



Writing Problems of Thai Candidates for Academic Writing Tasks in IELTS Standardized Test

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ABSTRACT

This research examined the writing difficulties faced by Thai students taking the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic Writing module. The study examined error patterns in IELTS Writing Tasks to highlight how English writing proficiency impacts international university admission prospects. Despite universities commonly requiring IELTS scores between 6.0 and 6.5, Thai test-takers have historically achieved mean scores of 5.5-5.7 in the writing section. Analysis of writing samples from 15 Thai candidates revealed prevalent challenges including time allocation, grammatical accuracy, organizational structure, and logical flow. The research sought to develop evidence-based recommendations for test preparation and inform pedagogical approaches, with the ultimate goal of helping Thai students improve their IELTS writing performance.

Keywords: academic writing, IELTS, Thai candidates, writing problems, test preparation

Introduction

When applying to universities where English is the medium of instruction, candidates must demonstrate a certain level of English proficiency, often through standardized tests like IELTS (IELTS Partners, 2024). Many universities require a minimum IELTS score of 6.0 or 6.5, with a specific requirement of 6.0 or higher on the writing component. For example, the University of Oxford and Simon Fraser University both set an IELTS writing score minimum of 6.5 (University of Oxford, n.d.; Simon Fraser University, n.d.), while the University of Technology Sydney and Mahidol University International College require at least 6.0 on the writing section (University of Technology Sydney, 2020).

The difficulty Thai candidates have faced in the IELTS writing component is evidenced by their average scores of only 5.5 in 2019 and 5.7 in 2022, indicating they are not yet proficient users of academic English writing (IELTS Partners, 2024), see Appendix A. Research has found that academic writing is one of the biggest challenges for Thai undergraduate students, who struggle more with tasks like essay structure, grammar, and critical thinking compared to other IELTS sections like listening and reading (Pawapatcharandom, 2007).

To address these issues, many Thai IELTS candidates have opted to take preparation courses, seeking assistance from tutors, instructors, and peers (Cennetkusu, 2017). While this approach has helped some students achieve higher overall IELTS scores, others continue to fall short on the writing component specifically. Studies have shown that candidates who achieve a 6.0+ overall score but less than 6.0 on the writing section exhibit different abilities compared to those who meet the 6.0+ requirement across all IELTS subtests (Coleman et al., 2003).

Prior research on IELTS writing challenges has often focused on non-native candidates in general or delved into Task 1 or Task 2 individually (Susana, 2012; Panahi & Mohammaditabar, 2015). However, few studies have specifically examined the academic writing problems of Thai IELTS candidates, highlighting the need for more targeted investigation in this area (IELTS Partners, 2021).

Literature Review

Academic Writing

Unlike general writing, academic writing is document-based in nature. Academic writing is more than the presentation of facts; it requires telling a

story through original research, ideas, and evidence-based arguments (Whitaker, 2009). The academic world is not focused solely on knowledge; rather, scholarly work reflects on reasoning and how thoroughly a subject is explained. As a result of such writing, students learn how to conduct and evaluate research, organize information, build coherent arguments, analyze and express ideas in writing, and communicate (Whitaker, 2009). These skills are valuable in the job market, which highlights the need for developing proficiency in this type of writing. To expand on the main purposes of academic writing, Bailey (2011) found four principal aims: to report one's research, to respond to a given task, to discuss and give commentary, and to analyze and summarize others' works. Akkaya and Aydin (2018) highlighted the importance of a written academic text's coherence, cohesion, clarity, and conciseness as fundamental elements.

Factors Affecting Academic Writing

An understanding of the language of instruction is crucial for achieving success in academic writing. Writing skills are better if a learner has a strong English vocabulary and grammar (Fareed et al., 2018). On the other hand, poor language skills often result in problems relating to vocabulary, syntax, and coherence. The writer's culture and educational background are also contributing factors. The culture nurtured in the writer's home country shapes the understanding of academic writing genres and their constituents. It has been shown that cultural aspects such as the conventions of writing and rhetorical style affect how academic work is written in terms of organization, cohesion, and overall structure (Hayisama et al., 2019). The purpose and outlined instructions provided greatly influence academic writing tackle. The genre, objective, as well as the intended audience impact the writer's accomplishment (Mahmood, 2020). Moreover, the most crucial factors of academic writing include the writer's topic of study and the level of idea development and organization (Fareed et al., 2018).

Academic Writing Problems of Thai Students

Thai students encounter significant challenges in English writing, as demonstrated by multiple research studies. According to Nopmanotham's research (2016), students struggled with writing because it demanded multiple competencies, including strategic writing skills and language proficiency. Her study revealed that many students initially composed their thoughts in Thai before translating to English, leading to difficulties. The research participants frequently sought assistance from English-proficient peers, educators, and

native speakers due to challenges with idea generation, vocabulary limitations, and grammatical issues.

In Barua's study (2017), which focused on Thai undergraduate English major students, the participants also exhibited some specific difficulties with grammar such as in the use of clauses, sentence formation, verb tenses, and vocabulary.

Further evidence comes from Rodsawang's study (2017) at another Thai institution, which highlighted severe difficulties in maintaining coherence and cohesion in writing. Students struggled to develop their essays effectively and express complete thoughts. The research also noted frequent grammatical and spelling errors that significantly impacted the overall comprehension and quality of their written work.

IELTS Academic Writing Problems

Based on professional experience, Thai IELTS candidates typically struggle most with the writing component, showing the lowest average scores across all four skills; however, researching IELTS writing performance specific to Thai candidates presents challenges due to limited publicly accessible research data, as noted by IELTS Partners (2021). While Thailand has produced numerous studies on general and academic writing challenges, these serve as indirect but valuable references for research.

A study by Bagheri and Riasati (2016) examining IELTS writing task difficulties revealed several issues. In Task 1, candidates showed information inconsistencies, inappropriate use of cohesive devices, spelling and word formation errors, and difficulties with complex sentences and punctuation. Task 2 revealed problems with maintaining focus, cohesive device usage, spelling, word formation, grammar, and punctuation.

Research by Jackson (2020) examining 30 Japanese IELTS preparation students identified grammar and coherence/cohesion as primary challenges. The study attributed these difficulties to insufficient academic writing practice and translation-related issues.

Global research on IELTS writing challenges, particularly in Asian contexts, provides additional insights. Panahi and Mohammaditabar's (2015) investigation of Iranian candidates' performance in Task 2 identified coherence and cohesion as the main weakness, with candidates struggling to develop and link ideas effectively. Approximately 60% of participants showed deficiencies in grammatical range and accuracy, often attempting complex structures with limited success. Their writing displayed frequent punctuation errors, and spelling mistakes impacted their lexical resource scores.

According to Yao's (2014) study on Chinese IELTS candidates with a score lower than band 6, assessment of coherence, cohesion, and lexical

resources highlighted five critical gaps. These gaps included reference (especially personal pronouns and possessive forms) and use of substitution words (it, that, one) conjunctions and cohesive ellipsis, as well as lexical cohesion. The candidates did not use appropriate terms which were identified as reference terms and candidates did not avoid repetition using substitution techniques. In terms of lexical cohesion, Yao distinctly defined five: repetition, synonyms/near-synonyms, general words, and collocations. The repetition of words was predominant and excessive among candidates' writing.

Bagheri and Riasati's 2016 study of Iranian graduate students' IELTS writing revealed widespread difficulties across all assessment criteria: task response/achievement, cohesion and coherence, lexical resources, and grammatical accuracy. Task 1 responses frequently contained irrelevant or incomplete information, while Task 2 responses lacked focus. Coherence and cohesion presented the greatest challenges, with inappropriate use of references, substitutions, and cohesive devices. Students also demonstrated consistent problems with spelling, word formation, grammar, and punctuation.

Research Questions

This study aims to investigate the writing problems experienced by Thai candidates in the academic Writing Tasks 1 and 2 of a standardized test, specifically focusing on the difficulties encountered in relation to the assessment criteria for each task.

Research Methodology

Participants

Fifteen participants were intentionally chosen for a study aimed at Thai speakers who had previously taken and planned to retake a standardized academic test. The selection criteria included being a Thai speaker, having prior experience with the test, and having the intention to retake it. By employing purposive sampling, the researchers effectively gathered meaningful data from a group that was particularly relevant to the study's objectives, despite the sample not being representative of the wider population.

The study encompassed a diverse group of participants at different educational stages and career points. These included high school students from both Thai and international educational systems who were seeking admission to either domestic international programs or overseas universities.

Additionally, current university students planning to continue their education in English-speaking nations such as the UK, USA, and Australia were included. The participant pool also comprised working professionals and graduates aspiring to pursue further education abroad. Rather than implementing a placement test, the researchers opted for a more naturalistic approach to data collection, utilizing mock examinations and referring to participants' previous official test scores to assess their language proficiency levels.

Instruments

The research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. To gather comprehensive data, the study utilized three distinct research instruments: two separate Writing Tasks, a questionnaire, and interviews. This multi-instrument approach was designed to thoroughly investigate and identify the participants' writing challenges.

Questionnaire

After the participants finished their essays, questionnaires were immediately distributed to the participants online and offline (see Appendix I). Before distribution, the draft of the questionnaire created by the researcher was presented to a research advisor in order to receive any suggestion for improvement and this draft was adjusted in accordance with comments. To ensure instrument quality, the survey underwent validation by two Thai specialists in ELT (English Language Teaching). The questionnaire was made available in both English and Thai languages. This bilingual approach allowed respondents to choose their preferred language, minimizing potential translation misunderstandings and improving response accuracy. The instrument incorporated various measurement scales, including rating, ranking, Likert, and semantic differential formats. The questionnaire was structured into four main sections: participants' background information, IELTS writing experience and expectation, perceptions of the level of difficulty of IELTS Writing Tasks, and perceptions of the level of difficulty of each criterion.

Interview

Individual online interviews were conducted with 14 participants who met the selection criterion of scoring below 6.0 in both Writing Tasks. This focus on modest English users allowed researchers to examine writing

difficulties among those who showed basic language proficiency but demonstrated notable errors. The remaining participant was excluded from this phase. The interview process began with examiner feedback, followed by 15-20 minute individual sessions. The interviews explored participants' task-specific challenges, with questions designed to expand upon their questionnaire responses and the examiner's feedback. The interview protocol consisted of three main sections containing eight questions focused on writing challenges under each criterion, plus three supplementary questions about IELTS preparation courses.

Data Analysis

The Writing Tasks were collected after one hour for evaluation by two qualified examiners: the researcher and an IELTS coach who possessed both a Certificate in Advanced English (Grade A) and an IELTS score of 9 overall (8.5 in writing). Working independently, the examiners evaluated the essays using the IELTS 9-band scale, employing 0.5-point increments to precisely identify performances below band 6.0. Both IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 and Task 2 were assessed using four primary criteria: Task Achievement (TA) for Task 1 or Task Response (TR) for Task 2, Coherence and Cohesion (CC), Lexical Resource (LR), and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA). The analysis focused on identifying writing errors in both tasks, categorizing them according to IELTS assessment criteria for subsequent interview discussions. Error frequency was calculated as percentages using MS Excel, with each instance of a problem counted as one error.

For the qualitative component, interview recordings were transcribed and subjected to content analysis. The researchers segmented the data into meaningful units, such as phrases or sentences, and categorized them according to the assessment criteria, enabling detailed analysis of individual participant challenges.

Results

This study aims to identify and analyze the primary challenges Thai candidates encounter when completing Writing Tasks on the IELTS examination, specifically in relation to the test's established assessment criteria. The central research question investigates the specific writing difficulties experienced by Thai test-takers in both Academic Writing Task 1 and Task 2 of this standardized assessment.

Participants' Demographic Information

The participants were evenly distributed across three age groups: under 18, 18 to 23, and over 23, each comprising 33.33% of the total. Females represented a slight majority at 53.33%, while males accounted for 46.67%. In terms of educational background, 26.67% were high school students, 6.67% were GED students, and the remaining participants were evenly split between university students and graduates or working individuals seeking further education, either domestically or overseas.

Participants' IELTS Experience

The study involved 15 participants whose overall IELTS scores were 6.0 or lower, with writing scores also not exceeding 6.0. Their average writing proficiency was approximately 5.5, placing them at an intermediate to upper-intermediate level, or what IELTS categorizes as “modest users.” All participants had prior experience with the IELTS exam and planned to retake it. The primary motivation for taking the test, cited by nearly half (46.67%) of the participants, was for admission into international programs in Thailand. Studying abroad was the second most common reason (33.33%), followed by school requirements (13.33%) and personal goals to enhance English skills (6.67%).

Perception of the Level of Difficulty of Writing Task 1 and 2

The difficulty levels for Writing Tasks 1 and 2 were rated on a scale from 1 to 10, where higher scores indicated greater difficulty. No participants rated either task below a 5, with scores for Task 1 ranging from 5 to 10 and Task 2 from 6 to 10. For Task 1, the most common ratings were 7 (46.67%) and 8 (13.33%), while 26.67% rated it a 10, indicating extreme difficulty. Smaller portions of participants gave it a 5 or 6 (6.67% each), resulting in an average difficulty score of 7.7 (77%). In contrast, Task 2 was rated even more challenging, with an average score of 8.6 (86%). Most participants rated it between 7 and 10, with 33.33% selecting 8, and 20% and 13.33% assigning scores of 9 and 10, respectively. Only one participant (6.67%) rated it a 6, suggesting that Task 2 was generally perceived as more difficult than Task 1.

Perception of the Level of Difficulty of Each Criterion

Based on questionnaire responses, participants' writing difficulties in both Writing Task 1 and Task 2 were categorized using the IELTS writing

criteria. In Task 1, Lexical Resources (LR) emerged as the most problematic area, with 80% of participants (12 out of 15) ranking vocabulary issues as their top challenge. This was followed by Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) at 13.33%, and Coherence and Cohesion (CC) at 6.67%, while Task Achievement (TA) was not identified as a difficulty by any respondent. In contrast, for Task 2, the primary issue shifted to Grammatical Range and Accuracy, cited by 53.33% of participants. Coherence and Cohesion was the next most problematic area (26.67%), followed by Lexical Resources (13.33%), with Task Response (TR) being the least concerning at 6.67%. These results highlight a shift in perceived difficulties between the two tasks, with grammar being a consistent challenge across both.

Self-Reported Writing Problems under IELTS Criteria in Writing Task 1

A large number of test-takers indicated that IELTS Writing Task 1—which involves interpreting and explaining visual information—presents considerable difficulties across various assessment criteria.

Table 1

Percentage of 14 Participants' Identifying the Most Significant Problem on Each Criterion in Writing Task 1

Criteria	Most Problematic Issue	Percentage
Task Achievement	Deficiency of Ability to Summarize the Given Task	71.40%
Coherence & Cohesion	The Use of Transitions, Cohesive Devices and Conjunctions	57.14%
Lexical Resource	Limited Range of Vocabulary	64.29%
Grammatical Range & Accuracy	Tenses	78.57%

The primary issue identified in the first criterion of Writing Task 1, Task Achievement (TA), was that 71.40% of participants struggled with determining what information to include in their report due to the overwhelming amount of data presented. As a result, many tended to overwrite by attempting to address every detail instead of summarizing only the most relevant points, often leading to the omission of key features. In the Coherence and Cohesion (CC) criterion, the majority of participants (57.14%)

identified the incorrect use, overuse, or underuse of transition words—along with the repeated use of conjunctions—as the most significant issue. For Lexical Resource (LR), 64.29% of participants reported having a limited vocabulary, which hindered their ability to express ideas accurately and precisely in Task 1. The most significant issue reported in the Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) criterion was the use of tenses, with 78.57% of participants identifying it as their main challenge.

Self-Reported Writing Problems under IELTS Criteria in Writing Task 2

In contrast, IELTS Writing Task 2, which requires writing an academic essay, presents a distinct set of challenges as perceived by test-takers.

Table 2

Percentage of 14 Participants' Identifying the Most Significant Problem on Each Criterion in Writing Task 1

Criteria	Most Problematic Issue	Percentage
Task Response	Limited Knowledge of the Topic	50.00%
Coherence & Cohesion	Deficiency of Ability to Express Ideas	42.86%
Lexical Resource	Limited Range of Vocabulary	42.86%
Grammatical Range & Accuracy	Tenses	64.28%

In Task Response (TR), the most problematic issue reported by 50% of participants was their limited knowledge of the essay topic, which made it difficult for them to fully develop their ideas and present well-supported arguments. For Coherence and Cohesion (CC), 42.86% of participants identified difficulty in expressing or explaining information and ideas clearly as the most significant challenge. This issue often led to unclear paragraph progression and weakened the logical flow of their writing. In terms of Lexical Resource (LR), 42.86% of participants struggled with limited vocabulary, which hindered their ability to convey precise meanings and varied expressions—this part was 20% lower than that reported for Writing Task 1, suggesting slightly greater confidence with vocabulary in Task 2. The most frequently reported issue in Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) was the incorrect or limited use of tenses, affecting 64.28% of participants. This

consistent difficulty with verb tense usage across both tasks highlights a key area for improvement in grammar proficiency.

IELTS Preparation Course

As Thai students aim for competitive IELTS scores, tutoring programs are essential in meeting their specific linguistic and cultural needs. The majority of participants (85.71%) were enrolled in an IELTS preparation course taught by either Thai or foreign instructors at the time of the study. This indicates that most Thai IELTS candidates preferred to take a formal course to prepare for the exam. However, the data also showed that a small group of participants (7.14%) had sought private tutoring in addition to the course, while one candidate (7.14%) had never attended any IELTS preparation course.

Table 3

The Length of IELTS Preparation Course (Only for Those Who Were Taking/Have Taken)

Answers	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 3 months	2	15.38
3 to 6 months	3	23.08
More than 6 month	8	61.54
Total	13	100

As shown in Table 3, the majority of participants (61.54%) had been enrolled in a course for over six months at the time of the study. Around 23.08% reported having attended a preparation course for 3 to 6 months, while a smaller group (15.38%) stated they had studied with various tutors specializing in different sections of the IELTS exam for less than 3 months.

Suggestions and Recommendations from the Participants for IELTS Coaches and Tutors

The majority of participants—10 out of 13—were enrolled in IELTS preparation courses at private tutoring schools, while the remaining three received one-on-one instruction from individual tutors. Despite many of these learners having studied for an extended period, they still struggled to achieve their target band scores. A key shortcoming of these programs was

the absence of comprehensive diagnostic assessments to identify students' existing strengths and weaknesses. Pre-tests or placement tests were rarely administered, and fundamental elements—such as tenses, vocabulary, punctuation, and other core components essential to each IELTS criterion—were often not thoroughly explained or reinforced.

The interviewees suggested several improvements for IELTS writing courses. They emphasized the need for instructors to first identify each student's specific writing problems, as current approaches often overlook individual struggles. They also criticized the use of a one-size-fits-all curriculum and recommended more personalized instruction tailored to each student's needs. Additionally, they highlighted the lack of detailed feedback, urging instructors to go beyond simply correcting mistakes by explaining errors, offering guidance, and providing suggestions to help students improve their writing skills.

Examiners' Feedback on Writing Tasks

Examiners assessed and provided feedback on the participants' writing performance. Despite the fact that many universities in Thailand and abroad require a minimum IELTS writing score of 6.0, the average score for Writing Task 1 was 5.73—rounded down to 5.5—and 5.67 for Writing Task 2, also rounded down to 5.5. It is important to note that under each assessment criterion, participants were often found to have multiple overlapping issues simultaneously.

Actual Problems under IELTS Criteria in Writing Task 1

Common issues that could arise include failing to address all the important details, inadequately comparing or contrasting data, using inappropriate language or tone, and struggling to organize the response logically. To perform well, test-takers needed to carefully interpret the visual information, identify the most salient points, and convey their analysis concisely and coherently within the word limit under 4 criteria: Task Achievement (TA), Coherence and Cohesion (CC), Lexical Resource (LR), and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA).

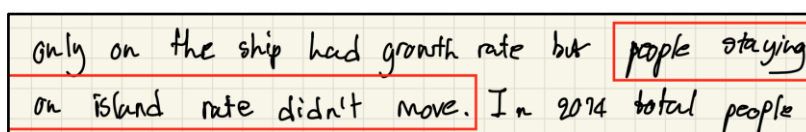
Task Achievement (TA)

Writing issues such as inappropriate formatting, omission of key features or essential details, and inaccurate descriptions or comparisons were commonly observed among participants who scored 5.5 or below.

Table 4*Problems in Task Achievement in Writing Task 1*

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Missing Key Features	15	41.67%
Irrelevant Information or Inaccurate Comparison	13	36.11%
Inappropriate Format	8	22.22%
Total	36	100%

According to Table 4, a total of 36 issues were identified under the Task Achievement criterion across the 15 participants. These included 15 instances of missing key features, 13 instances of providing irrelevant information or making inaccurate comparisons, and 8 cases of inappropriate formatting. The most frequent issue—omitting key features—occurred when participants failed to mention important elements from the graph, despite their significance. Inaccurate comparisons, slightly less frequent, involved 13 cases where test-takers misinterpreted or incorrectly compared data points or trends from the visual. Additionally, 8 errors were attributed to the use of an inappropriate format, where the structure of the response deviated notably from the expected format for Writing Task 1. This formatting issue may have also contributed to the inclusion of irrelevant information. An example illustrating inaccurate comparison is shown in Figure 11, where one test-taker wrote, “people staying on island rate didn't move” in reference to 2014—a statement not supported by the data provided.

Figure 11*An Example of Errors in Task Achievement in Writing Task 1*

Coherence and Cohesion (CC)

Examiners identified five key issues in Writing Task 1: improper use of reference and substitution, lack of clarity or repetitive information, omission of cohesive devices, incorrect use of cohesive devices, and overuse of transitions and cohesive tools.

Table 5

Problems in Coherence & Cohesion in Writing Task 1

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Overuse of Cohesive Devices	20	38.46%
Reference and Substitution	15	28.85%
Misuse of Cohesive Devices	8	15.38%
Omission of Cohesive Devices	5	9.62%
Lack of Clarity or Repetition of Information	4	7.69%
Total	52	100%

An analysis of the Coherence and Cohesion (CC) criterion revealed a total of 52 errors across the 15 participants. Several participants demonstrated multiple issues, with overlaps occurring among different problem types. Although participants generally did not perceive CC as the most challenging aspect of Writing Task 1, the data suggests otherwise. Most test-takers appeared to have a fair ability to present ideas in a logically connected manner when describing visual data. However, difficulties with cohesive devices—particularly their use, overuse, and substitution—were common.

The most frequently observed issue was the overuse of transitions and cohesive devices, accounting for 20 errors—the highest number of mistakes recorded under this criterion. Reference and substitution followed with 15 errors. Other issues included the misuse of cohesive devices (8 errors), omission of cohesive devices (5 errors), and lack of clarity or repetition of information (4 errors). As illustrated in one participant's response (Figure 12), the excessive use of connectors such as moreover and furthermore exemplifies the problem of overusing cohesive devices.

Figure 12*An Example of Errors in Coherence and Cohesion in Writing Task 1*

2010, there were about 1 million total visitors. Moreover, visitors staying on the island were more than those on cruise ships. Furthermore, by 2013, both types of visitors increased, with

Actual Problems under Lexical Resource (LR)

Based on the questionnaire results, the majority of respondents identified this criterion as the most challenging aspect of Writing Task 1. The three primary difficulties they reported were spelling errors, limited vocabulary, and issues with selecting appropriate words and synonyms.

Table 6*Problems in Lexical Resource in Writing Task 1*

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Spelling	11	37.93%
Lack of Vocabulary	11	37.93%
Word Choice and Synonyms	7	24.14%
Total	29	100%

Under the Lexical Resource (LR) criterion, a total of 29 errors were identified. According to Table 6, examiners highlighted spelling issues and a limited vocabulary as notable challenges. They distinguished word choice as the repeated use of the same terms within a paragraph, while lack of vocabulary referred to having a restricted range of words to draw from. Despite these challenges, LR was not seen as the most significant barrier in Writing Task 1, as many test-takers effectively described the charts using correct spelling and appropriate vocabulary, with 11 accurate instances each. A smaller group, with seven errors, appeared to struggle with selecting the most suitable words or synonyms based on the writing context.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA)

Five specific writing issues were identified under this criterion for Writing Task 1: sentence structure, article usage, punctuation, quantifiers, and the use of tenses.

Table 7

Problems in Grammatical Range & Accuracy in Writing Task 1

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Errors in Tenses and Tense Usage	26	35.63%
Punctuation	18	24.66%
Articles	16	21.92%
Sentence Structure	10	13.70%
Quantifiers	3	4.11%
Total	73	100%

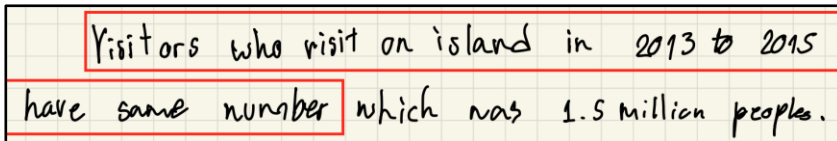
Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) was identified in Table 7 as the most significant issue in Writing Task 1. A large number of test-takers made frequent errors in tense usage, including mistakes with subject-verb agreement, active and passive voice, verb forms, and overall verb structure. Tense-related errors were the most common, with 26 instances, where verbs failed to accurately reflect the timing of actions. This finding aligned with interview responses, in which participants consistently mentioned difficulties with tense usage in Task 1 writing. The second most frequent issue was punctuation, with 18 errors. Thai test-takers often misused or omitted punctuation marks such as commas, semicolons, or periods. Article usage ranked third, with 16 errors, indicating confusion about when and how to use definite and indefinite articles. Additionally, problems with sentence structure and quantifiers were identified, with 10 and 3 errors respectively.

Figure 13 illustrates an example of a participant's grammatical errors. The sentence "Visitors who visit on island in 2013 to 2015 have same number" contained multiple issues. The phrase "visitors who visit" is redundant and should be shortened to "visitors." The preposition "on" should be replaced with "to," and the phrase "have same number" is missing the article "the." Moreover, the time expression requires "from" or

“between” for clarity. The corrected sentence would be: “The number of visitors to the island remained the same from 2013 to 2015.”

Figure 13

An Example of Errors in Grammatical Range & Accuracy in Writing Task 1



Actual Problems under IELTS Criteria in Writing Task 2

In IELTS Writing Task 2, participants demonstrated a variety of challenges across all four evaluation criteria: Task Response (TR), Coherence and Cohesion (CC), Lexical Resource (LR), and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA). Multiple issues were noted within each criterion, indicating that the test-takers faced widespread difficulties in meeting the expectations of the task.

Task Response (TR)

Similar to Writing Task 1, three major issues were identified in Writing Task 2: a lack of clear main ideas or supporting details, the inclusion of irrelevant information, and the use of an inappropriate format. These problems significantly impacted the overall effectiveness and coherence of the participants' essays.

Table 8

Problems in Task Response in Writing Task 2

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Lack of Main Ideas/Support	42	57.53%
Irrelevant Information	17	23.29%
Inappropriate Format	14	19.18%
Total	73	100%

Table 8 summarizes the key issues identified by the examiners in relation to Task Response (TR). A total of 73 errors were recorded under this criterion in Writing Task 2. Among these, the most prominent issue was the lack of clear main ideas and adequate support, with 42 instances. Many Thai test-takers either failed to fully develop their main points or provided insufficient supporting details, resulting in content that was either overly detailed in one area or too narrowly focused. Additionally, 17 errors were related to the inclusion of information that, while detailed, was not relevant to the thesis or main ideas. This suggests that participants attempted to elaborate, but often strayed from the central argument. Although none of the participants mentioned formatting as a concern during interviews, examiners noted that 14 errors stemmed from essays that leaned heavily on personal experiences rather than presenting balanced, academic arguments. This reflects a misunderstanding of the task requirements.

As shown in Figure 14, one participant's introduction included only a thesis statement without properly paraphrasing the question. This resulted in a vague topic introduction and a weak thesis, which undermined the overall clarity and direction of the essay.

Figure 14

An Example of Errors in Task Response in Writing Task 2

Even though technology has been taking part in human lives and modern devices sometimes replace former ways of reading, books and printed newspapers will not become unnecessary because they are wanted by some groups of people.

Coherence and Cohesion (CC)

Five main issues were identified in Writing Task 2, mirroring those found in Task 1. These included: improper use of reference and substitution, lack of clarity or repeated information, omission of necessary cohesive devices, incorrect use of cohesive devices, and the overuse of transitions and linking words. These problems affected the overall coherence and cohesion of the essays, making it difficult for readers to follow the flow of ideas smoothly.

Table 9*Problems in Coherence & Cohesion in Writing Task 2*

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Reference and Substitution	52	37.41%
Overuse of Cohesive Devices	39	28.06%
Omission of Cohesive Devices	18	12.95%
Misuse of Cohesive Devices	17	12.23%
Lack of Clarity or Repetition of Information	13	9.35%
Total	139	100%

In Writing Task 2, this criterion resulted in a total of 139 errors, as shown in Table 9. The most significant issue was with reference and substitution, which accounted for 52 errors. Many test-takers struggled to appropriately substitute nouns or phrases, often repeating the same terms, which affected the coherence of their writing. The overuse of transitions and cohesive devices was the second most frequent issue, with 39 errors. In an attempt to connect ideas, many participants overused linking words, leading to redundancy and disrupting the natural flow of the text. Omission and misuse of cohesive devices were also common, with 18 and 17 errors respectively. These problems stemmed from either failing to use linking devices where needed or using them inaccurately, which hindered logical progression. Additionally, 13 errors were related to the repetition of the same ideas or information within a paragraph. Instead of introducing new content or building on their arguments, some participants simply restated previously mentioned points, making their writing repetitive and less impactful.

Figure 15 illustrates this issue through the excessive use of the word “people.” The repeated use of this noun throughout the paragraph exemplifies poor reference and substitution. Rather than repeating “people,” it would be more effective to use pronouns like “they” or “them,” or synonyms such as “readers” or “individuals.” Moreover, the second reference to “people” in the sentence discussing printed newspapers and books created unnecessary repetition, which could be avoided through sentence restructuring and more varied word choice.

Figure 15*An Example of Errors in Coherence & Cohesion in Writing Task 2*

Today technology is one of the important parts in daily life. Most people use technology as it is comfortable and easy to use: smart phone and internet. In the next decade, a printed newspapers or books were not bought by people since people will be able to read everything they want on the internet without paying. There are many reasons why people will read on the internet more than buy the printed newspapers or books in the future.

Lexical Resource (LR)

Most test-takers did not consider this criterion to be a major challenge in Writing Task 2. However, Lexical Resource (LR) appeared to be more problematic compared to Writing Task 1. Four key issues were identified, showing those found in Task 1: incorrect use of singular and plural nouns, limited vocabulary, inappropriate word choice and synonym usage, and spelling errors. These problems affected the precision and variety of language in the participants' essays, reducing the overall lexical quality of their writing.

Table 10*Problems in Lexical Resource in Writing Task 2*

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Singular & Plural Nouns	62	36.69%
Lack of Vocabulary	54	31.95%
Word Choice and Synonyms	35	20.71%
Spelling	18	10.65%
Total	169	100%

Table 10 outlines a total of 169 errors under the Lexical Resource (LR) criterion in Writing Task 2. The most frequent issue was with singular and plural nouns, which accounted for 62 errors. This suggests that many Thai test-takers consistently struggled with using correct noun forms, often repeating the same mistakes with specific words. The second most common problem was a limited vocabulary range, responsible for 54 errors. In many cases, participants lacked familiarity with appropriate word usage or meanings

within context, which led to repetitive language and unclear messaging. Word choice and the use of synonyms ranked third, with 35 errors. Even though some test-takers possessed a broad vocabulary, incorrect word selection often resulted in ambiguity or miscommunication. Lastly, spelling errors occurred when test-takers attempted to use more sophisticated or less familiar vocabulary in an effort to avoid repetition. These efforts, while well-intentioned, sometimes led to inaccurate spelling of complex words.

Figure 16 highlights an example of frequent singular and plural noun errors in a participant's response. While some of these may have been accidental, many test-takers showed a consistent pattern of making similar mistakes, indicating a deeper misunderstanding of noun forms.

Figure 16

An Example of Errors in Lexical Resource in Writing Task 2

In conclusion, reading habits have changed in a decade. Peoples transfer to using internet and website are keep increasing and less expected, and website will be popular in the future. In this, I strongly agree with this topic with many reason that I have mentioned.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA)

Writing Task 2 also revealed five key issues under the Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) criterion, consistent with those found in Writing Task 1. These included: errors in tenses and tense usage, incorrect use of articles, punctuation mistakes, problems with sentence structure, and improper use of quantifiers. These grammatical weaknesses affected the overall clarity, accuracy, and complexity of the participants' writing.

Table 11

Problems in Grammatical Range & Accuracy in Writing Task 2

Problems	No. of Errors	Percentage
Errors in Tenses and Tense Usage	142	50%
Articles	58	20.42%
Punctuation	37	13.03%
Sentence Structure	30	10.56%
Quantifiers	17	5.99%

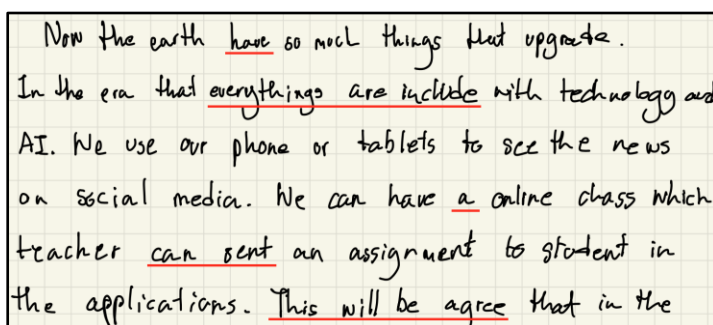
Total	284	100%
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Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) was identified as a significant challenge in Writing Task 2. The majority of Thai test-takers made errors in tense usage, often using incorrect verb forms and collocations to indicate the timing of events. The second most common issue was with articles, which accounted for 58 errors. Over half of the participants (11 individuals) made mistakes in this area. Punctuation errors also emerged, with 37 instances involving issues such as comma splices, missing commas, or misplaced punctuation marks, including periods, semicolons, colons, dashes, and apostrophes. Additionally, problems with sentence structure were noted, particularly with the use of simple and compound sentences. Many participants relied on these sentence types but used them inaccurately. A few test-takers attempted to use a mix of compound and complex structures, though they did so incorrectly, leading to a total of 30 errors in sentence structure. Quantifier errors also appeared in Writing Task 2, totaling 17 mistakes. These errors resulted from inappropriate use of quantifiers, which affected the accuracy of the descriptions of quantities.

Figure 17 illustrates an example of a participant's response that contains various grammatical errors, including issues with tenses, subject-verb agreement, verb forms, and verb structure, highlighting the need for improvement in these areas.

Figure 17

An Example of Errors in Grammatical Range & Accuracy in Writing Task 2



Total Percentage of Errors in Each Writing Task

In Writing Task 1, a total of 190 errors were identified, with Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) being the most common issue,

accounting for 38.42% of errors, followed by Coherence and Cohesion (CC) at 27.37%. In Task 2, 665 errors were observed, with grammar again being the primary challenge, making up 42.71% of errors. Lexical Resource (LR) and Coherence and Cohesion (CC) were also significant issues, at 25.41% and 20.90%, respectively. These findings highlight the areas that need targeted attention for improving IELTS writing performance, particularly grammar and coherence.

The analysis of Writing Task 2 errors revealed that grammatical issues were the most prevalent, making up 42.71% of all mistakes (284 instances). Lexical Resource (LR) errors followed at 25.41% (169 occurrences), and Coherence and Cohesion (CC) issues contributed 20.90% (139 errors). Task Response (TR) was the least problematic, accounting for only 10.98% of errors (73 instances). In total, these four categories contributed to 665 errors, providing a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by candidates in this task.

Discussion

The study focused on academic Writing Tasks in the IELTS standardized test to identify the specific challenges faced by test-takers. The initial phase involved 15 participants, each with an overall IELTS score of 6.0 or below, and writing scores under 6.0. On average, participants demonstrated an English proficiency level around 5.5, suggesting an intermediate to upper-intermediate competence. In terms of expectations, most participants anticipated achieving scores of 5.5 or 6.0 in both Writing Tasks, which aligned with their self-assessed capabilities. The research aimed to investigate writing difficulties in greater depth by organizing issues according to the four IELTS writing criteria: Task Achievement/Task Response (TA/TR), Coherence and Cohesion (CC), Lexical Resource (LR), and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA). Unlike previous studies, which generally identified problems across all criteria without distinguishing which areas posed the most significant challenges, this study offered a more detailed analysis. It became evident that Thai test-takers encountered different types of problems in Writing Tasks 1 and 2, with Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) emerging as the most problematic criterion in both tasks—contrary to the participants' own perceptions.

Writing Problems in Task 1

The study identified Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) as the most problematic area in IELTS Writing Task 1, particularly with Thai test-takers struggling to use varied and appropriate tenses, despite not perceiving

it as their main weakness. Coherence and Cohesion (CC) followed, with issues in organizing ideas and overusing cohesive devices, even though students believed they performed well in this area. Task Achievement (TA) ranked third, as many test-takers failed to summarize key features or make accurate comparisons based on visual data. Surprisingly, Lexical Resource (LR) was the least problematic, despite participants' concerns, with most issues related to spelling, word choice, and vocabulary use being less severe than other criteria. The findings revealed a disconnect between students' self-perceptions and actual performance, highlighting the need for targeted instruction in grammar, cohesion, and task-specific strategies.

Analysis of examiner feedback on IELTS Writing Task 1 identified Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) as the primary challenge, with Thai test-takers particularly struggling with tense control. These observations echo the findings of Kobkuerkul (2009), who documented similar grammatical challenges, especially tense-related issues, among Thai and other non-native English writers in academic contexts. However, the current findings present an interesting contrast to Bagheri and Riasati's 2016 research. While their study highlighted sentence structure and punctuation as major obstacles, this investigation found that candidates encountered more significant difficulties with tense variety and accuracy. This contrast demonstrates how grammatical challenges can vary significantly across different learner populations and learning environments. The divergence in findings suggests that grammatical proficiency may be shaped by multiple factors, including educational background, learning experiences, and the specific emphasis placed on different aspects of grammar during language instruction. Many Thai test-takers also encountered significant challenges with Coherence and Cohesion (CC) in Writing Task 1, which was the second most common problem. A frequent issue was their limited use of cohesive devices such as conjunctions and transition words, which are essential for producing clear and logically connected writing. As a result, many struggled to organize their responses effectively, leading to fragmented ideas and an inconsistent flow of information. Maintaining a logical progression and avoiding unnecessary repetition were crucial for high scores in this area but often proved difficult for these candidates. In addition, the third most common issue was related to addressing all the key features in the visual data. Many failed to include all essential information, made inaccurate comparisons, or chose an inappropriate format for the task. These problems are consistent with earlier research, which found that students often misinterpreted visual information, included irrelevant details, and did not structure their answers according to the task's requirements (Bagheri & Riasati, 2016). As noted earlier, Bagheri and Riasati's (2016) study highlighted notable difficulties language learners face with spelling and word formation. The findings from the present

research may help explain these challenges, as limited vocabulary knowledge emerged as a major issue among 15 participants, potentially contributing to their difficulties in producing words accurately and appropriately. Although a few participants made frequent spelling mistakes, this did not necessarily point to weak vocabulary knowledge or problems with handwriting or typing. Despite these concerns related to Lexical Resource (LR), this area was identified as the least problematic among the four main criteria for Task 1 writing. This indicates that while vocabulary issues do exist, they may be less significant or less influential in Task 1 than other writing aspects or their impact in Task 2.

Writing Problems in Task 2

In IELTS Writing Task 2, the most problematic issue for Thai test-takers was Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA), particularly tense use, article misuse, punctuation, and sentence structure. These errors often disrupted clarity and coherence. Lexical Resource (LR) ranked as the second most challenging, with difficulties in using a varied vocabulary, correct plural forms, and appropriate word choices, often leading to repetition and reduced lexical sophistication. Coherence and Cohesion (CC) followed, where test-takers struggled with referencing, substitution, and effective use of cohesive devices, resulting in unclear connections and disorganized ideas. The least problematic area was Task Response (TR), though issues like off-topic responses, improper format, and inclusion of irrelevant details were still present. Despite being the strongest area, TR still showed room for improvement, indicating that even the "least problematic" criterion posed challenges.

Studies examining Writing Task 2 performance have revealed notable grammatical challenges across different language groups. An analysis of Iranian test-takers by Pahani and Mohammaditabar (2015) showed significant difficulties with Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA), which also reflected the situations described by examiners during the assessment of Thai candidates. The fact that these two groups exhibit the same problems could signify the common problems non-native writers face in English grammar. In Jackson's (2020) investigation of Writing Tasks, learners' attempts to employ more cohesive devices often neglected core grammar issues, above all tense. The existence of such errors in the Thai candidates, as described in the results, is a disturbing phenomenon since applying the correct tense works toward grammatical accuracy and coherence and, therefore, influences scores in more than one assessment criterion. Apart from that, Yao (2014) investigated Chinese IELTS test-takers and found that candidates who scored under Band 6 frequently reused the same vocabulary in their writing, the same as the result

from the research. This pattern of repetition pointed to a narrow vocabulary range. Such limited word choice may come from inadequate vocabulary knowledge, hesitation to use less familiar terms, or the stress of the exam pushing them to stick with words they knew well. Yao's (2014) study on Chinese IELTS candidates also showed clear problems with Coherence and Cohesion (CC). Candidates who scored below Band 6 often had trouble using substitution correctly, made mistakes with references, and used too many linking words, similar to the results of this study. This suggests that many test-takers may not fully understand how to connect ideas clearly and naturally when writing in English. Across the studies reviewed, Task Response (TR) was not seen as the biggest problem for test-takers. This study's results were similar to Jackson's (2020) findings, which showed that while some candidates had trouble with essay format, it was not their main weakness. Likewise, Panahi and Mohammaditabar (2015) found that this criterion was actually a strength for their participants. In the same way, Thai test-takers in this study showed better performance in this area, even though they still made mistakes. This means they could understand and respond to the question but sometimes struggled with structure and format.

The Difference between Test-Takers' Perception and Examiners' Evaluation on Problems in Writing

Thai test-takers shared a variety of challenges during interviews, offering valuable insights into their perceived difficulties with IELTS Writing Tasks 1 and 2. However, the examiners' assessments highlighted a slightly different set of priorities and concerns, shedding light on additional or alternative issues that impacted the participants' writing performance.

Table 12

The Difference between Test-Takers' Perception vs Examiners' Evaluation in Writing Task 1

Criteria	Participants	Examiners
Task Achievement	Deficiency to Summarize	Missing Key Features
Coherence & Cohesion	Use of Transitions, Cohesive Devices & Conjunctions	Overuse of Transitions, Cohesive Devices & Conjunctions
Lexical Resource	Limited Range of Vocab	Spelling & Limited Range of Vocab

Grammatical Range & Accuracy	Tenses	Tenses
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According to Table 12, a comparison was made between Thai test-takers' perceptions and examiners' evaluations of Writing Task 1 in the IELTS assessment, across the four main criteria: Task Achievement (TA), Coherence and Cohesion (CC), Lexical Resource (LR), and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA). In Task Achievement (TA), test-takers believed their main difficulty lay in summarizing the task effectively. However, examiners identified a more critical issue: the omission of key features, suggesting a gap between what test-takers thought was required and what was actually expected. For Coherence and Cohesion (CC), participants emphasized their efforts in using transitions, cohesive devices, and conjunctions. While examiners also noted the presence of cohesive devices, they observed an overuse of these elements, which sometimes disrupted the logical flow of the writing. In terms of Lexical Resource (LR), both groups agreed on the problem: a limited range of vocabulary. This shared perception indicates some alignment between self-assessment and formal evaluation. Finally, under Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA), both test-takers and examiners identified tenses and tense usage as the most common and significant issue, suggesting a consistent awareness of grammatical challenges.

Table 13

The Difference between Test-Takers' Perception vs Examiners' Evaluation in Writing Task 2

Criteria	Participants	Examiners
Task Response	Limited Knowledge of Topic	Lack of Main Idea/Supports
Coherence & Cohesion	Deficiency to Express Ideas Cohesively	Reference & Substitution
Lexical Resource	Limited Range of Vocab	Singular & Plural Nouns
Grammatical Range & Accuracy	Tenses	Tenses

Table 13 presents a comparison between Thai test-takers' perceptions and examiners' evaluations for IELTS Writing Task 2, revealing key differences across the four assessment criteria. In Task Response (TR), test-takers believed their main difficulty stemmed from a limited understanding of the topic. In contrast, examiners pointed to a lack of clearly developed

main ideas and supporting evidence as the more pressing issue, indicating a mismatch between perceived and actual performance requirements. For Coherence and Cohesion (CC), participants reported struggles in expressing their ideas clearly. However, examiners identified more technical issues, particularly with reference and substitution, which affected the clarity and flow of writing. Under Lexical Resource (LR), both test-takers and examiners acknowledged vocabulary limitations. Still, examiners specifically highlighted repeated errors with singular and plural nouns—an issue that may not have been fully recognized by the test-takers themselves. In Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA), there was alignment between both groups: tenses and tense usage were consistently seen as the primary grammatical challenge.

These contrasting perspectives emphasize the need for Thai IELTS candidates to deepen their understanding of how writing is assessed. While some areas, like grammar, show a shared awareness, other aspects—such as content development and cohesion—demonstrate a disconnect between what candidates focus on and what examiners evaluate.

Conclusion

Thai students preparing for the IELTS Academic Writing test face recurring yet distinct challenges in Writing Tasks 1 and 2. In Task 1, the most significant issue was Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA), particularly with tenses, articles, punctuation, and sentence structure—despite students underestimating these difficulties. Coherence and Cohesion (CC) followed, as students often misused or overused linking devices, disrupting flow. Task Achievement (TA) was the third concern, with frequent inclusion of irrelevant data and missed key comparisons. Lexical Resource (LR) was the least problematic, though issues like limited vocabulary, spelling, and word repetition were noted. A total of 190 errors were recorded in Task 1, with grammar errors being the most frequent. In Task 2, Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) again posed the biggest challenge, with persistent issues in tense consistency, punctuation, and complex sentence use. Lexical Resource (LR) ranked second due to problems with word choice, singular/plural forms, and repetitive language. Coherence and Cohesion (CC) came third, as many failed to maintain logical flow or used transitions ineffectively. Task Response (TR) was the least problematic but still showed weaknesses in structure and relevance. Task 2 accounted for 665 errors, with grammar again leading. The study also found a mismatch between students' self-perceptions and examiner evaluations, highlighting the need for more targeted grammar instruction, clearer understanding of IELTS criteria, and personalized learning strategies to improve writing outcomes.

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