

## EFL LEARNERS' MAJOR PROBLEMS IN THE IELTS WRITING TEST: INSIGHTS FROM A VIETNAMESE CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

*This research investigates the principal challenges encountered by Vietnamese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in composing argumentative essays for IELTS Academic Writing Task 2, drawing on a case study situated in the Mekong Delta region. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, integrating quantitative evaluation of learners' written outputs with qualitative insights obtained from semi-structured interviews. The study involved 21 candidates preparing for the IELTS Academic module at Band 5.0 who were enrolled in a private language center. Learners' essays were assessed in accordance with the official IELTS Writing Task 2 scoring rubric, incorporating four criteria: Task Response, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy. The results reveal that participants face substantial challenges in developing ideas, structuring arguments coherently, employing appropriate lexical resources, and maintaining grammatical accuracy. Among these areas, weaknesses in idea development and vocabulary usage were the most pronounced. These challenges can be clearly explained by learners' limited subject-matter knowledge, restricted range of academic vocabulary, inadequate writing strategies, and insufficient opportunities for consistent writing practice. In response to these findings, this study contributes to the existing literature on IELTS and EFL writing by providing empirical evidence from an under-researched regional context in Vietnam, thereby enriching current understandings of IELTS Writing Task 2 performance at lower proficiency levels. Moreover, the findings offer practical implications for IELTS instructors and curriculum designers by informing targeted instructional interventions that address learners' specific weaknesses in idea development and lexical resource use.*

**Keywords:** Academic writing difficulties, argumentative writing, EFL learners, IELTS Writing Task 2, Mekong Delta

### 1. INTRODUCTION

English has long been established as a global lingua franca, underpinning international communication, academic exchange, and professional mobility [1]. In response to the growing demand for English-medium higher education, standardized tests such as IELTS have become central gatekeeping mechanisms for university admission and professional certification

worldwide [2]. Moreover, market analysis projects that the English proficiency test sector will continue growing strongly in the coming decade, reflecting ongoing global demand for standardized English assessment as part of academic and professional pathways [3].

Within the IELTS Academic section, Writing Task 2 manifests a particularly demanding component, as it requires test-takers to construct

a well-reasoned argumentative essay that demonstrates advanced critical thinking, coherent discourse organization, and a high degree of lexical and grammatical control. Academic writing in a second language is a complicated skill that requires explicit instruction and sustained practice [4]. Prior studies indicate that L2 learners face persistent challenges in academic essay writing, particularly in content development, organization, linguistic accuracy, and genre awareness [5], [6].

In recent years, the demand for IELTS learning and test preparation in Vietnam has increased substantially, not only in major urban centers but also in peripheral and non-metropolitan regions. In particular, in the Mekong Delta, the number of learners enrolling in IELTS preparation courses has risen steadily to meet university and postgraduate entry requirements as well as employment opportunities; however, learners' performance in Writing Task 2 generally remains limited [2]. Nevertheless, existing studies have predominantly focused on academic writing skills in broader scopes or urban contexts, while the specific challenges encountered by EFL learners in writing argumentative essays for IELTS Writing Task 2 in local settings - especially in the Mekong Delta region - have not yet been systematically and comprehensively investigated [5], [6].

In the Vietnamese context, despite the increasing prominence of IELTS in universities and language centers, empirical research on IELTS writing - particularly argumentative writing - remains limited, with notable gaps in regional contexts such as the Mekong Delta. To fill this research gap, (i) the current study investigates the main challenges faced by Vietnamese learners of English as a Foreign Language in producing argumentative essays for Writing Task 2 of IELTS. (ii) It further analyzes the factors underlying these challenges and examines the extent to which they affect learners. (iii) In addition, the study

offers pedagogical implications intended to inform and improve instructional practices for learners, instructors, and materials developers. It is anticipated that the findings will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of EFL learners' academic writing challenges and inform improvements in IELTS writing instruction in Vietnamese context.

The findings obtained from this study will provide valuable knowledge contributing to the area of EFL learners' problems in academic writing for the literature because no previous research focusing specially on the writing problems of Vietnamese learners of IELTS has been undertaken by any researchers. It is hoped that this study will shed some light into the area of teaching IELTS preparation courses (IELTS writing - argumentative essay in particular) of instructors of English in Vietnam. As such it is hoped that a larger research project in this area would be conducted so that even more effective IELTS preparation could be achieved.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is based on theoretical foundations of academic writing and the genre-based approach, in which the argumentative essay is considered a discourse genre with a relatively well-defined structure and conventions [6], [7], [8]. In particular, argumentation genre is of exposition and discussion genres which can represent hortatory style (how the situation should be) or analytical style (what the situation is). In other words, the argumentative essay is categorized into sub-genres: one-sided argument (exposition) and two-sided argument (discussion). According to this approach, an argumentative essay is required to include essential components, namely an introduction that establishes the writer's stance including hook, background, and thesis statement, body paragraphs that develop arguments supported by reasons and illustrative examples, and a conclusion that summarizes and reinforces the writer's viewpoint.

The analytical framework employed in this study was developed based on the four official assessment criteria of Task 2 in IELTS writing, including: (i) task response, (ii) coherence and cohesion, (iii) lexical resource, and (iv) grammatical range and accuracy [2]. These criteria not only reflect the assessment requirements of the IELTS examination but also represent the core components of academic writing competence in the EFL learning context [3], [9].

Research on academic writing has predominantly focused on EFL contexts; however, relatively limited attention has been paid to the specific difficulties faced by IELTS candidates, particularly in writing tasks. Previous studies acknowledge that unaddressed writing problems negatively affect test performance, yet they often fail to provide detailed explanations of the underlying causes of these difficulties. To date, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no empirical study in Vietnam has systematically examined the writing problems encountered by IELTS learners, especially in the Mekong Delta region.

In the Vietnamese EFL context, many learners struggle to recognize academic writing as a distinct genre and tend to adopt an informal, spoken style when composing argumentative essays. Consequently, learners experience varied difficulties in idea development, organization, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy. These challenges are reflected in relatively modest IELTS writing performance among Vietnamese candidates, as evidenced by reported mean band scores.

Identifying these gaps in the literature and practice, this study aims to investigate the major problems faced by IELTS learners in argumentative writing, explore the underlying causes, and propose pedagogical solutions to enhance the effectiveness of IELTS preparatory courses in Vietnam. Accordingly, the study holds clear practical significance for IELTS writing instruction.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive research framework using a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to achieve a thorough examination of the challenges faced by EFL learners in producing argumentative essays for the IELTS examination [10]. By incorporating both methodological approaches, the research not only measures the severity of learners' writing difficulties through analysis of their written outputs but also elucidates the underlying factors contributing to these challenges by drawing on learners' perspectives and lived experiences [11].

Consistent with the mixed-methods framework, quantitative data were utilized to evaluate learners' writing performance using the IELTS Writing Task 2 assessment criteria, while qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews served a supportive function by providing in-depth interpretations of the quantitative results.

Quantitative data were collected based on the four assessment criteria for the argumentative essay, which were adopted from the public IELTS Writing Task 2 scoring rubric. Task Response evaluates the extent to which learners address the task requirements, present a clear position, and develop relevant ideas with adequate support. Coherence and Cohesion focus on the logical organization of ideas, clarity of progression, and appropriate use of cohesive devices. Lexical Resource refers to the range, appropriateness, and accuracy of vocabulary used to express meaning. Grammatical Range and Accuracy assess the variety and correctness of sentence structures, including control of complex forms and the frequency of grammatical errors. These key criteria are used as a theoretical framework for analyzing the quality of the writing texts for the purpose of examining

how EFL learners response to writing assessment task.

### 3.2. Participants

Twenty-one participants were randomly drawn from a cohort of 27 EFL learners enrolled in an IELTS preparation program at a center for foreign languages in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. The selected participants represented diverse levels of writing proficiency, as reflected in different IELTS Writing band scores. Each of the four skills provides a band score, ranging from zero (non-user) to 9 (expert user) and an average of the 4 scores determines an overall band score. Besides, the participants, aged between 18 and 30 years, included 13 female and 8 male learners. All individuals held the Vietnamese English Certificate Level, which is equivalent to a pre-advanced level of English proficiency.

The learners enrolled in the IELTS preparatory course for various purposes, primarily to achieve the required band scores for admission to undergraduate or postgraduate programs, including master's degree programs. Other participants sought high IELTS scores to enhance employment prospects, while a smaller number attended the course for purposes related to general English improvement or immigration.

Furthermore, two English instructors from the Department of English Education at Can Tho University were invited to evaluate and comment on the participants' written texts.

All participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis and were assured of anonymity throughout the processes of data collection and analysis.

### 3.3. Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

The study employed two primary instruments for data collection, namely IELTS Writing Task 2 essays and semi-structured interviews [12]. The writing tasks were administered in accordance with the standard

requirements of the IELTS examination, with a minimum length of 250 words [2].

Qualitative information was gathered through semi-structured interviews. Nine participants drawn from the same population, whose written texts had previously been assessed and analyzed, were purposefully selected for approximately 45-minute face-to-face interviews from the study sample. These interviews aimed to elicit learners' views on the challenges they faced while composing argumentative essays and to identify the factors they believed affected their writing performance [8]. The qualitative data were employed to complement and elucidate the quantitative findings, offering in-depth insights into the underlying reasons for the patterns observed in the writing scores.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Learners' writing texts were independently evaluated by four raters, comprising three English instructors and the researcher, using the publicly available IELTS Writing Task 2 band descriptors [2]. Reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient [13]. Each script was assessed according to four equally weighted criteria on a nine-band scale.

To ensure inter-rater reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed to examine the level of consistency between the raters [10]. The results indicated that both writing tasks achieved a high reliability coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ), thereby confirming the reliability of the quantitative data.

Quantitative data were processed using descriptive statistics to determine the extent of learners' difficulties across each assessment criterion. In parallel, interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with a focus on major issue categories, including content development, argument organization, lexical use, and grammatical accuracy [7], [8]. The integration of these two data sources contributed to enhancing the validity and reliability of the research findings.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 4.1. Reliability of the Assessment Instrument

Prior to analyzing learners' writing performance, the reliability of the assessment instrument was examined to ensure consistency in scoring among the raters. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for the rating scale based on the four official criteria of IELTS Writing Task 2, namely task response, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy.

The analysis results indicated that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the first writing task on the topic of *studying abroad* was  $\alpha = 0.96$ , while that for the second writing task on *environmental protection* was also  $\alpha = 0.96$ . Both values far exceeded the acceptable threshold ( $\alpha \geq 0.70$ ), demonstrating that the assessment scale exhibited very high reliability and a strong level of inter-rater consistency.

**Table 1. Results of Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis for IELTS Writing Task 2 Essays**

Writing task	Number of assessment criteria	Number of observed variables	Cronbach's Alpha
Studying abroad	4	16	0.96
Environmental protection	4	16	0.96

*Note: The acceptable threshold for Cronbach's Alpha is  $\alpha \geq 0.70$ .*

#### 4.2. Results of Writing Scores Based on IELTS Assessment Criteria

The findings indicate that content development (task response) was one of the weakest assessment criteria among the learners, which is consistent with findings from previous studies on academic writing in EFL contexts [5], [11], [12]. Analysis of the writing samples revealed that learners frequently experienced difficulties in identifying and developing main arguments, providing specific supporting evidence, and

maintaining relevance throughout the essay. As a result, many essays tended to be descriptive or list-like in nature, with limited depth of argumentation and incomplete fulfillment of the task requirements. Following the confirmation of the reliability of the assessment instrument, the writing scores of the 21 learners were analyzed based on the four official assessment criteria of IELTS Writing Task 2. The results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Mean Scores of IELTS Writing Task 2 Essays by Assessment Criteria**

Assessment criteria	Essay 1	Essay 2
Task response	5.1	5.4
Coherence & cohesion	5.3	5.6
Lexical resource	4.9	5.2
Grammatical range & accuracy	5.4	5.7
Overall mean score	5.2	5.5

*Note: Scores were calculated based on the IELTS band scale (1-9).*

Table 2 shows that the learners' mean scores in both writing tasks ranged approximately from Band 5.0 to 5.5, reflecting an average level of academic writing proficiency that aligns with the intended learning outcomes of the participant group. A comparison between the two writing tasks indicates that Essay 2 achieved higher mean scores than Essay 1 across all assessment criteria, with differences ranging from 0.3 to 0.4 points, suggesting a certain degree of improvement in learners' writing performance following the practice period.

With respect to individual assessment criteria, task response achieved a mean score of 5.1 in Essay 1 and 5.4 in Essay 2. These results indicate that the learners were generally able to identify the task requirements and present a basic stance; however, limitations in idea development and argumentation prevented the essays from attaining a higher level of persuasiveness.

Regarding coherence and cohesion, the mean score increased from 5.3 in Essay 1 to 5.6 in Essay 2. This finding reflects a relatively stable ability among the learners to organize their essays and employ cohesive devices, although their use remained somewhat formulaic and lacked flexibility in certain cases.

The lexical resource criterion recorded the lowest mean scores in both writing tasks, at 4.9 and 5.2, respectively. These results indicate noticeable limitations in learners' academic vocabulary range and their ability to select context-appropriate lexical items for argumentative writing, which in turn directly affected the quality of their expression and argumentation.

In contrast, grammatical range and accuracy achieved relatively higher mean scores than the other criteria, with 5.4 in Essay 1 and 5.7 in Essay 2. Although grammatical errors were still evident, these results suggest that the learners had acquired a range of basic sentence structures and were able to apply them at an acceptable level in academic writing.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that lexical resource and idea development constituted the weakest components of learners' performance in IELTS Writing Task 2. Although an increase in scores was observed between the two writing tasks, suggesting a beneficial effect of practice, the extent of this improvement was relatively limited, highlighting the need for more substantial support in writing strategies and academic language development.

#### 4.3. Learners' Difficulties in Relation to The Assessment Criteria

To further clarify the severity and prevalence of the difficulties encountered by learners, the study proceeded to analyze the distribution of learners across different score bands for each assessment criterion of IELTS Writing Task 2. This classification enables a clear identification of aspects in which learners experience serious difficulties,

moderate difficulties, as well as criteria that are relatively well controlled. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3.

The analysis of learners' distribution across score bands reveals varying levels of difficulty among the assessment criteria. Specifically, lexical resource emerged as the criterion with the highest proportion of learners scoring below Band 5.0 (61.9%), followed by task response, in which 57.1% of learners experienced pronounced difficulties. In contrast, the proportions of learners scoring below Band 5.0 were lower for coherence and cohesion and for grammatical range and accuracy, at 42.9% and 38.1%, respectively.

**Table 3. Distribution of learners experiencing difficulties in relation to IELTS Writing Task 2 assessment criteria (n = 21)**

Assessment criteria	Below Band 5.0	Band 5.0–5.5	Above Band 5.5
Task response	12 (57.1%)	7 (33.3%)	2 (9.6%)
Lexical resource	13 (61.9%)	6 (28.6%)	2 (9.5%)
Coherence and cohesion	9 (42.9%)	8 (38.1%)	4 (19.0%)
Grammatical range and accuracy	8 (38.1%)	9 (42.9%)	4 (19.0%)

*Note.* The classification is based on the mean scores of the two writing tasks, assessed using the IELTS 1-9 band scale.

These findings indicate that learners' difficulties are not evenly distributed but are primarily concentrated in content development and the use of academic vocabulary, whereas aspects related to organization and grammatical control are managed relatively more effectively. This pattern reinforces the mean score analysis presented in Table 2 and provides clearer

evidence of the severity of each category of difficulties in IELTS Writing Task 2.

#### **4.4. Problems in Content Development and Task Response**

The findings indicate that task response was one of the two lowest-scoring criteria across both writing tasks, reflecting learners' marked limitations in analyzing the prompt, establishing a clear position, and developing ideas in a sufficiently thorough manner. Although learners were generally able to express a personal viewpoint, their arguments were often presented at a superficial level, lacked specific supporting evidence, and were insufficiently elaborated in depth.

These findings are consistent with more recent research on academic writing in EFL contexts, which indicates that learners frequently experience difficulties in generating ideas and developing arguments when writing under strict time constraints [14], [15], [16]. For learners at the Band 5.0 level, limited background knowledge of common academic topics featured in IELTS has also been identified as a key factor constraining their ability to fully meet task requirements [17], [18].

#### **4.5. The Impact of Limited Lexical Resources on the Quality of Argumentation**

Lexical resource emerged as the lowest-scoring criterion across both writing tasks, indicating that it constitutes a substantial obstacle for learners in producing argumentative essays. The results suggest that learners tend to rely on a limited vocabulary range, exhibit frequent lexical repetition, and experience difficulty in selecting contextually appropriate academic lexis. This pattern is clearly reflected in Table 3, where 61.9% of learners scored below Band 5.0 in the lexical resource criterion, underscoring limited academic vocabulary as the most significant constraint on the quality of argumentative writing.

A lack of academic vocabulary not only constrains learners' ability to express ideas but also limits their capacity to elaborate and deepen

arguments. In many cases, learners are compelled to simplify their ideas or avoid addressing more complex points due to insufficient linguistic resources, thereby reducing the overall persuasiveness of their writing [14], [17], [18].

#### **4.6. Argument Organization, Coherence, and Cohesion in Writing**

In comparison with content development and lexical resources, coherence and cohesion attained a higher mean score. This finding suggests that learners have acquired a foundational understanding of the structural conventions of argumentative essays as well as principles of paragraph organization. A considerable number of the written texts exhibited a relatively well-defined macro-structure, with clearly delineated introductions, body sections, and conclusions, indicating an emerging level of organizational proficiency.

However, the utilization of cohesive devices in the essays remained largely formulaic and lacked flexibility. In several cases, linking words were overused or employed inappropriately in relation to the logical flow of the argument, resulting in an unnatural expression of ideas. This pattern indicates that, although learners demonstrate awareness of the formal structure of an essay, they have not yet fully mastered cohesive strategies in academic writing.

The proportion of learners experiencing significant difficulties in this criterion was lower than that observed for content development and lexical resources, indicating that learners possess a certain level of awareness regarding essay structure, although their ability to apply it flexibly remains limited.

#### **4.7. Problems in Grammar, Accuracy, and L1 Influence**

While grammatical accuracy and syntactic range are not considered the most critical evaluative criteria, errors in these areas remain pervasive in learners' written productions, particularly in compositions receiving lower overall scores. The most recurrent issues

pertain to inappropriate tense usage, difficulties in constructing complex sentences, and violations of subject–verb agreement, reflecting persistent challenges in mastering morphosyntactic conventions. Such patterns suggest that, despite some proficiency in linguistic forms, learners continue to struggle with the consistent application of grammatical rules in extended written discourse.

Insights from the interviews indicate that, during the writing process, learners tend to prioritize the conveyance of ideas over the control of grammatical forms, particularly under time constraints. In addition, the influence of the first language contributes to non-native-like expressions and word-for-word sentence constructions, which diminish the academic quality of the writing. These findings are consistent with the observation that only 38.1% of learners scored below Band 5.0 in the grammar criterion, suggesting that while grammar is not the primary obstacle, it nevertheless affects the clarity and quality of expression among lower-performing learners.

#### **4.8. Enhancing Writing Performance Through Practice: Evidence from Two Tasks**

A comparison of the outcomes from the two writing tasks reveals an overall increase in mean scores across all evaluation criteria in the second task. While the degree of progress was relatively small, the results nonetheless indicate that practice contributes positively, though to a limited extent, to the development of learners' writing proficiency.

However, the modest extent of improvement indicates that practice alone is insufficient without the accompaniment of strategic guidance and targeted pedagogical feedback. This underscores the critical role of directed instruction in helping learners identify weaknesses, adjust writing strategies, and sustainably develop their academic writing competence.

This finding is further corroborated by the analysis of learners' performance, which shows that over half of the participants (57.1%) scored below Band 5.0 in the task achievement criterion, indicating that this represents a common challenge for learners at the Band 5.0 level.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1. Conclusion**

This study investigated IELTS learners' major problems in writing argumentative essays faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in the Mekong Delta region. The findings indicate that learners encounter significant limitations in content development, the use of academic vocabulary, the organization of arguments, and grammatical control. Among these, content development and lexical resources emerge as the weakest areas, directly impacting the overall quality of the essays.

The integration of quantitative score analysis and qualitative interview data indicates that these difficulties are systemic and closely interrelated. At the same time, the results demonstrate that practice positively influences writing competence; however, its effectiveness is enhanced when complemented by appropriate instructional strategies.

### **5.2. Pedagogical implications**

The pedagogical implications presented below are based on the analysis of mean scores (Table 2) and the distribution of learners according to the severity of difficulties (Table 3), thereby providing a comprehensive reflection of both the extent and prevalence of each category of challenge in Task 2 of IELTS Writing. On this basis, the study proposes several pedagogical recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of teaching and learning IELTS writing skills in the EFL context to learners in Vietnam.

First and foremost, regarding difficulties in content development and task fulfillment, IELTS writing instruction should emphasize

guiding learners in analyzing prompts, establishing a clear stance, and constructing a coherent argument structure appropriate for argumentative essays. Activities such as analyzing sample prompts, outlining before writing, and evaluating the extent to which sample essays meet task requirements can help learners enhance their content development skills in a structured and purposeful manner.

The next step is to address limitations in lexical resources, IELTS preparation courses should focus on the systematic development of academic and topic-specific vocabulary. Integrating activities such as reading short academic texts, extracting vocabulary in context, and practicing the use of new words in writing tasks can support learners in enhancing their ability to select and employ appropriate language when presenting arguments.

Furthermore, regarding difficulties in argument organization, cohesion, and coherence, instructors should guide learners to use cohesive devices flexibly and appropriately in alignment with the essay's argumentative flow, rather than mechanically applying preset templates. Activities such as peer or instructor-led essay revisions, paragraph structure analysis, and comparisons of essays with varying levels of coherence can enhance learners' awareness of effective argument organization in academic writing.

Regarding issues related to grammar, accuracy, and the influence of the first language, instruction should combine the practice of linguistic accuracy with the development of learners' ability to express ideas naturally in English. Instructors may focus on common grammatical errors in IELTS Writing Task 2, while encouraging learners to identify and correct their own mistakes through guided feedback activities.

Finally, concerning improvement across writing tasks and the role of practice, the findings indicate that practice has a positive impact but remains insufficient in the absence of

specific guidance. Therefore, the organization of regular writing activities should be accompanied by focused pedagogical feedback, prioritizing content and argumentation in the initial stages, followed by vocabulary and linguistic accuracy. This approach can gradually enhance learners' academic writing competence and increase their confidence in taking the IELTS examination.

### 5.3. Directions for Further Research

A further line of research could focus on the problems that IELTS learners encounter throughout the entire test preparation process rather than examining only a single stage of preparation. In addition, another possible direction is to shift the focus of participants from learners to instructors and teachers. Future research may extend the present study into a broader investigation of the IELTS preparation process, employing a larger-scale design and a more diverse population to strengthen the robustness and contextual validity of the findings.

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## NHỮNG KHÓ KHĂN CHÍNH CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ TRONG BÀI THI VIẾT IELTS: TRƯỜNG HỢP NGHIÊN CỨU TẠI VIỆT NAM

### TÓM TẮT

*Nghiên cứu này phân tích những khó khăn chính của người học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL) tại Việt Nam, thông qua một trường hợp nghiên cứu được thực hiện tại khu vực Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, khi viết văn bình luận trong IELTS Writing Task 2. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, kết hợp phân tích định lượng kết quả bài viết và dữ liệu định tính thu thập từ phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc. Đối tượng nghiên cứu gồm 21 học viên luyện thi IELTS Academic Band 5.0 tại một trung tâm ngoại ngữ. Các bài luận của người học được đánh giá theo thang điểm chính thức của IELTS Writing Task 2, bao gồm bốn tiêu chí: đáp ứng yêu cầu đề bài, mạch lạc và liên kết, vốn từ vựng, và phạm vi cũng như độ chính xác ngữ pháp. Kết quả cho thấy người học gặp nhiều khó khăn trong phát triển nội dung, tổ chức lập luận, sử dụng từ vựng và kiểm soát ngữ pháp; trong đó, phát triển nội dung và nguồn từ vựng là hai tiêu chí yếu nhất. Những khó khăn này chủ yếu xuất phát từ hạn chế về kiến thức nền, vốn từ học thuật, chiến lược viết chưa hiệu quả và thiếu luyện tập thường xuyên. Dựa trên các phát hiện này, nghiên cứu đóng góp thêm bằng chứng thực nghiệm cho lĩnh vực IELTS và viết học thuật trong bối cảnh EFL từ một khu vực còn ít được nghiên cứu tại Việt Nam, qua đó làm rõ hơn năng lực thực hiện IELTS Writing Task 2 của người học ở trình độ thấp. Đồng thời, kết quả nghiên cứu cung cấp các hàm ý sư phạm cho giáo viên IELTS và nhà thiết kế chương trình trong việc xây dựng các can thiệp giảng dạy có trọng tâm nhằm cải thiện khả năng phát triển ý tưởng và sử dụng từ vựng của người học.*

**Keywords:** Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, IELTS Writing Task 2, khó khăn trong viết học thuật, người học EFL