

1. An ethnographic study of classroom instruction in an IELTS preparation program

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ABSTRACT

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This study documents practices in an IELTS preparation class to investigate which features characterise instruction and to explore the implications for IELTS preparation programs.

This is a report of an observational study of classroom instruction in an IELTS preparation program. The study documented the pedagogy of an IELTS preparation class managed in an ELICOS adult education centre. (ELICOS – English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students.) The main purpose of the study was to provide a description of the pedagogy, and a discussion of implications based on an analysis of the classroom discourse. The qualitative study recorded the classroom practices in an eight-week program designed for students who planned to take an IELTS Test. Documentation for the study included observational notes of classes, video-recordings and audio-recordings of selected lessons, interviews and discussions with students and the teacher, and materials used for instruction.

The analysis of classroom instruction showed an eclectic teaching approach that covered information about the Test format, practising the Test tasks, awareness-raising of the constituent parts of the tasks, practical hints and strategies for doing the Test tasks, and recommendations for independent learning. Language skills were treated separately in line with the design of the IELTS Test. Much of the class work involved rehearsal for the Test with the teacher modelling and scaffolding exemplars of texts.

The study showed the complexity of preparation for the Test which engaged students in multidimensional social practices. Instruction constituted a process of socialisation into test-taking behaviours and into the priorities embodied in the Test.

AUTHOR BIODATA

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Dr Peter Mickan directs the postgraduate program in Applied Linguistics in the Discipline of Linguistics at the University of Adelaide. He supervises a postgraduate research group investigating socialisation and language practices in education. He has published papers on language learning and socialisation, IELTS assessment, CALL and bilingual education. His recent book, *Social practices, pedagogy and language use: studies in socialisation*, co-edited with I Petrescu and J Timoney (Lythrum Press, Adelaide) frames language learning as a process of socialisation into the social semiotics of communities of practice. His research interests encompass language learning and teaching, text-based curriculum design and language assessment. He is directing projects on socialisation in New Arrivals' classes, IELTS preparation and Indigenous language teacher training.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The reason for this study was to gain insights into the nature of pedagogy used to prepare candidates for IELTS Tests. Qualitative research into IELTS preparation programs is needed to gain an understanding of candidates' instructional experiences prior to taking IELTS Tests. Although other studies have examined aspects of preparation programs, their scope has been restricted, for example, to particular skills (Brown 1998) or to information gained through questionnaires (Green 2006). Research on the influence of pre-test preparation programs for IELTS is limited, as is research on the influence of pre-test preparation programs for high-stakes tests in general.

There is a lack of descriptive studies of classroom instruction of candidates preparing for IELTS. Studies of high-stakes test preparation programs have been based on data such as pre- and post-test performance scores and interviews with candidates (Robb and Ercanbrack 1999, Elder and O'Loughlin 2003, Rao et al 2003). Such studies consider the effects of specific test preparation programs on scores but are not designed to provide descriptions of classroom practices. Other research into high-stakes test preparation has studied the influence of tests on teacher behaviours. Hayes and Read (2004) compared two IELTS preparation programs in New Zealand. Their descriptions focused on the allocation of time to different tasks within the programs but did not examine the details of pedagogy or learners' behaviours.

This study documents classroom practices in an IELTS preparation class. The purpose was to investigate which features characterise instruction and to explore the implications for IELTS preparation programs. As a classroom observation study over time, it examined the significant practices in the program.

2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The original aim of this study was to explore the relationship between instructional discourses and performance on the IELTS Test to gain insights into the conditions for development of discourse skills tested in IELTS. Instruction designed to prepare candidates for IELTS is, by implication, preparation for participation in cultural practices, such as further academic studies. The study of the relationship between instruction and language skills measurement has the potential to contribute to the external credibility of a test (Brindley and Ross 2001). If the tasks that learners do as preparation for the test are tasks that facilitate language learning this is a positive result of washback (Messick 1996). The aim was to investigate the language of instruction in the preparation of students for the IELTS Test, and in particular, to explore pedagogic discourses experienced in class as preparation for taking the IELTS examination.

However, the original aim of the study was modified to a focus on classroom practices. As the collection of data proceeded, it became evident that the situated instructional practices embraced a range of activities primarily related to test-taking behaviours. The original research questions were modified in response to the particular conditions prevailing in the program. Such modifications are a factor in qualitative studies, as the documentation is determined by the events and ecology of contexts under investigation. The analysis of the data is based on the observed and recorded practices in the classroom context.

The study addressed the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the instruction in an IELTS preparation program?
2. How do the instructional practices relate to IELTS assessment tasks?
3. What are the implications for the preparation of IELTS examination candidates?

The specific objectives of the study were to:

- record (audio and video) classroom discourse in one IELTS preparation class of students with anticipated IELTS scores in the range between IELTS 4.0 and 5.5
- document the instructional resources used in class, eg texts, videos, worksheets
- transcribe the recordings of spoken language
- describe the characteristic features of the teacher's classroom discourses
- examine the language of instruction as preparation for the IELTS Test
- discuss implications of the study for the preparation of IELTS candidates.

The project documented the classroom practices as preparation for the IELTS Test. Specifically, this study examined teacher practices in relation to the IELTS tasks as preparation for candidates' test-taking. The study adopted a social frame of reference for the analysis of classroom work.

3 RESEARCH CONTEXT

This study sought to identify and describe features of instructional practices as preparation for candidates intending to sit the IELTS Test. There is a growing acceptance of the view that the teaching and evaluation of language activity needs to be done at a discourse level (McCarthy 1998, Mickan 2000). Today, sociocultural theories are having a significant impact on the interpretation of classroom experiences and on the analysis of the development of language skills (Kramsch 2002, Lantolf 2000, Mickan et al 2006). Ethnographic studies provide insights into the social processes of language learning (Saville-Troike 1997). Qualitative studies provide insights into learners' experiences of instruction (Unsworth 2000). Qualitative studies of assessment are designed to gain an understanding of candidates' experiences of testing (Harrison 2004, Mickan, Slater and Gibson 2000, Torrance 1995, Weeden et al 2002).

The theoretical principles underpinning this study are based on a social perspective of language learning. Given the complexity of situated language use, it is necessary to document classroom discourse without reducing the parameters of literacy and oracy events to segregated linguistic items. The first principle is that classroom discourse experiences socialise learners into the language practices associated with cultural activities. This is a process of socialisation, as learners participate in socially situated language uses (Barton et al 2000, Mickan 2007, 2006b). From a socialisation perspective of language learning, the IELTS Tests can be viewed as measures for ascertaining the readiness of candidates to take part in society's activities in a language other than their own. In effect, the learners in IELTS preparation classes are taking apprenticeships in the discourses measured in the IELTS Tests. The second principle is that the development of learners' communicative resources is a result of taking part in the discursive practices, both spoken and written, of speech communities such as language classes (Mickan 2006a). Verbal interaction with more experienced speakers and with peers builds learners' language resources and therefore conceptual knowledge and understanding of experiences (Vygotsky 1962).

In previous studies of the IELTS Writing components, the importance of social factors in assessment has been identified, as they impact on interpretation of prompts (Mickan, Slater and Gibson 2000), and on composition of candidate responses (Mickan and Slater 2003). In another study, the complexity of the process of composition was described and the need for instructors to emphasise the social purposes of communicative tasks was highlighted (Mickan 2003). Studies of oral testing have examined social factors which impact on performance, in particular, in the way the contexts and purposes of oral tests influence spoken language achievement (Yu and Mickan 2005). These studies suggest that the classroom discourse experiences of candidates constitute important experiences for performance on tests. For this study, classroom instructional practices were documented and analysed in order to consider these experiences as preparation for taking an IELTS Test. The ethnographic

approach enabled exploration of a range of factors without limiting the parameters under consideration.

4 LITERATURE REVIEW

Significant research has been conducted into the effects of testing, and in particular high-stakes examinations, on teacher behaviour. In the literature this effect is called washback. Washback refers to the influence of tests on teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall 1993). Wall and Horak (2006) have reported the initial stage of a longitudinal project documenting the impact of changes in the TOEFL examination on teaching and learning. The study highlights the need for testing institutions to be aware of the impact that exams have on teaching and learning. Generally there is an understanding that washback relates to what can be described as normal teaching and learning procedures. In their 1993 paper, Alderson and Wall called attention to the need for empirical evidence of washback. This effect has been investigated in a variety of contexts, using a variety of methodologies. Alderson and Wall (1993) proposed a set of 15 hypotheses to encourage a systematic approach to the study of washback. In the same year, Wall and Alderson (1993) published findings from their detailed, longitudinal study into washback from the Sri Lankan impact study. This study used classroom observations over two years to discover whether changes to classroom practice could be observed following the introduction of a new O Level English exam. The results of the study found that there was no conclusive evidence for washback in teacher methodology – “there are many reasons why this might have been happening, but the most obvious one that emerged from later interviews was that many teachers did not really understand what the exam was testing or what the textbook was teaching in the first place”. (Wall and Alderson, 1993, p 55)

Research has investigated washback as a result of tests designed to bring about educational change. The tests included high school exit exams, university entrance exams and standardised tests across regions. Read and Hayes (2003) investigated two IELTS examination preparation courses with a focus on teacher behaviour. Classroom observations, document collection and teacher interviews were all used to form a picture of the content of IELTS preparation programs. Read and Hayes (2003) describe tasks, and time allocated to those tasks in the preparation courses, but do not investigate closely the tasks themselves or the language of instruction.

Brown (1998) compared the pre- and post-program IELTS scores of students in an IELTS preparation program and in a general EAP program. He concluded that the IELTS preparation program gave the students a better chance of score gain than the general EAP program. However, his description of classroom behaviours was limited to summaries of teacher allocation of time to tasks related to the four skills and a discussion of the teaching of writing. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) studied TOEFL preparation courses. Their investigation of washback on teacher behaviour compared two teachers in different contexts. The teachers were observed teaching both TOEFL preparation courses and general English lessons. The scope of this study covered observations of classes over one week. Their study reported the differences between the two teachers’ behaviours, indicating one of the complexities of qualitative research which compares different classes. However, they also reported “substantial differences between TOEFL and non-TOEFL classes” (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons 1996, p 289), suggesting the possible influence of tests on teaching.

Green (2006) used questionnaires to explore the influence of teachers’ priorities on learners preparing for the IELTS Academic Writing test. He suggests the need for “more sensitive instruments” such as in-depth interviews and classroom observations to take account of different perspectives on washback. Other studies of interest include Elder and O’Loughlin’s (2003) depiction of candidates’ lives, statistically considering many possible factors in determining learner success in the IELTS Test. One of the factors considered is time spent in IELTS preparation courses. Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) studied the effectiveness of TOEIC preparation courses. Their report used pre- and post-test

scores and descriptions of course content to determine if preparation courses were effective in their Japanese university context. Their research highlighted the need for more detailed descriptions of teaching in test preparation programs.

In his IELTS impact study, Hawkey (2006) has described features of IELTS preparation courses. The descriptions are based on teacher and learner questionnaires and video-taping of 10 IELTS preparation course lessons. General features of these courses have been summarised as:

- “learners who are motivated, but sometimes to the extent of wanting, even demanding, a narrower IELTS focus than their teacher would otherwise tend to offer
- teachers’ preference for task-based, often inter-related, macro-skills activities, involving micro-skills relevant to IELTS
- the use of materials from within and beyond the textbook
- multicultural learning and communicating between learners, often one of the most engaging features in mixed nationality classes
- an ethos of focused activity within a coherent, often learner-centred, institutional approach to preparation for IELTS
- teacher willingness to try a range of teaching methods and approaches.”
(Hawkey 2006, pp 112-113)

This impact study identified the need for further research into IELTS preparation courses such as the research reported in this paper.

5 METHODOLOGY

This study investigated an IELTS preparation class in an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) centre in Adelaide, South Australia. Recent changes in Australian immigration policy have meant that the number of candidates for the IELTS Test has increased rapidly in Adelaide. As a result, there is student demand for IELTS preparation courses. The site for the study was chosen as the centre enrolled students from different backgrounds who had experienced different English language instruction. The student enrolments in the centre were considered typical of the range of students preparing to take the IELTS Test in Australia.

This project applied an integrated, ethnographic approach to the analysis of the discourses of classroom instruction (Mickan 2000). The method was to describe the instructional practices in the preparation class and to investigate how the instruction prepared students for the Test. The researchers were experienced in classroom research. They considered documentation of practices and discourses of teachers as valuable sources of information about learning opportunities. A specific interest in this study was the role of instructional discourses in the preparation of students. The candidates in the study were non-native speakers of English. Appendix 1 gives an overview of the widely different backgrounds and experiences of candidates and their reasons for taking the program.

The IELTS class was held one day a week for eight weeks. The students were enrolled in English language preparation programs as well as in the IELTS preparation course. IELTS candidates in the centre were invited to enrol in the course and to participate in the study. Students’ agreement for participation in the study was obtained. The teacher, who was experienced in teaching English as a second language, gave permission for involvement in the study, and for recording and interviewing as part of the data collection. The second author of this report observed classes for the full period of the program and audio-recorded all lessons except for the first one. The final two weeks’ lessons were video-recorded. The focus of the data collection was on the teacher’s pedagogy. The recordings were transcribed to provide an accurate record of spoken language. As the study was primarily interested in how the teacher prepared students, the teacher’s classroom talk comprises most of the data.

The teacher was interviewed and lessons and preparation for lessons discussed. Resources used in lessons were also collected and analysed.

6 THE IELTS PREPARATION COURSE

The IELTS preparation course ran over eight weeks for three hours each Friday morning. There was a nominal total of 24 teaching hours but classes regularly ran into break time. The IELTS preparation course was offered to students enrolled in General English in intermediate and higher level classes as an elective. Students were offered a choice in their program — IELTS preparation or attendance in a General English class. The program commenced with over 20 students but after the first two weeks, the large class, with its wide range of levels and target scores, was separated into two classes. This resulted in an academic class and a general class. The study followed the general class for the remaining weeks.

This was the first time a specific IELTS preparation course had been offered at the centre. As the course was new, the curriculum evolved over the eight weeks, with the teacher responding to student needs, taking into consideration balanced coverage of skills required for the Test. The teacher used a range of resources – IELTS practice tests, IELTS course books, internet resources and materials used for teaching general English. She devised several worksheets and pro-formas for classwork and for students' individual study.

Student information was collected through a class-based “interview your partner exercise” in the first session. Additional information was collected through small group meetings and email requests for further information. Students in the class were from the institution's intermediate proficiency level. The majority had a goal of 5.5 for the General IELTS Test. Student ages ranged from 18 to 39 years. The students came from various South-East Asian countries (Appendix 1). Their plans for the future included applying for permanent residency in Australia and further study leading to tertiary degrees and diplomas.

The teacher had six years of experience teaching English as a second language (ESL). Her experiences included teaching migrants and international students in Australia and overseas. This was her first IELTS preparation course but she had taught exam preparation courses previously, in particular, the Cambridge First Certificate and Cambridge Certificate in Advanced English. The teacher's tertiary studies included English and Education. She had prior experience working as a pre-school teacher. The teacher holds CELTA and other certificate level qualifications in TESOL.

The class was held in the same room each week. The room comfortably seated up to 26 students. It was well equipped with a television and video-recorder, a large whiteboard, overhead projector and screen. Desks were small, rectangular and portable for arranging different configurations of seating. The room was well lit but had no windows. The room was air-conditioned. One hour of one session was spent in a computer laboratory. The computer laboratory was bright and spacious with a computer for each student. Students in the institution had access to networked computers in the library during break times and after classes. Student seating arrangements in the classroom varied with the teacher directing some students where to sit or to work with nominated partners.

7 DOCUMENTATION OF CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Classroom events were observed and recorded by one of the researchers. Before starting observations, consideration was given to the use of an observation scheme but the decision was made not to use one. This followed discussion of the possible restrictions of using a pre-determined schema, as there would be possibilities for overlooking classroom practices based on a set of externally developed criteria. Field notes were unrestricted by prior categorisations and drew attention to classroom events which

struck the researchers as noteworthy. This decision was informed by Hayes and Read's (2004) experience of classroom observations in which the observation schedule omitted elements of classroom behaviour, in particular, "times when the teacher gave the students information about the test or discussed test-taking strategies" (Hayes and Read 2004, p 103).

The decision to transcribe each of the audio-recorded lessons also resulted in ample data and an opportunity to revisit each of the lessons to develop a rich picture of events. Seven of the eight sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed. During and following transcription, further comment was added to the field notes. The two final sessions were video-recorded. Worksheets and handouts used in lessons were collected by the researcher. Samples of student work, practice tests, homework and an IELTS course placement test administered after the seventh session were also collected.

The researcher interviewed the teacher weekly with an open-ended schedule. The meetings were held on Tuesday mornings, away from the language centre. This provided opportunities for the researcher and teacher to talk without interruptions and without the time pressures of a teaching day. The meetings provided a valuable opportunity to address assumptions made by the researcher and to nurture the relationship between teacher and researcher, which influenced positively the teacher's reactions to the researcher's presence in the classroom. It is possible that the increased communication between teacher and researcher had some influence on the classroom behaviour of the teacher. The authors discussed the implications of this for the study and decided that the benefit of the increased insights into the teacher's decision-making was more important than the effects on her instruction. The meetings were valuable for attempting to gain an action perspective on classroom events and to understand the teacher's motivation behind her instructional decisions.

The class was established as a specific purpose class to prepare students for the IELTS Test. The class was additional to students' other studies in English so the IELTS preparation program was only one of the many influences on students during the course. The students in the class were legitimate peripheral members of the class community in terms of the IELTS Test. The teacher had not taught IELTS previously and was invited to take the IELTS class by her centre. The class community developed over time, which is a natural characteristic of communities of practice as they change and transform in order to realise common goals (Mickan 2006a).

The following analysis is based on the transcripts of the lessons, observational notes taken during lessons, notes from discussions with the teacher and documents such as worksheets used for teaching. The focus of the study is on pedagogy so the analysis of the transcripts concentrates on the identification of significant patterns and regular features of the teacher's practices. The numbering of extracts identifies the page numbers of the transcripts, notes and documents. Although the classroom events embraced many complex social interactions, the analysis includes the normal, typical and most frequent practices.

8 THE PEDAGOGY

The pedagogy was teacher directed and IELTS focused. Dominant activities were test practice, skills-focused activities, and explanations of the format and content of the IELTS modules and of test-taking procedures.

The pedagogic focus of the class was on preparation for the IELTS Test. The teacher, as manager of the class, directed tasks and controlled information exchanges, except for group work and pair work activities. In her instructional role, the teacher mediated interpretations of the practices which constituted the IELTS Test, the processes of test-taking, students' preparation for the Test and the students' test-taking procedures. The classroom transcripts show the teacher in the role of manager. The teacher framed the content of lessons, chose the tasks for the class and directed the activities. The following extract is an example of a lesson preview.

The schedule for today is we're going the way that I can encourage you to study for the exam to help you, to think about your exam schedule and how you're going to study for the exam and then we're going to look at reading passage one and look at some exam techniques for that and I'm going to give you some of my ideas and you're going to give me some of your ideas on how to handle reading passage one of the exam and then unfortunately for some of you in the second session we're going to do a writing exam and that's only to see your level and it's just to help me to know what you need in the IELTS class... (29)

The complexity of the teaching role is highlighted in the extract above. IELTS preparation covers a wide range of possible tasks and topics, as indicated in this introduction. From the multiple topics which could be addressed in a preparation program, the teacher had to select those that she considered most important for the students in this lesson. In the preview the teacher set the tasks for the lesson and also gave a partial overview of the range of tasks in the program. She outlined her role in support of the students' study for the Test. It included encouraging study for the Test; looking at one of the IELTS components; test-taking techniques; and doing written test practice to evaluate students' level of performance and to use this information to fill the gaps in terms of student needs. The preparation of students for an examination as comprehensive as the IELTS requires an instructor to make selections in content and in the planning and sequencing of lessons and lesson activities.

The teacher adopted an authoritative role to meet student expectations: *I know what will help students to pass IELTS. Listen to my advice* (6). Although the students did tasks in pairs and groups, monologic talk comprised a significant part of the lessons as the teacher directed student preparations. An examination requires close adherence to instructions and guidelines as well as performance under pressure of time. For maximum performance, students need to have internalised the rubrics and requirements and expectations of a test. The teacher as manager prepared students for test conditions in a variety of ways. She set tasks for students to gain experience in exam procedures and at the same time emphasised the value of working in lessons: *If you do it in class you will do it in the exam* (10). She signalled the importance of the program for their test-taking behaviours. Preparation is rehearsal for an examination and becoming familiar with its scripts. Given the complexity of the test scripts and the need for making sense of different instructions and tasks, developing understanding of the different texts which comprise the examination is appropriate. Class activities included practice tests, reviewing answers to test questions, scrutinising rubrics, discussing Examiners' expectations, and talking about the Test situation. The teacher modelled components of the Test, giving test practice across modules.

The teacher was responsive to student questions, concerns and needs. Early in the program, she undertook an informal needs analysis, setting a practice writing exam to determine writing levels.

In the second session we're going to do a writing exam and that's only to see your level and it's just to help me to know what you need in the IELTS class. (29)

The teacher as manager responded to student issues by giving them time to do tasks in class, setting opportunities to work together and to help each other in class. The agency of the teacher in setting the agenda is a reflection of the importance of the program for students and their expectation of guidance in their preparation for the Test. In addition, the issues of power and control in high-stakes testing were emphasised through the teacher's regular references to appropriate candidate behaviours in the examination.

8.1 Student participation in the classroom

The role of teacher as manager positioned students as respondents who reacted to the teacher's directions. Tasks were teacher initiated. In groups and pairs, students controlled what was going on as they worked together on joint activities. In the course of a lesson students engaged in many different activities, as recorded in the lesson notes:

- students spend 20 minutes on questions on spoken IELTS test working out answers to the questions (200)
- group work talk – paraphrasing an essay written by the teacher – structured practice (205)
- group working well on brainstorming (245).

Students had opportunities to ask questions and to initiate topics. Students worked together on exercises, on analysis of sections of the Test and on preparation of answers to test questions. Tasks were followed by student reporting, checking of answers and responding to the teacher's questions.

The collaborative work gave students a lot of experience in exam-related language use. The class activities and the teacher's discourse immersed them in different literacy practices so that, in addition to receiving instruction on Test components, students engaged in oral and literate discourses which were fitting preparation for the discourses tested in IELTS. As students listened to the teacher, and talked and wrote together during pair and group work, they were practising meaning-making in English. The instructions and the advice they heard from the teacher constructed an orientation to, and anticipation of, the exam context.

8.2 Raising awareness of test features

The teacher devoted a significant amount of class time to explanations about studying for the Test, the Test components and test-taking strategies. The consciousness-raising discourse targeted exam procedures to prepare students for the Test situation, to familiarise them with the contents of the test, and to give them experience in the application of test-taking strategies. The teacher's explanations included general comments about the nature of the IELTS Test and the rating procedure. The general advice included recommendations on how students should independently prepare for the Test:

Very important you do a lot of study in your spare time if you want to pass the IELTS – serious business. (5)

She gave practical advice on private, pre-test study:

Study an IELTS, look at the back of an IELTS book, the back of IELTS books, test books actually give you examples of writing. Study the exam questions...then check the answers in the book. (32)

She used activities to develop student skills in speaking on a topic or drafting an argument, for example, brainstorming, which students took part in during most lessons:

Do you know what brainstorming is? ...preparing to talk for one minute, preparing to talk for one minute... (72)

Speaking as a knowledgeable instructor, the teacher gave advice on test-taking tactics and behaviours, including what students should and shouldn't do in the test situation:

Timing is very important...I have to keep an eye on the clock. The more you practise timing you will feel more confident. (5)

Never ever ever copy the topic question into the book. (8)

Tidiness is important it affects your overall score. (166)

Concentrate really hard...keep practising when you go to the exam...you must listen to the instructions... (174)

The teacher's explanations of the features of tests anticipated test conditions and the possible impact on students. By stressing the difficulty of sections of the exam, and the purpose of the increasing difficulty of the Speaking module, she intended to prepare students for this facet of the Test:

...in the IELTS exam you know that there are many sections to the speaking exam...so it starts off nice and easy and towards the end becomes quite difficult and at the end of the lis, of the speaking exam what happens is that students become quite nervous so they leave the exam room and the last question is the most difficult question and then they think Oh my gosh, I was terrible in the IELTS exam but actually they might have been quite good...that last question is really hard is because we're trying to separate the high and the low level students, so it's their chance to see who is really strong... (119)

These instructions were a process of socialisation into test taking by raising awareness of what the Test required in terms of test-taking behaviours, interpreting prompts and managing time. The teacher's representation of the Test was developed further in skills-based activities.

9 THE FOUR SKILLS

Although this was a specific purpose class, preparation covered a wide range of parameters. The translation of the broad concept of preparation for IELTS into a teaching program involved a process of choices – the selection of what to include and what to highlight in the program. A significant pedagogic choice was following the IELTS Test structure that segments verbal communication into four skills. Preparation on the four skills individually made up most of the classroom work as the teacher prepared the students for the different modules of the IELTS Test.

9.1 Speaking

The class was conducted in English so students heard, read, wrote and spoke a lot of exam-related discourse relevant to sitting the Test. For the Speaking module, the teacher focused on students practising English related to the test tasks and also gave advice on what to do in the test situation.

9.1.1 Practice speaking tasks

The teacher set tasks developed by her or selected from IELTS preparation materials for students to practise speaking on a range of topics.

Just relax, sit back and relax, ok, let's just go through some thoughts here, practising speaking regularly is the key to getting a higher mark, absolutely, if you want to get a higher mark in the IELTS, not only do you have to practise general speaking, but you also have to practise actual speaking exams as much as possible because there is a certain style of speaking that you will need for the exam... (260)

Practice speaking and brainstorming for a few minutes was done frequently so students gained experience in unplanned talk, expression of opinions and arguing points of view. She invited students to think about what topics they might need to discuss, helping them to envisage possible topics:

- Teacher: What kind of topics do you think the IELTS exam will test you on what kind of topics what kind of topics just talk to your partner what topics do you think you will have in the IELTS exam talking quietly with your partner
- Students: History, environment, medicine, newspaper. (29-30)

The teacher modelled talking on topics and also set discussion tasks on topics students might encounter. This covered different topics and required speaking without prior planning.

Do you believe that plastic surgery should be banned? Do you believe that smoking should be banned in public places? (283)

We'll just speak for one minute on this topic and then we're going to move. (251)

The teacher and researcher modelled talking on a topic. This followed the structure of an argument genre:

We're going to look at today is structuring an argument...I'm just going to ask you to begin discussing this question for about five minutes, so, should mothers work full time or should they stay at home, with children, between the ages of 0 and 7, so should mothers work full time... (119-120)

In the discussion which followed she used questions to build perspectives on the topic.

Teacher: Ok, so what were your ideas, what were your ideas, women should stay at home 0-7, who agrees with me?

Student S: Yes!

Teacher: Who agrees, why, come on K, Why?

Student K: Because, umm, many years ago, when I was err, umm five years old, my parents didn't stay at home.

Teacher: Did it affect you? Did it hurt you?

Student K: Yeah! (119-120)

Through the interactions the students and teacher formulated a series of arguments:

Student K: Because they had to go to work (120)

Teacher: It affects children (120)

Student S: I agree it is better if the mother stay at home with the children but if the family income is not enough umm, umm then they should work full time I think. (121)

Student S: When the children are, start, when the children go to the primary school then the mother can do some part-time job because they go to school they don't need to take care. (121)

Over the course of this section of the lesson, teacher and students jointly constructed arguments related to the topic. Then the researcher and teacher debated the topic at length, exposing the students to discourse resources for the expression of opinions and points of view: *I certainly believe...; it's really important...; I don't think that's the issue... (124); I think that...; I agree with you on all the points...; I can understand what you are saying...but I still believe that... (126); My conclusion is that... (127).*

The teacher then played the tape recording of the debate and students took notes while listening to it. The researcher transcribed the recording and this was used for teacher's explanations of specific discourse characteristics. Students worked with the transcript to identify statements, re-stating an argument, use of examples and expressions of opinion. The teacher then analysed the structuring of an argument:

So writing an essay of course, if it's an opinion essay then it's a requirement that you state your opinion at the start. (133)

The demonstration and analysis of argument structure continued with both teacher and researcher presenting perspectives on the topic. Students observed the development of a spoken argument and practised stating arguments with one another.

Teacher: This person believes or firmly believes...how many reasons does she give
Students: Three (193)

Frequently, the teacher set students time for talking on a range of topics with a partner for rehearsing expression of opinions. Through teacher-directed modelling of texts, students examined the language of arguments and expression of opinions.

9.1.2 Advice on test-taking techniques for Speaking

The teacher advised on many aspects of taking examinations. She noted the social context of the oral examination:

Of course, this is a social interaction, how do you handle yourself in a social situation. (12)

She reminded students of appropriate behaviour when meeting the Examiner in the oral examination:

Don't forget to shake hands, smile, good morning, how are you, show confidence, show confidence (260).

Advice included what students might expect in the Test and what techniques and strategies they might adopt in their responses. She stressed the importance of addressing the topic:

When you're answering the question...remember stick to the topic, focus on the topic, one of the biggest problems in the IELTS, in the speaking, the writing is students don't talk about the topic, stick to the topic... (139)

The teacher recognised the students' dilemma when faced with an unfamiliar topic, so although she emphasised the need for students to keep talking, she advised the following:

So just keep talking and one of the ways to, if you're in a difficult situation, is to talk about personal experiences, talk about your own city or a friend, talk about something that happened close to you home or in your country, or just something that's in the news in your country, just for example, but don't stop talking. (82)

Try to stick to the subject but if you can't answer you can move the subject to something you do know. (12)

The teacher commented here on the socially determined conventions of spoken discourse but pointed out that students could nominate topics as well. She offered comment on the perspective of the Examiner:

...examiner's more worried about general communication rather than every single mistake...communication is vitally important... (261)

The teacher advised students to practise speaking frequently out of class:

...organise points for talking on unprepared topic for one minute, practise, quick notes about the topic, practise this at home. (13)

The teacher proposed practical techniques for the avoidance of communication breakdown. She modelled specific utterances to be used in specific situations, for example, if a student is unfamiliar with a topic or does not comprehend the Examiner:

Could you explain that please, I'm not sure I know, I'm not sure what you mean by that, sorry I don't understand the meaning of the topic, using this language is part of social conversation.

... you just say I'm sorry I don't know what you're talking about, I'm sorry, and it's honest, so be honest...etc. (84)

The teacher also suggested paraphrasing:

...if you don't know one word, try and think of another way to explain the word... (84)

The teacher proposed strategies for keeping a conversation going.

T: ...the Examiner asks you a big question, what do you say, what do you do?

S: Listen

T: You, you listen, that, ok...ok, yes, what else...you try to understand, the question, you mean you ask them again...if you do not understand the question what are you going to do?

S: Ask

S: Repeat

S: Pardon...

T: [teacher expands] could you say that again please, pardon me, I, I think pardon me, I, I would actually say could you say that again please, could you repeat that please, ok. (183)

To build students' discourse resources for talking in the Test she made suggestions for expansions and for alternative expressions for maintaining a discussion. The teacher's instruction combined modelling expressions with explanations for the use of strategies.

The teacher's talk included familiarisation with the content, components and format of tests. This included the kind of questions likely to be asked and the need for students to think about likely questions and to practise them:

T: Do you think these [personal data] questions are common questions in the IELTS exam?

S: Yes. (144)

During a speaking practice session she directed attention to the section in which the questions might appear:

T: When do you think they could ask you these questions in the IELTS, these sort of questions?

S: One

T: In, in Part One...could be in the final section of the speaking exam (183)

She explained that the last part of the Speaking test was more difficult, like the Listening test, but advised students to attempt to continue taking part in the interaction:

Even if you just use some of this language it shows that you are confident...you are controlling the situation ... (187)

The teacher used class time to familiarise students with the nature of the Test through explanations about the format and content and by suggesting practical strategies for use in the Test.

9.2 Writing

Preparation for the Writing module of IELTS covered the components that comprise the Test, how to prepare for doing the tasks and what procedures to follow in doing the tasks.

9.2.1 Writing task practice

The teacher prepared students by focusing on the different tasks and text types in the Writing module. As with preparation for the Speaking module, the teacher drew attention to the features of the different test components:

How many tasks do you have to do? (86)

She pointed out the initial decisions students need to make in the exam:

What's the first thing you do? ...The first thing is we read the in...read the instructions. ...mark the key words...read the instructions, underline to understand the meaning of the instructions, the meaning of the question, step two, decide if it's formal or informal...first think about the meaning... (104-105)

Over the course of the program, the teacher repeated such instructions, reinforcing students' application of practical procedures to examination conditions. She instructed them to attend to the meaning and decide on the register for the task, whether formal or informal. She continued:

...then you can start planning...paragraph one, what will you have in paragraph one? (106)

The students were instructed to plan and structure their responses. This was done with reference to an example in a textbook. She set a task for students to identify the discourse features which distinguish informal writing from formal writing:

We're going to look at a letter and in your groups you're going to decide what is formal and what is informal, which one is correct, which one is incorrect... (89)

After the students had completed the task, they reported back on features that characterised the letter as a formal text: form of address, avoidance of slang and impolite terms, complex phrases, use of passive voice, use of modal verbs, and signing the letter. The teacher discussed these with the class.

The teacher suggested students analyse the correspondence they receive for identification of formal and informal lexicogrammatical features of letters:

It's a really good idea to start making lists at home so when you get your letters in the post box or when you read a letter write down the, the formal and then maybe ask your friend or your teacher or you homestay or look it up in the dictionary and see what the informal is, just keep a list in your files. (103)

The analysis of correspondence was intended to raise student awareness of register differences between texts.

Students' preparation for the Task 2 essay included brainstorming ideas in groups and then structuring the ideas with paragraphs:

T: [gives class different topics] ...to discuss in groups as practice for writing exam; you are going to prepare some brainstorming and structure essays for each one...you do your brainstorming as you see there, then you move to the next topic, you do your brainstorming, you do your paragraph one, two, three, and keep going until you've finished all the topics, ok and the reason why we're doing this is to practise what, what are we practising?

Ss: Speaking and writing (219)

She drew attention to the structure of the essay text.

With the second task in the writing, because you need to learn how to structure an argument, how to put an argument together, that's one of the most difficult things in the exam, so what we're going to look at today is structuring an argument. (119)

The teacher and researcher gave instructions on the generic structure of an argument text in which writers express opinions:

Researcher: *So writing an essay of course, if it's an opinion essay, then it's a requirement that you state your opinion at the start. (133)*

The use of a pro-forma provided students with a format for planning the essay:

Teacher: *Now we're going to look at brainstorming ideas for an essay...using this pro-forma where you have some space for brainstorming and then some space for the structure before you write an essay (133) ...so I look at how to organise those into coherent paragraphs, paragraph one I'm going to talk about personal, so I need to have a topic sentence... (134)*

In addition to the use of the pro-forma and comments on the structure of the essay, the teacher and researcher orally modelled an argument, which was recorded, and transcribed by the students:

That was an educated argument, so we were arguing our points...rewind tapes and you're going to write the argument as you hear it...working as a group... (127)

By listening to the recording and then transcribing it, the students were rehearsing the discourse components of an essay. The transcript was used to emphasise expressions for constructing arguments:

When you make, when you, when you give a statement, you're actually giving your opinion, you're actually making a statement, (129) ...discussing argument, restating the statement, that is a strong argument. (132)

The content of paragraphs was discussed to illustrate generic structure of the essay:

Researcher: *So I've got all my ideas, still a bit messy, but those are my ideas around why should women stay around, go to work, all the rest of it...So I look at how to organise those into coherent paragraphs, paragraph one I'm going to talk about personal, so I need to have a topic sentence... (135)*

The focus of instruction is at the level of text or genre, with specific wording used to realise the social purpose, which was the expression of opinions in an argument essay.

9.2.2 Practical advice for the Writing module

The lessons covered practical hints on a range of matters, for example length of the essay: *Word count is very important for the overall score...If you write more than 250 words you're wasting your time.* (271)

The teacher discussed with students how they should prepare in their own time by writing regularly.

T: How about writing? Talk to your partner about writing what can you do to practise writing for the IELTS? ...OK. Writing – what are your ideas?

S: Diary.

T: Writing a diary, what do you think that diary will help you to practise? ...It helps you practise your grammar, the words you learn in class, it helps you remember all those things by writing a diary. What else can you do everyday?

S: A letter.

T: Writing a letter, remember if you are doing the general academic you might want to write a letter. Practise letter writing. (32)

She reminded students of text variations which changed with the purposes and recipients of texts.

Ok. Good. Writing emails to friends, yeah, good, that's fine, remember that emails are not the same as formal letters so...maybe, maybe if you're writing email, remember that style... (36)

The teacher stressed the importance of addressing the topic and proposed that students do the essay question first:

Always read the question very carefully...to make sure that you answer it completely. I would do the essay first, it's the harder one... (271)

She reminded students to plan before composing the text.

You've got to plan...brainstorm, you have to plan, brainstorm, um plan your letter as well as your essay...brainstorm and plan, first paragraph I'm going to think, next are...what vocab you need for a letter. (272)

Preparation for the Writing module included explanations about the tasks, modelling and analysis of responses to the tasks with a particular focus on text level features, and practical advice on techniques.

9.3 Reading

The teacher targeted the type of tasks comprising the Reading module. She discussed topics which might appear in the Reading:

What kind of topics do you think you're going to get in the reading exam? Give me some ideas. (30)

Students proposed various topics: history, environment, medicine. They talked about how to prepare for the topics:

T: What kind of things should you be reading everyday?

S: Newspapers.

T: Newspapers. So you would agree that you should be reading something once a day or maybe once a week?

The teacher advised students to read out of class to expand their knowledge of vocabulary.

So how are you going to be prepared for the exam if you never practise your reading? When you don't have the vocabulary. Your reading is really really important. (31)

A central focus for reading was attention to the overall meanings of texts:

It's important to keep reading for meaning. (9)

In discussing the approach to the Reading tasks, she instructed students to read the whole passage to find out what it is about before going through the questions:

Look at the meaning of the article...I would strongly recommend that you read the whole article. (42)

She recommended an initial reading to determine the topic:

...read whole article...reading it for gist, for general information, gist, just to get an idea about the passage...I read it once...two, I read it again...what is the main topic...general meaning... (43)

She then suggested underlining a few key words (43) and the topic sentence and re-reading the text:

I've underlined the topic, underlined the topic sentences. I read it again. The most important thing is to understand. (44)

She advised students to consider the context of words and to guess meanings of single words from the context. Students worked together reading sample texts and composing responses to questions. In class they used sample tests from IELTS preparation materials, with students working together and checking answers with the teacher. The teacher wrote texts as examples for analysis in class. The teacher reminded students to concentrate on the meaning of a paragraph rather than single words.

[To two students reading an essay written by the teacher] Are you discussing the meaning of the paragraph or just each word? You need to discuss the paragraph, what do you think it means? (206)

Students took supervised practice tests, timed and answered on test sheets, to become familiar with the format and time constraints of the Test. They also read texts together and prepared answers which were then checked in class, with the teacher giving feedback on responses. Apart from the lessons in which instruction focused on the Reading module, the students also had extensive reading experience in their preparation for other sections of the Test as they studied model essays, scanned transcripts and discussed test instructions.

9.4 Listening

During the eight weeks, students were exposed to lots of listening in class, attending to the teacher's instructions and working together on many tasks. She asked students to suggest how they might prepare for the Listening module. Students suggested listening to TV news, talking with homestay families and watching TV shows (32-33). She advised students to practise listening – with others and with IELTS practice materials:

If you want to do better in the, in the IELTS listening exam, you have to practise, practise, practise, practise...the more you practise the more that you will see the pattern in the exam, the more confident you will become, the more techniques you will begin to learn and the better you will get, you've got to do a listening exam almost, I would say every week, I would say every week, ok (266).

The teacher suggested listening in different contexts to learn vocabulary (149). She answered students' questions about test procedures (266). As with the other skills, the teacher explained the content and procedures of the Listening test. She talked about the social context of the Listening test:

Listening in an exam is an unnatural situation, nobody sits next to a tape-recorder in their own language. (266)

She reminded the students of the need for accuracy in writing responses.

Although, however, they're testing your listening skills, be careful, that is the same for reading, spelling and grammar are extremely important...if you spell things incorrectly you'll get it wrong... (268)

The class took practice tests under examination conditions using commercial materials (146), which were corrected in class. A tape script was analysed:

I'm going to talk about the IELTS exam and some ideas about the IELTS exam...look at the tape script and you start thinking about where the answers are now the tape script doesn't give you the answers like this but it gives you the ideas about where the answers are...why study the tape script – check your answers...learn new vocab...post listening task. (150-151)

The teacher used the transcript to show students how discourse patterns in the text related to responses:

So while you're going through your tape script you should be writing these things down, and you will see patterns in the test of what they're testing (164).

The analysis focused student attention on identification of key wordings in the Listening passages (165):

I'm going to check the answers so that first thing you do is you take your tape script and you look at the tape script and you start thinking about where the answers are. Now the tape script doesn't give you the answers like this but it gives you the ideas about where the answers are... (150)

The teacher used the script to explain to students discourse markers for change of topic, such as prepositions of time (151). She encouraged the students to revisit listening tests and to read the transcripts provided at the back of IELTS preparation text books while listening to the texts. Through close analysis of the transcripts, the teacher advised the students they would be able to find patterns for locating the information for their answers. She demonstrated the analysis in class.

Class preparation for the Listening module covered practical advice on what to expect in the Test, experiencing taking practice tests, and the analysis of transcripts and responses.

10 DISCUSSION

The documentation and analysis of an IELTS preparation program underscores the multiple factors invoked in high-stakes assessment such as the IELTS Test. Wall and Horak (2006) conducted a baseline study of teaching and learning in TOEFL preparation courses in Central and Eastern Europe, which included limited classroom observations using schedules. In the skills relevant to TOEFL, they found that teachers did not instruct in listening subskills, that there was some “brushing up of grammar” (Wall and Horak 2006, p 108), that vocabulary learning was a focus in teaching reading, and that the teaching of writing focused on paragraph structure. They commented that teachers’ choice of content was heavily influenced by the course-books used for teaching.

The pedagogy in the class observed in this study covered knowledge of the Test format, practising the tasks which make up the Test, awareness-raising of the constituent parts of the tasks, practical hints and strategies for doing the test tasks, and recommendations for independent learning. The preparation extended beyond the content of the Test to building students’ understanding of social factors impinging on test-takers: anticipating anxiety in taking the Test, maintaining communication in the oral test and reflecting on raters’ judgements. The teacher directed student attention to the Test modules and testing situation, consistently emphasising the relationship of classroom tasks to test-taking procedures. The influence of the IELTS Test on the teaching approach was evident in the separate treatment of skills, the talk about the Test and the test techniques, and the nature of classroom activities.

The teaching approach in this class was eclectic with the following features characterising the pedagogy:

1. teacher-directed instruction
2. content based on IELTS Test components with segregated instruction of the four skills
3. rehearsal of test-taking with practice tasks
4. information on test-taking procedures and techniques
5. awareness raising of discourses and text types, including modelling exemplars
6. discourses of test-taking embedded in classroom practices.

The authoritative voice of the teacher characterised instruction. The IELTS Test is a complex combination of communicative activities and, as such, requires the selection of what to teach and what to prepare students for. The teacher did not use a course-book for determining the content of the program, unlike most teachers in the study of Wall and Horak (2006). The program was constructed around IELTS Test tasks. In what was a relatively brief program, the teacher had to set priorities and tailor class activities to the specific purpose of preparation. Although the teacher recommended independent study for the students, normally she did not give feedback on work students had done out of class. Feedback to students was provided through general comments to the whole class. The teacher achieved this through direct explanations, through students working in pairs on test-related tasks, through group work, modelling of texts and students doing practice tests under exam conditions.

The IELTS Test assesses skills independently and this was mirrored in the separate treatment of skills. Although the segmented treatment of skills was a focus of lessons, as the teacher concentrated in one lesson or part of a lesson on one skill, class work engaged students in integrated skills activities. In preparation for writing on a topic, students brainstormed orally to generate ideas. The teacher drew attention to the effects of transfer across skills:

Reading is a very important part of your learning, for this IELTS, not only is it important for the general reading task but also if you want to improve, your, your, your letter writing skills,

or even your essay skills doing lots of reading is very important because...ideas of what you are studying...how to write correctly (89).

The class analysed argument texts orally and in writing, and discussed topics for the essay module, so that, in actuality, students participated in integrated skills activities.

The focus of lessons was rehearsal for taking the Test. The teacher modelled responses to the IELTS tasks. The modelling involved scaffolding exemplars for the class and using sample answers from IELTS preparation materials. The explicit teaching of discourse structure included demonstrating the expression of opinions and brainstorming terms for the expression of points of view.

Ok, so here we have different opinions, we have different statements and what you have to do is you have to speak for one minute about your opinion on each statement...Let's just remind ourselves of some ways to give opinions. (68-69)

The students contributed suggestions for the expression of opinions, with the teacher commenting on informal terms compared with formal expressions: *In my opinion...I really think...I feel...I reckon...I suggest (68-69)*. Rehearsal for the Test extended beyond practising tasks to analysis of the modules. The teacher commented on the objectives of tasks and on the design of tasks. Students rehearsed tactics to follow in planning responses and in test-taking procedures. The teacher described practical techniques and gave advice on specific details such as attending to time and sequencing responses. Student awareness of the scope and content of the IELTS modules was stimulated through the teacher's comments on test procedures linked to students engaging in test-based tasks. The teacher's reflections on, and evaluations of, the components of the Test permeated the discourse of the teacher.

Development of students' language awareness was a characteristic feature of the lessons. The teacher pointed out the relationship between the general study of English and preparing for the IELTS Test.

General English classes are just as important as the IELTS classes. (144)

She stressed the role of grammar.

Grammar is really important, you need to use sophisticated grammar – relative clauses, vocabulary related to the content. (8)

References to grammar included traditional grammatical description as well as genre analysis. Student attention was also directed toward the discourses and text types of the different IELTS tasks. Characteristic language features were highlighted, emphasising the significance of discourse selections for conventional communication. The teacher discussed the need to consider whether letters are formal or informal and the appropriateness of wordings used for the expression of opinions:

T: You can't just say it's disgusting. (218)

T: This is an educated essay, it's an educated essay, therefore when you're giving an educated essay you need educated reasons and examples, saying it makes you throw up or makes you sick...

S: Yeah yeah

T: ...is too personal (227-228)

The focus on language choice provided students with insights into the appropriacy of language use in their responses to the different IELTS tasks.

Students had wide exposure to English use in context. Discourses of test-taking were embedded in the teacher's talk and in classroom practices. This created conditions for students' own language development. Although the class observed was limited in the number of contact hours, at the end of the program, students' language development was noted by the researcher:

After eight weeks these students are much more confident in their speaking, a combination of speaking practice, the strategies that have been studied and the fact that they've been in Adelaide for another eight weeks. (Researcher notes 283)

The intensive nature of each session engaged students in a diversity of language-mediated practices suitable for students' development of language use. What emerges from close analysis of the recordings and documents is the breadth of issues addressed in the preparation class, highlighting the numerous and complex features of the IELTS Test.

11 CONCLUSIONS

The documentation of the class over time resulted in a large amount of data constituting multiple facets of the program. Based on the data in this study, it is clear that an IELTS preparation course with an overt aim to prepare students for taking the examination is a complex series of semiotic events. Although the course had a specific aim, the decisions about what should be incorporated in the program covered quite different domains and also changed over time. IELTS preparation in this program was not static but dynamic as the teacher developed confidence and established relationships with students. A number of factors ensured the dynamic nature of the program. The researcher did not adopt a neutral stance, but became a participant researcher, called on at times to contribute to the content of lessons. The researcher's discussions and interviews with the teacher influenced her teaching. Through a kind of reflective practice, the discussions and the researcher's presence contributed to the teacher's growing awareness of the IELTS Test and impacted on her preparation for the Test and how she went about her teaching. The influence was particularly evident in the teacher's increasing attention to texts and the discourse features of texts. The researcher's role in this respect is normal for such a qualitative study.

A teacher preparing students for the IELTS Test has to select elements for instruction. The choice extends along a continuum between developing language skills, as in general or academic language classes, and training for taking the Test. The aim of a general English course is oriented to development of language use in communication, but some students take a general English course in preparation for IELTS. In the program we observed, the pedagogic choices differed between attending to students' English language expressions and rehearsing procedures and tasks for the Test. However the distinction between the two was not clear cut, as the procedures for doing the Test, what might be called the techniques or strategies, were bound up with an understanding of such matters as the social purposes of texts, which determine register and therefore, the lexicogrammatical choices.

Two perspectives on preparation for IELTS emerge from this study with implications for future observational and washback studies in general. The first was instruction in test-taking techniques, which constituted a major part of the program. Techniques covered a wide variety of information, from actual conduct or behaviour in the test-taking context, which was particularly evident in the instructions given for the oral test, to instructions on how to do things in the Test such as reading the instructions in the test papers. A second component of the teaching was a focus on language awareness – on the discourses and linguistic elements relevant to actually doing the Test. Students did not do grammatical exercises. The focus on language was integrated in modelling of responses, reflections on test items and giving feedback on practice tests.

Exam preparation confronts teachers and students with the need to select and to prioritise the content and activities of a program. The choices are significant because of the complexity of exam events constituted with different tasks and different text types, and because of the wider social implications for individual students of the gate-keeping role of IELTS. Preparation of students for exams engages students in multidimensional social practices. Following instructions and doing test tasks are meaning-making processes that require understanding of rubrics and of questions, and knowing how to respond with the appropriate answers, selecting discourses appropriate to tasks. The instruction in the class we observed constituted a process of socialisation into test-taking behaviours and into the values or priorities embodied in the Test. Student understanding of the Test and of the tasks is mediated at least in part by the teacher. As a process of socialisation, students are apprenticed into the semiotic activities connected with the IELTS examination (Mickan 2006a). Future studies are needed to investigate student experiences in preparation programs to complement the focus on pedagogy in this study. The documentation of student development of awareness of tasks and of test-taking procedures and strategies over time would inform decisions related to content and course design of IELTS preparation programs.

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APPENDIX 1: STUDENT INFORMATION

Core students who attended almost all sessions; some students attended for only short periods, eg, they had only enrolled for five weeks.

Student	Date of birth	Home country	Years of English study	Length of time in Australia	Highest schooling completed	IELTS test date	Reason for choosing IELTS class	IELTS score achieved overall
I	7-5-87	Hong Kong	15	6 months	Not completed high school	22-7-06		
S	11-1-85	Hong Kong	18	9 months	Not completed high school	17-6-06	Prepare for the IELTS	5 (General)
D	28-1-82	Taiwan	8	11 months	Technical college diploma	24-6-06	Need to know what is scope of IELTS	4.5 (General)
A	17-8-87	Hong Kong	11	6 months	High school Form 5	24-6-06	I need IELTS score just can going to study (diploma)	5.0 (General)
G	16-11-77	South Korea	8	3 months	College	17-4-06	To prepare for IELTS	5.5 (General)
J	17-10-81	South Korea	8	3 months	2nd year of university	10-6-06	Because I'll take the test	6 (Academic)
K	15-9-82	Japan		4 months – previous experience in ELICOS centre in Sydney	High school	Plans for 2008	Because I wanted to know about IELTS	
To	1-11-80	Hong Kong	20	1 year	High school	24-6-06	Advice from agent	5.0 (Academic)
Ti	5-1-64	Hong Kong		4.5 months	High school Form 5	12-8-06	Lots of practice and exposure to different IELTS related topics	6 (General)