Effects of IELTS Writing Topic Awareness on Non-English Major Undergraduates at Ho Chi Minh University of Economics and Finance.

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Abstract:

The study quantitatively probes into the potential prospect of whether students' pre-knowledge concerning a given topic in the English writing task has any correlation, either positive or negative, to their ensuing score. With one functional research question and a pool sample of non-English major undergraduates whose relevant language proficiency and backgrounds are curriculum-inclined to be homogeneous overall, the study relies on the test as the research instrument, the scores of which are regarded as data. Subsequent analyses which employ one-sample t-test and Pearson's correlational test against the conventional p-value of 0.05 yield results that align with what is posited prior, and serve to provide further evidence of the possibility of the phenomenon in the localized context of Vietnamese higher education. The study, despite its confidence in academic integrity, has not delved deeply into the intricacies surrounding the presented notion - all of which duly addressed. It, however, sufficiently points out the novelty of the research and urges additional works to explore the subject further with this as the foundation.

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Introduction

Many languages across the globe, in an attempt to further proliferate its touch as well as increasing the number of relevant speakers, have devised standardized tests based on various criteria. (Kellaghan et al., 2012) Though English finds itself in the same competition, it can be considered unique in the sense that already has it been the cream of the linguistic crop in the industry. Thus, there are certain privileges that the language sole enjoys, which can be it being the lingua franca, a compulsory subject in the higher education scheme, an academic language, to name but a few. (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020)

Concerning the latter of the aforementioned, which is the field of academia and its prerequisite check on the writing skill, the English language offers potential researchers and similar adherents training in the form of standardized tests the likes of TOEIC, IELTS, TOEFL iBT, Aptis, and so on, which can be accessed and deemed eligible for professional screenings from various distributors, e.g., the British Council, IDP Education, or IIG Education. Among these, the IELTS rises up as a singularity - that is, a class of its own - due to the fact that its writing screening resembles an actual academic journal writing style the most. (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022) In fact, in the localized context of Vietnam, many have regarded the testing method a gatekeeper of sort for any aspiring researcher whose work is to be published in the language. This, however, poses an issue: since the test from that perspective can be quite challenging to undergraduates of non-English majors who, by abiding to the assigned curriculum of their specialization, have no choice but to learn and correspondingly take up the exam at a later time, they must amply prepare for it. (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020) This spells that they have to seriously learn and take up the courses offered in a not-so-voluntary approach of their university of choice, attend cram schools, or sign up for language training centers, then choose to either grind on-site, via distance learning, or online learning. (Nguyen et al., 2021; Uong et al., 2022)

In the grand scheme of things, there are many techniques that can ease them along the studying journey of the writing skill. Among them, there is one deeply rooted in academics, which is to rely on the students' worldly knowledge, or 'schemata', to better understand the given topics before heading off to face them. (Al-Jawi, 2010; Nguyen, 2023) This is by no means an instant gratification or an easy feat; instead, they must be trained in the act before they can even think about pulling it off by themselves successfully. Hence, the author of this study expresses extreme interest in the topic, and seeks to posit several effects along with ponders concerning the raised subject, all of which are compressed into the following research question: To what extent can non-English major undergraduates' writing topic awareness assist them in increasing the writing score?

The research question assumes the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between the sample's writing topic awareness and their score, thus signifying that the

approaches utilizing this facet of worldly knowledge is effective in teaching the writing task skill found in or similar to the IELTS.

Literature review

The IELTS writing model and the CEFR

According to Nguyen and Nguyen (2022), in terms of technicality, the IELTS is a very thorough standardized testing system that seeks to assess all four major language skills of a tester, namely listening, reading, writing, and speaking - more often than not in this order, or with speaking in front if taken via the computer-based method which is rising in popularity, or separately examined on a different day should the test takers opt for the more traditional paper-based approach. A more in-depth look at the writing section reveals that the skill is assessed via two writing tasks, the first of which concerns the utilization of formal writing to accurately and adeptly describe a given chart or diagram, whereas the second task is set for test takers to express their articulated views on a certain socially-inclined topic. As with the majority of the standardized tests, the IELTS relies on a framework of references as the foundation from which the language proficiency of the examinees is rated. Deemed as the prototype of its kind, the test makes use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, commonly known as the CEFR, to achieve this end. (Nguyen, 2023; Uong et al., 2022) This translates to the fact that the nine-score standardized test adheres to a six-level grading scheme, from the beginner proficiency of A1 to the most advanced/ native-like C2. However, as it is not recommended for people below the age of 16, the IELTS only aims to assess in the most precise means possible the higher proficiency level, that is, from B1 onwards. Thus, their corresponding overall band score is viewed as follows.

Table 1. The Corresponding IELTS Overall Band Score Compared to the CEFR.

IELTS overall band score	CEFR language proficiency levels
8.5-9.0	C2
7.0-8.0	C1
5.5-6.5	B2
4.0-5.0	B1
Not assessed	A2
Not assessed	A1

The overall band score is gained through the averaged tally of the four distinct band score of each of the four language skills as mentioned above. In detail, the two receptive

skills of listening and reading divide their own nine-point band score into 40 questions, with cumulative correct answers through the obstacles providing more and more score toward 9.0. The remaining two productive skills of speaking and writing are viewed as mini overall band scores, which have their own sub four-entry band score. In the case of the writing task 2, these are task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resources, and grammar range and accuracy. (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022) On another note, the writing task 2 alone boasts an arsenal of five different topic styles, which are opinion, discussion, problem and solution, advantage or disadvantage, and direct question. (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022) This calls for diverse approaches to tackling the given topics and expressing oneself, and is deemed a very unique trait of the standardized test.

Writing topic awareness of Vietnamese non-English major undergraduates

Uysal (2010), in his argument on the IELTS, points out that topics of the writing task 2 section are very relevant to a test taker's surrounding living environment, even more so if they actively engage in social events and make their livelihood in urbanized settings. He also shares that the test always tries its best to be argumentative so that test takers can garner ideas from various perspectives, but not too radicalized to the point of scandal and controversy as a means of respecting the authority and personal autonomy, i.e., they will never give subjects on religion and personal spiritual beliefs, among others. On the other hand, from the experience point of view being seasoned IELTS instructors of language centers in the localized context of Vietnam, Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) surmise that the eight topics commonly found in the IELTS writing task 2 are education, technology, environment, work, culture, crime, health, and family.

Though the aforementioned eight topics are very close to what a normal test taker experiences throughout a mundane day, in the context of Vietnam and more specifically its young denizens who are attending university generally on time to learn non-English majors, the same cannot be said entirely. Al-Jawi (2010) posits that students are always encouraged explicitly by teachers and implicitly via the test topic to rely on their 'schemata' - worldly knowledge – to better comprehend and express themselves. In all actuality, he argues that the test topics, in other words, endorse students with awareness of them prior. However, to what extent can this be true for undergraduates priming for IELTS nowadays? Around the globe, it seems like test takers of the young adult and higher education demographics are very attuned to what society and news offer up. (Hayn et al., 2016) Very dissimilar to past generations, university undergraduates have a generally high rating when it comes to comprehending and knowing of what approaches a topic should be tackled as well as how extensive they can write about it, especially when the topics are about family, environment, education, and technology. In the context of Vietnam, non-English major university undergraduates are at the intermediate English user threshold of CEFR's B1

and B2 proficiency. (Nguyen, 2023) Additionally, they engage a lot and spend most of their leisure time surfing all corners of the internet via applications and browsers. (Tran & Bui, 2014) One would come to the conclusion that they via such practice and behavior must have been aware of more topics than ever, but this unfortunately is not the case. (Tran, 2016) Rather, they do not read much, are indifferent to social events that do not matter to them in the immediate sense, and are pretty much desensitized of politics, socio-economics endeavors if they do not concern them. That is to say, their general writing topic awareness can be inferred to be barely passable. In synthesis, seeing that the area of study remains largely unexplored academically in Vietnam, the potential it unlocks could be phenomenal: students may have a much easier reading and understanding what they are required to do from the topic as well as how they should develop their ideas to better cope with that.

Writing topic awareness and score

Whether the writing topic awareness, that is, the preordained ability to easily comprehend and write more extensively about a given writing topic, has any link to the score received, is a subject of much debate. Much like the receptive skills, metacognition from writing topic awareness is of great benefits to non-English major undergraduates (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). By quickly comprehending the topic and knowing how to properly express their ideas with articulation in mind, they can not only save the time, but raise their score across all of the writing test's characteristics, i.e., grammar, vocabulary, coherence and cohesion, and task relevancy. (Ollesch et al., 2021) Bonyadi (2014) reinforces this notion, stating that the writing scores awarded are generally higher the more students are aware of the topic or have an intimate knowledge on them beforehand.

Methodology

Research site, scope, participants, and sampling procedures

The research was conducted on-campus, at the Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance. Due to the nature of the presenting facilities, the research occurred in both campuses A and B of said institute during the entire academic year of 2022-2023.

The research was limited to only the General English Program 7, i.e., GEP7, a compulsory English module for non-English major undergraduates at the university. This was due to the fact that this was the only English module that based off of the IELTS. The four classes and their students numbering at 102 that the author-lecturer was assigned to as a writing instructor were chosen. They were taught how to conduct IELTS writing task 2, thus they were compatible to the aim of this study.

The participants were strictly sophomores and juniors whose majors inclined towards finance and economics. They were picked due to the aforementioned compatibility. Their English language proficiency - according to their gradual progression through the curriculum - was placed at upper intermediate, which translated into approximately B2 of the CEFR.

In terms of saliency, the university had seven English modules aimed at the entire enrolling non-English majored students, named GEP1 to GEP7. The gradual progression in difficulty from GEP1 to GEP6 was consistent as the students were introduced to business and working English via the American English File coursebook series (Latham-Koenig, 2013). However, as they advanced to GEP7, a spike in academic demand was apparent, and students who were getting through KET- or PET-leveled English then faced B2-leveled IELTS training across four skills. Additionally, instead of having one Vietnamese and one foreign lecturer guide them through the previous prerequisite modules, for GEP7, both Vietnamese lecturers jointly taught the class with one responsible for the writing skill, while the others for speaking, reading, and listening. The university often allowed up to nearly 50 GEP7 classes to run simultaneously in one semester to accommodate the student body. Efforts were made to put those with related majors into one class, resulting in the authors' one having most majoring in Accounting, Auditing, International Business, and E-Commerce.

Research design and instrument

The research was quantitative in nature. Creswell (2012) vouched for education researches to be done quantitatively should a certain number threshold be reached and a level of homogeneity be realized as they helped generalize a practice and/ or an academic discovery for the greater picture. In light of the fact that the study attracted a sample of around 100 participants, quantifying what were to be acquired seemed befitting enough to warrant a quantitative approach. In this regard, the research adopted a correlational design in order to assess whether the two variables of 1/ being aware of the written topic, and 2/ the score produced thereof, had any effect on one another.

Consequently, along this note, the research instrument of choice was a written test since the students were made to sit through one IELTS writing task 2 topic which was also their midterm, the authors believed that they were not coerced in any way as this was what they had to do eventually, and that they had sufficient external motivation, i.e., the written test was also their midterm, and internal motivation, i.e., they needed to gain as high a GPA score as possible for each module since that was what their role of being university students demanded of them. (MacArthur et al., 2008) Additionally, this produced no further change

to the lesson plan and progress at the time. That, coupled with the fact that the test was done largely covertly, resulted in the test as the most desirable instrument. It should also be noted that the participants were given one other research instrument under the guise of a five-point Likert scale to which they responded in written form at the top corner on the same paper of their test, signifying how well they were aware of the test topic before doing it. The Likert scale was utilized in this case because the scores yielded from the test must have been the dependent variables, and there was no better and more intimate alternative to observe the correlation other than the often-independent variable of said scale. (Roy, 2020) Personally, the scale was chosen due to its attested efficacy, its familiarity with the authors, and how pressed the time was, i.e., the writing lecturer only had seven sessions with the class.

Data collection and analysis

After the tests were administered, the author-lecturer would mark them in accordance with the band descriptors for IELTS writing task 2 and inputted the participants' Likert scale responses for ensuing analysis. The test score– as an attempt to emulate the IELTS band score, only consisted of scores with no decimal – which was to be released at a later week was the dependent variable, whereas the five-point Likert scale, designated from 1 to 5 as "very unfamiliar", "unfamiliar", "neutral", "familiar", and "very familiar", served as the independent variable. These two data inputs which were viewed as ordinal figures were then subjected to SPSS analysis, particularly the one-way Pearson correlation analysis to find out whether they adhere to the established hypothesis that the writing topic awareness had any correlation to the test score in a positive manner, and that whether the study was statistically significant at all.

Considerations for research ethics

Every step of the way, the authors emphasized the importance of maintaining research integrity. On the first day, after deeming the students' disposition favorable for conducting the research, the first author verbally explained to them about the intention of having one. Afterward, they were shown a Google Form with one yes/no question asking for their consent, having been assured that they could drop out midway with no repercussion. No privilege was awarded for those who joined; likewise, no punishment befell those who did not.

Result and discussion

Post analysis, the crosstabulation of the Likert scale and the test score were as displayed below.

Table 2. Crosstabulation of Relevant Dependent and Independent Variables.

Score	Awareness					Total
	Very unfamiliar	**Unfamiliar**	**Neutral**	**Familiar**	**Very familiar**	
4	5	5	5	4	3	22
5	5	3	3	3	3	17
6	2	5	3	4	2	16
7	3	2	2	5	2	14
8	3	2	3	4	3	15
9	1	2	2	2	5	12
10	1	1	1	1	2	6
Total	**20**	**20**	**19**	**23**	**20**	**102**

As a tallied table, the crosstabulation served to saliently elucidate the figures that were invited into the analysis. Traditionally, the means must be investigated and shown at this phase separately; however, since the endeavor had been included as a part of the Pearson correlation analysis, this was uncalled for.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations
of Relevant Dependent and Independent Variables.

Variables	Means	Standard deviation	N
Test score	6.42	1.90	102
Topic awareness	3.03	1.42	102

Via one-sample t-test, the means and standard deviations of the variables were revealed. Data retrieved from the above table illustrated ideal condition. According to common practice, the standard deviation of all variables involved should never exceed plus or minus 2.0 for the sake of validity, i.e., within those boundaries, standard deviation truly represented what they were supposed to measure. In this case, the test score fell within the golden range, at 1.90 and 1.42 respectively for the dependent variable of test score and the independent variable of topic awareness, both of which were lower than 2.0. Hence, all two of the relevant variables were representative of their stance. Despite not being the focus of this research, the means did reflect certain truths from what had been yielded. The test score was above average, at 6.42, which proved that the written test dubbed midterm was meaningful and that students did take to heart what had been instructed throughout the

entirety of their course. The topic awareness, albeit straying very close to the undesirable neutral stance of the Likert scale of 3.0, did curve up positively at 3.03, thus denying the claim that the data were unsavory and unsalvageable.

Table 4. The Correlations Rating of The Dependent and Independent Variables

Variables	Analyses	Test score	Topic awareness
Test score	Pearson correlation	1	0.183
	Significance (one-tailed)		0.033
Topic awareness	Pearson correlation	0.183	1
	Significance (one-tailed)	0.033	

The research yielded very desirable and statistically significant figures post-analysis. With the significance between the two variables at 0.033, below the conventional p-value of 0.05, the retrieved one-tailed Pearson correlation was meaningful. With this, the analysis proved that between the independent variable and dependent variable, there existed a positive correlation of 0.183, which signified that the more the student-participants were aware of the written test topic, the better they handled them. This relationship was saliently displayed via the test score and the topic awareness.

With the data deemed statistically significant, the study reinforces the claim that the IELTS writing task 2 does make use of mundane, day-to-day materials that are not far from the reach of mostly urbanite undergraduates. As the various tests administered had their topics compounded within the ranges proposed by Nguyen and Nguyen (2022), the conclusion that test takers have no trouble getting in touch with the elements and that when they do, the easier they are aware of the writing topic and the better their test score turn out can be reached. (Hayn et al., 2016) This coincidentally also extends the view of Al-Jawi (2010) from solely the receptive skills to writing – a productive counterpart – when it comes to the usage of worldly knowledge to deal with the test.

That said, since there were apparently still score below the average of 5, it indicates that even though topic awareness for writing is essential, whether the non-English major undergraduates motivate themselves to be aware of the topic via interacting meaningfully with their surroundings in the first place remained a practical obstacle. This aligns with what Tran (2016) speaks of the targeted demographics that they do not know to properly utilize and turn growing sources of distraction into tools to benefit themselves, what with their seemingly advantageous standpoint raised by Tran and Bui (2014).

Conclusion

Though the yielded results were favorable and answered the research question that there is a statistically significance positive correlation between a heightened writing topic awareness and the subsequent test score received, the study only serves as sort of a precursor into the subject at hand. Since the field has not been looked into extensively, this research acts as a lure to attract further attention into this novelty.

The research should only assume the role of a basis for others to be developed upon. This is because in-depth reviews on which of the eight topics the non-English major undergraduates are most vested into in terms of awareness as well as their ranking have not been discovered. Furthermore, the setting of the study was subjectively restricted, so additional findings in other universities, higher education institutes, and other levels of education in the system nationwide should be conducted. Furthermore, researches under the form of other designs and instruments should also be conducted to provide more localized context into the phenomenon in Vietnam.

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APPENDICES

Table 5. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

A1 Basic user	A2 Basic user	B1 Independent user	B2 Independent user	C1 Proficient user	C2 Proficient user
I can recognize familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly.	I can understand phrases and the highest frequency vocabulary related to areas of most immediate personal relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local area, employment). I can catch the main point in short, clear, simple messages and announcements.	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programs on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programs. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect.	I can understand extended speech even when it is not clearly structured and when relationships are only implied and not signaled explicitly. I can understand television programs and films without too much effort.	I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language, whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at fast native speed, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent.

Table 6. Names of the IELTS Writing Task 2 Topics Used in this Research.

No.	Topic	Question	Type
1	Education	Education should be free to all people and should be paid for and managed by the government. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?	Opinion
2	Technology	Modern technology now allows rapid and uncontrolled access to information in many countries. This is a danger to our societies. To what extent do you agree or disagree?	Opinion
3	Health	Doctors recommend that older people exercise regularly. However, many of them do not get enough exercise. What are the reasons? What can be done to encourage them to exercise more?	Cause & solution
4	Environment	Water pollution has become an increasing problem over the past few decades. What causes water pollution? How can we prevent this problem?	Cause & solution
5	Society	Many parents put a lot of pressure on their children to succeed. To what extent do you agree?	Opinion