

Designing for Successful Learning: redesign of an IELTS preparation short course

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Context

The IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test is the world's secondⁱ leading proficiency testⁱⁱ of English language. The Evening IELTS Preparation Course trains students for the Academic versionⁱⁱⁱ, whose scores are requested by further and higher education institutions as evidence of prospective non-native students' English language abilities. The test comprises four modules: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, and each module is scored using a 9 level scale; the highest achievable level being 9 and the lowest being 1.^{iv}

The students on the Evening IELTS Preparation Courses are non-native speakers of English from a range of countries and cultures. They have different native languages, learning backgrounds and are of varying ages, ranging from late teens to forties. Motivation on the course is mainly extrinsic; the students' principle aim being to improve their chances of achieving the required/desired IELTS exam scores to enable entry to UK degree programs. Consequently, student expectations are high and commensurately motivation levels are high. Classes tend to be dynamic, with eager student participation, and completion rates of homework assignments are good. However, students usually have demanding day commitments; therefore they are generally tired by the time they arrive to class, and may struggle to focus. The students tend to be comfortable with technology and open to its use as part of study. There is a wide range of learning styles; however, the students are rarely aware of their own styles and their importance.

The course is a 50 hour programme: five hours per week (over two evenings) for ten weeks, and is run by the ELS (European and Language Services) department. The IELTS Evening Preparation Course has run numerous times, but has never had a written curriculum, and relies on a more organic curriculum, based on a coursebook and the lecturers' decisions on content.

In general the course is taught by Hourly Paid Lecturers (HPLs). These lecturers are experienced English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals, however, most do not have IELTS examining experience and hence rely on published materials to inform them and assist in assessing student writing and speaking level scores.

While the Evening IELTS Preparation Short Course at London Metropolitan University has been running for several years, it has not benefited from a formal pre-determined syllabus. This paper reports on a redesign of the course which was undertaken to enable students doing it to finish with a better ability to achieve their required/desired IELTS exam score.

Rationale for the Redesign

There were several grounds for redesigning the course. Firstly, having recently qualified as an IELTS examiner, my more accurate and comprehensive knowledge of the test meant that I could design and deliver a more effective course; one which would better prepare its students for IELTS exam success.

Another factor was the course's lack of a written curriculum; this meant that there could be no standardisation of teaching and learning on the course, nor could there be effective monitoring of student progress and to what extent the learning outcomes were achieved. Although students had generally expressed satisfaction with the courses^v, it was apparent that a written curriculum would be an asset. According to Walker (1994, pp.5-7), key criteria that learning outcomes should meet are that they 'be achievable and assessable'; however, without a detailed course plan (and therefore no agreed learning outcomes) there could be no guarantee of either criteria being met.

The redesign project also sought to address the gap in linguistic teaching on the course. Success in the IELTS test requires that candidates have good accuracy and range of grammar and lexis. Accordingly the ELS (European Languages Service) English Language Programme 2009-2010 brochure states that course content includes "grammar improvement" and "vocabulary development". However, analysis of previous formative assessment results^{vi} highlighted that neither students' accuracy nor range of these language areas markedly improved by the end of the course. Previous end of course feedback^{vii} indicated that students felt that they would have benefited from more instruction regarding grammar and vocabulary. Additionally, a needs analysis conducted at the beginning of the latest course^{viii} showed that students felt they needed to work on grammar and lexis and expected these to be significant elements of their course.

A further area which needed to be addressed was the course's lack of summative assessment. Without one, it was virtually impossible to accurately evaluate student

progress and the extent to which learning outcomes and course objectives had been met. While students were given test practice on an *ad hoc* basis, a lack of end-of-course testing meant that students were unable to have an accurate idea of their progress, the IELTS test scores they could expect to receive, or the areas in which they needed to improve. Of equal concern, the teaching team did not have the information needed to check the validity of the claim that the course would improve students' levels of English and IELTS examination skills.

Limited contact hours meant that better independent study would be imperative to ensure learning outcomes be met, particularly those relating to the development of grammatical and lexical knowledge and use. A further justification for attempting to develop students' self-study skills was that in an HE environment students should be encouraged to develop their learner autonomy skills in order to be successful as language learners and users (Benson, 2001), so as to prepare them for their planned degree courses, and to improve possibilities of lifelong learning. It was also important that students receive help with their self-study: guidance to assist them to develop autonomous learning abilities. Start of course needs analysis revealed that most students were happy to spend between 5 and 10 hours a week on independent learning, with guidance from their teacher(s).

Similarly described IELTS preparation courses are offered in hundreds of centres in the UK, including language schools and further education colleges, but I did not lose sight of the fact that our students make conscious decisions to take their course at a HE institution. Therefore when redesigning the curriculum, I kept in mind the higher education context of the course in order to ensure coherence and adherence to London Metropolitan' mission and policy, as well as national HE policy and aims.

Curricular Approach

At the time of the redesign, the course followed a mixture of curricula. It used a competency-based curriculum (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and a negotiated curriculum (Jordan, 1997). A competency-based curriculum focuses on learning outcomes as opposed to class input. This type of curriculum is designed based on what the learners will have to do with their knowledge and skills at the end of the programme. A negotiated curriculum is one where learners contribute to decisions about the curriculum and course content, enabling the course to match student needs more closely. The IELTS course also used a non-predetermined curriculum, which can be more responsive as the learning facilitator continuously makes curricular decisions depending on what (s)he believes the students need.

However, with limited contact hours, challenging learning outcomes and course objectives, and the fact that the course is preparation for a high-stakes examination, this course needed more structure. A better structured course would better meet

student needs and ensure better learning experiences, a view which D'Andrea (1999) supports: she states "making teaching/learning intentions more explicit improves the learning experience of students" (p.41).

In order to achieve the course objective of improving students' abilities to achieve their specified examination scores, students need to become competent in the relevant exam skills and also in their grammatical and lexical accuracy and range, they also need to master a range of communicative and academic skills. Accordingly, I found that no *one* curriculum type would meet the needs of this student base and therefore decided upon a hybrid of ELT and HE curricula: structural curriculum (White, 1988), which focuses on aspects of grammar and lexis, grading and teaching them depending on students' capabilities and needs, and the outcomes-based approach (D'Andrea, 1999, pp.41-56), which focuses on the proposed outcomes of a course.

The Curriculum Design Process

Planning Learning Outcomes & Sequencing Topics

The first and arguably most important stage for this particular course design project was the determination of learning outcomes and sequencing of topics. There is a direct correlation between the learning outcomes developed for this course and the skills and knowledge students need in order to achieve scores of above Band 5.0 in the IELTS exam.

The sequencing of the topics was straightforward as it was agreed that the course would use a coursebook (a textbook specifically designed for groups of language learners), whose units would be followed in the order, hence providing the sequencing of topics for the curriculum.

Assessing Student Characteristics

Following the guidelines in D'Andrea (1999, pp.53-55), data on student characteristics was gathered for the four categories listed: knowledge on entry, personal characteristics, demographics and learning style. As many of the students who enroll for the course do so very shortly before the start of course, or even a couple of weeks into the programme, it was difficult to access information regarding the students on the next course. Therefore information gathered and documented from previous courses in 2008 and 2009 was used. For this step several sources were used: information from student registration forms, pre-testing results, start of course questionnaires, student feedback during the courses, review and analysis of class conversations, formative assessment results, and feedback from teachers regarding previous sessions of the course. In addition to D'Andrea's recommended categories, I also evaluated general student strengths and weakness in grammar,

lexis, academic skills, and exam skills. Following collation and analysis of all data, a class profile, student characteristics and, arguably most importantly, student needs were established.

Designing Teaching/Learning Units

Determining the actual course content was unquestionably a key stage and mistakes made during this stage would negatively impact on the outcomes of the project. There were two parts to the planning of course content: determination of *class* content and determination of the *independent learning* content.

For this curriculum the most important part of content planning was selection of course materials. Discussing the subject of materials in ELT classes, Richards and Renandya (2002, p65-66) emphasise their importance stating “Whether the teacher uses a textbook, institutionally prepared materials, or makes use of his or her own materials, instructional materials generally serve as the basis for much of the language input learner’s receive”. They go on to highlight eight main advantages of the use of coursebooks on an English language programme; out of these, four were key justifications for using a coursebook on this programme of study: 1) coursebooks provide structure for a programme of study; 2) they provide standardisation of instruction, better enabling the teaching team to ensure that each course run provides similar knowledge and skills; 3) they provide a variety of learning resources, as most coursebooks are accompanied by audio CDs, DVDs, additional practice workbooks and other materials; and 4) they can train teachers; an important consideration, as the course tends to be taught by HPLs, who are in general less experienced than permanent members of the teaching team.

A range of coursebooks was considered and the textbook ‘IELTS Express Upper Intermediate’ was chosen. This book, designed specifically for intensive IELTS preparation courses, is accompanied by audio CDs, a teacher’s book, a workbook with additional exercises, and a DVD. Having assessed and tried out the book before the curriculum design project, I believed it to be perfect for achieving the proposed learning outcomes of this course, to be the most suitable for the average level of English on the courses, and to be the best fit for the duration of the course. It also matched well with other departmental needs regarding cost and available materials and teaching resources; the cost of a book for each student had already been considered and figured into the course fee students pay, so would not come as an additional cost to the department. In addition, having one main teaching material meant that the department would save on printing and photocopying, as much fewer copies of resources would be needed.

One drawback of the selected coursebook is that it provides little grammatical input and the range of topic specific vocabulary is not broad. In order to overcome this

disadvantage, the syllabus listed various grammar and lexis to be taught each week, the language areas selected were judged to be the most useful areas for successful IELTS examination performance. Due to restricted available time in class to dedicate to language, online and print resources were selected for completion at home; they would be followed up with the lecturer in the following lesson.

Additional materials and resources for the course (for both language and skills) were selected taking into consideration the student characteristics and needs and the proposed learning outcomes of the course. This additional class material included not only the coursebook's accompanying resources, but also authentic material from the press, activities and exercises from other coursebooks held in the English Language department's resource room and the lecturers' self-produced materials.

It was decided that the independent learning content would be made up of worksheets, Internet website exercises, and specified online and print reading, listening and writing tasks. As part of the course's independent learning component, I had intended London Metropolitan University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) platform (WebLearn) to be the primary independent study resource, as it has a comprehensive range of functions and uses. I was particularly eager to use the discussion feature to encourage use of language and skills studied in class, and also in an effort to create improved rapport amongst the course's participants, who tend to be more removed from the university culture and environment as they only attend in the evening.

Many HE professionals agree that 'asynchronous' online discussion is a valuable teaching and learning tool. Bloxham and Boyd (2007, p213) recommend its use because of its flexible nature, enabling students to participate at their own pace and convenience. Stacey (1999) discusses the role of social interactions in online discussion in bringing about "a reduction in feelings of isolation for learners" (cited in Bloxham and Boyd, p.214). However, logistically it was very difficult to incorporate WebLearn, as the students on this particular course generally do not receive ID cards for at least one week into the course, or often longer, they cannot be registered on or use the WebLearn system until weeks into the short course. Seeking a more easily accessible alternative VLE, I turned to the online social networking website Facebook. While it did not allow use of the same number of learning and teaching features as WebLearn, it did allow links to be added and allowed online discussion.

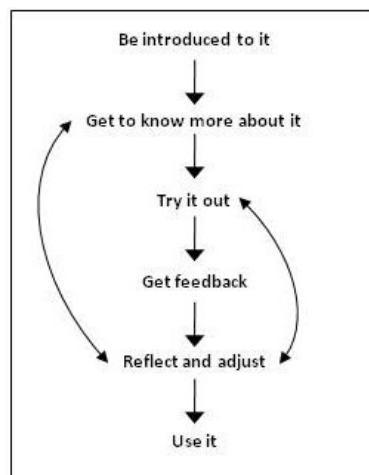
Assessment was another key part of the curriculum design. It seemed unquestionable that an exam preparation course should feature assessment in order to prepare students, measure progress and to evaluate achievement of learning outcomes. More structured use of formative assessment was therefore built into the course. Each lesson would include a minimum of one IELTS test practice activity, the scores of which would be recorded by the teacher in order to document progress. Additional formative assessment was set for homework; this would be an IELTS

writing exercise or a reading exercise. I then advanced to the planning of the new summative assessment. During the last week an IELTS mock exam would be given for three of the four modules (reading, writing and listening). Including a mock speaking test proved to be a challenge. The individual 14-minute tests could not feasibly be worked into the existing allotted class time as, based on the average number of students in the class, it could consume up to two entire lessons (a whole week's class time).

Implementing Learning/Teaching Strategies

In order to achieve the course's learning outcomes, not only would lessons need to cover key skills and language and give ample IELTS test practice with feedback, but they would also need to employ learning and teaching strategies appropriate for the students on the programme.

Firstly I considered strategies for presenting new knowledge and skills. Toohey's 'simple model of the learning process' (1999, p54) informed my decisions regarding how teaching on the course should occur.



Source: Toohey, S. (1999) p154

Although the process on paper seems linear, in fact it is a cycle. Using this model, I noted that there should be *regular* assessment of all language and skills studied on the course, with teacher guiding students as to how they could build on their knowledge.

I decided that formative assessment by means of IELTS test practice would be part of this learning/teaching approach. Feedback from the completed start of course questionnaires highlighted that students wanted to spend a considerable part of class time working on IELTS practice tests; students specified that between a quarter and a half of each class should be spent on this. I agreed that this would be an appropriate amount of time to spend on test practice, in order to provide

opportunities to put into practice language and academic skills in the context for which they were studying training. The only concern was that IELTS exam practice is a sedentary activity, which is far from ideal on an evening course whose trainees are tired from their day's commitments.

This led to the consideration of learning and teaching strategies which would stimulate the students on this course, maintaining their focus and motivation at such a late hour in the day. I also wanted the strategies to match the students' learning styles and be coherent with the higher education context in which the course takes place. I decided that these classes should be faster paced than other ELS classes, and involve a range of activities and activity styles in each 2½ hour lesson. The incorporation of against the clock language activities at 'danger' points in the lesson (points in which student energy levels, motivation levels and focus are more likely to wane) helped in this area. However, I believed it important to highlight that there should always be an explanation of the aims and benefits of such activities, so as to avoid any student concerns about time wastage. In fact, I felt that students should be aware of the aims and benefits of *all* activities, as this would result in students' pushing themselves to stay focused in order to benefit from each activity.

The inclusion of a range of media (including audio, video and SMART Board™), activities involving movement, stimulating topics and different types of formative assessment (to show progress or areas for improvement and therefore motivate students further) were also incorporated into the curriculum to encourage constant levels of energy and focus.

Evaluation

After its first implementation, curriculum design, delivery and outcomes were assessed. This involved reviewing formative and summative assessment, mid-course student feedback, end of course student feedback and lecturer feedback.

The data indicated that the curriculum was implemented with relative success. Progress was evident and student satisfaction was high. Nevertheless, improvements are needed:

- While the increased vocabulary and grammar training was a valuable addition, with students using a wider range of language more accurately, vocabulary and grammar assessment in these areas is needed in order to regularly check that learning has taken place.
- More formative speaking assessment is needed. This will require more meticulous planning of each lesson in order to ensure a balance of language skill practice and assessment.

- It is clear that a summative speaking assessment would be an important addition; it is not only critical to the students' exam preparation and progress, but also to the evaluation of the course's success.
- There needs to be consideration of strategies for evening IELTS student registration and ID number generation at least a week before the course begins, in order that a WebLearn environment can be set up for the class.
- The department should investigate the possibility of producing E-pack provision for the IELTS courses (both afternoon and evening); this would contribute to the students' self-study and would help achieve learning outcomes.
- The coursebook selection would benefit from review. There is some lecturer dissatisfaction as the current coursebook has flaws (a range of mistakes and some texts are poorly written) causing student and lecturer confusion. However, this selection cannot be made superficially, it must be multi-dimensional, contemplating the length of course, number of contact hours, proposed learning outcomes and student characteristics, among other considerations.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that a well-designed and well-implemented English Language course curriculum results in better programme structure and more appropriate content and assessment.

However, ELT professionals need to be mindful that there must be more to the process than selecting a coursebook. Despite the range of coursebooks on the market with good methodology, content and resources, using an appropriate course design model remains a key requirement to curriculum development. Every course is different, with different learning outcomes and different student characteristics, consequently different courses need different curriculum approaches, content, assessment and learning and teaching strategies. Using D'Andrea's (1999) systematic approach to curriculum design, and carefully considering a range of factors when developing the Evening IELTS Preparation Course resulted in a more structured programme, which was more successful in achieving its learning outcomes.

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Notes

- i. The international leader is the Test of English as a Foreign Language™ (TOEFL®). For more information on this exam consult: <http://www.ets.org/toefl/>.
- ii. A proficiency test determines the level of a candidate's knowledge and use of a given language.
- iii. The other version is General Training, which is required for immigration purposes in Australia and Canada.
- iv. More information on the IELTS™ exam is available from [www. ielts.org/](http://www.ielts.org/).
- v. Student end-of-course feedback in 2008 and early 2009 had been overall positive.
- vi. Formative assessment in 2008 and early 2009 had included written work, speaking tasks in class and language testing.
- vii. This comprised informal discussion and end-of-course questionnaires.
- viii. Students completed questionnaires regarding their perceived needs and their expectations of the course in the first week of the Spring 2010 course.