Preparing lower level students for IELTS

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Fiona Aish and Jo Tomlinson

Are your students too low a level to take the IELTS exam? It's understandable that students of English want to get started on an IELTS course as soon as possible to attain that desirable qualification. However, this poses real challenges for the IELTS teacher! Watch this seminar for some useful practical advice.

Session summary and objectives

Fiona Aish and Jo Tomlinson are very experienced IELTS and EAP teachers. In this seminar they guide you through a structured approach on how to help low level students embark on their path to attaining the IELTS exam, without them losing their motivation along the way. The speakers provide practical examples of how to overcome the challenges of teaching IELTS at pre-intermediate level, covering topics such as language proficiency, exam techniques and academic skills across all four of the papers – reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Who is this session for?

All teachers who teach IELTS or EAP (English for Academic Purposes), but especially those whose students have a low level of English.

About the speakers

Fiona Aish and Jo Tomlinson work for Target English, a consultancy group which works with universities and Further Education colleges in the UK. Their work focuses on EAP and exam preparation resources. They have produced Exam Ready, which is a diagnostic tool for IELTS, plus a roadmap for IELTS improvement. They have produced 4 books for Collins: Listening for IELTS, Grammar for IELTS, Get Ready for IELTS Writing, and All About Lectures.

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Before you watch

What challenges do you face in teaching IELTS to lower level students? How do you try to overcome these challenges?

Real life practice

There are numerous IELTS resources available, both published and on the internet. If you use an IELTS course book, we strongly recommend you invest in the teacher's book as well. This will be a valuable source of ideas on how to adapt the materials for the classroom.

The task below provides a simple format that IELTS teachers can use again and again to get low level students started on their IELTS course.

With low level English students, the teacher's initial challenge is to help students:

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- raise their level of English to the level required in order to embark on a realistic exam preparation course.

One suitable approach is to create simplified IELTS style tasks based on the typical topics that come up. This after all, is what lower level IELTS books set out to do. This sample task is based on the one supplied by Fiona Aish & Jo Tomlinson in this seminar.

Sample Task

The theme is 'technology'. You can look at different aspects of technology (or other IELTS related topics) with questions focused on:

- Types
- Effects
- Time
- Opinions
- Location
- Process
- Comparison

These are typical IELTS-like questions to ask students:

1. Types: What types of technology are there? Organise the different types of technology into groups.
2. Effects: What is the impact of/ are the effects of technology?/ What is the impact of/ are the effects of technology on …? (Reasons/ examples?)
3. Effects: Does technology have an impact/ effect on … ? How?
4. Effects/time: What do you think the effect of technology will be in the future? Why?
5. Comparison: Do you think the advantages of technology outweigh the disadvantages? Why? How?
6. Process/Comparison/Location: What is the difference between the use of technology in your country and in Western countries?
7. Process/Comparison/opinion: How has technology changed people's lives?
8. Opinion/Comparison: Is using technology more popular among the young than the elderly?

Let us look at Question 8 in more detail. This is a typical IELTS style essay question. In order to produce a good essay on this topic the students need to identify the key words in the question, such as 'technology' 'popular', 'young', 'elderly' and say more about each one. Then they need to add their own opinions on the subject. The questions below will help them to think through these points in more detail:

1. What type(s) of technology do people have/use? What types of technology are we talking about?
2. What does 'the young' mean?
3. What constitutes the elderly?
4. Can the use of technology benefit the elderly? How can technology benefit the elderly?
5. Is it the same in your family?
6. Has the use of technology always been popular among you and your friends?

It is also important to build vocabulary and grammatical accuracy alongside this topical approach.

Encourage students to build vocabulary logs for each topic or theme covered. These logs can include relevant words, phrases and functional language. As their language knowledge grows they can add additional lexical sets to these topical logs.

This approach needs to be repeated frequently until it becomes second nature to the students.

Top Tips

1. Diagnostic testing of students is essential in order to establish their language strengths and weaknesses across the four skills right from the start.

2. Agree small incremental goals with the learners. Emphasise progress and achievements and provide each learner with an improvement pathway to follow. This will help maintain learner motivation.

3. Familiarise yourself with the areas of grammar that are most valuable for the IELTS papers and target grammar practice for students specifically to these – the grammar required for IELTS is more specific than for general English.

4. Make explicit to students the purpose for each task you set them to do. Remember that students will not necessarily see the purpose unless it is clearly explained. Highlight the link between IELTS and academic English, as this shows students why IELTS is designed the way it is.

5. Students often believe they need to do endless IELTS practice tests in order to improve their English. This approach can have a negative impact on learner motivation and is unlikely to lead to language proficiency. Practice tests are useful, but it is more fruitful to prioritise learning the language than doing repetitive practice tests.

Join the discussion!

Discuss these questions with your colleagues, if you can:

1. From your experience, what are the main differences between teaching IELTS to low level and higher level students? How do you bridge the gap between the students starting point and meeting the requirements of the exam without negatively affecting the students' motivation?

2. How important is the role of 'rote memorisation' for IELTS exam preparation? Can you see advantages and disadvantages to this learning approach? Would you embrace it or reject it?