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INTRODUCTION

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Ben: How to score band 8 in IELTS. In this tutorial, we are going to look at what skills you need, we're going to look at successful ways to improve your English, we're going to look at



exam techniques, and we're going to look at getting feedback on your work and getting expert advice. And joining me on today's podcast is Daphne. How are you today, Daphne?

Daphne: Hi, Ben. Hi, everyone. I'm really well, thank you and I'm really glad we're going to talk about this because band 8 is very, very unusual and all the essays I've been correcting there have been a few which are fantastic, but it is super hard to get. So, I really hope this will help those of you who aspire towards a band 8 to really get some useful advice to achieve that.

Ben: Absolutely, absolutely. When I started out preparing students for IELTS, I was working in Spain as an English teacher and there were a lot of students coming to me and saying I need to get band 7, I need to get band 7 in IELTS and I was like what is this with band 7? And then when I got stuck into it and I started interviewing all these experts I was like wow! This is quite tricky and it is so frustrating. So, this is only emphasized when you're going for band 8 because it's basically C2 level which is with the Cambridge Common European Framework for languages



then it basically equates to C2 which is an extremely high level [unintelligible 00:01:56.00] and it shows an extremely high level of competence with the English language as well. So, let's go. What are the minimum scores you need in the tests to get a band 8, Daphne?

Daphne: Okay. So, the listening and the reading is the easiest one to talk about first because that is based on raw scores; literally how many marks do you get out of 40. 40 is the number of questions for both the listening and the reading. And for band 8, you need to score at least 36 correct answers out of 40, so 36 out of 40 for listening and reading.

And then speaking and writing, as Ben said, you are writing at proficiency level. So, you're speaking and writing need to be practically error-free.

Ben: This is not easy. This is not easy because at this level, to start improving it becomes incredibly more difficult and because you've probably been learning the language for a while,



you might not even be aware of some of your mistakes. So, this is why it gets much more difficult and we can improve our-- we can get to band 8 by working basically, as I said before, working on language skills and exam skills, but the difference here is that if a student is around, for example, 6, 6.5 with some solid exam skills, they can sometimes or quite often get nudged into a band 7. The language skills obviously need to be improved too, but if they've got-- what I'm saying is that it's easier to get the scores for a band 7 with exam skills and okay language skills. The difference in exam skills can improve your score. That's what I'm saying especially for the writing whereas the band 8, you need to have both of these sort of like at a very high level. You can't wing it or you can't rely on exam skills to get that band improvement. That's what I'm trying to say.

Daphne: Yes, you need accuracy and you need fluency and that you need to be very, very confident as you say in your grammar which will show in your writing and your speaking and



the range of depth of vocabulary. For me, vocabulary is a really big differential. If you're a band 7, absolutely you can have great vocab, but for band 8 your vocabulary will be like a whole other level really, won't it?

Ben: Exactly, exactly and when you're writing and when you're speaking, it's practically error-free as we were saying before and this is why if you're going for this level, I would strongly recommend getting feedback because as we said at this level, to get those minor improvements, it takes a lot of-- it takes a very sort of like precise level of tuning so to speak because you're unaware. It sounds natural to you because you've been learning English so long, you've been using English. A lot of the time these errors become fossilized and they totally go sort of like missed. They go unaware. So, what are the steps a student could take?

Daphne: Well, I think partly to do with what you were just saying, Ben, I think the most important thing is be very aware of your strengths which you probably are, but also be very



aware of your weaknesses and I think this is more difficult to know unless you are getting feedback. If you get feedback from someone, they can say to you okay, this is fantastic. I love this, but actually stylistically, you should be avoiding that.

A particular thing with me just quickly on the writing is when people say we should do this, we should do this, we should do that. I don't like having we in these essays. Make it business-like. Who are these people? Talk about business experts or company owners rather than we or they.

Ben: Absolutely.

Daphne: It just has to do with being more specific. So knowing your level is also really important. Do a practice test. Do a mock test. Do something to get some feedback. And then if you're getting feedback, then follow the plan. Listen to the feedback that you're getting as well. That's important.



Ben: Absolutely, yes and just going back to the point of feedback, you could get a native English speaker to review your work, but they are not going to point out for example what Daphne just said. If you are writing like we believe climate change is a very common issue and to solve this we need to introduce taxes across all carbon-based industries and so on and so forth. If you're writing like this, a native English speaker who's not trained in IELTS will probably not spot it because it sounds grammatically fine, the vocabulary is there, and it just sounds natural, but we're not going for natural writing.

We're going for academic and this is like the next level up. So, it's better to get your work reviewed by experts who know this exam inside out, back to front, and who are correcting essays day in day out basically like us and there's lots of services out there, but you want to go with somebody who's specializing in IELTS, not just an average normal native English speaker. They can give you some feedback, but it's not going to be so specific and likewise at the language



academy or the language school; you want somebody who's got experience with IELTS and who really understands academic writing.

Daphne: Absolutely.

Ben: So, moving on, we've got listening and for the listening, as we were saying in a previous podcast, to get a band 8, you need to be at least for the general task getting 38 out of 40 and then for the academic at least 35 out of the 40 to get that band 8.

Daphne: Yes, and listening is tough. It was interesting thinking about what you have to do when you're listening. You're doing a lot of multitasking. You have to read the questions and then you have to listen and then you have to note down your answer. So, these questions test your ability to grasp, not only the kind of general meaning but the factual detail and as well as that, the speaker's attitudes and opinions. So, there's an awful lot going on when you're listening and



you're listening for various things. So, for example, if your level at the moment is a 6 or a 7 in listening, to reach a band 8, you're going to have to do quite a lot of specific things, I really like this advice, Ben. Do you want to run through the advice here?

Ben: Yes, before I share that advice, I just want to mention that if you've been living in an English-speaking country or you've got a high level of English already, do not confuse that or do not equate that to a high band score in the IELTS exam because fair enough, you might understand everything perfectly first time. However, for the exam, you need exam skills and this is what Daphne was saying. You need to be able to multitask; coordinate the listening and the writing and this is completely different-- not completely different but it's slightly different when you're doing it on the computer as well. So, not only do you need to learn it if you're doing the paper-based, but you need to learn it specifically if you're doing a computer-based test because



it's slightly different. Again, a slightly different set of skills that you want to get familiar with so as not to really impact your true listening grade.

So, yes. The things you should do to get this, to improve your listening skill is probably about 15 to 20 minutes a day go for something that interests you. You don't have to be doing exam listening tests day in day out. You can also-- if you've got a profound interest in the premier league and also this is a podcast about the premier league-- also if you are doing the academic one, I would suggest listening to scientific podcasts or TED Talks-- TED Talks might be a bit too casual, but you could definitely find podcasts about machine learning, about biology, about all these different specific subjects.

And also, I always recommend transcribing as well because this develops one of those exam skills we were talking about before about being able to listen and write and plus if you're listening to a podcast that comes with a transcription, you can always compare them afterwards.



By the way, our podcast in the podcast app they always come with the transcription and on the site, you can get the transcription as well so you can compare what you're hearing with what you're listening. And this is a great way to improve your vocabulary because the first time you learn a new term, you're going to be hearing the correct pronunciation first time rather than reading it first time and guessing their pronunciation.

Daphne: And I like that. And I like the idea of what you say noting things down so writing it down, but also paraphrasing. So, once you've written it down, you can kind of test yourself by paraphrasing; writing it in a different way. So, you're starting off just with two or three minutes almost and then writing down a different version of it or what did that mean or summarizing something. So, you're just building on different skills, but it's quite nice, as Ben said, to broaden your perspective so not just always be doing mock tests, but just listen to different things as well.



Ben: Exactly, exactly and then for the actual test itself I know a lot of students that have said well that it's basically sort of like a test of concentration. If you've got the concentration skills and the endurance to sort of like hang in there for the full extent of the time, then you're going to increase your chances of success considerably. I think it was Vinod a while back was talking about how he meditated to improve his concentration.

Daphne: Wow!

Ben: Yes, another student told me that she was doing breathing exercises just to get her heart rate down so she could improve her level of concentration and also going back to what Daphne was saying, many questions in the test are based on synonyms. So, if you've got a high level of paraphrasing ability then it's going to make it much easier. So, we'll just give you a very quick



example here. We've got this listening exercise and the question is obviously you're listening to two speakers; Carla and Rob which will be played by Daphne and Ben in this version.

Daphne: My acting debut here we go.

Ben: The question is Carla and Rob were surprised to learn that coastal cities a) contain nearly half the world's population, b) includes most of the world's largest cities, c) are growing twice as fast as the other cities. So, let's jump into it. I will be Rob and I start.

Rob: Yes and cities are growing so quickly. I mean we know that more than half the world's population lives in cities now.

Carla: Yes and that's all cities, not just the ones on the coast but most of the biggest cities are actually built by the sea. I'd not realized that before.



Rob: Nor me.

Ben: Okay. So, as you can see here for this multiple choice question, I'll just go through it again. Carla and Rob were surprised to learn that coastal cities a) contain nearly half the world's population, b) include most of the world's largest cities and c) are growing twice as fast as the other cities. So, what would you say was the answer there?

Daphne: Thank you for trying that one on me, Ben. The answer is b) and the reason we know that is that we're looking for these synonyms. So, we're looking for-- in the question, it says the world's largest cities; this is the b) and in the text or in the reading or the listening-- sorry-- we've heard most of the biggest cities and then you've got this in the question: they were surprised to learn and then she says-- Carla-- I'd not realized that before. So, that's your clue; that she's surprised and then the other way the paraphrasing is I'd not realized that before.



Ben: Excellent.

Daphne: They're not going to give you the answer obviously. They're not going to make it obvious, but this is a really good way to look out for it and that takes practice as Ben was saying.

Ben: Definitely, definitely. I think it was Vinod who was saying that he was doing basically a listening test every single day and I think he even did a reading test every single day as well. So, it's not just a matter of having great listening skills. It's also a whole array of exam skills that you need to develop and improve as well. So, moving on to the reading. Okay.

Daphne: Yes, you go, Ben. Yes.

Ben: I was just going to say for this I think some of the best advice that I've ever given and I got feedback from our students as well who said that that is working is basically identify the ones where you lose points. So, you do the reading test and then you find out where specifically you're



losing points and then work on those specific ones rather than doing the entire test again and again or different tests again and again. You just focus on the specific questions where you're losing points.

Daphne: Absolutely. I'll just remind you there's a lovely student Angelica in Africa and she had such a focused method of dealing with the reading. So, literally it was for three days she was going to work on the yes/no questions or for another time she was going to work on the multiple-choice and then she was going to work on the flow diagram when you have to fill in the gaps. She absolutely mastered every type of question and really understood that the different questions needed different skills and different techniques. I like that she did very well and I thought that was just that understanding what was needed really and then addressing that I thought was a really good way to work.



Ben: Exactly. It's like we were saying in previous tutorials that the students who will succeed are the ones who have got a clear plan and who are working that exact plan and just focusing on implementing that plan and following through day in day out. From my experience, those are the most successful types of students.

Another point with the reading especially if you're going for band 8 is to get a clear and indomitable grasp of the passive. If you know this then this would definitely help you because the passive can be quite misleading and it can be quite difficult to follow who is doing what to who and especially under exam conditions.

Daphne: Yes. So, there's an example that we've got here. This is a yes/no/not given question and the not given ones I think people find very, very hard because it's tempting to put in your own



answer or make up an answer for maybe what you know already and there's an instruction obviously, if there's no mention of it, it is not given.

I've got another example here. This is also from Cambridge IELTS Academic 14 and question 35 it says staff should be allowed to choose when they take breaks during the working day and the text states that working conditions would improve if "certain actions were adopted allowing adequate breaks during the working day". So, as Ben said, it uses the passive construction, so if certain actions were adopted-- that is your past passive-- is different than staff should be allowed to choose. So, it is not given is the correct answer for this because we don't know about the staff, but we do know that some action may be taken or might be taken by management. So, you've got this passive idea of it being somebody else and that that would give the staff the breaks rather than the staff themselves being in control. So, it's a grammar awareness this, Ben, I think, isn't it?



Ben: Absolutely, yes, absolutely and this is why it's definitely worth just getting to grips with not only the test format but the grammar constructions especially the passive and learning the question format as well. And you'll do this by doing tests day in day out because this is kind of a trick where they kind of mislead you with the passive and you need to be able to identify all the different sort of like styles of questions or even if you want to be a little bit [unintelligible 00:20:14.07] you could say the different styles of misleading the test taker.

Daphne: Oh, yes.

Ben: Separating the band 8s from the band 7s.

Daphne: Absolutely and a quick one on that I think much as you're identifying-- when you're doing your practice, you're identifying the right answer. You're also identifying why the other



answers are wrong and that's a great way to start getting your band 8; just being really aware of what traps they're leading you into and what tricks the examiner is using.

Ben: Absolutely. Okay. So, with the writing-- now obviously, we've been saying this quite a lot, but obviously, one of the best things-- three actions to take: get feedback, plan your writing from the get-go, and know exactly what the task involves. So, you basically need to be really analyzing the question and writing towards that question. Daphne, could you tell us basically what often distinguishes a band 8 candidate from the 6s and the 7s?

Daphne: Well, I've got a great example for you now. There's an essay which is an essay from the course actually, Ben, about dependency; people's dependency on the internet and on mobile phones and is this a good thing or a bad thing. So, it looks like a very straightforward question,



but a number of students fall into the very easy trap of not really thinking about the question and not really understanding every word of the question before they start writing.

So, a lot of people write about how good the internet is and how important it is and how we all like it, but the keyword for this essay is dependence on and unless you're addressing that element of is the dependence-- the fact that we rely on it the whole time-- is that a good thing or not, then you will not be able to score a band 7 or above. Definitely not your band 8. You need to really understand every element of the question. So, I think in terms of your preparation, knowing what each task involves that's a big thing for me. Really understanding the question and writing to that is very important.

Ben: Absolutely and I think another area would be grammatical range and accuracy especially the accuracy because we know at band 7 you should be using a lot of the conjunctions and of course your topic-specific vocabulary and the conditionals, but if you're going for a band 8, you



need to be using all of this as well, but at an extremely high level of accuracy and also even more complex grammar structures.

And if you're absolutely confident, even possibly an idiomatic expression, but that's a little bit risky. You need to be absolutely certain and supremely confident that you're using it in the right context because I've seen a lot of essays where they've just basically pushed this idiomatic expression into the essay and it wasn't appropriate and it just sounded forced. It did not sound natural at all.

Daphne: I'm a bit cautious about that because often they're not very academic because by their very nature they're slightly more informal. So, I think you have to be quite careful on those.



Ben: Exactly, exactly. You have to be very, very confident and also it has to be absolutely in context as well. So, just take that very, very carefully. Okay then, moving on to the speaking. How could a student improve with their speaking? What steps should they take?

Daphne: Well, I think this is really interesting to talk about this because a lot of students think oh yes, that's fine. I can speak. That's absolutely no problem. But for me, one of the biggest things in speaking and with the feedback I'm doing with students at the moment on speaking is understanding the different levels almost that's needed in the exam because in the Part 1 it's obviously more informal, the Part 2 is your presentation, the Part 3 is much more academic in terms of content and the style that's needed.

So, I think a big thing is to cut out the simple errors. You may, as Ben said before, you might be saying something you think is okay because no one corrects you, but until that error is pointed



out, you may not be aware of it. So, cutting out simple errors; that's really important. Like I'm gonna do this; you shouldn't talk like that on an academic kind of exam. It's just too casual.

Working on the more complex structures. So, this is really useful in Part 3 where you might be using more speculative language and connected into that is using conditionals. So, using them correctly and appropriately can be really impressive. So, just a little example here answering the question should all students pay for their university education? Rather than saying no, it's not fair because students don't have money and that would be okay on your band 6, 6.5, but an answer like for example, definitely not. If they all had to pay, then many families would not be able to send their kids to university. Friends of mine wouldn't have gone if they'd had to pay for their studies. You're getting into a third conditional which is a really good structure. An examiner will be sitting up thinking wow! This is very impressive.



Ben: Absolutely, yes. Good point there and there are just two things I'd like to mention. A good way to get to this sort of like higher level is not only get feedback as we mentioned and we've got the feedback service here at IELTS Podcast but to put yourself in those situations where you are answering sort of like speculative questions and maybe even write out your answers beforehand so you can get used to extending them and to introducing the conditional or certain grammar structures into your writing.

And the other thing that I found very helpful for improving my Spanish was to put myself in situations where I would have to be sort of like working in a team. For example, putting up a curtain in a flat with my friends who were all Spanish and then that really pushes your use of the language because you're having to be very accurate like okay, lift up the right-hand side by about 5 centimeters and then take it 20 centimeters to the left.



That's really challenging and just having that confidence and the accuracy with your language. So, not only sort of like in everyday situations but also you want to be possibly even getting into slightly more challenging, not arguments but debates with your friends. So, if you could start softly challenging and pushing your friends and you're getting into sort of like a situation where you're really forced to explain more complex arguments or explain something or to even teach something, then you're going to be getting more used to using more accurate language, more complex language. And also as well depending on the topic, you could use more speculative language also which would definitely help.

Daphne: I really like that, Ben. Yes, it's a fantastic tip there, yes.



Ben: Okay and then the final point-- well, we're almost near the end, we want to just talk about fluency. So, what phrases could a student use to help them sound more fluent? I believe I stumbled on that. The irony.

Daphne: That's Ben not sounding fluent at all, okay? So, this is really useful for me because I think a lot of the time on the speaking the danger is you're talking away, but your talk is not very structured and trying to learn a set of phrases which you can use for different purposes during the three parts of the test will really push up your score. This is the kind of thing that will take you from a 7 to a band 8 because your speaking will become more organized.

So, to express an opinion, you could be saying something like well, in my opinion or as far as I can see, if you ask me I would say that or stronger I'm convinced that. So, these little phrases take you into a nice grammatical structure and then obviously, you'll be getting marks for



grammar. So, that's an opinion. Talking in general terms, you could say generally speaking, on the whole, to a large extent and then carry on. Ben, do you want to take over?

Ben: Yes. I just want to mention that as Daphne says, these phrases alone will not get you to a band 8. It's important that after using these phrases that you continue in a very accurate style, in a very accurate fashion and that you are answering the question and you are developing the question. Also just like with the writing, that it's not just a case of using this phrase and then answering. It's a case of giving your answer or giving your opinion. It's a case of developing the whole answer in an accurate fashion and also naturally using more complex grammar structures.

So, more phrases that we could use are a case in point is, take for example, or to tell a story, I remember one time or I'll never forget the time or to rephrase, well what I'm trying to say is or to go back to the topic if you do go off-topic. This-- I'll just go off-topic now-- if this happens to you and you do find that you are sort of like veering away, don't carry on down that path. Just get



back to the question and you can use a rescue phrase such as right, to get back to what I was saying or now, where was I? Ah, yes. I was talking about friendship and childhood friends.

Also, another final point to make-- another useful point is to use structuring language and use signposts and we can use something like to begin with or firstly, secondly, but just be aware it's very similar to your writing in that in order to give a coherent answer, you've got to be answering the question. It's got to be accurate, but you've got to really develop it. So, a very useful term is because. So, I think students should pay for their own university education because... Develop it and give an example.

Daphne: Yes and another one to add to that one my favorite is although. So, on the Speaking Part 2, you could say although I've never visited Canada before it's top on my list because I've read so many fantastic reports about it or I've recently been watching a documentary. So, it gets



you into this lovely complex grammar and this is the kind of thing that you're going to be looking at for your band 8.

Ben: Exactly, exactly. Okay then, final points. If you do make a mistake, you can go back, but remember speaking is a spontaneous activity, so it's not like writing where you can sort of like just erase what you said. If you try and do this with your speaking, it often sounds more confusing. So, the best way to do it is just short and quick and just briefly correct maybe a grammar point or a certain vocabulary error. Don't try and sort of like rewind and start the whole question again because that could be more confusing.

Daphne: And that'll just make you panic as well. So, just keep moving forward. Yes, absolutely.

Ben: Exactly. All right then. To practice, I know students that write out the cue card answers just to really jog their brain for vocabulary so they're not as cold on that topic. I think as well getting



feedback. We've got the feedback service here where you can make a recording, send it in to Daphne and--

Daphne: And we're doing some nice work. We're expanding that as well because we're doing some nice work on Part 3 with some students at the moment. They find that very hard so I'm setting them some Part 3 questions and then they're recording their answers to those. And that's also useful to link back to the writing because a lot of the Part 3 speaking questions could be lovely phrases for writing Part 2. It's the same sort of academic vocabulary and the same cool grammatical structures that we're talking about. So, that's really useful.

Ben: Yes, absolutely and getting to grips with the higher-level grammatical structures; using them appropriately and accurately. That's what's going to get you the band 8 both in the writing and in the speaking. And one of the best ways to get confident with these is just to use them over



and over again and get feedback as to when you're using them correctly and when you're using them incorrectly.

Daphne: Yes.

Ben: Excellent. Okay, so that's everything from us today. If you are struggling with the exam, you can go to ieltspodcast.com, sign up for a free book with lots of IELTS materials that includes some sample essays. Also, when you sign up for that, you will be given special offers for getting feedback on your speaking or getting writing feedback. And also in the IELTS podcast app that we have, you can listen to the podcast and download the transcript and listen to them at the same time as well to improve your speaking and listening; your listening skills especially and obviously, it's going to have an indirect effect on your speaking and your writing as well.



And just remember you're not alone in this. There are a lot of students who get frustrated, get really fed up, but you've got Daphne, Ellen, and myself here. We're all here to help you and every day we're helping students pass the exam. We're getting thank you messages that [unintelligible 00:33:36.17]. We're getting some amazing reviews there and we're here to help you. That's why we've set up this whole organization.

Daphne: Absolutely. It's a hard exam and it can feel lonely, but we really want to help you and this is our whole motivation, so yes.

Ben: Exactly, exactly.

Daphne: You're not alone.



Ben: Exactly and this is what we do day in and day out. This is what we do. We're doing IELTS. We're not doing business English. We're not doing general English. We're not doing English for adolescents or English for directors. It's IELTS day in day out.

Okay. That's everything. So, good luck with your exam and don't forget if you're struggling you can get in contact and we're going to help you.

Daphne: Exactly. Go for it, everybody, and I'd love to see some band 8s. So, we're happy to help you try and get there.

[Music]

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