

Designing IELTS Writing Practice Material for Taiwanese EFL Learners

Matt Walpole

Introduction and Rationale

Education means business. At least, this appears to be the case when it comes to international students in British Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In recent years, numbers approaching half a million and rising have been studying in the UK alone each year, and the vast majority of these students are Asian (Universities UK, 2019). The knock-on effects for the world of ELT and assessment in this region are far reaching. IELTS, 'the world's most popular English language proficiency test for higher education', had over 3.5 million test takers in 2018 (British Council, 2019). Although UK HEIs set a range of IELTS results for unconditional entry depending on a particular course, a band 6.5 or 7 is a usual requirement. Average band scores in Taiwan, while on the increase, are still falling short of these HEI requirements, and students appear to have the greatest difficulty with the writing component of the test, with an average score of 5.5 (Ielts.org, 2018).

Having spent many years helping Taiwanese students with their test preparation, it has been clear that the 150-word written report (Task 1) of the academic writing component can be problematic. Dissemination and presentation of data across a number of question types proves challenging, as does appropriate selection and usage of vocabulary and grammar. Although a great number of IELTS preparation textbooks are available for both in-class and self-study use, a clear approach for Task 1 writing can often be lacking, and may have little reference to the public band (marking) descriptors to which teachers and students freely have access online. As a result of this, I have spent a number of years developing materials to scaffold textbooks for in-class use, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to provide additional autonomous practice material for my students. On observing anecdotal benefits of the autonomous learning material in particular, I decided to explore these findings to more clearly assess the benefits of creating learner-focused and autonomous practice materials. In order to achieve this, four overall research questions were devised to inform the study:

1. In what ways do the following factors affect the design of IELTS Task 1 writing practice (self-study) material for Taiwanese students?

- a genre-based writing approach

- first language (Mandarin) influence

- learner autonomy in a Taiwanese context

2. What can an error analysis of practice writing scripts reveal about the development of practice material for students in this context?
3. How far can teacher-designed IELTS Task 1 writing practice material improve the estimated band scores of students in this context?
4. What can be learned from student evaluation of the teacher-designed material?

A brief literature review will provide a theoretical framework for the practice material approach and design. As will be outlined in the Methodology section, a sample of students' writing will then serve as a baseline for the material input. Using an experimental method, it is hoped that a second writing sample may show a comparative improvement in estimated band score after using the self-study practice material and reinforce the benefits of teachers actively engaging in learner-focused material creation. Finally, feedback and evaluation obtained from the participants may reveal whether those materials have been perceived as helpful or not, and in what ways.

Literature Review

Genre-Based Writing

IELTS Task 1 writing practice is essentially a narrow genre of report writing requiring an expected format according to criteria laid out in the public band descriptors. Students must write a 150-word report usually based on a graph or chart. A common example which will be the focus of this research is that of a change over time graph. Accordingly, a genre approach will be considered in relation to the design of material. This dictates that clear models and examples are central, allowing students to notice salient features, which may include analysis of social context, purpose and reader, before considering structural and lexicogrammatical features that fit the purpose of writing (Badger & White, 2000). Swales (1990, p. 58) suggests that 'if all high probability expectations are realised, the exemplar will be viewed as prototypical by the parent

discourse community', which in the context of this research would be the examiner. According to Tribble, a large number of models is ideal, in order to be as representative of the genre as possible, which can then be 'adopted and adapted as necessary' (1996, p. 58), and may help to ensure adherence to the genre rules. The benefit of reading models is supported by evidence suggesting that extensive reading makes better writers, as input to bolster acquisition of writing skills is gained through a directional hypothesis (Eisterhold, 1990). This assumes that features noticed in reading are likely to be applied in writing. Also of interest is research conducted by Stotsky (1983) which showed that reading rather than overt grammar or writing practice was more effective in developing writing.

It should not be forgotten that the role of the criteria in the public band descriptors is crucial in shaping the requirements of this genre and is consequently of paramount importance for candidates to achieve success. There is therefore a need for clear instructional material with reference to public band descriptors as well as salient structural and lexico-grammatical features. Good English skills in themselves are not enough if knowledge of the examiners' expectations as dictated by the genre and the test rubric is lacking.

First Language (Mandarin) Influence

In general terms, cultural influences often result in different expectations when organising writing, and Hedge argues that a contrastive analysis is therefore of importance (2000). Fundamental differences between Western and Chinese rhetorical patterns have been explored. A study by Gonzalez, Chen & Sanchez (2001) highlights a contrast between Western linear writing conventions versus those of a circular Chinese nature, while Buendia Arias (2015) and Lam (2014) revealed that students with Mandarin as their first language expressed difficulties in understanding 'Western' logic, which therefore made writing in English challenging. Furthermore, attention to organisational features may be negatively influenced by the directional hypothesis. According to research conducted on Chinese students' reading skills by Chau, Chen, Lughmani & Wu (2012), it was found that micro elements were overly focused on to the detriment of macro understanding.

Recognition of lexico-grammatical differences may be one of many possible factors (including teaching methods) accounting for the greater emphasis placed on this area by these students. Mandarin is an uninflected language, meaning that learners can often struggle to consistently notice and use correct English forms, while the use of double transitions within the same sentence can lead to cohesive inaccuracies (Swan & Smith, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 2001). Research seems to indicate a paradoxical relationship between the heavy focus given to lexico-grammatical features, and high frequencies of inaccurate use in grammar and

vocabulary which can occur (Buendia Arias, 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2001). Chen (2006) revealed that during an investigation into errors in 100 essays written by Chinese university students, errors in the use of verbs were highest, with lexicon not far behind. It is clear from the above that any writing material designed in this context must emphasise structural features and address the anticipated lexico-grammatical errors. In addition, it must be made explicit to students why they need to focus on these areas, and this can be achieved by drawing overt attention to the relevant areas of the IELTS public band descriptors in the material.

Learner Autonomy in a Taiwanese Context

Learner autonomy, generally accepted as involving the capacity to take responsibility for one's own learning, is essentially viewed as a positive trait for language learning (Benson, 2007). In 'Western' education, independence from the teacher may be fostered gradually throughout the education process. However, for learners in a different cultural and educational context background, the situation may be rather different, and Ho & Crookall (1995, p. 235) state that 'a learner's cultural background may impede promotion of autonomy'. Taiwanese students are educated within a traditional Confucian pedagogical setting (Talley, 2014). Students in this broader Chinese cultural and educational context are sometimes branded as less autonomous, and the reason for this may be complex and rooted in cultural tradition (Buendia Arias, 2015). As a collectivist culture, students may be less willing to take initiative, finding it hard to deal with the ambiguity that can occur in the absence of a teacher. They may feel that the teacher alone is responsible for any learning and progress that takes place (Buendia Arias, 2015; Ho & Crookall, 1995). Indeed, one student in Buendia Arias' study on Chinese cultural learner autonomy reported that 'without the teachers I cannot learn the knowledge' (2015, p. 45). With this in mind, careful scaffolding and grading in the language of instruction in the practice material will be important for two reasons: firstly, to lower the affective filter by providing a clear 'voice' of support; and secondly, to enable learners to complete tasks and avoid cognitive overload before even attempting them. A useful analogy of this language could be classified as 'i minus 1' (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 15). Although based on the above it may appear that engaging students in autonomous learning could be challenging, in the context of this study, one essential factor which may serve to mitigate the potential issues raised above is the role of motivation.

Autonomous learning may be triggered by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In a study on motivation and Chinese EFL learners, Chen, Warden & Chang claim extrinsic or instrumental factors alone are paramount (2005). Learning the target language is seen as an investment for the future, and in addition to high

family and teacher expectations as well as the social prestige brought about by success in exams, Chen et al. coin the term ‘The Chinese Imperative’ for this powerful motivating force (2005, p. 623). Motivation for success in the IELTS test, and a willingness to engage in self-directed learning and clear goal-setting may then be high.

Methodology and Results

This study focused on an initial target population of 20 Taiwanese students at an approximate band 5 to 6 level. They were preparing for their IELTS test in a small language school in Taipei, and aiming to achieve a band 7. As this research is concerned with the development, trialling, and evaluation of self-study writing practice material, the data was collected over a series of steps. Participants were asked to complete an initial writing task which provided a baseline for their perceived IELTS level in accordance with the public band descriptors. An error analysis informed the design of the self-study practice material. To demonstrate whether the material may improve estimated band scores, an experimental group used the self-study pack in addition to their normal studies, and a control group studied as normal but did not use the additional self-study material. All participants then repeated the writing task and their performances were cross-referenced against their first attempts. In order to glean participant responses to the material, the experimental group then completed an evaluation questionnaire. I have outlined the data collection methods, stages and timings in *Table 1* below. A description of each stage will be provided and is followed by an analysis of results.

Stage 1: First Writing Task

An original Task 1 writing question was created based on a change over time graph. This was designed to be accessible and typical of the genre, and able to place adequate cognitive demands on the participants in terms of planning, attention to key features, and eliciting a range of lexico-grammatical features. In total, 18 of 20 initial writing tasks were received back from the participants. Bearing in mind that the target range of the material was to be for students of a current IELTS band 5-6 aiming to achieve a band 7, four of the responses were deemed unsuitable for this study due to

the strength of the writing being estimated to be at or above an IELTS band 7. This left 14 participants who were to form the basis for the study. Each script was marked according to the rubric in the public version of the band descriptors. This included Task Achievement (TA), Cohesion and Coherence (CC), Lexical Resource (LR), and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA). Overall, total band scores ranged from 4.5 to 6.5, with an average band score of 5.9.

Attempt 1 Band Scores

| Participant | TA | CC | LR | GRA | Total |
|-------------|----|----|----|-----|----------------|
| A | 2 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 4.5 |
| B | 4 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5 |
| C | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| D | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| E | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 6 |
| F | 7 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 6 |
| G | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| H | 7 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 6.5 |
| I | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6.5 |
| J | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6.5 |
| K | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| L | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 |
| M | 6 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6.5 |
| N | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 5.5 |
| | | | | | Average 5.9 |

Table 2: First Writing Task Band Scores.

Error Analysis

The scripts were analysed for errors of relevance to the public IELTS criteria, which would inform the subsequent design of self-study practice material. The results were as shown in *Table 3*, overleaf.

Area 1

From the literature review it was expected that Taiwanese students may experience difficulty in organisational features, due to either a focus on English

| Stage | Description | Experimental Group | Control Group | Time Allowance |
|-------|------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1 | First writing task | ✓ | ✓ | 2 weeks |
| 2 | Self-study practice material | ✓ | ✗ | 2 weeks |
| 3 | Second writing task | ✓ | ✓ | 2 weeks |
| 4 | Evaluation questionnaire | ✓ | ✗ | 2 weeks |

Table 1: Data Collection Stages.

at a sentence level, or because of different writing conventions. These difficulties occurred in just over one-third of scripts, and therefore overall guidance and practice in organisation of key features would be of use in material. Issues here reduced band scores for both Task Achievement and Cohesion & Coherence and suggested the need for specific genre-based cognitive instruction in terms of structural expectations.

Area 2

Again related to organisation, incorrect use of linking devices reduced the ability to follow the message with ease. Sentences were often not fluently linked to each other, or incorrect functions were applied to linking words. This resulted in band score reductions for Cohesion & Coherence. A high frequency of errors was recorded here, spread across all scripts.

Area 3

Accurate reference to data affects scores for both Task Achievement (the reported data must accurately reflect the content of the graph) and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (prepositions are often used incorrectly as can be seen in the examples given in *Table 3*). This was a common error across all scripts.

Area 4

It was expected that accuracy of verb use and lexical forms would also be problematic. While lexical range was generally a strong area, accuracy in usage pertaining to both word-form and / or verb use were evident, resulting in by far the highest frequency of error across all scripts, and which could either reduce band scores for Lexical Resource or Grammatical Range and Accuracy.

Stage 2: Material Design

Genre-specific requirements which are embedded in the IELTS public band descriptor rubric are important for students to be made aware of. In addition to raising awareness of the requirements, they can also form four key areas for students to work through, thus giving the instructional material itself logical structure and progression. As Hedge argues, in the writing process

there must be a focus on ideas and organising them, before accuracy in language is turned to (2000). This would suggest that Task Achievement and Cohesion & Coherence ought to be covered before Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. Errors uncovered in the initial writing task analysed above indicated a need to include input and tasks for use of linking words, using prepositions when referring to data, and accuracy tasks for key lexis and grammar structures.

As well as considerations in terms of organisation and content, the fact that the practice material will be used independently of a teacher was also an issue influencing design. Bearing in mind potential cultural reliance on the teacher, the language of instruction should allow the voice of a teacher to come through the material. Use of Plain English and 'i minus 1' would also be important in enabling students to understand band descriptors and tasks. Based on these considerations, a comprehensive self-study workbook and accompanying answer book was designed for change over time graphs, using model questions and answers, and including scaffolded input and output exercises moving through Task Achievement and Cohesion and Coherence, to Lexis and Grammar. Example pages from the workbook can be found in the Appendix.

Stage 3: Second Writing Task

The participants were divided into an experimental group (n=7) who used the self-study workbook, and a control group (n=7) who continued studying as normal. After two weeks, both groups completed the writing task for a second time. 5 of 7 control group participants, and 6 of 7 experimental group participants submitted an answer. All scripts were marked in accordance with the public band descriptors. The band scores for second attempt scripts have been presented alongside the first attempt scores, in *Table 4*, opposite.

Results of the experimental group yielded slightly more positive results than the control group, with four participants demonstrating an approximate gain in overall band score. Participant A made a dramatic gain in Task Achievement, showing an increase from 2 to 6.

| Area | Frequency | Detail/Example |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Illogical answer structure | 5 of 14 scripts | Circular structuring e.g. returning to a subject already covered; illogical division of data. |
| 2. Incorrect use of linking devices | 26 counts across all scripts | Incorrect use of function leading to confusion e.g. us of 'therefore' in a non-result related cause. |
| 3. Incorrect reference to data | 26 counts across all scripts | Use of prepositions e.g. 'falling to 95 to 5'; 'fell about 20 tons' (rather than to); 'remained in 40 to 50'. |
| 4. Lexico-grammatical inaccuracy | 56 counts across all scripts | 'was increased steadily'; 'rose remarkable'; 'was slightly increase'; 'was suddenly growth'; 'a dramatically drop'. |

Table 3: First Writing Task Error Analysis

What is also interesting to note is that all participants who made gains in the experimental group did so in Task Achievement. Three participants made one-band gains in Cohesion and Coherence, while two made one-band gains in Lexical Resource.

Error Analysis

Removing participants who dropped out from the initial task error count, the error types as summarised in the initial writing task can be compared against corresponding error counts for both control and experimental groups. The main finding of note here is that the experimental group showed a decrease in all

error areas from attempt 1 to attempt 2, while this was not the case for the control group, see *Table 5*, below.

As previously noted, the experimental group showed some gains in band score compared to the control group. This could then be attributed to the fact that frequency of errors in all recorded areas showed a slight drop across in the experimental group.

Stage 4: Participant Evaluation of Material

A brief follow-up questionnaire was devised to capture quantitative and qualitative responses to the material from the six participants in the experimental group. Questions were designed to glean evaluation of the

| Control Group | | Attempt 1 Band Scores | | | | | Attempt 2 Band Scores | | | | |
|---------------|----|-----------------------|----|-----|----------------|----|-----------------------|----|-----|-------|----------------|
| Participant | TA | CC | LR | GRA | Total | TA | CC | LR | GRA | Total | |
| B | 4 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5 | |
| C | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 5 | |
| I | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6.5 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 6.5 | |
| K | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | |
| N | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5.5 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6.6 | |
| | | | | | Average 5.8 | | | | | | Average 5.8 |

| Experimental Group | | Attempt 1 Band Scores | | | | | Attempt 2 Band Scores | | | | |
|--------------------|----|-----------------------|----|-----|----------------|----|-----------------------|----|-----|-------|----------------|
| Participant | TA | CC | LR | GRA | Total | TA | CC | LR | GRA | Total | |
| A | 2 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 4.5 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 5 | 5.5 | |
| D | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6.5 | |
| F | 7 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 6 | |
| J | 7 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6.5 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 6.5 | |
| L | 6 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 8 | 7 | 7 | |
| M | 6 | 6 | 7 | 7 | 6.5 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | 7 | |
| | | | | | Average 5.9 | | | | | | Average 6.4 |

Table 4: First and Second Writing Task Band Scores.

| Area | Control Group Attempt 1 | Control Group Attempt 2 | Experimental Group Attempt 1 | Experimental Group Attempt 2 |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Illogical answer structure | 2 of 5 scripts | 2 of 5 scripts | 3 of 6 scripts | 2 of 6 scripts |
| 2. Incorrect use of linking devices | 13 counts across all scripts | 12 counts across all scripts | 10 counts across all scripts | 7 counts across all scripts |
| 3. Incorrect reference to data (prepositions) | 9 counts across all scripts | 12 counts across all scripts | 10 counts across all scripts | 7 counts across all scripts |
| 4. Lexico-grammatical inaccuracy | 19 counts across all scripts | 23 counts across all scripts | 23 counts across all scripts | 21 counts across all scripts |

Table 5: Second Writing Task Error Analysis

material in areas such as engagement, instructions, range of tasks, understanding, and perceived improvement. Questions 1-4 solely used rating scales, while 5-6 also allowed open ended responses. The questions and results are shown in *Table 6*, below.

Responses for each question were positive. Significantly, participants indicated a perceived increase in understanding of public band descriptors. The language and content of the public band descriptors is complex, and while this may be the reason that the clear majority of respondents selected option 3 rather than 4, the positive response here is encouraging in terms of learner awareness and development of the genre requirements.

Questions 5 and 6 allowed open-ended comments. Each statement is attributed to the participant, thereby allowing comments of interest to be cross-referenced against band score performances. For question 5, all respondents indicated that they found the material helpful. Comments were as follows:

- A: 'The material helped me to write task 1 step by step.'
- D: 'Clear organisation. Lots of useful phrases.'
- F: 'Learn some useful words to use and let me know more ways to describe a word.'
- J: 'The introduction and overview guides are clear and useful.'
- L: 'There are some useful techniques to help me structure my paragraphs.'
- M: 'I learned what I should focus on the charts and how organise my ideas, on top of that, some useful vocabulary.'

Features related to desirable criteria for Task Achievement and Cohesion & Coherence are mentioned specifically by participants A, D, J, L, and M, who all demonstrated increases in Task Achievement scores. Participants L and M, who also mention structure and organisation showed one-band gains in Coherence & Cohesion. Vocabulary is also mentioned by respondents

D, F and M, though only D showed an increase in band score here. Nevertheless, it would appear that the range of lexis introduced was appreciated by the students, who found this a useful area of the material.

For question 6, the rating scale indicates a fairly even response although Cohesion & Coherence (ability to organise) received most responses, echoing sentiments expressed above. Comments were as follows:

- A: 'All of them helped me to know well writing skills and remind me what request of exam.'
- D: 'These two parts [TA / CC] is the most important part and this book include a lot of good example. It is good for me to realise how to write in a correct way. It also includes a lot of grammar.'
- F: [no comment]
- J: 'I learned some vocabularies to describe charts, but still need more practice to use them correctly.'
- L: 'It help me increase variety of vocabulary in adjectives and verbs in writing.'
- M: 'Some clear examples in all of these. Especially I learned what structure is most appealing to the examiner.'

The comments in this instance reflect the general spread of criteria selected, which is encouraging in terms of the balance of the material, and which may therefore allow each student to find benefit in an area of their choosing. That the students are not just focusing exclusively on lexico-grammatical features is also encouraging given that cultural influence suggested this may be the case. Participant M shows some genre awareness in the fact that the reader's (examiner's) expectations were taken into consideration.

Discussion

Based on the four overall research questions which formed the basis for this study, there are several

| Question | Answer Responses (1 = no, 4 = yes) | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---------|--------|--------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 1. Did you enjoy using the materials? | - | - | 3 | 3 |
| 2. Were the instructions easy to understand? | - | - | 3 | 3 |
| 3. Was there a suitable range of tasks? | - | - | 3 | 3 |
| 4. Do you feel you understood the public band descriptors more after using the material? | - | - | 5 | 1 |
| 5. Do you feel the material helped you to improve overall? (Comments available) | - | - | 2 | 4 |
| 6. Which area(s), if any, do you feel the material helped you to improve more? Please circle as many as you wish. (Comments available) | TA 3 | CC 4 | V 3 | G £ |

Table 6: Material Evaluation Questionnaire and Responses.

factors which can be discussed in relation to each of these in turn. Firstly, the literature review revealed a number of factors worth considering when designing practice material in this context. Providing input specifically related to reader (examiner) expectations would be essential for students to have a better chance of success in the test, and as such, clear reference to public band descriptors would be needed. In addition, raising cognitive awareness of the writing process, and using explicit models in order to exploit a directional hypothesis would be necessary. As students in this context may neglect macro (organisational) elements in favour of micro (lexico-grammatical) features, an approach moving overtly through both of these in relation to the band descriptors would be helpful. It was also expected that due to the so-called 'Chinese Imperative' (Chen et al. 2005, p. 623), motivation would be high, which may mitigate potential concerns over learner autonomy.

In response to the second research question, the error analysis revealed areas which were of particular relevance to the rubric in the public band descriptors. Illogical or unclear organisation occurred, indicating that this warranted attention through the use of model answers and drawing explicit attention to key features of a graph and cognitive planning processes. This could potentially influence ratings for Task Achievement and/or Cohesion & Coherence. The incorrect use of linking devices, which could potentially affect a number of areas such as Cohesion & Coherence, Lexical Resource, or Grammatical Range and Accuracy, was an area of common difficulty and one which would therefore justify explicit input and activities in the self-study practice material. Reference to data, mainly through incorrect use of prepositions, could affect scores for Task Achievement or Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and a number of activities were included in the material addressing this. While range of lexis was identified as a strength in the scripts overall, accuracy of key lexico-grammatical features was clearly an area which required remedial tasks. Broadly speaking, the errors uncovered here echoed those anticipated by the literature review, and therefore can more generally reinforce the benefits of researching and designing material with learners' first language and culture clearly in mind.

In terms of band score improvements, as a result of using the designed practice material, a second error analysis for the experimental group showed a reduction in all areas in comparison to the first scripts, suggesting that targeted remedial input in the material may have had a positive effect, and accounted for the slight band score improvements seen in the experimental group over the control group. Although there are of course a number of additional variables which may influence this, and there are clear limitations in the scope of this study in terms of question types and participant numbers, there nevertheless seems to be some evidence in this case

that using the material was of benefit to band scores for students in the context of this study, particularly for Task Achievement and Cohesion & Coherence. A focus on the genre-specific requirements of the task which are essentially embedded in the public band descriptors may then be a worthwhile consideration for the design of test preparation practice material.

Finally, regarding the evaluation of the material, a positive response was received from all six participants. Improvements seen in the macro areas of Task Achievement and Coherence and Cohesion were reflected in the comments made by respondents, and this seems to provide further support that the material may be of both actual and perceived benefit here. The positive responses are also encouraging when considered alongside potential concerns that autonomous learning may be challenging for students in this context. It would appear that at least in this case, 'The Chinese Imperative' may have overcome theoretical issues relating to self-study, while the detail in the material instructions, essentially acting as the teacher, may actually mitigate concerns that learning can only happen in the presence of a teacher.

Conclusion

Material design is often a necessary, challenging, and rewarding aspect of an EFL teacher's development. Through a process of reflecting on the needs of students, identifying issues, and consequently creating and targeting material for a specific group of learners, higher standards of both teaching and learning can be gained. This research has sought to demonstrate that careful consideration of first language cultural and linguistic influences can provide a deeper level of understanding of students and their potential needs. In turn, reacting to those needs, in this case through the design and application of learner-focused writing material in a genre-specific context, has been a beneficial experience for both teacher and students. In a high stakes and often short-term context such as an IELTS preparation course, this level of student support in either a classroom or autonomous setting may help to make both actual and perceived gains, however small. As a final note, in an era in which teaching and learning contexts are undergoing significant changes, it is also suggested that clear and careful scaffolding of instructional material can positively enable autonomous learning, and challenge the assumption that 'without the teachers I cannot learn the knowledge'.

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Matt Walpole is currently a Teaching Fellow (ELT) at the University of Sussex, U.K. He is involved in a range of academic and business English modules for foundation, undergraduate, and postgraduate students. Before joining Sussex, Matt worked for the British Council in Taiwan and Singapore. Besides materials development, his current research interests include teaching and learning transitions from IELTS to EAP.

m.walpole@sussex.ac.uk

Appendices

Appendices: Sample Workbook Pages

IELTS Task 1 Writing Workbook

First of all, let's take a look at an example question:

The chart below shows the percentage of the population who smoke everyday in three countries:

| Year | South Korea | Japan | Taiwan |
|------|-------------|-------|--------|
| 1960 | 60 | 50 | 40 |
| 1970 | 55 | 48 | 38 |
| 1980 | 45 | 45 | 35 |
| 1990 | 40 | 42 | 30 |
| 2000 | 35 | 40 | 20 |

An example of a good answer is on the next page.

IELTS Task 1 Writing Workbook

Look at the model answer for the smoking question as you answer the questions below. Then, check pages 3-4 in the answer pack.

- How many paragraphs are there? Why? ?
- What is the purpose of the first sentence? Does it use the same language as the question?
- What is the purpose of the second sentence? Does it include any data?
- What language is used to introduce the second sentence? Can you think of any other examples?

TA, CC

IELTS Task 1 Writing Workbook

The given chart indicates the percentage of daily smokers in three Asian countries: South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Generally speaking, all three of the nations showed a decline in smokers, though by different degrees.

South Korea demonstrated the most dramatic change in comparison to other countries. The smoker percentage was clearly the highest among all countries from 1960-1970, at a hefty 60%. This was followed by a rapid decline to somewhere in the region of 45% by 1980. The decrease then eased off, falling to approximately 35% in 2000.

Japan showed the steadiest trend in the chart. Although the percentage drop in people who smoked was minimal, from just under 50 in 1960 to slightly below 40 by 2000, it finished off as the highest percentage in this chart.

Finally, the Taiwanese population represented the smallest proportion of smokers over the whole time period, showing a gradual reduction from 40 % in 1960, followed by a more rapid decrease to 20% in 2000.

IELTS Task 1 Writing Workbook

- What is the main topic in each paragraph? ?
- Why do you think the answer is structured in this way?
- Is data included in the paragraphs two, three and four? (Main body paragraphs)
- What linking words can you find?

TA, CC

IELTS Task 1 Writing Workbook

Our first focus will be on Task Achievement (TA), and Coherence & Cohesion (CC). If you can't remember what these are, check the band descriptors again.

To get a band 7, in our answer we want to make sure that we:

TA

CC

- Write 150 words
- Include a clear overview
- Include all the key features
- Remember to use data (numbers)
- Structure our writing logically
- Use a range of linking words correctly

Remember: Your objective is to write a clear report so that the reader could draw the graph (fairly well) without looking at it!

TA, CC

IELTS Task 1 Writing Workbook

The Introduction:

The introduction is the first sentence of the first paragraph. It should tell the reader what the chart is about. It should NOT use the same language as the question. You MUST paraphrase!

Let's look again at the example. Here was the question wording:

'The chart below shows the percentage of the population who smoke everyday in three countries.'

and here was the model answer:

'The given chart indicates the percentage of daily smokers in three Asian countries: South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.'

What differences can you see? ?

After you have answered, check page 5 of your answer pack.

TA, CC

FOR MATSDA MEMBERSHIP PLEASE CONTACT

Siv Sears, MATSDA Membership Secretary, Norwich Institute for Language Education,
82 Upper St Giles Street, Norwich NR2 1LT, UK, e-mail: matsdamembershipsec@nile-elt.com