



Original Article

Freshmen's Difficulties with IELTS Writing Task 2

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Abstract: IELTS Writing Task 2 plays a critical role in assessing students' academic writing ability, particularly their capacity to construct and communicate arguments effectively. This article examined the difficulties encountered by first-year non-English-major students in Vietnam when writing IELTS Writing Task 2, based on four assessment criteria: Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. Data were collected through an online survey administered to 120 students. The findings indicate that students experienced the greatest difficulties in Lexical Resource and Coherence and Cohesion, with Lexical Resource identified as the most challenging criterion. Common issues included overreliance on basic vocabulary and the inaccurate use of word forms. In terms of Coherence and Cohesion, the misuse and underuse of linking devices emerged as major problems. Although Task Response and Grammatical Range and Accuracy were relatively less problematic, students continued to encounter challenges related to background knowledge, idea development, sentence structure, article usage, and word order. Furthermore, higher TOEIC scores were associated with fewer difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2, suggesting a positive relationship between overall language proficiency and writing performance. This study contributes to a clearer understanding of the specific challenges faced by Vietnamese EFL learners in IELTS Writing Task 2 and provides pedagogical implications for university-level IELTS instructors to better tailor their instructional practices.

Keywords: Essay writing, writing assessment, IELTS Writing Task 2, non-English-majored students, scoring criteria.

1. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, a strong command of English is indispensable. It not only helps people succeed in academic paths, but it also contributes to career advancement.

As a result, many English proficiency tests, such as TOEIC, TOEFL, and IELTS, are administered to assess English ability. Of these, IELTS is considered the most popular test in the world, accepted by over 140 countries with approximately 12,000 organizations [1]. The IELTS test assesses four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing, of which writing is often regarded as the most difficult for students to master [2].

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The IELTS Writing test has two tasks. In Task 1, candidates need to select the most important aspects of a chart or diagram to present and describe similarities and differences, whereas in Writing Task 2, candidates are required to argue a topic and support their points by providing supporting information and examples based on their knowledge and experiences [3]. Consequently, Task 2 is often considered more challenging for learners because they need to gather and organize ideas into a logical and coherent essay.

Several studies have explored the challenges students face with IELTS Writing Task 2 in various contexts. For instance, Tikupasang et al., (2022) identified four main problems among Indonesian EFL learners: language use, punctuation, spelling, and word choice [4]. Similarly, Panahi and Mohammaditabar (2015) examined the strengths and weaknesses of Iranian IELTS candidates based on the four grading criteria [5]. However, their research only identified which criteria were areas of strength or weakness without detailing the specific difficulties within each criterion.

While existing literature has investigated student difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2, a deeper exploration of the specific challenges within each of the four grading criteria remains underexplored. This gap is even more pronounced when looking at Vietnamese students, particularly those who are non-English majors.

To address this gap, this study aims to discover the specific difficulties that Vietnamese university students, especially non-English majors, encounter within each of the four IELTS Writing Task 2 grading criteria. By focusing on a specific group and a more detailed analysis, this research will contribute new insights to the existing body of literature. The research question that will guide this study is: *What are the specific difficulties that freshmen at a university in Vietnam face in each of the four IELTS Writing Task 2 grading criteria?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Essay Writing

Writing involves the process of creating letters and words; it also involves putting them into paragraphs and sentences, accurately spelling words, and complying with rules in written form [6]. However, the process of writing is complex as it includes expressing ideas, information, and knowledge, and organizing them logically [7], so learners need to learn how to produce and organize ideas clearly and coherently and edit the writing for accurate grammar [8]. It can be seen that writing requires abilities of critical thinking, understanding, organization, and other language aspects such as grammar and vocabulary. Hence, writing is considered a difficult skill for learners because it requires a variety of factors that involve register/style, cohesion, sentence structure, organization, spelling, and punctuation [9].

Writing an essay is the most common task for students [10]. An essay consists of many paragraphs about a specific topic, starting with an introduction and ending with a conclusion [11]. However, writing an essay is a difficult assignment for students because it requires them to create new ideas, put them into grammatically correct sentences, and understand the format and style of the essay [12]. Even students who have basic knowledge of essay writing may still be confused and also lack coherence and cohesion in their work [13]. Thus, essay writing challenges learners. This study will therefore examine these challenges in more detail to identify the specific difficulties students face.

2.2. Assessment in Writing

Writing assessment is important since it helps develop writing skills for learners. Thanks to writing assessments, teachers can identify students' strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to provide targeted feedback to help learners overcome their limitations [14]. There are many factors to evaluate a good writing essay, of which Jacobs et al. enumerated five

criteria, including content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics [15]. Content refers to the planning, writing, and editing that make the article easy to understand. Organization is the logical arrangement and organization of ideas. Vocabulary refers to the ability to choose appropriate and effective words. Language use refers to following grammatical rules and using correct structures. Mechanics involves capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.

Besides, English proficiency tests such as TOEIC and VSTEP have specific scoring criteria for their essay writing sections. More specifically, the TOEIC opinion essay is evaluated on four criteria: using reasons/examples to support your opinion, grammar, vocabulary, and organization. The VSTEP essay is evaluated based on task fulfillment, organization, vocabulary, and grammar. In general, essay writing is evaluated by whether the essay meets the requirements of the topic, organizes ideas, and uses correct and diverse vocabulary and grammar in the writing.

2.3. IELTS Writing Task 2

In IELTS Writing Task 2, the learners must write 250 words in about 40 minutes. With this task, they argue a specific topic and decide whether to agree with or disagree with a given proposition. To support their arguments, the learners are required to provide supporting information, evidence, and examples. Besides, the topics are general, relevant, and easy to understand for learners entering undergraduate or postgraduate programs [16]. Essays are scored based on four criteria, including Task Response (TR), Coherence and Cohesion (CC), Lexical Resource (LR), and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA). Understanding these criteria plays an important role in improving learners' IELTS writing skills. By dealing with each criterion, they can improve their overall performance in IELTS Writing Task 2.

2.4. Difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2

There are various difficulties that students encounter when writing academic essays in

general and IELTS Task 2 in particular. Nguyen and Le (2021) identified four challenges in writing essays in their study, including linguistic problems, psychological problems, cognitive problems, and miscellaneous problems [17]. Meanwhile, Bolsunovskaya and Rymanova (2020) believed that the difficulties engineering students faced when writing academic essays included task achievement, coherence, cohesion, spelling and word formation, grammatical range and accuracy, lexical resource, and punctuation [18]. In the study on difficulties EFL students faced in writing Task 2, Tikupasang et al., (2022) identified the four main problems students faced as language use, punctuation, spelling, and word choice [4]. Overall, the studies have pointed to difficulties related to vocabulary and grammar in writing. However, to focus specifically on the challenges in IELTS writing Task 2, this study will categorize the difficulties according to the four scoring criteria of Task 2.

2.4.1. Task Response

This is the first of the four main criteria used to evaluate writing Task 2. With this criterion, candidates must write a minimum of 250 words to present their viewpoint on a requested issue. They must make a clear, logical argument and clarify it with supporting ideas like examples, explanations, or their own experiences [16].

Alavi et al., (2020) found that Task Response was the biggest problem for learners when writing Task 2 [19]. Cullen (2017) agreed with this opinion when he showed that one of the common problems learners face is misunderstanding the task [3]. The writer made hasty decisions about the topic to discuss, ignored initial statements, or understood the topic in a broad sense, so the writing was rambling, confusing, and even off-topic. As a result, this writing lost points for the Task Response criterion.

Another challenge mentioned by Liu and Deng (2019) was inadequate foundational knowledge [20]. Learners felt confused and had no idea about their writing when faced with new topics. The topics for these essays were

diverse and unpredictable, so learners needed good background knowledge to effectively deal with any topic.

Besides, research by Nartiningrum et al., explored many difficulties Indonesian learners encountered in writing Task 2 [21]. Some students struggled to determine their stance clearly, while others presented their opinions, but due to language structure errors, this stance did not remain clear throughout the essay. In addition, some students had few ideas and ideas related to the topic, struggled to develop ideas, and lacked a conclusion, resulting in their essay failing to meet the requirements of Task 2. Furthermore, learners even provided examples that were not relevant to the discussed topic. Wicaksono et al., agreed with the findings related to the ideas of Nartiningrum et al., [21, 22]. Several students found that expanding ideas was the biggest challenge for them. Some students had ideas but could not develop them, while some could not express their opinions. However, Panahi and Mohammaditabar (2015) showed that TR was the strong point of Iranian IELTS test takers, who could identify the position and convey all aspects of the given topic [5].

In general, the TR criteria have posed various challenges in writing Task 2 for IELTS learners, as highlighted by the studies discussed above. These studies discovered that difficulties in writing Task 2 include the challenges in the task, a lack of background knowledge, struggling to develop ideas, failing to have a clear position, and not meeting the requirements of the task. These insights align with the focus of the current study on difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2 for the TR criterion.

2.4.2. Coherence and Cohesion

To meet this criterion, the message that candidates give must be clear and logical. Coherence refers to the logical organization of ideas, while cohesion is the employment of cohesive devices such as conjunctions and linking words in a natural and flexible way to connect those ideas [16].

According to Panahi and Mohammaditabar (2015), the weakest point in IELTS writing

Task 2 for students in Iran was cohesion and coherence [5]. This study showed that candidates were not good at connecting ideas in their essays, resulting in essays that lacked cohesion and coherence. Farid and Saifuddin (2018) supported this when they reported that learners' biggest challenge in writing Task 2 was essay structure [23]. Cohesion was not demonstrated among sentences in a paragraph. In addition, the writer used conjunctions incorrectly, causing the meaning of the message to become ambiguous.

Bagheri and Riasati (2016) observed both overuse and underuse of reference and substitution, as well as misuse or inconsistent use of cohesive devices [24]. In addition, they discovered that another problem in learners' essays was having no clear topic sentence. Agreeing with this, Alavi et al., argued that inaccurate, overused, and repetitive cohesive devices were the most common issues related to the cohesion and coherence of students' writing [19]. Following this, illogical paragraphs, unclear referencing, and a lack of clear progression for main ideas were also significant problems.

Additionally, Ahmed and Mohammed (2015) agreed that lexical cohesion played an important role in building a clear essay [25]. However, using appropriate tenses in writing was a vital factor in creating a cohesive essay. Their research showed that students used inappropriate tenses more than appropriate ones, causing their writing to be less appreciated.

Besides, Nguyen et al., (2022) indicated that using synonyms and antonyms to connect ideas and using vocabulary related to the topic challenged learners [27].

In summary, issues of cohesion and coherence are significant challenges in writing for IELTS Task 2. In this study, the above issues are examined to understand students' difficulties in writing Task 2.

2.4.3. Lexical Resource

Another criterion is Lexical Resource, which evaluates the vocabulary that candidates use in terms of range, flexibility, and precision of meaning when using them in the task [16].

Liu and Deng (2019) showed that insufficient vocabulary was the greatest problem for students because they tended to apply the same words repeatedly in their essays [20]. In addition, some students tended to learn difficult and rare vocabulary by heart to achieve high lexical scores, leading to their essays being filled with inaccurately used words.

Besides, candidates not only showed poor collocation usage but also faced challenges with spelling, word formation, and the use of vocabulary that was appropriate for the context [24]. Nguyen et al., (2022) also acknowledged lexical errors, including misspellings, incorrect use of verb forms, word choice, and collocations of Vietnam IELTS learners [27]. Some other difficulties identified in this study included the ability to use diverse vocabulary and distinguish between formal and informal vocabulary when writing. Bolsunovskaya and Rymanova (2020) agreed that lexical resource challenged engineering students the most, in which flexible and diverse use of vocabulary was the biggest issue for engineering students [18]. Most students primarily used common and basic vocabulary in their writing.

According to Mustafa et al., (2017), using the wrong prepositions was a lexical error as it affected the meaning of the sentence [28]. Therefore, students could deal with this problem by improving their vocabulary. Arjan et al., (2013) added that confusion often occurred when learners were unsure which preposition to use in similar contexts [29].

Overall, in this category, the difficulties come from many sides. Problems with vocabulary, spelling, collocations, and prepositions reinforce the challenges related to lexical resources in this study.

2.4.4. Grammatical Range and Accuracy

The last criterion is Grammatical Range and Accuracy. Similar to the Lexical resource criterion, this last one also denotes the diversity and precision of the grammatical structures demonstrated in test takers' writing [16].

According to Wicaksono et al., (2023), the biggest issue for IELTS Writing Task 2 learners was grammar, along with vocabulary [22]. The

study by Tran and Truong (2021) discussed an aspect of grammar that involved using complex sentences and single sentences in essays [30]. They discovered that using multi-clauses did not significantly improve results in IELTS Writing Task 2, so learners should avoid using them excessively. However, using many single sentences also made the writing less effective. As a result, learners had to consider the sentences they wanted to use in their writing to utilize them flexibly. Another problem discovered by Farid and Saifuddin (2018) was sentence fragments - incomplete sentences that appeared to be complete [23].

According to Panahi and Mohammaditabar (2015), punctuation and subject-verb agreement were difficulties found in students' writing essays [5]. Nguyen et al., (2022) also showed other grammatical challenges faced by students, such as tenses, word order, and subject-verb agreement [27]. Besides, this research indicated difficulties in using combinations of words, phrases, and clauses within sentences and using a variety of sentence structures.

Le (2023) pointed out that word form and incorrect or missing articles were challenges faced by many learners [35]. Jackson (2020) reinforced this opinion through his study, indicating that utilizing articles was one of the biggest problems in learners' writing essays [31].

Thus, studies have indicated various grammatical difficulties faced by learners when writing Task 2. These findings align with the current study to explore the challenges related to the GRA criterion.

In general, it is evident that extensive research has been conducted on the difficulties in writing essays and writing for IELTS Task 2 of EFL students, but studies on the difficulties in writing IELTS Task 2 of Vietnamese learners based on IELTS scoring criteria are limited. This study, therefore, has a significant role for Vietnamese students because understanding the specific challenges students face in Task 2 writing can lead to useful solutions to improve writing skills and overall performance. Additionally, this research can help develop more effective writing teaching strategies that

align with IELTS essay requirements and address students' weaknesses.

Thus, this study is expected to fill the existing research gap by providing detailed insights into the difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2 facing Vietnamese learners. This contributes to the wider field of language education research, providing data that can be used for further research and comparative studies.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Method

A survey questionnaire was utilized to collect data for this research. A survey is considered the most popular quantitative research design in social science because it is flexible and can be applied in many different forms [32]. The effectiveness of a survey lies in its ability to collect a large amount of data with low cost and effort. It also ensures better anonymity and can provide more straightforward answers than other methods, such as interviews. Therefore, this method is believed to be suitable for collecting opinions and feelings about an issue. In addition, standardized questions will help researchers explore relationships between variables.

Muijs (2004) also explained that there are two types of questions in a survey [32]. Using both open-ended questions and closed-ended questions in a survey helps to gather a large amount of data quickly, and respondents still have the opportunity to express their thoughts about a problem.

3.2. Research Instrument

To collect data for the study, the researchers developed a self-designed survey questionnaire after a careful review of related studies, with two versions: one in English and one in Vietnamese.. To guarantee that both versions shared the same meaning, a rigorous translation and validation process was employed. The English questionnaire was first translated into Vietnamese by two independent translators. Discrepancies between the translations were

resolved by the research team to produce a unified Vietnamese version. A pilot study was then conducted with a small group of students from a similar background to the target population. Their feedback on the clarity and comprehensibility of the Vietnamese questionnaire was used to make final adjustments before the full-scale survey with the Vietnamese version was launched.

The survey questionnaire was divided into three parts: Part 1 - demographics of the respondents, Part 2 - difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2, and Part 3 – open-ended questions. Demographic questions included the student's name, gender, major, and TOEIC score. Part 2 explored difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2 based on four marking criteria for Task 2: TR, CC, LR, and GRA. Each criterion was assessed using ten statements. The last part had two open-ended questions, allowing respondents to freely express their thoughts and opinions about other difficulties students encounter when writing IELTS Task 2 and how they deal with difficulties. The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to measure participants' level of agreement, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

This survey underwent a pilot test of 31 sample respondents. The results of the pilot test were evaluated through the Cronbach's Alpha Validity Test. The results of Cronbach's Alpha were 0.827, 0.915, 0.901, and 0.904, respectively. A Cronbach's Alpha above 0.7 is regarded as appropriate [33]. In general, all four parts had very high reliability, and all items met the requirements of the Corrected Item-Total Correlation value. Therefore, the survey questionnaire may be evaluated as reliable and suitable for official data collection.

3.3. Participants

This study involved first-year students in the advanced program of a university in Vietnam who are non-English majors. According to the training program, these students study in English and need an IELTS score above 6.5 to study specialized subjects.

The students took a TOEIC test to assess their English proficiency, and then they were divided into IELTS classes. There are two types of IELTS classes categorized based on TOEIC scores. Type 1 students had higher TOEIC scores, mainly in the range of 405-600, while Type 2 students had lower TOEIC scores, mainly in the range of 205-400. Therefore, although the students had different English levels, they all participated in IELTS classes at the university and received instructions on IELTS Writing Task 2. In addition, the English proficiency output requirement for students in both class groups was the same. A total of 120 responses were gathered for this study. The profiles of respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

	Number	Percentage (%)
Sample size	120	100
Gender		
Male	83	69.2
Female	37	30.8
TOEIC scores		
Type 1 (405-600)	97	80.8
Type 2 (205-400)	23	19.2

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

An online survey was conducted using Google Forms. Permission from the teachers who taught IELTS classes was first acquired. After that, the researcher came to each class to collect data and encouraged students to complete the survey in class. The online survey began with a consent form that students were required to read and then affirmed that they agreed to take part in completing the survey before moving on. Some respondents had questions about personal information security, which received immediate responses from the researchers. Firstly, participation in the research was voluntary. If they approved the questionnaire, they chose "Agree" to move on, and vice versa. They could withdraw at any time without consequences. Secondly, all information and data collected in the study from respondents were kept confidential. Lastly, it

was concluded that the results were only used for this study, and the collected data was retained for any future research approved by the Research Ethics Board.

The research used statistical analysis to analyze the data collected from the questionnaire. According to Wang et al. (2016), this technique is suitable for analyzing big datasets [34]. In this study, it helped the researcher summarize and evaluate the answers from 120 students quickly and easily. SPSS version 20 was used to analyze the data in this research. After the responses were coded, they were imported into the software for analysis. It created frequency distributions, tables, and graphs from a large amount of data to describe relationships between variables, leading to easier interpretation of findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Difficulties with Groups of Scoring Criteria

As illustrated by Figure 1, the highest mean ($M= 3.53$) of Lexical Resource shows that it was the biggest difficulty that the freshmen face in IELTS Writing Task 2. Coherence and Cohesion ($M=3.46$) was the second biggest challenge that students identified in writing. Mean values of Task Response ($M= 3.26$) and Grammatical Range and Accuracy ($M= 3.25$) did not illustrate a significant difference. Additionally, when compared to Table 4.1, these two criteria were not major problems for students in writing Task 2.

Overall, Lexical Resource had a high mean value. It means that the freshmen made more errors in vocabulary than others. This is similar to Bolsunovskaya and Rymanova (2000), who found that learners had to face many issues related to vocabulary [18]. The most common score range for the freshmen on the TOEIC test was 405-600, indicating that students could communicate in usual situations but were limited in new situations. Therefore, insufficient vocabulary could be a student's biggest weakness. In addition, using words incorrectly in context and lacking diversity also caused lower evaluations of students' writing.

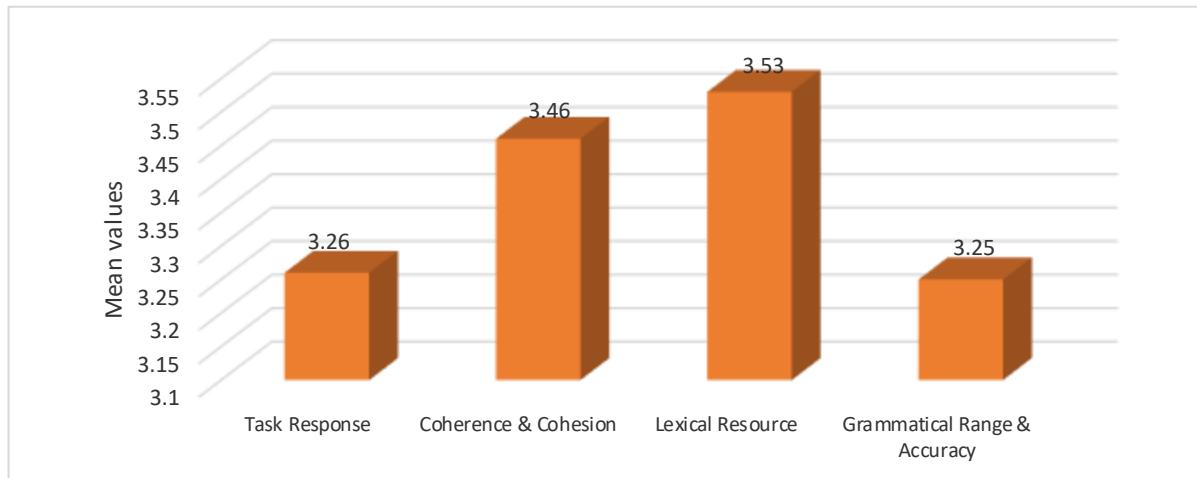


Figure 1. Mean of students' difficulty levels with four groups of scoring criteria.

Another criterion that challenges the students is Coherence and Cohesion. This finding aligns with the research of Panahi and Mohammadirabar (2015) that CC was the most problematic for Iranian learners [5]. This shows that students may struggle with expressing ideas clearly and coherently, along with a lack of connection between ideas due to not using cohesive devices. Thus, it is necessary for more

focused instruction and practice in organizing writing and using vocabulary effectively. The remaining two criteria, TR and GRA, were found to be less difficult for the freshmen. This may be because the participants had basic English knowledge of essay writing, along with a grammar-oriented English learning program, so TR and GRA were less challenging for them.

Table 2. Mean of students' difficulty levels scoring criteria

Items	Mean	Items	Mean	Items	Mean	Items	Mean
TR1	2.9	CC1	3.05	LR1	4	GRA1	3.65
TR2	3.55	CC2	3.71	LR2	3.22	GRA2	3.2
TR3	3.84	CC3	3.88	LR3	3.33	GRA3	3.19
TR4	3.38	CC4	3.61	LR4	3.58	GRA4	2.96
TR5	3.04	CC5	3.32	LR5	3.63	GRA5	3.07
TR6	3.15	CC6	3.64	LR6	3.79	GRA6	3.63
TR7	3.08	CC7	3.65	LR7	3.49	GRA7	3.3
TR8	3.33	CC8	2.89	LR8	3.25	GRA8	3.18
TR9	3.13	CC9	3.39	LR9	3.38	GRA9	3.15
TR10	3.16	CC10	3.42	LR10	3.63	GRA10	3.2

Task Response.

It can be seen from Table 2 that TR3 - "Have ideas but struggle to develop them" was the biggest challenge the students encountered

in the TR criteria when writing Task 2, followed by TR2 - "Lack of background knowledge". More than half of the students agreed and strongly agreed that they had

problems with developing main ideas and background knowledge. This is similar to the view of Nartiningrum et al. (2021) and Wicaksono et al., (2023) [21, 22]. They found that expanding ideas hindered students when writing. Some students had good ideas but could not expand them with convincing evidence, which prevented their writing from being highly appreciated. Meanwhile, Liu and Deng (2019) said that background knowledge played a very important role in providing ideas for writing, especially with new topics [20].

In short, with the TR criteria, the students all faced different challenges as reflected in their responses to the questionnaire items; however, "Have ideas but struggle to develop them" and "Lack of background knowledge" were their two biggest obstacles.

Coherence and Cohesion.

In terms of CC, incorrect use and underuse of linking words were the two difficulties that most students agree with in the CC criterion, in which incorrect use was the biggest challenge for students in this criterion. This was supported by Farid and Saifuddin (2018) [23]. He said that many students misused linking words, making the meaning of the writing unclear and even confusing for readers. Besides, Alavi et al., (2016) and Bagheri and Riasati (2020) also pointed out in their studies that underuse and incorrect use of cohesive devices were the biggest obstacles that prevented students from fully meeting the CC criterion in IELTS Writing Task 2 [19, 24]. Overall, the significant challenges for the students in CC are related to the use of linking words, so regular practice and review of linking words may help students improve their performance in the CC criterion.

Lexical Resource.

With the LR criteria, "Only use common vocabulary in the essay" was the biggest challenge for the students, followed by "Use incorrect forms of words". Bolsunovskaya and Rymanova (2020) agreed that a lack of vocabulary made students use common words when writing, which prevented their writing from achieving high scores for the LR criterion

[18]. In addition, students faced a problem related to word formation. Using the wrong word forms, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives, made students' writing awkward. This is in line with Bagheri and Riasati (2016) [24]. Therefore, improving vocabulary and learning the correct word forms will help students' writing to be rated higher on the LR criterion.

Grammatical Range and Accuracy.

The most challenging aspect that the students faced in the GRA criteria was the lack of diversity in sentence structures, followed by incorrect usage or omission of articles in Writing Task 2. Tran and Truong (2021) [30] explored that the diverse and appropriate use of sentence structures played an important role in helping the writing achieve a high score in the GRA criterion. Additionally, Nguyen et al., (2022) and Le (2023) both agreed that one of the major difficulties students faced when writing was the use of articles [27, 35]. They tended to either omit articles or choose the wrong ones. Thus, regular writing practice significantly can help students overcome grammatical difficulties they encounter in Writing Task 2.

4.2. Differences in Perceived Difficulties between Type 1 (T1) and Type 2 (T2) Students

The comparison between the two student groups reveals differences in perceived difficulties across four categories when writing IELTS Task 2: TR, CC, LR, and GRA.

As indicated in Figure 2, in Task Response, T2 students demonstrated a slightly higher difficulty level than T1, with an average score of 3.31 compared to 3.21. This suggests that T1 students felt slightly more confident in dealing with the essay requirements.

Coherence and Cohesion means were generally higher for T1, with an average score of 3.47 compared to 3.4 for T2. Despite T2 showing a higher difficulty level in CC1 (from 3.53 to 3.65) and CC7 (from 3.36 to 3.52), the overall difference suggests that T2 students found it more challenging to organize their ideas

logically. This was particularly evident in CC6, where the mean was 3.4 in T1 and 3.26 in T2.

Similarly, T1 students reported more difficulties in Lexical Resource, with an average score of 3.56 compared to 3.42 for T2. The pattern continued in Grammatical Range and Accuracy, with average scores of 3.20 and 3.13, respectively. It indicates that T1 students struggled more with grammar, particularly when attempting to make more complex sentence structures.

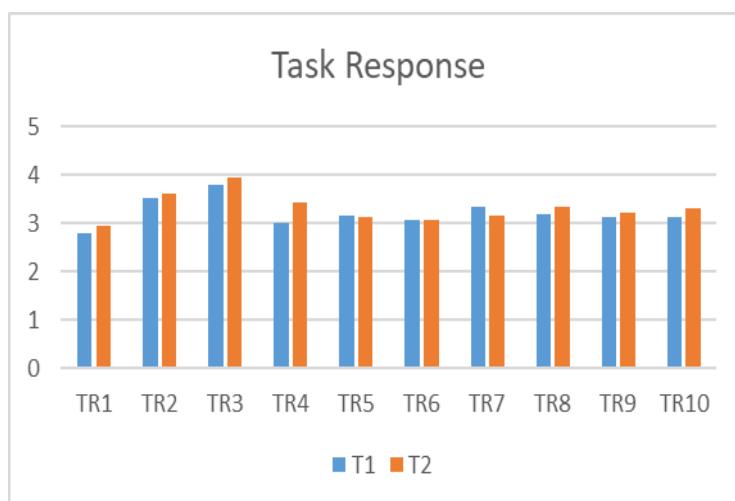
Overall, while T2 students showed a lower level of difficulty in Task Response, they experienced more difficulties in Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy, highlighting areas that may require targeted support and instruction.

4.3. Other Difficulties in Writing IELTS Task 2

An open-ended question was applied in the survey questionnaire to explore additional difficulties that students might encounter beyond those mentioned above. The results from this question again confirmed what was analyzed above. Limited vocabulary was the most-mentioned problem when students were asked about other difficulties beyond those already mentioned, in addition to the problems

mentioned above. This shows that students are aware of the challenges they face that limit their writing ability.

Limited vocabulary was also discovered in Liu and Deng's study (2019), which is the biggest challenge for learners, leading to repetitive vocabulary use in their writing [20]. Thus, this challenge for the freshmen once again confirms that Lexical Resource is one of the biggest challenges students need to overcome. In addition, not having ideas and not knowing how to develop ideas were also often mentioned by students. These findings are in line with Nartiningrum et al., (2021) and Wicaksono et al., (2023) [21, 22]. This further supports the difficulties associated with the Task Response criterion. Although the results show that TR was not a major difficulty for students, the problem of ideas could be pressing in IELTS Writing Task 2 for first-year students. Notably, several other difficulties were discovered, such as not knowing how to write a conclusion, the essay being too short and not meeting the word count requirement (250 words) and not having enough time to write. These difficulties all led to the loss of points for the TR criterion.



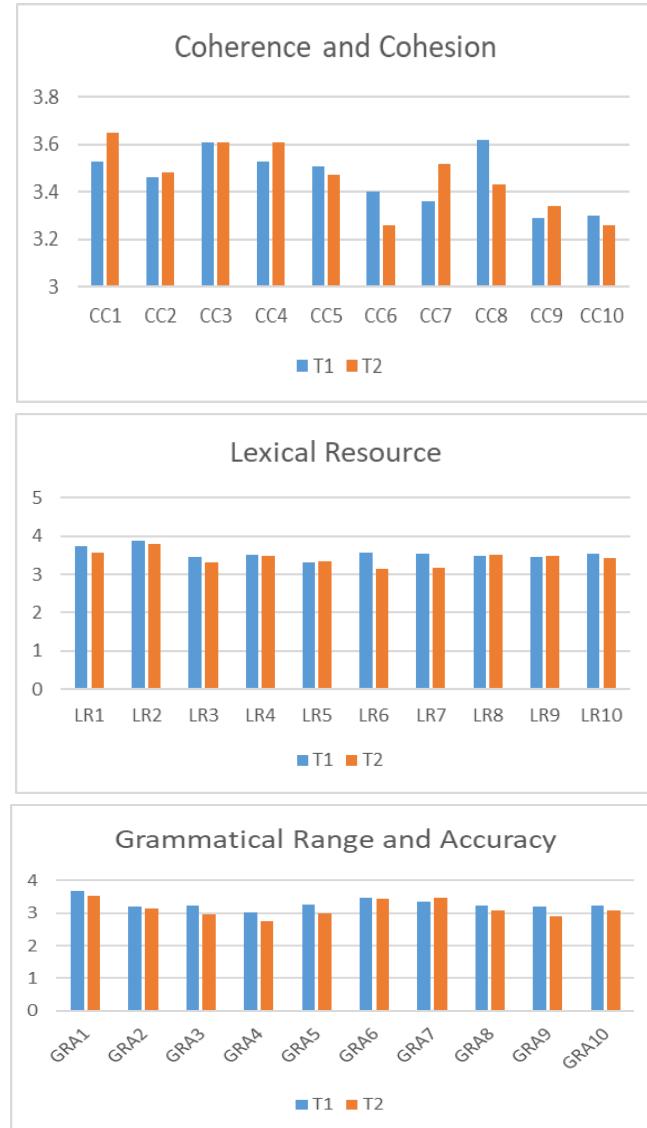


Figure 2. Mean of perceived difficulty levels between Type 1 (T1) and Type 2 (T2) student.

4.4. Implications

Another open-ended question was used in the survey to provide some solutions from the students' perspective. The most popular solution was practicing writing regularly on various topics. Writing is consistently a challenging skill for EFL learners, so regular writing practice is key to improving this skill. This finding is consistent with the study by Nguyen and Le (2021), where students reported that dedicating more time to writing practice helped them enhance their writing skills [17]. Besides, revising grammar structures and learning more vocabulary were regarded as good ways to enhance the quality of essays. It is also implied that reading habits may help students improve background knowledge, vocabulary, and

writing skills. This view is supported by Nguyen and Le (2021) [17] and Belkhir and Benyelles (2017) [36]. It is believed that learning vocabulary and grammar assists learners to write essays better, and building a reading habit contributes to improving writing skills. Besides, teachers should recommend more vocabulary sources for students to help them enhance their vocabulary. Moreover, teachers should also have more detailed discussions with their students about their essays to identify strengths and weaknesses in writing skills. This is in line with Ariyanti and Firtriana (2017) that the students expected to have more guidance and feedback from teachers while writing, and they also wanted to gain more material resources from teachers to help them boost their writing skills [37].

5. Conclusion

Through an online survey, this study investigates the specific difficulties encountered by 120 non-English-majored freshmen in IELTS Writing Task 2, using the four scoring criteria as a framework for analysis. The findings show that Coherence and Cohesion and Lexical Resource were the two most challenging criteria students faced when writing IELTS Task 2, in which Lexical Resource was the biggest challenge for students. A closer analysis, however, revealed distinct differences in the specific challenges faced by students in each class type. While those with lower TOEIC scores showed a lower level of difficulty in Task Response, they experienced significantly more difficulties in Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. This highlights specific areas that may require targeted support and instruction for these students.

The scope of the study was limited to first-year advanced program students taking part in IELTS classes in a university in Vietnam, so it cannot be representative of the difficulties of all other IELTS learners. Furthermore, there is no balance between the two groups of students being compared. Therefore, future studies could collect larger sample sizes between the two groups to present a more comprehensive overview of the findings. Besides, although the research has attempted to identify a series of difficulties in Writing Task 2 based on the four scoring criteria, it still does not create a clear connection between the presented issues or explore the causes of these difficulties. Due to these limitations, future research could also expand the scope of the causes of difficulties and use an additional research method, such as interviews with teachers, to propose appropriate solutions with high reliability and meet student needs.

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