

Let Their Voices be Heard: IELTS Candidates' Problems with the IELTS Academic Writing Test

February 2023 – Volume 26, Number 4

<https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26104a3>

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Abstract

According to the IELTS official website, IELTS candidates usually score lower in the IELTS Writing test than in the other language skills. This is disappointing for the many IELTS candidates who fail to get the overall band score they need. Surprisingly enough, few studies have addressed this issue. The present study, then, is aimed at shedding some light on why IELTS candidates usually score lowest in writing by investigating IELTS candidates' problems with the IELTS Academic Writing test. To this end, 10 Iranian IELTS candidates were interviewed concerning the difficulties they had with this test. The interview summaries were subjected to thematic analysis. The results suggested that IELTS candidates may face four main problems with the IELTS Academic Writing test: insufficient time, unclear and difficult-to-understand task instructions, "distant" topics, and overvaluation of advanced vocabulary and grammar in the scoring system. The study suggests that IELTS candidates' problem of scoring lowest in the Writing test may not be entirely due to deficiencies in their writing skills, and that certain features of the IELTS Academic Writing test may aggravate undesirable testing outcomes. The implications of the results of the study are discussed.

Keywords: IELTS candidates' complaints, writing test construction, IELTS Academic Writing test, IELTS low writing scores

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the most large-scale, internationally-recognized and high-stakes English proficiency tests in the world. Every year about 3 million people take IELTS, and before the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, "the number of IELTS tests grew to a record 3.5 million in 2018" (IELTS, 2021a). It is "globally

recognised by more than 11,000 employers, universities, schools and immigration bodies including 3,400 institutions in the USA” (IELTS, 2021b). Millions of people need an IELTS certificate for immigration and/or study-abroad purposes, and their very futures are affected by this test (Weigle, 2002). Understandably, then, scoring well on IELTS is important for IELTS candidates, and this is why they often devote a great deal of time, energy, effort, and money to IELTS preparation.

There are two types of IELTS test, Academic and General Training. For candidates taking the IELTS Academic test, the writing test seems to be a major barrier to getting the overall band score they need (usually at least 6, and often 6.5 or more for entry to an undergraduate course, see Read, 2015), insofar as IELTS candidates usually obtain lower scores in writing than in the other three language skills. For example, as the IELTS official website reports (IELTS, 2021c), in 2019 the mean performance of IELTS academic candidates was lowest in writing (compared to speaking, reading, or listening), with males scoring 5.6 and females scoring 5.7 on average. Iranian IELTS candidates seem to share this problem, as they scored lowest in writing (5.8, on average) in 2019, compared to reading, listening, and speaking, in which they scored 6.1, 6.4, and 6.4 on average, respectively (IELTS, 2021c). Müller (2015) also reported that for 90 percent of IELTS candidates, writing is the lowest-scored language skill, in that IELTS candidates usually score half a band lower in writing than in the other three language skills. Table 1, taken and adapted from the IELTS official website (see IELTS, 2021c), shows some IELTS Academic candidates’ mean performance by first language.

Table 1. IELTS Academic Test: Mean Performance by First Language

First Language	Reading	Listening	Writing	Speaking	Overall
Arabic	5.4	5.7	5.2*	5.9	5.6
Azeri	6.3	6.6	5.8*	6.4	6.3
Bengali	6.1	6.5	5.8*	6.4	6.2
Chinese	6.2	6.0	5.5*	5.5*	5.9
Farsi	6.1	6.4	5.8*	6.5	6.3
Filipino	6.8	7.4	6.1*	6.8	6.8
French	6.9	6.9	5.9*	6.6	6.7
German	7.7	7.9	6.3*	7.4	7.4
Greek	7.2	7.4	6.1*	6.8	6.9
Hindi	6.3	6.8	6*	6.4	6.4
Indonesian	6.7	6.7	5.8*	6.3	6.4

* indicates the lowest score achieved out of the four tests.

On the IELTS official website, this list continues with the same pattern for other first languages, and another list in which mean performance is shown according to nationality again displays the same pattern (see IELTS, 2021c). As can be seen in Table 1, except for Chinese speakers, who scored equally low on average in both speaking and writing, people of different first languages all scored lowest in writing. Even Greek- and German-speaking test-takers, whose overall band scores were better than those of other nationalities, scored lowest in writing.

Before we explore this matter further, please note that it is assumed in this study that the reader is familiar with IELTS and its writing tests; if not, the reader is referred to the IELTS official website (www.ielts.org) for descriptions of the tests. Suffice it to say here that the IELTS Academic Writing test has two tasks, which are conventionally referred to as Task 1 and Task

2. In Task 1, candidates are presented with a table, graph, diagram, or chart, and they are required to describe and summarize the information shown there. Sometimes they have to explain a process and its stages, or describe how something works. The candidates have to write at least 150 words in about 20 minutes. In Task 2, they are presented with a topic about which they have to write an essay of at least 250 words in about 40 minutes. The test-takers are expected to write in academic style an essay that is coherent and relevant to the topic. They are penalized if they write fewer than 250 words, or in a way that is not relevant to the topic. Task 2 has twice as many marks as Task 1, so it is important for candidates to write as good an essay as they can in 40 minutes. It is also to be noted that candidates can manage their time for writing the two tasks by spending more time on one at the expense of having less time for the other. That is to say, the time allocations for both tasks are merged; the candidates are given 60 minutes to use however they like for writing both tasks (for further descriptions see IELTS, 2021d). Note also that candidates do not pass or fail IELTS. They obtain band scores indicating their level in each skill test as well as an overall band score, and it is universities and institutions around the world that set their own requirements for admission. Institutions may require either a minimum overall band score, for example, 6.5, or such a score in addition to a minimum score for every language skill, for example, an overall band score of 6.5 when no language skill has been scored below 6.

Literature Review

For many second language learners and nonnative speakers of English writing may be a difficult skill (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Kurk & Atay, 2007; Müller, 2015; Sawir, 2005), so that such EFL learners may lag behind in writing compared to the other language skills (Berman & Cheng, 2001). A probable reflection of this difficulty is the fact that, as mentioned earlier, most IELTS candidates score lowest in writing (IELTS, 2021c).

A number of issues may lead to this difficulty. For example, second language learners may have limited linguistic resources, and may be weak in idea-generating (Maharani & Setyarini, 2019) and in attending to coherence, cohesion, and organization (Yao, 2014). They usually have to race against the allotted time in writing tests (Weigle, 2002), and they may not get sufficient practice and useful feedback in writing (Pearson, 2018). Ata (2015) reported a lack of sufficient world knowledge as a reason why some Chinese and Arab IELTS test-takers disliked IELTS and found it difficult. Yao (2014) also found that Chinese IELTS test-takers were usually weak in grammar, mechanical aspects of writing, and most noticeably in coherence and cohesion, as they frequently misused and overused cohesive devices and conjunctions. All these factors can turn writing into a daunting task.

Despite all the difficulties of writing for second language speakers, especially in high-stakes tests, surprisingly few studies have addressed the problems that candidates may have with the IELTS Academic Writing test. Even the above-mentioned studies that have addressed such problems have usually focused on the test-takers' weaknesses in the writing skill, and the authors of these studies may thus view test-takers as being solely responsible for their scoring lowest in writing.

However, the nature of the IELTS Academic Writing test itself may also be responsible in part for test-takers' problem of scoring lowest in writing. A number of studies, for example, have focused on task difficulty, showing that test-takers may score differently depending on the task type. For instance, Alavi and Masjedlou (2017) found that the difficulty of Task 1 was not

consistent for test-takers (see also Hamid, et al., 2019). They found that diagram analysis was more difficult for Iranian test-takers than the interpretation of bar charts. Ahmadi et al. (2019) found that Iranian test-takers had more vocabulary problems with tables than with charts. O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth (2003) found that task difficulty was not consistent in Task 1, and that tasks that were simpler with less information led to test-takers in Australia achieving better performances. Although these studies suggest that the IELTS Academic Writing test is not flawless, they have mainly focused on one issue, that is, task difficulty. It is contended in this paper that the IELTS Academic Writing test may present other problems too.

This study, then, tries to fill some gaps in the literature of IELTS by shedding further light on the problems that the IELTS Academic Writing test may create for test-takers, and especially by examining the problems described by the test-takers themselves. This seems to be an under-researched issue, and examination of it may encourage the IELTS organization to take some measures to resolve a problem that exists on an international scale. In light of this, we have addressed the following research question:

What problems, if any, do IELTS candidates say they have with the IELTS Academic Writing test?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 10 Iranian IELTS candidates (2 males, 8 females, mean age 27). On average, they had experience in learning English for 7 years, and they had experience in preparing for IELTS for one year. They all were Persian native speakers who had learned English as a foreign language.

All the participants had hands-on experience of the IELTS Academic Writing test, experiencing the test conditions both in mock tests and their real IELTS test. They had all taken the Academic version of IELTS, and on average they had obtained an overall band score of 5.5, with an average score of 5 in the Writing test (see Table 2). Although the researchers did not see the test-takers' report cards, the scores reported to them were assumed to be accurate. In all cases, the test-takers indicated that they were dissatisfied with their Writing band scores. The study focused on the IELTS Academic Writing test because most IELTS candidates take the Academic version of IELTS (77 percent in 2019, see IELTS, 2021c).

The participants were selected on the basis of purposeful sampling and by means of convenience and snowball sampling methods. Only test-takers who had taken the IELTS Academic test were selected for the study. Initially, test-takers who were available at the time of data collection were used as subjects (convenience sampling), but the number of subjects was then increased by requesting participants to ask their friends who had taken the IELTS Academic test to participate in the study (snowball sampling). Three participants joined the study in this way. The participants came from different cities and schools in Iran and had several different teachers of English, but because of the small sample size they cannot be considered a representative sample of IELTS candidates in Iran or a region of Iran.

Procedure

The participants in the study were interviewed by the researchers, but circumstances dictated that the interview formats varied. Five of the interviews were conducted in person. For the

other five participants interviews could not be conducted in person, primarily due to the Corona virus pandemic. Two of these participants were interviewed online via WhatsApp video calls. The other three participants, those who were selected through snowball sampling, could not be interviewed online in video-based calls. Instead, they sent their comments in the form of recorded voice messages through the social networking sites Telegram and WhatsApp.

The in-person and video-call interviews were semi-structured in that they had one main question, which was “What are your problems or difficulties with the IELTS academic writing test?” and two follow-up questions asked at appropriate times, which were “Can you elaborate on that, or explain further?” and “How do you think that problem could be solved?” Moreover, except for one of the themes, that is, *distant topics*, for which we did not have any counterarguments, a follow-up counterargument was also used to better understand the participants’ views. For example, if the participants mentioned insufficient time for the IELTS essay writing test as one of the problems that they had with this test, we pointed out that practicality and administration exigencies might not allow an increase in the allotted time. The reasons for the follow-up counterarguments were to make the interviews more interactive, to see what the participants might say if a counterpoint was mentioned, and to elicit more in-depth ideas.

The formats of the main question and the follow-up questions were identical in all the in-person and online interviews. The respondents who sent in their comments were asked two questions in the form of a recorded voice message, but obviously no direct follow-up questions to points mentioned by the respondent could be asked. The two questions asked were “What are your problems or difficulties with the IELTS academic writing test?” and “How do you think these problems could be solved?”

The synchronous interviews (both in-person and online) each took about 15 minutes. The interviewees’ comments were transcribed in the form of summaries in English. This summarizing process meant that if a participant repeatedly mentioned, for example, that the time allowed for the IELTS academic writing test is not sufficient, this was recorded in the transcriptions only once. The transcriptions written in this way were about 600 to 700 words long. The recordings submitted by the other three participants were only around five minutes each in length, resulting in summary transcriptions that were 150 to 250 words long.

The participants were asked to feel free to talk about any problems or difficulties they had with the IELTS Academic Writing test. All the participants were interviewed in Persian, their mother tongue, so that they could talk easily, without any language barriers. The participants gave their verbal consent to the recording of their voices, the summarizing of the main points they raised, and the use of the summaries for research purposes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to the interview summaries to identify any common problems or difficulties. This analysis included initial open coding followed by selective coding (see Corbin & Strauss, 1990), resulting in the generation of four themes. In three cases, the generated themes were the same as the initial codes (e.g., insufficient time), but in one case (*distant topics*) a broader term had to be considered to cover three different codes.

In open coding the data, the coders, who were the researchers of this study, were in agreement about the codes to a great extent. After an initial general discussion session, the coding was

carried out by the researchers working individually. Then, the codes were compared. There was disagreement about the codes of only one theme. The researchers resolved this disagreement by selecting a broad name (*distant topics*) that could cover the related codes. Finally, the coding was reviewed, and the phi-coefficient index of agreement reached .91. Overall, four themes were generated, which highlighted four main problems or difficulties that the participants claimed to have had with the IELTS academic writing test. These themes were insufficient time, distant topics, the overvaluing of advanced vocabulary and grammar, and unclear and difficult-to-understand task instructions.

Attending to the Quality of the Qualitative Data

The quality of qualitative studies is conventionally discussed in relation to the criteria for research trustworthiness in qualitative inquiries proposed by Guba as long ago as 1981 (Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In defining aspects of qualitative studies that can be considered parallel to the four aspects of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity in quantitative studies, Guba (1981) proposed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, respectively, for qualitative studies.

In attempting to adhere to Guba's conceptualization of trustworthiness, we tried to attend to the credibility of this study by member checking (also known as participant or respondent validation). We did this member checking orally at the end of each of the seven synchronous interviews by reiterating the main points that the participants had raised, and getting confirmation from them that the main points had been extracted correctly. With regard to the transferability of the results of this study, although the small sample size of the study does not allow for much generalization, it may not be too far-fetched to think of other IELTS candidates in other contexts having the same or similar problems with the Academic Writing test. Clearly, though, the small sample size is one of the main limitations of this study, and this may restrict the transferability of the results.

Concerning dependability, we used an external audit to check the process and product of the data analysis (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This external audit was conducted by a university lecturer (a colleague of one of the researchers) who was an expert in qualitative and mixed-method research. The auditor confirmed almost all the processes and products of the analysis but recommended that the researchers disregard what they had coded as "problem with the minimum-word requirement" because only two participants had referred to this problem. We agreed to consider a problem to be a theme if at least three participants had referred to it. Finally, to attend to confirmability, we used the same external auditor to confirm that the findings are supported by the data.

Results

All the IELTS candidates interviewed raised a number of issues as being the problems or difficulties they had with the IELTS Academic Writing test. The analysis of the interviews by thematic analysis generated four themes, which answered the research question of the study by showing that the IELTS candidates surveyed complained about insufficient time being allotted to the writing tasks, about topics being in some way distant from them, about the overvaluing of advanced vocabulary and grammar (AdVG), and about unclear and difficult-to-understand task instructions. Table 2 lists the problems reported by the participants.

Table 2. Themes Mentioned by the Participants

Participant	Writing test score	Themes mentioned			
		Theme 1 Insufficient Time	Theme 2 Distant Topics	Theme 3 Overvaluing AdVG	Theme 4 Unclear Task Instructions
1	6	*	*	*	
2	5.5	*	*		
3	6.5	*	*	*	*
4	5	*		*	*
5	4.5	*	*	*	
6	4	*	*	*	
7	4.5	*	*		
8	6	*		*	*
9	4	*			
10	4	*	*		
Number mentioning each theme		10	7	6	3

Insufficient Time

A problem that all the participants mentioned as one of the biggest challenges of taking the IELTS Academic Writing test was insufficient time for both Task 1 and Task 2. As Participant No. 3 (P3) noted, the overall 60-minute allotted time “just allows candidates to write a first draft.”

The insufficient time for writing may create a number of problems for test-takers. To start with, P1 complained that “there is no time to change a paragraph or revise the organization of your writing much.” P3 noted that because candidates have to write fast, they often make spelling mistakes or omit words. Moreover, as P4 maintained, “the allotted time for Task 2 is very anxiety-provoking. I think that 95 percent of IELTS candidates are afraid of Task 2.” Although this may seem exaggerated, there is no denying the fact that impromptu timed writing tests can be stressful for second language writers (Cassady & Johnson, 2002; Maharani & Setyarini, 2019).

Another difficulty that insufficient time may create for test-takers is that IELTS writing tasks may force candidates to get used to thinking and writing quickly, which can be very difficult for test-takers who are good thinkers and writers but not fast ones. P9 maintained that:

Writing proficiency does not have much to do with writing fast; I think many proficient writers take their time in writing and do not sacrifice the quality of writing to write fast. The 60-minute time limit cannot measure test-takers’ individual differences.

Along the same lines, P1 mentioned “individual differences” as a determining factor in scoring well in Task 2, because, for example, some people are generally, even in their mother tongue, fast thinkers, but others may be slow thinkers. This may seriously affect candidates’ performance in Task 2. As P1 put it:

If fast thinkers can do better in Task 2, it does not necessarily mean that they have higher proficiency in writing. If slow thinkers were provided with more time, they would be likely to outperform fast thinkers in the quality of writing. I believe that the allotted time to both tasks is so insufficient that I cannot but think that IELTS values the speed of performance more than its quality.

When the participants were asked how this problem can be solved and how much time is sufficient for both Task 1 and Task 2, they suggested different amounts of time. P2, for example, said that:

I think, on the whole, at least 30 minutes should be added to the test in a way that for Task 1, we can have at least 30 minutes instead of the current 20 minutes, and for Task 2, we should have 60 minutes instead of 40 minutes.

P9 believed that Task 1 should have at least 45 minutes, and Task 2 should be given at least 90 minutes. The other participants had similar ideas about the test time, believing that it should be increased considerably.

When, as a counterpoint, we highlighted the fact that practicality issues, administration time, and general test exigencies may not allow test designers to increase the test time, the participants did not accept these lines of argument. As P2 put it:

Increasing the test time by 30 minutes does not seem impractical to me. We pay a great deal of money for the test. Why cannot they give us some more time for the writing test so that we can score better on the test?

P4 made similar comments, accusing IELTS of intentionally making the test difficult:

I do not know what happens if they increase the time of the writing test to, say, 90 minutes. I think the time of the reading test should also be increased by at least 30 minutes. It seems to me that IELTS has intentionally made the test difficult so that test-takers have to take IELTS a couple of times so that IELTS can make a lot of money this way.

These comments are similar to some of the comments made by some of the participants in Hamid et al.'s (2019) study, as one of them believed that "after doing the test a couple of times I have just realised what a biggest scam the Ielts [sic] is. They are making it extremely hard to pass so that they can rip off money from the students" (p. 14). Although such accusations are purely speculative and not based on any evidence, it seems likely that a number of IELTS candidates share this view.

Distant Topics

As far as the topics of the writing tasks are concerned, seven of the participants discussed a number of problems, which led to three codes in the thematic analysis. Choosing a name for the theme that could cover the three codes was rather difficult, but ultimately the coders settled on the name "distant topics" as they felt that this term could best cover all the codes produced. The first code was named *too general topics*. Three of the participants complained about topics that were too general. One of them gave an example, saying that:

A topic such as whether scientists are more important for societies or politicians is too general because it depends on who the scientists and politicians are and in what

societies. This much generality may be good for some test-takers but it makes me come up with so many ideas that I get confused by them.

P5 provided us with another example, contending that a topic such as *the problems of women in societies* can be too general and that it can vary considerably from culture to culture. She suggested that a narrower topic such as “the problems of women in *your* society” could be a better one because test takers could more readily relate to it.

On the other hand, two of the participants complained that sometimes topics are too specific. This issue caused us to produce another code in the thematic analysis, namely *too specific topics*. P7 complained about topics such as *sewage or wastewater coming out of factories*, noting that “even in their mother tongues many candidates may not have enough knowledge of many of these technical topics.” She maintained that “IELTS topics generally require candidates to have vast general knowledge,” and this may give an advantage to candidates of greater age and with more life experience. She noted that these features may not be common among IELTS candidates, as most of them are probably university or potential university students.

The third code was *one-topic policy*. This was included because two participants highlighted the fact that there is no choice of topic in the IELTS writing tests. Candidates are provided with only one topic in both Task 1 and Task 2. As P10 put it, “when there is only one topic for the writing tasks, there is a good chance that we may not relate to the topic as it can be too unfamiliar to us.” P1 maintained that “if topics are well-chosen and if there is a choice of topic, there is a better chance that candidates can relate to one of the topics and write more confidently.”

Overall, then, participants felt that the problems *too general topics*, *too specific topics*, and *one-topic policy* may make some topics too distant for them to relate to.

Overvaluing Advanced Vocabulary and Grammar

Another problem that six of the participants had concerning the IELTS Academic Writing test was that they felt that advanced vocabulary and grammar (AdVG) are overvalued in the scoring of the test. Although on the IELTS official website and in the Writing Task 2 band descriptors there is no reference to the word “advanced,” there are some expressions such as “less common lexical items,” “uncommon lexical items,” “complex structures,” and “complex sentence forms” that are used in describing band 6 and above (see IELTS, 2022a). These expressions were referred to as advanced vocabulary and grammar by six of the participants, who also questioned the rationale behind using them to score 6 and more. P3 believed that:

For native-speaker novelists, it may be good to know a lot of AdVG, as they may want to give a detailed literary description of, say, a place or a person. But for non-natives who want to join an academic community, the most important skill to learn is to write clearly and to the point in a way that is easy to understand.

P1 noted that:

I can usually write a short and to-the-point essay that answers the essay topic, but when I am expected to use AdVG, I unnecessarily lengthen the essay to show my knowledge of AdVG, making my writing long and with redundant ideas.

P6, who also talked about AdVG, believed that overvaluing advanced vocabulary poses an unnecessary burden on candidates to learn and use difficult or less common words, and that many test-takers do not know what words and grammar structures count as advanced. He added that the weight given to AdVG makes some candidates try to show off their knowledge of vocabulary by using convoluted words that do not have much to do with the topic and context of the writing.

When we mentioned, as a counterpoint, that the rationale behind valuing AdVG can be the fact that by knowing AdVG we can communicate subtle nuances of meaning and that academic discourse is not devoid of AdVG, they showed more flexibility in their ideas, but still maintained their positions. As P8 stated:

I am not saying that AdVG should not be valued. It should not be overvalued in a way that for getting a 6.5 or 7 band score we have to think about an advanced word for every sentence. I think many test-takers' problem is that they force themselves to use an advanced word in almost every sentence when it is really not necessary. This happens because of overvaluing AdVG.

When we asked what *overvaluing* means, P8 noted that AdVG is overvalued because for scoring 6 and more, test-takers have to use them. She believed that AdVG should not be a requirement for scoring 6 or 6.5 so that test-takers are not worried about using them in every sentence. Overall, then, the views about AdVG expressed by some of the participants may be considered to represent another problem that IELTS candidates might have with the IELTS Academic Writing test.

Unclear and Difficult-to-Understand Task Instructions

As far as task instructions are concerned, three participants pointed to some problems that the IELTS academic writing test can create for them. The broad theme was that task instructions are sometimes unclear and difficult to understand. As P4 put it:

A disturbing problem that my IELTS buddies and I have experienced is that the instructions for Task 2 are frequently difficult to understand and need careful analysis to see what they want and what they do not want us to do. This is such a common problem that in many of the IELTS preparation books that I have worked with there are some sections to practice the analysis of task instructions in the writing tests.

There may be some reasons why task instructions are sometimes difficult to understand. For example, one test-taker observed that sometimes task instructions do not clearly specify what test-takers are expected to do. As P3 pointed out, "in Task 1, for example, candidates are not expected to write a conclusion based on their own opinions, but this can only be learned in IELTS preparation textbooks, not in the instructions for Task 1." P8 complained about some special words in Task 2 instructions. She remembered that in one essay topic she was asked to write about a *sedentary* lifestyle, and she did not know, at the time, what *sedentary* meant. As she put it, "it is quite unfair that I lose a lot of marks in writing just because I do not know what *sedentary* means. I think task instructions are sometimes intentionally made difficult so that we cannot write relevantly."

When we mentioned, as a counterpoint, that it might not benefit IELTS to intentionally make task instructions difficult to understand, this participant quickly gave her opinion to the contrary. As she put it:

Of course, it can benefit IELTS. IELTS does not allow test-takers to take the writing tests to the best of their abilities. I think IELTS owners have intentionally made the test difficult to make more money out of test-takers' failures.

As mentioned earlier, these comments are again in line with some of the comments made in Hamid et al.'s (2019) study, which accused IELTS of being a money-making industry. Some of the participants of that study also felt that if they cannot understand IELTS task instructions clearly, especially because of unknown vocabulary used in the instructions, they may get a lower score than they deserve on the writing test.

Discussion

As reported in the Results section, the most frequently mentioned problem that the participants had with the IELTS Academic Writing test was *insufficient time*. It is easy to imagine that having insufficient time to write may cause test-takers to make spelling and vocabulary mistakes, create additional anxiety for them, prevent them from thinking enough about the topic, and only allow them to write a single draft, with no time for rewriting. As Weigle (2002) noted, because in impromptu writing tests test-takers have little time and opportunity to think about a given topic, "the writing may thus represent a somewhat superficial consideration of the topic and a first draft only" (p. 176). It is, then, understandable that a piece of writing that is not well-thought-out, that is a first draft, has spelling and vocabulary problems, and is written under stress may not have a high chance of getting a good score.

The solution to the insufficient time problem seemed straightforward to the participants. They naturally wished they had more time for the writing test. To them, test exigencies did not seem to be a justifiable reason for not increasing the time allowed for the test. However, the fact that the participants in this study felt that the time allowed for the writing test was inadequate does not necessarily mean that increasing the allotted time would have any statistically significant effect on IELTS candidates' writing scores, and few studies have investigated this. One notable study that examines the effects of time pressure in IELTS-style essay tests is that by Wu and Erlam (2016). In that study, the researchers first gave participants as much time as they wished to write an IELTS-style essay, and then had participants write a second essay in which they were restricted to 70% of the time they had taken for the first one, thus increasing the time pressure equally on all participants. The authors found that having restricted time had statistically significant negative effects on the length in words and the scores for content quality of essays written by their participants, but not on the accuracy and complexity of their writing. Further research is clearly needed to see whether increasing the time of the IELTS academic writing test would help IELTS candidates to score significantly better in the test, and if so on which of the component scoring scales.

It would also be interesting to see what amount of added time would lead to statistically significant increased scores. For example, adding 20 minutes to the test time might have a different effect on candidates' scores than adding 30 minutes. It could also be interesting to find the point beyond which increasing the test time had no further effects on candidates' scores.

Regardless of whether increasing the time allotted to the writing test does or does not lead to increased scores in some cases, it is clear that many IELTS candidates may find the current allotted time insufficient and may attribute their low scores in part to this. Although increasing the time allowed for the test might present the IELTS with practical problems as far as the

administration of the test is concerned, the organization might also benefit from such an increase by improving the face validity of the test.

The second most frequently mentioned problem was that of *distant topics*. Various participants said that setting topics that were either too general or too specific, and the policy of not offering candidates a choice of topics, could all adversely affect performance on the IELTS Academic Writing test. An essay topic should ideally be written in a way that is neither too general nor too specific so that test-takers can better relate to it, and giving a choice of topic might help to reduce the chance of test candidates finding the topic on which they had to write too distant from their own knowledge and experience. IELTS says that it “ensures test questions are extensively trialled with people from different cultures to confirm they are appropriate and fair” (IELTS, 2022b) and claims that “it is unbiased and fair to *all* test takers from *all* backgrounds” (IELTS, 2021b, emphasis added). Nevertheless, Uysal (2010) questions IELTS’s claim to avoid topics that may introduce a bias against some candidates, maintaining that:

Controlling the topic variable is not an easy task as it is highly challenging to determine a common knowledge base that can be accessed by all students from culturally diverse backgrounds and who might have varied reading experiences of the topic or content area. (p. 316, referencing Kroll and Reid, 1994)

The points raised by the participants in our study would seem to suggest that not all topics were felt to be fair to them. However, even if some topics are unfamiliar to a degree to some test-takers, there is no certainty that this variation in level of familiarity will have any statistically significant effect on scores. One notable study in this regard is that of Freimuth (2014), who found that familiarity with topics on Task 2 had no statistically significant effects on the band scores obtained by intermediate language learners in the UAE. Further research is needed to see how strong an influence topic familiarity can have on test-takers’ band scores.

The third problem that was mentioned by some of the participants was *overvaluing advanced vocabulary and grammar* (AdVG). They believed that vocabulary and grammar are overvalued in the IELTS Writing tests in that their use is necessary for obtaining a band score of 6 or 6.5. Although there are four scoring criteria that are averaged in the overall IELTS score, and one can thus still score 6 or more overall by getting, say, 5.5 on the vocabulary and grammar scales and a sufficiently high score in the other two scales to compensate for the low score in vocabulary and grammar, still it is a fact that to score above 6 on the vocabulary and grammar scales one has to use AdVG.

When the participants were asked what could be done as a solution to the problem of overvaluing AdVG, they maintained that the solution to the problem would require some attitudinal changes. As P5 noted, AdVG should not matter much because someone might write a text using simple vocabulary that is much better than one by someone else who uses advanced vocabulary. As P8 put it:

What should be a criterion for scoring as far as vocabulary and grammar are concerned is the correct use of words and grammar structures when the situation and context require the use of them, not necessarily the use of AdVG. This is so because, in real-life international communication, we do not usually use AdVG to show off our linguistic competence.

These comments seem to be reflected in the literature on World Englishes and English as a lingua franca (ELF). When the context of use is international, the aim of language use should be communication and mutual understanding. Seidlhofer (2004), for example, in depicting some of the features of ELF, maintained that:

As long as a certain threshold of understanding is obtained, interlocutors seem to adopt what Firth (1996) has termed the “let-it-pass principle,” which gives the impression of ELF talk being overtly consensus-oriented, cooperative and mutually supportive, and thus fairly robust. (p. 218)

Overvaluing AdVG would not seem relevant to this “cooperative and mutually supportive” communication in international contexts. Quite the contrary, overvaluing AdVG in IELTS may undermine IELTS’ status as an international test. Even in academic writing, communication should come before AdVG. As the American Psychological Association (2010) has emphasized, “the prime objective of scientific reporting is clear communication” (p. 65).

We suggest that candidates should not be encouraged to use AdVG in IELTS just to show off their knowledge. Grammar and vocabulary should be used for communicative purposes. Candidates can be encouraged to present their ideas clearly, and preferably with appropriate words and grammar structures. This does not mean that candidates who use AdVG should be penalized. The use of AdVG is fine when the situation requires it. The point is that AdVG should not be overvalued in scoring. A possible solution to this problem, then, could be to decrease the scoring weight of the vocabulary and grammar scales. Another solution might be to rewrite the band descriptors for the various levels.

The last theme or problem discussed was *unclear and difficult-to-understand task instructions*. It was mentioned that sometimes task instructions are not as clear as they should be, in particular because of the use of difficult-to-understand words (e.g., *sedentary*). The easiest solution to this problem might be simplifying those words that have a high chance of being difficult for some test-takers. Let us consider an example of an IELTS Task 2 instruction:

It is now 30 years since man landed on the moon. Since then more and more money has been spent on space research and exploration. Some people think that this is not a good use of our resources and that any hope of establishing human colonies in space is unrealistic. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this opinion? (Coffin & Hewings, 2004, p. 154)

If some candidates do not know the words ‘establishing’ and ‘colonies’, they may have difficulty in completely understanding the requirements of the task. They may write off-topic, losing valuable points as far as “Task Response” is concerned. But if these words are simplified, there is a better chance that more test-takers will understand the task instructions. In the above case, for example, “establishing human colonies in space” could simply be changed to “people living in space”.

There seems, then, to be room for improvement concerning task instructions in the IELTS Academic Writing test. By providing clearer instructions, IELTS may decrease the likelihood that some candidates, especially the ones with lower language proficiency, may be put at a disadvantage by failing to fully understand the task prompt. It is true that not all candidates will do better if they are provided with clearer instructions, but some may do, because they may then not write off-topic or irrelevant essays. The amount which simplification of the

instructions might contribute to the scores of test-takers of different proficiency levels could be an interesting area of investigation.

Although the current study cannot show whether the problems discussed above do indeed contribute to the IELTS candidates' problem of scoring lowest in writing, they can nevertheless point to under-researched areas worthy of investigation (see Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Research is needed to clarify whether or not these factors can be sources of systematic assessment error, thus introducing bias and unfairness into the design of the IELTS Academic Writing test.

Summary and Conclusion

The participants in this study stated that in the IELTS Academic Writing test they find it difficult to handle the existing time limits, that task instructions may be difficult for them to understand, that they may find topics "distant" from them in some sense, and that they had problems with the perceived need to use advanced vocabulary and grammar. What can be concluded from the results of the present study is that regardless of how good and fair a test such as IELTS, and in particular its Academic Writing test, may seem to its owners and developers and to the receiving institutions, candidates may think and feel differently and may have a number of problems with the test, preventing them from seeing it as a fair means of assessing their language proficiency.

Some points are in order concerning the limitations of the study. The main limitation was the small sample size, which means that it is impossible to conclude that the problems mentioned by the participants are shared to a similar extent by other IELTS candidates, whether internationally or even just in Iran. The small sample size may also mean that IELTS candidates' problems are most probably not limited to the ones expressed by the participants in this study. Another limitation of the study was that it did not empirically investigate whether the problems discussed really do lower test-takers' scores. Further large-scale studies, of both survey and cause-effect experimental kinds, are needed to see what problems IELTS candidates may have with the IELTS Academic Writing test and whether these problems prevent them from scoring better on this test.

Despite its limitations, however, this study may be important with regard to a number of issues. To start with, most studies, as discussed in the literature, blame test-takers for scoring low in writing by highlighting their weaknesses. Test-takers are suggested to be either weak in different aspects of writing (see, for example, Ahmadi, et al., 2019; Maharani & Setyarini, 2019) or unfamiliar with IELTS genres of writing (Pearson, 2019). Unlike the studies mentioned in the literature review, this investigation has adopted a different perspective and provided a chance for the test-takers to voice their concerns.

Hearing IELTS candidates' voices and caring about the problems that they may have with the IELTS Academic Writing test and their concerns about the test can benefit IELTS too. Test-takers who want to study abroad usually need an English language proficiency certificate, and there can be fierce competition among well-known tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, and the Pearson Test of English Academic (PTE). If people needing to certify their level of English learn that the test-takers who have taken IELTS are dissatisfied and disenchanted with this test and think that IELTS cannot assess their English proficiency reliably and accurately, they may opt for another test.

Ultimately, few people are affected by the results of IELTS as dramatically as IELTS candidates themselves. Thus, although researchers, IELTS instructors, experts in language testing, and the authorities of the institutions that evaluate international students by their IELTS scores may all have their own ideas about why IELTS candidates usually score lowest in the writing test, IELTS candidates' perspectives can be equally important, and therefore, it is our view that feedback from candidates should be taken into account in the test design. Addressing the difficulties identified by test takers may help to make IELTS a fairer test as well as solving the IELTS candidates' problem of scoring lowest in writing.

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To Cite this Article

Arefsadr, S. & Babaii, E. (2023). Let their voices be heard: IELTS candidates' problems with the IELTS academic writing test. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 26 (4). <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.26104a3>

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