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Review of *Developing Writing Skills for IELTS: A Research-Based Approach*



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Developing Writing Skills for IELTS: A Research-Based Approach by Sin Wang Chong and Xuejun Ye, Routledge, 2021, 200pp., £23.19 (Paperback) £23.19 (eBook). ISBN 9780367258375.

International English Language Testing System (IELTS), joint property of the British Council, IDP (IELTS Australia), and Cambridge Assessment English, as one of the most critical high-stakes tests, has become an indispensable part of any person who strives to study, work, or live in an international community. The pivotal importance of IELTS should not go unnoticed as it is used for making critical life-changing decisions about test takers (Uysal, 2010). The reported data underscores that the number of IELTS candidates has been increasing exponentially, reaching three million candidates annually in 2016 (Pearson, 2019).

Since its inception in 1989, IELTS has provided a fertile ground for the parties involved in teaching, testing, and publishing. It goes without saying that IELTS has become a lucrative business as, for instance, the annual revenue from IELTS for IDP was reported to be around 185 million dollars in 2017 (Green, 2019). Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that we are also witnessing an increasing number of publications. The hard truth is that a vast majority of the available books, aiming to help test takers get high band scores, are written based on one size fits all strategies, lacking any trace of research-based materials development theories.

Surprisingly enough, in this unfortunate situation, a new title published by Routledge in 2021, that is, *Developing Writing Skills for IELTS: A Research-Based Approach*, is worth reviewing. As the title speaks for itself, the book is written based on a research approach. Sin Wang Chong, one of the authors of the book under review, has extensively published in writing instruction.

The book is divided into two parts: the first part consists of 13 chapters, and the second part acts as an answer bank with eight chapters. The first chapter of part one gives a synopsis of IELTS and the

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academic writing test. The four main assessment criteria for the writing test, namely task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy, are explained succinctly. Afterwards, the authors analyse IELTS writing questions in both tasks 1 and 2. Notably, the question types and classifications in this introductory chapter are illuminating. Chapter 2 is of primary importance as it elaborates on the theoretical and research framework of using exemplars in education. This chapter is well organised and comprehensive. Having read it, a teacher or a learner can get familiar with the benefits of exemplar-based instruction so they would be able to take much advantage of this book. In this chapter, online resources are provided for further reading using exemplars in higher education, a list of journal articles, scholarly books, and related websites to IELTS and IELTS writing. As mentioned in the acknowledgements section, writing teachers who read this book are advised to study Chong's article (2019), in which the theoretical underpinnings and practical implementations of the use of exemplars in English writing classrooms are explained at length.

In the following eight chapters (3–10) of part one, Chong and Ye explicate the quadruple assessment criteria for Tasks 1 and 2 of the academic IELTS writing section. These chapters' distinctive features are the fundamental tasks which can be done individually or collectively with a peer, further facilitating the book's pedagogical effectiveness. Precisely speaking, the designed tasks and sections in these chapters are in line with the conceptual framework behind this book which guides a reader step by step to gain a better understanding of the assessment criteria and how to satisfy them in writing tasks. In sections titled "Do You Know?" the authors pinpoint the intricate points that warrant mention. In doing so, readers can obtain the underlying principles in each criterion. The given exemplars are selected and ordered carefully to enhance learning from each chapter. Each chapter comprises various tasks and activities that complement each other to give a thorough and clear picture of the academic writing tasks in IELTS. Online resources are introduced in the related sections in each chapter, indicating that the authors have spared no time and effort to write a book to meet all needs of IELTS test takers and teachers. Peer evaluation and writing practice tasks in each chapter provide a favourable opportunity for readers to evaluate what they have learned from each chapter.

Chapters 11 and 12 are devoted to exemplar analysis by question type in Tasks 1 and 2. In these chapters, the readers are required to analyse exemplars of academic IELTS writing Tasks 1 and 2, including the most common question types for Task 1 (chart/graph, charts/graphs, table, diagram/map) and Task 2 (discuss views, advantages and disadvantages, opinions, problems and solutions) to achieve sufficient understanding of these tasks requirements based on the assessment criteria. Most importantly, for each exemplar, three sample writings are given: high (bands 7+), average (bands 6-7), and low (bands 4-5) coupled with constructive comments.

The last chapter of the first part is the question bank covering 29 main themes for Task 1 and 22 themes for Task 2. The questions presented cover a vast array of topics in the scope of academic IELTS writing. The second part of the book provides answers for the tasks presented in Chapters 3 through 10.

The book can be an invaluable resource for teachers and learners of IELTS writing. The book has some privileges which I find worth recommending. It is written in a reader-friendly, straightforward, and coherent style enriched with research findings and educational theory. Undoubtedly, the provided examples can enhance test takers' understanding of an acceptable sample of IELTS writing tasks. In doing so, they can compare and contrast their writing as self-assessment and self-edit to facilitate having autonomous learners. Teachers can guide learners to take advantage of the exemplars for inductive learning. Samples in different qualities, namely high, mediocre, and low, can help learners

decipher IELTS writing assessment criteria across a spectrum. As the authors rightly emphasise, one of this book's unique characteristics is its diagrammatic representation of assessment criteria that shed light on different evaluation layers. The book includes 100 writing questions categorised distinctively based on the question types.

Some recommendations may be presented for a potential future edition of the book. Although it is included in the support material, it is also claimed that the answer chapters in the second part can be downloaded from the book product page on the publisher's website, but I failed to find them. Direct and valid hyperlink could have been provided easily. The authors can add a new chapter to explicate how to teach the writing tasks according to exemplar-based instruction in more detail. Furthermore, having videos produced by the authors showing how to teach a sample lesson based on exemplar-based instruction could have been more beneficial for early-career teachers. Likewise, a chapter could have been devoted to explaining different written corrective feedback types in this theoretical framework. Finally, the authors could have covered writing Task 1 of the general module of IELTS, that is, a letter writing task, so that the book could be an excellent resource for both academic and general IELTS test takers. It is advisable to see far more books such as this one based on research findings. The authors should be appreciated for this project, and I would recommend that the authors compile similar books for the speaking test as a partner to the written test. In sum, the book can be an excellent introduction to be used in IELTS writing classes as the primary textbook, and at the same time, it can be used as a purposeful self-study resource.

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