

Vietnamese Learners' Performance in The IELTS Writing Task 2: Problems, Causes, and Suggestions


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ABSTRACT

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IELTS is popular in Vietnam thanks to its reliability and applicability. Writing task 2 has been acknowledged to be the most challenging for IELTS learners. However, in Vietnam, not much research has attempted to investigate in an in-depth manner as to what are the problems, causes, and consequently the suggestions of such a notion. The research hence aims to investigate the phenomenon in a more thorough, empirical manner. To this end, the study employed the participation of 205 IELTS learners from two language centers in Ho Chi Minh city to provide their opinions regarding the problems, causes, and recommendations deemed the most pressing, acute, and beneficial, respectively. With convenience sampling and survey being the chosen research design, the research was quantitative in nature, producing numerical data as a result. Further analysis conducted via comparing the means of the items listed in the questionnaire yielded based on the IELTS band descriptors managed to discover a series of problems, causes, and suggestions considered the most relevant to the Vietnamese learners concerning IELTS writing task 2. The research thus served as the basis for teachers and learners of IELTS writing task 2 to identify the recurrent issues and provide relatable approaches.

Introduction

Background of the study

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has significantly developed and is now witnessing a rise in popularity, especially in Vietnam (Nguyen & Tran, 2018). It assesses candidates' English proficiency to verify whether they are qualified for higher academic study, with English being the language of instructions (Clapham, 1996). Therefore, IELTS is likely

the key to a better future for all students, as it grants students access to prestigious universities and colleges abroad – obviously only if their band scores meet the prerequisites. Besides, globalization is a booming trend, resulting in international corporations establishing branches in foreign countries (Kordos & Vojtovic, 2016). This is why employees in Vietnam are required to be able to communicate in English, and IELTS is one of the examinations that can confirm this. As a result, it is sufficient to say that not only are students attracted to IELTS, but adults also find IELTS an irresistible opportunity to enhance their careers.

Statement of the problem

Among the four skill tests, the writing test is often considered the most challenging because writing is believed to be a complicated skills, in terms of both learning and assessment, and it is a crucial element of tertiary education (Uysal, 2009). Therefore, having to write an essay with an indicated style is never an easy feat to any test taker, especially those who are inadequately competent in English. Besides, the time constraint further sophisticates the task as students have to complete the two tasks within an hour.

In 2019, the average band of the writing test of Vietnamese candidates was only 5.7 – the lowest in the four tests (IELTS, n.d.). This suggests that IELTS test-takers in Vietnam are clearly struggling with the skill in general and Task 2 specifically, which explains why many learners resort to IELTS centers to improve their writing skills. Hence, learners' poor performance in Task 2 leads to a low band in the overall band for writing skills, hindering their academic development and preventing them from achieving their desired goals, either in their study or work. Furthermore, in Vietnam, IELTS is also one of the requirements for university or college graduation. This translates into heavy stress on Vietnamese students who have to attain the IELTS certificate so as to graduate. It is also worth noting that for people not majoring in English, the problem is even more exacerbated. They often find it difficult to construct sentences and paragraphs that are fundamental in Task 2 (Tran, 2016).

Aim of the study

Taking that into account, this study aims to investigate learners' problems in IELTS Writing Task 2 and identify their causes, thus suggesting appropriate solutions to the aforementioned. High school students, tertiary students, and adult learners are the main subjects in this study because they account for a majority of test-takers.

Significance of the study

There are currently plenty of articles and books addressing EFL learners' writing skills and the IELTS writing test. However, studies on Vietnamese learners' difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2 are limited at best. With this research, Vietnamese learners' problems can be identified in a detailed manner, which is of relevance in Vietnam. Henceforth, this paper seeks to bring practical measures which IELTS trainers in Vietnam can apply in their classrooms so that learners' performance in Task 2 can significantly enhance overall.

Literature review

It is clear that many Vietnamese candidates struggle a great deal with the writing test, which calls for the need to identify what problems they have, their causes, and ways to improve their writing skills. Therefore, this chapter attempts to review and discuss related literature regarding IELTS Writing Task 2, learners' problems with the causes, and some suggestions on how to improve the performance in Task 2. These are deemed essential because it is necessary to understand what has been studied in this field, hence establishing the basis of this study as well as identifying the gap, if any, between the literature and the context of the study, Vietnam. The reviewed works can date back to the late 20th century, and there are even some recent studies on the matter at hand.

The IELTS test

IELTS was first introduced in 1980 and started to be accepted as a requirement for courses in English-speaking countries in 1989 with two general tests – Listening and Speaking – and two specialized tests – Reading and Writing. (Charge & Taylor, 1997). The examination is co-owned by the British Council, IDP, and Cambridge Assessment English (IELTS, n.d.) and held in 120 countries around the world, being one of the most prevalent tests (Uysal, 2009). IELTS (n.d.) states that this test is to evaluate candidates' English proficiency using a 0–9 band scale and is also reliable. There are two test modules for test-takers to choose from general training and academic. While the former serves the purpose of migration and employment, the latter assesses whether examinees are qualified for undergraduate or postgraduate study using English as the medium (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate [UCLES], 2004). It was reported that 77% of the candidates took the academic module (IELTS, n.d.), which is reasonable because this module is required for university or college entrance, and many of the test attendees are students; however, it is undoubtedly more difficult than the other module owing to the need to employ academic language.

IELTS Writing Task 2

An IELTS academic writing test includes two tasks, which weigh more points and requires candidates to write a short essay of at least 250 words on a particular topic with academic or semi-formal or neutral language (IELTS, n.d.; UCLES, 2004; Uysal, 2009). This, according to Uysal (2009), is similar to a non-academic form of discourse or the genre essay. The task includes a topic and a question, in which candidates have to address the topic and present relevant opinions that display their views on the matter in a formal manner (Cullen, 2017). Notably, topics are closely related to the fields for which candidates apply in their undergraduate or postgraduate programs (UCLES, 2004). Despite this, any learner attempting to take IELTS must have some prior knowledge about general social issues so as to perform well in this task (Wilson, 2010).

Test takers' works are marked based on the band descriptors by IELTS examiners (Uysal, 2009). The band descriptors include four criteria for assessment: task achievement (TA), coherence and cohesion (CC), lexical resource (CC), and grammatical range and accuracy (GRA) (British

Council, n.d.; UCLES, 2004). Each criterion is described on a 0–9 scale, with each band denoting particular abilities of candidates. Additionally, the description from band 0 to 9 in a continuum increases in importance (Pearson, 2018).

Task achievement refers to how examinees establish and support their position in response to the given topic by expressing relevant opinions and giving instances while ensuring the essay length (Bagheri & Riasati, 2016; UCLES, 2004). According to UCLES (2004), coherence and cohesion assess how the essay is constructed in general. More specifically, coherence addresses the connection of ideas, while cohesion concerns candidates' ability to use cohesive devices. By taking into consideration task achievement and coherence and cohesion, Cullen (2017) summarized that test takers have to write formally at least 250 words talking about the topic at hand with supporting arguments, logically organize their opinions in paragraphs, each of which focuses on one main idea, and clarify their ideas with explanations and examples. Lastly, lexical resource and grammatical range and accuracy involve the diversity, precision, and appropriateness in vocabulary use and grammar use, respectively (UCLES, 2004).

The band descriptors developed by British Council (n.d.) have provided a valuable basis for identifying IELTS learners' problems. Henceforth, any problem discussed is going to be referred to one of the four marking criteria.

Problems of IELTS learners and candidates in Task 2

Before looking at studies about problems in terms of the four criteria, some background research addressing IELTS Writing Task 2 in general will be discussed. As Cullen (2017) puts it, writing is the most difficult skill to be proficient in, and many people describe writing a painstaking task. In actuality, candidates may suffer from severe stress when taking the writing test in view of the restriction of time and the unexpectedness of topics, as well as their mentality (Pearson, 2018). To elaborate, Slater (2002) found that candidates face problems due to the prompt of the task. Since test takers are non-native English speakers and their culture is different from that of their English counterparts, it can take them longer to be able to comprehend what the task means fully. Another problem pointed out by Slater is planning under time constraint. He explains that some candidates, when planning, cannot come up with ideas to support their arguments, ending up having to discard the current plan and opting for another one, which consumes a great amount of time. These studies have provided an overview of how challenging the test is from the candidates' perspective.

With regard to examinees' work, the less competent they are, the higher rate of errors and types of errors they make, especially in LR and GRA (Müller, 2015). Alavi et al. (2020) discovered that test-takers commit many more mistakes in terms of TA compared to other criteria. In agreement with this, Cullen (2017) states that examinees often misunderstand the task as a result of ignoring the background information given in the task or identifying too broad a topic. This leads to the essay going off-topic and unclear. Another problem pointed out by Bagheri and Riasati (2016) is that the writing is not adequately focused and the aspects of the topic are not equally addressed. This is, in some ways, connected to the problem mentioned by Cullen

(2017), which she claims to inhibit candidates from improving their band scores. In addition, the lack of knowledge about the topic in the task can also be a critical problem for any test taker since they have no idea on what to write despite having a wide range of vocabulary (Liu & Deng, 2019). As discussed earlier, the topic presented in the test is unpredictable (Pearson, 2018), and examinees need to possess enough background knowledge so as to cope with it (Wilson, 2010).

In contrast, Panahi and Mohammaditabar (2015) highlighted that, in Iran, students are weakest at CC. Their study finds that candidates cannot link the ideas, hence unable to show clear development in their essays, and find producing a cohesive and coherent essay troublesome. Farid and Saifuddin (2018) support this by declaring essay structure is the most common error made by test takers. Moreover, Bagheri and Riasati (2016) observed that reference and substitution are limited and there are mistakes in the use of cohesive devices. They also identify the lack of topic sentences and find the division of paragraphs confusing. Liu and Deng (2019) add that there is duplication and conflicts in the supporting ideas, showing that candidates do not have a clear structure of a paragraph. Moreover, many learners are misled about what a high band entails; they tend to think that creating a long and complicated sentence with many ideas may help boost the score, but this proves otherwise since a long sentence can obstruct the ability to recognize the main idea (Cullen, 2017).

Regarding LR, examinees often display their incompetence in using vocabulary. This includes the poor use of collocations and idiomatic language, mistakes in spelling and word formation, and improper use of words (Bagheri & Riasati, 2016). Liu and Deng (2019) emphasized the problem of paraphrasing of candidates. As long as they are not capable of paraphrasing, they exhibit their limited range of vocabulary, thus lowering their scores. Using memorized words is also a serious issue as test-takers are prone to fill their essays with uncommon words thinking that rare words will enhance their bands, resulting in texts full of inaccurate word use (Liu & Deng, 2019). Though there has been a rise in students using dictionaries – both paper and online – to assist them with acquiring new lexical items, the endeavor does not ensure that they will use them right (Trinh et al., 2021).

One of the problems associated with grammar is the overuse of complex structures (Cullen, 2017). Though essays employing more multi-clause sentences tend to yield a higher band score compared to those relying on single-clause counterparts (Tran & Truong, 2021), according to Cullen (2017), using too many complex structures can lead to adverse effects as they complicate the writing. Instead, she claims that complex structures are only beneficial when they are used to elaborate ideas appropriately. Similarly, Liu and Deng (2019) believe that long and complicated sentences induce tediousness for readers. They also suggest that an essay with too many simple sentences yields the same results because examinees only show a lack of variety in structures. Additionally, learners' writing also contains a number of punctuation and grammatical errors (Bagheri & Riasati, 2016).

Although the opinions of different authors about the criterion with the most serious problems vary, it is necessary to bear in mind that all existing problems amount to a low band score in

candidates' test results, no matter what the problems are related to. However, since these problems are spotted outside Vietnam, more research needs to be carried out in terms of Vietnamese IELTS learners since overgeneralization is not advisable.

Causes of problems

Upon investigating the reasons behind the problems, Bagheri and Riasati (2016) elicit responses from both teachers and learners who participated in their study, discovering that both subjects hold the same opinions. They believe that the existing problems stem from a number of factors, including the lack of exposure of learners to English. This is due to English being a foreign language and constrained access to English media. Besides, the curriculum pays little attention to writing skills, inducing plagiarism and copying in large classes. The authors also reveal that unqualified teachers also amount to the problems as they receive poor professional training, leading to them being more willing to teach reading and listening rather than writing. In addition, learners are not encouraged to write and thus hold negative attitudes towards writing, not to mention their anxiety and influence of their mother tongue. Last but not least, the deficiency of available technological facilities also hinders learners' improvement in writing skills, and learners feel demotivated (Bagheri & Riasati, 2016). Simply put, this study highlights the common factors causing problems in learners' performance in Task 2, which appear in every aspect of education.

To be more specific, Cullen (2017) pinpoints different factors causing test takers' problems. With regard to the reason why IELTS learners misunderstand the topic, she explains that there are many unauthentic sources that contain practice tests far away from the real test in terms of content. These materials usually include tasks which demand specialized knowledge, which does not adhere to IELTS design principles. By relying on those materials, learners are more likely to be confused by the task, hence leading to misunderstanding. She also finds out that many IELTS trainees follow false beliefs and unverified claims about IELTS, which turns them into mechanical writers. Because of this, test takers are often misled into writing lengthy and wordy sentences with unclear and unfocused messages, as well as overwhelming their writing with uncommon words with limited control. Furthermore, she significantly adds that culture plays a pivotal role in Task 2. It may be the reason why examinees lack ideas when they are to write about some particular topics; apart from that, culture also induces the cyclical writing style in some Eastern countries, whereas IELTS requires candidates to write in a linear manner. In some cultures, it is problematic when a learner is not educated to be autonomous but is always dependent. (Cullen, 2017).

Pearson (2018), on the other hand, directs his attention to teacher training and available resources. He emphasizes that there is an absence in training teachers to give feedback, so it is obvious that many learners receive ineffective comments from their teachers. Similarly, there does not exist any practical guideline for teachers to follow, which results in imbalanced feedback across four criteria from teachers (Pearson, 2018). Plus, IELTS materials for test preparation still follow an old approach, not taking learners' factors into account; hence they present numerous exam tips, which can cause confusion (Wilson, 2010).

Suggestions on how to improve learners' and candidates' performance

Learners ought to be responsible for their writing development. Cullen (2017) advised IELTS learners to be aware of available resources online in order to avoid unreliable ones. Moreover, she highlights the need to learn the language deliberately, especially vocabulary and grammar, and not hold any wrong IELTS claims. Candidates should also thoroughly comprehend the band descriptors so that they can meet the requirements to reach their desired bands. Cullen (2017) maintained that band 6 and below examinees tend to adopt an ineffective approach, occurring in only three steps: read, write, and check. Instead, she states that candidates at a higher level opt for a more rigorous one, including read, think, plan, write, and check. This approach is more detailed and achievable so that the time required for writing is reduced and all the requirements can be met (Cullen, 2017). This is particularly useful for any IELTS trainee attempting to conduct self-study.

What teachers teach and their techniques have to aid the development of writing skills, including planning and strategies in the exam room (Brown, 1998), and they should look for approaches for effective teaching, especially with the use of technology (Wilson, 2010). Collaborative writing can considerably help learners improve their writing regarding TA (Khodabakhshzadeh & Samadi, 2018). Not only that, Khodabakhshzadeh and Samadi (2018) claimed this activity to be useful in enhancing motivation in class, developing vocabulary range, and gaining more insights into writing through working cooperatively. Ameri-Golestan and Nezakat-Alhossaini (2013), in addition, praised the role of consciousness-raising for drawing learners' attention to the four criteria, which is far more efficient than explicit instructions. Moreover, Farahani and Pahlevansadegh (2019) encouraged teachers to focus on the metadiscourse aspect of IELTS with the aim to improve learners' control in the coherence and cohesion of their work. Teachers can also exhibit different examples and materials so as to get learners to be better at using cohesive devices and references, hence making their essays more coherent and cohesive (Ly, 2010; Marashi, 2021; Panahi & Mohammaditabar, 2015). In addition to this, exercises and avoidance of using uncommon words are also advisable in vocabulary learning, which can improve learners' band in LR (Panahi & Mohammaditabar, 2015). Besides that, Mickan and Slater (2003) accentuated text analysis in teaching. They claim that teachers should recognize the lexical items typical to a particular text type and teach them to learners. This makes sure that learners are capable of dealing with different types of text, which they are required to write using the language they have learned. Teachers should also pay more attention to the careful selection of words, especially academic ones, to teach learners (Awwalia & Suhardi, 2020). Model essays can also be advantageous to learners, especially those who are at least at the intermediate level because such writing from native or native-like people can have learners attend to the language more (Abe, 2008; Bagheri & Zare, 2009), recognize holes in their knowledge (Bishop, 2011), and learn prefabricated chunks (Mohseni & Satariyan, 2013). Abe (2008) also promoted the importance of instructions to get learners, especially less competent ones, to notice the language. On another note, mind mapping is a great technique that can help learners explore the topic more deeply, enlarge the vocabulary range, correct grammatical mistakes, and write the essay more efficiently (Pratiwi et al., 2016).

A positive relationship between emotional intelligence enhancement and writing skill is identified by Ebrahimi et al. (2018) after they had their participants do the IELTS and EQ tests, which is what teachers may exploit in the classroom in terms of affective factors. Various techniques emerge in plenty of studies, dealing with distinct problems in the four criteria; therefore, they may stand a high chance of being applied in Vietnam because the four criteria are also in use universally.

Feedback from the teachers can help learners detect what they are good at as well as what they should improve (Noor, 2020). Among six ways to give corrective feedback, Sanavi and Nemati (2014) highly recommended using reformulation from which learners can benefit a great deal. Nevertheless, they also suggest that teachers should consider learners' perspectives of the best strategy, as those of learners might differ from the teachers'. Nevertheless, Ganji (2009) criticized teachers' correction for being inefficient and believes that it is feedback from peers and self-correction that work best for learners. Whether the teacher's corrective feedback is useful or not cannot be proclaimed. These studies are conducted in a specific country only, and hence, their universal validity has to be questioned. However, it is certain that there is no available protocol regarding how to provide feedback, due to which Pearson (2018) asserted that IELTS institutions ought to establish their methods to provide comments for learners. He believes that this should help test takers be better prepared for the examination and assist novice teachers in the feedback process.

Synthesis

A number of existing studies have examined IELTS Writing Task 2, problems of candidates with connected causes, and measures to combat the problems. They have also yielded valuable insights into the problem stated in this paper. However, the works which have been analyzed were mainly conducted in the Middle East, especially Iran, which therefore may not be completely true to the context in Vietnam but can be beneficial to some extent.

Since there is insufficient work on the problems of Vietnamese test-takers as well as their causes, this paper attempts to further investigate this area and impart several corresponding suggestions. [**Font: Time New Roman; size 12; citations of APA styles**]

Research Questions

In accordance with the proposed aims, three research questions are posited as follows:

1. What are the Vietnamese learners' problems in IELTS Writing Task 2?
2. What are the causes of the problems that Vietnamese learners face in IELTS Writing Task 2?
3. What are the suggestions to resolve the problems that Vietnamese learners encounter in IELTS Writing Task 2?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was held at two English centers, namely IPP IELTS and WESET English Center, where learners who intend to obtain the IELTS certificate come to enroll in courses specially tailored to them. The two institutions are both situated in Ho Chi Minh city, the larger of the two metropolises in Vietnam, where learning for the IELTS examination has become more common, and the IELTS examinations are densely organized.

205 participants who were concurrently attending different IELTS courses at the two aforementioned centers were chosen to take part in the survey, which according to Fraenkel et al. (2012), fell into the acceptable range for surveys to produce statistically significant results. They hailed from various levels of education, and their level of English proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced. However, students who were below senior high school education were deliberately omitted on account of the remarkably small number of them undergoing IELTS training courses at the two centers. Though they belonged to distinct brackets of English proficiency, they all attended classes in either of the two language centers where they received instructions and guidance on IELTS Writing Task 2. Therefore, it could be concluded that the research opted for a convenience sampling procedure since the participants were in close proximity to the researchers and that they barely had anything in common save for the fact that they had been taught IELTS Writing Task 2 by either of the researching team members (Creswell, 2012).

Design of the Study and Research Instruments

The study was to verify and clarify the most pressing among the problems, causes, and subsequent suggestions for the IELTS Writing Task 2 learning process in the Vietnamese context via the participants' personal attitudes and beliefs. According to Creswell (2012), the appearance of a trend to be investigated and the need to collect relevant numerical data converge at the fact that the study is quantitative in nature. Of the designs at the disposal of typical quantitative research, the survey was compatible with the research's aim, which was to measure and then point out the most trending problems, causes, and suggestions that the Vietnamese learners suffer and benefit from, orderly.

Of the 17 research instruments with the highest frequency of usage that Griffiee (2012) pointed out, the survey claims the second-highest rank due to its popularity. This can be inferred that the population is more likely to come across this design more often as they go about their daily activities. Thus, for the ease of collecting data from a moderate sample size, the majority of which were still senior high school students and hence yet to have much exposure as participants in research at the time, along with the fact that the sheer number of sample size was too large to allow for direct observation, its optimal instrument for data collection, the questionnaire, was relied on (Cohen et al., 2000, as cited in Griffiee, 2012; Babbie, 2004, as cited in Griffiee, 2012). In particular, the questionnaire consisted of two descriptive questions in the form of demographics, 12 behavioral questions of frequency for the clarification of which

problems the learners faced the most while engaging in the IELTS Writing Task 2, and 22 questions of preference, 12 of which were the causes for the mentioned problems, 10 of which the suggestions thereof.

Data collection & analysis

The researchers utilized Google Form as the platform upon which the questionnaire was established, owing to its nature of being user-friendly, ease of access, and the way the yielded results are presented (Callegaro et al., 2015). In light of the complications from the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the need to hand out the questionnaire directly were redundant and unnecessary, the participants were contacted online via mail and social platforms, e.g., Facebook and Zalo, to contribute. The entire process occurred in May 2021.

The collected data was quantified by comparing the means of the responses. It was decided that the most pressing problems and suggestions would be those with the most reactions, as they were the collective choice of a large and, to some extent, homogeneous population size. Of the two, the former's frequency was measured by allowing the participants to choose between having never come across to always encountering them, whereas the latter's data was collected via a four-point Likert scale, which, according to Croasmun and Ostrom (2011), helped participants be more decisive in their choice. As for the causes, their data would be collected via a series of dichotomous inquiries of "yes" or "no" to the given statements/ items, where a participant was eligible to choose more than one at a time. It should be noted that all the information the participants inputted were kept confidential while they themselves remained anonymous throughout the ordeal as initially assured.

Results

In this section, the collected data were presented and elucidated in great detail, as it provided the basis for the entailing analysis in the succeeding section.

Due to the nature of the sampling procedure, which was convenience sampling as stated above, the 205 participants belonged to different demographic groups in terms of education level and English proficiency, which were reported saliently in the following table.

Table 1 presents the demographics of our sample. It is worth noting that the majority of our participants were undergraduates, who accounted for 73.2%. The level of English proficiency spread throughout the spectrum, with the two ends being elementary and advanced. The largest proportion was at the intermediate level (N=83), followed by upper-intermediate (N=45) and advanced levels (N=33). The two lowest levels, namely elementary and pre-intermediate, took up the smallest proportion of the total participants.

Concerning the frequency of problems the participants confronted in IELTS Writing Task 2, there were 12 in total, each of which received different responses, as shown below.

Table 1.

The Participants' Demographics [size 11]

Education Level	No.	Percentage
1. High school	18	8.8%
2. Undergraduate program	150	73.2%
3. Bachelor's degree	23	11.2%
4. Postgraduate program	9	4.4%
5. Master's degree	5	2.4%
6. Doctor of Philosophy	0	0.0%
N	205	100.0%
English Proficiency	No.	Percentage
1. Elementary	17	8.3%
2. Pre-intermediate	27	13.2%
3. Intermediate	83	40.5%
4. Upper-intermediate	45	22.0%
5. Advanced	33	16.0%
N	205	100.0%

Table 2.

The Participants' Problems Measured in Frequency in IELTS Writing Task 2

Problems	Never	Sometimes	Often	Usually	Always	Mean	Std.	CV.
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)			
	N	N	N	N	N			
1 Time constraint	4	28	58	90	25	3.51	0.94	0.27
2 Paraphrasing difficulty	9	37	51	74	34	3.42	1.12	0.33
3 Insufficient background knowledge	4	45	64	69	23	3.30	1.06	0.32
4 Failure to link ideas	12	57	59	55	22	3.09	1.23	0.40
5 Confusing sentences	14	58	56	62	15	3.03	1.22	0.40
6 Punctuation and grammatical errors	17	58	60	48	22	3.00	1.28	0.43
7 Misuse of words/phrases	16	59	58	58	14	2.98	1.24	0.42
8 Off-topic	19	69	54	53	10	2.83	1.29	0.46
9 Complex structures	25	60	62	42	16	2.82	1.32	0.47
10 Misspellings	27	67	58	36	17	2.75	1.36	0.49
11 Task misunderstanding	19	82	62	37	5	2.64	1.29	0.49
12 Issues with essay structure	50	65	47	33	10	2.45	1.42	0.58

Among the problems faced by the participants shown in Table 2, according to the mean obtained, the five most frequent ones were time constraint, paraphrasing, insufficient background knowledge, linking ideas, and writing confusing sentences ($M > 3$). The choices' responses for each item were coded as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively. With regard to the other issues, they tended to have such difficulties on a less frequent basis, with the mean of each less or equal to 3. From the calculated standard of deviation, the coefficient of variation generated was numerically low (all $CVs < 1$), indicating that all the choices in each item attracted responses and that their dispersion was adjacent to the mean.

Owing to the problems aforementioned were the ensuing 12 causes. The data were yielded by asking the 205 participants to check "yes" if such were the causes of their problems and "no" if they were otherwise.

Table 3.

Causes of the Problems in IELTS Writing Task 2

Causes	"Yes" responses	"No" responses	N
1. Influenced by Vietnamese	129	76	205
2. Writing anxiety	126	79	205
3. Lack of English exposure	119	86	205
4. Cultural barrier	102	103	205
5. Unbalanced curriculum	71	134	205
6. Not encouraged to write	62	143	205
7. Negative attitude towards writing	58	147	205
8. Following unverified claims	43	162	205
9. Using inauthentic sources	40	165	205
10. Unqualified teachers	23	182	205
11. Outdated materials	22	183	205
12. Lack of technological facilities	12	193	205

Of the 12 causes, only the first three, which were, respectively, being influenced by Vietnamese (129), writing anxiety (126), and lack of English exposure (119), received more positive remarks than their negative counterpart. The fourth category, cultural barrier, attained mixed responses, with 102 out of 205 participants deeming it a noteworthy cause, which left the remaining 103 convinced otherwise. In contrast, extrinsic-based causes, namely unqualified teachers (182), outdated materials (183), and lack of technological facilities (193), attracted the most negative responses.

Ten suggestions measured for relevance via a four-point Likert scale, which ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," were posed to the participants. The results were shown explicitly as follows.

Table 4.

Suggestions to Eliminate or Mitigate the Problems in IELTS Writing Task 2

Suggestions	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std.	CV.
	N	N	N	N			
1. Adhering to the five steps of read-think-plan-write-check	1	1	32	171	3.82	0.53	0.14
2. Paying more attention to word choice	0	2	54	149	3.72	0.56	0.15
3. Understanding the IELTS band descriptors	1	7	65	132	3.60	0.67	0.19
4. Exchanging feedback with peers	1	6	69	129	3.59	0.78	0.22
5. Not believing in unverified claims	2	27	59	117	3.42	0.94	0.27
6. Reading sample essays	0	16	92	97	3.40	0.81	0.24
7. Collaborative writing	4	36	73	92	3.23	0.97	0.30
8. Making use of available online resources	3	26	100	76	3.21	0.93	0.29
9. Using mind maps	6	32	80	87	3.21	1.03	0.32
10. Avoiding using uncommon words	14	54	78	59	2.89	1.13	0.39

To find out the mean, the four points on the Likert scale were coded as 1, 2, 3, and 4, ordered from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree". Based on the yielded data exhibited in above, the five-step process was on top of the suggestion list ($M=3.82$). Apart from that, careful selection of words, understanding the band descriptors, working with peers, and dismissing false beliefs were among the suggestions with the most agreement reached by the participants. Meanwhile, avoiding the use of uncommon words situated last on the list, being the only item in the questionnaire with a mean of less than three. Similar to the problems, the suggestion items' coefficient of variation stemmed from the standard of deviation was also low (all $CVs < 0.5$), the illustration from which was that the four-point Likert scale drew responses to all of the posed choices, except for the choice "Strongly disagree" for item 2 and 6. Additionally, the majority of the responses were distributed between the "Agree" and "Strongly agree" choices.

Discussion

As stated prior, this paper aimed to explore the problems which Vietnamese learners faced in terms of IELTS Writing Task 2, together with the associated causes and practical suggestions on how to overcome those issues. By discerning these three dimensions, both teachers and learners of IELTS are able to relate to their own situations, enacting proper measures so that they can put their best efforts in enhancing their writing performance accordingly. Judging from the demographics, it could be illustrated that most Vietnamese learners undertaking the IELTS

courses were at the higher academic and proficiency levels, proving the intense nature of the IELTS examination, particularly the writing test.

Regarding the first question, which was to seek out the most pressing problems Vietnamese learners encountered in IELTS Writing Task 2, from the yielded data in the results, the top five were time constraint, paraphrasing difficulty, insufficient background knowledge, failure to link ideas, and confusing sentences. The first factor mentioned was in line with what Pearson (2018) and Slater (2002) postulated, that test takers' mentality was majorly affected by the limited allotted time, which put a lot of stress on their mental state, hence draining them of the much-needed composure to confront the test. On the cohesion and coherence endeavor as per the IELTS writing band descriptors dictate, what Panahi and Mohammaditabar (2015) found out from their research on Iranian IELTS test takers, was also apparent in their Vietnamese counterparts, which was the linkage between ideas, either main or supporting. This was due to the fact that the cohesive devices were not used correctly, and in some cases, either redundant or lacking. For the task achievement, Vietnamese learners might not have much difficulty with understanding the task, but what comes next was puzzling to them – the sufficient background knowledge to pull the task off, which agreed with the statements from Liu and Deng (2019) and Wilson (2010). For lexical resources, the researchers discovered that Vietnamese learners had no trouble with having a limited vocabulary pool but rather how to employ them meaningfully. The findings were in accordance with Liu and Deng (2019), who argued that no matter how large their lexical resources were, the failure to paraphrase a word or phrase into another alternative served as proof they could not live up to the requirements, thus rendered their band score to the minimal in this regard. In addition, Vietnamese IELTS test takers also abused complex sentence structures simply because they thought they could garner additional score by doing so, which were not the case (Cullen, 2017).

As for the causes for the identified problems, it was found out that the interference of the mother tongue, Vietnamese, anxiety, and the inadequacy of necessary amounts of exposure to English were the three most fundamental agents inducing the problems. These factors were also discovered in the study of Bagheri and Riasati (2016) when they collected data from teachers and learners. It is true that Vietnamese has a profound impact on learners' English writing skills (Vu, 2017), which may explain the problem regarding writing ambiguous sentences. The differences between the two languages are most likely to induce this negative transfer (Hummel, 2014). In addition, the anxiety experienced by Vietnamese learners, which was confirmed as the second most significant cause, was apparent owing to the sophisticated characteristic of writing skill, making itself the most difficult skill to master (Uysal, 2009). Furthermore, learners' lack of mandatory exposure to English was attributed to the fact that most of the participants were undertaking courses in universities and colleges and that they had recourse to IELTS training classes in language centers. This accounted for the shortage of input received by them within limited studying hours, thus impeding the progress of their writing skill. Although perceived as a potential cause by half of the participants, the discrepancy between Vietnamese and English cultures brought about the issues. Since undergraduate students had

developed their Vietnamese writing skills, they found adopting the English writing style overwhelming, which is the cultural block highlighted by Cullen (2017).

For the third research question, five suggestions that aligned objectively with what the Vietnamese learners desired the most were posed, namely the five-step process, paying more attention to word choice, consulting the IELTS writing band descriptors, exchanging feedback with peers, and not believing in unverified claims. Interestingly, the latter three of which fell into the preparation stage, while the first two occurred after and during the writing process, respectively. For the five-step process, it should be noted that learners should comply with the five-step process proposed by Cullen (2017), which entailed reading, thinking, planning, writing, and checking instead of the conventional read, write, check. Regarding word choice, teachers should teach learners, and the latter should also test out situations where certain words or phrases were more preferable than the others before applying them directly in writing (Awwalia & Suhardi, 2020). Similarly, precautions and thorough consultation with the IELTS writing band descriptors were essential, as it helped learners focus on the appropriate path (Ameri-Golestan & Nezakat-Alhossaini, 2013). On feedback, Ganji (2009) dismissed those coming from the teachers, as they were more like lectures in nature. Instead, learners could benefit greatly from giving and receiving feedback from peers as they practiced writing. Last but not least, IELTS Writing Task 2 learners must refrain from confiding in unverified claims on the matter. As they were baseless and unscientific, they could pose uncalled for consequences (Cullen, 2017).

Conclusion

This study has to some extent, successfully investigated the problems Vietnamese learners experienced, their potential causes, and the suggestions for remedying such. The most acute areas of issues observed were dispersed in three of the four criteria described in the band descriptors, namely TA, CC, and LR. According to the findings from the survey handed to Vietnamese learners enrolling in IELTS courses, the five most pressing problems were time limit, paraphrasing, the lack of background knowledge, incapability to connect ideas, and composing puzzling sentences. Four related causes on which most of the participants agreed were also identified, including the interference of Vietnamese, anxiety, the scarcity of exposure to the English language, and the cultural divergence between the two languages in question. Among the suggestions displayed in the survey, the top five recommendations with which the majority of the participants aligned themselves were the five-step process proposed by Cullen (2017), cautious word selection, apprehending the band descriptors, working cooperatively with peers, and rejecting dubious claims.

Even so, the research, in light of its scope being limited to only the learners who have at some time interacted with the researching team members at two language centers in Ho Chi Minh City, could in no way represent an adequate homogeneous population for all of Vietnamese IELTS Writing Task 2 learners, but rather only a fraction - specifically in the country's southern

metropolis. Furthermore, even though the study managed to point out a series of problems, causes, and suggestions for the learners engaging in the said endeavor, it has not made a tangible link between the presented issues and their sources as well as with the ensuing recommendations. Thus, the research should serve as a foundation for succeeding studies into the notion to base on so that a more complete picture could be realized nationwide.

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Biodata

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