The IELTS Writing Test - text issues and teaching strategies

Stephen Slater

INTRODUCTION

The IELTS test consists currently of four subtests covering Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. Assessors score candidates' performance at Writing and Speaking on a scale from 0-9, using criterion referencing as the basis of assessment.

The IELTS Writing subtest (Academic Module) involves two tasks. In one hour, candidates have to write two essays : the first essay (Task 1 - 150 words minimum) involves writing a short report of some statistical data presented as a graph, table or diagram ; the second essay (Task 2 - 250 words minimum) requires candidates to respond with their argued perspective on an opinion about a general social issue presented in the task prompt.

When candidates score 5 on the IELTS Writing subtest they often fall below the base line expectation of receiving universities in the UK, Australasia and Canada, which often use a score of 6 as their lowest entry level. From considerable experience of assessing candidates internationally it is reasonable to report that 5 is a common score for Writing.

A score of 5 in the Writing subtest basically means (at least within the context of the IELTS test) that such candidates are not yet able to write in a way that communicates their message clearly, are not yet able to organise a text sufficiently well in terms of logical structure, cohesion and coherence, or supply enough individuality and ideas. Candidates, furthermore, are not yet able to generate enough variety of sentence construction and lexis accurately and appropriately.

This paper will explore some of the issues surrounding written performance in IELTS, the practical purpose being to develop strategies that may improve the preparation of IELTS candidates and ultimately enhance test performance. The focus of the paper will be on Task 2 of the IELTS Writing Test since this is more heavily weighted for final assessment.

Clearly there are many factors surrounding the performance of individual candidates on language tests - psychological, and cultural, as well as linguistic. It must be assumed that the full mix of complexity is beyond the scope of most research and analysis and that any writers on such matters would be wise not to overstate the importance of their chosen focus. The text issues which will be discussed in the first section of this paper are : task prompt interpretation, planning what to write, previous instruction, nature of the target text, comparisons between native speaker texts and non-native speaker texts, and cultural influences. A second section will look at possible teaching strategies to deal with some of the issues raised.

TEXT ISSUES

Task Prompt Interpretation

How candidates make sense of a task prompt and the ideas and wording that make up the prompt are a critical pivot for the later written response. Ideally task prompts should not favour one candidate over another, but in reality the prompt, like the test, is a cultural construct and carries its own cultural freight. Let's take an example of a specimen Task 2 for IELTS. Consider the following prompt :

> ***WRITING TASK 2 (taken from IELTS Specimen Materials 1995)***
> *You should spend about 40 minutes on this task*
> *Present a written argument or case to an educated non-specialist audience on the following topic.*
> ***The first car appeared on British roads in 1888. By the year 2000***
> ***there may be as many as 29 million vehicles on British roads.***
> ***Should alternative forms of transport be encouraged and international laws introduced to control car ownership and use?***
> *You should write at least 250 words.*
> *You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience and support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.*

Figure 1

The cultural context for the prompt is clearly Britain, a country that will still be unfamiliar to many candidates even if their intention is eventually to study there. Even though the issue of too many cars on roads is probably accessible to candidates from many countries, the wording can cause confusion. In a research project comparing native speaker and non-native speaker responses to this prompt (Mickan and Slater, forthcoming) one non-native speaker from Hong Kong was confused by the expression 'British roads'. Her confusion centred on whether that expression referred only to roads in Britain or included roads built by the British in other countries during colonial rule.

The construction of a task prompt carries the conventions of the essay question in that particular culture. Among the participants in the same project, the native speakers found no difficulty in either interpreting the prompt or deciding what sort of answer to produce. The non-native speakers, on the other hand, stated a range of difficulties ranging from uncertainty about what the prompt was actually asking, to feelings of inadequacy due either to lack of factual knowledge about cars in Britain or to not having received any instruction in international law. For non-native candidates from non-European backgrounds it seemed important to have studied actual content relevant to the topic ; they seemed less comfortable at the prospect of being asked to generate ideas and opinion based on personal, general reading or discussion of such an issue.

This points to significant cultural differences in what might be called 'finding your own voice', even at this preliminary stage of prompt interpretation. The native speakers, all from Australia, felt empowered to give their opinion on the issue of cars, irrespective of whether or not they had studied such a topic formally or beforehand, because in their cultural context they are encouraged at school to develop and argue for their indi-

vidual viewpoint and to incorporate information and views from many sources. For the non-native speakers, on the other hand, the issue of having a response provoked by a task prompt, and having their own ideas and expressing them still seemed to represent an uncomfortable risk, suggesting a different cultural tradition.

In practical terms, the outcome of the uncertainty in dealing with the prompt was the eating away of test time. Non-native speakers took much longer to tease out their meaning and the purpose of the task, thus putting additional pressure on the time available for composition.

The implication for test item writers is clear - test items must be accessible to candidates from many cultures (Kroll, 1998) and so cultural bias which assumes shared cultural background knowledge should be avoided (move bracket Hamp-Lyons, 1996)

Planning what to write

Another contingent stage that candidates engage in is the process of planning what to write. This basically means that they carry their sense of understanding of the prompt forward to a consideration of the shape of their written response, their viewpoint, and the ideas and examples that might support that view in their written response.

In the project under consideration, the doubts expressed by non-native speakers when they grappled with the meanings of the prompt lingered as they began to think of what they were going to write. Some of them carried a notion of an organisational framework for their essay (for instance, to express ideas 'for' and ideas 'against' the view in the task prompt) but lacked flexibility if this paradigm was unworkable, as, for example, when they couldn't think of any reasons 'for' the view expressed in the prompt. The lack of specific knowledge about international law surfaced again as a barrier to forming their own viewpoint. Some confusion was also created by the preamble to the task prompt, with candidates feeling unclear about the difference between an 'argument' and a 'case', which raised the issue of whether or not they had a clear sense of the generic structure of the type of text they were being asked to produce.

Once again, the pressure of time contributed to the difficulties experienced by non-native speakers in clarifying such doubts, an issue that is common in testing but less pressing in most academic work which offers more generous preparation time. The native speakers expressed their intentions with more precision and were not worried about knowledge gaps. They were able to generate ideas and explore likely formulation of their responses.

Apart from the differences in language ability in English it is clear that the native speakers could construct a mental scenario for this test event. In other words, as they knew the IELTS to be a test of language not content they were perhaps imagining an assessor who would look at the level of their expression rather than their opinions per se. They had the confidence and the flexibility to separate those considerations and meet the demands placed upon them. They also seemed to know intuitively what sort of text was expected even though they knew little of what the IELTS was and were not likely to take it. Being asked to write an essay unprepared with a time limit was familiar, cultural territory.

The non-native speakers, however, seemed to be unable to clarify in their minds that they were being asked for their view as individuals within the context of a language test not of an academic subject and weren't expected to have learnt facts in advance. They seemed less familiar with this context and were struggling to establish an authoritative framework for it in order to legitimate their writing. This, despite knowing about IELTS, and being in the middle of preparation for an actual IELTS test. Perversely then, the native speakers were more comfortable than their non-native speaker counterparts with a specific language test context they knew less about.

Previous instruction

Linked to the previous two sections is the issue of the sorts of instruction in writing that candidates from various countries have received both in their native language and in English. The nature and style of this instruction will have contributed much to the candidates' notions of what texts are, the contrasting features of different types of text and how to produce them in written form. Taking the example of Japan, it is apparently the tradition in Japanese high schools to focus on grammar when teaching writing, thereby emphasising accuracy of writing at sentence level, and neglecting the notion of paragraph structure and paragraph writing (Kogo, 1999).

Takagi (2001) carried out a survey to compare the writing experiences of 25 Japanese students who had studied in both Japan and the US. Her conclusions were that Japanese students needed to have more instruction in order to understand the contrasting rhetorical patterns in written Japanese and English, and in order to understand better the audience for their written English. Finally she concluded that Japanese students need process writing instruction in order to gain the benefits of planning, writing, rewriting, revising and editing (8).

Writing about Chinese IELTS candidates, Wang Hong-xia (2001) says something very similar :
'In writing, cultural style is also a problem, in particular the reluctance to argue. Students tend to write a one -sided essay, without balance and not conforming to the rhetorical requirements of writing an essay in English'. (3)

These examples point to a need not only to review the nature of preparation courses offered specifically to IELTS candidates by taking the prior instruction of course members into account, but also to a need for preparation that is individually-tailored to the needs of students from particular languages and cultures.

Nature of the target text

It has already been noted that some candidates are unsure of the type of text they are being required to produce for Task 2 of the IELTS Writing test. The preamble in the prompt mentions 'case' and 'argument' (see Figure 1) apparently without concern that this already raises issues of whether or not such types of writing are sufficiently distinguishable to warrant those labels, or, even worse, that such labels can reasonably be applied to types of written text in this context, because their respective textual features can be clearly identified and described. Either way, candidates are not likely to feel more confident for seeing those terms used in the same sentence.

In a study of authenticity of task type in university assignments, Moore and Morton (1999) suggest that the

IELTS Task 2 most resembles the format of the university essay (85). They claim, however, that the 'written argument' term used in the IELTS task preamble does not correspond precisely to any of the types of genre specified in the university corpus they analysed.

Analysts of genres consider 'argument' to be a subcategory of a broader class of text genre called 'exposition' (Martin 1985). Gerot and Wignell (1994) distinguish between 'analytical exposition' which has the social function of persuading the reader that something is the case (197), and 'hortatory exposition', sometimes referred to as 'argument' or 'persuasion', which has the social function of persuading the reader that something should be the case (209). It seems unclear which of these classifications best describes the type of text required of IELTS candidates, since the wording of prompts varies - sometimes using 'should' as in Figure 1, sometimes stating an opinion using 'is' and inviting candidates to set out their own viewpoint in response. To the extent that a clear genre is not identifiable and describable in terms of its generic structure, then the task of preparing candidates for the IELTS Writing test is made that much more unclear.
The instructions in the IELTS handbook (1999) perhaps add a little more insight :

"In Task 2 candidates are presented with a point of view or argument or problem.
Candidates are assessed on their ability to :

- *provide general factual information*
- *outline a problem and present a solution*
- *present and possibly justify an opinion, assessment or hypothesis*
- *present and possibly evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence and argument.*

... Part of the task realisation is to respond appropriately in terms of register, rhetorical organisation, style and content.

Appropriate responses are personal semi-formal or formal correspondence (Task 1) and short essays or general reports, addressed to course tutors or examiners (Task 2)." (11)

These instructions perhaps lead more towards the expected Task 2 textual response as 'analytical exposition'. Given that all these genre labels are constructed within a cultural context, even if clarity of classification eventually emerges, it seems reasonable to concur with Kroll and Reid (1994) that there is :
'a problem when the presumed rhetorical style of a desirable response is outside of the cultural frame of reference for the test candidate' (241)

Native speaker and non-native speaker texts

Mickan and Slater (forthcoming) compared the essays produced by two cohorts of six native speaker students (all Australians) and six nonnative speakers (1 Japanese, I Indonesian, and 4 Hong Kong Chinese) in response to the same IELTS Task 2 prompt (Figure 1)

The participants were all Year 11 and 12 High School students aged 16-19. The Australian students had no previous knowledge of the IELTS test ; the non-native speakers were participating in an IELTS preparation program and were due to take the IELTS test some months later. All participants completed the task under test conditions.

Although all 12 participants were able to address aspects of the topic in their responses, the non-native

speaker essays were informally rated at an average level of only IELTS 5. Surface features of the essays of the two cohorts were broadly similar - number of words written, length of sentences, for example. Across the 12 essays, there was considerable variation in organisational features indicating that the essays did not conform to a particular genre in any narrow sense. For example, some essays used personal pronouns to express opinion (eg 'I think that...') ; others used impersonal formulations (passives or 'It...' constructions). However, whereas the native speakers used their opening paragraphs to articulate their points of view as a foundation for later elaboration, the non-native speaker essays were less explicit in articulating a definite viewpoint in the opening paragraph, further evidence perhaps of their lack of confidence and experience at holding, shaping, declaring and owning their own viewpoints.

While the high level of variation both within and between the essays in each cohort should caution against any strong generalisation, it would appear that the native speaker essays tend to conform to argument type texts in the sense of' to persuade the reader that something is the case' (Gerot and Wignell 1994 : 197). The non-native speaker texts, in contrast, seem to resemble discussion texts in which different ideas are discussed rather than arguments developed.

Using some of the categories offered by functional analysis to the lexico-grammar of the essay (Halliday, 1985, Gerot and Wignell, 1994) a much richer set of contrasts between the two cohorts emerges. These will be discussed under the headings of : general participants, nominalisation, cohesion using reference, lexical cohesion and conjunctions.

General participants

Nouns that refer to who or what is taking part in what is happening in a sentence and text are termed 'participants' in functional grammar (Halliday,1985). Written argument texts tend to avoid personal or emotive discourse by using impersonal participants via passive constructions or general participants like 'people'. Comparing the two cohorts, there is a greater tendency among the non-native speaker writers to use personalised and general participants, perhaps indicating an inability to distinguish between language suited to general discussion and language suited to academic writing.

Nominalisation

Compressing information in texts by nominalisation (the grouping of nouns, for example, as in newspaper headlines) is a device that makes text sound authoritative and prestigious (Gerot 1995 : 76) The native speaker cohort used this device effectively to distil information whereas the non-native speakers tended to use nominalisation less frequently.

Cohesion

The ways a writer links together parts of a text are broadly referred to as 'cohesion' and it is this linguistic ability that enables writers to provide continuity and flow in their text (Halliday and Hasan 1985). Analysing cohesion further, several types can be identified :

a) Reference

Specifically, writers employ 'reference' to follow the identity of participants through the text (for example, after the first mention of a noun, the following mention of the same noun might use 'it' rather than repeat

the original noun). Reference devices include 'the', 'this', 'that', 'these', 'those'. When a reader can't easily retrieve a referent, the text becomes more difficult to understand. Across the essays in the study under consideration, the native speakers employed reference devices more frequently and with more assurance than did the non-native speakers.

b) Lexical cohesion

Skilful lexical cohesion is achieved by using synonyms and collocation to avoid repetition of the same key topic item over and over again. The native speakers, predictably, were much more able in their lexical strings to use synonymy and collocation than their non-native speaker counterparts.

c) Conjunctions

These are used to connect information, clauses and sentences in written discourse. The native speakers used linking conjunctions of all sorts more effectively than did the non-native speakers.

Sample essays

The following two sample essays from the study show some differences in schematic structure of the texts and differences in the application of the textual features outlined above.

Essay of NS 2	**Schematic structure**
Alternative forms of transport should be encouraged and international laws introduced to control car ownership and use, to reduce the number of vehicles on British rods.	Thesis : topic introduction, viewpoint 'should be'.
Alternative forms of transport include, buses, trains, car pools, walking and riding a bike. Public transport means that there is less people driving cars which reduces the number of cars. However, walking or riding a bike is even more of an advantage as they are environmentally friendly. This can also be a disadvantage because it takes longer to travel from A to B. A way to encourage people to use these alternative forms of transport, can be done through school and the media which includes, the radio, T.V., newspapers and magazines. First of all, for people to be encouraged, they must be educated in school about the environmental impacts on the environment if the number of cars on British roads increases. Harmful pollutants are released from cars which causes global warming and smog for instance, not to mention the problems with acid rain. People have to be encouraged to use alternative forms of transport if possible, and they have to be educated about the environmental impacts on the environment.	Elaboration of point of view. Argument 1 Point Argument 2 Elaboration Point 1 Point 2 Elaboration
International laws should be introduced to control car ownership and use. There needs to be a limit on how many cars each household can own, two cars should be sufficient. There needs to be laws on the use of cars, for example how often each week a person is allowed to drive their car. Maybe there should be a law introduced where there is a car free day, one day for the week. This would reduce pollution for one day at least. Also, people should not be permitted to drive their car down the street when they could easily walk.	Argument 3 Point 1 Point 2 Point 3 Point 4 Point 5
In conclusion alternative forms of transport should be encouraged to reduce the number of cars on British roads. Car ownership needs to be controlled, and international laws introduced to decrease the use of cars. This needs to be done to reduce the amount of pollution released into the atmosphere and to generaly reduce the number of cars on British roads. [356 words]	Conclusion : restatement of position.

Figure 2 : Essay of Native Speaker 2

Essay of NNS 7	Schematic structure
In British use of car is increasing rapidly. It was introduced in 1888. Now, most of families have at least one car. As a result, it is thought by the year 2000 there will be about 29 million vehicles in British. Some people concern about it because of air pollution. Other people think it wouldn't have much differences. There is a idea >that is< to introduce international laws to control it. People think we should think alternative way or introduce to transplate people without using people. The benefits of alternative ways are there will be less polluted air. the one alternative way is using solar energy cars. These cars will not produce any poisoness gas. This poisones gas [is] causes the greenhouse effect. People who use car everyday have different idea.	Statement of issue + points Argument for and against Point 1 Point 2 Point 3 Elaboration
People use cars because it is very comfortable. Many people know what are the problems but they can't stop using them. If they can use cars, nobody need to look time for bus or tram. Sometimes it will make more time to play. It also give some private out side of houses.	Counter argument Point 1 Elaboration Point 2 Elaboration
To organise a international laws, it will bring many problems [it will] To make laws all countries have to agree to it, but it will be very hard. Some countries that know more about problem, want to make strict laws but others will not. if > these < kind of cars are introduced, it will be more easier to make everyone together.	Argument Point 1 Elaboration
Some poeple [ar] think that if there is a international law [s], it will not bring any problems > between countries< because laws will control these problems. Laws could be about speed limits or use of case. If laws are to limit use of cars it will bring [it] big difference to our society.	Point 2 Point 3 Elaboration
I think people need to form alternative way to transport people. I think cars are very useful >and< comfortable, but I think that people need to consern more about environment. I do not have idea what kind of law will if there is, so I can't think it is good or not. (356 words)	Statement of thesis Summary of point of view. Statement

Figure 3 Essay of Non-Native Speaker 7

Comparison of schematic structure

The native speaker text (Figure 2) is structured to build a persuasive argument. The right hand column in figure 2 indicates a clearly structured text with a foregrounded point of view in the opening sentence. The essay develops the expressed viewpoint via three arguments with supporting points and elaboration. The final paragraph clearly signals the end of the argument ('In conclusion..') and restates the writer's position. This schematic structure offers the reader recognisable linguistic signals to help interpretation of the text. The organisation of the text meets the expectation of the audience thus strengthening the ability of the text to persuade the audience in the direction of the writer's point of view.

The non-native speaker text (Figure 3) poses more difficulties since it is less easy to establish the type or genre of text offered by the writer. The schematic structure shows that the essay has been divided up into three paragraphs, but apart from that little marking of an argument text is in evidence. This deprives the reading audience of the familiar staging which might make the reading of the text easier. The text has no introduction presenting the writer's thesis. The presentation of ideas is structured as a discussion with the presentation of different points of view, or arguments and counter arguments. The writer's point of view is only stated in the final paragraph, almost apologetically. It reads more like a spoken statement than the summarising of an argument.

Cultural influences

This is the final issue to be discussed in this section of the paper, though in a very real sense it has been present throughout the preceding discussion, since it has been suggested that every test is a cultural product, and thus every essay prompt originates within a cultural context and reflects the cultural assumptions of the item writer. Further it has been concluded that for learners from non-European countries like Japan and China the different rhetorical traditions and perhaps the grammatical, sentence-level basis of the teaching of writing produce a cultural view of text that does not mesh easily with the type of discourse required in the IELTS Writing subtest. Finally, it has been suggested that cultures in which students are encouraged to offer personal viewpoint and exchange opinions differ from those cultures in which factual learning of content is given priority and in which the personal opinions of students in certain learning contexts may be accorded little time for nourishment. But there are other important cultural considerations.

The ability of IELTS test candidates to improve their performance speedily probably requires the availability of teachers or mentors who combine detailed familiarity with the IELTS test and a deep understanding of two cultures and two languages —English and the native language of the candidate. Such teachers may not be abundant. That is not to say that such teachers are the only ones who can help, but they are best equipped to explore contrasts in text types and composition styles across the two cultures and languages and to communicate the contrasts sensitively and effectively as candidates build the flexibility to compose texts reflecting the appropriate genre and schematic structure, as well as finding their own voice and style both as writers and opinion holders.

A final, contentious cultural issue surrounds the nature of the assessment criteria. At this point in time the written criteria for the assessment of the IELTS Writing subtest make no overt statement which enables assessors to be sensitive to cultural factors in writing, as, for example, in acknowledging different traditions of writing. General notions often used in criterial descriptions like 'communicating well' or 'causing difficulty for the reader' probably disguise some level of insensitivity towards texts that don't conform to the cultural expectations of the assessor. These are most likely to emerge from non-European cultures. The notion of generic or schematic structure for text is a culturally derived one, but it is test devisers who decide that test takers from all cultures should be subject to the same criterial demand in terms of producing a text that conforms to a certain rhetorical or schematic structure. This conforms to notions of test standardisation and reliability and to the not unreasonable expectation that test candidates should aspire to reproduce text in the style of the receiving culture. However, at the same time it seems to work against an equitable level of opportunity and study expense for candidates from nations with very different approaches to text construction and from very different learning traditions. This is at root an issue of test design and of personal values. In simple terms, the question is whether or not it is equitable to require test takers to respond to tasks that create particular difficulty for students from particular cultures for reasons of cultural background. There is some similarity here with the notion of 'authentic assessment' (Kohonen,1999) which accords value to the aim of being 'culture-fair' (285). Given the growing numbers of students now going overseas to study and the increasing reliance of universities on the revenue from such students it will be interesting to see if assessment criteria begin to reflect a slightly less specific notion of appropriate written discourse or genre, in the same way that British and American English have come under pressure from the charges of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), thus heralding an enhanced status and legitimation for varieties of English specific to

smaller nations, like Singapore or Malaysia.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

The aim of the second part of this paper is to explore possible teaching strategies that may help IELTS candidates to improve their written performance and which seem to address some of the findings that emerged from the first part of this paper. The teaching strategies will be discussed under the following headings : strategies to help with understanding the prompt, strategies to help with the generation of ideas, strategies to help test candidates to understand better the type of text that is required, strategies to build better awareness and management of cultural differences.

Strategies to help with understanding task prompts

The task prompt, as was discussed earlier, is a culturally situated and produced text. Candidates from some cultures may not easily be able to connect with the language, perspective on the topic, style of discourse and purpose of this mini text. Possible sfrategies might indude :

Provide mini texts similar to test prompts and / or mini texts of different types

This activity would aim to build awareness of the style of what we may loosely call 'task speak' and the impact of different texts on the reader.

Taking the Task prompt from the first section (see Figure 1), teachers might generate different styles of discourse and ask candidates to explore differences in meaning and possible differences in content and language in response.

Consider, for example, the following conversation and newspaper headline :

Conversation

A : Hey, John, I've just read that there were more than 29 million cars on roads in Britain in 2000, but only 1 car in 1888.

John : Really, that's amazing.

A : Yeah, frightening. Do you think it would be a good idea to develop other types of transport and use international laws to control the number of people who can own cars?

John : Yes, of course

A : Why?

John : _____

Newspaper headline

INTERNATIONAL LAWS PROPOSED TO CUT NUMBER OF CAR OWNERS AND INCREASE TRAIN AND BUS USE.

What do you think? Send your thoughts to the editor.

Interrogate and rewrite the prompt

a) Imagine you are asking the test prompt writer some key questions to find out more. Try to answer the questions as if you were the person who wrote the test prompt.

Eg

What is the topic? (Look for key vocabulary that is linked- cars, transport

What is the key issue about the topic in this prompt?

What does the writer of the prompt seem to think ? (Writer's view or views)

How much do I agree with that? 100%, 75%, 50 %, 25% 0%

What are examples of things the writer might agree with / examples of things the writer might disagree with?

b) Try reversing the order of the prompt or rewriting it to see if it feels easier to decode.

Examples (based on Figure 1)

i) Should alternative forms of transport be encouraged and international laws introduced to control car ownership and use?

Helpful information

(The first car appeared on British roads in 1888. By the year 2000
there may be as many as 29 million vehicles on British roads)

ii) 1 car in Britain in 1888 ; 29 million in 2000!
Isn't it time to switch to trains and buses and have international laws to control the number of car owners and users?
What do you think?

iii) I think that we should use the trains and buses more, and have international laws to control the number of people owning and using cars. Why do I think that? Because there are just too many cars on the roads today (29 million in Britain in 2000, for example!).
Do you agree with me or not?

iv)	*1888*	*2000*
No. of cars in Britain	*1*	*29 million*

International laws must be introduced to control use and ownership of cars and to encourage people to use buses and trains and planes. What's your opinion on this?

When candidates become more flexible at dealing with different ways of interpreting and maybe even writing different versions of the same prompt they might get a better 'feel' for how language choices can be manipulated when communicating a similar message. If students practice actually writing prompts themselves, it may help them to occupy the test writer's position and to understand how task construction shifts text mean-

ing, type or voice.

Strategies to help with the generation of ideas

Even when the prompt is interpreted appropriately, many candidates seem to avoid making a writing plan and just start writing, or get confused and lose confidence. On balance, it seems better to keep active at the planning stage. There are many ways to make plans that reflect the ill-sorted rag bag of ideas at that stressful point in time. Some candidates may think that a plan should be a clear outline, suggesting that they are not flexible enough to let the plan be anything that helps!

Possible strategies to encourage pre-writing, planning activity

i) Mnemonics

For rhetorical structure

Eg **PADS** (**P**oint of view / **A**gree / **D**isagree / **S**ummary of why I have my view

(Some candidates may, however, prefer the more traditional categories : Intro / Body / Conclusion or Intro. / Paragraph 1,2,3 / Conclusion, or even : Thesis / Antithesis / Synthesis)

For Lexico-grammatical factors before or during writing / when editing

Eg **LOST PANS** **L**inking words **O**rganization **S**ynonyms **T**enses
Paragraphs **A**udience **N**ominalisation **S**pelling

ii) Visuals

It may be helpful to encourage candidates to use drawings as an aid to planning. Sometimes candidates get ideas while they are writing but forget them as they continue. The idea of a 'drop-box' for ideas and words might encourage candidates to draw a box and 'drop' (ie write) any words or ideas in the box as they come to mind. Then they can look at the box to choose when and how to use the ideas or expressions as their essay progresses.

Another idea is a flow diagram made up first of a 'brainstorm box' for all ideas that come into the candidate's head, then a 'my viewpoint' box and 'fanning out' from that box a range of 'arguments + examples' boxes.

Obviously notions of essay planning such as the above may not readily feel comfortable for students from backgrounds where planning to write your own point of view seems initially very unusual.

Strategies to help test candidates to understand better the type of text that is required

It was pointed out earlier (Takagi, 2001) that candidates from some cultures have difficulty mastering rhetorical styles of writing directed at, say, a British or American audience. Apart from reasons of insufficient exposure to text within the target culture there are clearly specific gaps in awareness that certain strategies might offset.

Audience awareness

Nearly all writing assumes an audience for the written text. The mental construction of that audience shapes some of the rhetorical and lexico-grammatical choices made. IELTS candidates are asked to write for 'an educated non-specialist'. It would seem useful to ask candidates to try to describe their stereotype of such a reader, firstly in their own culture and then in an English-speaking country. Even a stereotype is at least preferable to no image. A possible stereotype :

> *The person you are writing to is probably about 40 and went to a university in Britain. He or she is married and works as peraps an English teacher / social worker / accountant. He/she is interested in world affairs and has worked in or visited one or two other countries, but maybe not yours. She or he reads good quality newspapers, likes talking about world affairs and is interested in conditions in other countries. Her or his written English is of a good quality.*

The advantage of 'fleshing out' such imagined readers is that it makes the candidate more aware of the importance of audience and perhaps gives the writing additional context.

Text awareness

Many candidates learn English in traditions that focus on sentences and translation and rarely explore the broader organization of texts in terms of paragraphs and development of ideas. As was suggested, a functional grammar perspective is a useful counterpoint to sentence-level approaches (Halliday, 1985) There are a number of strategies that can be employed in IELTS preparation courses to build a better sense of text organization and function.

Comparing Texts

As was suggested for the task prompt in this paper, it is possible to write several versions of a task response to illustrate different types of text. For example, the response could be written as a letter to a friend, or as a newspaper report, or as a leaflet to persuade people to use other forms of transport. By asking candidates to explore differences of genre, their awareness of the patterns used in test responses should become clearer. Then the features of the argument-type text can be looked at in more detail.

Text-gapping or text-mixing activities

Another simple strategy for helping candidates to become aware of textual features is text-gapping. This involves the pinpointing of particular features of sample test essays from native-speaker-writers and asking students if they can complete the gaps appropriately (see Slater, Millen, Tyrie, forthcoming). Examples of gapping might include topic sentences, nominalisation, cohesive devices, argument development, and lexical synonymy used to avoid repetition as outlined in the functional analysis in the first part of this paper.

Alternatively, texts can be selectively mixed up, as for instance in the re-ordering of sentences in a particular paragraph. Again, students simply try to put the paragraph's sentences into the appropriate order, thus having to attend to sequential meaning.

Strategies to build better awareness and management of cultural differences

This final area is perhaps the least practical and most general, but seems none the less important. The IELTS test exists within a cultural context which it in turn reflects. Candidates for IELTS come from a variety of other cultural contexts, either more or less similar to Britain. An exploration of key differences can help to make awareness of context more significant for candidates. Let's take two simple examples :

Expression of personal opinion

As was clear from even a small research project (Mickan, Slater, forthcoming), native speaker subjects seemed to express personal viewpoint, confidently and easily, reflecting the cultural acceptability of personal opinion. The non-native speaker subjects, on the other hand, seemed less comfortable and were anxious about not having particular knowledge on which they could draw. Language issues aside, why is this so? Following just one strand of possible explanation, from Japan, various writings on the issue of shyness in Japanese schools point to a reluctance among Japanese students to express themselves in public (Mcveigh 2001 ; Doyon, 2000).

Differing notions of knowledge and power

Pursuing this line of thought a little more, it seems clearly the case that in different cultures, differing notions of knowledge and power are in operation in schools or other agencies of socialisation. To simplify, in some cultures 'facts' coming from the teacher may be accorded great authority as representing acceptable truths which need to be memorised to form legitimate knowledge ; in other cultures so-called 'facts' may more often be viewed as propositions, competing with other 'facts', or available to be contested, rejected or replaced. The latter perspective frees the individual from the pressure of the group or the teacher as collective or omniscient knowledge holders, and makes a reasoned, personal view less risky. Perspectives that are constructivist (Williams and Burden 1997), make multiple realities normal and individual viewpoint comfortable. It is useful, perhaps for teachers on IELTS preparation programs to explore such cultural differences so that candidates from say, Asian cultures, can start to explore the impact of different socialisation patterns when they enter specific cultural worlds such as those of international English language tests which require them to write essays or be interviewed and to be assessed using concepts embedded in the target cultures. In this way they can begin to see their position as test-takers analytically and comparatively, and perhaps thereby reduce the hold that past patterns have on their test performance.

Concluding remarks

This paper has reported on some of the issues faced by candidates, especially those from non-European cultures, when responding to the IELTS Writing Task 2 test prompt. It has explored just a few potential teaching strategies for helping candidates to understand the functional organisation of text and the cultural interactions that form part of that test experience. Its limited scope points to the need for further research into the influence of cultural factors in IELTS test performance and perhaps more controversially, research into asses-

sors' interpretive processes and behaviour when they use set, written criteria as the basis for rating essays submitted by candidates from many cultural traditions.

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Abstract

The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test is growing in popularity internationally both as an entry requirement for students wishing to study in various English-speaking countries and, more

recently, as a tool of the migration process.

This paper explores some of the issues surrounding candidate performance on the Writing section of the IELTS test. It draws on research which used a functional grammar perspective to compare texts produced in response to the same task prompt by two cohorts — one of native-speaker-writers, and the other of non-native speaker-writers from non-European cultures.

The classroom implications of the identified writing issues are discussed in terms of practical strategies for assisting the written performance of IELTS test candidates.