

Strategies of Using Theories to Train IELTS Learners

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Abstract

Colin Powell, the famous American statesman stated “A dream doesn’t become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work”. The dream of every IELTS aspirant is to achieve the expected score to qualify for an academic program or take up work in an international environment. Training for IELTS is the sweat, determination and the hard work of both the trainer and the student. Developing proficiency in LSRW skills in English needs a certain discipline and practice. IELTS trainers provide the ideal environment for students to develop these skills within a short time. This paper aims to put into practice the learning theories of Stephen Krashen, David Asubel, Jerome Bruner and Lev Vygotsky in the process of IELTS training. Activities appropriate to individual skills that have been effective in practical classroom situations have been suggested to guide future trainers in IELTS. Active participation of the learners is a key aspect in achieving a high band score. Trainers are facilitators in the process and support every learner to reach their potential.

Key Words: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, IELTS

Introduction:

LSRW skills are an integral part of language proficiency. While many of us acquire our mother tongue easily, we may not be ‘proficient’ in it- we may know speaking and listening, but many of us don’t know reading and writing. However, learning the second language often involves learning all four skills making us proficient, once we develop fluency and accuracy in LSRW. International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a test to check proficiency in English before non-native students enroll in international universities in the UK, Australia, Canada, the USA and other English speaking countries. It is one of the most popular paper based tests followed by the British Council and International Development Program. Training students to focus on the techniques to be followed in achieving

high band scores is a serious task for IELTS trainers. The test is usually taken by working professionals and students who wish to study or work abroad. As a result they must provide proof that they have the desired standard of English. Most learners come from different backgrounds and the IELTS classroom is always heterogeneous. Within the specified hours of training, the students and teachers have to work as a team in achieving the expected band scores. This paper is an attempt to communicate the methods followed in a popular language center in Bangalore that specifically caters to such IELTS aspirants.

The Process of developing LSRW skills:

All year round students work towards scoring higher band scores in IELTS. Closer to the dates of applying to University or immigration purposes, they enroll in special IELTS training centers

that offer them a structured and methodical guidance to achieve the desired band scores. Most of the students who enroll go through a preliminary test at the language center check their current level of English language. Based on a minimum requirement standard, they are enrolled into IELTS training. In Bangalore, there are students from all states of India, with varied L1 and often with strong Mother Tongue Influence (MTI). One of the main tasks of an IELTS trainer is to identify such specific areas and help students improve their pronunciation. Also, LSRW skills are interconnected. Hence to improve one skill, all other skills need to be addressed to provide a holistic approach in improving the students' English.

In this paper, each skill has been individually discussed with focus on activities that are most useful in enhancing the skills. A primary need on part of both the student and the teacher is to have faith in the process, even if it takes time, and keep working on the method, without giving up in the initial stages. Also diagnosing the weak areas of the student helps the trainer focus only on improving those areas rather than wasting time on fairly developed skills. The trainer must also observe the student's participation in class to decide what method must be used to motivate him/her. One of the key aspects of an interesting IELTS class is to provide 'meaningful interaction' for the student. Topics that are typically used in the Cambridge University Test books are a good practice to keep the students engaged. The students become familiar with the topics and make a conscious effort to develop academic language for competing in the test.

Listening:

'Listening' forms the foundation for the students' path to proficiency in English language. Most students find it difficult to understand native speakers initially. Over time, they become familiar with the language, context and pronunciation of the native speakers, often taking lesser time to understand and answer the practice test papers. While there may be fast learners whose growth curve may be steep, most Indian students struggle during the initial weeks of the IELTS course. This may also be the time when they lose confidence easily. It is this crucial phase that a trainer must support and motivate the student by conducting activities that include all levels of learners to participate.

The following activities have been found efficiently to promote listening for information:

1. Trainer plays the audio file after giving a background of the topic and eliciting existing knowledge of the learner. This helps learners to actively listen for information. The first time round, the learners develop a basic outline of what the contents of the topic are. With subsequent listening sessions, more clarity is achieved and students feel confident in their listening ability. The exercise is repeated through the different sections of the test paper.
2. Mind mapping is a good exercise to develop vocabulary and associations between topics. It helps to predict the words, themes, ideas in context as English has several words which have different meanings.
3. Random native speaker audio files are played in class and the trainer elicits response to questions. This helps check comprehension and if the learner understands the context. This is a

higher order thinking activity that does not include background information. However, it checks learner's ability to capture information in unknown circumstances.

The above activities are the most essential methods to stimulate listening for information that is an integral part of IELTS training. It boosts the confidence of the learner, irrespective of the level they are in and motivates them to continue the practice.

Speaking:

Speaking is one of the earliest skills a child develops, as it acquires L1. When a L2 learner is working on proficiency, he/she has to work towards articulating thoughts by the right choice of words. According to Noam Chomsky, a learner always has a higher level of 'linguistic competence' in comparison to 'performance' (1). Often students can comprehend what they hear but may not be able to communicate fluently. As such it becomes necessary that in order to get higher score, a learner must be good at speaking as well.

Activities on speaking skills:

1. Pick and Speak: This activity provides an opportunity to start the speaking process without any inhibitions. Learners pick a topic from the chat box and speak what they know about the topic. During the initial stages of the course this is a lower order thinking skill as everyday common topics are provided for the learner to speak, usually for two minutes. This is an impromptu speech and often has errors, delays, fillers and is disorganized. However as the classes progress the topics become academic in nature leading to higher order thinking skills. With practice, the learner develops

language with fewer types of filler, is able to think on the spot and speak with limited gaps.

2. Word Chain: This is an exercise that helps develop words in association with a topic. Students are given a topic and they must say a word associated with it. The chain moves from one person to another till a student doesn't have the word. Such a student is given more time, to come up with a word, but this time it is two words. Students are advised to make notes of the words that they have learnt which will help them use in the future. This is also an effective method to enhance vocabulary.

Writing Skills:

IELTS has both General and Academic writing for students to choose either work or academic purposes. Since both have different formats, the trainer has to plan the sessions where each of the learners follows their chosen option and practices accordingly. Training on letter writing, deciphering charts, maps and diagrams, essay writing and using appropriate tone in letter writing are important. Some of the activities that have shown a rapid and positive growth in learners' writing abilities include:

1. Break-up /Make-up: This is an activity that has pieces of paper which have paragraphs on a particular topic. Students are grouped into different teams and timed on putting the paragraphs in the right order. The group that finishes first is the winner. This method involves collaboration between team members, helps understand and implement order and logic in the construction of paragraphs as well offers students to work with linkers.

2. My number strongest: This is an activity similar to 'pick and speak', but here it is 'pick and write'. Students choose a topic of their choice from the list on the class board and write a few paragraphs within a five minute period. This is shared by reading out in class, and the student who has followed cohesion, coherence, vocabulary and grammar using appropriate linkers gets to be graded by the class, not by the teacher. This exercise helps learners assess their peers and also understand the expectations of an IELTS examiner.
3. Letter Writing: Students are given topics on formal and informal letters, individually. They are timed as per the test rules and when they finish, they exchange the letters among each other. Ten minutes is given to comprehend the letter and respond accordingly to the letters. The response letters are read out in class to guess what the initial topic was. The letters of those had responses closest to the topic questions are cheered by the class. The trainer identifies the problem areas for the individual students and guides them against grammatical errors. This helps them to stay focused on the topic and avoid irrelevant information.

Reading Skills:

Reading skill is one of the toughest skills in IELTS and often learners find it hard to complete the sections in time. However, with practice, it becomes easy to develop comprehension and understand the different paragraphs in a text at much faster pace. Initially the trainer has to spend a good amount of time to familiarize the learners with different reading texts. Subsequently, the learners gain confidence in answering the questions, once they learn

the art of reading for information. The following activities have been found most useful for developing reading skills:

1. Newspaper: Students are each provided a sheet of the newspaper and given time to do silent reading. They then address the class and explain the piece of news they read. Subsequently they are made to read the text loudly to ensure their comprehension matches with the text. Corrections are made where necessary. This method helps learners 'search for information' by prediction based on headings.
2. Target: This activity helps students to look for specific information in a text. Handouts with paragraphs of a text with information about dates, money, location and such other specific details are provided. Students are given time to skim the text. The teacher reads out questions about specific details and the students have to immediately locate them in the hand out. This helps students develop speed in locating information in a text.
3. Comprehension: Students are given long passages and asked to answer questions without keeping track of time. Initially, students find it hard to complete the task. However, the exercise is repeated with the teacher helping students with answers and guiding them with the process. A similar exercise on a different topic is then conducted. It has been observed that students show progress in comprehension by this method. When the activity has been repeated a few times, the exercise is conducted keeping track of time. This way the student becomes focused on locating the answers and practices answering the questions within the specific time frame.

In all the above activities, it can be seen that the process involves introducing the learner to IELTS by simple activities and then adding complex levels, with the pressure of time. By this method the trainer activates prior knowledge of the learners thus smoothly taking them through the learning process. According to David Asubel's **Subsumption theory of Advanced Organizers**, it is necessary for the teacher to activate the past knowledge of the learner before providing them with new information. This helps them to construct associations with the new information and thus organize the information in their schemata. Asubel states in his book 'The Psychology of Meaningful Verbal Learning', that the advanced organizers are introduced before the learning, and are also presented at a higher level of abstraction and as "the substantive content of a given organizer or series of organizers is selected on the basis of its suitability for explaining, integrating, and interrelating the material they precede, this strategy simultaneously satisfies the substantive as well as the programming criteria for enhancing the organization strength of cognitive structure" (Asubel 81). This is an important aspect of 'meaningful learning'. The students have to feel familiar with the topic because they always know something about it. When the trainer draws this knowledge into the training process, the learner feels confident in the process and actively participates.

Jerome Bruner in *The act of discovery, Harvard Education Review* states "**Discovery learning** is an inquiry-based, constructivist learning theory that takes place in problem solving situations where the learner draws on his or her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover facts and relationships and new truths to be learned" (Bruner 31). By

providing the learner with background information on the topic, the trainer ensures that any new knowledge gained by him/her is more of a discovery of his/her new truths and their relationship to the past knowledge. This also promotes problem solving using available information. This ensures the learner retains the information for a longer period of time due to the associations formed. Both Bruner and Lev Vygotsky recommend '**Scaffolding**' process to motivate a learner to go beyond their natural abilities. According to them, every learner needs the support of parents, peers and teachers (who act as scaffolds) to help them extend their knowledge from what they can do without help to what they can do with help. The support system is vital in the form of the social and cultural environment that the learner exists and active interaction is a vital part of learning (4). The **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** is most effectively utilized concept in the IELTS classroom. When the teacher becomes the 'scaffold' and guides the learner, he/she develops the 'ability to do certain tasks without help or assistance' (5). This crucial support helps the learner overcome difficulties in listening, speaking, writing and reading and thus develops proficiency of the English language. Also, this support motivates the learner to lose inhibition and overcome fears about his/her lack, but focus on improvement.

Stephen Krashen, in *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, states "The best methods are therefore those that supply '**comprehensible input**' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready,'" (Krashen 7) which does not

involve forced production. This **Input Hypothesis** is a key element in developing the learners L2 skills. Krashen states “It (still) maintains that *input* is the primary causative variable in second language acquisition, affective variables acting to impede or facilitate the delivery of input to the language acquisition device” (Krashen 32). In identifying what is ‘comprehensible input’, the IELTS trainer plays a vital role. Often an IELTS class is heterogeneous with students from different social environments and levels of English. Identifying their existing level of the language (**i**) and providing them a “**i +1**” **input**, is a key factor in preventing ‘**affective filters**’ such as Anxiety. But the positive affective filters such as ‘Motivation’ and ‘Self Confidence’ are enhanced when the input is truly just what the learner needs. By offering low anxiety situations, and not forcing learners to perform, by encouragement and focused training, the IELTS trainers provide them with a safe environment. Students with high motivation and self confidence have often scored high bands (above 7) in IELTS.

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Conclusion:

From the above learning theories, and by using the activities described in this paper, one may conclude that LSRW skills can be effectively improved by an IELTS aspirant by active participation in class, within a specified period of time. The trainer plays an equally important role in supporting the learner and must empathize with each learner individually. The most common limitations that prevent a learner from gaining substantial improvement are often a shy attitude, or a lack of interest in English. In such cases, it has often been found that despite the trainer’s best efforts, the learner doesn’t participate. Also the limited number of hours that one has, to develop the skills, is both encouraging and sometimes detrimental too. When a learner is keen on getting a higher score, he/she works actively on themselves. However slow learners need more time and may find it a financial burden to repeat the program. While the number of slow learners is less, IELTS trainers invariably find a marked improvement in the LSRW skills of every student who has actively participated in the program.