

## IELTS academic writing and speaking modules - a question of skills transfer

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#### Introduction

For our students to achieve a good score in the Writing and Speaking Modules of the IELTS exam, they need to know exactly what is expected of them. Yet, all too often, in the minds of our students, to paraphrase LP Hartley, IELTS is a foreign country, they do things differently there. This is a source of frustration for both students and teachers and can cause problems in everything we do as teachers. The 'great secret' is to make what is expected of the students in the both modules, familiar and clear.

#### Making the exam clear and familiar

By taking a top-down approach, we can help ourselves and our students navigate the exam tasks and show them the links between the various tasks in the two modules under consideration here. For example, if students are being taught to write about data, such as a graph, bar chart, map, process or an explanation of how something works, we can also make links between Writing Task 2 and Speaking Part 3. We can isolate what the main functions and grammar features that students are expected to use in Writing Task 1.

These features can be turned into a Checklist (See Figure 1) for the students to check their answers. It is advisable keep the error check separate from checking for these features and it is also advisable to encourage students to adopt this as a regular habit with every Task 1 answer.

Alternatively, students can do a peer review of a partner's answer. In Writing Task 1, having a simple Checklist such as in Figure 1 is a starting point to giving students an appreciation of what is involved in writing about data. The Checklist, just like the general overview of the IELTS exam, is better introduced incrementally with one of two features at a time in low-level classes. Features such as comparison and contrast and tenses could be introduced first and the Checklist built up gradually. The list is not exhaustive and can be added to, but care needs to be taken not to overload students. Different electronic lists could be made to focus on different features. Or a master list can be made, from which a certain number of items are chosen in the class. With higher-level students, the list can be given in full and discussed before and after students do a writing task.

Figure 1: Task 1 Checklist

Task 1 Language features	Comments
1. General vs. specific	
2. Introductions / trends / overviews	
3. Summarising	
4. Comparison and contrast	
5. Complex sentences: Conjunctions	
6. Noun phrases / nominalisation	
7. Paraphrasing / synonyms	
8. Singular vs. plural	
9. Tenses: Simple Present / Past / Present Perfect / Simple Future / Future Perfect	
10. Active vs. Passive	
11. Verbs of rise / fall	

### Making overt links

Even at a low level, bands 3-4.5, it helps in the long run to start making connections across the different skills to help students build an overview of the exam and make it less ambiguous. When comparison and contrast language is taught in Task 1, for example, we can elicit from the students in what other parts of the IELTS exam this language is useful; in effect, in all four skills. We don't need to restrict ourselves to writing and speaking. It is important to know comparison and contrast language when reading and analysing reading questions such as True False Not Given statements where a feature of teaching can be analysing the language features of the sentences (e.g. comparison and contrast, cause and effect and so on) as well as looking at paraphrase. Such sentences then become less of a mystery. A link can be made with Writing Task 2 where comparison can be used in presenting and the evaluation of simple ideas (e.g. Such a measure is much more useful than...). The link can then be made with all parts of the Speaking Module.

### From Writing to Speaking Part 3

When students do a role-play ask in pairs or groups, we often go round the class and monitor the students to see how frequently students use language features such as comparison and contrast language that we have just taught. Just like 'if' clauses and certain complex sentences, sentences with comparison and contrast can be surprisingly absent. This can happen despite a lot of time spent on practising as part of Writing Task 1. What can be done here to help the students? A simple technique is to encourage students to make short revision cards. This can be turned into a review of comparison and contrast language and at the same time a class revision activity. Students can be asked to make a list of the different ways they know to compare and contrast items/ ideas as a part of a class activity on speaking. They can then compare this list with a partner and then with other students. Initially, they can be asked to do it without reference to any books to see how much they can come up with.

Once students start speaking with each other, the chances are they will trigger different ways of comparing and contrasting, bringing in more complex items such as: *...as...as...* and *...not as... as...* and adverbial phrases such as *By contrast/ In stark contrast to* this. The information can be collated on the board, dividing it into different categories. The next stage is to make a class master list electronically or on paper for each student to access and copy and to call up in later classes. To make the process even more student-centred, a student or students can be asked to create the class list for the whole class. The contents of the list can grow as the students' exposure to comparison and contrast language grows. The temptation is to give the students a list without them engaging with it. By having them create it themselves and discuss it, we are making them much more conscious of the language that they know, but don't use. The next task is to encourage students to use what they know.

### Knowing and using

Now the students have the list, it can be added to periodically. The impact of the initial collation stage needs to be borne in mind. To highlight the fact that students know the words, but don't use them, before a speaking or writing exercise, students can be asked to repeat the initial stage of the process where they listed what they know. A quick revision exercise can be done verbally or on the board. The length of this stage obviously depends on the level and knowledge of the students, but quick fire questions focusing on a small number of items is probably best at this stage of the process.

Now that we know students have the language 'at their finger tips', we need to focus on encouraging them to use it. If we do a role-play helping students prepare for the Speaking Part 3, how do we ensure they use the target language? We can, for example, ask student to do the role-play in groups of three: candidate, examiner and language ('comparison and contrast') monitor. During the role-play while the student is answering the examiner's questions, the job of the monitor is 'prompt' the candidate at certain moments to use comparison and contrast language, e.g. by comparison, by contrast ...greater than. The candidate then has to use the language given by the monitor immediately in the sentence he or she is saying or as soon as possible.

The students then change roles so that each of them has a chance to role-play the part of the monitor. This can give students insight as to how little they use certain language features and illustrate the difference between knowing and using the language. The monitoring role also gives students insight as to how the problem of activating the language is not restricted to themselves and shows them that it requires a conscious effort to bring the language to life and make it real: using as well as knowing. It can also help build confidence among the students and remove from the classroom that common refrain: we have done this before? Oh, have you? Show me...

### Skills transfer

After the task has been completed, the students can be reminded of the link between comparison and contrast in Speaking Part 3 and Writing Tasks 1 and 2. Just as when students do transformational grammar exercises and sometimes find it difficult to transform in both directions with equal ease, the same can perhaps occur with making the connections between skills. We need also to remember that knowing and being able to use any language or language feature in one skill does not equate to knowing and being able to use it in another. The 'knowing' may be present in both skills, but lacking in one. Immediately after students have done the role-play described above, they can be asked to compose an IELTS Task 2 essay question based on what they talked about, using the 'examiner's questions' they asked each other. Even if the class time is limited, it is possible to start the writing in the class collaboratively where the students write down the answer as it is composed by the whole class.

Obviously, this can be done on the class board or on the interactive whiteboard. But having students write down the essay as it is composed verbally discussing phrase-by-phrase or sentence-by-sentence can help build concentration skills.

This technique can be taken a step further by not allowing students to write for the first four or five sentences or the first ten minutes as the text is composed verbally by the class. There will always be a desire for students to write, but it is a useful exercise to not to let do so. The students can be reassured that they will be able to ask the teacher questions later. When the students are at the peak of their involvement in the task, they can then be allowed to write down what they have composed together. At the next stage, they can be asked to write the answer to the essay question by themselves or in pairs or groups and allowed to ask any class member for information or use a dictionary. If there is no class time to complete the writing task in class, it can at least be started in class and students then asked to finish it for homework. In this way we are catching some of the enthusiasm built up for writing though the earlier speaking stage.

In another class, the process of transferring the skills can be reversed with the writing task coming first and the speaking second.

### Integrating discussion and writing in one task

The collaborative writing task described above can be developed further with students giving alternatives as they write, for example: ...have a huge/ enormous impact on... As the text is developed, alternative sentence beginnings can be given: This idea/ Such a concept... so that the students will have a text that has multiple choice alternatives all of which are correct. A student can be asked to read back what has been written, making choices as he or she reads as to which alternative is preferred.

In this task, the students can be encouraged to supply all the alternatives with the teacher nudging them in the right direction. As students supply synonyms or paraphrases, they can be shown how the grammar may change if a synonym for a noun is used (impact on vs. consequence for). Discussing in this way can be useful for building student confidence as the students are sorting out often conflicting ways of writing down ideas. The process is a way of showing them what they know in a safe environment with the teacher as a guide. This task can be followed up with a speaking task on a related subject and then the writing task completed for homework.

Making discussion integral to the writing process can help reinforce the writing process and builds confidence, especially when you only use what the students know.

### Organization - speaking and writing

The transfer of the concept of organisation from writing to speaking is another area that can have an impact on student's competence and overall achievement. When students do a candidate/ examiner role-play, what can often happen is that students over-generalise.

The same thing happens when they provide an answer for a Writing Task 2 essay. One strategy is to give students a paragraph of about 50 words on a familiar topic, for example, recycling with some functions: effects, purposes, or linking devices or specific examples, removed. Student can be asked to grade the level of the text and then asked to write it out and improve the score band by adding words or phrases. A list of phrases can be given for lower level students while more advanced student can add their own words and phrases. This exercise can be useful as a means of revising a range of language or one particular feature of language. The exercise can be immediately followed up with a speaking role-play, focusing on the same language and theme an organization.

Further, before doing a speaking part 3 role-play, we can ask students to focus on one or more examiner questions (e.g. What are the advantages of recycling...?) eliciting a few ideas. Students can be asked to give you some of the language features: reasons/ because...; examples/ for example cause and effect; (can) lead(s) to; comparison/ ...is more efficient than... The students can then be asked to think about the structure of the answer, providing a basic framer: *there are many benefits, but perhaps the main one is..., because... for example if ... and ....It's also beneficial/ It also benefits the.../ another benefit is, because....* This frame can then be used by students for writing a paragraph on recycling. We can take the 'organisation transfer' a step further by keeping the organisation and changing the theme, e.g. from recycling to crime.

### Organisation and beginning answers

In both speaking and writing, beginning an answer for students is often difficult. In speaking, it can involve ellipsis and substitution (Examiner: Do you think recycling is a useful way to protect the environment? Candidate: Yes/ Yes I do/ Yes I think so/ I'd say yes definitely, because...). In writing Task 2, students need to be able to demonstrate organization which is connected with fluency and coherence. The same basic organizational skills hold in writing as in speaking. The speaking frame given in the previous section can be used in writing a Task 2 essay. The opening statement works like a topic sentence at the beginning of a body paragraph.

When you give students an IELTS Writing Task 2, you can elicit a frame with the actual topic introduction and the topic sentences for a five body paragraph (introduction-general sentence and statement they are going to write about (approximately 30 words), three body paragraphs, each beginning with a topic sentence (approximately 65/70 words each) and a conclusion (approximately 30 words). (See Figure 2) Students can practise writing frames and writing different types of topic sentences so that they can write them automatically. One aspect of competence in language is responding to stimuli in a predictable and expected way, but it needs to be natural, which can only come with practise. The primary aim is that the students use the structures initially as a straight-jacket ultimately to give them freedom.

### Ideas transfer

We transfer vocabulary, grammar, and structure between skills. Why not ideas? Teachers of IELTS commonly come up against the problem of young students not having ideas for Part 3 of the Speaking module or Writing Task 2.

The problem can often be as simple as an inability to transfer ideas from reading and listening to the other two skills and an inability to transfer ideas from speaking to writing, and vice versa. This can occur even though students have been working on one of the last two skills immediately beforehand. The answer is, perhaps, to have an 'ideas bank' that students can build and use across the two productive modules. Using education, for example, can be a solution to many problems as can 'being cooperative and building partnerships. We cannot expect students to be original at any level, but we can expect an attempt at synthesising information in an original way, so a class master ideas bank of say about ten ideas can be shown to students as part of a speaking or writing task. The bank can then act as a stimulus or trigger for other ideas and help take away the initial anxiety of having to come up with ideas out of thin air. As a way building confidence in writing or speaking tasks, the ideas bank can gradually be removed from the process.

Additions can be made to the 'ideas bank' with higher level students refining the bank by making brief notes. In this way, students can then be given ownership of the bank with responsibility for any revisions. At all times, however, the link between speaking and writing needs to be overtly reinforced.

### Not a lack of ideas

So, perhaps, the reality for many students is not a question of general competence, of language knowledge, or indeed a lack of ideas. It is partly a matter of a lack of transfer skills. Students need constant nudging to remind them to use skills, language and knowledge across all four skills, not just writing and speaking. As teachers, we ourselves possibly need constant nudging to remind us to make the connections and the transfer overt. A connected-up world of IELTS will then seem more familiar and clear.

### A frame for a five body paragraph

Figure 2

1. Introduction - general sentence and statement  
(approximately 30 words)
2. A topic sentence  
(approximately 65/70 words)
3. A topic sentence  
(approximately 65/70 words)
4. A topic sentence  
(approximately 65/70 words)
5. Conclusion  
(approximately 65/70 words)