

Understanding the Contribution of Coherence and Cohesion to the Band Score Rating in Writing Task 2 of the IELTS Test

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Abstract—IELTS is a high-stakes English test for study, migration or work. It has four components, namely Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing. In many surveys, candidates claim that the most challenging part of the test is the second writing task which is the last section of the exam as well. In this paper, we have analyzed the essentialities of this task for ones who aim to score bands 6 and 7, the two most popular band scores aspirants for different purposes yearn to earn. Analysis-based instructions curated for accomplishing band 6 are provided separately, under titles of a. coherence, and b. cohesion; however, for acing the exam with band score 7, complex methods and approaches that incorporate and merge both of the sub-skills are aptly derived from IELTS authentic reference materials and demonstrated in bright and realistic manner.

Keywords—*IELTS; writing task 2; coherence; cohesion; IELTS performance descriptors; IELTS band descriptors*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) measures the language proficiency of people who want to study or work where English is used as a language of communication. IELTS is available in “Academic” and “General” module and both versions provide a valid and accurate assessment of the four language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking [1]. The writing section of the modules consists of two tasks; task 1, in which format, the modules are significantly different from each other, and task 2, which is mainly the same between the two modules. In this article, focus is dedicated to the latter task of the writing section; however, in order to get a valid band score on the exam, one must attempt to answer both of the tasks. In Table. 1. an abridged description of the task format, task focus, marking criteria and performance descriptors excerpted from the IELTS authentic website is presented [1].

Each component or section of the test has its own band score table, and the overall band score is the average of the four component scores, rounded to the nearest whole or half band. Since the writing component has two sections, each of them has its own “band descriptor” table. The value of band descriptors for each component is that they demonstrate the quantitative equivalent to the performance descriptors as performance descriptors are not provided for in-practice aims and student preparation intentions. For the purposes of this article, only the writing task 2 band descriptor, particularly the “coherence and cohesion” criterion, will be subjected to scrutiny.

It is of fundamental importance that one who reads this paper has a consolidated understanding of the two concepts of “coherence” and “cohesion”. Hence their literal, yet practical and easy-to-absorb definition should be illustrated (as will be in section 3). When we encounter a language, whether through the spoken or the written medium, quite a lot more takes place than simply hearing a sequence of sounds or reading a sequence of letters; how we communicate with these sequences continues to be a central issue in language studies.

For over three decades now, matters of cohesion and coherence have intrigued researchers of text and discourse. A great number of models of analysis have been introduced, showing how cohesion and coherence are manifested in different types of spoken and written discourse. Applications of the models to teaching, and reports on the suitability of different models for instruction, are almost as numerous [2]. As a result, we have an abundance of books, studies and articles focusing on various aspects of cohesion and coherence. The assertion that there are features in texts which help make them appear as unified wholes rather than as collections of unrelated sentences or utterances will therefore come as no surprise to anyone involved in text and discourse studies [2].

II. RESEARCH QUESTION, METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Given the extensive interest attracted by cohesion, what is somewhat surprising is the fact that while we have several accounts of cohesion in particular types of discourse, from children’s stories to student essays to academic papers, studies dealing with cohesion across several types of discourse are much harder to find [3]. It is also quite difficult to compare the results of the existing studies in order to form a unified picture of the use of cohesion in different types of discourse, since each study will typically use an approach tailored for the analysis of a particular type of discourse. Consequently, there still exist notable gaps in our understanding of the effects on the use of cohesion of the different contexts in which speakers, writers, listeners and readers operate and communicate.

Yet, for complementing our understanding of the functioning of cohesion in discourse, comparisons of the operation of cohesion in texts produced under different conditions would be essential [3].

Finding a suitable model of analysis forms an important part of the present investigation. As already noted, there is no scarcity of models created for the analysis of cohesion, but each study typically brings with it specific problems and questions and thereby also a need for modifications of existing models [3]. The present study is no exception in this respect. However, while the model used in this study slightly differs from earlier models, there is a conviction behind our model which is similar to that informing earlier models, namely the belief that the choice of lexis is one of the primary means available to speakers and writers for creating continuity in their messages.

In this article, we aspire to answer the following question: Which parts of the “coherence and cohesion” sub-skill should be manifested through the essay of a candidate in writing task 2 in order to increase one’s score for different band scores of writing task 2. Among different methodologies in research, we consider to establish analytical methods. The remaining of this paper is organized as the following: in section three, recent articles related to our topic will be presented briefly, while in section four we explain our understanding drawn from precise investigation in detail. The article’s conclusion is in section five, and last but not least, references section of the paper resides in the ending.

III. RELATED WORKS

Broadly, all published methods in this scope of language learning and testing of language, focus on academic writing without considering IELTS authentic band descriptors as a ground truth in their studies, however, recent advances in different frameworks of teaching as well as the advent of new schemes, such as task-based learning, has paved the way for researches dedicated to succeeding in the IELTS test using the IELTS-provided materials solely. Among which, two has concentrated on writing task 2 challenges: [4, 5]. In [4], the authors explored “The Effect of Six Different Corrective Feedback Strategies on Iranian English Language Learners’ IELTS Writing Task 2” and concluded that:

- Like many of the studies, the findings of this study adds to the bulk of knowledge regarding CF strategies. The main theoretical implication of the study is that it dealt with a particular domain of the language and revolved around a phenomenon, writing, under a “parent” category, socio-culturalism. In this respect, the researcher studied writing without recourse to other territories or perspectives.
- Another significant contribution of the study is that the benefits of reformulation extend beyond form and grammatical structure and encompass other band descriptors in the IELTS writing scoring rubric, namely, task achievement, coherence and cohesion, and lexical resources because the feedback provider dealt with those things at the same time, for the definition of reformulation sanctioned feedback on other areas as well.

In [5], while the authors were working on “The Effect of Teaching Cohesive Devices on IELTS Writing Task 2 of Iranian Foreign Language Learners”, they found out that:

- Test time limitation and other test conditions were based on IELTS standards except the familiarity with the topic from the pre-test. Participants took the IELTS writing task 2 after being exposed to cohesive devices for 450 minutes.
- As the results of the post-test indicated, there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of pre and post-test. The basis of IELTS writing task 2, is the

application of linkers that participants learnt how to use them in writing sessions treatment.

- The novel aspect of this research based on the results of present studies was that EFL learners who are sometimes concerned about the results of their IELTS writing scores may have more promising future through thoughtfully planned linkers treatment.

Although derived remarks from [4, 5] unveil many unknown aspects of the matter of how to implement “coherence and cohesion”, it is still quite unresolved that which parts of coherence or cohesion is critical to be used by the candidate in order to for example achieve the band score 7. Therefore, it should be claimed that our article is, to our best knowledge, the first in taking this problematic question into account.

IV. PROPOSED ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The first part of this section is devoted to an exploration of the concepts of cohesion and coherence. It was already pointed out in the introductory section that they are of fundamental importance in the present study. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to note that the relationship between cohesion and coherence, and their role in discourse, are the cornerstones on which the analysis rests. It is therefore appropriate to dedicate a part to these two concepts.

- 1- **Cohesion (Unity of Discourse):** As the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s dictionary defines it, cohesion means “when the members of a group or society are united” [6], nonetheless it refers to the way texts use grammar and vocabulary to adhere ideas together which is done through articles, pronouns, word families, summary nouns and synonyms. Cohesion is a dominantly important aspect of academic writing, because it immediately affects the tone of your writing, however, cohesive writing does not mean just grammatically-connected correct sentences; it refers to the connection of your ideas both at the sentence level and at the paragraph level [7].
- 2- **Coherence (Consistency and Integrity):** Meaning literally "to fit altogether" [6] (the corresponding verb is “cohere”), in writing it means that all the ideas in a paragraph flow smoothly from one sentence to the next sentence. With coherence, the reader has an easy time understanding the ideas that you wish to express. Paragraph integrity means that one paragraph is about only one main topic. That is, all the sentences – the topic, supporting sentences, the detail sentences, and (sometimes) the concluding sentence – are all telling the reader about one main topic. If your paragraph contains a sentence or some sentences that are not related to the main topic, then we say that the paragraph "lacks unity," or that the sentence is "off-topic" [7].
- 3- **Cohesion and Coherence, Independent but Intertwined:** Let us start with Halliday and Hasan, who in 1976 introduced the concept of cohesion in *Cohesion in English* [7]. They use it to refer to relations of meaning that exist within a text and that define it as a text. The definition is thus a semantic one, and like all the components of the semantic system, cohesion is realised through grammar and vocabulary. Cohesion can therefore be divided into grammatical and lexical cohesion. Grammatical cohesion includes devices such as

reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction, while lexical cohesion is divided into reiteration (repetition, synonymy etc.) and collocation (co-occurrence of lexical items) [7].

Halliday and Hasan emphasise that grammatical and lexical elements become cohesive only when they are interpreted through their relation to some other element in the text, i.e. no single element can be cohesive by itself [7]. But when two elements in a text are related, a cohesive tie is formed, contributing to the unity of the text. *Cohesion in English* includes an exhaustive treatment of grammatical cohesive devices, at the expense of that of lexical cohesion, which receives a considerably more limited discussion. This is surprising in view of the fact that grammatical ties in a text can be, and usually are, easier to detect than lexical ties, which can be very subtle. Halliday and Hasan note themselves that the effect of grammatical cohesion is clearer than that of lexical cohesion: reference items, substitutes and conjunctions clearly presuppose another element for their interpretation, whereas lexical items carry no indication of their possible cohesive function [7].

Example (1) comes from [8] and cohesive elements, which in this example are all instances of repetition, are in italics:

>> (1) The discussions ended last *week*. A *week* has seven *days*. Every *day* I feed my *cat*. *Cats* have four legs. *The cat* is on the *mat*. *Mat* has three letters. <<

Examples such as (1) demonstrate that a set of sentences, despite abundant cohesive ties, does not form a unified whole if coherence between the propositions is non-existent; in [8]'s words the text is *pseudo-coherent*. By contrast, we can consider example (2), which has been used to demonstrate that coherence can be created without cohesion.

>> (2) A: That's the telephone. B: I'm in the bath. A: O.K. <<

There is no surface textual cohesion in this short text, but the three utterances still form a plausible whole, because a situation can easily be imagined in which their propositional content would make sense together, i.e. cohere. Consequently, it was concluded that overt markers of cohesion are only of secondary importance in the creation of unity in text, compared to the covert aboutness created by coherence [8].

In this part, we need to introduce the reader to the original band descriptor for the "coherence and cohesion" sub-skill, specifically for the sake of observing coherence in this article. In Table 2., the public version of this band descriptor is presented [1]. As the band score 0 for writing task 2 indicates the fact that either the test-taker did not attend or wrote a totally memorised response, there is no description for this band in terms of coherence and cohesion.

We can compare any two arbitrary band score with each other and investigate what it takes to be manifested through the essay of a candidate in order to boost his/her band score to the desired level. However, as this procedure may not be fruitful for any two band score, specifically from the students and candidates' point of view, we concentrate on systematically analyzing two of the band scores that the majority of candidates aim for:

- A. Band score 6; ideal for one planning to apply for occupational purposes abroad
- B. Band score 7 (and 8); for anyone who pursues academic goals in English-speaking countries)

We have defined coherence and unity so far, however, we need to provide another interpretation of those two from the IELTS examiner's point of view. Coherence refers to how easy it is for the reader (the examiner) to understand and follow your ideas. Unity refers to how you connect those ideas together, and this also affects how easy it is to follow your ideas. If one already knows his/her IELTS band score, and is hoping to change his/her score, then the description of the current band shows where he/she is going wrong, and the description of the band one would like to be tells him/her what is needed to improve and work on. In Table. 3., highlights of each description for band scores 6 and 7 are arranged, followed by the detailed comparison between them:

- 1- With the first bullet point we can see, for band 6 and band 7, that ideas are presented clearly and coherently. The difference is in the 'progression' of these ideas. This means how the writer's ideas lead from one to another and build up on each other to create the argument [9]. With band 6 candidates, this is done clearly 'overall', but with band 7, this is much more consistent. So, we could say that, with a band 6 or 6.5 answer, we can generally follow the argument, but with a band 7 answer, we can follow the argument 'throughout' the essay [10].
- 2- That idea may be linked to the second bullet point, which refers to paragraphing. At band 6, the ideas within a paragraph sometimes appear a little odd or as though they belong in another part of the essay. But a Band 7 candidate is able to logically present their ideas. It is always maintained that one can only achieve this by planning his/her answer before beginning to write [9].
- 3- The third bullet point refers to cohesive devices. We are told that, at band 6, candidates may make mistakes with cohesive devices, while at band 7 they are used well (even though sometimes they may be over-used) [10]. A criticism of band 6 is that the cohesive devices may be either 'faulty' or 'mechanical', therefore what 'cohesive devices' are and what the terms 'faulty' and 'mechanical' mean, are the key to achievement of the goal. This links very appropriately to questions candidates often ask about using common phrases that some people see as too simple [9, 10].
A 'cliché' is a phrase that is seen or heard often and the term tells us that an idea is not very original [11]. For example, 'My wedding was the happiest day of my life', but the only people who need to worry about using clichés are professional writers, who are supposed to write in an original and fresh way [1]. IELTS candidates at all do not need to worry about entertaining the examiner, they just and merely need to communicate their ideas as clearly as possible [10]. Phrases like 'On the other hand' are natural and accepted ways of joining ideas together. Your examiner will have seen these phrases being used in a 'faulty' way (e.g. 'Another hand' or "On other hand" or when it isn't appropriate to use it), hence seeing them used effectively will be rewarded. If one were building a wall, we would not think that it is a 'cliché' to use bricks and mortar. What the examiner is looking for is whether you choose the right bricks at the right time and whether you join them together effectively and skillfully, so that your argument stands up [11].
- 4- The final bullet point in the band 6 description mentions 'referencing', which is another way of joining ideas together. Referencing is when one refers back to a previous idea. Candidates can do this either with pronouns or with synonyms. At band 7, this comes under the idea of a cohesive device being used appropriately. At band 6, these may not always be used clearly [9, 10]. These examples will illustrate the core concept [12]:

>> Travel can be expensive and dangerous. Despite being expensive and dangerous, many people still choose to travel. Because of them, the number of international flights rises every year. <<

Instead of repeating 'expensive and dangerous' in the second sentence, it is better to refer back to these with a synonym like this: Travel can be expensive and dangerous. Despite these problems, many people still choose to travel. The pronoun 'them' in the third sentence is referring back to 'people', but we need to refer back to the whole idea of 'many people travelling' [12].

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, the "coherence and cohesion" criterion of the writing section of the IELTS test was discussed with respect to the reference materials that IELTS cites. By guiding concentration toward only the second task of the writing component, achieving band scores 6 and 7 in this criterion was completely analyzed and the band descriptors were comprehensively decoded into suggestions and practical advice for applicants of the general module of the test and candidates applying for higher education through taking the academic module, respectively.

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APPENDICES

TABLE I. WRITING TASK 2 BROAD DESCRIPTION

	<i>Academic Writing</i>	<i>General Training Writing</i>
<i>Task Format</i>	Test takers respond to a point of view or argument or problem. They need to write 250 words in about 40 minutes. Responses to both tasks must be in a formal style.	Test takers write an essay in response to a point of view, argument or problem. The essay can be fairly personal in style.

<i>Task Focus</i>	This task assesses the ability to present a clear, relevant, well-organised argument, giving evidence or examples to support ideas and use language accurately.	This task assesses the ability to follow English discursive writing conventions to organise and link information coherently and cohesively and to use language accurately and appropriately.
<i>Marking Criteria</i>		
Task 2 responses are assessed on: Task response; Coherence and cohesion; Lexical resource; Grammatical range and accuracy		
<i>Performance Descriptors</i>		
<u>Task response</u>		
In both IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training versions, Task 2 requires test takers to formulate and develop a position in relation to a given prompt in the form of a question or statement. Ideas should be supported by evidence, and examples may be drawn from the test takers' own experience. Responses must be at least 250 words in length. Scripts under the required minimum word limit will be penalised.		
<u>Coherence and cohesion</u>		
This assesses the overall clarity and fluency of the message: how the response organises and links information, ideas and language. Coherence refers to the linking of ideas through logical sequencing. Cohesion refers to the varied and appropriate use of cohesive devices (for example, logical connectors, pronouns and conjunctions) to assist in making the conceptual and referential relationships between and within sentences clear.		
<u>Lexical resource</u>		
This criterion refers to the range of vocabulary used and its accuracy and appropriacy in terms of the specific task.		
<u>Grammatical range and accuracy</u>		
This assesses the range and accurate use of grammar, as manifested in their test takers' writing at sentence level.		

TABLE II. BAND DESCRIPTOR FOR COHERENCE AND COHESION

<i>Band score</i>	<i>Description</i>
9	* uses cohesion in such a way that it attracts no attention * skilfully manages paragraphing
8	* sequences information and ideas logically * manages all aspects of cohesion well * uses paragraphing sufficiently and appropriately
7	* logically organises information and ideas; there is clear progression throughout * uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately although there may be some under-/over-use * presents a clear central topic within each paragraph
6	* arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression * uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical * may not always use referencing clearly or appropriately * uses paragraphing, but not always logically
5	* presents information with some organisation but there may be a lack of overall progression * makes inadequate, inaccurate or over-use of cohesive devices

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * may be repetitive because of lack of referencing and substitution * may not write in paragraphs, or paragraphing may be Inadequate
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * presents information and ideas but these are not arranged coherently and there is no clear progression in the response * uses some basic cohesive devices, but these may be inaccurate or repetitive * may not write in paragraphs or their use may be confusing
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * does not organise ideas logically * may use a very limited range of cohesive devices, and those used may not indicate a logical relationship between ideas
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * has very little control of organisational features
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * fails to communicate any message

TABLE III. COMPARISON OF COHERENCE AND COHESION BETWEEN BAND 6 AND BAND 7

Coherence and Cohesion	
Band 6	Band 7
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arranges information and ideas coherently and there is a clear overall progression. 2. Uses paragraphing but not always logically 3. Uses cohesive devices effectively, but cohesion within and/or between sentences may be faulty or mechanical 4. May not always use referencing clearly or appropriately 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Logically organizes information and ideas; there is a clear progression throughout 2. presents a clear central topic within each paragraph 3. uses a range of cohesive devices appropriately though there may be some under-/over-use