IELTS strategies

Introduction

Below are some of the strategies that need to be automatic for you to be able to develop your confidence as you prepare for the academic version of the IELTS examination. You can add other strategies to the list as you progress through the course. Note that you learn skills and techniques; strategies are what you choose to use as you read, write, speak and listen.

Activating schemata: you activate schemata to help you predict as you read by focusing on nouns and verbs so that you build up 'a theme or picture' as you read or listen. It is *also* important for you to help listeners and readers to activate their own schemata as they listen to you and read what you've written. It is, therefore, vital that you use words and phrases that create a consistent theme and that are relevant to the topic that you are writing or speaking about. To help readers and listeners further, you can give examples and reasons to develop the context you're presenting and thus help with schemata activation.

Nominalisation: you use the process of nominalisation to talk about abstract ideas and concepts and to summarise. In this process, you build information around nouns rather than verbs. For example, in Writing Task 1, you can turn *'Attendances at the cinema rose dramatically by 50% over the period'* into *'There was a dramatic 50% rise in attendances at the cinema over the period'*. In the latter sentence, the information is added before (adjective/percentage) and after (prepositional phrases) the noun (*rise*).

In all four skills in the IELTS exam, you need to be able to notice and process the exact meaning of noun phrases, which can, for example, be between 9–12 words long, e.g.:
- in paragraph headings, *the effect of rising sea levels on certain island communities*
- in Writing Task 2 *Some people think that the cost of the preservation of old buildings in major cities is …*
- in Listening Section 4, *the _____ of the use of plastic in cosmetic products on the environment*
- in Speaking Part 3, *Do you think that the cost of the preservation of old buildings in major cities is a good use of scarce funds?*

Noticing: you need to be able to develop your noticing skills when you read, write and listen. For example, in the Reading test, it is important to be able to notice elements in the texts such as causes, effects, examples, general statements/conclusions, problems, reasons, solutions, etc.; linking devices such as *for example*, *such as*, *although*, *but*, *however*, etc.; general and specific information in a text, the organisation of the text from titles, subheadings and questions; general patterns that you have met in previous reading tests or other parts of the IELTS examination. Things like this will help you develop your speed and accuracy and, hence, competence in performing in the exam.

Paraphrasing: you use paraphrasing to avoid repetition as you write and speak. For example, it is important to paraphrase the rubrics in both Writing tasks. This shows the range of your knowledge of grammatical structures as well as vocabulary. You also need paraphrasing skills to avoid repetition as you develop your answers as you write and speak. In the Reading and Listening tests, you need to be able to recognise/ notice paraphrasing in the questions and the reading passages, etc. You need, therefore, to have knowledge of a wide range of language, e.g., for expressing cause and effect, measures and solutions, etc.

Predicting: you use predicting skills in the Reading and Listening tests to help you answer the questions. It is important to distinguish guessing from predicting. Guessing means that you give an answer without thinking, whereas predicting means that you use your knowledge and the information given to work out possible answers and the general meaning of answers as well as the organisation of a Reading Passage or Listening test. You can do the latter from titles and headings as well as the questions.

Predicting effectively involves using the skills and experience you already have to answer questions without actually imposing your opinion, etc., when giving the answers.

You also use predicting skills to think about the organisation of a Reading Passage or paragraph using the title before you start reading. If you do not do so, then you are wasting valuable information and time. See also *activating schemata* and *navigating a text* and *noticing*.

Managing time: you need to be able to manage your time extremely carefully and efficiently in preparation for the IELTS examination. It is important to be able to complete the tasks given in each component within the allocated time and not to do more than is necessary. For example, in Writing Task 1, you are advised to write your answer in 20 minutes. It is advisable, therefore, to spend about two minutes planning and two minutes checking, leaving you with 16 minutes for writing. It is worth thinking about all the components of the exam and reflecting on the time you need to

complete the tasks. Use a stopwatch and look at the time as you read or write so that you *feel* what 20 minutes, and 40 minutes, in the Writing test is like. The same applies to the Reading test.

Organising and planning: you need to develop efficient organisational and planning skills so that you can operate accurately and effectively in all parts of the examination. For example, in the Reading test you need to allocate the appropriate time for each Reading Passage, bearing in mind that one of the passages has 14 questions. You need, therefore, to adjust your time accordingly. You also need the above skills when you write your answers for Writing Tasks 1 and 2. You need to organise your ideas and their development so that they are clear to the examiner. The same applies in the Speaking test. See *activating schemata*.

Questioning: you can examine exam questions, or information, in Reading or Listening by using questions. For example, when you are asked to fill a gap in sentences such as *Recycling has a positive _____ on the environment*, you can ask yourself questions. Examples of questions are:

- *Is the missing word a noun, verb, adjective, adverb or number?*
- *Are there any clues before and after the blank space?*
- *Is the pattern of words in the sentence familiar?*
- *Is there a clear relationship between the different parts of the sentence?*
- *Is this relationship to do with cause and effect?*

You won't have time to ask all these questions in the exam, but you can practise as you prepare so that you can trigger possible answers. Remember, you need to develop this so that the questions are automatic and fast by the time you take the exam.

Reading closely: you read the text closely to examine information carefully after you have located it in a Reading Passage. When you find the information you are looking for, remember to read the text either side of the information and also note that the context of the paragraph will influence the meaning.

Reflecting: you can reflect on, or think about, each unit or several units as you progress through the coursebook. You can use this reflection for revision purposes, thinking about the language or the skills you have learnt. You can also discuss these with your friends and colleagues. If you have time, you can write a brief summary of the unit in your own words in list form, and keep and refine the summaries as you progress through the course. If your colleagues are also doing this, it is useful for you to compare the process you use for reflection.

Scanning: you can use scanning to look for words and paraphrases of words. How you find the words does not matter. If you scan them from left to right,

it is difficult to stop your brain from reading. Try the methods below, using a pencil to guide your eye.

1 Scan a paragraph, or part of a text, from the bottom to the top or the top to the bottom, looking left to right, or right to left.
2 Scan a paragraph, or part of a text, in a zigzag from left to right, or right to left.
3 Scan a paragraph, or part of a text, diagonally looking from left to right or right to left. Start from the top or bottom on the left to the right.

Skimming: you use skimming to get the gist or the general meaning of a paragraph or whole text, including the questions. You should aim to skim a Reading Passage and questions in an IELTS Reading test in about two minutes. In the exam, you do not have time to read the whole passage closely. In order to increase your skimming speeds, learn to look at the words that give you the general meaning or gist so that you can *build a picture* of the passage. To do this, skim a paragraph looking mainly at the nouns and verbs. This is called *activating schemata*. See *activating schemata*. Compare this with *reading closely* and *scanning*.

Summarising: you need to be able to summarise efficiently to write answers for Task 1. You also need to be able to notice/recognise summaries in the Listening and Reading tests. For both of these you need to be able to paraphrase and recognise/ notice paraphrases. You also need to be able to use and understand processes such as *nominalisation*.

Surveying: You survey the whole of the Reading test before you begin. This should take you no more than 30–60 seconds. You look at the titles of the passage and any subheadings and the questions. This helps you plan your time and pace.

Transferring knowledge/skills: you need to make a conscious effort to transfer knowledge, language and skills from one part of the test to another. For example, if you learn cause and effect language such as *result from/in, lead to, because of*, etc., in your preparation for the Writing test, it is also applicable in the Reading, Listening and Speaking tests. The same applies to factual knowledge and skills.