Caring for the academically-oriented: IELTS, EAP and loving the prodigals on the bridge to uni.

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Objectives:

1. To provide participants with an understanding of the variety of needs international students have on their journey to and through university in a foreign land;
2. To consider some of the academic (and other) challenges they face in passing the IELTS test and what English language teachers and tutors can do to help them;
3. To briefly consider their academic (and other) needs beyond English proficiency such as those gained through and English for Academic Preparation
4. To brainstorm ways to continue and enhance their support once they enter their university course and beyond.

Framework:

Talk to a partner: What similarities and differences can you see between an international student and the younger son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son?

IELTS: The Great Wall of English

To enter a course in an Australian institution, international students need to get a certain score on a recognised English language test, such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC or ISLPR. Each has its merit and sphere of influence but the most common one is the IELTS test. IELTS stands for International English Language Testing System. There is much that could be said about it, most of which you can find on their website: [www.ielts.org](http://www.ielts.org)

What I would like to do in this very short time is to:

1. Give you an overview of the test
2. Give you some useful descriptors which will help unlock the mystery of the bandscale levels
3. Preview and trial ways that you can help your students to develop
4. Look at ways that you can help them to increase their chances of success beyond book work.

An overview:

There are four separate modules to the IELTS test: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. The Reading and Writing Modules can be done in either an Academic or a General format with slight variations in the text and task types. The Listening and Speaking Modules have a standard format. I will be talking about only the Academic format but much will still be relevant.

The Listening module has four different sections, 40 test questions and lasts 30 minutes. The four sections are 1. A social conversation; 2. A social monologue; 3. An academic conversation; 4. An academic monologue. Task types include multiple choice, selecting an appropriate picture, labelling a diagram or flow chart, completing a table or a gap fill, true/false/not given. Skills needed might include: listening for gist, or for specific information, listening for numbers, focusing on multiple questions at one time, matching words and meanings, recognising content words, using synonyms, predicting, recognising spoken signposts, following processes, identifying cause and effect, classifying and identifying arguments.

Task: complete the process diagram and the object description based on the listening.

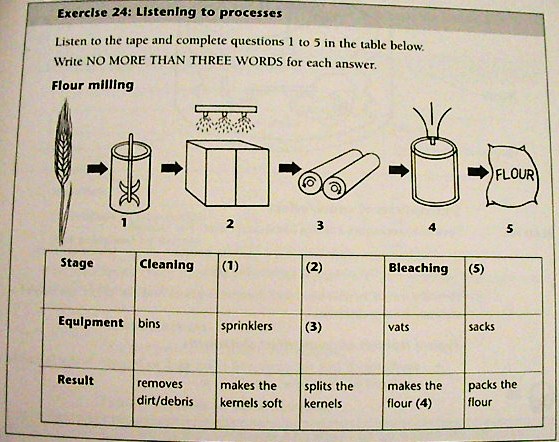


Diagram 1. Focusing on IELTS: Listening and Speaking Skills (K O’Sullivan and S Thurlow, 2002, NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney) p31.

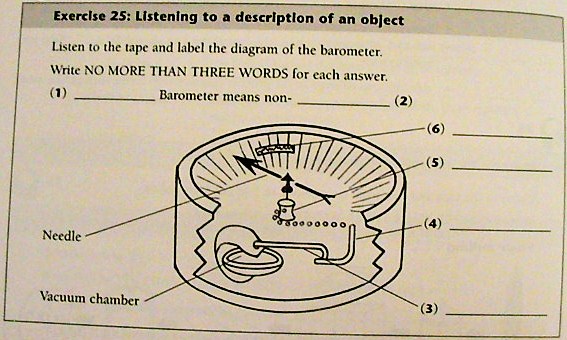


Diagram 2. Focusing on IELTS: Listening and Speaking Skills (K O’Sullivan and S Thurlow, 2002, NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney) p32.

The Reading Module has 3 sections, 40 questions and takes 60 minutes. There are three passages of general academic interest from magazines, books, journals, or newspapers, with one passage including detailed logical argument. Task types include: multiple choice, gap-filling questions, summary completions, short answer questions (eg. NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS FROM THE TEXT), and matching questions. Candidates need various strategies like scanning, skimming and intensive reading – the eagle, the stone and the fish. They also need to develop various skills: selecting vocabulary, recognising definitions, understanding and using classifications, following processes, contrasts and examples, identifying cause and effect, identifying what writers are doing, reading supporting graphs and tables, and matching references.

Task: Identify the viewpoints of the writers of these paragraphs. What clues helped you?

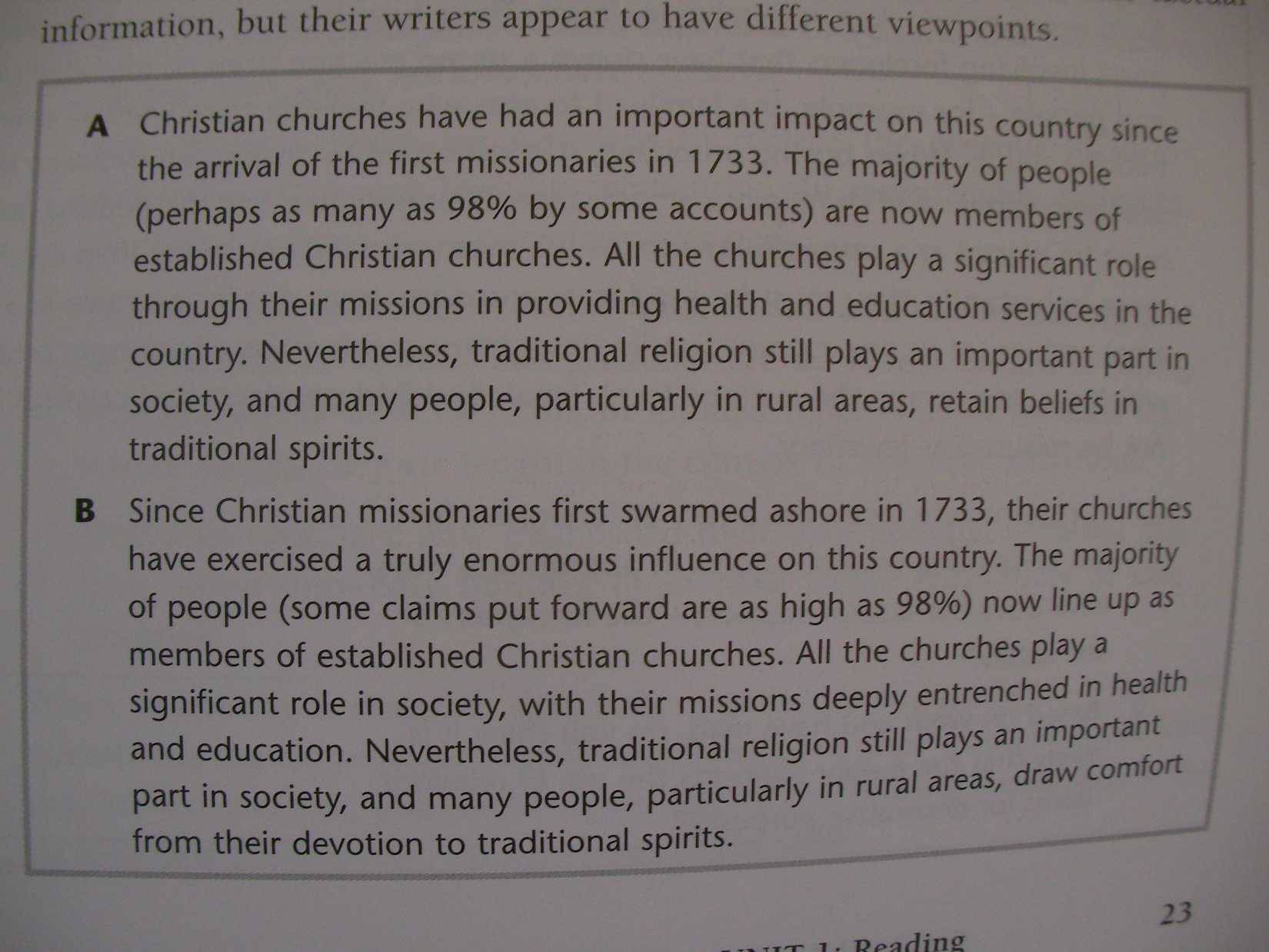


Diagram 3. From a section on ‘Judging the writer’s viewpoint’ in Focusing on IELTS: Reading and Writing Skills (K O’Sullivan and J Lindleck, 2002, NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney) p23.

The Writing module has two parts and these often cause students the most grief. Certainly, giving feedback on writing is something we can contribute to well. Part 1 requires at least a 150-word description of a graph, a table, or some kind of diagram. Part 2 requires at least an argumentative or discursive essay of at least 250 words giving their opinion in regard to a two part statement to which they usually agree or disagree. To complete Part 1 well, they need to interpret the given stimulus, organise their plan with an overview, a paragraph about the most important features, and a final paragraph summarising all other features. They should include data from the stimulus and paraphrase rather than copy words. They should complete Part 1 within 20 minutes. Part 2 requires a careful analysis of the question and statement, and it is useful to plan for an introduction with a topic statement and scope statement, 2-3 body paragraphs and a conclusion which summarises the main points and restates the thesis. Part 2 should take about 40 minutes and including time for analysis, planning and editing. Some of the challenges for both parts are: Getting content ideas, using correctly spelled sophisticated vocabulary and accurately constructed complex grammatical structures, stating thesis statements and topic sentences clearly, and developing strong paragraphs with sufficient support. See the IELTS website for example tasks.

Task 1: How would you describe a table showing the populations of the Australian states, territories and their capital cities for an IELTS Task 1 writing task?

Task 2: Imagine the topic: *Many people dream of studying or travelling overseas before starting their real university studies in their own countries. Others argue that this is a waste of money and income earning potential.*

To what extent do you agree or disagree? Present a written argument using your own ideas, knowledge and experience.

Use the PRESS strategy (original author unknown) to develop a paragraph on **one advantage of international travel**.

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| --- | --- |
| P: Make a POINT |  |
| R: Give a REASON |  |
| E: Add an EXPLANATION, EXAMPLE and/or EVIDENCE |  |
| S: End with SUMMARY (concluding sentence) |  |
| S: SIGN OFF (link to next paragraph) |  |

The same strategy can be used to help students develop their speaking skills. The Speaking Module is conducted as a recorded interview between the candidate and an examiner, with the examiner asking a limited number of questions from a set script. It has three parts: 1. Introduction and questions on a couple of familiar topics; 2. An individual long turn in which students are given a topic and guiding points. They have 1 minute to plan what they will say and then 2 minutes to speak. 3. A more indepth interview with more abstract academic questions.

At this point, it might be useful to say something about the different levels. As the level increases, so does evidence of increasing confidence, sophistication of vocabulary, and complexity and control over grammatical accuracy.

Level 4 is a FRUSTRATION level – they can say a lot but there is a lot they can’t get out right.

Level 5 is a SOCIAL level – they can use English well enough to communicate for most social purposes.

Level 6 is an ACADEMIC level – they can discuss academic topics and engage in more formal transactions.

Level 7 is a CULTURAL level – into both social and academic discourse, they bring a greater cultural knowledge including a growing prevalence for less common vocabulary, such as idioms and cultural references.

Like learning to drive, which requires 100 hours of supervised practice, becoming proficient at speaking, writing, listening or reading, requires consistent effort and much practice. The more involvement that the learner has with the host culture and native speakers, the more likely they are to grow in their proficiency. Sadly, many never do or at too slow a pace.

EAP: Practical skills for life beyond the wall

For many students, the goal is to get into uni. Once they are there, they will face academic and other challenges which they may not be ready for. This is the purpose of an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) implies preparation for the various ways in which they will need to use English at uni – researching for assignments, finding and understanding resources; structuring a wide range of written genres; participation in lectures, tutorials, and group work; as well as understanding some of the cultural expectations and prohibitions, such as the dangers of plagiarism.

Supporting their lives within Uni and beyond

Very importantly though, students need to have a life beyond their study. Like the prodigal son, they may have taken half their parents’ livelihood to get here and can easily waste their life and resources away through misguided living, or sow themselves only into the study and miss the joys of becoming part of the culture here. There is much that we can and should do to ‘bring the lonely into families’ and to ‘love the alien in our midst’. Be a friend of the prodigal’s father!