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LINGUISTIC ERROR PATTERNS IN IELTS ACADEMIC WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF VIETNAMESE EFL LEARNERS AT THE B2 LEVEL

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Abstract:
This case study investigates linguistic error profiles and discourse-level performance of 20 Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners (level B2/CEFR; target band 6.5+) in IELTS Academic Writing Tasks 1 and 2. Guided by Error Analysis (EA) and the official IELTS Writing Assessment Criteria, a descriptive mixed-methods design was employed to categorise errors at the word level (mechanical, morphological, lexical, and grammatical) and sentence level (syntactic, agreement, omission, and addition), complemented by qualitative discourse analysis. The findings reveal a task-contingent shift in the distribution of errors: Task 1 was associated primarily with word-level difficulties (81%), whereas Task 2 generated a substantially higher proportion of sentence-level errors (44%), particularly in modal verb complementation, passive structures, and subject-verb agreement. Discourse-level analysis further revealed a reliance on prefabricated cohesive patterns in Task 2, which constrained performance at the band 6-7 threshold. These findings suggest that the plateau many Vietnamese IELTS candidates experience is not simply a vocabulary or grammar problem but reflects a processing gap: learners lack the capacity to sustain grammatical control under the cognitive demands of extended argumentation. Task-specific instructional directions for learners targeting band 7 are discussed.

Keywords: error analysis; IELTS Academic Writing; Vietnamese EFL learners; case study; writing errors; task complexity

1. Introduction

Writing proficiency is widely regarded as one of the most challenging skills to develop in a foreign language (Ferris, 2002), a difficulty that is particularly evident in high-stakes assessment contexts such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), where candidates consistently score lower in writing than in any other skill (Arefsadr & Babaii, 2023). For Vietnamese EFL learners, achieving a target band score of 6.5 or above

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has become a common requirement for university admission and professional certification. Meeting this threshold demands not only grammatical accuracy but also lexical precision and coherent discourse organisation across two distinct task types, and this represents a persistent obstacle for EFL writers at the mid-proficiency level (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014).

Despite the importance of IELTS writing preparation in Vietnam's language education, relatively few studies have systematically examined the specific linguistic errors produced by learners at the B2 proficiency level across both task types (Bui, 2021; Bui, 2022). Crucially, the existing literature tends to catalogue error frequencies without explaining the cognitive or genre-related mechanisms that drive them. This case study addresses that gap by applying Error Analysis (EA) (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994) to 20 IELTS Academic Writing scripts collected from a single English language centre in Ho Chi Minh City. The context-specific nature of this inquiry is consistent with a case study design, which emphasises depth of analysis over statistical generalisability (Yin, 2018).

Using quantitative error-frequency analysis and qualitative discourse-level interpretation, the study addresses three research questions:

1) How are linguistic errors distributed across word-level and sentence-level categories in Task 1 and Task 2?
2) How does task type influence error frequency and error type?
3) How do discourse-level features of task achievement and cohesion differ between the two task types?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Error Analysis: Theoretical Background

Error Analysis (EA) emerged in the late 1960s as a response to the behaviourist premises of Contrastive Analysis (Lado, 1957). Corder (1967) reframed learner errors as evidence of an evolving internal grammar, which he termed *transitional competence*, rather than as mere failures of acquisition. Selinker (1972) subsequently introduced the concept of *interlanguage* to describe the systematic, dynamic system that learners construct en route to the target language. Richards (1974) distinguished between *intralingual errors*, arising from overgeneralisation of target-language rules, and *interlingual errors*, resulting from first-language (L1) transfer. Ellis (1994) formalised EA into a five-step procedure, namely data collection, identification, description, explanation, and evaluation, which guides the analytical approach adopted in the present study.

2.2 Classification of Writing Errors

At the word level, four major categories of errors have been consistently identified in the literature. Mechanical errors, including spelling and punctuation mistakes, often reflect limited orthographic control (Ferris, 2002). Morphological errors, particularly those involving verb inflections, plural forms, and derivational affixes are frequently reported in Vietnamese EFL contexts (Bui, 2021). Lexical errors mainly involve inappropriate word

choice and collocational misuse, which may persist even among learners with relatively extensive receptive vocabularies (Laufer & Waldman, 2011). Grammatical word-level errors, especially article and preposition misuse, are commonly associated with L1 transfer because Vietnamese does not possess a determiner system equivalent to that of English (Master, 1997; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

At the sentence level, subject-verb agreement violations remain one of the most extensively examined error types. Bock and Miller (1991) demonstrated that such errors are highly sensitive to the syntactic distance between the head noun and the verb, a phenomenon subsequently labelled *agreement attraction* in the broader psycholinguistic literature. Omission errors generally indicate learners' tendency to prioritise propositional meaning over grammatical completeness, whereas addition errors are often linked to overgeneralisation processes (James, 1998). More structurally complex problems, including run-on sentences and inappropriate passive constructions, tend to occur when learners attempt to produce more formal and academically oriented writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014).

2.3 Discourse-Level Features and Task Type in L2 Writing

Writing competence involves not only grammatical accuracy at the sentence level but also the ability to organise ideas coherently and achieve communicative purposes effectively. Halliday and Hasan (1976) proposed a foundational framework of cohesion consisting of reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion, which function as mechanisms for creating semantic unity within a text. Previous studies in L2 writing have consistently shown that intermediate learners tend to rely heavily on a limited range of additive and adversative connectives, producing texts in which surface-level connectedness masks weaker underlying logical development (Crossley *et al.*, 2016; Bui, 2022).

Task type has also been recognised as an important factor influencing linguistic performance. Drawing on Skehan's (1998) trade-off hypothesis, cognitively demanding tasks such as argumentative writing tend to push learners towards greater syntactic complexity while reducing grammatical accuracy, since learners must simultaneously manage content generation, syntactic processing, and lexical retrieval (Robinson, 2001). Within the IELTS writing context, O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth (2003) found that variations in task design, even within the same task type, had a significant impact on candidates' writing performance, highlighting the sensitivity of IELTS writing outcomes to task characteristics.. Similar tendencies have been observed in Vietnamese EFL contexts (Bui, 2021; Bui, 2022).

2.4 The IELTS Writing Assessment Criteria

The IELTS Academic Writing rubric consists of four equally weighted assessment criteria: Task Achievement/Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy (British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, & Cambridge Assessment English, 2023). Shaw and Weir (2007) confirmed the construct validity of

these criteria by demonstrating that they represent theoretically distinct dimensions of writing competence. Nevertheless, Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002) argued that rubric-based assessment may place excessive emphasis on formal linguistic accuracy while underrepresenting rhetorical sophistication. To address this limitation, the present study integrates quantitative error analysis with qualitative discourse analysis in order to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' writing performance.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a descriptive mixed-methods case study design (Yin, 2018). A case study approach is considered appropriate because the investigation is bounded within a single instructional cohort, a specific examination context, and a defined proficiency level, with the primary aim being analytical depth rather than broad population-level generalisation. The quantitative component focuses on identifying the frequency and distribution of errors across writing tasks, whereas the qualitative component provides interpretive insights into discourse-level features.

3.2 Participants

The case comprises 20 Vietnamese EFL learners enrolled in one IELTS class at a private English language centre in Ho Chi Minh City. Purposive sampling was employed. All participants shared a B2/CEFR proficiency level (approximately IELTS Writing band 5.5-6.0, confirmed by a pre-course placement test), were enrolled in the same 12-week course, and were targeting band 6.5 or above. Scripts were collected at the mid-course assessment in Week 7. All identities were anonymized, and each script was coded numerically (S1-S20). As the study follows a case study design, the findings are intended to achieve analytical rather than statistical generalisability; therefore, the bounded sample size reflects the design logic of the study rather than a methodological limitation.

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected through a mid-course written examination administered under timed conditions comparable to those of the official IELTS Writing test, with a total duration of 60 minutes. In Task 1, participants selected one of two visual prompts: a bar chart presenting coffee production across four countries between 2011 and 2013, or a line graph illustrating changes in recycled materials in a particular country from 1982 to 2010. Although different in content, both prompts required learners to demonstrate similar core competencies, including trend identification, feature comparison, and overview presentation. For Task 2, participants chose between two argumentative essay prompts following the "To what extent do you agree or disagree?" format, one focusing on animal conservation and the other on personal taxation. Both prompts required participants to construct a sustained argumentative essay of at least 250 words. The consistency in genre

expectations and rhetorical demands across prompt options contributed to the comparability of writing samples within each task type.

All scripts were subsequently coded using the IELTS Writing Assessment Criteria as the analytical framework (British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, & Cambridge Assessment English, 2023), summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: IELTS Academic Writing Assessment Criteria and Key Descriptors (Band 7)

Criterion	Applies to	Focus	Band 7 Key Descriptors
Task Achievement	Task 1	Coverage of visual key features; clear overview	Presents clear overview; highlights key features; could be more fully extended
Task Response	Task 2	Addresses all parts; sustains a position	Clear position throughout; presents and supports main ideas; may over-generalise
Coherence & Cohesion	Both tasks	Logical organisation; cohesive devices; paragraph structure	Logically organises ideas; uses range of cohesive devices appropriately; clear central topic per paragraph
Lexical Resource	Both tasks	Range, accuracy, appropriateness of vocabulary	Sufficient range for flexibility and precision; less common items with style awareness; occasional errors
Grammatical Range & Accuracy	Both tasks	Range and accuracy of grammatical structures	Variety of complex structures; frequent error-free sentences; good control with few errors

Note: Adapted from *IELTS Writing Band Descriptors (Task 1 and Task 2, public version)* by British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, & Cambridge Assessment English (2023). Each criterion is weighted equally at 25% of the total band score.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two phases following established Error Analysis procedures (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994; James, 1998). In the first phase, errors were identified and coded at both the word and sentence levels. Error categories were initially derived inductively from the collected scripts following Richards' (1974) approach, after which the frequency of each error type was calculated and converted into percentages to examine distributional patterns across tasks. To improve coding credibility, all scripts were reviewed twice by the researcher with a one-week interval between coding sessions, and any inconsistencies were resolved prior to finalising the coding framework. The absence of an independent rater is acknowledged as a methodological limitation commonly associated with single-researcher case-study research (Yin, 2018). In the second phase, a qualitative interpretive analysis was conducted to examine discourse-level features, particularly task achievement, task response, and coherence and cohesion. Selected excerpts from participants' scripts were used to illustrate and support the interpretation of each analytical category.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Error Distribution and the Task-Contingent Shift (RQ1 & RQ2)

Table 2 presents the overall distribution of errors across the two writing tasks. Of the 40 scripts analysed, 96 errors were identified in Task 1, compared with 172 errors in Task 2. Although the increase in the total number of errors is itself noteworthy, the more significant finding concerns the shift in the distribution of error types across tasks. In Task 1, word-level errors accounted for 81% of all identified errors, whereas sentence-level errors increased substantially in Task 2, representing 44% of the total errors produced. This proportional redistribution, rather than the increase in raw frequency alone, constitutes the central empirical finding of the study.

Table 2: Distribution of Errors by Level in IELTS Academic Writing Tasks 1 and 2

Error Level	Task 1 (n=20)	Task 1 %	Task 2 (n=20)	Task 2 %
Word-level	78	81%	96	56%
Sentence-level	18	19%	76	44%
Total	**96**	**100%**	**172**	**100%**

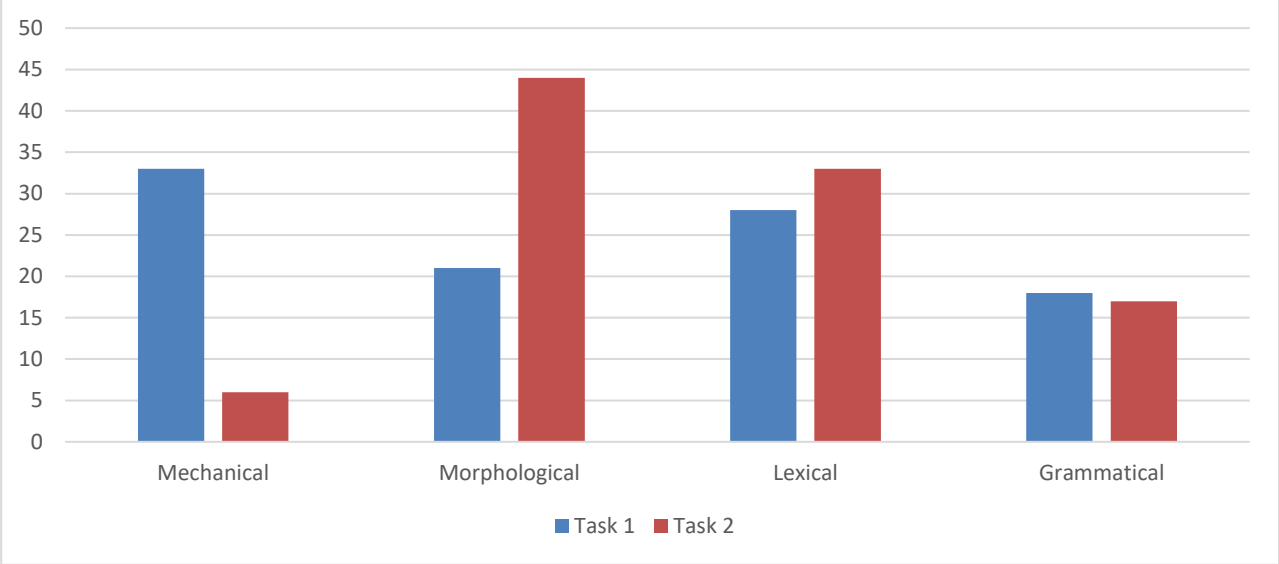
The redistribution can be interpreted with reference to the cognitive and linguistic demands of each task. In Task 1, learners were required to allocate cognitive resources across visual interpretation, information selection, summarisation, and linguistic encoding. Under these conditions, attentional focus appeared to concentrate primarily on word-level choices, while the relatively fixed rhetorical structure of descriptive writing reduced pressure on clause-level and syntactic processing. The comparatively low proportion of sentence-level errors in Task 1 (19%) supports this interpretation, suggesting that when learners operate within a more constrained and predictable genre, grammatical monitoring at the sentence level remains relatively stable.

Task 2 displayed a markedly different pattern. The argumentative essay genre simultaneously requires idea generation, stance maintenance, logical organisation, lexical signalling, and grammatical accuracy at the clause and sentence levels. From the perspective of Robinson's (2001) Cognition Hypothesis, these competing demands place considerable pressure on learners' limited attentional resources, while Skehan's (1998) trade-off hypothesis predicts that learners will prioritise meaning and fluency over accuracy as task demands increase. The substantial rise in sentence-level errors (from 18 instances in Task 1 to 76 instances in Task 2), therefore, reflects not only a greater quantity of writing but also a qualitatively different processing environment in which grammatical monitoring becomes progressively deprioritised. Notably, several learners who produced relatively accurate sentence structures in Task 1 (particularly S3, S4, S10, S12, S14, and S20) showed clear deterioration in sentence-level accuracy in Task 2. This pattern suggests that grammatical control demonstrated in descriptive writing does not necessarily transfer effectively to more cognitively demanding argumentative contexts, in line with Ferris and Hedgcock's (2014) view that writing competence is genre-dependent and requires genre-specific development. The findings also extend earlier

results reported by O'Loughlin and Wigglesworth (2003) by moving beyond error-frequency description to an explanation grounded in the redistribution of attentional resources during genre-specific writing.

4.2 Word-Level Error Patterns (RQ2)

Figure 1: Word-level Error Analysis



4.2.1 Mechanical Errors in Task 1

In Task 1, mechanical errors constituted the largest proportion of identified errors (33%), followed by lexical errors (28%), morphological errors (21%), and grammatical errors (18%). Common misspellings such as *surrpass*, *hightest*, *axproximately*, and *raughly* were concentrated around the specialised lexical items typically associated with data description. These words are generally less common in everyday communication and therefore tend to have weaker orthographic representations within learners' mental lexicons (Ferris, 2002). The findings suggest that orthographic inaccuracies are not randomly distributed across the writing system but are lexically selective, occurring primarily at the boundaries of learners' productive vocabulary where automatic retrieval and spelling control remain insufficiently developed.

4.2.2 Morphological Errors in Task 2

In Task 2, morphological errors dominated (44%), followed by lexical errors (33%), grammatical errors (17%), and mechanical errors (6%). Three morphological subtypes appeared with particularly high frequency: incorrect verb forms following modal verbs (e.g., *may benefits for*, S12), passive-voice misformation (e.g., *should be conserve*, S14), and subject-verb agreement failure in complex predicates (e.g., *it cannot provides*, S4). These errors cluster around the inflectional morphology of the English verbal system in argumentative register, a domain consistently identified as a persistent difficulty for Vietnamese EFL learners (Bui, 2021). The errors are more accurately interpreted as

intralingual rather than interlingual in nature. Rather than resulting directly from L1 transfer, they appear to reflect the overgeneralisation and incomplete automatisation of English morphological rules, particularly given that Vietnamese does not possess a comparable inflectional system. Importantly, many learners who demonstrated accurate morphological control in Task 1 produced more morphological errors in Task 2, indicating that the underlying grammatical rules are largely available to learners but have not yet become sufficiently automatised for stable use under cognitively demanding writing conditions. As a result, the pedagogical implication is significant. If these errors stem primarily from processing limitations rather than from a lack of grammatical knowledge, explicit grammar instruction and corrective feedback are necessary but unlikely to be sufficient on their own. Learners also require repeated opportunities for production practice under conditions that approximate the attentional pressures of argumentative writing, so that grammatical retrieval can become more automatic during extended composition.

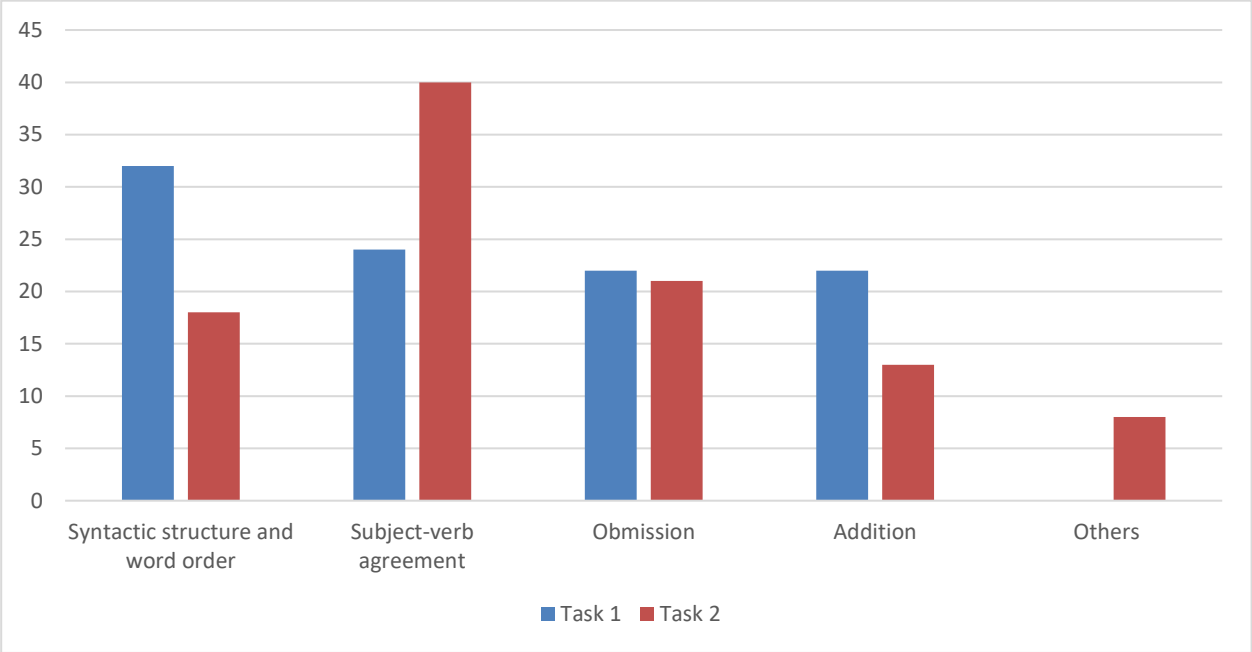
4.2.3 Lexical Errors: Overreach and Collocational Failure

Lexical errors in Task 2 mainly involved non-native collocational patterns such as *remitting tax* (S1), *human damage to nature* (S10), and *animals help the nature system* (S16). These examples reflect what Laufer and Waldman (2011) describe as *lexical overreach*, in which learners attempt to employ more advanced or complicated vocabulary but produce expressions that create greater communicative disruption than simpler alternatives would have caused. The findings indicate that learners' lexical difficulties are not primarily connected with insufficient vocabulary size but with limited productive collocational control. This dimension of lexical competence extends beyond isolated word knowledge and cannot be effectively developed through word-list memorisation alone. Instead, it requires sustained exposure to authentic language use and repeated engagement with words within their natural collocational contexts. The findings thus support Laufer and Waldman's (2011) distinction between receptive vocabulary knowledge and productive lexical competence, and suggest that vocabulary instruction for IELTS preparation should place greater emphasis on collocation, concordance analysis, and contextualised exposure rather than on isolated word memorisation.

4.3 Sentence-Level Error Patterns (RQ2)

In Task 1, sentence-level errors were distributed relatively evenly across categories, including syntactic and word-order errors (32%), subject-verb agreement errors (24%), omission errors (22%), and addition errors (22%). By contrast, Task 2 displayed a more concentrated error pattern in which subject-verb agreement errors became dominant, accounting for 40% of all sentence-level errors, followed by omission errors (21%), syntactic structure errors (18%), addition errors (13%), and a smaller residual category comprising run-on sentences and inappropriate passive constructions (8%).

Figure 2: Sentence-level Error Analysis



4.3.1 Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement errors in Task 2 followed a relatively consistent structural pattern, occurring primarily in sentences where substantial syntactic material intervened between the subject and the verb, as illustrated in examples such as *the state heavily rely on excise income* (S3) and *national resources is allocated for* (S5). This pattern reflects the phenomenon of agreement attraction identified by Bock and Miller (1991), in which an intervening noun phrase carrying conflicting number features interferes with the processing of grammatical agreement. The concentration of these errors in Task 2, where learners produced more syntactically elaborate structures, supports an attentional rather than purely competence-based interpretation. In other words, learners generally possess knowledge of the agreement rules but experience difficulty applying them consistently when cognitive processing resources are substantially constrained by the demands of argumentative writing.

4.3.2 Omission Errors

Omission errors observed in the data were structurally systematic rather than random. The most common subtype involved the omission of the obligatory copular verb *be*, as illustrated in S14's clause *avoiding the extinction not only a moral act*, in which the absence of *is* results in an incomplete predicational structure. A second recurrent pattern concerned missing object pronouns, as seen in S8's expression *need to make substantial efforts to preserve*, where the omitted referent (*them*, referring to endangered species) weakens local textual coherence. A third subtype involved omitted prepositions within complex noun phrases, exemplified by *humans destroy the balance nature* (S20), where the preposition *of* is required to establish the appropriate partitive relationship. These omission patterns suggest that under time pressure, learners tend to prioritise

propositional meaning over grammatical completeness (James, 1998). Although individual omissions may appear minor in isolation, their cumulative effect contributes to reduced clause-level coherence and structural stability across the essay as a whole.

4.3.3 Addition Errors and Run-On Sentences

Addition errors appeared to originate from two primary sources: redundancy and coordinative overextension. Redundancy-related errors were commonly observed in structures such as *often are tend to be* (S4), where learners combined overlapping grammatical forms within the same predicate. Coordinative overextension, by contrast, was reflected in expressions such as *as a result that it leads to* (S3), in which multiple linking devices were unnecessarily layered within a single clause.

Although run-on sentences accounted for a relatively small proportion of the dataset (8%), they represented the most structurally disruptive error type identified in the analysis. Representative examples include the run-on construction in S13's sentence *People earn money through effort and sacrifice and the state takes a large portion of it and uses it for things citizens never agree* and the comma-splice construction in S10's sentence *Animals in ecosystem are connected, the disappearance of one species may lead to the death of another species*. This pattern is characteristic of learners who have partially internalised the discourse function of logical connectors but have not yet fully mastered the punctuation conventions governing their syntactic integration. These errors, therefore, extend beyond surface-level grammatical inaccuracy and directly undermine the perceived coherence and rhetorical control of argumentative writing.

4.4 Discourse-Level Features (RQ3)

4.4.1 Task Achievement (Task 1)

Most Task 1 scripts successfully fulfilled the core communicative requirements of the Task 1 genre by identifying major trends, presenting comparative information, and maintaining generally logical organization, which are broadly aligned with band 6 descriptors for Task Achievement. For example, S1 effectively contrasted opposing trends (*Overall, there was an upward trend in Aluminium cans … while an opposite trend was seen in Paper and Cardboard*), while S8 accurately identified a shift in comparative ranking (*Brazil's coffee production had the highest figures, surpassing all three other countries*). In addition, all overview statements were placed after the introduction, ensuring the top-down organisational structure typically associated with band 7 performance. Despite these strengths, some learners (S1, S5, S7, S11 and S19) described data selectively without clearly identifying the most noticeable or significant feature of visual information.

4.4.2 Task Response (Task 2)

In Task 2, most scripts demonstrated an adequate ability to maintain a clear position throughout the essay. Learners generally sustained their stance across body paragraphs and supported their arguments with relevant examples, such as *many people rely on public healthcare when they are sick* (S3), *governments often use tax money to provide unemployment*

and free education (S9), *the medical use of snake venom exemplifies that each animal is useful in a way or another* (S18), and *bees are beneficial because they help pollinate crops* (S10). These features are broadly consistent with the IELTS band 6 descriptors for Task Response. However, a more substantial discourse-level problem emerged in S3's conclusion, which stated that *under no circumstances should the tax responsibility play a crucial role*. This conclusion directly contradicted the position developed throughout the preceding discussion. This issue extends beyond a simple lexical or grammatical error and is more appropriately interpreted as a pragmatic failure, suggesting that some learners may have acquired the formal structural conventions of argumentative writing without fully developing an understanding of its broader communicative logic.

4.4.3 Coherence, Cohesion, and the Band 7 Threshold

Task 1 responses generally demonstrated clear paragraph organisation and effective use of comparative cohesive devices such as *Similarly*, *Likewise*, *In contrast*, *Conversely*, and *Meanwhile*. In particular, S12 employed these connectors consistently to guide the reader through multi-year comparisons of coffee production data, especially when contrasting Brazil's production trajectory with that of Vietnam across the three-year period. This pattern illustrates relatively effective local cohesion within the descriptive writing genre. Cohesion in Task 2, however, reflected a different and considerably less productive pattern. The majority of essays began with highly formulaic introductory structures such as *In recent years…*, *There has been growing concern about…*, or *It is often argued that…*.

Although these expressions provided learners with a convenient structural entry into the essay, their pervasive use frequently produced responses that appeared coherent at the surface level but lacked corresponding depth of argumentative development. This pattern aligns with previous L2 writing research suggesting that excessive reliance on logical connectors in non-native academic prose may create an impression of cohesion without necessarily supporting substantive rhetorical progression (Crossley *et al.*, 2016; Bui, 2022). These prefabricated discourse frames appear to reduce compositional cognitive load but frequently do so at the expense of rhetorical flexibility and originality. This issue is particularly relevant to IELTS assessment, since the band 7 descriptor for Coherence and Cohesion explicitly requires cohesive devices to be used "flexibly," a quality that formulaic templates inherently limit. The implications for IELTS pedagogy align with Hyland and Hamp-Lyons' (2002) critique that test-oriented instruction often prioritises surface-level formal control over genuine rhetorical development. In this respect, heavy reliance on template-based preparation may unintentionally reinforce the prefabricated cohesive patterns observed in many Task 2 responses.

At the same time, one notable counterargument pattern emerged within the dataset. A larger group of learners (except S1, S4, S14, S15, S16, and S20) demonstrated attempts to incorporate counterargument strategies within their body paragraphs. For example, S17 employed a concession-rebuttal structure in the statement: *Critics might argue that excises may create financial pressure … however, it may overlook the fact that most of the welfare system … is funded from duty income*. This pattern reflects an emerging

awareness of the dialogic dimension of argumentative writing in the sense of Toulmin (1958), where rebuttal functions as an integral component of effective argument. However, the uneven distribution of this feature across the cohort suggests that such discourse competence remains developmental rather than fully consolidated.

4.5 The Band 6-7 Plateau as a Processing Gap

Taken together, the findings suggest that the persistent band 6-7 plateau among many Vietnamese IELTS candidates is better understood as a limitation in processing capacity than as a deficiency in linguistic competence. The evidence supporting this interpretation is threefold. First, the task-dependent nature of the increase in errors indicates that much of the relevant grammatical and lexical knowledge is already available to learners but has not yet been sufficiently automatised for stable use under increased cognitive pressure. Second, the concentration of errors within syntactically demanding structures is consistent with attentional breakdown during real-time composition, particularly when learners are required to manage idea generation, discourse organisation, and grammatical monitoring simultaneously. Third, the widespread reliance on formulaic cohesive templates appears to function as a cognitive-offloading strategy through which learners reduce the demands of discourse planning, albeit at the expense of argumentative flexibility and rhetorical sophistication. From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that instruction at this proficiency level should prioritise the development of automatised language use, particularly through extensive argumentative writing practice conducted under timed, examination-realistic conditions rather than relying primarily on additional grammar explanation or vocabulary expansion alone.

5. Recommendations

Two pedagogical implications emerge from these findings. First, grammar instruction for Task 2 preparation should focus more on helping learners maintain morphological and syntactic accuracy when writing under pressure rather than relying too heavily on isolated rule explanation. The error patterns identified in this study, especially the substantial increase in agreement and morphological errors during argumentative composition, indicate that timed writing practice combined with focused post-writing error analysis may support development more effectively than traditional pre-writing grammar drills alone. It may also be beneficial for courses to distinguish more explicitly between the linguistic demands associated with Task 1 and Task 2 so that learners can distribute their attentional resources more strategically during extended written production. Second, vocabulary and cohesion instruction may be more effective if it moves beyond rigid lexical memorisation and formulaic cohesive templates toward more contextualised interaction with language in authentic use. Concordance-based activities together with comparative examination of authenticated band 7 responses may facilitate learners to develop stronger collocational control while also understanding how cohesive

devices operate within rhetorically developed arguments instead of functioning merely as fixed discourse markers.

Several directions for future research also emerge from the present study. Future investigations should expand the learner corpus, incorporate independent raters in the error-coding process, and employ longitudinal designs capable of tracking the effects of targeted instructional interventions over time. In addition, corpus-based comparison between learner scripts and authenticated band 7 writing may provide a more principled benchmark for analysing discourse-level development and argumentative sophistication in IELTS writing performance.

6. Conclusion

This case study documented error patterns and discourse-level performance of 20 Vietnamese IELTS learners at the band 6-7 threshold, identifying a task-contingent shift in the distribution of errors as its central empirical finding. The transition from descriptive to argumentative writing revealed not only a higher number of errors but a qualitative change in error type: sentence-level errors dominated in Task 2, particularly in morphological accuracy and clause-level syntax, while relatively strong word-level accuracy in Task 1 tended to conceal these underlying weaknesses. At the discourse level, learners showed adequate task fulfilment and basic argumentative competence but relied on formulaic cohesive devices that limited the rhetorical originality required for band 7 performance.

These results suggest that the band 6-7 plateau in Vietnamese EFL IELTS writing reflects a processing gap: an insufficiently automatised linguistic knowledge base that breaks down under the cognitive demands of extended argumentation rather than simply limited vocabulary or isolated grammatical errors. As a case study, the findings are analytically generalisable to similar instructional contexts rather than statistically generalisable to the broader Vietnamese EFL population, and they invite further investigation through larger and longitudinally designed studies.

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Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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