



**Ben:** Hello there, IELTS students. Welcome to IELTS podcast. You no longer have to worry, fret, or panic about IELTS because we are here to guide you through this test jungle. Enjoy these IELTS tutorials and if you need more help or want to access the famous online course, you can visit us at [ieltspodcast.com](http://ieltspodcast.com).

How to get ideas for IELTS writing task 2 is Ben Worthington and in this tutorial, we've got a very special teacher who is now-- who was brought up in the west, in London.

We were chatting earlier because she was sharing some really interesting and valuable information. We have difficulties thinking of ideas-- generating ideas. So, we are you doing?

**Sophie:** Thank you, Ben. Thank you. How are you?

**Ben:** I'm good. I'm good. So, before we jump into this, Sophie if it's okay with you could you just give us a brief overview of how you managed to get into-- how you managed to find yourself in Hong Kong?

**Sophie:** Yes, sure. So, as you said, I was born in the UK, but I'm ethnically Chinese and Vietnamese and I was actually teaching design and visual arts or art and design in England for about three years specializing in GCSE and A levels.



Then I decided that I actually wanted to teach abroad and I wanted to explore Asia because that's ethnically where I'm actually from. So, in order to learn more about my Chinese and Asian background, I decided to apply for an international job in Hong Kong and I've been in Hong Kong for about nine years now teaching arts and design and in various curriculums such as GCSE, IGCSE and the IB and I've taught in three different international schools.

**Ben:** Wow! Excellent. Sophie's regarding her accent. Sophie, do

e, but a similar situation to me nt just out of curiosity?

**Sophie:** Do I modify my accent Asia for nine consecutive years can tell there is a distinct difference my family. So, I was brought up to is the Cockney accent so--

stion, Ben because I've been in re UK where I was brought up I a comparison to my friends and e accent that is usually referred

**Ben:** You're a Cockney-- Sorry, carry on.

**Sophie:** I have a Cockney accent, but I've been told since being in Asia, since being in Hong Kong it's more the-- I'm more of an international accent or it's more of a polished spoken English compared to a Cockney accent.



**Ben:** Right. So, basically you've-- how would you say this? You've abandoned your Cockney origins.

**Sophie:** I don't know if I abandoned my Cockney origins, but I do realize-- I remember the experience I had in my first year teaching in Hong Kong when I pronounced specific words and a lot of the students didn't know it is especially in a setting like Hong Kong students watch this sized TV series or films so their accents are more Americanized are specifically watching some [unintelligible 00:04:32.06] Engl

So, in-- even speaking in a very a specific terminology they just wouldn't understand. For instanc e U.S. is known as trousers and its equivalent in England. So, it's

**Ben:** Got you. Got you. Well, I said this a few times on this show that I've modified my accent as well just so I can be understood and also-- I think I said this just a few weeks ago, but also I didn't feel sort of like so comfortable teaching students the Yorkshire pronunciation of certain terms because they're learning the accent-- sorry, they're learning the language and when you're speaking another language your goal is to communicate.

So, when I taught I tried to basically neutralize my accent a little bit because like you, certain words they just stared at me blank and I had to-- really and I had to modify them and only when



the student got it and they were like oh, he's saying bus and I'm like okay it's bus not bus. Only then I'd realize that okay, this is the way they've been taught, so I'm going to use these terminologies, this accent as well, but yes, I think it's just part and parcel of being a teacher.

**Sophie:** Yes. I think it's just one of those things I think depending on the environment that you're in and the audience that you're talking to, I think it's quite a natural thing to alter the way you communicate.

**Ben:** Yes. Totally. I totally agree. I think you said as well in Asia in general, you said that-- well, I have a lot of experience with students and you basically-- yes, you agreed with them that it's quite common for students to come with this problem that they can't get ideas and sometimes maybe their brain goes blank, but I think that's a problem that a lot of people can't think of the ideas. In your opinion, why do you think this happens?

**Sophie:** Being a teacher that tries to coach creativity specifically, what I realize is that there's quite a distinctive difference with students born and taught and cultured in western culture and those with eastern backgrounds just from my personal experience having taught in London.

Students were able to use their own initiative, they weren't frightened of trying new ideas, and testing and exploring things that they could find that don't actually work through try and error. They basically moved on from ideas very quickly. They were very resilient and they had a



growth mindset I would say, a very positive way of thinking in terms of learning through making mistakes and in a positive way.

The idea of a mistake is kind of seen as a negative thing in Asia in a sense that most students from a very young age are taught that there is either a right or wrong answer rather than looking at the idea that there are many different ways of seeing things. It's usually either right or wrong.

I see this a lot with subjects like science or there is a way you do things in subjects of creativity or subjects that doesn't follow a formula in a background in Asia when they're doing things.

notice formulas that you follow and you get a right answer. So, it's an initiative to think out of the box especially with students from a background that there's a specific way of

So, there's an idea of idealistic perfectionism as well when you know if you try something and it doesn't work, then it's wrong while in the west that's seen as a good thing because that's the process of thinking. So, in terms of the distinct differences of the east and the west, I tend to find soft skills such as critical thinking, creative thinking skills and transit skills are probably a little bit more behind in the east compared to the west.



**Ben:** And conversely, in the east they excel where there is a right and wrong answer such as the science subjects especially mathematics, no?

**Sophie:** Yes, actually it's more academic subjects like you said math and science when there is usually just a right or wrong answer or one answer. Students in Asia are [unintelligible 00:10:08.28] basically taught from a very young age of five they have been tested before they have been accepted

When I first moved to Asia my first experience was in academic panel interviewing five-year-olds for school positions. There were 300 five-year-olds and there were 1000 questions.

These students were interviewed in a panel. They were tested in math and other tests as well. So, even though you've got to get the right answer. Don't get the wrong answer otherwise there will be consequences.

**Ben:** Wow! That's incredible and then if we try and apply that mindset to a situation like IELTS writing task 2 where we've got these typical questions where there is no right or wrong answer.

**Sophie:** Absolutely, yes.

**Ben:** I can totally understand now why they find-- because at first when I got into this I was like what's the issue? Why is it so difficult to find answers-- get ideas? I can't think of ideas until the



cows come home. This isn't a difficult part for me, but time and time and time again I got emails from students, "My mind goes blank. I can't think of ideas."

Yes, it's just-- what you were saying now just puts it all in perspective and I think it would be-- the equivalent would be maybe a western student getting thrown a horrifically difficult algebra problem by western standards, but in their culture that's just child's play I imagine.

**Sophie:** Absolutely. Students in traditional schools i.e. they're not actually from an international background get rigorous tests. They get tested literally all the time. Their tests are not as much about them value in terms of how well they are doing.

So, it's more of the result and usually to do with an answer or a right or wrong answer rather than trying to do something or finding a way through trial and error. So, basically they can't afford to make any mistakes. So, their mindset is there is only a right or wrong answer.

So, when they're being asked well, can you come up with something else, they automatically assume there's a right answer to something rather than oh, there are different possibilities, there are multiple alternatives and they can possibly try something that seems quite unlikely or an unusual connection to ideas and shedding their own unique way of thinking because they've been uniformed to think and perform in such a specific way.



**Ben:** Yes, I totally agree with you there and also it's like there's-- as I said before, there are multiple answers, but it's the-- as you said the process of getting to that answer and if you can prove your process is-- related to IELTS, if you can prove that your argument is correct, if you can prove it by examples, by opinions, and by persuasive writing then it is correct.

And it is kind of weird now that there are probably three thousand, five thousand, there's an infinite number of answers to do is prove that it is the right answer.

And then coming from an infir and white approach-- from a you've been learning it's right infinite opportunity, but you've approaching that from a black your life you've been shown, . Now you get thrust into this I can now totally see why it's ridiculously difficult basically.

**Sophie:** You know the teaching experience and the learning experience is very different. So, what I realized in more local schools especially is it's very in structural. It's very much the teacher is standing in the front and the delivered information is received by the students. So, it's basically taking the knowledge from the teacher and transplanting it to students.

This is quite common in countries like China as well when sometimes the class sizes are 50 or 60 students and there's only one teacher. So, it's kind of a dictation way of learning and more





international ways of thinking or even in the western way of thinking is very much of explore, find out, experiment and find out your own thoughts, opinions, and ways of doing things or learn new things.

I think that the biggest thing I would say is like you said, it's make up your own opinions. Students in a local system or in a system that is more of a traditional way of teaching they're not given the time or space to form

**Ben:** Yes, totally.

**Sophie:** There's no time for them to think about it. They're just being given information and then they're being asked to spit out the information. You don't have time to think about it. There is no scope for individuality there.

**Ben:** Yes, absolutely and wow! It is interesting and how can a student then start developing these ideas? One way that I put forward to students is to basically fill their head up with information. If their mind goes blank and they get a question about climate change and there's nothing in there to sort of like even start forming an opinion I just say look, learn about that topic.

Learn about the reasons. Learn about the country specifics or each country like which countries are pro-climate change. Which ones are environmentally friendly? Learn about all this, the history. That's like one technique that I share with students. In your field or from your



experience, how have you really taught to improve a student's creativity? How have you developed that subject?

**Sophie:** I think sometimes it's also developing the right environment to allow students to feel safe to share their individual ideas. So, if a student isn't used to come up with their own ideas they kind of need to be coached. It's not about the right and wrong, it's okay to have different ideas and different potential ways of seeing things. It hasn't actually been explored and to teach them that through a different way of learning.

It's not about the right and wrong, it's about giving them the freedom to bring and for them to feel safe enough to express-- communicate their ideas. It's not a set that's quite boxed and in a box then it's not.

But if you're trying to encourage them to think outside the box is almost trying to ask them well what do you-- you can even actually reverse it and say what do you think the wrong answers would be and why do you think that might be? So, it's almost reverse learning and challenging them to think a little bit more deeply and more critical at the potential possibilities.

**Ben:** I love that. I love that especially developing the environment. Almost coincidentally, it's like one of the modules we've got on the online course where we challenge the students to develop ideas for a whole range of questions and topics.



We've got like basically one of the teachers who just replies and says look-- because some of the students are worried about this right and wrong. So, this is why we got the whole module about just developing ideas and the whole sort of like objective behind that exercise is to say look, any idea is probably valid as long as it's not ridiculous.

Any idea is valid if you can prove it. It's not like you have to make the case to essay writing, but it goes back to what you said. It's not like you have to make the case to essay writing, but it allows them to explore without consequences. Explore without water so to speak.

**Sophie:** Absolutely.

**Ben:** Yes and just one other thing you mentioned the thing about education in Asia and that's so fascinating. Could you tell us how that impacts the students before when we were talking about that?

**Sophie:** Okay. So, education in Asia is a very competitive field. Like I mentioned when I first turned up to Asia I was interviewing students in the hundreds and they were only five years old. And I was beginning to-- it was actually a mid-range school in terms of performance and achievement. So, you could imagine how competitive it actually is to get into some of the top performing schools in Asia.

So, students here they go to school, they have normal school hours, but on top of that as soon as they finish they have extra private tuition after school and during the weekends as well. So,



they take education very seriously. And these students have been ingrained in them by their parents just how important education is and just how important it is to do really well in your tests and get the results.

**Ben:** Yes, and the other thing-- carry on.

**Sophie:** So, I guess that already in some sense, to do things as it should

g right, to be a perfectionist in tests and their expectations.

**Ben:** Absolutely and the other school are they getting this right home in the curriculum after basically face their parents who wrong. It's black or white.

like when you said not only at culture so to speak and then at vers. And then they've got to ctly the same culture of right or

So, it's basically from-- they open their eyes until they go to sleep at night. Even before consciousness starts until-- all through their academic life until they sort of like face-- they get faced with a certain aspect of western culture that's very different and so-- put in that and then you've got to explain as well to your parents-- okay, maybe you have to explain, I don't know, but even that task of saying to the parents look, there's no right or wrong answer here. That as well is going to be horrendously difficult if they've been brought up for the last 50, 60 years with a mentality of it's right or wrong.



**Sophie:** Absolutely. There is a cultural joke here in Asia where if you get an A- that's a bad grade and in the schools that I have taught that is a bad grade. So, yes your aim is to get at least an A.

**Ben:** Wow!

**Sophie:** At least an A and they should be getting A scores.

**Ben:** Wow! That's insane.

**Sophie:** That's the frame of reference for teachers, educators you have to be aware of doing things differently to what you are used to. Vulnerability too, but in such a way that it is a strength, but actually a weakness. In the east, vulnerability isn't necessarily seen as a weakness, but it can be cultivated there needs to be a degree of vulnerability and the allowance of making potential mistakes in order for richer and improved learning to take place. well. That's the challenge as to how to allow creativity and possibilities to be cultivated. It is about the ability to allow a sense of vulnerability. It isn't necessarily seen as a weakness, but it can be cultivated there needs to be a degree of vulnerability and the allowance of making potential mistakes in order for richer and improved learning to take place.

**Ben:** Yes, absolutely and the funny thing is like in the west-- well, I think this can be like-- it can really be embodied in the west by the fact that, for example in the U.S., having a bankruptcy where you're just financially in ruin isn't seen as a bad thing. It's seen as almost a good thing in the fact that you at least attempted and you tried to succeed.



Fair enough it didn't happen, but it's not seen as a bad thing whereas in Europe especially in Continental Europe, it's labeled as a failure, but in the UK it's seen as-- yes, it does have some negative connotations, but in the U.S. it's like okay, you had a bankruptcy. Pick yourself up and get going. Well done for trying. Keep on trying. I don't know, do you have any experience-- is bankruptcy seen as a failure in Asia, just out of curiosity?

**Sophie:** Well, if you think that going to be sweeping the road is a failure, you didn't do well in school you're going to be sweeping the road. It's a projection that parents actually put on their children. Why do you think it's good-- will you get good grades if you don't want to?

You think bankruptcy is going to be a failure. If you didn't do well in school you're going to be sweeping the road. [phrase? 00:25:13.27] spoken. So, whenever you ask a student for their response they will say, "You need to give your response. Right."

**Ben:** Wow! Got you.

**Sophie:** So, if you say bankruptcy well, that's in the same direction as that phrase basically even though it's not a true phrase. It's something that's been ingrained and told to them at such a young age they think it's a true thing. It's a conditioned mindset.

**Ben:** Absolutely. It's become a belief, isn't it now?

**Sophie:** Absolutely yes.



**Ben:** Right. Well, thank you. Do you have anything that you would like to say, Sophie?

**Sophie:** It's been a pleasure actually to have this open conversation and I hope your audience members both students and parents are able to listen to this podcast and probably take something away from it and reflect and probably think a little bit differently with more of a positive growth mindset that is a positive thing to a learning process.

**Ben:** Excellent words. Thank you very much, Sophie.

**Female Voice:** Thanks for listening.