



EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION  
FOR LANGUAGE TESTING  
AND ASSESSMENT



University of  
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# The Impact of Academic Writing Tests

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# A washback study

IELTS washback in context

Green 2007

# Researching washback

Green 2007



## Context

**EAP** English for academic purposes, preparation for academic study in the UK

**ielts** a test of English for academic purposes designed to test readiness to study at tertiary level through the medium of English

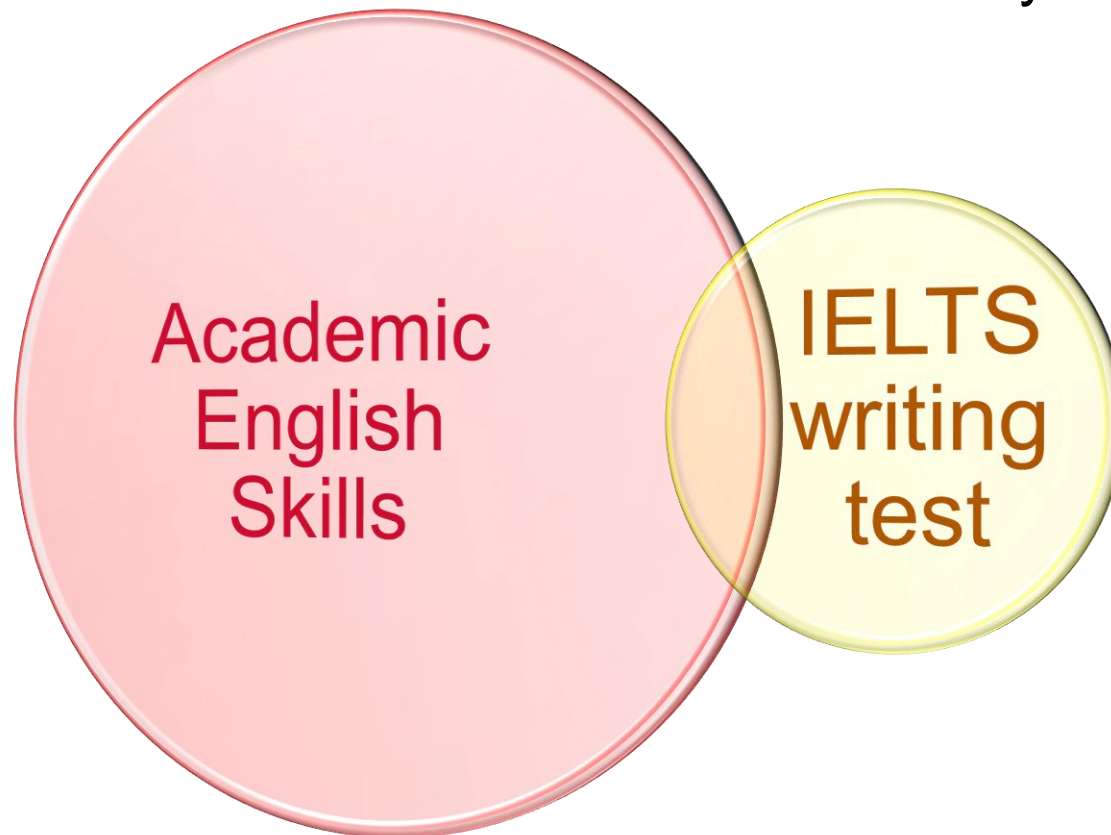
**Preessional English** Courses intended to prepare students for their courses at university

**ielts Preparation** Courses intended to enable students to achieve their required ielts score

**Combination courses** Preessional English with an ielts preparation component

# Overlap

- How far does the design of the test cover the language skills that students need for academic study in English?



# Overlap between IELTS and academic literacy: Areas of similarity



- **Task fulfilment**
  - Organise present and explain data
  - Describe stages in a process
  - Describe an object, event or series of events
  - Explain how something works
- **Coherence and cohesion**
  - Arrangement of information to make it easy for the reader to retrieve
  - Effective use of cohesive devices
- **Vocabulary and sentence structure**
  - Accuracy, effectiveness and range of syntax and lexis
- **Arguments ideas and evidence**
  - Present the solution to a problem
  - Present and justify an opinion
  - Compare and contrast evidence, opinions and justifications
  - Evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or an argument
- **Communicative quality**
  - Ability of the writer to convey a clear message to the reader

Appropriate responses are short essays or general reports addressed to tutors or examiners

# Overlap between IELTS and academic literacy: areas of difference



- Topics and objects of enquiry
  - General rather than specific content
  - Phenomenal rather than metaphenomenal objects of enquiry
- Rhetorical task
  - Hortation: A judgement about the desirability of a given entity or phenomenon
- Writing from sources
  - Paraphrase and language of citation
  - Referencing of sources and plagiarism
- Length and time allowed
  - 150 words and 250 words in 60 minutes
- Addressees/ raters
  - University 'lecturer' and 'educated non-specialist readers'
  - Judgement applied to language ability or content

# Asking: teachers contrast IELTS prep and EAP course practices



## IELTS Preparation

Students memorise useful phrases and structures

Students take practice tests

Teaching how to describe graphs and trends

Grammar correction on written work

Feedback in form of IELTS bands

## English for Academic Purposes

Working with reading material in students' intended subject areas

Teaching of sub-technical academic vocabulary

Referencing, quoting and synthesising from sources

Writing summaries of source texts

Individual project work

Extended (project) writing

Teaching note taking and making skills

Awareness raising for students of the expectations of university supervisors

# Watching: observations from the IELTS preparation classroom

- ★ Lists of typical IELTS topics prepared for students
- ★ Topics were broad, not explored beyond task demands
- ★ Students were sometimes given a choice of topic for IELTS practice essays
- ★ IELTS-like task stimuli heavily used on IELTS courses
- ★ IELTS classes limited to writing T1 and T2 type essays
- ★ Question analysis based on the generic IELTS task prompt
- ★ Rhetorical tasks limited to those required for the test: description, hortation
- ★ Exposition in IELTS classes limited to T1 and T2. EAP involved greater variety e.g. classes on definition
- ★ IELTS classes typically about reproducing information: from graph or from personal knowledge
- ★ Teaching 'ways to impress the examiner'

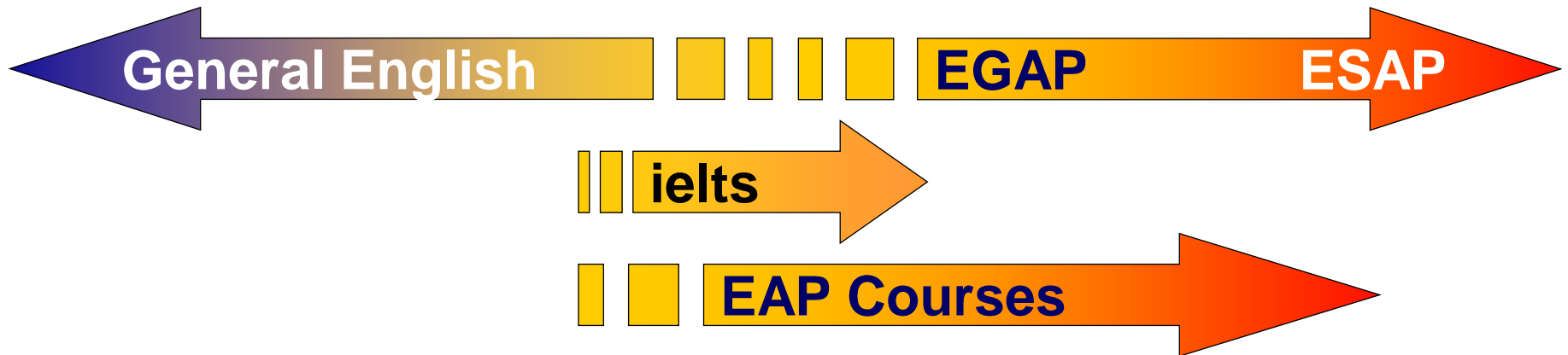


# Watching: observations from the IELTS preparation classroom



- ★ Teaching formal style, but not including such academic features as hedging
- ★ Teaching organisational templates
- ★ Teaching grammar points relevant to test – error analysis/ useful structures
- ★ Encouraging use of more formal vocabulary
  
- ★ Essays for the IELTS classes were short (100-300 words)
- ★ Students encouraged to count words
- ★ Teaching how to use more words – sentence expansion
- ★ Timed essay practice activities more frequent in IELTS classes
- ★ Little word processing observed in IELTS writing (and none in class)
  
- ★ Feedback on essays in the form of band scores

# The GE → ESAP continuum



- Broad audience for IELTS → cultural and academic neutrality
- Shortcomings of subject specific modules and reading-writing links → the 1995 revision
- Constraints of practicality
- Readiness to enter vs expertise in study skills

# Learners: Participants and Settings



- 476 Students
  - 55% China/Taiwan
  - 19% Other East Asia
  - 13% Western European
- 14 Institutions
  - English for Academic Purposes
  - IELTS Preparation
  - Combination EAP/ IELTS

# Presage Variables

First Language

Gender

Nationality

Previous Exposure to English

Experience of Writing in L1 and L2

Previous Test Preparation

Knowledge of IELTS at entry

Learning Preferences

Educational Level

Academic Subject

# Process Variables

Course Length & Intensity

Using English Outside Class

Satisfaction with the Course  
& with the Host Culture

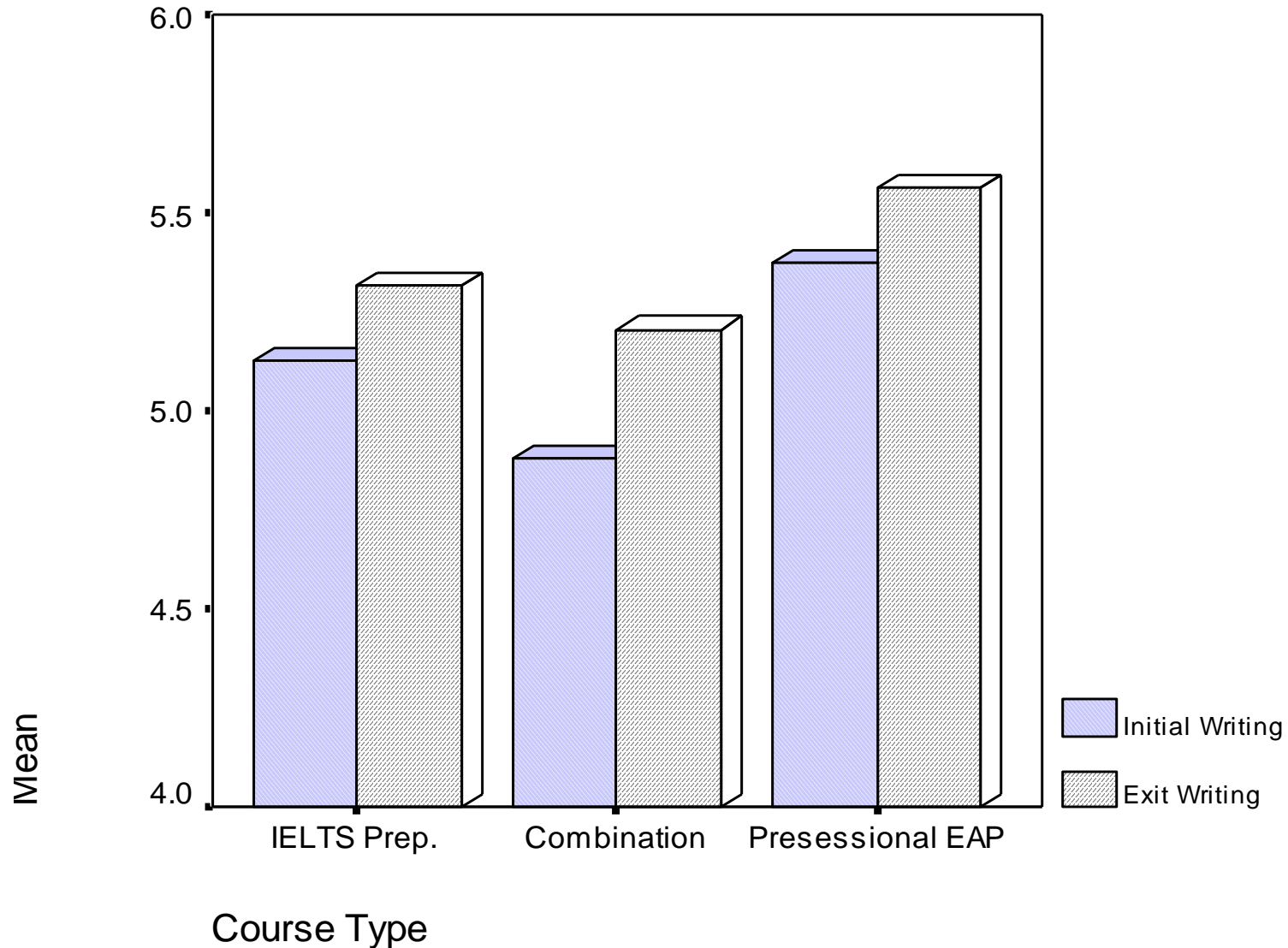
Approach to Learning

Learning Strategies

Course Content

Frequency of Test Practice

# IELTS Writing Score Gains by Course Type



# IELTS Writing Score Gains



*Exit test scores*

=1.184

+ .405 Initial writing score

+ .018 Initial vocabulary score

+ .010 Initial grammar score

+ .228 Secondary School  
Education (not  
university)

+ .038 Course length in  
weeks

+ .011 Self-confidence in  
English writing ability

+ .070 Enjoyed meeting  
British people

+ .054 Learned to improve  
writing test scores

+ .030 Use of test strategies  
at course exit

# Implications for learners



Limited evidence for benefits of dedicated IELTS preparation:  
washback to learners of key importance

*IELTS preparation teaches basics of academic writing. We use a one sentence introduction – a very basic technique. If I learn this method, I don't know if it's useful for academic writing such as a dissertation. I don't know how to write for an MA, but I think the basic idea is the same.*

Bei, Chinese student

Learners need to pass beyond immediate requirements of IELTS AWM to be adequately prepared for academic study



# Implications for IELTS



Possible to substantially improve on predictions of score gains by considering

- Instructional differences such as course length
- Individual differences among learners

Stakeholders are currently advised to take account of local context

- Message needs to be reinforced
- Further health warnings needed on relationship between gain scores and periods of study in line with the findings of the research

# Implications for teachers



Teachers need to reflect on...

- the nature of language assessment, test qualities and fitness for purpose
  - relationships between test content, test construct and teaching/learning aims
  - relationships between...
    - test-wiseness: exploiting construct irrelevant aspects of test design
    - test familiarisation: learning about test content and format
    - test preparation: building tested skills
- ...and test success
- how best to exploit the motivational effects of a test without sacrificing professionalism

# Implications for policy makers



- Tests, however well-designed, can do very little to improve teaching and learning
- Tests, even well-designed ones, can contribute to damaging effects on teaching and learning
- The most obvious test preparation strategy is to focus on test *content*, teaching and learning tested *skills* is more challenging
- Teachers and learners should be given more information about the thinking behind tests
- Reflective practice should be encouraged – self assessment and greater autonomy can benefit learning