ASSISTING STUDENTS TO ATTACK WRITING TASKS ON IELTS TEST WITH "PROBING TECHNIQUE"

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Abstract: Writing section on IELTS test is commonly considered one of the most difficult parts of test. The test takers can't even understand what to do with the tasks provided. They eventually write without clearly knowing the expected direction. Therefore, there should be a fastest way to well equip students to successfully cope with such hindrances. This paper is an action research report of how to make students better understand and answer writing tasks on IELTS test by employing probing techniques as one of test taking strategies. The paper will preliminarily elaborate the characteristics or nature of IELTS test in general and writing section consisting two different tasks in particular including its indicators of what expected kind of writing the testees should be aware of. It will then discuss probing techniques in details. The attack strategies and their sequential implementation will afterward be discussed. The technique will assist students to respectively understand what and how to plan and write effectively on the test.
Keywords: *IELTS test, writing section, writing tasks, probing, attack strategies*

INTRODUCTION

Writing section on IELTS test is commonly considered one of the most difficult parts of test. The test takers can't even understand what to do with the tasks provided. They eventually write without clearly knowing the expected direction (Jakeman, 2007:23). There should deliberately be a fastest way to well equip students to successfully cope with such hindrances. Probing offers a way out of providing a kind of scaffolding (Derek and David: 78, 2006; Brown, 1994a: 189) that can be used to prepare students to attack the writing tasks on IELTS Test in the pre-writing stage (Brown, 1994a:156).

When people really want to learn something, they ask questions. It is not surprising that for many, questioning is at the very heart of learning, the central skill in the teaching-learning process. Questions can and have been used for a wide variety of educational purposes: reviewing previously read or studied material; diagnosing student abilities, preferences, and attitudes; stimulating critical thinking; managing student behavior; probing student thought process; stirring creative thinking; personalizing the curriculum; motivating students; and assessing student knowledge (http://changingminds.org/techniques/questioning/questioning.htm).

One of the first directions for improving the quality of classroom questions was determining the intellectual level of teacher questions. In 1956 Benjamin Bloom developed the so

called "taxonomies" that included three overlapping domains: the cognitive (intellectual), psychomotor (physical), and affective (attitudes and emotions). The taxonomies have recently been renewed to be three systems ,that is, cognitive systems (retrieval, comprehension, analysis, and knowledge utilization), metacognitive systems, and self-system (Marzano and Kendall, 2007:45).

Probing questions are follow-up questions asked after a student responds to the initial question. Probing questions require a student to think deeper than the original response, and to integrate new materials. Probing as a questioning strategy can also be called *scaffolding* (Derek and David: 78, 2006; Brown, 1994a: 189).

In probing techniques, the types of questions used are those that belong to cognitive domain/system comprising of knowledge/retrieval, comprehension, and analysis (Marzano and Kendall, 2007: 34). The following brief definitions are followed by several sample verbs that reflect the appropriate intellectual activity:

1. Knowledge: Requires that students recognize or recall information. Remembering is the key intellectual activity. (define, recall, memorize, name, duplicate, label, review, list, order, recognize, repeat, reproduce, state)
2. Comprehension: Requires that students demonstrate sufficient understanding to organize and arrange material mentally; demands a personal grasp of the material. (translate, explain, classify, compare, contrast, describe, discuss, express, restate in other words, review, select)
3. Application: Requires that students apply information, demonstrate

principles or rules, and use what was learned. Many, but not all, educators believe that this is the first of the higher-level thought processes. (apply, classify, solve, use, show, diagram, demonstrate, record, translate, illustrate, choose, dramatize, employ, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, write)
4. Analysis: Educators agree that this and all the following categories require higher-level thinking skills. Analysis requires students to identify reasons, uncover evidence, and reach conclusions. (identify motives and causes, draw conclusions, determine evidence, support, analyze, deduce, categorize, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, justify, distinguish, examine, experiment)

METHOD

This study is a classroom action research in nature. It is intended to overcome the students difficulties in writing section on IELTS. The participants of the study are 15 students of IEDUC English Course in Bandung. The activities involve repeated cycles consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The result of one cycle is used to determine the need for the following cycle, until the problems get solved by the strategy (Kemmis & McTaggert, 1988).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Probing is selected as it is a technique that enables students to accommodate and construct their own knowledge. Teachers do not need to explain or answer questions but invite students to probe the writing tasks by providing a series of questions as proposed by constructivism. From students' point of view, they could

communicate directly to teachers as well as concentrate fully to prepare the answers of the questions delivered by the teachers. Furthermore, the students cognitive aspects are trained by getting used to process their background knowledge, seeking the relationship one another, and applying them in explaining something new. On top of that, students think that they are given a trust to construct their own knowledge and guided to study independently (Williams, M. & Burden, R. 1997:65).

In teaching and learning process in classroom, there are two major interrelated activities in probing: the students' activities embracing physical and cognitive activities in which they endeavor to construct their knowledge and teacher's activities who guides the students with probing techniques by employing a series of questions ranging from low level thinking order to higher level thinking order. The expected physical activities of students are observing (observing graph, identify graph variable, or predict the tendency), answering questions, clarifying and disagreeing, and the cognitive activities of students are assimilating, accommodating, and constructing a new knowledge. Teacher's activities in conditioning probing technique consist of seven following stages (Wijaya, 1999:34):

Stage 1: expose the students with writing task 1 and writing task 2
Stage 2: wait for 3-5 seconds to give opportunities to students to observe
Stage 3: probe the questions
Stage 4: wait for 3-4 seconds to give opportunities to students to formulate the answers.
Stage 5: point one of students to answer the question
Stage 6: if the first response from that student is correct and relevant, then ask other students to confirm that all students get involved. Provide reward. If not, give subsequent questions related to the first response, guide them up to phase in which the students get the correct answer.
Stage 7: give the final question to different students to emphasize that all students could obtain new knowledge.

Those seven stages can be illustrated in the enclosed flowchart (see the appendix 1)

IELTS Academic Writing section consists of two writing tasks. In Writing Task 1, candidates may be asked to describe facts or figures presented in one or more graphs, charts or tables on a related topic; or they may be given a diagram of a machine, a device or a process and asked to explain how it works. This task assesses the candidate's ability to identify the most important and relevant information and trends in a graph, chart, table or diagram, and to give a well-organised overview of it using language accurately in an academic register or style.

In Writing Task 2, candidates are given a topic to write about. Answers should be a discursive consideration of the relevant issues. Candidates should make sure that they read the task carefully and provide a full and relevant response. This task assesses the candidate's ability to present a clear, relevant, well-organised argument, giving evidence or examples to support

their ideas, and to use language accurately.

The probing strategy is preliminarily commenced by asking the students to analyze the task of writing task 1. The students are also requested to find out what form of facts or figures representation is used whether it is pie charts, graph, table, process diagram or flow chart. Afterward the students are probed with a series of questions concerning facts and figures. If it is pie chart, graph, or table, probe with the following a series of questions that are intended to provide a general overview:

What are the key words on this pie chart, graph, or table?
What are the headings on this pie chart, graph, or table?

What rates and measurement are used on this pie chart, graph, or table?
What is the most important/significant trends on this pie chart, graph, or table?
What is the best example for certain trend on this pie chart, graph, or table?
What is the purpose of this pie chart, graph, or table?
What changes have occurred over time?
What is the most interesting feature on this pie chart, graph, or table?

The aforementioned series of questions can also be followed up with more specific questions that are to lead students to outline their writing. The examples are as follows:

Example 1: Pie Chart
The two graphs show the main sources of energy in the USA in the 1980s and the 1990s.
Write a report for a university lecturer describing the changes which occurred.
Write at least 150 words.
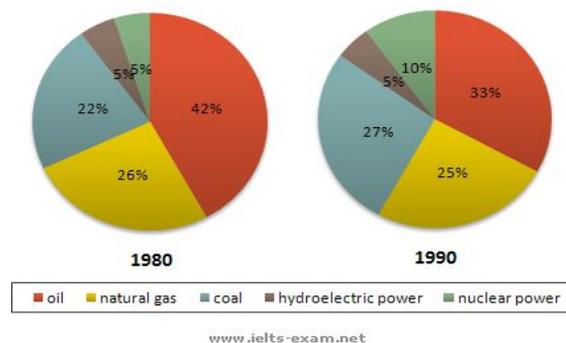
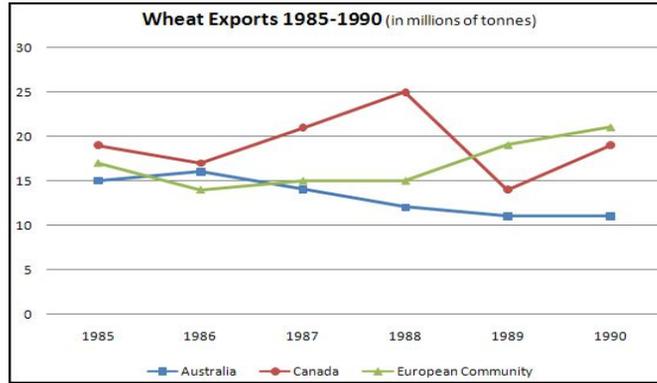
Probing Questions:
For First Paragraph
What do the two graphs show?
What source of energies seem to remain the same?
What source of energies seem to rise dramatically?
For Second Paragraph
Which source of energy is the largest and how much?
Which source of energy is the second largest and how much?
Which source of energy remains constant and how much?
Which source of energy has the greatest change and how much?

Example 2: Graph
The graph below shows the differences in wheat exports over three different areas.
Write a report for a university lecturer describing the information shown below.

Probing Questions
Paragraph one
      What does the three line graphs of wheat exports each show? How?
Paragraph two
      What changes have occurred over time with Australia exports? How much?
      What changes have occurred over time with Canada exports? How much?
      What changes have occurred over time with European Community exports?
      How much?

Example 3: Table
The table below give information about Favorite Pastimes in different countries. Summarise the information by selecting and reporting the main features, and make comparisons where relevant.
Write at least 150 words.

	TV	Sport	Reading	Hobbies	Music	Beach	Sleep
From 30 - 50 years old							
Canada	60	22	15	40	3	0	2
France	/	/	30	20	4	/	/
England	/	/	30	21	4	/	20
Australia	65	30	15	45	5	30	4
Korea	22	21	60	45	2	2	4
China	15	25	60	50	0	5	5
USA	60	23	15	42	23	30	2
Japan	/	/	62	/	/	/	/

Probing Questions

Paragraph one
        What does this table presents and compares?
Paragraph two
        What the comparison among countries based on favorite past times? How
        much
Paragraph three
        What factors might influence those past times?

        Then if it is process diagrams or flow charts, probe with the following series of
questions that are intended to provide a general overview:
        What are key words from task description?
        What labels and the order of steps can identify?
        How is the process step by step from the beginning to end?
        What is the purpose of this process?
        How does it work?
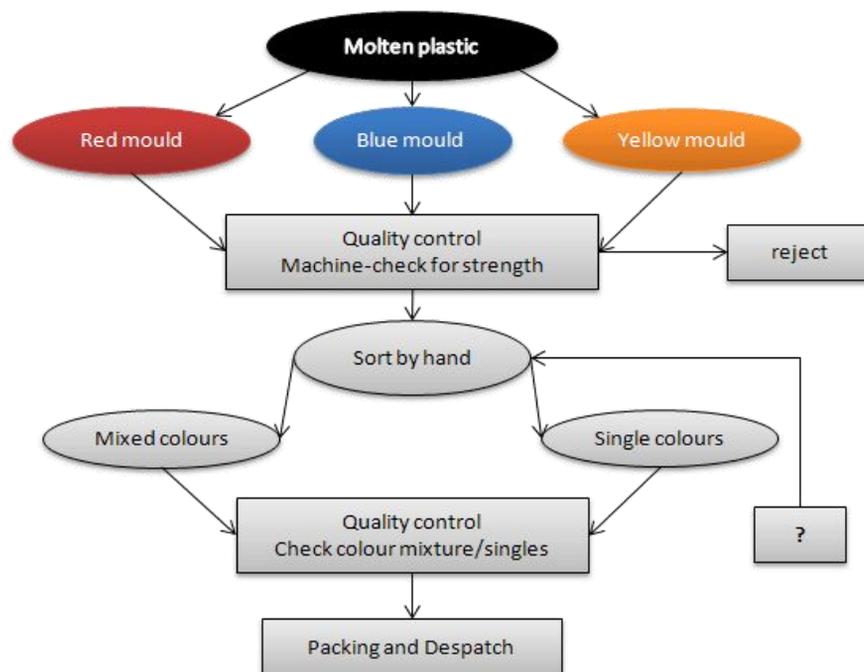   How do you include alternative steps?
        What is the end result?

Example: Flow Chart
The flowchart illustrates the production of coloured plastic paper clips in a small
factory.
Write a report for a university tutor describing the production process.
Write at least 150 words.

www.ielts-exam.net

The general overview series of questions can also be followed up with more specific questions that are to lead students to outline their writing. The examples are as follows:

Probing Question:
Paragraph one
      How many stages are there? What are they?
Paragraph two
      How the sequential stages?
Paragraph three
      What is the end result?.

The attack strategy is preliminarily commenced by asking the students to analyze the task of writing task 2. The students are also requested to find out the main essay types and what they have to do for each one. Afterward the students are probed with a series of questions concerning the topic and the task.

There are five common essay types that are given in IELTS writing task 2 as shown on table 1 below:

problem/solution, agree or disagree, two sides of argument, make choice and justify, and evaluate an argument. Each of essay type can be identified by looking at the task words. The task requires certain kinds of essay frameworks. Once the students misinterpret the task, they will accordingly lead to misleading essays in which the students fail to fulfill the task requirement.

Table1. Essay Type, Task Words, and Meaning (adopted from Slater, 2007:13)

No.	Essay Type	Task Words	This means
1	Problem/ Solution	What can be done to solve…? How can this problem be addressed? What challenges…? What strategies…?	Explain 2 or 3 aspects of the issue (1 paragraph each) Suggest solutions Make recommendations
2	Agree or disagree	Do you agree or disagree? Why? Explain your position Justify your opinion	Take position Defend it strongly. Give several reasons to support your argument (1 paragraph each) It is useful to acknowledge the opposite view (counter argument) and say why you don't accept it
3	Two Sides of an argument	Discuss Compare/contrast Advantages/disadvantages	Give a balanced presentation. This means you should write equally about both sides of the issues. In the conclusion you can indicate your position
4	Make choice and justify	From option A, B, C, D, E, etc. Choose 3 most important Justify your choice	Each of your choice becomes the topic of one paragraph Give reasons for choosing in this order
5	Evaluate an argument	To what extent…? How important…? What do you think?	You probably take a position which neither in total agreement (100%) nor total disagreement (0%), but somewhere in between. Explain why,

The probing questions towards IELTS Writing Task 2 can be exemplified as follows:

Example of Writing Task 2

Write about the following topic:

As mass communication and transport continue to grow, societies are becoming more and more alike leading to a phenomenon known as globalization. Some people fear that *globalization* will inevitably lead to the total loss of cultural identity.
To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

Give reasons for your answer and include any relevant examples from your own knowledge or experience.

Model probing questions:

> What is the task words of this essay?
> What are key words related to the topic?
> What are key words related to the task?
> So what type of essay does it belong to?
> What do you have to do with this kind of essay?
> What are you planning to write in paragraph 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5?

Despite the effectiveness of probing technique in assisting students to better understand the tasks and know what to do in answering the tasks, it still poses two major currently apparent weaknesses. First, they deal with the precise time planning since the answers given by students often do not meet the expected and planned answers. Therefore, teachers leave the prepared ones and design a new series of question which eventually consumes additional time. Then, the second weaknesses are the boredom that is resulted from overloaded series of questions and helplessness or even frustration due to their incapability in answering the questions

To cope with those weaknesses, the number of questions should be prepared in such a way that they can still anticipate the unanticipated events in line with the time allocated. In addition,

teachers need to be more relaxed and humorous to reduce the tense and fear of being questioned.

CONCLUSION

Probing technique has made students better understand what to do with the tasks provided. They can eventually write with clearly knowing the expected direction in the pre-writing stage. Therefore, probing technique becomes the alternative fastest way not only to well equip students to successfully cope with writing tasks on Writing Section on IELTS Test but also to assist students to respectively understand what and how to write effectively on the test.

In spite of its effectiveness, probing technique still deliberately requires a good time management, an exhaustive preparation, and a quality of teaching in a way that still provides a

space for fun and joy so as to get rid off students' boredom and stress.

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