

## Examination of the Development of Writing Skills of Turkish Students Who Succeeded in the IELTS Exam

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to examine the development of writing skills of Turkish students who are successful in the IELTS exam. This qualitative research is designed in a descriptive phenomenological model. The participants in this study are four female students. The data of the study were collected through a semi-structured interview. The findings obtained were analyzed by content analysis method. The findings of the research show that students focused on the structure of the target language. They memorize word and sentence patterns to improve the content of their essay. To achieve IELTS, they attended online courses and received feedbacks from their peers.

**Keywords:** Writing Skills, IELTS Exam, Language Learning, Vocabulary

### 1. Introduction

As English has become a language used in every field internationally from education to trade, the number of English learners is also constantly increasing. Therefore, International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is widely used to evaluate the English language abilities of persons who want to live or work in English-speaking countries or especially by those who are going to follow academic courses such as a master's degree at a university (Jones, 2008; Ariani & Arkham, 2020).

The tests include four modules: listening, reading, speaking and writing. With regard to writing, there are two tasks in order to justify an opinion or propose a solution to a problem (McCabe, 1999). However, in this research the writer would like to conduct research to deal with writing stages of the IELTS. Terry et al. (2006) stated that writing Task 1 always contains a diagram type. In this task, you need to write an essay explaining the main features, trends, or differences of the diagram. For this, you should take a close look at the diagram and, where appropriate, indicate your main points with figures. You do not need to provide any explanations for the data, but you only need to describe the information provided in the task. On the other hand, the students will write at least 250 words about writing a discursive (discussion) essay, or defense of an idea, relating to a topic of general interest in writing Task 2 (Ariani & Arkham, 2020).

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Of the two productive skills, writing is considered to be more complex and difficult for learners. Because, it is believed that writing is a complex skill in terms of both learning and evaluation and it is an important element of higher education (Uysal, 2009). This is due to the need to use complex grammatical constructions of authors to convey their ideas effectively. Therefore, the content presented in writing contains much denser information, while less information is presented in the speech (Byrne, 1988). Therefore, having to write an essay in a specified style is never an easy feat for those who take any exams, especially those who are insufficiently proficient in English. In addition, the time constraint further complicates the task, since students must complete two tasks within an hour.

Yahya (2009) stated that it becomes difficult for students to learn the target language because the target language has a different rule system than the native language. Thus, sometimes students change the grammatical structure of the target language based on their limited knowledge, or generalize the rules of the target language and apply them very widely. Therefore, generalizing the rules of the target language and applying them very widely prevents students from learning and writing the new language. These incorrect applications are revealed as a problem at the writing stage of the IELTS exam. Ariani and Arkham (2020) classified these problems as incorrect word choice, incorrect use of punctuation marks, spelling and language usage errors, and grammatical disorder. Grammatical errors in this classification include verb, noun, pronoun, adjective, adverb, article, and preposition and conjunction errors. Therefore, they could not pass the exam.

It is clear that many Turkish applicants are largely struggling with the writing test, which entails the need to identify the problems they have, their causes and ways to improve their writing skills. Therefore, this study attempts to review and discuss some recommendations on how to improve the performance of prospective students in Tasks 1 and 2, based on the experience of students who have succeeded in the IELTS exam and the literature on the IELTS Writing Task. They are considered essential, because it is necessary to understand what is being studied in this field, therefore, to decipher the basis of this work and, if any, to determine the gap between the literature and the context of the work.

Literature investigated suggestions on how to improve learners and candidates' performance. First, candidates ought to be responsible for their writing development. Abe (2008) drew attention to the explanation of the importance of students, especially less competent ones, to follow instructions that will allow them to notice the features of the language. Cullen (2017) emphasized that candidates need to learn the language deliberately, especially vocabulary and grammar. Feedback from teachers can help students identify what they are good at and what they need to improve (Noor, 2020). They should also pay more attention to choosing the words that they teach students, especially academic words (Awwalia & Suhardi, 2020).

The techniques taught by the educators have to help improve the writing skills of the students in the exam room, including planning and strategies. Based on the result of the study, Ariani and Arkham (2020) made some recommendations on how to effectively deal with writing stages of the IELTS, as: (1) Before the IELTS exam, candidates should practice more about writing IELTS by increasing their vocabulary, learning more about how to use punctuation marks, and paying more attention to what they are writing. Candidates should be as careful in their choice of words as they are in their spelling and punctuation marks. (2) Candidates should learn and practice grammar rules better to write a good paragraph. (3) Candidates

should know the structure of the writing stage of the IELTS exam to better prepare themselves for the exam, study more IELTS preparation books to improve their writing techniques.

Cullen (2017) argued that low-achieving students tend to take an ineffective approach to exams, which takes place in just three steps: reading, writing and controlling. Instead, high-achieving candidates are preparing for the writing stage of the IELTS exam with studies that involve a longer mental process such as reading, thinking, planning, writing, and controlling. This approach is more detailed and success-oriented so that candidates can write longer articles in a shorter time (Cullen, 2017). This method is guiding and useful for any IELTS trainee who is trying to do self-study.

Nowadays, educational online tools provide students with convenience and an increasing amount of convenience in interacting and communicating with their peers (Saeed, Ghazali, Sahuri, & Abdulrab, 2018). Therefore, students should prepare for the exam especially with effective teaching approaches that use technology so that they can make students' writing more consistent and cohesive (Brown, 1998; Wilson, 2010). Online education not only promotes and facilitates socialization, but they also lead to the development of social skills, in particular, mastery of foreign languages. However, Cullen (2017) stated that IELTS students should be aware of the resources available online to avoid unreliable ones.

Sanavi and Nemati (2014) strongly recommended that giving corrective feedback could bring many benefits to students, especially using the reformatting method. Ganji (2009) states that the most effective feedback for students is those from their peers and the corrections they make to themselves. Peer review, also called peer editing, is a process that involves students reading other students' work and providing feedback to them. Noroozi and Mulder (2016) highlighted the positive impact of online peer feedback environments on students' motivation and satisfaction.

Collaborative writing can significantly help students improve their writing skills. In other words, Collaborative writing improves students' vocabulary, and students gain more knowledge and experience (Khodabakhshzadeh & Samadi, 2018). Pratiwi et al. (2016) stated that mind mapping is a great technique that can help students explore the subject in more depth, expand their vocabulary, correct grammatical errors, and write an article more efficiently.

When the literature was examined, it was seen that no study was conducted on how Turkish students cope with the writing stage of the IELTS exam and how candidates who will participate in the IELTS will cope with this exam. Therefore, the aim of the study is to examine of the development of writing skills of Turkish students who succeeded in the IELTS exam

## **2. Method**

This study was designed in a qualitative phenomenological research pattern. Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual's lived experiences. In qualitative research, data are collected qualitatively by methods such as observation, interview and document analysis. In this way, it is ensured that perspectives, perceptions and events are revealed in a realistic and holistic way in the natural environment (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). Phenomenological researches are studies aimed at investigating the phenomena that we encounter frequently on a daily basis that are not foreign to us but whose exact meaning we cannot comprehend (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998;

Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The phenomenological approach aims at understanding a person, and it advocates understanding what is meaningful in his life, what he wants to achieve, revealing the conditions that create the phenomenon, and then understanding the behavior to understand it (Cüceloğlu, 2016). Therefore, in the study, it was preferred to conduct qualitative research because it was desired to reach the answer with the question "how".

## **2.1 Participants**

Criterion sampling was used within the scope of purposive sampling methods to select the participant of this study. In this study, four students who have succeeded in the IELTS exam and who want to study outside of Turkey for a master's degree were interviewed. All of the students are female. The ages of the students range from 21 to 25.

## **2.2 Data Collection Method**

In this study, the experiences of the students were obtained by approximately 20-30 minute interviews. The purpose of the interviews is to reveal people's unobservable experiences, attitudes, thoughts, comments and reactions. Therefore, ensuring that the participants react in a comfortable, honest and correct way is the main condition of the interview method (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

The researcher first prepared a suitable environment for phenomenological research. After a detailed literature review, open-ended questions prepared by the students were asked and interviews were started. During the research process, we tried to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and were not forced to think that this was part of the evaluation process. The dialogue with the participants began with the request to "help us understand your unique experiences and become co-researchers with us". The purpose of this discourse is to obtain more detailed data from the participants during the interview. During the design and asking of interview questions, attention was paid to the basic principles such as being easy to understand and one-dimensional, not directing the respondent (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

## **2.3 Data Analysis**

In this study, content analysis method was used for the systematic analysis of the qualitative data obtained from the IELTS students. The Bogdan and Biklen (1998) defines data analysis as the process of obtaining data through interviews to understand a situation, and then bringing a new perspective to an existing situation using this data, field notes, and other materials. Researcher analyzed data in four stages by content analysis method: a) Coding the data, b) Finding the themes, c) Editing the codes and themes, d) Defining and interpreting the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). The researcher extracted theme and code lists from obtained data, and then tried to interpret the findings by integrating these themes and codes into a single list.

## **3. Findings**

The findings of the study were collected under three headings: the general writing experiences of the students, their experiences for the first part of the exam and their experiences for the second part of the exam.

### 3.1 Students' General Experiences of Writing Stage of IELTS Exam

Students noted that the writing stages of the IELTS exam consists of two parts. G1 explained these parts as follows:

“You will face two tasks. At the first task, you need to express (summarize) a graph, a table, or a shape by writing. In the other task, they ask if you agree with an opinion”

G3 explains the second task as follows:

“The article you are asked to write at this part may be an argumentative article or an article with different content, such as advantage - disadvantage, cause – effect, agree - disagree.”

G1 and G4 state that the first task, which must be in 150 words, should be completed in 20 minutes; the second part, which must be in 250 words, should be completed in 40 minutes. G2 states that writing stage of IELTS exam is actually not difficult. He explained it as follows:

“Although I had not written an essay before, the writing stage became easier for me because I had memorized many sentence patterns before the exam. Although I used the same sentence patterns in my essay, I still scored highly. Sentence patterns are important when writing the essay.”

Students explained that in order to be successful in the writing stage of IELTS exam, one must improve their vocabulary and use adverbs and prepositional a lot in his essay. G3 expressed her experiences as follows:

“Initially, the writing stage was difficult for me. After I started using some sentence patterns in the article, I realized that it was very easy for me to write. When I add sentence patterns to the article, I have already written part of a 150-word article. I am also trying to use different words that will enrich the content for the rest of the article. For this, you need to improve your vocabulary. Because using the appropriate words will earn you plus points.”

G2 explains her experiences for the writing stage as follows:

People say that you cannot raise your score at the writing stage. However, I disagree with this. IELTS's own web page provides word suggestions to strengthen essay writing. There are many recommendations on how to succeed in the exam. In addition, there are many articles on the IELTS page for the writing stage. I was trying to write all the time. In any case, when you do every day, you will notice that there is a pattern in the articles. There are some sentence patterns in the writings. You are constantly improving yourself. They do not bring you a question from space. Believe me, there are similar questions on these topics in the exam.”

### 3.2 Students' Experiences of First Part of Writing Stage of IELTS Exam

G1 implemented the following definition for Task 1:

"As you know, there are two writing tasks. In the first task, you need to type 150 words in 20 minutes. In the second task, you are expected to write an essay of at least 250 words in 40 minutes"

G3 expressed its disagreement with this opinion as follows:

"It is generally recommended that you write about task 1 in 20 minutes and write about task 2 in 40 minutes. Nevertheless, I do not agree with this distribution of the given time. This may differ from person to person. I completed each task in half an hour."

The recommendations of G2 on how to write an article in task 1 are presented below.

"At this stage, all you need to do is to depict, summarize the line, column, or pie chart that you have been given. The essay they expect from you to write should be in such a way that someone who has not seen this diagram or image before can visualize this diagram or image in their mind while reading your essay. The most important point here is that you should never and never make personal comments. This will lead to the fact that you will lose points. Therefore, you should not write a concluding paragraph, but only make a statement. I suggest you pay attention to this."

G3 recommendations for this task are as follows:

"Graphic reading is given in this task. I was given a cycle showing the production and consumption of olive oil. I used sentence patterns a lot when explaining the graph. For example, the graph reveals information about the changes in..., the graph provides the differences between.... It is necessary to use a variety of nouns and verbs for words like rise and fall will help increase your overall score. Even if you explain the expressions in the same sense with different words, your writing stage will increase your score."

G2 expressed its experience gained at the first stage as follows:

"For the writing stage, I followed this path. There are many articles on the IELTS page. I have been reading the articles called line chart all day. Then there are questions on the same site. I have been trying to keep time and write. In any case, when you do every day, you see that there is a layout in the articles."

### 3.3 Students' Experiences of Second Part of Writing Stage of IELTS Exam

G4 has defined the second part of writing stage as follows:

"It is asked if you agree with the opinion at this stage. For example, the question of discussion is: Should students take private lessons or go to public schools? This is a debate."

In the second stage, the students stated that it doesn't matter what you are writing about, but it should be a fluent article with grammar and vocabulary. G1 explains what should be considered at this stage as follows:

"Your opinion is not asked here. It does not matter if you are defending the right or wrong idea. If you think you can write easier content while defending the wrong idea, defend the wrong idea. You can also defend both ideas. Therefore, do not feel pressure to defend an idea. That is what I did. In my article, I argued that education should be provided at school. Despite this, I said that online education can also be successful. During the Covid-19 period, education has already been provided online.

G3 explained this stage as follows:

"In my opinion, the most important thing to pay attention to at this stage is to ensure the integrity of the issue. In order for the article to be consistent in itself, first determine the scheme of the content in your mind, and then start writing it. Therefore, you can get a higher score. Otherwise, when writing, you can switch from one opinion to another.

G4, on the other hand, defends its views as follows:

"The important thing here is that you start the paragraph with the introductory sentence first. Defend your own opinion in the introductory paragraph. Compare the two views in the second paragraph. Another point that you should pay attention to here is that you give examples related to the topic. You can also give examples from yourself. It is also very important to use patterns such as to summarize, for example, the first, the second, as a result, etc. In the final conclusion section, finish the article with a sentence such as; although both proposals have the right aspects, I defend this idea."

The statements of G2 for this stage are as follows:

"I got the lowest grade from the writing stage. That is what I blame myself. I did not get an education to write an essay in English. I advise to you, to try to write an essay at a certain time."

In order to achieve the writing stage of IELTS, the students followed some websites and used the recommendations given on these websites during the writing stage.

"My advice for that. I have also used external online sites for these. There I came across a lot of advice stating how much attention I should pay to what." G1

"I studied how to write from Cambridge publishing essays and I joined the online courses." G2

"I followed a YouTube channel for the writing stage. This YouTube channel also has a website. There is a lot of content on this website not only about the writing stage for IELTS,

but also about speaking and listening. I have not used any other resources for the writing stage. But, I can say that I have memorized the content of this YouTube channel.” G3

Another important recommendation of the students is to share their articles with someone who knows English well and get feedback. Three of the students gave this advice.

“I would also recommend this. Share your writing with a friend who is an expert in English. Ask him to correct your mistakes. Moreover, read what he wrote. Constantly give feedback to each other.” G1

“Have someone who know English well check your articles. Get feedback. Because of the feedback, your article will become even more beautiful. Learning takes time. First of all, you need to set yourself a goal.” G2

#### **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

In this study, the experiences of students who succeed at the writing stage of the IELTS exam were investigated and compared with the literature findings.

The number of students who want to take master's degree in English speaking countries is constantly increasing. However, in order to do this, these students must take and pass the IELTS exam. Therefore, in this study, the experiences of students who were successful in the IELTS exam were examined. It is thought that the findings will contribute to the candidates who do not know how to study for the IELTS exam and to the literature.

One of the students described the tasks in the writing phase. She stated that they need to be expressed by writing a graph, table or figure in the first task and, in the other task, they ask whether you agree with a view or not. Another student explained the second task in more detail. This student stated that in the second task, applicants would encounter an argumentative article with different content such as advantage-disadvantage, cause-effect and agree-disagree etc. While three of the students said that task 1 should be completed in 20 minutes and task 2 should be completed in 40 minutes, the other student stated that they did not agree with this time distribution and that he completed each task in half an hour.

Three of the students stated that English sentence patterns are very important and they had to memorize many sentence patterns, so they did not have much difficulty in the written exam. In this study, it is seen that the students used expressions similar to the results stated by Yahya (2009) that information content of the written language is intense and by Ariani and Arkham (2020) that students mostly make mistakes in grammar because they do not study vocabulary and grammar enough. As an example, a student stated that the questions did not come from outer space. In general, the students explained that in order to be successful in the writing phase of the IELTS exam, target language structure should be well known (Bryne, 1988). Besides, they stated that first of all, the vocabulary should be developed, and the use of various nouns, verbs, adverbs and prepositions in the composition increases the value of the composition. These findings also show similarities with the literature findings (Abe, 2008; Cullen, 2017; Noor, 2020; Awwalia & Suhardi, 2020). Students also emphasized that using words that show cycles such as rise-fall, increase-decrease in the essays helps to increase the overall IELTS writing score.

Students also state that the given diagram or figure should be described in essay very well, that the person reading the essay should be able to visualize the diagram or image in his mind with your description, and that you should never add comments while describing figure. To do this, you draw attention to the importance of vocabulary and sentence patterns. Another student stated that using phrases such as “firstly”, “secondly”, “to sum up”, “consequently”, “in summary” is very important in order to write essay in a line of thought.

When analyzed their opinion about second task, they stated that only one opinion should be defended in this task. One student stated that the content should not focus on whether the idea is right or wrong and continued, if you can better express the wrong idea in writing, defend the wrong idea. This finding reminds the results of literature (Yahya, 2009; Abe, 2008; Cullen, 2017; Noor, 2020; Awwalia & Suhardi, 2020) stating that the correct use of the structure of the language is more important. In support of this view, the other student stated that the most important point to be considered in the second stage is ensuring the integrity of the subject. For this reason, she stated that in order for the article to be consistent within itself, the schema of the content must first be drawn in the mind. This finding is similar to the result of Pratiwi et al. (2016) that mind mapping can help students explore the subject more deeply and write an article more efficiently.

When researching which resources students use for the writing stage of IELTS exam, it is understood that students mostly followed online resources. These are TOEFL's official website, various channels on youtube, online courses. One student stated that he memorized the website he followed. This finding is similar to the findings of the study stating the positive effect of online education on the ELTS writing stage (Saeed, Ghazali, Sahuri, & Abdulrab, 2018; Cullen, 2017; Wilson, 2010).

One of the most important advice of students is to share their articles with someone who knows English well and to get feedback. This finding is similar to the findings of the study on the importance of the effect of feedback on writing essay in English (Ganci, 2009; Noroozi & Mulder, 2016; Khodabakhshzadeh & Samadi, 2018).

To summarize, it turned out that in order to understand the target language structure well, it is necessary to know the grammar and sentence structures very well, memorizing them if necessary. After the structure of the target language is known, it is necessary to use various verbs, adverbs and prepositions to enrich the content of the inscriptions. During this difficult process, students achieved success with the help of online courses and the feedback they received from their peers who corrected the essay they wrote.

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