Authenticity in the IELTS Academic Module Writing test: a comparative study of Task 2 items and university assignments

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Abstract

The study reported here investigated the authenticity of the Task 2 component of the IELTS Writing test (Academic Module) by examining the extent to which this component of the test corresponds to the writing requirements of university study. This was researched in two ways: through a survey of writing tasks set in the two domains, and through interviews with academic staff. In the task survey, a total of 155 assignment tasks from a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses were compared with a corpus of 20 IELTS Task 2 items according to four dimensions of difference: genre; information source; rhetorical function; object of enquiry. While the IELTS tasks were found to bear some resemblance to the predominant genre of university study – the essay, a number of important differences were observed:

1. The use of prior knowledge as the basis for writing in the IELTS tasks, compared with the prescription of a variety of research processes in the university assignments.

2. A restricted range of rhetorical functions in the IELTS items (with a focus on hortation), compared with a diversity of functions in the university tasks.

3. An emphasis on ‘real-world’ entities (situations, actions, practices) in the objects of enquiry of IELTS items compared with a greater focus on abstract entities (theories, ideas, methods) in the university tasks.

The staff survey – a supplement to the task analysis – consisted of interviews with twelve lecturers of first year undergraduate subjects. Overall, lecturers were positive about the nature of the IELTS Task 2 format and also the type of language instruction they imagined students would receive in preparing for it. Most however, identified some substantive differences in
writing requirements in the two domains which in general terms, were of a similar order to those found in the task analysis, including IELTS' emphasis on opinionative styles of writing as opposed to the careful use and evaluation of sources required in many university tasks.

In the final section of the report, recommendations are made for modifications to the format of Task 2 items. If implemented, these changes would bring this component of the test more into line with the requirements of university writing and in so doing improve the test's washback effect on pre-tertiary English programmes.

1 Introduction

A central issue in validating direct assessments of writing is the authenticity of test tasks. Authentic test tasks are those which correspond closely to tasks which a language user is likely to encounter in the target situation (Bachman and Palmer 1996). A second, related issue concerned with validity is that of a test's impact. When a test influences programmes of instruction, this impact is referred to as washback. Washback is said to have a harmful or negative effect on classroom practice if the teaching concentrates solely on preparing students to pass a test rather than for the broader demands of real-world or target language use tasks. The washback effect is seen as particularly relevant in the case of large-scale public tests which have become the focus of teaching programmes (McNamara 1996:23). In such circumstances, when tests are used for making important decisions about large numbers or people, the potential for impact on instruction or washback is high and therefore the authenticity of test tasks is of utmost importance (Bachman and Palmer 1996:262).

The IELTS is an example of a large-scale public test, one which is used for university entrance selection. The expanded use of the IELTS test in recent years has been the result of an increase in the numbers of international students intending to study at English-speaking universities, along with an increase in the number of universities requiring IELTS band scores as a prerequisite. A consequence of this situation is that many English language centres now include IELTS preparation within their EAP programmes. In a recent Australian survey of teachers' attitudes to IELTS (Deakin 1997), it was found that despite an overall positive response to the test, almost half of those surveyed believed that IELTS had a less than efficacious washback effect on EAP teaching and university preparation. The increasing influence of IELTS and the apparent concerns about its washback effect on EAP programmes highlights the need for the test to be as authentic as possible.

The current study takes up the issue of authenticity of test tasks on the IELTS Academic Module Writing test. Specifically, its purpose was to investigate the degree of correspondence between tasks in the IELTS Writing test.
and target language use tasks, i.e. those that students are required to undertake in university study.

The IELTS test (Academic Module) is made up of four components: Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. The Writing component is a direct test of writing, requiring candidates to produce two samples of writing in the 60 minutes allocated. In Task 1, candidates write a short description of information presented in the form of a diagram, table, etc. Task 2 requires candidates to write a composition, usually an essay, in response to a proposition or question. In both tasks, candidates are assessed on their ability to write with 'appropriate register, rhetorical organisation, style and content' (UCLES 1996).

In the present study, it was considered too large an undertaking to investigate the authenticity of both tasks in the Writing test. A decision was made to focus only on Task 2; this was partly because this component carries a heavier weighting on the test and also because anecdotal evidence suggests that this task is given greater attention in test preparation classes.

2 Previous studies of university writing requirements

The study of writing requirements in different domains has been an active strand of applied language research over the last three decades - motivated largely by the imperatives of needs analysis and the development of communicative pedagogies (Munby 1978). In the domain of higher education, a number of large-scale surveys have been conducted in recent times to develop a picture of the type of writing required by students on university courses. While most of these studies have been undertaken for the purpose of EAP syllabus design (e.g. Braine 1995, Canesco and Byrd 1989, Carson et al. 1992, Horowitz 1986, Johns 1981), others have been designed specifically for test validation purposes (e.g. Bridgeman and Carlson 1983, Hale et al. 1996). Two studies which reflect theoretical approaches to academic writing are Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Grabe and Kaplan (1996).

The methods and data used in these writing surveys have been of two types: there are those studies which have drawn on academic staff or students as the main source of data and those which have focused on the actual writing tasks set by these academics. The first type has involved surveying academic staff to obtain their impressions of writing requirements and practices in their faculties (Bridgeman and Carlson 1983, Johns 1981, Ostler 1980). These studies have used interview or questionnaire methods and usually included in their design some rank ordering of academic skills or tasks with respect to their frequency and importance. Academic staff, who are the ones who actually 'create' the writing requirements of university study, are obviously an important source of information in writing research.
These survey studies however, have not been without their critics. Horowitz draws attention to one problem (also identified by Johns (1981) in her own survey study): the difficulty of knowing whether survey data reflects 'what academics do, what they think they do, or what they want the researcher to think they do' (Horowitz 1986:448). Another problem concerns the metalanguage that is used unavoidably in this type of research. Many of the terms needed by researchers to characterise aspects of academic tasks (e.g. genre, rhetorical function and the like) may not be readily comprehensible to survey respondents and can be a source of confusion.

These shortcomings of the academic staff survey have been the spur for the other type of study mentioned - surveys of academic tasks - with those by Hale et al (1996) and Horowitz (1986), the most substantial to date. A key element of this type of research has been the development of classification systems used for the analysis of task corpora (Hamp-Lyons 1986). For example, Horowitz's (1986) study, which analysed a total of 54 writing tasks from one US university, employed a classification system based mainly on the type of information sources to be used in the preparation of the task. Horowitz identified seven categories: 1) summary/reaction to reading; 2) annotated bibliography; 3) report on a specific participatory experience; 4) connection of theory and data; 5) case study; 6) synthesis of multiple sources and 7) research project. The main finding from this work was that almost all tasks collected involved research processes of some kind, requiring students to collect and reorganise some specified source material. Very few tasks, by contrast, required students to draw exclusively on personal experience.

Hale et al (1996) was a considerably larger study, involving the collection and analysis of tasks from 162 undergraduate and postgraduate courses at eight US universities. As mentioned, this study was conducted for test validation purposes, specifically for the development of future versions of the TOEFL test. The classification system used was considerably more elaborate than that used in Horowitz (1986) involving six broad 'dimensions of difference': locus of task (i.e. in class; out of class); prescribed length of product; genre; cognitive demands; rhetorical task; pattern of exposition. Under each of these dimensions was a set of subcategories. For example, included under cognitive demands were the following: retrieve/organise and apply/analyse/synthesise. While this study is impressive in scope, its findings are a little inconclusive. This is due in part to the complexity of the classification scheme used, as well as the difficulty of achieving interjudge agreement across the six researchers on the project.

The rationale for the 'task survey' study is that the tasks themselves, rather than the lecturers who set them, are able to reveal more directly what students are required to do in their university writing. We are also of this view, but note that this approach is not without its own shortcomings. The researcher in this type of study must engage in a good deal of interpretation. This interpretation
3 Method

This section describes the two stages of the study: the task survey and the interviews with academic staff.

3.1 Task survey

For the task survey section of the study, assignment handouts were collected from a range of courses taught at two Australian universities, Monash University and the University of Melbourne. Assignments were obtained from first year undergraduate and postgraduate subjects (excluding degrees by research only). For the study, it was important that the sample of tasks represented the types of writing international students can expect to encounter in tertiary study. There was therefore, some targeting of subject areas with high enrolments of international students, including economics, computing and management.

Letters were sent to academic staff from selected disciplines requesting two writing tasks from a subject they teach. Of the 98 academic staff contacted, 79 provided tasks, yielding an overall response rate of 81% across the two universities. This rate compares very favourably with those obtained in previous task surveys (Hale et al. 1996; Horowitz 1986). The sample consisted of 155 tasks: 125 from undergraduate and 30 from postgraduate courses. Table 6.1 shows the distribution of the sample according to discipline areas.
Table 6.1 Number of tasks collected (by discipline)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline areas</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Postgraduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthropology</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computing</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English literature</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law*</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics**</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy***</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual Arts</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes a range of subjects offered to the Faculties of Law (Yr1, Legal Process, Jurisprudence, and Business (Business Law)).

** Includes Japanese Linguistics.

*** Includes History and Philosophy of Science, Biometrics.

For the comparison with IELTS, a total of 20 Task 2 items was used. The IELTS corpus consisted of two items from IELTS Specimen Materials (1995) as well as a sample taken from recent commercially produced materials (see Appendix 6.1 for details of the IELTS corpus). The use of the specimen tasks and the commercial tasks was required because 'live' and 'retired' Task 2 items were unavailable to the researchers. It was assumed that the items from these sources would reflect the nature of those used in the official versions of the test.

Tasks from the two domains were analysed and compared using a classification scheme developed for the study. The formulation of a scheme which would enable useful comparisons of the two sets of data represented a major challenge in the project. The one eventually settled on was derived from...
several sources, including previous survey studies of academic writing (discussed above), taxonomic frameworks from the field of discourse analysis, and a preliminary survey of our own data. Details of the classification scheme as well as the process by which it was formulated are provided in Section 3.3.

3.2 Staff survey

In stage two of the study, interviews were conducted with 12 of the academic staff who had provided tasks in stage one. The aims of these interviews were:

- to provide an alternative perspective on the task analysis
- to obtain feedback on the suitability of the IELTS Writing test in relation to the writing demands of various subjects
- in a more general way to gain further information about the nature of university writing tasks.

Interviews were conducted with first year teaching staff from the following discipline areas: chemistry, computing, economics, engineering, geography, law, linguistics, management, politics, and communications. Prior to the interviews, a schedule of questions including two sample IELTS tasks was sent to each interviewee (see Appendix 6.2 for interview schedule). The interviews were approximately 20 minutes in length and were tape recorded.

The interview was divided into two sections. In the first part, staff were asked to elaborate on the task(s) they provided for stage one of the study - including:

- characteristics distinguishing the assignment from other academic genres
- sources of information students were expected to consult
- criteria used in assessing students’ work.

The questions in the second section were designed to probe staff perceptions of Task 2 items and their suitability with respect to the writing demands of their subject. Interviewees were asked to comment on the degree of correspondence between characteristics of tasks in the two domains.

3.3 The classification scheme

The methods used in stage one of the study to analyse and compare assessment tasks were based to an extent on the methods used in the field of discourse analysis to analyse whole written texts. While there are obvious differences between these two types of written data, we believe there are reasonable grounds for analysing them in similar ways. First, the rubrics of assessment tasks do constitute texts in themselves, even though by their nature they are much shorter than whole texts. The second reason relates to the special communicative function of assessment tasks, which is to prescribe...
the composition of another text, i.e. an essay, report, etc. From the nature of the task in question, it is possible, to varying degrees, to make informed predictions about the type of text that will be produced in response to it. It needs to be acknowledged however, that this predicting involves an act of interpretation on the part of the analyst, a point that will be taken up in more detail later in the discussion of the results of the study.

The field of discourse analysis offers many different frameworks and taxonomies for analysing written texts including, for example, Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday 1985), Rhetorical Structure Theory (Mann and Thompson 1989), Genre Analysis (Swales 1990). In our study, we did not seek to employ any single taxonomic framework, believing that a syncretic approach would be more useful to deal with the specialist data used. Furthermore, it was thought sensible not to begin with any a priori set of theoretical categories, but to draw initially on the data to establish broad ‘dimensions of difference’ (Hale et al 1996) and then to refer to relevant theoretical frameworks later to refine the classification scheme.

The classification scheme was developed in the first place through analysis of a selection of university assignment tasks and IELTS Task 2 items. From this process, the following broad categories were generated:

A Genre
B Information source
C Rhetorical function
D Object of enquiry

Figure 6.1 shows an example of an IELTS Task 2 item and indicates, in a preliminary way, how each of these categories was derived from the task rubric.
In the section that follows, explanations are provided for each of the categories A, B, C, D as well as the subcategories included under each. An outline of the overall classification scheme is given in Table 6.2.

### Table 6.2 The classification scheme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Genre [G]</th>
<th>By what name is the task described? (Select one category)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Case Study Report [G-CaseR]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Essay [G-Ess]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Exercise [G-Ex]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Experimental Report [G-ExR]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Literature Review [G-LitR]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Review [G-Rev]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Short Answer [G-SAns]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Summary [G-Sum]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Written argument or case [G-Arg]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Other [G-Oth]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. Information source [I]</th>
<th>On what information source(s) is the written product to be based? (Select one category)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Prior knowledge [I-pk]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Primary sources [I-ps]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 provided in task [I-ps-p]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 collected by student [I-ps-c]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Secondary sources [I-s]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Primary/secondary source* [I-p/s]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. No specification of source [I-n]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Categories 2.1 and 2.2 were also applied to the primary source component of these tasks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Rhetorical function [R]</th>
<th>What is the task (or component of the task) instructing students to do? (Select one or more categories)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Epistemie [R-E]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Comparison [R-E-c]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Description [R-E-d]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Explanation [R-E-ex]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Evaluation [R-E-ev]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Prediction [R-E-p]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Summarisation [R-E-s]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Deontic [R-D]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Horation [R-D-h]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Instruction [R-D-i]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Recommendation [R-D-r]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D. Object of enquiry [O]</th>
<th>With which type of phenomenon is the task mainly concerned? (Select one category)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Phenomenal [O-p]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Metaphenomenal [O-m]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Genre, the first category used in the classification scheme, has become a difficult concept in discourse analysis, with a variety of definitions being offered for the term (e.g. Swales 1990; Martin 1989), as well as disagreement about how this concept might relate to associated concepts, such as 'text-type' and 'speech event' (Levinson 1979; Paltridge 1996). Another source of complexity is the variety of genre taxonomies that have been generated by analysis. For example, Martin's (1984) categories of report; recount; explanation, etc. bear no obvious correspondence to the categories used by other genre theorists such as Swales (1990), e.g. research article; reprint request, etc. In the present study, we sought to avoid these theoretical difficulties. As the first category in the analysis, the concept of genre was used in an unproblematic, self-referential way that is, the genre of a task was taken to be the name given to the required written product as outlined in the task rubric, i.e. whether students were asked to write an essay, a literature review, etc. In reference to the variable taxonomies above, it should be noted that such a methodology generates a set of categories related more closely to those of Swales (1990) than to Martin's (1984). The category Written argument or case was a genre designation peculiar to the IELTS data. Its relationship to the university genres is discussed later in section 4.1.1. The category Other refers to genres that appeared only once in the data. These included the following: annotated reference; computer program; education program proposal; homepage; letter; project brief; resume. Our survey of the collected tasks generated the following genre categories: essay; review; literature review; experimental report; case study report; research report (other); research proposal; summary; exercise; short answer; written argument/essay; other.

The analysis of the data according to genre was mainly an empirical procedure, but not in all instances. In a number of tasks, no genre term was specified in the task rubric. In these cases, a category was assigned, if there was other contextual information that enabled a plausible judgement to be made about the genre-type. For example, if a task instructed students to write up the results of a laboratory experiment, this task was assigned to the category experimental report. To assist in the process of allocating unspecified tasks, the following rough definitions of genre categories were drawn up. These were based on information provided in those tasks that were genre-explicit:

**Essay**
A task with a variety of features and specifications. In its prototypical form, an essay is a task requiring the presentation of an argument in response to a given proposition or question.

**Review**
A task requiring the summarisation and appraisal of a single text (including non-verbal texts, e.g. film, painting).
Literature review A task requiring the identification, summarisation and appraisal of a range of texts relevant to a specific field of knowledge.

Experimental report A task requiring the description and analysis of data obtained from an empirical research procedure.

Case study report A task involving identification and discussion of a problem(s) arising from a given situation, along with suggested ways for solving the problem.

Research report (other) A task similar in many respects to the experimental report, but requiring the description and analysis of information of a non-empirical nature, e.g. that obtained from interview or participant observation.

Research proposal A task requiring the description of an intended research project, including a statement of its rationale.

Summary A task requiring the representation of the main contents of a text or texts.

Exercise A task requiring the application of some discipline-specific tool or model to a given situation.

Short answer A task requiring mainly the reproduction of previously provided items of knowledge, e.g. from lectures or textbooks.

3.3.2 Information source

The second dimension of difference used in the classification scheme was information source. This category was concerned with the type of information that was to be used in the completion of a task; for example, whether students were required to read from a list of prescribed readings or to analyse data obtained from an experimental procedure or to examine case material. The following subcategories were included under this dimension, derived in part from the classification of Taylor (1989):

1. Prior knowledge
2. Primary sources
   2.1 provided in task
   2.2 collected by student
3. Secondary sources
4. Primary/secondary source*
5. No specification of source

*Categories 2.1 and 2.2 were also applied to the primary source component of these tasks.
The first category – Prior knowledge – was used for tasks which did not require students to draw on any external sources of information. For tasks in this category, the contents of the piece were to be based exclusively on the writer’s pre-existing knowledge, experience, beliefs, intuitions and the like.

The two categories primary sources and secondary sources were applied to those tasks which required the use of external sources of information; in other words, tasks which involved research of some kind. The category primary sources, denoted those sources which might otherwise be called ‘data’. Examples of primary sources in our corpus included:

(i) The documents provided for analysis in a history assignment.
(ii) The details of a case given in a law assignment.
(iii) The experimental data to be collected and analysed in a chemistry practical.

The category primary sources was further divided into two types: those provided in the task itself and those to be collected by students via some prescribed research procedure. Of the sample sources above, (i) and (ii) would be classified as provided and (iii) as collected. The category secondary sources was used for those tasks which required students to engage with and incorporate in their writing works of an ‘interpretative’ nature – monographs, research articles and so on.

The combined category primary/secondary sources was assigned to tasks which prescribed sources of both varieties. Examples from the corpus here were various research tasks which required students to collect and analyse their own data (primary source), but also to situate their work within previous research (secondary sources). Similarly, in a number of case study tasks, students needed to analyse case material (primary sources) but also to draw on relevant theoretical frameworks to help resolve issues raised in the case (secondary sources). The category no specification of sources was used when there was no mention of information sources in the assignment guidelines and when it was not possible to infer from the task itself the nature of sources to be used.

3.3.3 Rhetorical function

The concept of rhetorical function has been used widely in the field of discourse analysis (e.g. Hoey 1983; Lackstrom et al 1973; Meyer 1975) and has led to the generation of an array of functional categories, e.g. comparison/contrast; cause/effect; definition; problem/solution. By one definition, the rhetorical function of a text is ‘that which a given unit of discourse is trying to do’ (Trimble 1985), e.g. comparing entities, explaining the cause of an entity. Applied to the study of academic tasks, the concept can be modified to mean: ‘that which a task (or unit of a task) is instructing students to do’.
Our attempts to develop a systematic set of rhetorical categories began with an initial distinction being drawn between tasks that involved a more ‘analytical’ rhetoric and those with a more ‘practical’ orientation. This difference can be illustrated in the following two tasks, the first from the pure discipline of sociology and the other from its applied counterpart, social work:

1. Write an essay on the following topic: Do young people from different class backgrounds experience the world differently?
2. Discuss some of the problems currently facing youth in Australia. Using a social theory, discuss how the situation of youth could be improved in Australian society.

The first task requires the writer to ‘analyse’ a situation and to assert whether something does (or does not) happen - in this case whether class has a bearing on young people’s experience of the world. The focus of the second task, at least the second part of it, is not on what does happen, but rather on what could be done to change what happens - by way of a solution to the problems identified.

The rhetorical difference noted in these two tasks is captured in the distinction traditionally drawn in semantics between epistemic and deontic modality. An epistemic clause, as Huddleston (1982) explains, has the status of a proposition: it asserts whether something is true, partly true, false, etc. A deontic clause, in contrast, has the character of an action: ‘what is at issue is not whether something is true but whether something is going to be done’ (Huddleston 1982:168). The difference between these two modal meanings can be illustrated in the following ambiguous sentence (with epistemic and deontic interpretations given below):

This task must be an essay.
- ‘I am forced to conclude that this task is an essay’ (epistemic)
- ‘This task is required to be an essay’ (deontic)

The distinction between the deontic and epistemic was used in the study to establish a first level of rhetorical categories. Under these two broad categories, the following sets of sub-categories were generated.

**Epistemic categories**

**Comparison** This category was applied to tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to identify the similarities and/or differences between two or more entities or phenomena. The prototypical ‘comparative’ question was in the form: *What are the similarities and/or differences between X and Y?*
Description
This category was applied to tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to give an account of the nature of a given entity or phenomenon. The prototypical 'descriptive' question was in the form: *What is the nature of X?*

Explanation
This category was applied to tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to give an account of the causes for a given entity or phenomenon. Note that both non-volitional causation (e.g. cause, reason) and volitional causation (e.g. purpose, motive) were included under this category. The prototypical 'explanatory' question was in the form: *What is the cause of X?*

Evaluation
This category was applied to tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to make a judgement about the value of a given entity or phenomenon with respect to its validity, importance, relevance, etc. The prototypical 'evaluative' question was in the form: *How valid/important/relevant is X?*

Prediction
This category was used for tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to speculate about the future state of a given phenomenon or entity. The prototypical 'predictive' question was in the form: *What will happen to X?*

Summarisation
This category was used for tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to give an account of an author's views on a given entity or phenomenon. The prototypical 'summary' question was in the form: *What is author A's view of X?*

Deontic categories

Hortation
This category was used for tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to make a judgement about the desirability of a given entity or phenomenon, especially those concerned with actions and states of affairs. The prototypical 'hortatory' question was in the form: *Should X happen/the done?*

Recommendation
This category was used for tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to suggest ways of dealing with a given entity or phenomenon, usually presented in the form of a problem. The prototypical 'recommendatory' question was in the form: *What can be done about X?*

Instruction
This category was used for tasks (or components of tasks) which required students to outline a sequence of
procedures for a given entity or phenomenon. The prototypical ‘instructional’ question was in the form: What must be done to achieve X?

3.3.4 Object of enquiry

A final dimension of difference, one that to our knowledge has not been considered in studies of this kind, is what we have referred to as object of enquiry. This dimension was concerned with probing the nature of the variable X referred to in the discussion of rhetorical function categories above. The need for this additional category arose from our observation that some tasks in the corpus, of their nature, required a more ‘abstract’ form of writing than others. This difference can be illustrated in the following two topics from a first year management subject:

1. Discuss the role of the manager in Australia in the 1990s.
2. Are there significant differences between ‘systems’ and ‘classical’ views of management?

These topics, it can be argued, deal with two distinct domains. In the first, the ‘object of enquiry’ might be regarded as the real world of the manager (i.e. what managers do or need to do, in their real-world activities). The second topic, in contrast is concerned less with the world of managers and more with the abstract or ‘meta-phenomenal’ world of management theorists (i.e. how these theorists view the world). This difference in our view is not trivial; we would argue that the pattern of discourse elicited by each topic is likely to be of a different kind. In terms of Hallidayan grammatical categories (1985), responses to the first topic are likely to include a preponderance of clauses with the following configuration:

managers do
actor process: material

In contrast, the predominant clauses in responses to the second topic are more likely to be of the following form:

management theorists believe
actor process: mental

In the classification scheme, this difference in the objects of enquiry was captured in the following two categories, using additional terms from Halliday (1985: 229):

Phenomenal
Metaphenomenal

The phenomenal category was used for those tasks which directed students primarily to consider such ‘real-world’ entities as events, actions, processes,
Authenticity in the IELTS Academic Module Writing test

situations, practices, etc. The *metaphenomenal* category, in contrast, was applied to tasks concerned mainly with the abstract entities of ideas, theories, methods, laws, etc. 3

3.4 Sample analyses

In the following section, the way in which we applied the classification system to our data is demonstrated through the analysis of four tasks: one sample IELTS Task 2 item and three university tasks from the disciplines of sociology, chemistry and management. These tasks were selected for the range of disciplines they cover, as well as for the variety of their generic forms. Among other things, this discussion is intended to demonstrate the interpretative nature of the task analysis.

In the analysis of this task (Sample 1), the first two categories *genre* [G] and *information source* [I] can be applied unproblematically. For the category *genre*, the task instructs students to present a written argument or case and is thus allocated to the category [G-Arg]. For *information source*, students are instructed to draw on their own ideas, knowledge and experience which would mean allocation to the category *prior knowledge* [I-Pk].

Analysing tasks according to the remaining dimensions of difference is a more interpretative activity. For *rhetorical function* [R], the principal modality of the topic is *deontic* [R-D], signalled by the auxiliary 'should'. Further to this, students are asked to express a view about the desirability of a social practice, (i.e. whether alternative forms of transport should be encouraged), hence the task is classified as *hortatory* [R-D-h]. The task however, also

Figure 6.2 Sample 1: IELTS Task 2 item

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TASK 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You should spend about 40 minutes on this task:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present a written argument or case to an educated non-specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>audience on the following topic:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The first car appeared on British roads in 1888. By the year 2000 there</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>may be as many as 29 million vehicles on British roads.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should alternative forms of transport be encouraged and international</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laws introduced to control car ownership and use?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You should write at least 250 words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience and support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

includes an epistemic element [R-E], which relates to the requirement of 'supporting the argument with relevant evidence'. To support their arguments, students would need to state the advantages and/or disadvantages of alternative forms of transport. The task therefore also includes the rhetorical category of evaluation [R-E-ev]. For object of enquiry, the task is concerned with a real-world activity, namely transportation usage, and hence is classified as phenomenal [O-p]. The above analysis thus gives the following configuration of categories:

Genre: written argument or case  
Information source: prior knowledge  
Rhetorical function: hortation, evaluation  
Object of enquiry: phenomenal  

This task from a first year sociology subject (Figure 6.3) prescribes an essay [G-Ess]. The task instructs students to use a wide range of 'references', hence information source would be classified as secondary [I-s]. For rhetorical function, the modality is epistemic, glossed in the following question: What are the similarities and differences between the two approaches? For specific functions, clearly the task involves comparison [R-E-co]. Implicit in this part of the task however, is also summarisation [R-E-s]; presumably a summary of the two approaches would be necessary before they could be compared. In the final part of the task, students are asked to evaluate the two approaches [R-E-ev]. Finally the object of enquiry is metaphenomenal [O-m], with students being asked to focus on two theoretical approaches to the subject matter, 'work'. This analysis of the task gives the following configuration of categories:

Genre: essay  
Information source: secondary  
Rhetorical function: summarisation, comparison, evaluation  
Object of enquiry: metaphenomenal  

Figure 6.3 Sample 2: Sociology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compare and contrast Scientific Management with the Human Relations approach to work. Which in your view is the more valid approach?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essays should be approximately 2,000 words. You are encouraged to read more widely than the references provided. Also do not forget to read the ‘Departmental Policy on Plagiarism’ in this booklet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sample Task 3 (Figure 6.4) from a first year chemistry subject prescribes a 'formal report of an experiment', and is thus classified under the genre category of experimental report [G-ExR]. The principal source of information for
This exercise is intended to give you an introduction to an important aspect of research in chemistry by writing a short formal report of an experiment you have done. You will be assigned by your demonstrator, either the analysis of Hortico or cement to write up in full.

Your report should include:

i) a description of the problem and its background
ii) a description of the important principles and approaches
iii) a description of resources and procedures used to obtain results
iv) a well-ordered presentation of experimental observations
v) consideration and explanation of results

The task is the data collected from the experimental procedure and so is classified as a primary source—collected [I-ps-c]. The rhetorical functions of the task are clearly epistemic [R-E], glossed in the following questions (What was the experimental procedure? What were the results? What might be the explanations for the results?). As can be seen in the task rubric, the rhetorical functions are mainly descriptive [R-E-d] i.e. descriptions of the problem, the procedure and the results. The final component of the task (v) asks students to explain the results, hence explanation [R-E-ex]. For the object of enquiry, the experiment involves analysing one of two substances (Hortico or cement), which are categorised as phenomenal [O-p]. This analysis of the task gives the following configuration of categories:

Genre: experimental report
Information source: primary—collected
Rhetorical function: description, explanation
Object of enquiry: phenomenal

This final task (Figure 6.5) from a postgraduate management subject instructs students to prepare a case study report [G-CaseR]. The main information source is in the form of survey data provided for analysis, and thus would be allocated to the category primary source—provided [I-ps-p]. The rhetorical functions in the task include both epistemic and deontic elements. The epistemic elements are those concerned with providing background information about the company, i.e. description [R-E-d] and with then identifying the 'strengths and problems' in the CAR Department, i.e. evaluation [R-E-ev]. The deontic elements are those concerned with making suggestions for resolving problems, i.e. recommendation [R-D-r] and then with outlining the specific 'actions' to be taken, i.e. instruction [R-D-i]. Finally, for the object of enquiry, the task would be classified as phenomenal, concerned as it is with real-world problems in an organisation. This analysis of the task gives the following configuration of categories:
4 Results and discussion

4.1 Task survey

In this section, the findings from the analysis of the total university corpus are presented under the four dimensions of difference in the classification scheme. Each set of findings is then considered in relation to those obtained from the analysis of the IELTS corpus. While the data presented includes that of a quantitative nature, it needs to be acknowledged that the analysis was not a strictly empirical one. As mentioned previously, the process of analysing tasks involved a degree of interpretation and inference on the part of the researchers. Thus, it is intended that the numerical data not be seen as a definitive set of results, rather it is designed to provide a broad picture of the types of writing required in the two domains.

The analysis of the university corpus found a great diversity of writing requirements, both within and across disciplines. While in all subjects, written work of some kind had to be submitted, this varied considerably with respect to the type and the amount required, ranging from a single short report in engineering to a series of lengthy essays in philosophy. Some interdisciplinary variations are discussed below.
4.1.1 Genre

The diverse nature of university writing is evidenced in the wide range of genres identified in the university corpus (see Table 6.3). Of these types however, the essay was clearly the most common, accounting for almost 60% of tasks. This assignment type appeared most frequently in subjects in the humanities and social sciences, but was also prescribed in a range of other disciplines, including biology, computing and medicine. As a generic form, the essay was characterised in a variety of ways in assignment handouts; common to most definitions however, was the requirement that students argue for a particular position in relation to a given question or proposition. The following is a comprehensive account provided for students in a history subject:

The term ‘essay’ comes from the French word ‘essayer’ meaning to try or to attempt. From this older form we get our terms ‘assay’ or ‘test’. An essay therefore asks you to answer a question by constructing and testing an argument. You will be assessed on the quality of your attempt . . . We look to you to convince us that your consideration of the question is the most convincing.

The next most common genre was the case study report (10% of tasks), confined to subjects in certain applied disciplines: management, accounting, law, computing, and engineering. Case studies typically required students to analyse case material (in narrative and/or statistical form) and to suggest ways of resolving the issues raised in the case. Sample Task 4 (Figure 6.5) is an example of a case study report from the corpus.

The genre category exercise (8% of tasks) included a range of minor tasks often set as a first piece of work in subjects and usually requiring students to

Table 6.3 Genres of university assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Study Report</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Report (other)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Report</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Proposal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Answer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>155</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Annotated reference, letter, project brief, scenario, keynote, computer program, educational programme proposal.
demonstrate their understanding of a particular concept or technique by applying it to an exemplary situation. The following is one such task from the corpus, set in a literature/cultural studies subject:

Choose a television program (e.g. news broadcast, quiz show) and develop an analysis of this program in terms of its (a) mode of address (b) programming (c) genre (d) internal organisation.

The only other genre to appear with any frequency was the research report (non-experimental). In these tasks, students were required to collect their own data and to describe and explain it. Research reports of this kind were set in a broad range of disciplines. The following is an example from a linguistics subject:

Write a report which examines the structure of greetings in a wide sample of languages. What are the most common types of information used in greetings? Can you construct a grammar that represents the first moves of the greeting sequence?

The corpus also included a small number of experimental reports. These were confined to the disciplines of physics, chemistry and psychology.

Analysis of the IELTS corpus found that the genre specifications were standard for all items. In each case, students were instructed to 'present a written argument or case’ on a given topic, taken from the rubric used in official versions of the test. The ‘topic’ part of all items consisted either of a question or a proposition often followed by a prompt asking students to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the proposition.

While the written argument nomenclature does not correspond exactly to any of the genre terms identified in the university corpus, clearly IELTS Task 2 items most resemble the format of the university essay. Indeed, in earlier versions of the official test, the Task 2 was referred to as an essay. The avoidance of the essay label in current versions of the official test suggests, however, that test developers have been mindful of certain differences between the university essay and the IELTS version of this form. The differences we have found are discussed below under the remaining categories considered in the task survey.

4.1.2 Information source

Table 6.4 shows the results from the analysis of information sources prescribed in the tasks from the university corpus. The most notable finding is that almost all tasks involved a research component of some kind, requiring the use of either primary or secondary sources or a combination of the two. The most frequently prescribed sources were secondary sources (55%) of the
Table 6.4 Information sources prescribed in university assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information sources</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary/secondary</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior knowledge</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No specification of sources</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>155</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Corpus, usually described in tasks as 'references'. These included monographs, journal articles and textbooks. The use of secondary sources was required in tasks from a broad range of disciplines, but with a higher aggregation in disciplines from the humanities and social sciences. There was a good deal of variation in the amount of information provided about the secondary sources to be used, ranging from tasks which included a simple exhortation for students to base their work on 'wide reading', to those which provided a specific list of references to be incorporated in the written product. One feature common to most tasks prescribing the use of secondary sources was the inclusion of information about citation practices in the discipline, along with warnings about plagiarism.

Tasks prescribing the use of primary sources (or data) were also from a wide range of disciplines, but especially in the more research-oriented, as opposed to theoretical, disciplines. As suggested in section 3.3.2, there was a good deal of variation in the types of primary sources prescribed. These ranged from quantitative and qualitative data in the natural and social sciences, to case study material typically used in the disciplines of law, management and economics. As mentioned, a distinction was made in the classification scheme between primary sources that needed to be collected by students and those that were provided in the task itself. In the latter type, students were not required to collect data but only to be engaged in their interpretation. The results from this analysis are shown in Table 6.5. It is of some interest that the majority of prescribed primary sources were of the provided type, both at undergraduate and postgraduate (coursework) level. A possible

Table 6.5 Primary source-types prescribed in university assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary source</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provided in task</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collected by student</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>81</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note that sources from both the categories primary source and primary/secondary source were considered in this analysis.
4 Results and discussion

explanation for this is that in certain discipline areas, lecturers may not have wanted their first year students, with limited grounding in research methods in the discipline, to be conducting their own research.

As can be seen in Table 6.4, a fair proportion of tasks (21%) required the use of a combination of primary and secondary sources. These tasks tended to be of two types: research projects which required students to compare their findings with literature in the field and case studies which required reference to theoretical frameworks to resolve the issues in the case. The following two tasks are examples of these respective assignment types:

- Play is an important area of development for children aged 2-5. Piaget called it 'the child's work'. Discuss play as observed in your study child and compare your observations to the literature. (Medicine)
- Your advice has been sought to settle the following dispute in Company X (Case study material provided about dispute). Referring to appropriate accounting principles, write a report advising the company on the best course of action to adopt. (Accounting)

As can be seen in Table 6.4, the category prior knowledge represented the least frequently prescribed information source. The very small number of tasks in the corpus that fell under this category (7%) tended to be minor pieces of work in the overall assignment requirements of subjects, including, for example, the following task set as the first piece of writing in a history subject:

- Write a paragraph explaining what you know about your own family's experience of World War II.

Other prior knowledge tasks tended not to be generically typical of the corpus, including a personal resume set in a communications subject and the text for a homepage in a computing subject.

Unlike the assignments in the university corpus, IELTS Task 2 items were found not to be framed around the use of external sources. All items in the IELTS sample included the following instruction to students, taken from the standard rubric in the official versions of the test.

- You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience and support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.

This specification meant that all tasks in the sample were allocated to the category prior knowledge.

These findings point to a major difference in the nature of writing in the two domains, even if it is one that can be readily accounted for. In a test of writing, the task must be completed, of necessity, within a restricted time...
frame (in the case of IELTS Task 2 it is 40 minutes). This restriction means it is not possible to incorporate a substantial research component in writing tasks. For university tasks, this time restriction does not usually apply. The difference in prescribed information sources can also be related to the different nature of writing assessment in the two domains. In a writing test, the task is used to elicit a written sample which is then assessed primarily in terms of its linguistic proficiency. In university study, writing is assessed according to far broader criteria, including a student’s understandings of key knowledge in a discipline, the modes of analysis used, as well as the discipline’s discursive practices, much of which will come from an engagement with sources. In short, in the university context, the content of a piece of writing is salient; in a language testing context it is often incidental.

The reasons for the differences in prescribed information sources are understandable enough. It needs to be recognised however, that preparation for the IELTS Writing test (Task 2) may not give students an entirely accurate view of the nature of academic argumentation, especially with respect to what constitutes adequate evidence in a piece of writing. In the IELTS test, students learn that it is sufficient to base their assertions on ‘their own ideas, knowledge and experience’. In the university context where valid evidence is usually seen as the findings of research or the authoritative pronouncements of disciplinary scholars – a student who relies exclusively on prior knowledge will usually be criticised for being ‘anecdotal’ and for not having read adequately for the task. Another point to be made is that the IELTS Task 2, as it is framed, does not suggest any need for students to be taught about the conventions for citing the ideas of other writers.

4.1.3 Rhetorical function

Table 6.6 shows the results from the analysis of rhetorical functions in tasks from the university corpus. As explained in the sample analyses (see Section 3.4), assignments were generally found to prescribe more than a single rhetorical function. A total of 393 functions were identified in the corpus of 135 tasks (see Table 6.6, column 3). The first point to note from this table is that the epistemic functions were considerably more common than the deontic. In general terms, tasks specifying exclusively epistemic functions tended to be from the more ‘pure’ disciplines, e.g. the physical and social sciences. In contrast, those tasks that included deontic elements were clustered around disciplines of a more applied nature, e.g. agriculture, computing, engineering, education, law, management. This, of course, is not a surprising result, given that it is the nature of the applied disciplines to be concerned as much with practical knowledge as theoretical knowledge; the ‘knowing how’ in addition to the ‘knowing that’, as knowledge in these fields is sometimes characterised (Becher 1989).
4 Results and discussion

Table 6.6 Rhetorical functions in university assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Function</th>
<th>Modality</th>
<th>No. of tasks</th>
<th>% of tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>E = Epistemic</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarisation</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total functions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>393</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The epistemic category of evaluation was found to be the most common, with about two-thirds of tasks in the corpus adjudged to involve this function. Evaluation was found to be characteristic of tasks across a wide range of disciplines in the corpus. Tasks (or components of tasks) prescribing evaluation required students to make a judgement of the value of some entity or phenomenon with respect to its validity, importance, relevance, etc. The following are two sample 'evaluative' questions taken from tasks set in sociology and management.

How plausible do you find Marx's account of social inequality?
(Sociology)

To what extent can people be regarded as the most important resource of an organisation?
(Management)

It was noted that there was some variation in the nature of entities to be evaluated in tasks. This can be seen in the two sample questions above. In the first question, it is the views of a particular writer (Marx) which are to be evaluated; the second in contrast requires an evaluation to be made of a particular state of affairs, namely 'human resources in an organisation'. This difference corresponds to the distinction drawn earlier between metaphenomenal and phenomenal objects of inquiry and is considered in greater detail in Section 4.1.4.

As can be seen in Table 6.6, the next most common functions were also epistemic in nature: description, summarisation, comparison, explanation. Several sample questions under each of these categories are given below.

Description
What is the biology of toxoplasmosis?
(Biology)
Describe what is meant by international, domestic and mass tourism?
(Tourism)

Summarisation
Explain Plato’s theory of the tripartite soul.
(Philosophy)

What are the main points Christine Halliwell is making about the status of women in society in her chapter ‘Women in Asia: Anthropology and the study of women’?
(Anthropology)

Comparison
What differences and what similarities emerge from a comparison of Egyptian and Mesopotamian temples?
(Architecture)

Where do the arguments of Oakey and Gati differ?
(History)

Explanation
What are the causes of the current high levels of unemployment in Australia?
(Economics)

Adolescent mental health is a growth industry. Discuss factors which have contributed to this growth.
(Medicine)

As mentioned, the deontic functions - recommendation, hortation, instruction - were less frequent in the corpus than the epistemic. Of these, recommendation was clearly the most common and was especially prominent in the more applied disciplines. In tasks involving recommendation, the entity to be analysed was presented as being problematic in some sense and students were required to suggest ways in which it could be resolved. ‘Recommendatory’ questions tended to be framed around the notion of possible action (or ‘can-ness’) as in the following examples:

What strategies can be used to make internet contributors self-regulating?
(Computing)

How can the land degradation problems of the Parwan Valley be overcome?
(Agriculture)

The other deontic category that appeared in the data, though to a much lesser extent than recommendation, was what we have termed hortation. In hortatory tasks students were asked to comment on the desirability of a given course of action or state of affairs. These tasks were framed around the notion of necessary action (or ‘should-ness’) and were most characteristic of disciplines with an ethical or polemical element to their contents, including law, medicine, politics, philosophy. The following are sample hortatory questions:

Since no person is an island, society should regulate private behaviour.
Discuss.
(Politics)
People subject to the power of the state need the protection of a bill of rights. Discuss. (Law)

The remaining categories used in the classification scheme—prediction and instruction—appeared infrequently in the corpus. The following are single examples of each of these respective categories:

What major changes in the Australian business environment are likely to impact on managers over the next decade? (Management)

In an assignment requiring the writing of a computer program:

Outline to any potential users precisely how the program is to be used. (Computer)

A similar analysis of rhetorical functions was made of the IELTS items, the results of which are shown in Table 6.7. All items, it can be seen, involved evaluation of some kind. (This is a finding consistent with the 'argumentative' nature of the Task 2 genre, as it is described in official versions of the test). In the following example, taken from the IELTS specimen materials (I.CLES 1995), the quality to be evaluated is 'compatibility'. (It needs to be noted that this task also comprises the function of comparison.)

It is inevitable that as technology develops so traditional cultures must be lost. Technology and tradition are incompatible you cannot have both together. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical Function</th>
<th>No. of IELTS items incorporating function (n=20)</th>
<th>% of items incorporating function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While all tasks involved some form of evaluation, in many instances this was found to be accompanied by another function, namely horation. As mentioned, hortatory elements in tasks were those framed around the notion...
of necessity (or should-ness). The following three tasks are representative of the 14 tasks which were found to incorporate this function:

Higher mammals such as monkeys have rights and should not be used in laboratory experiments. (Source 5)

A government’s role is only to provide defense capability and urban infrastructure (roads, water, supplies etc.) All other services (education, health and social security) should be provided by private groups or individuals in the community. (Source 7)

Television nowadays features many programs of a violent nature. For this reason, it is necessary for parents to impose strict controls on their children’s viewing habits. (Source 8)

The other rhetorical functions that showed up in the analysis were prediction, comparison, explanation and recommendation, although each of these was confined to a total of only two or three tasks. The following are examples of tasks (or components of tasks) which incorporated these functions:

Prediction
The idea of having a single career is becoming an old fashioned one. The new fashion will be to have several careers or ways of earning money and further education will be something that continues throughout life. (Source 6)

Comparison
...Which subjects can be better taught using computers? (Source 7)

Explanation
News editors decide what to broadcast on television and what to print in newspapers. What factors do you think influence these decisions?... (Source 6)

Recommendation
...What are the most effective ways of reducing population growth? (Source 8)

The patterns of rhetorical functions identified in the IELTS Task 2 items were clearly different from those in the university corpus, as Table 6.8 shows. The more notable differences can be summarised thus:

1. The functions of summarisation and description, which were common in the university corpus, did not appear in the IELTS sample.
2. The functions of comparison, explanation and recommendation were less frequent in the IELTS sample.
Table 6.8 Comparison of rhetorical functions in university tasks and IELTS items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rhetorical function</th>
<th>University assignments (% incorporating rhetorical function)</th>
<th>IELTS items (% incorporating rhetorical function)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of functions identified in corpus</td>
<td>393</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The function of horation, which was relatively rare in the university corpus, was, along with evaluation, the predominant rhetorical mode in the IELTS sample. Of these findings, the last is perhaps the most significant. Indeed it is interesting to speculate about why horation should figure so prominently in IELTS items. We can posit only one explanation here—this is that writing in a hortatory mode, of its nature, may not require the same amount of background knowledge that is needed to engage with topics of an epistemic nature. To take the topic area of animal experimentation as an example, it seems fair to assume that students in a testing context would be able to write more readily about the moral desirability (or not) of this practice (hortation), rather than, for example, about the reasons why the practice is employed (explanation) or about its scientific validity (evaluation) or about the views of various animal rights proponents (summarisation). While the prominence given to horation in IELTS Task 2 items is probably attributable to certain test-specific exigencies, this feature nevertheless represents a substantial difference in the nature of writing in the two domains, one that is likely to have implications for students whose pre-entry English language instruction is mainly concerned with test preparation.

4.1.4 Object of enquiry
Analysis was made of the objects of enquiry (or topic areas) of tasks—specifically whether these were of a phenomenal or metaphenomenal nature. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 6.9. While a majority of tasks were concerned with topics of a phenomenal nature, there was also a fair proportion of what may be termed metaphenomenal tasks. The latter category was particularly characteristic of disciplines in the humanities, some of which
may be said to be concerned exclusively with the metaphenomenal, e.g. philosophy and literature. Examples of metaphenomenal tasks however, were found in a range of disciplines, including, surprisingly, the following rather demanding task set for first year agriculture undergraduates:

Present a critical review of literature relating to a scientific topic which interests you. Summarise the principal ideas presented in a collection of scientific papers, highlighting the validity of the claims made, the conclusions and other important features.

No attempt was made to analyse the objects of enquiry further within each of the two broad categories; the topics were found to be too diverse and of too discipline-specific a nature to allow for such an endeavour. A sense of the diversity of topics covered in the corpus is captured in Table 6.10 which presents a representative sample of objects of enquiry under the phenomenal and metaphenomenal categories.

Table 6.10 Sample objects of enquiry in university assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenal</th>
<th>Metaphenomenal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Land degradation (agriculture)</td>
<td>1. Barthes' theoretical model (literature)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The Roman arch (architecture)</td>
<td>2. Methods for calculating household incomes (economics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Atmospheric pollution (biology)</td>
<td>3. Theoretical approaches to child's play (education)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Graphical user interfaces (computing)</td>
<td>4. The Aboriginal Protection Act (law)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Children's acquisition of speech (education)</td>
<td>5. Speech act theory (linguistics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Public water supply systems (engineering)</td>
<td>6. Freud's views of the feminine (medicine)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The Vietnam war (history)</td>
<td>7. Systems and classical views of management (management)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Adolescent mental health (medicine)</td>
<td>8. Utilitarian and retributive theories of punishment (philosophy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. The vibration of strings (physics)</td>
<td>9. Machiavelli's political thought (politics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Developments in international relations (politics)</td>
<td>10. The Chicago school of sociology (sociology)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast to the university tasks, the object of enquiry in all IELTS items was found to be of a phenomenological nature. A complete list of these is provided in Table 6.11. The lack of metaphenomenal elements in IELTS tasks can again be related to the issue of necessary background knowledge. Clearly the sorts of metaphenomenal topics from the university corpus given above (Table 6.10) would be unsuitable in a language testing context. For example, an account of ‘Barthes’ theoretical model’ could only be attempted after a careful reading of Barthes’ text (and even then, there may be no guarantee of success)! Similarly it would not be possible to discuss different ‘methods for calculating household incomes’ without first being familiar with these accounting methods.

Table 6.11 Objects of enquiry in total IELTS corpus

| 1. The relationship between technology and tradition |
| 2. Government regulation of motor car usage         |
| 3. Retirement age                                   |
| 4. Telecommuting                                    |
| 5. Studying abroad                                  |
| 6. Paternal responsibilities in child care          |
| 7. Government regulation of new technologies       |
| 8. Government provision of health care              |
| 9. The use of animals in scientific experiments     |
| 10. Studying abroad                                 |
| 11. Government funding of tertiary education        |
| 12. Editorial policies of newspapers                |
| 13. The nature of work                              |
| 14. Provision of aid by wealthy nations             |
| 15. Parental attitudes to medical treatment         |
| 16. Government provision of social services         |
| 17. Computers in education                          |
| 18. Capital punishment                              |
| 19. Parental regulation of children’s television habits |
| 20. Population growth                               |

While the objects of enquiry in the IELTS items shown in Table 6.11 are of a diverse nature they were found to be more amenable to further analysis than the university tasks. If there is any recurring theme to be discerned among these items, it is that of the social responsibilities of various agents of authority, especially with respect to the provision of services and the regulation of behaviours.

On our analysis the following items would fall within this overarching theme: items 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16, 18, 19. In most instances, the agent in question is ‘the government’; others include ‘wealthy nations’ (14), the scientific community (9), parents (19), fathers (6). This focus on the responsibilities of certain authorities is clearly connected to the rhetorical function of production and can be adduced here as additional evidence for the fairly restricted nature of Task 2 items.
4.1.5 Summary of findings

The main findings from the comparative task analysis can be summarised thus:

1. The predominant genre in the university corpus was the essay. While this term is not used to refer to IELTS Task 2 items, the genre that is specified—a written argument—is thought to resemble most closely the university essay.

2. Almost all university tasks required for their completion the use of external sources—either primary or secondary sources or a combination of the two. IELTS Task 2 items in contrast were framed around the use of prior knowledge.

3. The university tasks covered a broad range of rhetorical functions, mainly of an epistemic nature. The most common categories were evaluation, description, summarisation, comparison and explanation. Of the deontic functions, recommendation was the most common. Like the university corpus, evaluation was the predominant category in IELTS items. A distinctive feature of the IELTS corpus, however, was the disproportionately high number of hortatory tasks.

4. The objects of enquiry in the university corpus were mainly of a phenomenal nature; but there was also a fair proportion of metaphenomenal tasks. The IELTS items in contrast, were all of a phenomenal nature.

These differences in the two corpora appear rather technical in the terms described above. Taken in combination however, they suggest a distinction that can be characterised in broader terms. University tasks, by definition, prescribe academic modes of discourse, or to be precise, the discipline-specific discourses required of novice scholars. While the IELTS items clearly share features with those set at university, the form of writing they prescribe, on analysis, would appear to bear a closer resemblance to certain public forms of discourse. In particular, the emphasis placed on the spontaneous expression of opinion is suggestive of such public, non-academic genres as the letter to the editor or the newspaper editorial.

This section of the report concludes with a final comparison of tasks, one that captures well some of the differences discussed above. The first task is an IELTS item and the second an assignment from a bioethics subject. The comparison here is instructive, because the two tasks, on face value, appear similar in a number of respects. Both are concerned with a similar content area (i.e. government provision of health care) and seemingly with a similar rhetorical focus (hortatory—should) yet they are quite different.
The most advanced medical treatment tends to be expensive. However, people’s access to good health care should not depend on social factors such as their level of income or social status. Discuss.

Bioethics essay
Should a just state provide health care for its citizens? How can relevant ethical theories help to resolve this question?

What is required in the IELTS task above is that candidates express a point of view on the issue; one that is based on their own beliefs and knowledge. The bioethics task, in contrast, is concerned not so much with students expressing a point of view, but with them discussing the theoretical means by which a point of view might be reached. This difference can be understood in terms of some of the contrasts that have been considered so far: that is between prior knowledge and research; between a deontic and an epistemic rhetoric and between the phenomenal and the metaphenomenal. The nature of the two tasks is different, and it is fair to say that the language skills needed for the fulfilment of each will also be different.

4.2 Staff survey
While the task survey was the main part of this study, follow-up interviews with a sample of the lecturers who had submitted tasks, provided an alternative data source representing a different perspective on the university tasks. In addition, in the interviews the lecturers gave feedback on the suitability of the IELTS in relation to the writing demands of their disciplines (see Appendix 6.2 for interview schedule). In the staff survey, 12 lecturers were interviewed from ten discipline areas with comments provided on a total of 19 tasks submitted for the first stage of the study. The distribution of the genres of these tasks was similar to that in the corpus overall, with essays being the most common. Table 6.12 is a list of the tasks which formed the basis of the interviews.

The following discussion focuses on common themes arising from the interviews. It begins with a summary of the more notable features of the university tasks as perceived by those who set them, and then deals with perceptions of the sample IELTS tasks.

4.2.1 University assignments
Rhetorical function was one of the categories used by the researchers to analyse university assignments in the first stage of the study and was also the subject of a specific question in the interviews. The main rhetorical functions required in university assignment tasks were identified by the lecturers; the
results of this process are shown in Table 6.13 together with the results from the task analysis. This comparison reveals a surprising degree of correspondence between the results from the two stages with the order of frequencies almost the same. The only variation in order was a greater number of tasks requiring recommendation than explanation in the lecturers’ analyses.

Table 6.13 Rhetorical functions in university assignments: A comparison of interview and task analysis results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RHETORICAL FUNCTION</th>
<th>Lecturer perceptions</th>
<th>Task analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarisation</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hortation</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prediction</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the interviews, the lecturers were also asked to comment on the key characteristics of their tasks and on the qualities that would distinguish an outstanding assignment. Their comments fell into two main areas – those concerned with the research process and those with features of the written product. Almost all lecturers, regardless of discipline, emphasised the importance of research skills and many noted that a discriminating feature of outstanding assignments was evidence of extensive independent research. The following comments give a sense of the value lecturers placed on the use of research skills:
of sources. The first from a geography lecturer is interesting for the number of
references recommended as well as the detail he provides on acceptability of
different types of references; the second, from a politics lecturer, specifies the
research skills and types of sources one could expect from a 'better' essay in
the subject he teaches:

A minimum of at least 10 references are required – really good essays
would use 20 or more . . . students should avoid encyclopedias and text-
books if possible . . . and should probably avoid using www pages as
they are very difficult to verify. Students need to recognise that New
Scientist and Scientific American are not exactly refereed journals . . .
books by single authors are fine, as long as they are not university level
textbooks . . . dictionaries are unacceptable . . . if they’re using them
repeatedly to define terms.

Students need to show the ability to use footnotes and bibliographies to
jump off into other texts . . . [and] a familiarity with other kinds of cul-
tural documents, perhaps literary works, works of visual art, an under-
standing or familiarity with architecture of the period, as a way of giving
the historical framework.

Another aspect of assignments that many lecturers considered important
was the structure and organisation of the written product. Students were
expected to be aware of and to conform to the structural conventions of the
relevant genre, such as the different sections of a research report (introduc-
tion, methodology, etc.) or of an essay (introduction, body and conclusion).

4.2.2 Comparison with IELTS Task 2

In the interviews, lecturers were asked to make comparisons between their
tasks and two sample IELTS tasks (items 1 and 2 in Appendix 6.1), and then
to consider whether training for IELTS Task 2 items would be useful prepara-
tion for writing tasks in their disciplines.

In their discussion of the degree of correspondence between the tasks (aca-
demic and sample IELTS) comments about intrinsic similarities were most
common among those lecturers from disciplines in which the task genre was
an essay. The similarities noted by these lecturers tended to be of a general
nature, especially in relation to the broad area of argumentation in writing.
The following were two observations of similarities:

In short I don’t think there are big differences. I’m asking them to write a
cohesive piece of work, not a set of dot points or scattered ideas . . . it is
essential that they construct the arguments that they present with exam-
ple and relevant evidence . . . . The tasks that I set . . . usually ask them to
compare and contrast, do you agree or disagree, to what extent is this
statement relevant, or I have a quote, do you agree. So in many ways the
tasks of tasks I set are quite similar . . . .

(Economics)
6 Authenticity in the IELTS Academic Module Writing test

The requirements of the IELTS tasks arguing two sides of an issue, responding to a proposition seem similar to the requirements of my subject.

(Law)

The focus of staff responses, however, was more frequently on differences. IELTS tasks tended to be perceived as much simpler than academic tasks, with several lecturers comparing them to secondary school tasks.

The major assignments in my subject are more difficult and comprehensive. We’re asking for 2,000 words, in depth. IELTS tasks of 250 words are more like school rather than university level.

(Management)

The IELTS tasks remind me of Year 12 essays which don’t require much background work. There’s certainly no scope for rigorous attention to getting the detail right that we require.

(Law)

An exception was the comment by a chemistry lecturer who observed that experimental reports in chemistry required:

A lower level [of interpretation] than the IELTS, which requires fairly high-level interpretation skills . . . In Chemistry practical reports students are asked for a fairly operational description of what they’ve done so that someone else can do it.

(Chemistry)

In their comments about the requirements of their own assignments, lecturers emphasised the importance of research. This was considered to be a major difference between the academic and IELTS tasks. A law lecturer emphasised the reflective nature of university writing with tasks integrally related to course content:

The sample IELTS questions are asking people to use their background knowledge and whatever has come to them from life, whereas we’re expecting them to use material that we’ve taught and they’ve read.

(Law)

A similar observation was made by a geography lecturer:

Our assignments are research essays and focus on students researching a given question, whereas the IELTS tasks don’t have this focus on research.

Some discussed this disparity in terms of the differing nature of evaluation and opinion in the two domains. It was mentioned that both types of tasks require the expression of a point of view, however a qualification was made that the only valid opinions in university writing were those based on reading and research.
Students are asked to be critical and evaluate what they found in their research, what their informants said, what the literature says, we don't ask them for their personal values or opinion. (Linguistics)

Although lecturers were not specifically asked about what we have termed 'the object of enquiry' of tasks, several noted a difference in the topic areas of university and IELTS tasks, similar to the phenomenallmetaphenomenal distinction noted in the task analysis:

[In the IELTS tasks] students are being asked to develop an argument ... about entities, objects ... and make predictions and policy prescriptions ... the discipline I teach deals with writers and ideas ... In my own questions the students are not so much being asked to develop an argument, as to show how an argument was constructed by others in the past, and also to show the kinds of features that bring about that construction, whether it's logical or not, in its own context. (Politics)

While most lecturers identified differences in the two types of tasks, some were aware of reasons for these differences, i.e. the different assessment contexts of the two tasks. The constraints imposed by test conditions were summed up by a law lecturer in the following comment:

IELTS tasks are designed for a specific testing situation, so they've got limited time, limited words and no possibility of research, so they have to sit down and write an essay based on their own knowledge.

All lecturers, even those who emphasised the differences between the two types of tasks acknowledged that training for IELTS Task 2 items could be useful preparation for university writing. Some lecturers spoke in a general way of training in writing skills being relevant, thus lending support for direct tests of writing:

Any training in clear writing is useful preparation. (Communications)

For writing overall for this subject - IELTS training would be useful preparation. (Chemistry)

Others remarked on how IELTS would be a useful framework for teaching conventions of essay writing, such as paragraph structure and coherence:

How to structure an essay and how to argue a case ... will serve the students well for the questions we have here. (Geography)

Training in how to unravel a question ... how to make sure every paragraph relates to the question, how to make each paragraph flow from the one before ... introductions and conclusions ... some preparation for IELTS questions could be of great use. (Law)
6 Authenticity in the IELTS Academic Module Writing test

4.2.3 Summary of findings

Overall, lecturers were positive about the nature of the IELTS Task 2 format and the type of language instruction they imagined students would receive in preparing for it. Indeed some who were previously unfamiliar with the test and also with general issues related to language screening of prospective students expressed surprise at the quality of the test instrument. Most lecturers however, could identify substantial differences between the writing needed for the test and that required in their respective subjects. In general terms, these differences were similar to those found in the task analysis. Lecturers noted the limited rhetorical range of IELTS, especially its emphasis on an opinionative style of writing based on ‘lived experience’ – or what was described as hortation in the task analysis. In contrast, they stressed the overriding importance of ‘content’ in their students’ work, content that is acquired through processes of teaching, reading and researching in their subjects. The reasons for these differences were understood by some. As one lecturer succinctly put it:

My writing requirements are totally different. My students have got eight weeks to do the assignment. They’re not expected to have much knowledge of their own at the start - and we don’t really want to hear too much about their preconceptions of the issues. They’re expected to do a lot of research and they’ve got eight weeks to mull over it. In IELTS they’ve only got an instant. I guess the only problem is that students coming from this background may not realise how much needs to happen before they start their drafting.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

In this final section, we draw on the results of the two stages of the study to suggest ways in which the IELTS Task 2 format might be adapted to resemble more closely the requirements of university writing. Optimising the ‘authenticity’ of a test is an important objective of any test development process (Bachman and Palmer 1996). In the case of the IELTS test, with its increasing use as a university selection instrument and its corresponding influence on programmes of English for academic purposes, this objective seems especially pressing. Any recommendations for enhanced authenticity however, need to take account of the special constraints imposed on writing in a test situation. For the IELTS Writing test in its existing format, these constraints can be outlined as follows:

1. It must be possible to perform the task in the time frame available (40 minutes).
2. The task must not make unwarranted assumptions about the background knowledge of candidates.
3. The task must be, as far as possible, a test of candidates' writing skills, and should not require to any major extent the use of other skills for its completion.

4. The task should elicit a sample of writing that is assessable according to the existing criteria used on the test.

The suggestions which follow are organised around the categories used in the classification scheme.

5.1 Genre

The study found that the essay is the pre-eminent written genre of university study. It was also found that the standard Task 2 item resembles the essay genre more closely than any of the other generic forms identified in the university corpus, a point also noted by a number of academic staff in interview. For this reason, the current format of the IELTS Task 2, requiring candidates to 'present a written argument or case' in relation to a given topic, would appear to be the most suitable. Within this basic format however, a number of modifications are suggested.

5.2 Information source

One of the main findings of the study was the difference in prescribed information sources in the two domains, with the extensive use of sources required in university tasks and a contrasting reliance on prior knowledge in the IELTS Task 2 format. This was a difference also noted by staff in the interviews.

There are several options which might be considered to deal with this disparity. The two discussed here involve what might be termed a strong and a weak reading-writing link. In the 'strong link' option, writing tasks could be accompanied by a range of reading materials (secondary source), with candidates required to incorporate these materials in their responses. Such an approach, which would represent a close simulation of university essay tasks, is already used in a number of university entrance tests, including, for example, the Faculty of Arts Essay Admission Test used at Monash University (see Appendix 6.3). While the strong link option, in our view, represents an optimal task design, it does not fit well with some of the constraints on the IELTS Writing test listed above. This format, for example, would require more time than the currently prescribed 40 minutes. Furthermore, the obligation to include source material in responses would make this as much a test of reading as of writing.

An alternative option would be to draw on the framework used in the pre-1995 version of the IELTS Task 2. In this former version, at least one text in
the Reading test was thematically linked to the Writing task and candidates were given the option of referring to this text in their written response. Included in the task rubric was the following instruction to candidates:

*You may use ideas from Reading Passage 1, but do not copy directly from it.*

In the light of the study's findings, a return to such a framework would seem to be an option worth considering. Inclusion of this kind of reading-writing link would serve to enhance the test's authenticity and would also be compatible with test constraints. In terms of test washback, a link between the Reading and Writing components of the test would provide a basis in EAP programmes for the teaching of the important academic skills associated with citation.

5.3 Rhetorical function

The task analysis found a restricted range of rhetorical functions in the IELTS corpus, with a disproportionately high number of *expository* tasks and a corresponding lack of *summarisation, comparison, explanation, recommendation*. (This was a finding supported in the interviews, although not discussed by informants in the same precise terms.) These results, it needs to be acknowledged, are only strictly relevant to the sample of IELTS practice materials used in the study. As mentioned, official Task 2 items — live or retired — were not available to the study and so it is difficult to know the extent to which the findings might apply to them. Nevertheless, the study's recognition of the need for rhetorical diversity in Task 2 items is a point that probably needs to be heeded by test developers.

It was mentioned earlier that writing in an epistemic mode (e.g. summarisation, comparison, explanation) will normally require more specialised knowledge. If such functions are to be incorporated to a greater extent in IELTS items, it is important that topic areas are chosen carefully to ensure that candidates have sufficient background knowledge to be able to engage with the task (constraint 2). One way of dealing with this would be to use tasks which draw on candidates' knowledge of their country of origin. The following is an example of a possible *explanatory* task employing such an approach:

*What is the pattern of population shift in your country? From rural to urban areas or from urban to rural areas? What are some of the possible reasons for this pattern?*

It should also be pointed out that the inclusion of relevant reading materials (discussed in the previous section) could also serve to provide necessary
5 Conclusions and recommendations

epistemic content, as well as allowing for the incorporation of the function of summarisation in tasks.

5.4 Object of enquiry

The task survey found that university tasks were concerned with both phenomenval and metaphenomenval entities, whereas tasks in the IELTS corpus were all of a phenomenval nature. This was a difference also noted by several staff in interviews. While it is clearly not possible in a testing context to use a given theory (e.g. a particular ethical theory) as the basis for topics, it may be possible to frame tasks so that they at least elicit a more metaphenomenval form of discourse. This could be achieved by incorporating in tasks propositions which are attributed either to individual scholars or to a general school of thought, as in the following two examples:

Ballard and Clanchy argue that students preparing to study abroad need to do more than develop their English language skills. They also need to learn about the academic culture of English-speaking universities. To what extent do you agree with this view?

Some educationists argue that a student’s success at school is mainly due to the quality of learning that takes place in the home. To what extent do you agree with this view?

While such modifications in wording may appear minor, tasks framed in this way would be formally more akin to many set in the university domain. We would also argue that ‘attributed tasks’ like the examples above would encourage a more academic style of writing, one that would be more focused on the metaphenomenval lexis of ‘views’, ‘arguments’, ‘beliefs’ and the like.

5.5 Summary of recommendations

The suggestions made in the foregoing discussion are summarised in the following set of specific recommendations:

1. It is recommended that the subject of Task 2 items be thematically linked to at least one passage from the Reading test and that candidates be given the option of making reference to this reading passage in their written response.

2. It is recommended that a minimal number of Task 2 items be framed around what we have termed a ‘hortatory rhetoric’, that is items that require candidates to discuss the desirability (or not) of a particular social practice, public policy and the like.
6. Authenticity in the IELTS Academic Module Writing test

3. Following on from 2, it is recommended that Task 2 items be designed to incorporate a diverse range of rhetorical functions. An effort should be made to include the following functions, either singly or in combination: description; summarisation; comparison; explanation; recommendation.

4. It is recommended that some Task 2 items be framed to include an attributed proposition in the task rubric. These propositions could either have a generic attribution (e.g. many psychologists argue, some educators believe, etc.) or be attributed to a specific scholar.

5.6 Implications for teaching programmes

The results of the present study have been used as a basis for assessing the authenticity of the IELTS Writing Task 2 format and also for suggesting ways in which the test might be modified to enhance this authenticity. We believe the study also has implications for the design of pre-enrolment EAP language programmes which seek to prepare students simultaneously for the IELTS test and for university study. In this section we discuss briefly two issues:

1. The likely impact of the Task 2 component of the test on teaching programmes.
2. How programme designers and teachers might best approach test preparation within the broader context of pre-tertiary EAP.

The issue of a test’s impact on teaching programmes (or washback effect) is a complex one. Alderson and Wall (1993) suggest that our thinking about washback should not be restricted to some ‘general’ and ‘vague’ notion of influence (either positive or negative). Instead, they argue, we need to refine the concept to take account of a variety of possible specific effects, including inter alia, effects on:

1. How teachers teach.
2. How learners learn.
3. What teachers teach.
4. What learners learn.

The results of the present study can shed no light on the way IELTS Task 2 might impact on matters of teaching methodologies and learning processes (i.e. effects 1 and 2), but they do suggest a likely effect on curriculum (i.e. effects 3 and 4). On this score, we would conclude that the writing curriculum implicit in the current Task 2 format is a comparatively narrow one. While the test would appear to provide a basis for the teaching of a number of important aspects of academic writing (e.g. structuring of paragraphs,
writing coherently, arguing a case), there are other important areas which are unlikely to receive coverage in test preparation programmes. Perhaps the most significant of these are the skills, both linguistic and cognitive, associated with the integrating of other writers' ideas into one's own writing. We would also point to the limited rhetorical range intrinsic to the IELTS writing curriculum.

The best way to handle IELTS preparation within the broader context of pre-enrolment EAP language programmes represents a significant challenge for teachers and programme designers. In a survey of Australian language centres, Deakin (1997) identified a number of different models currently in use, including:

1. 'Integrated' models, where IELTS preparation is incorporated into EAP courses.
2. 'Separated' models, where IELTS preparation courses and EAP courses are run separately.
3. 'Exclusive' models, where IELTS preparation courses only are run, with no option of EAP for students.

Deakin (1997) points out that programme design decisions in language centres are motivated by a number of factors, some of which are administratively based and some educationally. We believe the present research can provide some guidance for the design of IELTS/EAP programmes, at least in those situations where decisions can be based primarily on educational imperatives. The first point to be made is that preparation for the IELTS Writing test should not be seen as adequate preparation in itself for the literacy demands of tertiary study. In this regard, the 'exclusive' model, from the alternatives above, should be viewed as the least adequate. Of the other options mentioned, the study's findings probably lend greater support to the 'separated' model. As we have suggested, the IELTS Task 2 prescribes a form of writing which is distinct from that required in the academy, one which is arguably more akin to certain public non-academic genres, e.g., the letter to the editor. For this reason, the more prudent option would appear to be to run two separate programmes. While 'integration' of IELTS and university preparation may be a worthwhile objective, without systematic attention given to the distinctions discussed above, such programmes run the risk of presenting students with a confusing model of university writing.

5.7 Further research

This report concludes with some suggestions for further research. These can be divided into areas: those related specifically to the IELTS Writing test and those concerned with broader issues of writing research. In the first area, this
study has only considered the Task 2 format of the IELTS Writing test; clearly there is an equally pressing need to investigate the authenticity of the Task 1 format with respect to university writing requirements. The methodology used in the present study, in our view, would also be suitable for any study of this other component of the test. An additional objective in a survey of Task 1 items could be to investigate how it fits with the Task 2 format and also the extent to which it might fill some of the rhetorical and linguistic gaps identified in the present study.

The present study has discussed the advantages and also shortcomings of each of the sources of data used, i.e. the tasks themselves and staff perceptions of tasks. An additional source of data which might be drawn on in further authenticity studies is the actual written texts (particularly exemplary texts) produced in response to university and test tasks. This data would lend itself to more conventional 'discourse analysis' procedures and, as Hale et al (1996) suggest, would enable one to obtain 'an even more concrete picture' of the nature of writing in the university and testing domains.

In the broader area of writing research, the present study has made some contribution to that field of discourse analysis concerned with the classification and analysis of writing tasks. One limitation however, of the taxonomic procedures used is that our dimensions of difference were all considered independently of each other. Clearly there is a need to investigate in what ways these dimensions might relate to each other systematically; and in particular, to find out the extent to which categories of genre can be understood in terms of specific configurations of the other dimensions used: information sources; rhetorical functions; objects of enquiry. A better understanding of the nature of academic genres, as this study suggests, will have obvious benefits for the field of language testing - to improve the way in which students are selected for university study. But it is likely to have even greater benefits for the field of language teaching - to help students to be better prepared for their studies.

Acknowledgements

The researchers wish to thank the following people for their assistance with this project: the staff at Monash University and the University of Melbourne who provided copies of their writing assignments, and also those staff who agreed to be interviewed; Associate Professor Gordon Taylor, Associate Professor Brian Lynch and Dr Brian Paltridge who provided advice on a range of methodological issues; Judith Bishop and Caryn Nery, who acted as research assistants in the collection of data and the interviewing of academic staff. The researchers also wish to thank IELTS, Australia for their support of this project.

Note that data was not collected for such variables as length of product and time allowed on task. This was because the differences between IELTS and university tasks with respect to these variables were thought to be self-evident. A very cursory analysis of the data showed that university tasks were considerably longer and also that extended time was allowed for their completion.

A similar distinction is found in Halliday's (1985) modal categories of 'propositions' (which are concerned with the functions of asserting and denying) and 'proposals' (concerned with prescribing and proscribing).

Our category of 'recommendation' resembles in some respects the rhetorical pattern of 'problem-solution' analysed at length by Hoey (1983). In our study however, we sought to draw a distinction between tasks (or sub-tasks) which require students to describe an existing solution (epistemic-description) and those which require students to propose their own solution (deontic-recommendation).

This distinction corresponds roughly to Lyons' (1977) semantic categories - 'first-order, second-order and third-order entities'. Under Lyons' schema, first-order entities refer to entities which exist in both time and space, i.e. physical objects or beings. Second-order entities also exist in time, but rather than exist in space they are said to take place or occur within it; they refer to such entities as events, processes, situations, activities, practices, etc. Third-order entities, on the other hand, are said to be unobservable and have no spatio-temporal location; they refer to abstract entities such as propositions, facts, etc. The classification scheme used in the study has conflated the first and second-order categories into the single *phenomenal* category. This was for the sake of simplicity, but also because the two-way *phenomenal-* metaphenomenal distinction appears to be the more significant.
APPENDIX 6.1

Sources of IELTS Task 2 items used in the study

Sample IELTS Task 2 items used in the study
All sample items used the following template taken from official versions of the test.
The topic components of items are listed below.

WRITING TASK 2
You should spend about 40 minutes on this task.

Present a written argument or case to an educated non-specialist audience on the following topic:

TOPIC
You should write at least 250 words.

You should use your own ideas, knowledge and experience and support your arguments with examples and relevant evidence.
Appendix 6.1

Topics

1. It is inevitable that as technology develops so traditional cultures must be lost. Technology and tradition are incompatible - you cannot have both together. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer. (Source 1)

2. The first car appeared on British roads in 1888. By the year 2000 there may be as many as 29 million vehicles on British roads. Should alternative forms of transport be encouraged and international laws be introduced to control car ownership and use? (Source 2)

3. In some countries the average worker is obliged to retire at the age of 50, while in others people can work until they are 65 or 70. Meanwhile we see some politicians enjoying power well into their nineties. Clearly there is little agreement on an appropriate retirement age. Until what age do you think people should be encouraged to remain in paid employment. Give reasons for your answer. (Source 3)

4. Telecommuting refers to workers doing their jobs from home for part of each week and communicating with their office using computer technology. Telecommuting is growing in many countries and is expected to be common for most office workers in the coming decades. How do you think society will be affected by the growth of telecommuting? (Source 3)

5. The idea of going overseas for university study is an exciting prospect for many people. But while it may offer some advantages, it is probably better to stay at home because of the difficulties a student inevitably encounters living and studying in a different culture. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? Give reasons for your answer. (Source 3)

6. Fathers are just as capable as mothers of taking care of children, so men should share parenting work more equally with women. (Source 4)

7. Technology can bring many benefits, but it can also cause social and environmental problems. In relation to new technology, the primary duty of governments should be to focus on potential problems, rather than benefits. (Source 4)

8. The most advanced medical treatment tends to be expensive. However, people’s access to good health care should not depend on social factors such as their level of income or social status. (Source 4)

9. Higher mammals such as monkeys have rights and should not be used in laboratory experiments. (Source 5)

10. More and more young people are studying and working overseas and this will help to bring about greater international co-operation in the future. (Source 5)
11. As most postgraduate research today is funded by industry, then student grants should also come from the same source. (Source 5)

12. News editors decide what to broadcast on television and what to print in newspapers. What factors do you think influence these decisions? Do we become used to bad news? Would it be better if more good news was reported? (Source 6)

13. The idea of having a single career is becoming an old fashioned one. The new fashion will be to have several careers or ways of earning money and further education will be something that continues throughout life. (Source 6)

14. Should wealthy nations be required to share their wealth among poorer nations by providing such things as food and education. Or is it the responsibility of the governments of poorer nations to look after themselves? (Source 6)

15. A number of different medical traditions are now widely known and used: Western medicine (using drugs and surgery) herbal medicine, acupuncture (using needles at certain points of the body), homoeopathy (using minute doses of poisons) and so on. How important is the patient's mental attitude toward his/her treatment in determining the effectiveness of the treatment? (Source 7)

16. A government's role is only to provide defence capability and urban infrastructure (roads, water, supplies etc.) All other services (education, health and social security) should be provided by private groups or individuals in the community. (Source 7)

17. Are computers an essential feature of modern education? What subjects can be better taught using computers? Are there aspects of a good education that cannot be taught using computers? (Source 7)

18. Should capital punishment (the death penalty) be used as a way of reducing violence in society? (Source 8)

19. Television nowadays features many programs of a violent nature. For this reason it is necessary for parents to impose strict controls on their children's viewing habits. (Source 8)

20. The world's expanding population is increasingly seen as a problem. What are the most effective ways of reducing population growth? (Source 8)
APPENDIX 6.2

Interview schedule
The following questions will form the basis of the interview.

Section 1
The questions in this section refer to the assignment task(s) you provided:

1. You've called one of your written assignments an essay/report/review etc. What do you think are the key characteristics of this type of assignment?

2. What in your judgement would distinguish an outstanding from an ordinary student response to this assignment?

3. What sources of information would you expect students to use in preparing this assignment? What types of references, how many etc.?

4. The following categories represent some of the 'rhetorical demands' that might be included in a university writing task.
   (a) Which of these categories, if any, would you say best characterise the assignment(s) you have provided?
   (b) Are there any additional categories (not listed here) that you would use to characterise the assignment(s) you have provided?

   i) Explanatory focus - the writer is required to give an account of the causes/reasons for a given entity or phenomenon.

   ii) Problem-solution focus - the writer is required to discuss a problem and to suggest possible ways of dealing with the problem.

   iii) Descriptive focus - the writer is required to indicate the distinguishing characteristics of a given entity/phenomenon.

   iv) Comparative focus - the writer is required to identify the similarities and/or differences between two or more entities/phenomena.

   v) Normative focus - the writer is required to make a judgement about whether a course of action should or should not be pursued.
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vi) **Evaluative focus** – the writer is required to indicate the value of a given entity/phenomenon with respect to its usefulness, relevance, rightness etc.

vii) **Predictive focus** – the writer is required to speculate about what might happen to a given entity/phenomenon at some point in the future.

viii) **Summary focus** – the writer is required to give an account of what an author has said about a given entity or phenomenon.

ix) **Instructional focus** – the writer is required to outline a procedure to be followed.

Section 2

Questions in this section concern comparisons between the assignment tasks you provided and the attached sample IELTS tasks. (Appendix 6.1)

5. What do you see as the main similarities and/or differences between the assignment tasks you provided and the sample IELTS tasks?

6. On the evidence of these IELTS tasks, to what extent do you think training for the IELTS Writing test would be useful preparation for the writing demands of your subject? Explain.
General Instructions

For this test you must write an essay on ONE of the following topics below:

Time allowed: 3 hours
Length: Approximately 700 words

Attached is a set of extracts from books and newspapers which deal with various questions concerning refugees. Using this material as fully as you can, you are required to write on ONE of these topics:

Topic 1:
What is a 'refugee'? Is the traditional definition of a refugee still fruitful in a world which often discriminates between economic and political refugees? Do you think it is possible to define a refugee in such a way that a humane and consistent international policy could be developed for dealing with the world's refugees?

Topic 2
Loescher and Scobler observe in their book Calculated Kindness (see extracts) that in recent times the United States (and other countries) have begun 'to limit the opportunities for refugee migration'. What factors can you suggest for this change of approach? What are likely to be some of the effects of restricted refugee policies on the various parties involved?

In assessing your essay the examiners will take into account the following:

1. the success with which you select and focus on the arguments and evidence in the reading matter most relevant to your answer;

2. the success with which you integrate your reading into the development of your own ideas. Use your own words rather than those in the readings, unless for some reason you especially want to quote them.

*Extracts not included here.*
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3. the fluency with which you develop your argument and sustain it with evidence.
4. the organisation of the writing, especially the success with which you use paragraphs to keep the lines of your argument clear.
5. the clarity and accuracy of your English (grammar, word choice and so on).

A dictionary will be supplied.

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Methodology evaluation of Chapter 6

The methodology used in this chapter reflects the ways in which the research methodology of many current doctoral and research studies are designed viz: a complementary approach in which a survey is followed by in-depth interviews. Such an approach provides two perspectives to a study, making the overall study richer in its findings.

The methods used in this chapter follow this broad and currently popular approach but differ in the greater emphasis given to the first research instrument – the survey. Most current studies use the first instrument to establish a wide perspective for the research questions. The second instrument – the interviews – is usually used to provide deeper descriptions and insights, ones that the survey is not always able to reveal.

In this chapter, however, the methodological emphases are reversed but this strategy is undoubtedly appropriate. The survey provides the major part of the study because it is a detailed, comparative study of IELTS Writing tasks and the writing tasks used in universities. In this instance the interviews serve a complementary and confirmatory role. It is also appropriate for the survey to be given greater weight because it describes the development of a new research tool, a taxonomy of tasks.

The development of the taxonomy provides an excellent example for researchers of the ways to approach the development of a research instrument when it is not always possible, or appropriate, to use an existing research instrument. The authors detail the sources which exist: Systemic Functional Linguistics; Rhetorical Structure Theory; and Genre Analysis. However, in an exemplary approach to their research, they do not rely on any one of these instruments alone. Instead, as the authors state:

... it was thought sensible not to begin with any a priori set of theoretical categories, but to draw initially on the data to establish 'broad dimensions of difference' (Hale et al 1996) and then to refer to relevant theoretical frameworks later to refine the classification scheme.

This is an approach which commend itself to all researchers into writing and writing tasks.

Thus the research methodology used in the chapter provides two examples of approaches to research:
1. The use of complementary research approaches – the survey and the interview.
2. The development of a purpose-built taxonomic research instrument.