

**Female Voice:** You are now listening to the IELTS podcast. Learn from tutors and ex-examiners who are masters of IELTS preparation. Your host Ben Worthington.

**Ben:** Hello there IELTS podcast listeners. In this episode, we're going to listen to Maria. Maria is a student who took the online course and she's going to share with us her experience and the end result. At the end of the course, she'll tell us what happened with her IELTS scores. So, welcome to the podcast, Maria. How are you today?

**Maria:** I'm very good, thanks, Ben. How are you?

**Ben:** I'm great, thank you. Great. It's a bit chilly and my nose is blocked and as I mentioned before in the message I think I look like death, but apart from that, apart from that, it's going alright. So, could you tell us about yourself, like where you're from, where you live and what you do?

**Maria:** So, I am originally-- I'm a Russian speaker, but I'm from Estonia. And now I live in Australia and I do a Ph.D. in Geoscience in one of the universities.

**Ben:** Wow.

**Maria:** So, I can complain about heat because it's very hot now. I think it's 30 degrees outside, yes. And then the reason why I had to take IELTS it's basically related to my stay in Australia and future job search. So, I had to get 7s in every part of the IELTS. So, this is how I ended up listening to IELTS podcasts.

**Ben:** Got you. Okay, and you said that you-- what was it? Geoscience? Is that what you're doing your Ph.D. in? That's what you study?

**Maria:** Yes, exactly. I'm a geologist by education so, yes. I mean it's a long story I guess.

**Ben:** Okay and you will finish your Ph.D. and then in order to stay in the country and work in the country, you had to take IELTS. Is that right?

**Maria:** Yes, it's basically regardless of what kind of visa I applied for. I need to have a fresh IELTS test before coming, yes, sorry.

**Ben:** No, no, no. Go for it.

**Maria:** Should I continue?

**Ben:** Yes, yes, yes, please.

**Maria:** Before coming to Australia, I had to-- obviously I had to take IELTS test, but then I took Cambridge English and I only had to receive 6.5s. Then I passed it like several years ago so now it's irrelevant and it's not enough of scores to apply for a visa.

**Ben:** Got you. Okay, I was going to ask if you're doing a Ph.D. there you must have taken the IELTS exam before, but you said you did the Cambridge exam instead of the IELTS. Is that right?

**Maria:** Yes, it was a long time ago and it was a weird decision. It's not really justified why I took one exam instead of the other. I just picked up the one that popped up online first when I googled among the exams. Yes, but if you like, I know enough about both of them, but for this time I really wanted to do IELTS because I feel like it's more recognized for Australian visas.

**Ben:** Absolutely. Yes, I must admit like in Europe when I started teaching-- I started teaching in Spain. I came over from England and then within about a year or two, I was teaching English. Everybody in Spain was obsessed with the Cambridge Frist, Cambridge Proficiency and all of these and Cambridge was really popular, but then in the last, I don't know, like seven or eight years, IELTS just really overtook the Cambridge exam. It really is becoming the global certificate. Yes. So, you-- how did you prepare for this IELTS exam?

**Maria:** So, it's been a long journey because I'm a Ph.D. student and I write lots of text every day. Then I've really written couple of essays. I've taken a couple of practice tests and I went straight to exam. Of course, I failed. I failed terribly. My first IELTS scores were writing 5.5. That hurts. It hurts so much and then I think I had a 7 in speaking, 7.5 reading, 7.5 listening. Then it

took me six months before I had the courage to take a new test. I worked on my writing for six months and then I had another attempt, which was successful.

**Ben:** Excellent. Okay, those six months, I'm really impressed and I want to just suggest something to the listeners that six months is a very smart and patient amount of time to work on your IELTS scores. I hear too many times about students like, "I got 6.5. So, I'm going to put in for the exam immediately after." And this is what I've called in the past the IELTS casino. You know, you just keep on gambling and gambling and gambling your money hoping that you're going to get a 7. That you might just get a 7 whereas your approach was infinitely more intelligent, infinitely more smarter and you just put in the work. Good solid six months of preparation and then you didn't have to play the IELTS casino. You went in there and supremely prepared and much more confident as well and obviously, you didn't get all of these hits and multiple hits to your confidence. You know you got that one hit where you got the 5--

**Maria:** Hit?

**Ben:** Yes, it was like a real body blow getting that 5.5, wasn't it? From what you said, it really hurt your confidence, no?

**Maria:** It did. It did. I think after I failed the writing part, I spent about-- almost two months just recollecting myself and so I didn't really do much for the first two months. Then I started-- all the times throughout my preparation, I listened to the podcasts from you guys. They were super helpful. I took notes. I remember writing down the phrases and sentence structures and remember implementing those. I also had a teacher over Skype and we were just-- basically, we had a lesson once a week and he would go through my essays, but he was only able to finish half of the essay. So, I ended up writing two essays a month, which is so inefficient and very slow. Then at some point, I felt like I need a boost of writing. I need to write at least three essays a week. This is why I decided to take the Essay Corrections and immediately, almost immediately, I spotted my weaknesses in the essays and in task 1, graphic descriptions. Yes, so then I guess that's pretty much the story.

**Ben:** Okay, okay. I was just going to--

**Maria:** I don't have any more details--

**Ben:** It's alright. That's fine. It's fine. I didn't want to interrupt you. I wanted to get all the story, all the information, but when you were doing, you said, was it one, no, two essays a month, something like that.

**Maria:** Yes.

**Ben:** How come you were doing so little? Was it time? Was it enthusiasm?

**Maria:** I think it was time because basically I have a full-time employment which is research and it really-- it's like-- it's hard work. It requires lots of thinking and lots of writing and it was very hard to come home in the evening and sit down and do these IELTS writing, which is exactly the same type of mental activity. Yes, I think time-- motivation was the main issue for me and that's why I ended up being so inefficient and not writing enough essays a week.

**Ben:** Right, yes. This reminds me just the other day I recorded a podcast about procrastination and one of the tips I gave if you are suffering from procrastination or a lack of motivation or finding time or energy to write your essays, one thing I suggested was as soon as you wake up in the morning, when your brain is fresh, you write an essay. Even if that takes a lot of time and energy, you could just copy one out, a perfect essay found online written by a native English speaker. Copy it out word for word. It's better than nothing, but if you leave it until the end of the day, your brain is shuttered, you know. You've got so many other stuff to do at the end of the day, but-- yes, that's why I recommended at the beginning of the day. So, anyway, you eventually-- did you ditch this writing tutor that you were doing one hour a week with or did you stick with him?

**Maria:** No, I actually-- yes, at some point I thought that oh, maybe I need to change the teacher. Maybe I just-- what do I do? But then I stuck with him till the last-- basically the last couple of days before the test. We did once a week catch up. It was still very useful, you know. I feel like it kept me in a good writing shape for IELTS even though it was not happening very often. I still-- I had-- I didn't lose my writing shape. I had a break between my first exam that I

failed and my preparation for the second round. In this month, I realized that I actually lost some of my IELTS essay writing skills.

**Ben:** Of course, yes, of course.

**Maria:** It's really-- what I would suggest to a person who doesn't have much time, just take it slower, but just be consistent and keep yourself in a good writing shape. Then before exam, do a marathon of like two weeks writing. Just two weeks writing of essays and then it's going to be polished before the exam.

**Ben:** Absolutely. That's fantastic advice. Absolutely and just hammer it intensively like you said, two to three weeks before the exam just to build up those-- the writing muscle. Yes, keep producing those essays while all the information is fresh in your mind.

**Maria:** Yes, I really like how you called it muscle. This is how I think about it.

**Ben:** Totally. I think the same, like any language. It's not a skill, I mean, sorry. It is a skill and it's very similar to sports, you know. You cannot-- I've said this a million times, but you cannot learn to ride a bike by reading a book. You have to jump on the bike and it's the same with language especially if you're speaking or writing. You cannot learn about writing alone just by reading material about how to construct your essay, about topic-specific vocabulary. At the end of the day, you need to put pen to paper and start writing and this is why-- yes, it's-- in my mind, it's insanely close to a sport. Just like a sport, unless you're actually doing it, you can't learn to play squash by reading a book about it. You need to get into the court, you know, and play. Be active. Okay, so I'm just a bit confused here. You did the first test and you got 5.5 and then you took another test. Then did you-- after the first test-- after the second test, did you get the results you wanted or did you take another test after?

**Maria:** Yes, I'm sorry I didn't mention that. So, when I took the-- in my second IELTS round, I got 7 in writing, 8 reading, 9 listening and 8 speaking.

**Ben:** Wow! So you got a big improvement in pretty much everything and closing it.

**Maria:** Yes, I was very much surprised by 9 in listening although I think it's the strongest skill out of all four. I really didn't expect it to be higher than 8. It was surprising.

**Ben:** Well done then, Maria. That's excellent.

**Maria:** Yes, what I found that was really helpful is just listening to English speaking podcasts in general and also reading some good media which uses advanced English like The Economist or The Guardian. I think they have very nicely written articles and they are almost like text that you can see in the IELTS reading part.

**Ben:** Absolutely, yes. I totally agree with you there. I got hold of The Economist writing style manual and it's-- yes, it really is very similar to academic texts, you know the style that they write. And also with The Guardian and with The Economist, you're going to get updated on world events as well. So yes, that's an excellent tip there. Excellent. So, this is how you got your 9 in listening, through reading a lot of these sort of like academic standard or level or style texts and listening to English podcasts. Which podcasts did you listen to?

**Maria:** Well, apart from the IELTS podcasts, I listened to BBC documentaries, which is like a person somewhere in Japan goes to a prison which is full of elderly people and he is taking interviews and just explains the situation. So, it's really full of action podcast with all the sounds. It's incredibly interesting. It's not just English. Another good one is called 99% Invisible. It's kind of also similar to the documentaries one. Just about any possible topic you can imagine. For example, the one I really liked was about Levi's jeans and how jeans were created and how they were produced and how they became fashionable. Yes, I think it really expands vocabulary and I was getting used to hearing-- like sometimes, my vocabulary is not very good, it's not perfect. So, I sometimes hear new words and you just really-- they stick to my mind much better than-- yes.

**Ben:** That's fantastic. You just reminded me of what AJ Hoge from Effortless English told me way back in one of the first episodes. He's like you could listen to IELTS listening tests, but they are not going to be so interesting. It's better to find a topic that you like and you're going to listen so intensely that you're going to even forget that it's in English.

**Maria:** Yes, exactly.

**Ben:** When you said as well that you were listening to the one about the jails in Japan and you get all the sounds, it sounds really immersive, but also you're going to be getting all this new vocabulary about a fairly common IELTS topic which is crime and society.

**Maria:** Oh, exactly.

**Ben:** Yes, and I imagine I think from what you are saying, you're quite an active listener as well. So, I could imagine you taking notes and writing down this new vocabulary.

**Maria:** Yes, I'm a bit chaotic with that, but I did. I did try to do so.

**Ben:** No, but this is a really good way and as you said at the beginning when you said you were listening to my podcast and taking notes and using sentence structures, I would strongly recommend students to do this because it transforms the act of listening into active listening and into an active tutorial. If you've got more functions and senses engaged in the activity obviously, you're going to recall more of that activity. Alright, that's super. So, you asked-- so the second test you got, it sounds like you got all the grades that you wanted. Is that correct?

**Maria:** Yes, yes. I totally passed. I only needed 7 in each of the parts, but now I have 8 in three of them and 7 in writing. I'm not going to take the IELTS test anymore. I really hope I won't have to, but my writing journey is not over. I'm still-- it's like my weakest skill and it lags behind my listening or my reading skills. So, it's not over really.

**Ben:** Okay and you were writing your essays with Ellen as well, weren't you? She was giving you feedback as well.

**Maria:** Yes, she was.

**Ben:** Super. Super. What was the-- what kind of benefit did you get from doing the course and getting the feedback on your work?

**Maria:** So, I think I-- there were two main things that Ellen-- she spotted them and then I realized that these are the things that keep me below 7 and maybe even below 6.5 in IELTS. So,

one of them is paragraphing structure and how I write my paragraphs. I used to write-- I used to go around the topic and from somewhere behind I would come to the point at the end of the paragraph. Based on Ellen's feedback, I started writing thesis as the first sentence of the paragraph. Then I would give some arguments and prove this thesis in two or three sentences. The final sentence would be like a summary that says, "This is why this problem exists because we have such and such issues," and that makes it very nice and coherent. Then I would do exactly the same for the second paragraph. I think this was the crucial change in terms of essay Task 2. As for Task 1, what I learned the most from Ellen is logic of organizing your answer is the most important thing in Task 1. You look at the chart and you need to find out what's the biggest trend and then you need to find out what is the smallest change? You could say like trend line. What's the smallest value if it's a bar chart? That would be my first paragraph. Then in the second paragraph, I would go and compare and contrast things and make sure I actually show some differences and contrasts because this is what they are looking for. One cool tip that she gave me is that as a reader, she expects-- she wants to be able to draw the same chart without seeing the figure.

**Ben:** Absolutely, yes.

**Maria:** And this is what I think-- it made me, it made it crystal clear how should I write about it.

**Ben:** Absolutely, yes, yes. That's a fantastic tip and I remember when I was doing the corrections as well that I would give a similar piece of advice. I'll just restate it just for the listeners. When you are writing this, you want the reader or the examiner, in this case, to be able to recreate the graphic from your text or at the very minimum get a very good overview because, as I've mentioned before, it's not a wise idea to mention every data point, but you want them to get a rough idea and be able to reformulate, recreate it from your text. So, yes, I think that's a good test, you know, if you are practicing with a writing partner if they can recreate the graph from your text. So, that's super. Then what would you say to-- actually, let's dive into your test day if that's okay.

**Maria:** Test, yes, good one.

**Ben:** So, you were doing a test in Australia, yes? In which city were you?

**Maria:** I was in Adelaide. This is the city where I live and it was actually Australia day when they celebrate diversity and they give out citizenship. So, it was a very symbolic day to do a test.

**Ben:** Maybe the examiners were all in a good mood, you know. I should add this to my tips, you know. Take your test on a national holiday when everybody is happy. Anyway, I get distracted. So, what happened on your test day?

**Maria:** Well, I think one of the important things was my test was in the afternoon and that was on purpose because once I saw that I have a chance to take a test at 1 p.m instead of 9 a.m. I felt like it means that I can sleep as long as I need. Then I had-- there was a problem because my speaking part was before the rest of the test. It really made me really nervous because normally you do like you know, reading, speaking, listening and then you go and have this final kind of la la, but then speaking was first. I remember sitting in the room and the examiner was about to call me and my heart was beating so much and I felt like it's almost uncontrollable and I felt like I have no air to breathe. I just started breathing with the lower belly, taking deep breaths. It calmed me down a bit, but it was still very nervous throughout the speaking test. I honestly thought I did very bad.

**Ben:** Wow, okay. That's quite an intense experience, isn't it?

**Maria:** Yes and there was--

**Ben:** Sorry, your breathing exercises, like breathing from deep below, did that have any effect? Did that calm you?

**Maria:** Yes, yes. This diaphragm breathing it's what-- this is what people do in yoga and meditation. They breathe with lower kind of belly, not with the upper chest because when you breathe with upper chest you take short breaths. It's short and fast, but with this diaphragm breathing you are-- it has something to do with psychology. I mean, it's proven and it works. People do it in yoga. I think breathing exercises are definitely worth doing if you have the heart jumping outside of your chest.

**Ben:** That is super. You've given me an idea for a future episode. Thank you for that Maria. Okay, and then-- so you managed to calm yourself down and get into like a better state of mind for the actual-- before the speaking started. Is that right?

**Maria:** Yes, I was-- yes, yes. It helped and exactly the same sort of high adrenaline rush was just before listening, you know, when you put the earphones on and the screen is already on and it's like it's about to start. Then again, I had this-- exactly the same feeling, but it was just, you know, as soon as I hear the test, I switched off completely and I was so immersed, so focused. So, I think this I why it was 9 out of 9.

**Ben:** Wow. Well done. That's super. And then so you had the listening. Did you do your-- the breathing exercises before the listening as well? Is that right?

**Maria:** Yes, yes, to calm the heartbeat. Yes, I did.

**Ben:** Super. That must have just brought you right into the zone. Then you went on and you absolutely nailed it and got a 9. Well done there, Maria. You should be very proud of that-- of those results. And then in the speaking, was it-- sorry to just go back to the speaking, but what kind of questions were you getting and how did you respond?

**Maria:** Yes, that was funny towards the-- first question was-- it was so funny. She asked me, "Do you like to look up at the sky?" Like do you like looking into the sky or something like that and I was like, what!

**Ben:** Yes, it's my hobby. I do it ten hours a day.

**Maria:** Yes, and then I talked about how I wish I had this time and then it's-- yes, we should pay attention to such details in our lives. The other question she asked me is about little lies. If little lies are good or bad. I think the examiner actually went along with my discussion. I don't think she continued to ask me questions she had in front of her. I think she kind of commented on my answers because I don't-- for that-- I think it was either part 1 or part 2 she really didn't look at the questions. She just engaged and it was a very different experience from my first IELTS test

when I had a lady who just drilled me with very similar questions and I felt like I already answered these questions. You are repeating them.

**Ben:** Interesting. Very interesting. So, this one, she just kind of dumped the script that she had in front of her. She stopped looking at it and just engaged with you and you had a pleasant conversation. Is that right?

**Maria:** Yes, yes. It felt like that and I really calmed down a bit because I saw that she's kind of enjoying. Then there was this question for a monologue or this two-minute question and it was about "Talk about a situation when somebody didn't tell you complete truth." For that, it's another good tip I'd like to share. Before going to exam, like two days before, I opened IELTS speaking questions, just like lists from, I don't know, December from different people where they collect the data and share it. Then I just had these two A4 full of questions and I started writing approximate answers like what would I say if I had this question? I would just write ideas and when she asked me this question about incomplete truth, I immediately had the answer because I remember seeing this question already. It really helped me. Also another thing, I've done exactly the same for IELTS essay topics.

**Ben:** Genius. Excellent.

**Maria:** Yes, because-- I keep talking.

**Ben:** That's perfect. It's perfect, Maria.

**Maria:** For IELTS writing, one of the challenging part was coming up with arguments because essay questions I feel they are hard. For example, the international marketing or business questions, they completely make me blank. I just don't know what to write. It's not my topic of interest, not even interest. I don't really know anything about it. So, that's why certain questions that are harder to answer need to be addressed before the exam, like topics.

**Ben:** Got you. I see you did exactly the same for those. You just got like a list of questions and just brainstormed possible ideas.

**Maria:** Yes, arguments.

**Ben:** And-- yes and arguments just to get your brain ready for a difficult topic on your writing paper.

**Maria:** Yes, and actually, my essay question was whether CEOs and directors of big companies should be paid as much as ordinary workers. I remember when I was preparing, I had a question about whether entrepreneurs and business people should be paid as much as teachers and doctors. So, it's really very similar question, so I think-- I felt like I've written an essay in half an hour and I had like ten minutes at the end to check my-- both tasks and I had lots of errors. I think that really helped me with the score. Like all the articles and-- yes.

**Ben:** That's genius, that's genius because when you see that question you don't have to waste time thinking of ideas. You can draw on your idea bank that you've produced already and it leaves a lot more time to actually focus on the writing, which is what the actual test should be testing anyway, in my opinion. Like your writing ability. So, yes, that's genius. It's a really good tip there. So, well done then, Maria. Sounds like you really came back with a vengeance, you know. You got that first IELTS exam, I mean, and you were like right. I'm going to come back and I'm going to really go to just absolutely-- yes, destroy it and come back with an amazing result. So, that's fantastic.

**Maria:** I wish it was my attitude because it wasn't. I was so upset, but I feel like it's a battle and yes, you really need to have the attitude to pass and to prepare because it's not an easy battle at all.

**Ben:** That's so true. That's so true, but I must admit you're very, very resilient and determined and also, yes, and patient not to just dive into another exam. You decided to take your time and be patient and prepare properly. Also importantly, you invested in yourself and you got some feedback from Ellen, essay correction and yes, I think in getting improved-- and that pushed your improvement level as well as-- Also as you said, immersing yourself with all the documentaries and the listenings and stuff like that. So, just before we finish Maria, do you have anything else to add or any tips for students?

**Maria:** Well, I think it's just-- it takes time. Good writing and good English skills they just take time to develop and if there is a huge gap between expectations and the scales, then you need to take time to bridge this gap. Yes and maybe another tip for writing. I really spent almost like three, four minutes before writing an essay, I spend on figuring out my arguments and logic of my paragraphs and only then I started writing the introduction. Yes.

**Ben:** Absolutely. I think I mentioned something similar before on the podcast, but it's also in the course. I think in the online course I mention like do not even think about writing your introduction or anything until you have clearly mapped out your ideas and your plan. Then it's a case of transferring these ideas into your essay. So, yes, good tip there. Good tip. Okay, I think that's everything and thank you very much, Maria. It's been really nice talking with you. Yes, we wish you all the best for the rest of the study and your stay in Australia.

**Maria:** Alright, thank you so much for your work. Looking forward to hear more success stories. I'm sure they will come.

**Ben:** Yes, I hope so as well. I hope so.

**Maria:** May I just ask you where your accent is from? I've been so curious.

**Ben:** Okay, I get this a lot really. The thing is, Maria, I haven't lived in the UK for about 15 years, okay, but when I did, I lived in Huddersfield and this is where I grew up, in Yorkshire, right?

**Maria:** Alright.

**Ben:** It's near Manchester. However, when I left Yorkshire for the first time, I went to Australia when I was like 18. Nobody understood me. Not even Australians, you know. So, I had to really modify the way I spoke and then teaching English, I had to modify it again to make it clearer, to slow down and-- yes. Even English people have difficulty believing that I'm from England. Yes, it's really sometimes humiliating, you know. I think I mentioned this before, but I remember once I was on the metro, I was on the underground and I helped this lady with her ticket and she said, "Oh, thank you. You speak really good English. Where are you from?" And I was like I'm from England and she was like, "Oh, oh, really?" but just one more last thing. When I go

back to England and I'm having dinner with my family and I'm there, I'm living at my mum's for a good week or two, then it slowly starts to come back, you know. Yes, it slowly starts becoming, returning to the original Yorkshire lad that left a good 20 years ago.

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