



Cambridge Assessment
English

Bridging the Gap: The Relationship Between Intensive IELTS Writing Preparation in China and Japan and ‘Relearning’ Academic Conventions

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Overview

Background to the study

Approach and Methodology

Results - Japan / China / UK

Discussion



Research context - my background

- IELTS Teacher
- PhD about IELTS Writing Test preparation
- IELTS Researcher at Cambridge Assessment English



Research Background

Japan

- Topic emerged through experience (IELTS Intensive course)
- Linking source to subsequent study
- Asking participants how they feel about the process, going under the surface
- ‘Writing is at the very heart of academic life’

(Surono, p.17, 2015).



Research Background

Table 1: China (a non-comparative addition)

Top Ten non-EU sending countries

Country	2016-17	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14
China (PRC)	95,090	91,215	89,540	87,895
Malaysia	16,370	17,405	17,060	16,635
United States of America	17,580	17,115	16,865	16,485
India	16,550	16,745	18,320	19,750
Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region)	16,680	16,745	16,215	14,725
Nigeria	12,665	16,100	17,920	18,020
Saudi Arabia	8,065	8,570	8,595	9,060
Singapore	7,300	7,540	7,295	6,790
Thailand	6,175	6,095	6,240	6,340
Canada	5,915	5,980	6,075	6,350

Source: HESA Figure 11 - Top ten non-European Union countries of domicile in 2016/17 for HE student enrolments 2012/13 and 2016/17



Research Questions

RQ 1: How are Chinese and Japanese learners aiming to study abroad supported to achieve their required IELTS writing section exam score in their own country?

RQ 2: To what extent does achieving the required writing score allow previous IELTS candidates to manage academic writing on a British course of postgraduate study afterwards?



Data Collection & Analysis

Tokyo

Classroom observations (entirety) over two months

Semi-structured interviews
(45 minutes each on average, 10 student and two teacher participants)

Written homework tasks collected (all data thematically analysed throughout)

Identity, former workplace



Hangzhou, China (test preparation on an industrial scale)

Data access issues

Classroom observations (entirety) over six months

Semi-structured interviews (45 minutes each on average, 20 student and two teacher participants)

Written homework tasks collected

Traditional pedagogy, 'Western mind', on-the-spot focus groups



Results - China and Japan

Table 2: Test Preparation Approaches by Theme

Theme 1	Planning and structuring an IELTS essay	generating ideas (addressed in 8/10 lessons in Japan, 15/18 in China) concept mapping (8/10 lessons in Japan, not used in China) reading (16/18 in China, not really used for writing in Japan)
Theme 2	Developing structure and expressing ideas	paragraphs (7/10 lessons in Japan, 15/18 lessons in China) lexical work (18/18 lessons in China, 7/10 lessons in Japan)
Theme 3	Improving candidates' written homework tasks	feedback (6/10 lessons in Japan, 16/18 lessons in China) model answers (6/10 lessons in Japan, 18/18 lessons in China) timed output sessions (15/18 lessons in China) improving topic 'knowledge' (15/18 lessons in China, 9/10 lessons in Japan)

The lasting impact of prior education...



UK (multiple sites)

Struggled to get participants, interesting – two months

Semi-structured interviews with postgraduates (in-depth)

Different stages of course, Russell Group



Results - UK

Table 3: UK Study Issues – recurring themes

Critical thinking issues	All participants (6) reported struggling with critical analysis, leading to problems writing. Learned after starting study in most cases, some took longer than others. Study background a contributing factor
Reading and self-study	Some candidates (3, N=6) read academic texts to critically inform their written work, others felt unable to do so which had a 'knock on' effect on essays
Pre-sessional courses & proof-readers	Certain participants (2 N=6) took part in pre-sessional courses, and reported learning how to think critically and write appropriately. Peer and professional proof-reading used by some participants
Tutor support & feedback	Mixed responses from lecturer to academic writing issues across all subjects included – personal preference a factor. Some stringent, others less so, according to interviewees (3, N=6).
Problems with group planning	Almost all participants (4, N=6) described problems with group writing tasks, mainly confidence issues. One case of extreme discord. Maybe beneficial to teach them collaborative work, but not culturally sensitive.
IELTS vs academic writing (film, finance)	Most students (4, N=6) highlighted the distinction in some form. Some mentioned 'unlearning' IELTS. Links to critical thinking category.



Individual Cases – UK Students

Olivia (Chinese – negative, finished)

Psychology Master's, recently completed

Band score 6 in writing, 7 overall

Had writing problems from start to finish

Serious issues with critical thinking but did develop eventually

Problems with group planning and participation

IELTS writing not academic but 'childish' for the purposes of assessment

Growth mindsets



Individual Cases – UK Students

Masako (Japanese – positive so far)

Several months into Policy and International Relations Master's
Got band score 7 on writing

Made a strong start to academic writing

Critical thinking already developed at point of entry (prep course)

Was managing group planning & peer feedback

Found IELTS less sophisticated and evidence-based than academic writing so far



Individual Cases – UK Students

Saturn (Chinese) - positive so far

Currently on pre-sessional course before Master's

Writing score too low for direct access (6)

Learning critical reading and thinking skills

EAP tutor believed these are essential to inform academic writing

'Unlearning' IELTS writing, clear message most important



Evaluation of Test Preparation Strategies for Academic Study

Idea generation & concept mapping – useful for Task 2 in the exam, but not for academic writing, which was to be informed by academic reading

Organisation & structure – appeared to be an important part of developing writing compositions (introductions and conclusions)



Table 4 - Considerations for Test Preparation (taking a longer view)

Shortcomings of Test Preparation to UK Study Process

A) 'Proper' academic writing not encountered early enough

B) Critical thinking not required until study begins

C) Purpose of tested writing not the same as academic writing

D) Less 'standard' subjects not particularly well accommodated

E) Reading not part of tested writing

F) Too much emphasis on demonstrating lexical range over presenting a clear message



Table 5 - Suggested Improvements for Receiving UK Institutions

Aspect identified for alteration	Recommended Modification
Lecturer feedback on writing inconsistent, some address it, others do not	Standardisation across universities required, either English language is to be 'corrected' or it is not. If so, issues around what kinds of language to accept re-emerge (consider World Englishes)
Proof-reading omitted by significant number of students, issues around what proof-readers should or should not address	Inherently difficult to enforce. Should be encouraged at all stages, and at the start of the course explained as essential. In the longer-term, professional proof-readers should be 'in-house', certified and regulated, in order to reduce the amount of 'extra' help given that appears to be currently offered in some cases.



Conclusion: Research Questions Revisited

- RQ 1: How are Chinese and Japanese learners aiming to study abroad supported to achieve their required IELTS writing section exam score in their own country?

They are supported through test preparation strategies which (necessarily) focus on the basics of essay writing (ideas, planning & structuring) but are we missing a trick here?

- RQ 2: To what extent does achieving the required writing score allow previous IELTS candidates to manage academic writing on a British course of postgraduate study afterwards?

It is a start, as IELTS intends. However, it could be a better start if the entire process was better aligned. Most students were managing ok on the surface.



Thank you!

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References

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Surono, I. (2015) Importance of Academic Writing Skills at the University. English in Higher Education. Jakarta: Indonesia, British Council.

