

## IELTS ASPIRANTS' WRITING SKILLS: PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

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**Abstract:**

*The EFL graduate students, who aspire to pursue higher studies abroad, have to take up English Proficiency Test, IELTS and they practice the four modules such as Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing which are parts of the test. But, it is observed that they find it difficult to write essays in the writing module. Hence, this current study aims at finding the EFL graduate students' problems in writing essays and suggests solutions to overcome them. The students are assigned some essays to write which are assessed as per the evaluation criteria by the IELTS Trainer. The students have got different scores as they could not meet the required criteria. To find out their difficult areas in Writing, a questionnaire is given to them. The responses, elicited from the survey have helped in finding their strengths and weaknesses to help trainers focus on the significant areas where the students are lagging. The data has helped to collect some important inputs and solutions required to strengthen students' writing skills with regard to Writing Module. The usage of sample answers in gaining an idea, teaching grammar and vocabulary as a prerequisite to writing, teaching pre-fabricated patterns, raising candidates' awareness of evaluation criteria, teaching discourse markers, and motivating students to develop their content knowledge will be helpful to the students in gaining good scores. The findings have clear implications for both students and look for effective techniques to overcome their writing issues and the trainers who strive hard to enhance student writing skills to get good scores in IELTS preparatory courses.*

**Key Words:** Writing Problems, Suggestions, EFL Graduates, Evaluation Criteria, Discourse Markers, Grammar, IELTS Preparatory Course.

**Introduction**

The EFL graduates who aspire to go overseas for higher studies have to take up IELTS test to prove their English Language Proficiency. Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing are the four skills which are assessed in this test. Students could perform well in the receptive skills such as Listening and Reading whereas the productive skills like Writing and Speaking are a bit challenging to them. Particularly, writing module is the one which the aspirants generally feel difficult and get disappointed with the low bands that they get in the test. Hence, this study attempts to find out the areas where the students generally struggle in writing essays.

It also provides the strategies to overcome their problems and techniques to enhance their writing skills and band scores in IELTS.

### **Review of previous empirical findings**

Some previous studies investigated the effect of task types on IELTS test takers' performance in writing. (e.g. Ahmadi & Mansoordehghan, 2014; Lan, 2015; To begin with, Ahmadi and Mansoordehghan (2014) compared the effect of task 1 and task 2 in IELTS writing module on candidates' writing performance and found that there is no significant difference between the performance of test takers' in these tasks. On the other hand, Lan (2015) found that when the test requires a low-demanding task such as task 1, which consists of graphic description, candidates perform significantly well in terms of accuracy. Whereas task 2, being a high-demanding task yields more complex texts with lexical variations and grammatical subordinations. Likewise, O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth (2003) found that simple task, which require less information to be processed, elicit more complex structures.

While some studies have tested the effect of instructional interventions such as exposing candidates to sample essays (e.g., Ambe, 2008; Bagheri&Zare, 2009). For example, Bagheri and Zare (2009) found that exposing students to model essays improves their awareness of writing structures such as form, discourse, relevant content, and lexical resources. Similarly, Ambe (2008) found that Japanese ESL learners improved their writing skill by comparing their essays with model essays and noticing the gap between their essays and the model essays in terms of lexis, form, discourse and content. He also observed that the degree of noticing was contingent upon language learners' proficiency and task types.

### **Purpose of the study**

According to the review of related empirical findings, it is clearly observed that the previous studies have focused on testing the effect of materials and methods on IELTS test takers' performance in writing tasks. So, most of the studies were experimental though there were some descriptive. Although there are many studies about teachers' perceptions, practices none of the reviewed studies explored the students' problems in writing essays with regard to IELTS. To fill in this gap, the present study aims at uncovering the issues, students face while writing essays by exploring their perspectives through a data collected and solutions to be followed to help the students to overcome their problems to get the best scores in IELTS.

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to identify the writing problems of the EFL graduates in their IELTS preparatory course and solutions to overcome their difficulties in getting the best scores in IELTS. The research was carried out to answer the questions such as, How perfectly do you use writing mechanics such as spelling and punctuation in your essay?; Have you used sample essays? How are they useful to you?; Do you frame structured sentences? Are you confident about your grammatical range and accuracy?; What kind of problems did you find while generating ideas for content development? etc. and these questions helped to find out the issues of the IELTS test takers while writing essays.

The responses to the questions are elicited from a group of 15 graduates who are preparing for IELTS preparatory course. It is advantageous when the students are similar and their interaction yields the best information (Creswell, 2012). The EFL graduates group comprises 40% male and 60% female students. The respondents are informed about this research and they are assured of confidentiality. The questions in the survey are cautiously framed and checked for self and expert validity as Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2013) state that validity is an important requirement and a touchstone for both qualitative and quantitative research. Besides this data collection, all the 15 students are assigned the writing questions to write essays as it is essential to assess their writing skills practically.

## **Research Results**

### **Problems in IELTS Test Takers' Writing**

#### **Findings from Written samples**

The evaluation and analysis of IELTS test takers essay responses delineate various issues related to grammar, structured sentences, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and order of the words, contracted forms, cohesive devices and repetition of ideas. Chiefly, the students failed in making accurate sentences grammatically. They made mistakes in the usage of subject-verb agreement for example, *'the city dwellers commutes from one place to another place like ants'*. *'People has to accept the consequences'*. Some students were unable to frame complex sentences appropriately which made them leave the sentences without complete meaning. As they were unaware of the concepts like phrase, main clause and subordinate clause, the students could not structure the sentences meaningfully. In a hurry to generate ideas and to manage time, they made spelling mistakes. Unknowingly, they mentioned, *durgs* instead of *drugs*, *belive* for *believe*. They use comma instead of full stop and vice versa. Some students wrote I in small case rather than in capital form. The test takers placed the words at wrong places twisting the proper meaning of the context. The wrong usage of adverbs and conjunctions are major here. Using SMS language and contract form was apparent in some essays. Some students missed proper use of cohesive devices which made the structures inappropriate in meaning.

#### **Finding from the Data Collection**

In IELTS, Task 2 is an Opinion essay/Problem-Solution essay/ Advantage-Disadvantage Essay which the students have to write 250 words in 40 minutes. When the students are asked about the difficulty level of Task-2 essay, a student mentioned that, "It is the only part where we should think and respond in the exam." Another stated that, "It is all about presenting our ideas but requires a bit more than general level of thinking ability to score good marks." One more respondent shared that "We should be very careful in framing the sentences, using appropriate vocabulary and grammar. One more factor is, Time Management is a big problem to another student.

Actually, the EFL graduates have to write words without errors but they make spelling mistakes in a hurry to generate ideas and also make errors in punctuation. Some said that they could not review the essays because of lack of time which cost them a lot. As they feel difficulty in structuring the sentences with appropriate phrases and clauses, they expressed that they

should be trained in basic grammar before explaining the writing module. Some said that they could not develop good number of ideas to reach the minimum word count. Hence, they wanted to learn the techniques to generate good ideas. They wanted to learn about conjunctions, Adverbs and collocations which are essential in connecting the statements to one another. But many of them stated that sample essays helped them to get an idea about writing a structured essay.

### **Solutions**

When interacted with the trainers, they came up with some useful solutions to clear the inhibitions of test takers in IELTS.

### **Exposing Students to Sample Essay Answers**

Initially students cannot understand how to write an essay in IELTS Preparatory course even after the trainer gives inputs about writing. Hence, Sample essay answers help them comprehend the structuring of the essay, the lexical resources used, the usage of cohesive devices, discourse markers and the content knowledge. This strategy will assist them to write the essay in a better way in IELTS. This helps them to learn proper punctuation and spellings.

### **Teaching Grammar, Structure and Vocabulary**

Some expected to learn grammar as a prerequisite to writing. By explaining important grammar concepts such as subject verb agreement, articles, complex and compound sentences, one can make a student confident about writing structured sentences. Rest of the factors can be corrected while evaluating the essays.

As Vocabulary is important, its significant role in determining the score should be explained to the students. They should be trained in how to enhance vocabulary and make them learn vocabulary. Some feel that it is not essential to teach grammar and vocabulary to the IELTS aspirant as there is no enough time. They believe that knowledge of language could be improved while practicing essay writing and through corrective feedback. Hence, though teaching grammar and vocabulary is important, sometimes it is not possible in IELTS preparatory course as the trainers are pressed for time. Then the candidates' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary can be enhanced through clear corrective feedback.

### **Enabling Candidates to be aware of scoring criteria**

Candidates' writing performance in IELTS is evaluated in terms of Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. When the test takers are aware of this scoring criteria, the participants opined that they would be conscious about all the parameters that they have in their essays which improves their performance in writing. Hence, as a trainer, I believe that enabling students aware of the scoring criteria is significant in determining the scores in IELTS. Hence, it is better to advise the students about writing relevant ideas to reach task response, using appropriate cohesive devices, using wide range of vocabulary and wide variety of accurate structures. And I also explain candidates about the band descriptors guidelines, a trainer stated. Another important point is when the peers' essays are evaluated, the candidates assessed these criteria in those essays and could learn about the variations in getting different bands. They could understand how a candidate could score higher than others.

### **Teaching Discourse markers**

Test takers feel it challenging to use discourse markers to form coherent sentences. Hence, I show different paragraphs and sample essays to them to understand how the connectors are used in giving appropriate meaning to the written text, a trainer shared. It can be achieved through corrective feedback also. The trainer not only focuses on spelling errors and grammatical mistakes but also on the discourse markers to assess whether relevant ideas are properly connected to give the expected meaning.

### **Raising Candidates' Content Knowledge**

As Namaghi et.al stated, "Writing deficiency may be rooted in candidates' knowledge of language including his or her knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and discourse markers. It may be equally being rooted in candidates' experiential knowledge or content knowledge". It is observed that many test takers find it difficult to develop relevant content to the given essay questions. They get confused in understanding the questions and sometimes, build up ideas in a different way which is quite contrast to the questions. Thus, lack of content knowledge leads to low band scores in IELTS. Hence, a trainer stated that the students should read books extensively to get ideas about various topics. Then they can easily generate content which enables them acquire better scores.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

After analyzing the Test Takers' issues and the trainers' strategies on writing essays in IELTS preparatory course disclosed the problems of the students that they face while writing and the suggestions of the teachers to improve the candidates' writing skills. Some of the solutions are emerged from this study. As students write the test in controlled conditions, regular practice helps them to manage their time effectively. Analyzing the sample answers will certainly help them to be confident about the structure of the essay, usage of discourse markers and vocabulary. For instance, in line with the previous studies (e.g., Ambe, 2008; Bagheri&Zare, 2009), participants of this study believed that exposing IELTS students to sample answers will certainly better their performance in writing tasks. The participants wished to learn grammar and vocabulary as a prerequisite to writing in harmony with previous studies (e.g. Decarrico, 2001; Frodesen, 2001; Fu, 2009; Rajabi&Dezhkam, 2014). Hence, it is better to teach essential grammar skills to the students to enable them write confidently. By analyzing the student levels, concentrating on their practice and giving corrective feedback, a trainer can certainly guide them to get the best scores. Continuous rigorous practice and the mentors' guidance will help aspirants grow confident by overcoming the problems in writing and they can gain the best band scores in IELTS.

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