

Difficulties of IELTS Writing Module Experienced by Test-Takers: A Case Study in Tishk International University Continuous Education Center

Mustafa Azmi Bingol¹

¹Law Department, Faculty of Law, Tishk International University, Erbil, Iraq

Correspondence: Mustafa Azmi Bingol, Tishk International University, Erbil, Iraq

Email: mustafa.bingol@tiu.edu.iq

Doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v9i4p287

Abstract: IELTS test has four sections, and writing is one of them as a productive skill. In this test, writing has two tasks, and the first one is descriptive writing while the second is argumentative type. Both of them have their own peculiarities, and candidates of IELTS test come across different challenges. In the study we conducted, we focused on most outstanding challenges that the candidates revealed during the 50-hour course. As a result, we prepared a questionnaire inquiring these challenging points for them. It seems they have some difficulties in writing these tasks, and since these tasks require some extra academic skills, the candidates cannot learn them in their past education, so they need to struggle extra to gain these skills to be able to write in IELTS test.

Keywords: IELTS Test, IELTS Writing, Descriptive and Argumentative Writing

1. Introduction

In the modern world, there are some tests like IELTS that people have to take in order to prove their proficiency level of English. It is especially necessary for those who would like to get an academic career. But when it comes to preparation to this test, people come across some challenges because what they have learned in their formal education may not be adequate to get a satisfactory mark in this exam. People need to gain some extra skill to achieve this test, and they also need some of these skills in writing. There are two tasks, and both of them require different skills to apply while writing. In this study, we will focus on some most outstanding challenges that candidates may meet during their studies and during writing in real exam.

2. Literature Review

2.1 IELTS Test

IELTS (International Language Testing System) is organized by British council, and this test is taken by many non-native English users for academic purposes (Cooper, 2013) and some others like immigration

Received: October 7, 2022

Accepted: November 29, 2022

Bingol, M. (2022). Difficulties of IELTS Writing Module Experienced by Test-Takers: A Case Study in Tishk International University Continuous Education Center. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Educational Studies*, 9(4), 287-297.

to English-speaking countries and professional accreditation. There are two modules in this test, and people choose one of them according to their purposes of use. The first one is general module, and the second one is academic module. People do the general module test when they intend to immigrate to English-speaking countries. As for academic module, it is taken generally for enrollment to universities or to continue further education like master's degree and above (Abe, 2008).

The difference between IELTSs academic and general modules is that their reading and writing parts are different. Since the general module is for immigration purposes and does not measure academic development, the questions are designed accordingly (Read, 2001). In general module, the reading passages are not from academic issues, but from general knowledge.

The test starts with listening part, and it has four sections. There are two conversations and two monologues that can be in the form of a lecture or a report. The listening part also includes two social topics and two study-based topics. Reading consists of three passages and related questions. Speaking is done on a separate day under the supervision of an examiner. There are three sections in speaking. In the first section, the examinee is asked to introduce themselves and talk about hobbies, interests, studies...etc. In the second section of speaking, the candidate is given one minute to prepare and given a topic. After preparation of one minute, the examiner asks questions, and the candidate talks about that topic. In the third section, they discuss the same topic in more general way rather than personally (Brook-Hart & Jakeman, 2013).

2.2 IELTS Writing

As for writing, it has two tasks. In task 1 in general module, test-takers are asked to write about any general topic, and the aim in this task is to measure how the test-taker can communicate in general situations and practical issues. You are given 20 minutes to write, and this task adds up to 30% of writing score in the test. It is evaluated separately from the other task.

Task 1 for academic module is quite different from the previous one, and it is a descriptive writing sample. The examinees are asked to report the information they see on a chart which can be a bar chart, a pie chart, a table, a map, a diagram, a diagram with process or a line graph. It is asked in this task to compare the information and report in written form. Candidates are also asked to make comparisons between two charts. The candidates are asked to describe the information, not to evaluate. They must write at least 150 words in this essay (Uysal, 2010).

As for task 2, it is an argumentative essay type and quite different from the task 1. The candidates are asked to develop an argument, support an idea, compare and contrast different ideas. This essay type is a bit complicated, and any candidate may come across a different kind of essay. For instance, in an essay, you may have to present two different arguments and discuss them. There may be thesis-led essays in which you are asked to compare two arguments and then add your own personal opinion. There are also some other essay types in which the examinee is asked to compare advantages and disadvantages of a given topic. Another type could be problem and solution essay in which the examinee is asked to come up with some problems of a situation and offer solutions to them in paragraphs (Mitchell, 2017).

There are four main criteria to assess the work of the candidates in IELTS writing tests.

1. **Task Achievement:** It is checked if the candidate has achieved the task and answered the question persuasively. Moreover, if the candidate stuck to the topic or not evaluated. If anybody writes off-topic essay, it is not evaluated at all even though the other criteria are met. It is expected from the candidate to construct logical arguments and defend them effectively. The argument should be supported by the examinee's personal knowledge, experience, valid evidence and supporting examples.
2. **Coherence and Cohesion:** In order to provide coherence in an essay, the writer should put the logical connections between ideas, and these ideas should be expressed in relevance with others. For cohesion, one should use connector words or cohesive devices effectively in their writing. In IELTS writing, the evaluators take this into consideration and give marks to the essays.
3. **Lexical Resources:** Any candidate is expected to use a wide range of vocabulary in their writing. Moreover, the vocabulary should be appropriate for the context and the ideas inside writing.
4. **Grammatical Range and Accuracy:** The examinee is expected to use different structures effectively in their writing and they should be used correctly. Both of them are evaluated by checkers and marks are given accordingly (Ahmadi et al., 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Model

Adult learners who applied to Tishk International University Continuing Education Center to take IELTS courses were used in this study. People who took these courses, mostly for academic purposes, responded to the questionnaire given to them. The challenges of IELTS writing are discussed in this survey. Because writing is a productive skill, candidates often complain that it is quite difficult. In this study, it is discussed which aspects of IELTS writing are difficult. It was evaluated at what point these people had difficulties.

3.2 Sampling

In this study, the opinions of people who applied to Tishk International University Continuing Education Center to take IELTS courses were taken. The challenges of IELTS writing were evaluated in the survey, in which a total of 12 people participated. All of these people are university graduates and take this course for academic purposes. Among these people, men and women were mixed and gender differences were not taken into account. In addition, all these participants are 25 years old and over.

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection in this study was obtained through a questionnaire given to the participants. In addition, 4 people were interviewed about the difficulties of IELTS writing.

4. Findings

These are all prospective test-takers of IELTS, and they experience some challenges while writing essays suitable for this exam. Although people at this proficiency level of English have some experience about

writing, this type is quite new to them, and they reveal some concerns about it. For this reason, we did this survey to see a clearer picture.

It is important to have experience about this exam, so we firstly asked if they already took it.

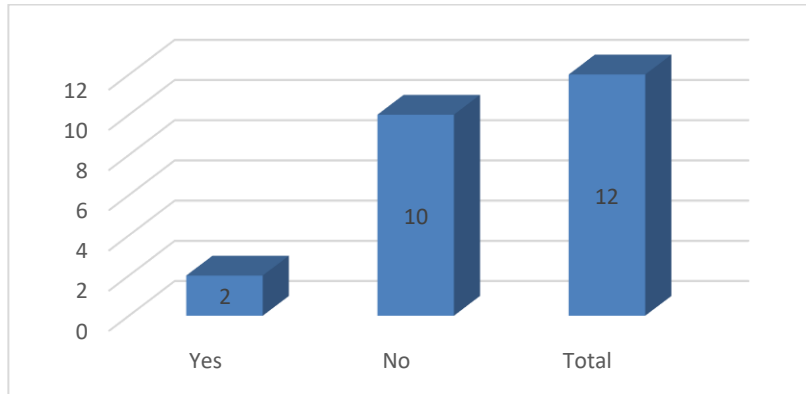


Figure 1: Did you take IELTS test previously?

Out of 12 people, only 2 of them took a real exam previously. The others are taking a course to take this exam in near future.

After we had a course, they already had an idea about task 1 and task 2 writing in this exam, so we asked them which one they find more difficult for them to write.

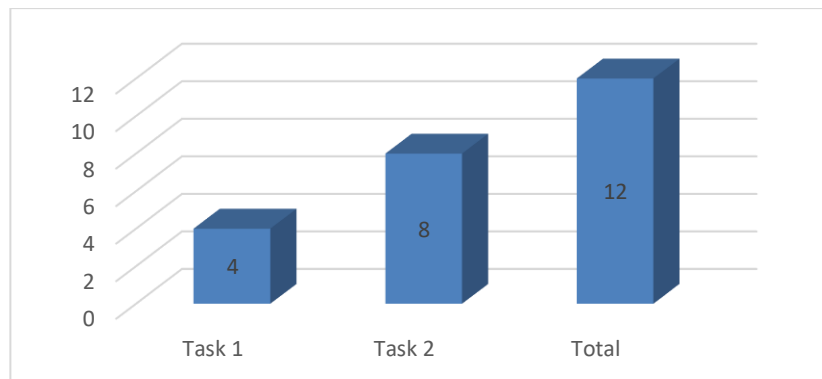


Figure 2: Do you find task 1 or task 2 more difficult?

8 people out of 12 think that task2 is more difficult while 4 people have different opinion, so it is changeable among people to find one of them more difficult. While some of them experience the difficulty in the task 1, some others have difficulty in writing task 2.

In order to see what points are difficult for them, we asked several questions about task 1. The first thing they had difficulty was understanding the graphs and how they summarized the data. For this reason, we asked the next question to see if they really have problems with reading the graphs in task 1.

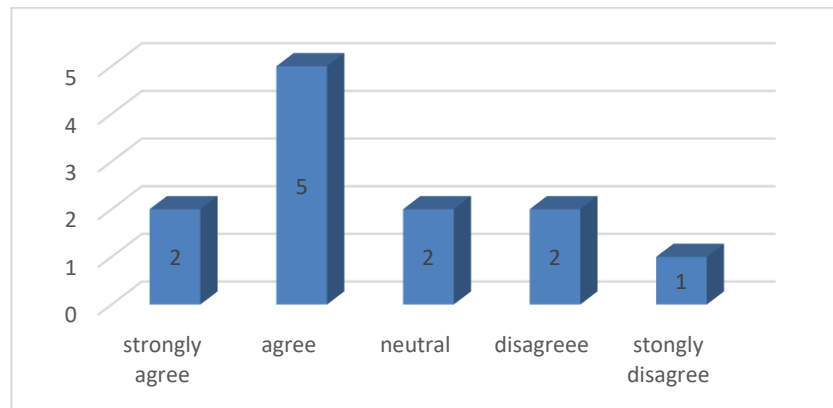


Figure 3: Understanding the graphs in task 1 is difficult for me.

7 people (%58%) agrees upon this statement, and they think that understanding the graphs is sometimes very difficult. They may sometimes have the difficulty from the beginning, and when they do not understand the question, it is not possible to proceed. This point stands as a huge challenge in front of them.

They also have problems with how to make comparisons especially when there is a complicated graph in front of them. They may not know how to make the comparison and between what to make it. To check this point, we asked the next question.

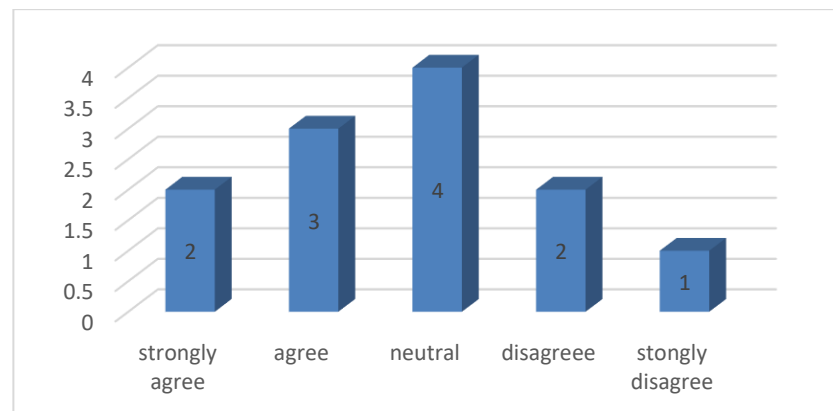


Figure 4: Making comparisons is generally confusing.

5 people (42%) think that it is difficult to make comparisons. Although the figure shows the minority, it is still high for such a population to reach this number. Even more, there are 4 of them who remained neutral. They may also find some points in comparison difficult.

Organizing the writing task is one of the essential requirements of this exam. The test-takers are expected to organize the essay appropriately to make it clearer in terms of meaning and structure. For this reason, we asked the next question to see their point of view.

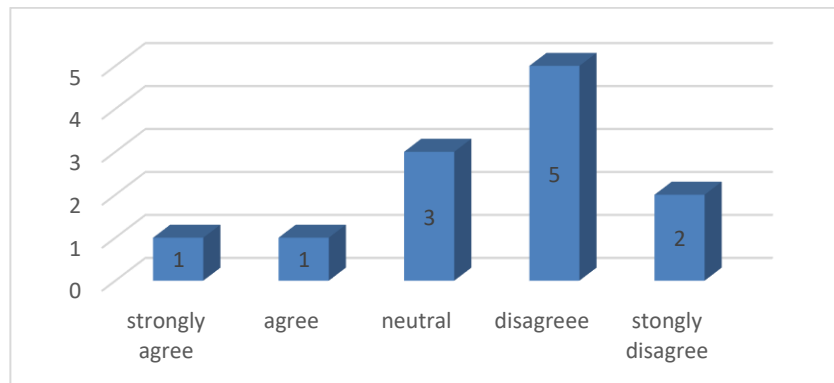


Figure 5: It is difficult to organize task 1.

Only 2 of them (17%) find the overall organization difficult. Also, there are those who remained neutral, they are 3 people (25%). 7 of them (58%) do not find the organization difficult. We can conclude from these results that they generally do not find it difficult, but still, there are people who find overall organization as challenging.

During the studies, they learned some new words to make comparisons, and some of them seemed to come across many of these expressions first time. For this reason, we asked the next question about their approach to the newly learned vocabulary.

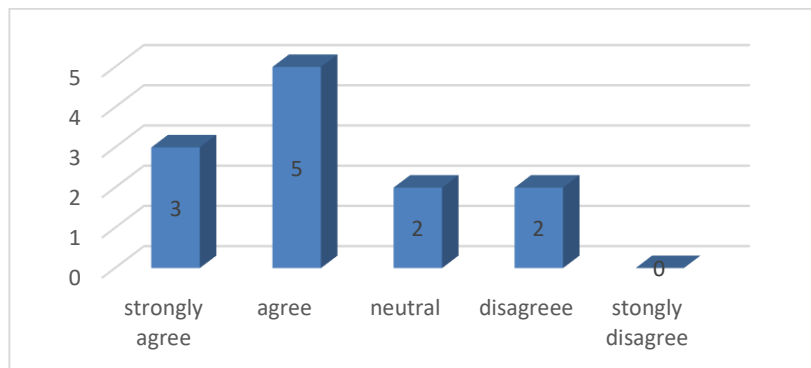


Figure 6: I need to learn many expressions to make comparisons.

8 people (67%) think that they need to learn new words and it already causes them to feel unsecure about this task. While making comparisons, they learned new vocabulary and even, needed to learn new ones. This new vocabulary already made them afraid because they were not sure when they would learn thoroughly so as to be ready for the exam.

As for writing task 2, there are some other aspects that make this task difficult for test-takers. We also went on asking more questions about task 2 and its difficulties for the test-takers.

Although task 2 is an argumentative essay type, there are still different kinds of essays in this test, and anyone can come across any of them during the real test. For this reason, they have to be familiar with all these types and be able to organize and write the essay.

We firstly asked them if they find it confusing to have to learn to write an essay applying the correct layout. As it was mentioned above in the literature review, there are different types of task 2, and they require different approaches and organization to write. These candidates already learned these types and did exercises. Then we asked them if they find these different types confusing.

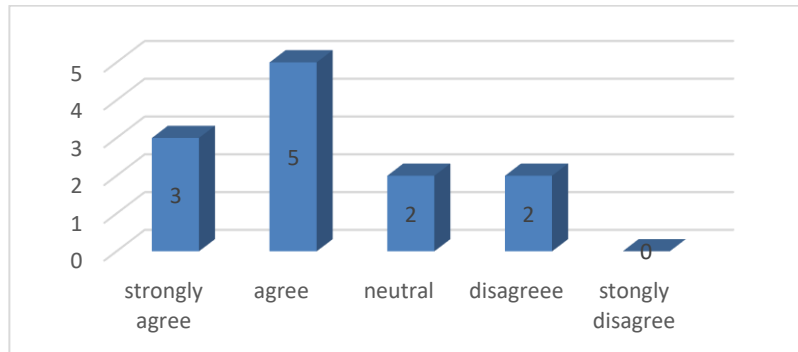


Figure 7: Learning different types of essays in task 2 is quite confusing.

8 people (67%) think that these different types of writing task 2 are difficult to learn, and that makes them discouraged because they feel they have to cover many things to get ready for the exam. When we consider that they already have to study for the other parts, too, it makes them even more challenging to cope with different types of writing.

Since they got the course, they were able to cope with the concerns about writing. At first, when they met various types of writing, it was discouraging, but later, as they learned about them in the course, they seemed to be more confident of themselves. To check this point, we asked the next question.

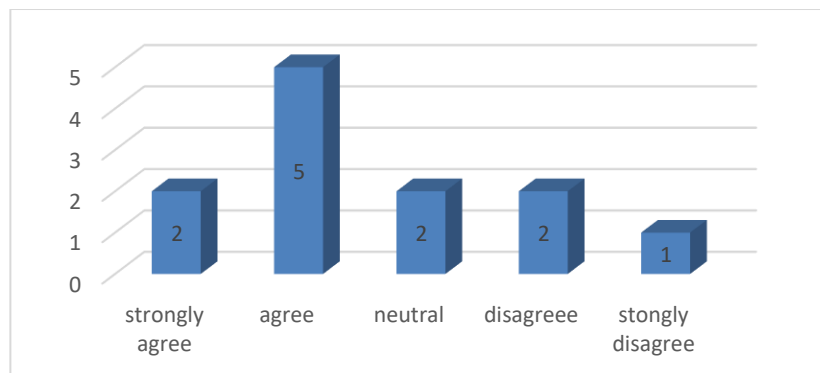


Figure 8: I could learn the overall organization of task 2 writing in the course.

7 people (57%) think that the course helped them to overcome the concerns about writing task 2 and variations inside it. But still, there are some others who think that they have difficulty in coping with these different types of essays in task 2. Although many of them were able to overcome their concerns, there still are some others having these concerns.

Understanding the given task for writing is very difficult for a lot of them in task 1, and it was determined through this questionnaire. To check the same point with task 2, we asked the same question to the students.

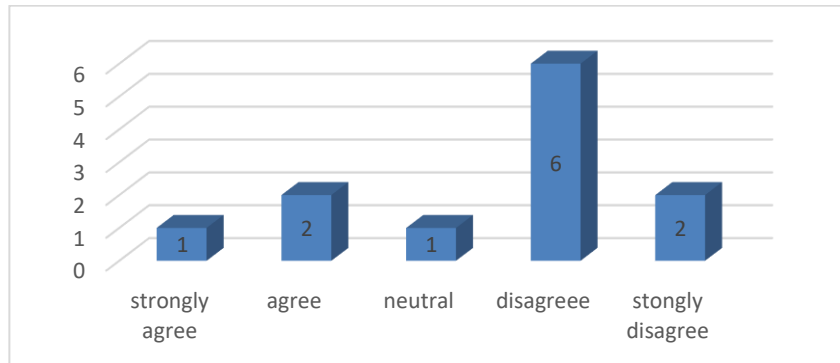


Figure 9: Understanding the task is difficult for me in task 2.

Seemingly, only 3 people (25%) find it difficult to understand the task. In fact, the question in task 2 is easier to understand in relation to the task 1, and it is apparent here, too, when we compare the same question about task 1 and task 2.

One of the reasons that make task 2 difficult is that the test-taker should brainstorm about the topic and determine their position and defend it. In other words, being able to create new ideas to defend your position is a skill that requires struggle and time. For this reason, we asked the next question to see their opinion.

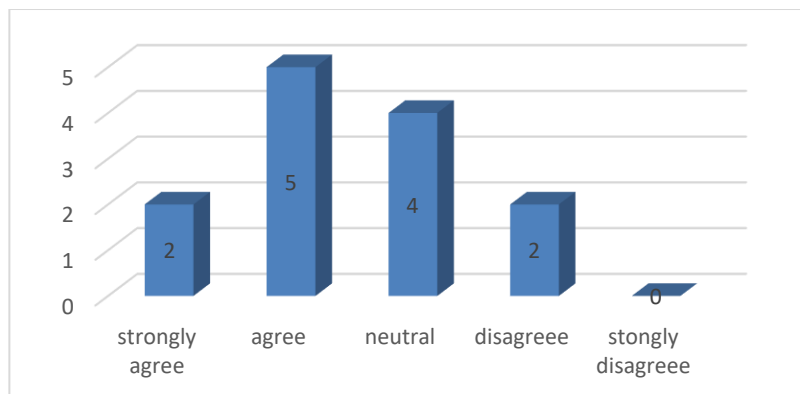


Figure 10: It is difficult to come up with new ideas in task 2.

7 people (58%) think that it is difficult to brainstorm and produce new ideas. Apparently, majority of them suffer from this point. It seems coming up with new ideas is quite challenging for them.

We also asked a similar question about brainstorming itself because it also makes this task difficult for some test-takers.

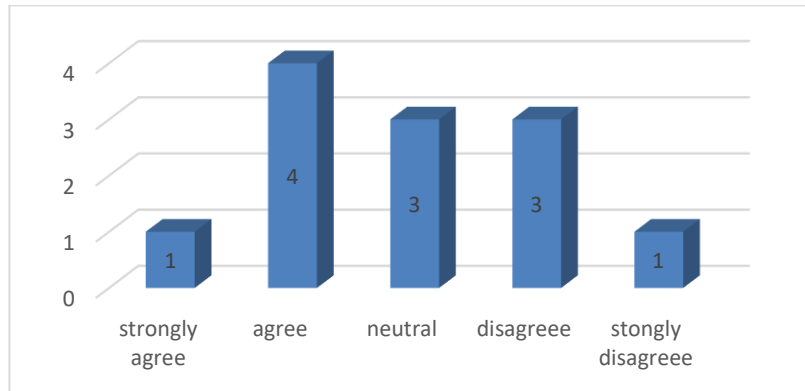


Figure 11: Brainstorming is quite challenging for me.

5 people (42%) think that brainstorming is difficult because, in this way, they are able to create new ideas, and it requires some extra skills. Even more the process of gaining such skills is also quite challenging. This is a good reason why people think that task 2 writing is difficult.

One of the most basic problems that test-takers complain is the time allocated for writing task 2. Even more, there are those who think that if adequate time had been given to them, they could have written much better and much more. Some of them complain that they cannot catch up with the whole task in such a short time. To check how much these people suffer from it, we asked the next question.

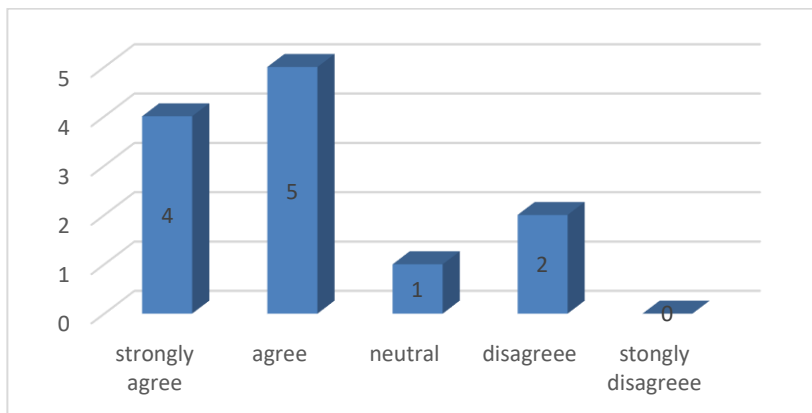


Figure 12: Timing is an important problem for me.

9 people (75%) share the idea that they cannot catch up with the task in this short time. This is so common among the test-takers that some of them only complain about this aspect. It is also apparent in these answers that majority of them suffer from timing.

The last point we asked to detect was their opinion about the difficulty of writing part in comparison to the other three parts in the test. For that reason, we asked the next question.

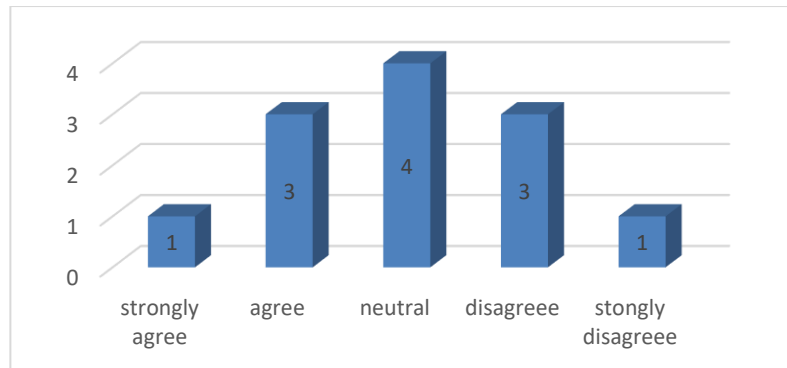


Figure 13: Writing is more difficult than other parts in IELTS.

Only 4 of them (33%) think that writing is more difficult than the other parts. It seems the other parts are even more difficult for them despite the difficulties they experienced in writing.

5. Discussion

IELTS writing is divided into 2 tasks and task 1 is a descriptive writing while task 2 is an argumentative writing. For that reason, there are some differences between these two types, and the test-takers have some difficulties with them.

When we inquired about the task 1, we detected that some points are especially challenging for them. Firstly, they struggle to understand the graphs, and they see some difficulties with understanding them. Secondly, they also have difficulty in comparing the figures and finding appropriate language to compare. Moreover, they feel the challenge when they try to organize task 1 writing. They also complain that they have to learn new words to make comparison. In fact, what makes them anxious about this issue is that they cannot predict how many more words they need to learn to cover everything so as to be ready for the exam. Even more, when they see the challenge in other parts, they feel insecure and be afraid that they will not be able to catch up with all this workload.

As for task 2 writing, they see the first challenge in different types of writing. They may need to compare advantages and disadvantages; they may need to see problems and offer solutions; they may need to compare two ideas and express their approach; they may need to only compare different ideas. It seems very difficult for them to keep all of them in mind and apply the one that suits to the question in the test. Another point is that they have to learn the overall organization and write introduction, development and conclusion paragraphs appropriately, and all of these paragraphs require different information to process, and it makes this task difficult for some of them. It seems these candidates do not have much difficulty in

understanding the task in the task 2 unlike task 1 which seems very demanding for them to fully comprehend and proceed with writing. What else makes task 2 difficult for them is that they need to brainstorm and come up with appropriate ideas for this writing type. One of the most challenging aspects of this writing is that many students complain about timing, and they cannot catch up with the task in given time.

In general, the candidates find different aspects difficult for them, and the difficulty level changes very much from person to person. But still, there are some common points that majority of them complain.

6. Conclusion

IELTS writing is difficult for the candidates from different perspectives. While some of them suffer from one aspect, some others complain about other aspects. Since this writing requires some extra skills that people generally do not learn in their educational life, they have some difficulties when they come across this type first time. As a matter of fact, they have certain templates in their minds that they learned during their formal education, but they do not perfectly fit into this type because it requires some academic skills. Even though the candidates' English proficiency level is high, they still need to gain some extra skills and learn new structures and expressions and even more, they need to improve their organizational skills to get any satisfactory marks from writing in IELTS test.

References

- Abe, M. (2008). Exploring the role of model essays in the IELTS writing test: A feedback tool. *Unpublished MA thesis, University of Queensland, Australia.*
- Ahmadi, S., Riasati, M. J., & Bavali, M. (2019). A Comparison of Writing Performance of Iranian IELTS Candidates Facing Chart Topics vs. Table Topics in Academic Writing (Task 1). *International Journal of Instruction, 12*(4), 17-34.
- Brook-Hart, G., & Jakeman, V. (2013). *Complete IELTS Bands 6.5-7.5 Student's Book with Answers with CD-ROM.* Cambridge University Press.
- Cooper, T. (2013). Can IELTS writing scores predict university performance? Comparing the use of lexical bundles in IELTS writing tests and first-year academic writing. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus, 42*(1), 63-79.
- Mitchell, R. (2017). *IELTS Writing Task 1 + 2: The Ultimate Guide with Practice to Get a Target Band Score of 8.0+ In 10 Minutes a Day.* Independently Published.
- Read, J. (2001). The policy context of English testing for immigrants. *Experimenting with uncertainty/essays in honour of Alan Davies*, 191-199.
- Uysal, H. H. (2010). A critical review of the IELTS writing test. *ELT journal, 64*(3), 314-320.