

## Reaching for the Stars: Tips for Success

by Josiah Lee

Have you ever dreamed of being successful—so successful that your name is etched on the coveted stars of the Hollywood Walk of Fame? Or are you simply satisfied with treasuring every hand-drawn star given by your teacher signifying your excellent work? Regardless of what they represent, stars have been characterized throughout the centuries as symbols of success. In like manner, the DSE has a system of attributing success with a set of stars. Scoring a 5\*\* in the DSE English Paper is the highest glory that a student can attain, and it means that the student has reached a proficient and native-like level in English. Those stars that follow the most coveted number 5 represent the fine skills that separate the best from the good. For those who would like to try their hand at reaching for the stars, here are a few tips.

### Paper 1: Reading—Watch Out for Synonyms

While the reading paper involves many elements, test takers are often flustered by unfamiliar words. Words such as *terrible* and *horrible* may be easy to identify as words with negative connotations. But what if the writer in the passage thinks the ideas are *appalling*? Immediately, we are left to wonder whether the writer agrees or disagrees with the ideas being presented. A simple but somewhat tedious practice can remedy this. Instead of searching the dictionary for an unfamiliar word, search a thesaurus. A thesaurus exposes you to words that have similar and opposite meaning. Simply looking up the word *appalling* can link you to other words such as *dreadful*, *unfortunate*, and *disastrous*. Having such knowledge will enrich your understanding and vocabulary.

### Paper 2: Writing—The Pitfall of “I think”

During the marking process of the writing paper, experienced markers immediately balk at phrases like “I think” or “in my opinion.” Using such overused expressions demonstrates a lack of vocabulary and limited language proficiency. One way to avoid such constructions is to use a cleft sentence. A cleft sentence not only rids your writing of overused expressions but also adds weight and emphasis to the sentence. To construct a cleft sentence (a WH-cleft in this case), use this structure: WH-clause + verb *to be* + emphasized word or phrase. The first part of the sentence clearly states the subject of the sentence while the latter part of the sentence puts the main issue into focus. So, instead of writing “I think the government should increase taxes,” try writing “What the government should do is increase taxes.” Using such constructions can make your writing more colorful. The key is variety. Having variety in sentence patterns, vocabulary, and even perspectives will most certainly elevate your writing.

### Paper 3: Listening and Integrated Skills—Quote or rephrase?

One of the main objectives of Paper 3 Part B is extracting relevant information from complex texts and skillfully transferring it to your writing. Once the needed information is located, the question many students ask is should I quote it or rephrase it? Rephrase it if the question clearly states to rephrase it; otherwise, quoting would be sufficient. But here’s a word of caution: don’t overquote it. Only quote information enough to satisfy your task. Also, whenever you pull a quote from the data file, make sure you check to see if you need to change any pronouns, tense, or formality. Points are easily lost if these small details are not attended to. When you match the register, tone, and style to the genre of your writing rather than the source text, you clearly demonstrate your

understanding of the task and your mastery of the elements in the text type. Thus, you are able to produce a piece of work that is relevant and coherent.

#### **Paper 4: Speaking—Practice Speaking by Speaking**

In the speaking paper, ideas are usually not the problem. There is no doubt that students do more than enough practice in notecard writing or mind maps; however, being able to organize ideas or use appropriate vocabulary and language patterns can only take a student halfway to success. While students work hard in learning various structures to create ideas or key words to transition their thoughts, they fall short of actually vocalizing their material. A phrase that I tirelessly ingrain in my students is “practice speaking by speaking,” for it is only through vocalizing your thoughts that you can improve your pronunciation, delivery, and communication skills—criteria that comprise half of the marking scheme. Instead of practicing silently or only in your mind, find friends to have a practice session or even speak to yourself out loud in front of a mirror. Take every chance to hone your skills.

When all is said and done, reaching for the DSE 5\*\* is a matter of willpower and diligence. Various tips and methods can only fine tune your skills to give you a higher reach. The real deciding factor is the height at which you begin reaching, and that is your foundational knowledge. So, start laying your foundation early and begin reaching for the stars from a higher starting point.