

5. The preparation practices of IELTS candidates: Case studies

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This study investigates the practices of candidates preparing for IELTS in Adelaide, South Australia. It focuses on the activities candidates use to prepare for the Test, particularly those who are not enrolled in English language programs.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the practices of candidates preparing for the IELTS examination in Adelaide, South Australia. The main aim of the study was to describe candidates' activities as they prepared to sit for an IELTS Test. Adopting primarily ethnographic procedures for data collection, the focus was on candidates' preparation practices and experiences. The study was carried out in two stages. In Stage 1, candidates leaving an IELTS test centre were surveyed to find out general biographical and test preparation information. This information was used to create target profiles for case study participants in Stage 2. Data collected for the study included interviews, observations, diary studies, and document collection. The case study methodology enabled documentation of individuals' practices in preparation for IELTS Tests.

The Stage 1 survey revealed that most respondents sat for the IELTS General Training module and that few had enrolled in a preparatory program. The information suggested that the Test was significant for candidates' aspirations, given the number who had sat it repeatedly, as well as individuals who went to some expense to take the Test. The information from Stage 1 was used to identify case study subjects.

The analysis of Stage 2 data focused on what case study candidates did to prepare for an IELTS Test. Of particular interest were candidates who were not enrolled in an English language preparation program. Reasons for taking the Test included obtaining permanent residency in Australia and university entrance. Most subjects prepared by using practice materials, in particular published tests. A number of candidates had repeatedly taken IELTS Tests with some admitting not knowing how to improve their scores. This suggested a lack of personal agency and strategic action in preparing for testing. In general life, circumstances impacted on preparation especially for subjects who were working full-time. The profiles of case study subjects document ways in which proficiency testing impact directly on candidates' aspirations and life trajectories, highlighting the significance of appropriate preparation practices.

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REPORT 5

1. Introduction	4
2. Literature review	4
3. Method	5
3.1 Method for Stage 1: Survey of IELTS candidates	5
3.2 Method for Stage 2: Case studies	6
4. Stage 1: Discussion	7
5. Stage 2: Case study information	14
5.1 Subjects' preparation practices	16
6. Discussion	19
6.1 Repeated test-taking	19
7. Conclusion	20
Acknowledgements	21
References	21
Appendix 1: Survey form	23
Appendix 2: IELTS preparation survey results	26
Appendix 3: Profiles of case studies	30
1. Ale.....	30
2. Aba	31
3. Zat.....	32
4. Dy	33
5. Ram	34
6. Ina.....	35
7. Ei.....	35
8. Oka	36
9. Bie.....	37
10. Go.....	38

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the preparation practices of candidates planning to take IELTS examinations in a testing centre in Adelaide, South Australia. IELTS is a high-stakes test for students planning tertiary study and for candidates for immigration to Australia. Entry requirements for academic study in South Australian universities include English language proficiency as measured through test results from the IELTS Academic module. At the University of Adelaide, applicants to academic programs require overall band scores between 6.0 and 7.0. Applicants for permanent residency in Australia use test results from the IELTS General Training module to meet immigration requirements set by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. During this study, immigration rules in Australia changed, increasing the required IELTS scores from 6.0 overall to 7.0 overall for the Skilled Independent Residence Visa subclass 885 (applicable for international students who had graduated from an Australian university). For the subjects who took part in this study, IELTS was a high-stakes test with consequences for candidates' life trajectories; for example, students from Kazakhstan were under pressure from their government to achieve specific IELTS scores to maintain their scholarships.

The focus of this study was on the preparation practices of prospective IELTS candidates. This is an under-researched area, given the significance of IELTS Test scores in candidates' lives. Mickan and Motteram (2008) reported on an IELTS preparation program in an English language centre and identified the need for further study of students' preparation practices, with a special emphasis on practices outside of formal training programs.

The study took place in two stages: the first to survey a range of candidates in order to identify representative individuals for case studies; and the second to document individual activities undertaken prior to sitting for the Test. Candidates selected for detailed documentation were profiled and interviewed for the study. The data were analysed in terms of practices considered to contribute to candidates' language resources for taking a proficiency test.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

IELTS preparation is relevant to language centres in Adelaide due to increasing IELTS candidature. Previous research on preparation for IELTS examinations has focused on pre- and post-preparation course scores and description of classroom time spent on various tasks (Brown 1998, Robb and Ercanbrack 1999, Elder and O'Loughlin 2003, Hayes and Read 2004). Although some research has begun to investigate what candidates have experienced in IELTS preparation programs (Elder and O'Loughlin 2003, Read and Hayes 2003, Hawkey 2006, Mickan and Motteram 2008), very little research has given candidates a voice (Elder and O'Loughlin 2003). There have been calls for research that investigates individual candidate experiences with tests (Templer 2004, Green 2007) and the influence of tests on individual candidate's learning (Bailey 1999). The significance of obtaining learners' perspectives has been documented in a previous investigation of IELTS candidates' interpretation of prompts (Mickan and Slater 2003).

Research on the way candidates prepare, and are prepared, for examinations has been influenced by washback studies. The washback hypotheses (Alderson and Wall 1993) identified learner perspectives on testing which have foregrounded the need to study the influence of testing on learners and on their test preparation practices. Messick (1996) noted the limitations of washback as a description of learning: "If it occurs, washback is likely to be orientated towards the achievement of high test scores as opposed to the achievement of facile domain skills" (p 245). Studies have investigated candidates attending English study programs; for example, Green (2006) investigated student and teacher perceptions of IELTS washback via surveys of students preparing for IELTS in English for Academic

Purposes classes in the United Kingdom. Hawkey (2006) found that, in his survey as part of an IELTS impact study, 96% of students had experienced an IELTS preparation course.

In Adelaide, many IELTS General Training module candidates do not attend preparation classes. This means that they are personally responsible for their preparation activities. For this reason, the primary – although not exclusive – focus of the present study is a description of candidate experiences and practices outside of language programs while preparing for IELTS examinations.

Mickan and Motteram (2008) concluded the study of an IELTS preparation course with the following: “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” (p 40). Motteram (2006) used case study methodology to investigate washback on learner IELTS preparation; in that study she interviewed three candidates over a period of three months in an attempt to document and understand learner preparation practices. This study builds upon and extends the work of Motteram (2006): it explores individuals’ preparation practices through case studies of a small cohort of candidates preparing to sit for an IELTS Test.

3. METHOD

The study was conducted in two stages from March 2007 to January 2008. The first stage of the project surveyed IELTS candidates in order to identify participants for the case studies.

3.1 Method for Stage 1: Survey of IELTS candidates

The purpose of Stage 1 was to gain information for the selection of case study participants and identify issues relevant to test preparation. The objectives of this phase of the study were to:

- survey recent IELTS candidates about their preparation for taking the Test
- collate and analyse responses from the survey to identify themes and commonalities in the preparation experiences of candidates.

This phase of the project served two purposes:

- it informed the selection of case study participants in an attempt to reflect the candidate population in Adelaide
- it guided the documentation for Stage 2 through the identification of the contexts and practices relevant to preparation experiences of candidates.

In Stage 1, candidates filled out a survey form (Appendix 1) as they left an IELTS test centre after completing their IELTS Test. The survey questions were designed to elicit general information on candidates, their education, their experiences with IELTS testing and on planning and preparation for the Test. The questions took into account surveys undertaken by Wall and Horak (2006) and Elder and O’Loughlin (2003). The first draft of the survey was piloted with a group of learners at a local English language centre. This group of students had already achieved IELTS scores in the range of 5.0 - 6.5. Information from the pilot survey was used to review and alter some of the questions for the survey. As they left the test centre, candidates were invited to fill in the survey. On the day of the survey, approximately 240 people sat the IELTS Test. Seventy-eight candidates completed the survey.

3.2 Method for Stage 2: Case studies

The second phase of the study documented the experiences of candidates who were preparing for an IELTS Test. The objectives of the second phase of the study were to:

- conduct longitudinal case studies for the investigation of individual candidates' activities as they prepared for the IELTS Test
- describe the preparation practices of candidates
- discuss implications of this study for IELTS preparation.

Data from Stage 2 of the project included:

- recorded and partially transcribed interviews with case study participants
- documentation of candidates' preparation tasks
- email communication between case study participants and researcher
- recorded and transcribed interviews of selected stakeholders allied with individual candidates (family members, housemates and teachers of the candidates)
- candidates' study journals
- observational notes of selected, significant events in candidates' preparation for IELTS, and documentation of candidates' practices in classrooms and other relevant contexts.

Information from the Stage 1 survey was used to select subjects for case documentation. In the initial survey, 56 candidates had reported preparing for the Test by themselves, and 80% of the candidates had reported not attending IELTS preparation classes. In an effort to reach this population of prospective candidates, invitations to participate in case studies were issued to all candidates when they registered to sit the IELTS Test in Adelaide. Invitations to participate were also included in the information package for registered candidates that was sent out approximately five weeks before the test date. In the survey, some candidates wrote that they were accessing the State Library's services for English language development. The State Library offers language consultations with volunteer tutors to English language learners. Tutors give conversation practice, provide editing assistance and help with selection of study materials for IELTS preparation. Library staff agreed to tell students about the project, distribute our recruitment materials to them and to refer the project to potential participants. Project information was posted around the IELTS test centre and around university campuses in Adelaide. The IELTS test centre sent invitations to newly registered candidates to join the project. Invitations were also distributed to English language centres in Adelaide.

Recruitment through English language centres was not difficult, with teachers recommending participation to students. The legitimacy of the research and willingness to participate was enhanced by the connection between language centres programs and the research. However, reliance on this method of recruitment would not have exposed the preparation practices of candidates who did not enrol in IELTS preparation or intensive English courses; these totalled 72% of candidates who responded to the survey. Although research which involves these candidates is difficult, selection of case studies required inclusion of this population. To encourage participation in the project, case study subjects were offered a \$50 bookstore voucher.

Initial interviews were held with 16 participants, eight of whom continued participation until their IELTS results were released. Partial information was obtained from other subjects; there was difficulty in maintaining contact due to their mobility and heavy commitments supporting themselves and families. The initial interview followed a formal structure which addressed general biographical information including past experience with formal language tests, education and specific information

about language education (this information is recorded in Table 1). During this initial interview, the timetable for future interviews, methods of communication and data collection appropriate to each participant were negotiated.

Further interviews adopted a less formal approach with some meetings involving short exchanges of information while others became lengthy chats about language and culture. Interviews ranged between 15 and 90 minutes. As part of the study, participants were asked to complete a diary of preparation tasks undertaken in the lead-up to their test date. This was not successful on the whole, with only two participants providing complete diaries recording their preparation activities and a few participants providing partially completed diaries.

Communication between the research assistant and the participants continued as the test dates approached. Generally this communication was through email or text messages. Some participants requested face-to-face meetings which became informal chats used for updating the research assistant with their continuing engagement with IELTS and changes in the participants' lives and relationships. All emails received from participants were stored for future reference as writing samples. In some cases, samples of preparation tasks, such as writing practice tests, were collected. To understand the broader experience of the participants, some were observed as they worked in their part-time jobs. In other cases, it was possible for the research assistant to interview the participants' teachers at their English language school. Participants sent emails with test results soon after they received them.

Information from the recorded interviews and the emails was used to compile profiles of the eight subjects. As the main aim of the study was to describe candidates' experiences in preparation for taking an IELTS Test, the selection of information for the profiles was guided by subjects' specific references to testing and test-taking. As the purpose of the case study procedure was to document candidates' experiences beyond traditional learning contexts, the investigation is not restricted to the classroom. Analysis viewed learning from a social perspective, so case study profiles show considerable variation in preparation practices. For this reason, the summaries have been reproduced for the report (Appendix 3). The theoretical frame of reference used for the analysis of the data was based on the personal practices of subjects in their preparation for testing.

4. STAGE 1: DISCUSSION

In this section, selected issues from the survey (Appendix 1 and Appendix 2) are discussed; in particular, those relevant to the case study research in Stage 2. Candidates were surveyed as they left the IELTS test centre after taking the Test.

1.0 General Information

1.1 Number of respondents: 49 male, 29 female

1.2 Age in years: Majority aged 20 – 27 years

1.3 Country of birth

Male Respondents	Country of Birth	Female Respondents	Country of Birth
24	India	17	China
12	China	3	India
4	Malaysia	3	Japan
2	Hong Kong	1	Korea
2	Korea	1	Singapore
2	Iran	1	Iran
1	Pakistan	1	Kenya
1	Singapore	1	Poland
1	Taiwan	1	Zambia

Table 1: Respondents' countries of origin

Although candidates came from many countries, most males were from India and most females from China. Candidates were keen to talk about the Test and many made critical statements about the use of IELTS for immigration purposes.

1.4 Length of stay in Adelaide and/or other parts of Australia (*m* = months)

Time:months; years	0-3	3-6	6-9	9-12	12-15	15-18	18-21	21-24	2/3yrs	3/4yrs	4/5yrs	5+yrs
No. of candidates	5	3	5	5	3	12	1	-	30	4	3	5

Table 2: Time in Australia

Of interest is the number of respondents who had been living in Australia for between two and three years, with a significant number (see 3.3 below) who stated that they were sitting the Test for visa applications

2.0 General Education Questions

(Not considered significant for Stage 2 of study)

3.0 *IELTS testing*

3.1 *Version of test*

Of the respondents to the questionnaire, nine took the Academic module of the Test and 67 sat the General Training module. Various factors could have influenced respondents' choices. The General Training module is required for immigration purposes. Impending changes to the points system for the granting of permanent residency visas in Australia may also have been a factor.

3.2 *Past experience with IELTS examinations*

The majority of respondents reported having sat the Test at least once before. It appeared that there was a pattern of using results from the IELTS Academic module initially for entry to tertiary institutions and then, once candidates had completed an Australian qualification, they used the results from the IELTS General Training for applications for permanent residency. This pattern could explain the majority of the respondents who had attempted the Test once before. However, this pattern did not account for candidates who had sat the Test two or three times previously.

3.3 *What will you use your IELTS result for?*

Purpose for taking test	Number of respondents
Immigration	60
Study	12
Other	5
No response	3

Note: Total 81 – some respondents nominated dual purposes for taking the test.

Table 3: Purpose for taking test

The role the test has in Australian immigration procedures is demonstrated in the responses to section 3.3 of the test.

4.0 *Planning for the test*

4.1 *When did you book to do the test?*

Month	March 2007	February 2007	January 2007	December 2006	November 2006	October 2006	September 2006
No.	1	9	47	13	1	1	1

Table 4: Enrolment for the IELTS Test

Candidates planned for the Test in advance. One of the respondents explained how he had flown to Adelaide from Sydney for the weekend to sit the IELTS Test. He needed his score quickly to help with a visa application as he had been offered a job on the condition that he had a visa. But he hadn't been able to secure a test date in Sydney due to the demand for places. Some respondents were unsure about the date on which they had booked the Test.

4.2 *Did you get advice about taking the test from friends, teachers or anyone else?*

Advice	Respondents
No	33
Yes	40
No response	3

Table 5: Advice for test-taking

In response to Question 4.2, most candidates had obtained advice about taking the Test. When asked from whom, they reported from friends or teachers.

4.3 *Did you prepare for the test with another person?*

No	56
Yes	17
Not really	1
No response	4

Table 6: Preparation with others

Most candidates had prepared alone.

4.3.1 *If yes, with whom did you prepare?*

Friend(s)	Relative/partner	Housemate	Other
12 (3)	4	1	1

Table 7: Preparation with other person

Those who responded Yes to Question 4.3 prepared with friends or a relative. One response noted with a school counsellor, another with a housemate. The term ‘friend’ included one or more friends.

4.3.2 *What did you do together to prepare for the test?*

Study/talk together	Access institution	Use of resources	Practice tests
9	2	5	6

Table 8: Shared preparation activities

Candidates’ preparation together included studying and talking together, doing practice tests and sharing resources. In describing how they prepared together, candidates stated ‘We speak to each other’, ‘read sample from internet’, ‘practice through exam’. Respondents had accessed the English Language Learning Improvement Service (ELLIS) at the State Library. The service offers

conversation classes, desk tutors for assistance with writing, English Language Learning computer programs and IELTS materials for English learning. We recruited some participants through the ELLIS program.

5.0 Preparation for IELTS

Section 5 asked for details about candidates' test preparations.

5.1 What did you do to prepare for the Test?

Study/ practise for test	Take practice tests	Resources: [I=Internet, L=Library]	Nothing and [no response]	Other
37	13	Internet – 4 Library – 4	5 [8]	Study course Feedback Friends

Table 9: Preparation practices

Most respondents studied and practised test-taking. They reported reading, writing and listening to tests at home and on the internet. For practice, candidates did exercises using sample materials in books and on the internet. Writing models in books were used. One student wrote that she 'kept writing and spoke with my friends'. In contrast another candidate wrote: 'Nothing; it is ability to speak English, so what to prepare'. Thirteen candidates took practice tests, including one candidate who noted doing seven practice tests. The previous category also included reference to practice tests. One student practised tests on the internet and another went to the library. Resources referred to included published materials, samples on the internet, visits to the library and watching television. A candidate wrote 'reading newspapers, listening to the radio'. Through these activities, candidates experienced a variety of discourses in different modes. The category 'Nothing' grouped responses in which no answer was given or no/nothing was written as response.

The 'Other' category included:

- reading advice on what to do and not to do in the Test
- analysing the format of the Test
- obtaining feedback on drafts from a school counsellor
- chatting with friends with specific mention of local English-speaking friends
- study in country of origin
- practising management of time for taking the Test.

The responses to this question suggest a wide variety of practices.

5.2 Did you attend English lessons in preparation for taking IELTS?

Yes	No	No response
6	62	8

Table 10: Course attendance

A majority of respondents had not attended formal language classes as part of their preparation for the Test. Fifty-six candidates reported preparing for the Test by themselves in response to Question 4.3. For Question 5.2 about attendance at lessons, 80% of students noted that they did not attend preparation lessons. Test preparation is reported as an individual activity dependent on individual initiative and resources. This is in contrast with Hawkey's (2006) data, where 96% of candidates had attended a preparation course. However, the subjects in that study had been contacted through language centres.

5.3 *Did you use an IELTS preparation textbook?*

Yes	No	No response
41	33	3

Table 11: Textbook use

5.3.1 *If yes, which book or books did you use?*

Book or books?	Number
Cambridge	21
Practice tests/materials	11
Not remember	3
Other (bks in library; from China/Hong Kong; internet; not specified)	6

Table 12: Selection of textbook

Section 5.3 records the significant role that access to, and use of, relevant resource materials have in IELTS preparation, with 53% respondents using an IELTS preparation textbook. Question 5.4 asked whether respondents had used IELTS preparation websites. Twenty-eight respondents claimed that they had, with most referring to the IELTS site.

5.5 *Did you do practice tests?*

Yes	54
No	22
No response	2

Table 13: Respondents doing practice tests

The responses to Question 5.5 corroborate the information obtained for Question 5.1 on preparatory study for the Test. However, almost half of the respondents indicated that they had not rehearsed for the Test by using practice tests. Of those who answered 'Yes', frequency varied.

No. of tests	Responses
Up to 3	17
Up to 10	9
More than 10	2
More than 15	1
More than 25	1
100	1

Table 14: Number of tests practised

There is considerable individual variation in the number of practice tests. One person wrote they spent two hours per day on practice tests. Five candidates reported doing a practice test every day, one of these only in the week before the Test. One person did two to three tests for one day only, another for six or seven days. Others reported between once and four times per month. Taking practice tests intensified the week before the test.

5.6 *Please list any other preparation activities you did below.*

Preparation activity	No. of respondents
Reading – newspaper, magazine articles	3
Watch movies/TV	6
Talking with locals	3
Grammar, exercises, class book	3
Other: radio, internet, dreaming	4

Table 15: Activities

A relatively small number of other preparation activities were noted. Additional comments are listed in Appendix 2.

The Stage 1 survey revealed that most respondents sat for the IELTS General Training module and that few had enrolled in a preparatory program. The information suggested that the Test was significant for candidates' aspirations, given the number who had sat for it repeatedly, as well as those individuals who went to some expense to take the Test (eg taking multiple tests, taking time off work or flying from Sydney to Adelaide to take the test). Access to test materials had a part in preparation. For a relatively small number, studying with others was part of preparation. The information from Stage 1 was used to identify some case study subjects who were not attending language courses and for recruiting subjects from different countries.

5. STAGE 2: CASE STUDY INFORMATION

In Stage 2, detailed information was obtained about individual preparation practices of case study candidates. Language and testing experiences of the case studies are summarised in the table below.

Name	Age	Education experience	English experience	Previous test experience	Scores
Ale	28	Masters in Engineering (Information measuring technologies) From Kazakhstani uni	Studied English at school 2 years of English at university, 80mins/wk Institutional TOEFL 465 as part of Scholarship Test 3 months English course + homestay before first test date	TOEFL in Kazakhstan No IELTS experience	1/08 (Academic) L5.5, R6, W6, S6.5, O6 3/08 (Academic) (No result available)
Aba	24	3 yr Bachelor of Accounting from Indian uni 2 yr Masters in Applied Finance from Indian uni 2 yr Masters in Accounting from Australian uni	EFL classes ages 6–14 Academic assignments from 14yrs submitted in English University education in India delivered in English with Bengali support	IELTS Academic in 2005 in Calcutta	2005 (Academic) O 6 2007 (General) L5, R6, W6, S7, O 6
Zat	26	Masters in Physics (Telecommunications) From Kazakhstani uni Delivered in Russian	Studied English at university (less than 10 in class, Beg – Adv) Institutional TOEFL 473 as part of Scholarship Test 3 months English course + homestay before first test date	IELTS in August 2005 TOEFL in Kazakhstan	2005 (Academic) L5.5, R5.5, W3, S4, O4.5 12/1/08 (Academic) L5.5, R6.5, W5.5, S6, O6
Dy	24	Bachelor of Accounting and Finance from Chinese university	English study from 3–22 years of age, 1–2 hrs/wk From uni graduation 2hrs per day self study + 4x30min conversation lessons/wk IELTS prep in China	IELTS twice in China; 2 months of IELTS prep classes in China, once a week for 6 hours. Chinese and native English teachers; Native teacher for oral practise, 40 students/class.	2005 #1 (Academic) O5.5 2005 #2 (Academic) O6 2007 (General) L6.5, R7, W6, S6, O6.5
Ram	25	Bachelor in Computing from Indian uni Masters in Information Systems from Australian uni	7 years of schooling (grades 5–12) - half English delivery Bachelor studies delivered in English Living, studying and working in Australia for three years.	IELTS four times	2003 Academic O5.5 4/07 (General) L6, R5.5, W5, S7, O5.5 5/07 (General) L6, R6.5, W5, S6, O5.5 6/07 (General) L6, R5, W6, S7, O6

Ina	25	Masters in Business Information Systems from Kazakhstan uni	High school (6 years) 70% English delivery At uni, 2 hrs/wk Used English at work (risk management)	TOEFL 630 in 2000	1/08 (Academic) L6.5, R6.5, W6, S7.5, O6.5
Ei	29	Bachelor of Medicine from Chinese uni Masters in Nutrition and Dietetics from Australian uni	From Year 7 at school through to university. Pre-enrolment English course in Australia Masters degree in Australian university. Living, working and studying in Australia for nearly four years	IELTS four times previously	2002 (Academic) O5.5 2003 (Academic) O6.0 2006 (General) O6.5 4/2007 (Academic) [writing 6], O7 7/2007 Academic-did not sit
Oka	27	Women's college degree in English and Computer Use	Studied English since junior high school in Japan English as part of four-year college study One month homestay and English study in Perth	TOEFL during college TOEIC three times – needed score of 470+ to pass English component of degree	1/2008 (General) L5, R5, W6, S5.5, O5.5
Bie	22	Continuing student in Bachelor of Pharmacy at Australian university	70% of high school content delivered in English 2 years Pharmacy studies in Malaysia delivered in English 3 years Pharmacy studies in Australia	First IELTS test	No results reported
Go	21	Bachelor of Commerce from Australian university Continuing student in Bachelor of Laws at Australian university	Studied English at school in China. Final two years of school at Australian high school. 20/20 for final year ESL course. Three years of Australian university life, double degree (Commerce/Law)		8/2007 (General) L7, R6.5, W6, S8, O7 11/2007 L7, R6, W6.5, S8, O7 3/2008 L7.5, R6, W7.5, S8, O7.5

Table 16: Case study – general information

The age of the case study subjects ranged from 21 to 29 years – a formative period from a career perspective. Six candidates had Master degrees – in engineering, physics, accounting and finance, nutrition and information systems. The other subjects had Bachelor degrees in accounting, English and computing, and commerce, with one student studying a second undergraduate degree in law and another studying for a Bachelor of Pharmacy. The English language experiences of the subjects varied. Only one had not studied English in school, three began English lessons before or in elementary school. Four subjects studied school or university subjects in English in their home country. Three subjects had been on homestays in English-speaking countries and one had attended high school in Australia. Four candidates undertook university study and worked in Australia, another used English at work.

Students' previous language proficiency test experiences included TOEFL (four candidates) and TOEFL plus TOEIC (one candidate). IELTS had previously been taken by five candidates: two had sat

for the test twice; two had sat it four times. Scores varied and the test taken also varied. Multiple test-taking demonstrates the importance of the Test in determining life options for candidates.

5.1 Subjects' preparation practices

The following table summarises information related to the profiles and preparation practices of case study subjects in Stage 2 of the project.

Name	Reasons	English use opportunities	General activities	Deliberate activities
Ale	Uni entrance, scholarship	20 hrs/wk English classes Homestay family (mother and son, NESB) Other Kazakh students	Attending classes Daily life with homestay Attended English circle	IELTS preparation elective Sample tests listening, reading and writing Feedback on writing from homestay Vocabulary learning from sample texts Deliberate radio listening
Aba	Permanent residency	Masters in Accounting (full-time student) Part-time kitchen hand (10–15 hrs/wk) Accessed library tutors	Full time university student – Lectures, tutorials, assignments (including group assignments with local students) and exams (until four weeks before test date)	Four weeks full-time, independent preparation at State Library Many practice tests, especially writing Feedback on writing from library tutors Newspaper reading
Zat	Uni entrance, scholarship	20 hrs/wk English classes Homestay family (retired couple) Other Kazakh students	Listening to the radio Watching TV	IELTS preparation elective Practice tests Reading test strategy books Listening exercises Reading academic materials Academic vocabulary
Dy	Permanent residency	Work in fashion boutique (limited language use) Masters in Business and Accounting (full-time student) Friendship group (all NESB) Changed living arrangements to increase opportunities for speaking practise following disappointing IELTS result	Full-time university student – Lectures, tutorials, assignments (including group assignments) and exams Past relationship with local man Enthusiastic participant in study	51 IELTS (website) Vocabulary list – 1000 useful phrases
Ram	Permanent residency	Full-time work in fast food store Accessed library tutors Private IELTS tutor (NESB)	Had been part-time and full-time university student - Lectures, tutorials, assignments and exams	Multiple practice tests Feedback from private IELTS tutor
Ina	Uni entrance, scholarship	20 hrs/wk English classes Homestay host (single woman with large extended family) Other Kazakh students	Reading; novels, newspapers and magazines Translation work (academic marketing texts English to Kazakh) Watching TV and movies	IELTS preparation elective Practice tests including daily listening tests (every morning) Vocab cards Vocab book
Ei	Medical registration	Work as medical professional – with patients and colleagues Home (English contact language with husband)	Watching movies Listening to the radio	A couple of practice tests

Oka	Future work opportunities	20 hrs/wk English classes Homestay family (Parents and 22 yo sister)	Academic writing project	IELTS preparation elective Practice tests (mostly listening and reading)
Bie	Permanent residency	Work in yiros shop (Lebanese takeaway shop) – mostly weekend nights Workmates (NESB) Student with many contact hours. Specific communication in Health subject.	Full-time university student	Listening, reading and writing tests Preparation materials borrowed from library Advice on preparation from friends
Go	Permanent residency	Work as waitress in Chinese restaurant Homestay (NESB parents) Full-time law student Tutor in undergraduate commerce subjects	Full-time university student – Lectures, tutorials, assignments and exams Heavy reading load	Practice tests Writing – memorising sample texts Reading tests with awareness of time management

Table 17: Profiles of case study candidates

This section is based on the data relevant to the IELTS preparation of 10 of the case studies.

Many factors impinge on candidates’ IELTS preparation and actions taken to prepare for tests. The case studies underscore circumstances in candidates’ lives which relate to their test readiness, including their age, English language education and previous test-taking (Table 1). The subjects were in their twenties, most had formal English education in school, had participated in varied post-school English classes, and had previously taken proficiency tests (Table 2).

Four candidates (Ale, Bezat, Oka and Ina) were enrolled in a General English for Academic Purposes course. The classes were small, streamed and in high demand. The teachers were experienced in preparing students for university study. The course articulated into a pre-enrolment preparation program with a focus on developing independent learners who were ready for university study. The IELTS preparation elective focused on preparation for the Academic module of the test. Practice tests, test-like tasks, commentary on test-taking strategies and feedback on written tasks were all included in the lessons.

The subjects’ reasons for taking the Test included permanent residency (five subjects), university entrance and holding scholarships for tertiary study (three subjects), and employment purposes (two subjects). The latter included Ei who needed to take the Test for medical registration. When taking account of age and reasons for taking the Test, it appears that candidates were aspirational and that the IELTS Test scores were significant in terms of their life trajectories. The number of times candidates repeated sitting for the Test in order to increase their scores is further evidence of the importance of the Test. Ram, for example, had taken the Academic module once and the General Training module three times with attendant financial stress. The increase in the required score for permanent residency visa points emphasised the importance of the proficiency test in subjects’ lives, as did the condition of test results for entry to institutions of higher education. The test score was also a gateway for enhancing professional options. Preparation for the Test was a high priority for all the subjects. Subjects were motivated to take advantage of classes and resources for their preparation. However, one candidate believed that obtaining a high score was serendipitous.

Although candidates were living in an English-speaking environment, the opportunities for English language use varied. Domestic arrangements and relationships involved regular English language use for some subjects. Others had considerable contact with speakers in workplaces. The profiles in the previous section illustrate the eco-social contexts of candidates. Social circumstances influenced subjects’ capacity for test preparation. For reasons of cost and personal circumstances, enrolment in

language courses was not an option for some. The necessity to work and associated financial and time constraints restricted occasions for focused language study and for participation in IELTS preparation courses. For candidates not enrolled in language courses, life circumstances were conditions which influenced candidates' preparations. From the survey in Stage 1, we noted that only 2% of IELTS test-takers surveyed on that day had attended IELTS preparation courses. Of the case studies, four students attended English classes 20 hours per week, two students accessed tutors in the public library and one paid a private tutor.

Living arrangements and relationships, as well as work, provided varied opportunities for language use and development. In jobs of low skill and minimal language use – food preparation, waitressing, sales in a fashion boutique – exposure to English was limited to relatively predictable and conventional discourses. Some subjects lived with English-speaking homestay families or lived with other English speakers who encouraged the use of English and gave feedback on speech. To increase her exposure to English, Dy changed her living arrangements so that she spent more time with English speakers. For full-time language students, there was regular exposure to varied and demanding speech and literacy events in lectures, tutorials, readings and assignments. For full-time tertiary students, the language domains for interaction were framed by disciplinary discourses and by the skills of tutors managing opportunities for international students to speak. As part of their daily lives, some subjects listened to the radio and watched television and movies. Ina read novels, newspapers and magazines and also translated English marketing texts.

Most subjects engaged in planned activities as preparation for the Test. This was in addition to class work in English classes. Test-related tasks included listening and reading, practising with sample tests and seeking feedback from tutors in the State Library. Strategies included vocabulary learning, memorising phrases and memorising written sample texts. Ei recognised the need to improve her spoken pronunciation. Working as a dietician, she invited her clients to correct her spoken language. She had confidence and took the initiative to obtain feedback on her language use.

Subjects accessed different resources for their preparation. In addition to enrolment in language programs and assistance from tutors mentioned above, they used IELTS practice books, sample tests, and vocabulary lists. They accessed websites with information on test-taking strategies and hints for IELTS. Zat changed his handwriting in the hope that that would increase his score but he did not write sample responses or look for feedback that might improve his writing.

Feedback, reflection and self-analysis, which influence language development, were part of subjects' preparations. Students who attended English language courses obtained feedback on their language use. Subjects also received feedback from volunteer tutors at the State Library. A few subjects received comment routinely from people with whom they lived. Feedback and comment raised candidates' awareness of their language use. Language awareness and analysis of tasks and texts contributed to candidates' understanding of test components, test content and what the Test aims to assess. Candidates received different kinds of feedback. On practice exercises, the feedback was in the form of grammar checking. In her homestay, Oka's hosts gave grammar corrections. Ei, in her diet consultations, invited feedback by introducing herself as language learner and asked patients to comment on her language use and pronunciation, a practical and routine strategy for tackling identified problems with communication.

Instruction and feedback directed candidates' preparation to specific features of testing. Some informants admitted that they did not know how to achieve higher scores but did not take action to identify constructive strategies, except to ask the researcher for help.

Preparation for the Test increased as the date for testing approached:

- seven to eight weeks before the Test, Oka made a decision to knuckle down and work harder; her study diary shows an intensification of work from mid-December
- Aba commented that ‘I think four weeks is not a short amount of time to spend preparing for a test like this’
- Bie remarked ‘but I will start about four weeks before the test, it should be enough for me’
- Zat struggled with intensive practice but decided that it wouldn’t be the best way to prepare
- Ei undertook some test familiarisation by looking at exemplars
- Go did some practice writing.

6. DISCUSSION

This study built upon Motteram’s (2006) case study investigation of washback on IELTS preparation in which she interviewed three candidates over a period of three months in an attempt to document and understand learner preparation practices. The survey from Stage 1 of the current project showed the very low number of candidates who had studied in a test preparation course or centre. The case study research approach provided evidence of how such candidates, as well so those in study centres, prepared for tests outside of programmed instruction. The approach was restricted to a small number of subjects and was time-consuming. A number of cases did not continue with contact after initial interviews and contacts by email and telephone. Interviews provided a dynamic picture of individual preparations and circumstances. Subsequent contact by email enabled contact over a longer period, including obtaining scores for IELTS. Only two students completed diary entries, which for this study were brief notes, used as prompts in follow-up interviews.

6.1 Repeated test-taking

The case study information provided insights into the conditions of candidates preparing for the IELTS Test. The situations of subjects varied, as did the life experiences of candidates. One of the issues which emerged from the survey and case studies was repeated test-taking and candidates’ experience of variations in scores. This affected test-takers’ confidence in the Test. They expressed frustration with rating procedures. Ram and Go decided that achievement on the Test was a matter of luck; Ram was superstitious and prepared to appease gods to achieve a desired score.

Candidates’ reflections on previous test performances did not appear to give them insights into what they needed to change or improve. Informants made comments about different standards and that it was more difficult now to get a high IELTS score than it used to be. Some subjects had gained the impression that taking an IELTS Test locally was more difficult than in international centres; there is a general perception that it is easier to get higher IELTS scores offshore. The problem with comparing data from local tests and international tests is that tests take place at different times, and there is the issue that Green (2005) describes of reverting to the mean, so that differences in test scores appear to result from the luck factor.

Zat heard from his friend that pollution had been a prompt for the Speaking test and pollution was something Zat knew a lot about as a result of his work as a physicist. There were similar experiences where students had recently prepared a topic in the Writing section and so were geared up for the task. Bie, on the recommendation of a friend, commented that she should do her IELTS in Malaysia. Zat believed that people in Kazakhstan got higher scores than people in Australia and Dy believed that there was a quota of 6.0 overall scores and 7.0 overall scores at the Adelaide IELTS test centre to limit the number of people who could apply for permanent residency. This has been borne out to some

extent with the recent government increase in the minimum overall score for applicants seeking permanent residency. There was also a shared opinion that sample tests were easier than the actual tests: the scores candidates achieved on sample tests at the library or at home were higher than the scores they achieved for the actual test.

The subjects' comments on test success and standards suggest a lack of personal agency in the face of assessment. The comments suggest a view that success was dependent on expert help: reflection and self-analysis was dependent on feedback. In the survey responses, some candidates stated they did not prepare for the test at all ('what can you do, it's just English on the day') and that by themselves, without mentors, there was not a lot they could do.

7. CONCLUSION

The study of preparation practices raises theoretical questions about language learning and development. IELTS Tests are designed as language proficiency tests. Preparation practices are essentially concerned with both test-wiseness and with language development. IELTS Test scoring assumes language development. Mickan and Motteram (2008) concluded that a teacher preparing students for the IELTS Test faced a choice "along a continuum between developing language skills, as in general or academic language classes, and training for taking the test" (p 39). The subjects in this study who attended IELTS preparation courses received instruction in test-taking techniques.

Opinion is divided on what kind of practices contribute towards language development, whether to focus on grammatical knowledge or on discourse development. The IELTS Test assesses discourse skills and candidates' meaning-making or semiotic abilities (Mickan 2008). The Test essentially measures candidates' ability to understand selected discourses and to express meanings with appropriated discourses or text types (Mickan 2006). Informants in this study were learning to mean from varied speech and literacy encounters in their social contacts and routine work. From many instances of language in use, people gain experience in making discourse choices and obtain feedback on inappropriate selections. Candidates, in effect, need to develop a range of discourse resources to deal with general instructions of testing, and also topic or subject-specific test resources for handling theme-specific tasks. As candidates are not in a position to predict exactly the themes which appear in an IELTS Test, they need experiences of language in use across domains of human activity.

The value of case study research is in foregrounding individual experiences, generating insights into candidates' circumstances and identifying factors impinging on test-taking. This study has illustrated considerable variations in preparation practices and focused attention on the life circumstances of candidates, and on the reasons for taking and repeating the test.

The study has raised two major issues for further research:

- the apparent intractability of success for some students
- the inconsistency of test scores on repeated test-taking.

These fundamental issues need to be addressed through intensive analysis of individual's test-taking – using procedures of text analysis (Mickan 2003, Mickan and Slater 2003) for comparison of literacy and oracy change over time, and verbal protocols of students engaged in assessment tasks and related preparation activities (Green 1998). The documentation of candidates' experiences of preparation for testing and of test-taking itself contributes to a general understanding of assessment procedures which impact directly and significantly on people's life trajectories.

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APPENDIX 1: SURVEY FORM



Discipline of Linguistics
School of Humanities
South Australia 5005, AUSTRALIA
March 2007

IELTS PREPARATION STUDY 2007 SURVEY FOR RECENT IELTS CANDIDATES

Invitation

We invite you to fill in the information on the survey form attached.

We would like to talk with you about preparing to take the IELTS examination.

Please write the information below so that we can contact you.

If you do not wish to talk to us, please do not write your contact details.

NAME: _____

PHONE: _____

Email:

Thank you for your time.

Peter Mickan

Discipline of Linguistics

University of Adelaide

Tel: 8303 3405 Email: peter.mickan@adelaide.edu.au

Johanna Motteram

Discipline of Linguistics

University of Adelaide

Tel: 8303 3343 Email: johanna.motteram@adelaide.edu.au

Please return your completed survey to Peter or Johanna before you leave today.
Thank you.



Discipline of Linguistics

School of Humanities
South Australia 5005, AUSTRALIA
March 2007

IELTS PREPARATION STUDY 2007

1.0 General information

- 1.1 Male / Female
- 1.2 Age in years
- 1.3 Where were you born?
- 1.4 How long have you lived in Adelaide?
- 1.5 Have you lived in any other English speaking country? If yes, where and how long?

2.0 General Education

- 2.1 How many years have you spent at school?
- 2.2 How many years have you studied English?
- 2.3 Have you started a university degree or other post-school qualification?
- 2.4 Have you completed a university degree or other post-school qualification?

3.0 IELTS testing

- 3.1 Did you take the Academic or General test today? [please circle]
- 3.2 Have you taken the IELTS test before? Yes / No
 - 3.2.1 If yes, how many times and when and where did you take it?
- 3.3 What will you use your IELTS result for?

4.0 Planning for the test

- 4.1 When did you book to do the test?
- 4.2 Did you get advice about taking the test from friends, teachers or anyone else?
 - 4.2.1 If yes, from whom did you get advice and what advice did they give you?
- 4.3 Did you prepare for the test with another person?
 - 4.3.1 If yes, with whom did you prepare?
 - 4.3.2 What did you do together to prepare for the test?

5.0 Preparation for IELTS

- 5.1 What did you do to prepare for the test?
- 5.2 Did you attend English lessons in preparation for taking IELTS? Yes / No

If yes, Please give details by filling in the following information.

Description of lessons or class	Yes/No	Where?	When?	How many hours / week?
IELTS Preparation				
English for Academic Purposes				
General English				
Private Tutor				
Other (please give details)				

5.3 Did you use an IELTS preparation textbook? Yes / No

5.3.1 If yes, which book or books did you use?

5.4 Did you use IELTS preparation websites? Yes / No

5.4.1 If yes, which websites did you use?

5.5 Did you do practice tests? Yes / No

5.5.1 If yes, how often and how many did you do?

5.6 Please list any other preparation activities you did below.

6.0 Any other comments

Please add any other comments you would like to make.

If you would like to talk with us about your experience preparing for the IELTS test please write your name and contact details below or on the form handed out with this survey.

Name

Telephone

Email

Thank you very much for your time. Peter & Johanna

Please hand your form to Peter or Johanna

APPENDIX 2: IELTS PREPARATION SURVEY RESULTS

(Information obtained from the original survey of test-takers exiting test centre)

1.0 General Information

1.1 Number of respondents: 49 male, 29 female

1.2 Age in Years: Majority aged 20 – 27

1.3 Country of Birth

Male		Female	
Number	Country of Birth	Number	Country of Birth
24	India	17	China
12	China	3	India
4	Malaysia	3	Japan
2	Hong Kong	1	Korea
2	Korea	1	Singapore
2	Iran	1	Iran
1	Pakistan	1	Kenya
1	Singapore	1	Poland
1	Taiwan	1	Zambia

1.4 Length of stay in Adelaide and/or other parts of Australia (m = months)

Time M=months	0- 3m	3- 6m	6- 9m	9- 12m	12- 15m	15- 18m	18- 21m	21- 24m	2- 3yrs	3- 4yrs	4- 5yrs	5+ yrs
No. of candidates	5	3	5	5	3	12	1	-	30	4	3	5

1.5 Other experience in English speaking country?

(Not considered significant for Second Stage.)

2.0 General Education Questions

(Not considered relevant for Second Stage)

3.0 IELTS testing

3.1 Academic 9, General 67

3.2 Past experience with IELTS test: varied from first to multiple tests taken

3.3 What will you use your IELTS result for?

Purpose for taking test	Number of respondents
Immigration	60
Study	12
Other	5
No Response	3

(Total 81 – some respondents nominated dual purposes for taking the test.)

4.0 Planning for the test

4.1 When did you book to do the test?

Month	March 2007	February 2007	January 2007	December 2006	November 2006	October 2006	September 2006
No.	1	9	47	13	1	1	1

(Unsure: 1; Unsure, more than 2 months: 1; Unclear: 4)

4.2 Did you get advice about taking the test from friends, teachers or anyone else?

Advice	Respondents
No	33
Yes	40
No Response	3

4.2.1 If yes, from whom did you get advice and what advice did they give you?

Responses varied but most referred to friends or teachers, references to advice were limited.

4.3 Did you prepare for the test with another person?

No	56
No Response	4
Yes	17
Not really	1

4.3.1 If yes, with whom did you prepare?

Friend(s)	Relative/partner	Housemate	Other
12 (3)	4	1	1

(Notes: *Friend* includes girl/boy friend & with more than one friend; One respondent referred to boyfriend and parents; *Other*—school counsellor)

4.3.2 What did you do together to prepare for the test?

Study/talk together	Access institution	Use of resources	Practice tests
9	2	5	6

(Note: some candidates noted more than one action; many candidates prepared alone)

5.0 IELTS preparation

5.1 What did you do to prepare for the test?

Study/practise for test [I=internet]	Take practice tests	Resources [I=internet, L=Library]	Nothing [no response]	Other
37	13	I-4 L-4	5 [8]	Format Advice Course Feedback Friends

5.2 Did you attend English lessons in preparation for taking IELTS?

Yes	No	No Response
6	62	8

If yes, please give details.

- Special IELTS preparation, Home (India), Since 2 month
- Self study 1 week
- Special IELTS preparation, Iran, 1 year before, 6 months
- Special IELTS preparation, at a college, since last July, 5 days per week, 6 hours
- Special IELTS preparation, Korea, last summer, 2 months
- Special IELTS preparation + Other English language programs ticked
- Special IELTS preparation Adelaide '07
- Special IELTS preparation language course, 1 year (ago?), 6 months (duration?)
- Special IELTS preparation China 2001, 2 weeks + Other E.L.P Adelaide, 2005, 15 weeks
- Special IELTS preparation, China 2005, 3 months

5.3 Did you use an IELTS preparation textbook?

<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>No Response</i>
41	33	3

5.3.1 If yes, which book or books did you use?

<i>Book or books?</i>	<i>Number</i>
Cambridge	21
Practice tests/materials	11
Not remember	3
Other (bks in library; from China/Hong Kong; internet; not specified)	6

Note: significance of access to relevant resource materials with 53% using an IELTS preparation textbook.

5.4 Did you use IELTS preparation websites?

Yes	28
No	46
No Response	4

5.4.1 If yes, which websites did you use?

Websites	Number.
www.ielts.org	12
General [google] other sites	6
Not remember	4
Not specified	6

5.5 Did you do practice tests?

Yes	54
No	22
No Response	2

5.5.1 If yes, how often and how many did you do?

How many practice tests?

<i>No. of tests</i>	<i>Responses</i>
>3	17
>10	9
10+	2
15+	1
25+	1
100	1

In response to how often, answers varied. One person wrote two hours per day. Five candidates reported every day, one of these only in the week before a test. One person did two to three tests for one day only, another for 6 or 7 days. Others reported between once and four times per month. Taking the practice tests intensified the week before the test.

5.6 Please list any other preparation activities you did below.

<i>Preparation activity</i>	<i>No.</i>
Reading – newspaper, magazine articles	3
Watch movies/TV	6
Talking with locals	3
Grammar, exercises, class book	3
Other: radio, internet, dreaming,	4

6. Any other comments

- What will you do for preparing those people who are not student, who has no sufficient money and still they want good result? Question
- Is it necessary to take ielts exam for student?
- Please don't make us wait for such a long time before we can go into the test room and have a seat.
- Then what about other ppl who don't know any English or I can say nothing
- I had scored 7 in all sub-bands but I failed to get 7 in reading I got only (5.5)
- Recently we see reading test are very tough than sample ones
- Please provide the IELTS results in websites
- Should have a stricter marking scheme
- Giving sth for eat during the exam will have positive effections
- Didn't prepare a lot due to lots of assignment during this period
- IELTS is torture
- IELTS is only for earning money
- It makes people sick, depressed
- It should not be necessary who already spent there 2 year or more time in English speaking country – like Canada
- Improve for listening room, give headphone in listening

APPENDIX 3: PROFILES OF CASE STUDIES

1. Ale

Ale is a 24-year-old female from Kazakhstan. She has completed a five-year degree in Information Measuring Technologies in Kazakhstan and has worked as an engineer. In Kazakhstan she studied English at school as part of the general curriculum with no great focus or motivation. She studied English in university for two years with a focus on technical language. The course at university involved two 40 minute sessions a week.

As Ale prepared for IELTS, she was studying in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class at an English language centre connected to a South Australian university. Ale needed to either complete her English course successfully or achieve an Academic IELTS score of 6.5 overall (no band lower than 6) to gain entrance to a Masters course. Ale also needed to achieve the IELTS score to continue receiving the government scholarship which was funding her study in Australia. Ale's study plan changed while she was preparing for IELTS. She decided that she would like to attend a different university which would require a higher IELTS score than the university she had a conditional offer for. This meant that she needed an Academic IELTS score of 6.5 overall. Ale's change of plan was linked to the attractions of a less harsh climate interstate and her preference for a combined Masters degree (business and IT) over a Masters of IT.

Ale's preparation for IELTS involved attending General English for Academic purposes classes for three hours, four days a week and one three hour session of IELTS preparation a week. Her IELTS teacher gave her written feedback on her writing (which she did in class and as homework) on a feedback sheet designed for IELTS writing. The feedback sheet describes student achievement in five 'can do' statements for each task. The 'can do' statements relate to time management, vocabulary and discourse and sentence structure.

Outside of class hours, she did sample tests of listening, reading and writing. She checked her listening and reading test answers against the keys provided with the sample tests. She sought feedback on her sample writing tests from her homestay host. Ale further prepared for IELTS by returning to the texts to learn new vocabulary. Ale kept a detailed notebook with vocabulary lists, responses to sample writing prompts and copied excerpts from a book, "IELTS secrets". Ale also listened to the radio in an effort to improve her listening.

Ale's communities of practice where she used English were the English language centre and her homestay. Ale identified her homestay as problematic in one of her first statements at the first interview. She expressed concern that her homestay host was a speaker of English as a second language (with Mandarin as the first language) and that her homestay hosts' pronunciation was difficult for her to understand. She also stated that her opportunities to use English in the homestay were limited as her homestay host was a busy professional and the only other family member was the host's 12 year old son who had little interest in speaking with her. Ale's problems with her homestay situation increased as her test date approached. Another guest in the house, a Chinese student, was about to graduate from university and his mother came from China to attend the graduation. The mother stayed in the homestay and the language of communication in the home changed from English to Chinese. This coincided with a three-week break in study as the English language centre closed over the Christmas/New Year period. This December/January period was exceptionally hot in Adelaide and Ale found herself struggling with heat, a loud, talkative Mandarin speaking co-resident in her homestay and the pressure to do well in IELTS. This homestay did not provide Ale with an English-speaking community of practise to participate in.

Ale's other obvious community of practice was based in her classes at the English language centre. Ale's group of friends who had also come to Adelaide from Kazakhstan on government scholarships had agreed to use English as their preferred language. When Ale was observed communicating face-to-face with other members of the group outside of the language centre they did use English only.

Ale was successful in her attempt to obtain an Academic IELTS score of 6.5 Overall with no band score lower than 6.5.

2. Aba

Aba is an Indian male, aged 28. At the start of his case study, he was a final semester postgraduate student of accounting at a South Australian university. He holds a Bachelor of Accounting and a Masters in Applied Finance from Indian universities. The language of instruction in his Indian universities was English. Aba lived in a share apartment with other Indian students while he studied in Adelaide. When he first arrived, he spent a year using English as the contact language at home. In the second year of his degree, he had new flatmates who spoke his first language.

Aba's communities of practice included both study and work. As a mature and experienced student of accounting, he had been able to take a leading role on group work assignments. These group work assignments involved collaboration with local and international students. Taking a leadership role in the groups led him to develop his writing of descriptive reports.

Aba worked as a kitchen hand in an Indian restaurant. His co-workers were also from non-English-speaking backgrounds but they had been in Australia for longer than him. Aba stated that his co-worker's command of English was fine for casual conversation and that generally communication in the kitchen was conducted in English. According to Aba, conversation in the kitchen was restricted to sporadic casual conversation. However, there were opportunities after work for a chat and a drink with co-workers.

Aba's major commitment to preparing for IELTS saw him setting aside four weeks to intensively focus on preparation. Following his final exam for his Masters in Accounting, he attended the State Library daily to access the short-term loan materials available there. He did practice listening tests, wrote letters and essays in response to test prompts and read newspapers; specifically *The Australian*, *The Financial Review* and *The Age*.

Aba sought feedback on his written work from the library volunteer English language tutors. This feedback focused on grammatical form. Significantly for Aba's IELTS preparation, there was no comment on his task response, notably that he often failed to address all aspects of the task prompt in his practice letters.

He also sought test preparation advice from within his friendship group. He was given sample essays by friends with tutor comments and projected band scores and then he read through the papers and the tutor comments. Aba's focus during preparation was on listening and writing. He was confident of his ability in the reading section of the test and felt that, as he always spoke in English outside of his home, he was well prepared for the speaking component of the test.

Aba approached the interviews for this research in a formal and reserved manner. He did not volunteer extra information or seek to extend the interviews by introducing new topics or asking questions. Although it would appear that he responded to the call for participants in order to increase his opportunities to speak English with a native speaker, he did not (unlike most of the other participants) attempt to develop the relationship beyond the range of the study.

Aba was confident in his approach to the test, significantly due to the fact that his required result was 6.0 overall. As he was completing his Masters degree before the 1st September cut-off date, he could submit his application for permanent residency under the old points test.

3. Zat

Zat is a 26-year-old male from Kazakhstan. He has a Masters in Physics and has worked as a telecommunications engineer. While preparing for the IELTS test, he was studying full-time in an English language centre. He attended 16 hours per week of General English for Academic Purposes and four hours per week of IELTS preparation classes. Zat required an Academic IELTS score of 6.5 overall with no band lower than 6 for entry to a Masters in Business. He also needed to ensure he had a score of higher than 5.5 overall following 30 weeks of English study to continue receiving his government scholarship which covered his study and living expenses. At the time the case study began, Zat was living in a homestay with a retired couple. He planned to move out into an apartment after he had achieved his target IELTS score. Zat had been married 20 days before he left Kazakhstan and his plan was for his wife to join him in Adelaide once he had confirmed his university place by achieving his IELTS score. Zat considered his homestay parents very important in his language development as he spoke with them at breakfast and dinner and his host mother taught him a lot of cultural information. Zat sought out opportunities to speak English by attending social events and other gatherings and attempting to strike up conversations.

In the first interview, Zat identified writing as his weakest skill:

education system, totally different from the ah, western education, eh, structure, writing structure is also different, I've never written this kind of essay, maybe in Russian, in Kazakh, I, I cannot, I not good writer, essay writer, and I am thinking, how I can do best in English, if I, if I'm not good writer in my own language and Russian language the two languages are the same for me I can think in Russian and I can think in Kazakh and now I understand structure, it become, how can I say, easy to write essay.

When questioned in the first interview about his plans to prepare for IELTS, he responded as follows:

I'm practising, IELTS tests, and read more about strategy, about, ah, hints, and more exercise, listening exercise, listening to radio before going to sleep, before going to bed, watching tv, ah, reading academic materials and vocabulary.

At this stage, even though he identified writing as his biggest problem, he had no clear strategy to improve his writing.

In the second interview which was held in the week before his test, after three weeks break from English classes, Zat stated that he had done very little preparation for the test during the break. He found it very difficult to focus on study. Further, he had developed a test theory of his own which highlighted the need to “tune in” on the day of the test. Zat’s past experience teaching high school students had led him to the conclusion that he could achieve anything if he concentrated all of his efforts on it at the time.

His main effort in preparing for the test during the break had been to change his handwriting. He had read in “101 helpful hints for the IELTS” that the first impression his written paper gave the examiner was extremely important in rating the paper. As a result, he decided that he would change to a neater linked script. He changed his handwriting by copying sample answers to writing prompts from an IELTS preparation book. Through this action Zat demonstrated his belief that rating of the written component of the IELTS test would not be solely based on the language he produced.

Zat *and ah, this three and a half weeks I paid more attention to my writing, ah, and vocabulary*

Researcher *what did you do with your writing*

Zat *I haven't done any, no, I didn't write any essay, just by studying and just, ah, just read answers given by books ah, and, and I was thinking about, essay, topic, certain topics, for example, studying English in an English speaking country is the best but not only the way*

learn the language, do we agree or disagree with this statement, but, just I thought around this topic, and I think I can, I can write, and, on the test day, in the test day

At a meeting following his test, Zat was reflecting on his experience on the test day. Zat was aware that a friend had been asked to talk about pollution during his speaking test. Zat decided that if he got pollution as his speaking prompt then he would talk about his work as a physicist in Kazakhstan. During the speaking test, Zat felt stressed and nervous so he didn't think he came across as confident as he usually does. In the general section, there was a question about teachers or teaching which he didn't understand but he answered it by talking about his experience as a physics teacher. He didn't ask a clarification question because he was too stressed. He did focus on maintaining a friendly and communicative demeanour during the test. He had advice from a friend who stated that he believed the reason he had only achieved 5.5 for speaking was that he had taken lengthy pauses (in his mind 20 to 30 seconds) during the interview while getting his thoughts together. When it came time for the long turn, Zat was given the topic 'pollution'. He was very confident speaking about his position in Kazakhstan and his experiences visiting Chernobyl. He was able to speak about pollution caused by radiation and about the long-term effects of the pollution. It seems that in the speaking test, Zat benefited from a happy coincidence between his experience and his long turn topic.

Zat considered his first attempt at IELTS as a warm-up. He booked for his second test date before he sat the test the first time. He stated that he had not done any extra preparation for his second attempt at IELTS other than attending a specialised pre-enrolment English program. He stated that he was better prepared for the writing due to the clear teaching of text structure he had encountered in the course. However, when walking from the interview venue, Zat made a phonecall to one of his Kazakh friends. He conducted the whole phonecall in English and when the call was complete he turned to me and stated: 'We always talk in English now'. Moments later we bumped into Zat's sister who he greeted in English and then introduced to me in English. It appears that Zat and his friends were making an effort to develop their own community of English speakers. This was in contrast to his admission in December 2007 that his social life was entirely conducted in Russian or Kazakh.

4. Dy

Dy is a Chinese female, aged 24. She is a postgraduate student of business and accounting at a South Australian university. She holds a Bachelor of Accounting from a Chinese university.

Dy's communities of practice include a wide network of international students in Adelaide, SA. She has an old-timer role in her university's formal orientation program for newly arrived international students and she is an efficient networker through a long email list and through mobile phone texting. Meetings with Dy were regularly interrupted by phonecalls and messages.

Dy is also a member of a retail community through the fashion boutique she works at each Sunday. Dy's membership of this community is peripheral both through choice (she is first and foremost a student, she doesn't want to invest too heavily in her part-time job) but also as a result of her limited control of 'shop girl English'. The research assistant observed Dy at work for two hours. During this time, it was evident that Dy did not have a retail sales script to develop conversations with customers nor was she confident in speaking to customers. Dy reported that her boss had tried to teach her more effective sales language but that she hadn't felt confident or the need to develop it. She also stated that, as on Sundays she is the only staff member in the store, she must remain behind the counter to mind the till. The store is large so it is difficult to instigate conversation with customers who drift in and browse at the front of the shop from behind the counter.

At the time of her preparation for IELTS, Dy was living in a share house with two other Chinese students. Following her test, when she acknowledged her results as a real indication of her proficiency, she announced her intention to move from the share house into a homestay so that she could improve her spoken English. Dy identified her need to increase her opportunities to speak English. She felt that

her confidence in spoken English was lower than it had been before she came to Adelaide. She explained that, at that time, if she didn't attend university or go to work on a given day then she would not speak English on that day. Upon her return from China for the summer break (December-January), she did find a homestay in Adelaide with the intention of using English more regularly with her homestay hosts, a retired couple of German origin.

Dy's experiences of IELTS preparation began in China before she came to Australia. She attended an IELTS preparation course for two months, once a week, for a six hour session. The course focused on test 'wiseness'. The aim of the course was to teach students test-taking strategies. In her preparation for IELTS, Dy expected to access preparation materials on the internet. She specifically mentioned the website '51 IELTS' as it contained lots of material. However, Dy was unsure of the quality of the information. Also, Dy considered test preparation in China as a gamble as a lot of it relies on prediction of IELTS questions. Dy had downloaded a list of '1000 useful phrases' which she was committing to memory.

Dy saw her major weakness as listening. She planned to improve it by watching the TV news for half an hour a day and watching videos borrowed from the library. The content of the videos was travel and tourism. Dy also accessed videos of her course work lectures to improve her listening skills.

5. Ram

Ram is an Indian male, aged 25. He has been studying in Australia since March 2004. He initially studied English in Sydney for three months before moving to Toowoomba to study a Master of Information Systems. After spending 20 months in Toowoomba he returned home to India for three months. In March 2006 he returned to Australia, coming to Adelaide to complete his degree. With credit for the work he completed in Toowoomba, he completed his Masters degree in 13 months. Ram required an IELTS score of 7.0 overall with no band lower than 7.0 for his application for permanent residency. He reported that he had been given incorrect advice by a migration agent regarding his application so he needed to achieve the higher score.

Ram worked full-time at a fast food restaurant. While he was completing his Masters degree, he worked part-time in another fast food restaurant. He worked mostly night shifts. Ram's spoken English was not corrected by people in his workplace. He said that they negotiate meaning but people do not make corrections. He thinks that they feel that he would be upset if they corrected his English. Ram's language use opportunities in his workplace were restricted to the sales script enforced by his workplace and casual conversation with his workmates. Most of his workmates were in their late teens; very few of them are enrolled in university. Ram lived with his wife who was also from India. Ram lives in a block of flats. Downstairs from his flat there are some Australians who he talks to sometimes. He fixes their computer when they have problems. They do not correct his spoken language.

Ram took the IELTS test at least three times in 2007. Each time he sat the test he had to re-program his body clock as he worked night shift. This meant that he missed out on work as he was employed as a casual staff member. As a result, he was paying twice to sit the IELTS; once for the fee and once for the missed opportunities to work. Ram's scores over the tests were not consistent or improving as he sat the test monthly. Ram reported that he was frustrated that he didn't know how to improve his scores.

In an effort to improve his scores, he engaged the services of an IELTS tutor. When questioned about his sessions with the tutor, he was not willing to talk about them. The tutor, who advertises in the foyer of the test centre and on notice boards around the universities in Adelaide, was not willing to talk to the research assistant. In her advertising, she claims to hold 'Master degree of Education in New York Central University' and have experience teaching English and IELTS preparation in New York and Melbourne. According to Ram, after reading a practice test she set him, the tutor stated that he would

definitely be able to get a score of 7 overall in the very near future (when his most successful writing score had been 6). Ram's willingness to believe her and to pay for her services reflect on his desperation to achieve the scores required for permanent residency and, I believe, his lack of understanding of the constructs being tested in IELTS.

Ram faced frustration in his efforts to apply for permanent residency based on the information he had been given by a migration agent and in his efforts to achieve his target score. His inability to achieve consistent or improving band scores led him to approach the test with a 'roll of the dice' attitude with the comment that he should get lucky if he did it enough times. His preparation also included changes to his diet in the hope that returning to a pure vegetarian diet might increase his chances.

6. Ina

Ina is a 25-year-old female from Kazakhstan. She needs a score of 6.5 overall on the Academic module of the IELTS test for admission to university in Australia. Ina is studying at an English language centre in Adelaide. In the lead-up to her test date, Ina was studying in a general English class with an academic focus. She attended classes 20 hours a week, with four hours a week of IELTS specific classes. She lived in homestay with a young widowed grandmother. Her host's daughters and grandchildren often visited the home. Ina was included in all social occasions at the home and, on occasion, spent time at her host's small business, a bridal wear salon.

Ina displayed a controlled, systematic, businesslike approach to preparation for IELTS (with the added luxury of an expired TOEFL score of 630 under her belt). Her method of preparation was to do practice tests, particularly listening tests daily. For preparation for reading she read a variety of texts in English, including newspapers, airport novels and magazines. Her preferred magazine was written for an aspirational, business and high-end fashion oriented audience.

To assist with her listening, she watched the television and movies alone and with her homestay host. Her selection included *Sense and Sensibility*, *Oceans Twelve* and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Ina had a bundle of brightly coloured vocabulary cards in her pocket which she used a little like prayer or worry beads. When she had a spare moment during the day, she would pull them out and read them. She had started using them at the advice of one of her English teachers from the ELC. The words on the cards were taken from books and magazines. She selected 'more academic words' and attempted to use the words in conversation and class discussion. If particular words represented pronunciation problems, she wrote the word with phonemic script. Ina also developed a vocabulary list with words, translations and phonemic script in a separate book.

In addition to her homework from the English classes, Ina spent two hours a day translating various texts related to marketing from English to Kazakh for her sister.

Ina reported that a classmate had advised her to study listening in the morning as the listening section of the exam is first thing. So Ina did an hour of listening exam practice every morning through the three week break from classes for Christmas/New Year. This was a time when other case study subjects had a great deal of difficulty committing to an exam preparation routine.

7. Ei

Ei is from China. She is 29 years old. She has permanent resident status in Australia. Her target score was an Academic module score of 7 overall, with no score lower than 7 for her application to the medical registration course as the first step towards being registered to practice medicine in Australia. She has a medical degree from a Chinese university and a Masters of Nutrition and Dietetics from an Australian university.

Ei is married. Her husband was born in India and educated in India and the United Kingdom. He is a medical doctor. Ei and her husband speak only English together. At the time of the study, Ei had been

living in Australia for four years. She had been married and living with her husband for a year. Ei and her husband see English as very important to their lives in Australia and to their work. Without English they can't work in their professions. Ei works full-time as a locum dietician at a large public hospital. In her work, she has many opportunities to speak, read and write English.

Ei was preparing for her fifth attempt at IELTS. She had taken the Academic module three times; once for acceptance to a pre-enrolment English course, once for university entrance and once for the medical board. Her most recent attempt had been for the medical board. She had not been successful in the written module. She had also taken the General Training module once for her application for permanent residency.

Ei's husband is her most significant English speaking partner. She also speaks English at work and with her friends. She has some Australian friends at work. Those conversations are mostly casual, relationship-building conversations. She also has some Singaporean and Malaysian friends with whom she speaks a mixture of English and Chinese.

Just before joining the case study, Ei began working in the diabetes clinic where there are a lot of opportunities for conversation with patients. Ei takes case histories and advises diabetics on dietary choices to help with managing their diabetes. When Ei started her Masters, she found the English very challenging. She had to study hard. Then in her second year, it became even harder as she began clinical work. During that year, she came up with a checklist for patient interactions to aid her communication. The checklist included early in the conversation an explanation that English is her second language and she has some pronunciation problems. She asks that if patients have difficulties understanding her, could they ask her to rephrase. This framing of the medical consultation has been very successful for increasing communication and forging relationships with patients. She is very pleased with how it works. She has only had one patient tell her that he couldn't understand a thing she said 'but he was a very angry man' and 'he was famous in the ENT ward' so she is happy with her workplace communication. This framing also involves inviting pronunciation corrections or explanations from the patients which has been helpful in her language development.

With respect to learning at work, when Ei was a student she worked at a large hospital as a menu monitor. This involved helping patients fill in their menus and helping them make menu choices that fitted their dietary needs. This work helped her learn about Australian food culture and she met lots of people and had many language use opportunities.

With regard to deliberate plans for preparation for IELTS, Ei planned to do 'nothing on purpose'. She and her husband already did a lot of things to help with preparation. They continued to watch English language movies. Ei planned to start listening to the radio while preparing for her medical exams.

Ei doesn't want to prepare for IELTS. She believes that she can prepare the writing (format) but she thinks that in the listening and the reading, either you have the skills or you don't.

In email communication after her test date, Ei advised that she had not been able to sit the IELTS on the day she had booked as she had lost her passport. She attended the test centre with other forms of photo identification but was not permitted to sit the test. While that was frustrating for her, she was not too upset as the rules for admitting doctors had changed since she had booked and her application was not reliant on the IELTS score. She stated that she did a couple of practice tests before the test but that was all.

8. Oka

Oka is a 27-year-old female from Japan. Her motivation to sit the IELTS was to have proof of her English proficiency on her CV as she applied for jobs in Japan. Oka had been in Adelaide for 22 weeks as a student at an English language centre when the case study began. When she arrived in

Adelaide, she entered a social circle of Japanese speakers based around an informal Japanese conversation class. She spent most of her spare time with other speakers of Japanese.

Booking for the IELTS test was an act that inspired Oka to invest more of her time and energy in English. She stopped spending as much time with her Japanese-speaking friends and spent more time at home with her homestay mother and sister. The act of booking the test seemed to be significant for many of the subjects. The existence of a test date inspired focused attention on the test and test preparation.

Oka studied English in high school and college in Japan. However, she had not been a motivated student of English. As a college student, she spent a month at an English school in Perth, Western Australia but she felt she did not benefit a great deal from that experience.

Oka lived in a homestay close to the business district of Adelaide. She lived with the homestay family for the duration of her visit to Adelaide. The family consisted of a mother and father and a 22 year old sister. Oka reported that her homestay mother and sister were extremely helpful for her language learning. They supported her by assisting her with her homework, chatting over meals and generally including her in the life of the family. Oka's homestay mother corrected her pronunciation and sometimes her use of verb tenses. Oka's homestay sister was very busy with study and part-time work but still managed to find time to chat with Oka most days.

Oka's preparation for IELTS consisted mainly of attendance at English language classes. The curriculum for the classes she was attending is a general EAP curriculum. However, Oka reported that her previous terms classes had felt IELTS-focused. There had been a lot of work on writing, especially discussion essays and letters. Her classes included 16 hours of general English for Academic Purposes and four hours of IELTS preparation a week. As well as participating in this study, Oka was assisting in a pilot study investigating the use of modality in academic writing (Nagao 2007). This entailed a weekly, one-on-one, intensive tutorial session which should be considered preparation for IELTS.

As Oka's test date was 12 January, the Christmas/New Year holiday fell in the month before her test. The English school Oka attended was closed for three weeks at this time. Oka spent an average of 12 hours a week during those three weeks doing practice tests at the university library, mostly for the listening and reading sections. On some days, she did five hours of practice tests. Oka did no reading for pleasure in English. Sometimes her host parents would find an article in the newspaper related to Japan and they would draw her attention to it but that was all.

Oka sat IELTS on 12 January. She was not very happy with her results so she resolved to continue to study English once she returned to Japan.

9. Bie

Bie is a female pharmacy student from Malaysia. She is 22 years old. At the start of the case study, she was about to complete a pharmacy degree and needed an IELTS score of 7 overall with no band lower than 7 for her application for permanent residency.

Bie worked casually (including late nights) at a yiros store (Lebanese takeaway shop) in an entertainment precinct in Adelaide. Her workplace English was limited to service exchanges and casual conversation with her workmates. Most of her workmates were also international students with English as an additional language.

Bie lived in a share house with other Malaysian students. She was aware of the difference between standard English (such as the language we used in the interview) and the English she uses at home in her share house where an English, Mandarin Chinese and Malay fusion is used for day-to-day communication. This shows awareness that her home language is not the English that is valued by the

test. Bie's social life was conducted in a range of languages. She attended a ballroom dancing class once a week which was held in English and she spoke English with her friends from the class.

Bie's degree was run in collaboration between a Malaysian and a South Australian university. The first two years of her degree were taught in Malaysia by lecturers from the South Australian university. Her final two years were spent in Adelaide studying with local students in the course. As part of her course, Bie studied a course in health communication where she was taught to take patient medical histories and advise patients on use of medications. Bie reported that the course had been very helpful. Another element of Bie's course was a placement in a retail pharmacy. Bie negotiated her placement in a pharmacy in Sydney as she wanted to experience Australian life beyond Adelaide. Bie stated that her spoken language had improved as a result of these two experiences in her course.

Bie had not taken the IELTS test before as her Malaysian university had assessed her English as being ready for study in the pharmacy course. She did have many friends to advise her on preparation for the test. She reported that she had already done sample listening and reading tests and discussed her results with her housemate who was also preparing for the test.

As Bie's course had many contact hours she withdrew from the study before she took the test.

10. Go

Go is a 21-year-old female from China. She is a student in a South Australian university. She is enrolled in a double degree in commerce and law. She completed her commerce degree in 2007 and, as a result, was eligible to apply for permanent residency. Her IELTS target score is 7.0 overall with no band lower than 7.

Go arrived in Adelaide when she was 16 years old. She and her cousin came to Adelaide to study the final two years of school. They lived together in a homestay family. They were both very successful at high school and achieved high enough tertiary entrance rankings to choose almost any degree they wished. Go has always been a successful student. Go worked as a waitress in a well-known Chinese restaurant in Adelaide. She initially found her work a good opportunity for language practise but reported that, after about six months, she had mastered the language required to waitress. Since then, she has felt that she had limited language learning opportunities at work. During the course of the case study, Go was offered a tutoring job in first year accounting. She found that a more challenging language use opportunity.

Go did some preparation for the test at the State Library where she accessed the IELTS preparation materials. She also had books and downloaded material from the internet at home. Go discussed IELTS preparation with her cousin and with her friends. She stated that she and her friends were confused about how the test was rated as she felt that her and her cousin's English proficiency was higher than other acquaintances who achieved higher scores. They also talked about the test becoming harder over time and the perceived differences between rating in Australia, China and Malaysia. Go's cousin was able to achieve her target score in China after several unsuccessful attempts in Adelaide. Go reported that another friend had also received their target score in Malaysia after similarly unsuccessful attempts in Adelaide.

Go mentioned a feeling of having failed when recounting her experience the first time she attempted IELTS. She had not achieved her target score and found it embarrassing to admit to her friends that she had not been successful. Her host parents also found it hard to accept that she had not been successful. Go said that she did not expect to do well in her most recent attempt because she had felt uncomfortable in the early stages of the listening test. She reported that in the first section of the listening test, she had been distracted by recalling her perceived failure in her earlier attempt.

Go prepared for the written section by reading and re-reading sample answers and attempting to rewrite them as close to the sample as possible. Go brought her preparation note book to show the

research assistant how she was preparing for the test. On the top of each page was written ‘I will get four 7’. She expressed frustration at not knowing how to achieve a high score in the writing section of the test:

*But with the writing I do not understand how do they judge you? What can you do to get a 7?
So I was surprised about the 6.5 result, I really would like to know what their expectations are.*

During the meeting, when she brought her note book to show the research assistant, it became obvious that she was approaching the first task in the written section without considering the most appropriate tone for the letter. It was also apparent that Go did not have the test wiseness required to achieve her target score. She did not paraphrase the writing prompt but used phrases taken from the prompt. Go’s understanding of correctness in writing was initially limited to grammar and vocabulary. She reported that through discussions with friends she had learnt how best to structure her arguments in the second task at a text level. Following discussion of the importance of appropriate tone in the letter, she changed her approach to the letter. This change appears to have assisted with an improvement in her writing band score.