Teaching IELTS: Producing materials for the academic reading and writing modules

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Sam McCarter has over 30 years experience in ELT, stretching back to the time he began working for the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) in Sierra Leone. Although he is now a full-time writer, McCarter still teaches, (indeed he claimed that he could not write unless he taught!), and is involved with a language project at the Salford Royal Hospital which he delivers through a blend of classroom teaching and video conferencing.

Eleven of his books have concentrated specifically on IELTS and McCarter used his wealth of knowledge in the field to support his presentation. In a wonderful aside, he mused on the theory that behind every teacher there is a writer, claiming that he has regularly overheard discussions in staff rooms that he feels should be published! Though McCarter’s presentation was ostensibly aimed at producing materials for IELTS, it became rapidly apparent that the advice he was dispensing could be appropriated for all strains of ELT.

Discussions began initially on how teachers should manage the process of selecting materials. In this regard, McCarter stressed his belief that tutors should be given the opportunity of attending related workshops and be afforded the time within their working schedule to produce resources.

This creative journey is likely to begin by a search on the internet or through newspapers and magazines. (We were reminded to keep details of the source when we locate something.) When we create original material, McCarter emphasised the importance of copywriting it. We were advised to check our contracts to ascertain whether any resources we produce belong to us or the organisation we are employed by. When collating and creating material, McCarter highlighted the need for critical thinking and tutors were strongly advised not to waste time creating exercises that bear little relation to the exam their learners will sit! This might necessitate the manipulation of certain texts, lengthening, shortening or adapting them accordingly so they mirror the framework of the exam.

Experience will see tutors become increasingly adept at mapping course criteria to material design. McCarter recounted how he used to spend up to a month looking for a reading passage, only to then discover that it was not appropriate. Now, he only spends one hour! He instinctively knows whether something is right or not and how to swiftly evaluate its merits as a learning tool.

Tutors must ensure that features in their selected texts match tenets of the IELTS exam, e.g. classification, time relationships, comparison and contrast, process, etc. Part of the problem with IELTS, McCarter averred, is that students are aiming for a target and they have got their eyes closed; a predicament engendered by the use of inappropriate and unrelated classroom learning materials that provide students with little idea of the exam formula they are working towards. Our materials should facilitate the transfer of ideas, functional skills and vocabulary knowledge in ways that make specific reference to the exact demands of a given course of study.

The structure of the IELTS exam is finite but the subject matter is infinite. Whilst some tutors often feel constrained by the demands of an accredited course and the need to ‘teach to the test’, McCarter argued that ‘straight-jackets’ give freedom.

When we have selected the material to use in class, McCarter advocated that tutors then systematically refine, redraft and summarise those materials. This procedure requires patience and time. It is likely that you will have made some mistakes. In a splendid anecdote, McCarter recalled some advice he received that suggested we should never make anything perfect. Students should always be given the opportunity to spot a mistake in their tutor’s work. The eagle-eyed learner could then be issued with praise and thanks for having identified the error! The search for material should be a process of collaboration. Students’ opinions should be canvassed concerning the type of material they would like to work with and they should be allowed to dictate their language wants and needs. McCarter strongly advocated a learner-centred approach to material selection.

Issued with a sample text, the audience were then invited to describe how they would utilise it in the classroom. A lively exchange ensued and a diverse range of suggestions were proffered. Learners could be invited to extract information and present it in the form of a flow chart or diagram. Learners could list all the verbs in the past tense. They could extract topic sentences and use this as a basis to write their own summaries. They could be shown key words from the text and be invited to provide definitions. A selection of words could be highlighted and students could be invited to provide according synonyms. There are, McCarter stated, endless possibilities. There is no ‘correct’ way.

Prior to distributing a text, McCarter will often provide his learners with certain associated words and ask them to create a picture of the article to follow. They may also make predictions about the contents of the material, utilising their existing schemata. McCarter might pose ‘True, False, Not Given’ questions or multiple choice questions to his students based on the article. I was intrigued by his assertion that comprehension can be increased by reducing the amount of time you allow your learners to look at an extract. The more you reduce the time, the more focused they become and their concentration levels intensify.

Alternatively, and extending the learner-centred approach that McCarter was advocating earlier, I was particularly struck by his proposal that we issue texts to our learners...
without questions. We can encourage students to read by
democratising the process. This affords us the
opportunity of then asking our students what questions
they would ask. They might prepare these questions over
the following week before the next lesson. Taking this
further, McCarter actually reverses the roles inside the
classroom and invites his learners to pose the questions
they have formulated to their tutor. Reading exercises
consequently become more dynamic and animated.

Rather than responding to a set list of questions following
the reading of a text, learners could instead be asked to
turn over their articles and summarise its contents. This
could be in written or verbal form. However, McCarter
underlined the importance of requesting that students do
not write anything during the initial digestion process of a
text. Tutors need to be mindful that the process of starting
to write from cold can be fraught with the same sort of
difficulties as trying to start a car in winter! Patience is
called for.

Once learners are up and running, McCarter believes that
it is better to stop them when they are at the height of
their interest rather than waiting until they have finished
writing.

Similarly, following the reading of a text, we might ask the
students what words they want to learn. A snag with this
approach, McCarter expressed, is that students learn all
the words that they don’t need to know and think they
already know the words that they don’t actually know!

A portion of his presentation was also devoted to the
marking of written work. At lower levels, McCarter
provides comments rather than grades. Often, McCarter
invites his students to assess the written work of other
learners, often discovering that they can be very harsh
critics! These exercises familiarize students with the
established exam criterion.

Tutors were implored not to blast their learners with
over-marking. The focus of corrections within a written
piece should centre on the specific target language that
has surrounded the setting of a particular assignment.

Ultimately, McCarter’s presentation encouraged tutors to
challenge themselves in relation to material and resource
design and to be as inventive as possible. McCarter drew
an analogy with the game ‘Twister’; he always approaches
reading and writing tasks from a new position! Selection
and delivery of material should be as participatory and
collaborative a process as possible between tutor and
learner. Studying IELTS (here can also be inserted all other
strains of ELT) is fun, McCarter enthused. Tutors must
assume responsibility for communicating this to their
students whilst at the same time ensuring that the way
they craft and deploy reading and writing exercises make
focused reference to the requirements of the course’s
pertaining examination.