.

2. Read your partner's essay and find:

- two examples of good tenses
- some grammar which isn't quite right
- a phrase you like and want to learn
- a real-life example
- two nice collocations
- a good linking phrase
- an example of the 'impersonal passive'
- 3 pieces of vocabulary about cities
- a spelling mistake

9.Make your own listenings

To make a piece of writing more fun, and take it off the page, it's really nice to make a recording to introduce some ideas and/or language. One way of doing it is to turn the task into an improvised chat with a colleague. You can add in a bit of humour to liven it up a bit.

For instance, writing about a process. You saw the process on tea in the presentation.

The key language here is the linking phrases to join up the stages ('subsequently', 'following this', etc), and passives. So I recorded a chat with a colleague where we discuss the process of making tea, and ask the students to write down all the linking words and passives as they listen.

Here's a snippet from the conversation, to give you an idea:

A: Mmm, this tea's lovely. I wonder how it's grown.

B: You don't know how it's grown?
A: No, no idea.
B: Well, I'm really interested in the production of tea. Shall I tell you about it?
A: Yes, that would be great.
B: Well, tea is grown in India and China..
A: Really?
B: Yes..and in the first stage, tea seeds are sown by the farmer, and then the sun shines, which causes the plants to grow..
A: Wow..
B: Yes, and then once the plants have grown, they are picked and put into boxes...

And so on. The students at the end will hopefully have a page of notes with the linking phrases ('in the first stage', 'and then') and the passives ('tea is grown'...'once the plants have grown'). They can then have a go at writing an answer to the process question.

I hope these ideas are useful, and I'd like to hear any feedback or hear your ideas. Please email me if you'd like to.

Lewis Richards