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Consolidating 25 Years of Research on IELTS Writing: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

IELTS writing is a critical factor in facilitating academic and professional mobility and success of both EFL learners and non-English majors globally. This study systematically identifies and categorizes the principal research themes, methodological trends, learners' challenges, and proposed solutions through a scoping review. In accordance with Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, relevant studies on IELTS writing task 2 were identified and screened from Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ResearchGate. Through a multi-stage screening process based on rigorous exclusion and inclusion criteria, 30 peer-reviewed studies were selected for the final content analysis. Thematic content analysis employing manual open coding was applied to these chosen studies in order to identify the recurring patterns regarding the themes, methodological issues, problems, and solutions. The analysis yielded five primary themes: linguistic features, cross-

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linguistic transfer, pedagogical interventions, assessment and washback, and emerging AI-based evaluation. The findings showed that IELTS writing research mainly employing qualitative approach, followed by mixed-methods, making use of corpus analysis, discourse analysis, surveys, and classroom interventions. According to these studies, candidates consistently face challenges in grammar, lexical range, coherence, L1 transfer, and task management, while the proposed solutions strongly emphasize genre-based instruction, model-essay noticing, contrastive rhetoric teaching, focused feedback, strategy training, and AI-supported diagnostic tools.

Keywords: IELTS Writing, Scoping review, PRISMA, Pedagogical Interventions, Learner Challenges

1. Introduction

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has become one of the most influential global gatekeeping assessments, influencing access to academic mobility, employment, and immigration opportunities worldwide (Green, 2019). Among its components, the Writing test is often regarded as one of the most challenging for test-takers, as it requires mastery of complex linguistic, rhetorical, and cognitive skills (Kabir, 2018; Uysal, 2010). In many contexts, particularly in EFL settings, learners struggle to meet the expectations of the test due to gaps in grammatical accuracy, genre awareness, vocabulary range, and discourse organization (Li & Pei, 2024). As a result, understanding the nature of IELTS writing performance has become a critical area of inquiry in applied linguistics and language assessment research.

A growing body of studies has investigated textual, grammatical, and rhetorical features of successful and unsuccessful IELTS essays to better understand the construct being measured. Research using systemic-functional linguistics, for instance, has examined clause relations, parataxis versus hypotaxis, and theme progression in high-scoring essays (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Sun et al., 2024). Other studies have focused on analyzing lexical sophistication and common error patterns in essays written by learners from various linguistic backgrounds, including Russian, Vietnamese, and Indonesian candidates (Zakhvatova & Pankratova, 2023; Ho, 2025; Arafah et al., 2023). These findings consistently highlight persistent weaknesses in grammatical clause structures, lexical precision, and cohesion—areas that strongly influence the test takers' band scores.

At the same time, a parallel line of inquiry emphasizes the influence of learners' first language (L1) on their IELTS writing performance. Cross-linguistic transfer has been widely documented among EFL writers, especially those whose L1 rhetorical and linguistic structures differ substantially from English (Talebi, 2014; Guo et al., 2024). For example, regarding Persian-speaking IELTS candidates, previous studies have shown recurrent challenges such as preposition misuse, non-native rhetorical sequencing, and reliance on L1-based argumentation patterns (Sadeghi & Maleki, 2015; Divsar & Heydari, 2017). These findings indicate that IELTS writing proficiency is not solely a matter of general English competence but also reflects deep structural interactions between L1 and L2 writing systems.

Pedagogical research has also explored how instructional interventions can improve learners' IELTS writing outcomes. Genre-based approaches, model-essay analysis, metadiscourse instruction, and culturally responsive teaching have all demonstrated positive effects on learners' writing performance and awareness of task requirements (Damayanti et al., 2023; Nguyen & Le, 2022). Recent innovations include AI-supported feedback and automated writing assessment tools, which have shown mixed but promising results in enhancing revision quality and diagnostic precision (Tang, Chen & Li, 2024). However, concerns about validity, fairness, and test-orientation remain central to ongoing debates within the IELTS literature (Pilcher & Richards, 2017; Azizi & Majdeddin, 2014).

Despite these pedagogical advancements, questions persist regarding the degree to which IELTS writing tasks reflect authentic academic demands. Research comparing IELTS essays with university writing assignments has raised concerns about construct coverage, rhetorical alignment, and task authenticity (Moore & Morton, 1999; Liu, 2019). Meanwhile, studies examining candidates' test-taking experiences have revealed that many learners struggle not only with linguistic complexity but also with interpreting task requirements, managing time constraints, and selecting appropriate discourse structures (Arefsadr & Babaii, 2023; Ivanova, Ivanov & Lyashenko, 2017). These findings suggest that test-taking performance reflects an interplay between linguistic proficiency, task awareness, and strategic competence.

Although the existing literature offers valuable insights into linguistic features, instructional approaches, and L1 transfer in IELTS writing, there remains no comprehensive systematic study that maps the core themes, methodological orientations, and candidate challenges across the body of research on IELTS writing. Previous studies tend to isolate specific issues such as grammatical accuracy (Pratama & Munandar, 2024), rhetorical transfer, or teaching strategies (Damayanti et al., 2023), without

systematically identifying broader thematic patterns. Similarly, while a range of research paradigms and methodological tools has been employed in IELTS writing studies, including corpus analysis, systemic-functional linguistics, and genre-based inquiry (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Divsar & Heydari, 2017), no study has synthesized these methodological trends to show how the field has evolved or where methodological blind spots persist. Furthermore, although candidate challenges are widely reported—such as lexical limitations (Zakhvatova & Pankratova, 2023), negative L1 transfer (Talebi, 2014), and task misinterpretation (Uysal, 2010)—there is no unified review that organizes these difficulties alongside pedagogical or technological solutions proposed in the literature. These gaps highlight the need for a scoping review investigation that identifies the major themes explored in IELTS writing research, analyzes research paradigms, designs, instruments, and analytic techniques used across studies, and synthesizes the documented challenges and proposed solutions related to IELTS essay writing. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a structured and comprehensive overview of the field, offering insights that can guide future scholarship, pedagogical decision-making, and test-preparation practices.

2. Literature Review

This literature review integrates prominent research approaches to IELTS writing, focusing on performance analysis, pedagogical strategies, linguistic and discourse features, cross-linguistic transfer, and challenges related to assessment validity and automation. Taken together, the studies illustrate the intricate interrelationship between language proficiency, teaching practices, test design, and learner background in determining IELTS writing performance.

One major line of research in IELTS has extensively examined the linguistic aspects of IELTS writing, focusing on grammar, vocabulary, and linking devices. Some of them consider grammatical mastery as a key determinant of IELTS writing performance. Pratama and Munandar (2024) analyzed clause mastery and its relationship with overall writing quality, demonstrating that grammatical control plays a decisive role in band score outcomes. Lexical and grammatical errors in English written academic discourse have also been studied among Russian-speaking learners, revealing systematic difficulties in morphological and syntactic accuracy (Zakhvatova & Pankratova, 2023). Error analysis of graph writing produced by Vietnamese IELTS learners further highlights persistent problems in tense use, data description, and lexical precision (Ho, 2025). Argumentative features of successful IELTS essays have also been examined, highlighting the difficulty of learning and producing structural and logical patterns

associated with higher band scores (Ananda et al., 2018). In addition, corpus-based investigations of EFL learners' errors in IELTS essay writing confirm that grammatical and lexical inaccuracies remain among the most frequent obstacles to high-level writing performance (Divsar & Heydari, 2017). Therefore, as can be seen, there are several challenges for IELTS test takers, especially in the writing task two.

As a response to the above-mentioned difficulties, another group of researchers has focused on the instructional side of IELTS. A range of instructional strategies has been proposed for improving IELTS writing performance. Pratama and Munandar (2024) emphasized decoding performance through grammatical clause instruction. The development of IELTS writing materials for learners with low English proficiency, based on a needs analysis, has been addressed by Farid and Saifuddin (2018). Rahman et al. (2023) investigated the effectiveness of the probing technique in assisting students with writing tasks, demonstrating its role in promoting deeper cognitive engagement. Cultural dimensions in EFL writing instruction have also received attention, with studies analyzing the integration of cultural background in Libyan writing classrooms (Baresh, 2024) and the effectiveness of culturally responsive writing instruction on the test takers' writing performance. Learner preparation for IELTS Writing Task 1, particularly in summarizing visual information, has also been examined by Fitria (2024), who reported improved performance through structured instruction. Ivanova et al. (2017) designed and evaluated training workshops aimed at enhancing students' IELTS exam mastery. The pedagogical remit of test preparation in IELTS courses has also been critically examined by Clark and Yu (2022), who focused on writing acquisition within test-oriented instruction. Furthermore, the impact of the IELTS writing test on postgraduate students in Kuwait underscores the need for tailored instructional support to meet the demands of academic writing (Alanezi & Alenezi, 2024). Modarres Mosadegh and Rahimi (2021) investigated Iranian IELTS teachers' knowledge and beliefs about four main aspects of formative assessment in relation to IELTS writing test. They found that Iranian teachers have good knowledge about effective feedback and employ some self-assessment techniques such as rubric orientation. However, they were not knowledgeable enough about the ways of involving their students in the learning process and considered the students as somewhat incapable of monitoring their own progress and achievement, which is a crucial aspect of formative assessment. Mansouri Et al. (2018) focused on the functional and sociolinguistics knowledge of IELTS candidates with band scores 7, 8, and 9 in writing. Based on their writings, statistical analyses revealed no functional knowledge differences between the different band scores in task one, but task two's higher bands involved more functional features because of the expression of a diverse range of psychological states, no speaker's involvement, and less

commitment to a future course of actions. These studies have focused on strategies and techniques that IELTS teachers can utilize to help students improve their writing performance. However, if the teachers know the main reasons for students' difficulties in IELTS, they will be able to provide better solutions.

Having recognized that the IELTS writing is posing serious challenges for the test takers, one group of studies has addressed the possible reasons for these difficulties. Systemic-functional analysis has been applied to examine parataxis and hypotaxis in IELTS sample essays, providing insights into syntactic patterning and textual organization (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Cohesion and coherence in IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 have been investigated through thematic progression analysis (Sun et al., 2024). The rhetorical influence of learners' mother tongue has been explored among undergraduate students, revealing the impact of first-language discourse organization on second-language writing. Cross-linguistic analysis of light verb constructions and collocational patterns in Persian and English has contributed to understanding transfer-related writing difficulties. The transfer of prepositional usage between Persian and English has also been examined, demonstrating systematic cross-linguistic influence on learner production (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012). The role of rhetorical awareness in reducing transfer effects has been explored among Iranian EFL learners writing argumentative essays (Sadeghi & Maleki, 2015). In addition, broader investigations into the linguistic features affecting cross-lingual transfer have been conducted (Dolicki & Spanakis, 2021), while lexical profiling in diagnostic writing assessments has clarified the relationship between lexical features and writing proficiency (Katagiri, 2019). Most of these studies conclude that the main reasons for these difficulties are the mother tongue or native culture of the learners.

The above-mentioned studies discussed the students' problems in IELTS writing, the reasons for those problems, and the strategies and techniques used by IELTS teachers. The last group of studies in this area has investigated the human and machine examiners' role in developing and scoring this test. Research has addressed fundamental questions regarding the construct validity of the IELTS writing test, including whether raters evaluate what they are theoretically expected to assess (Azizi & Majdeddin, 2014). The authenticity of IELTS Academic Writing Task 2 has been examined through comparisons with university writing assignments, revealing partial alignment between test tasks and real academic writing demands (Moore & Morton, 1999). Differential item functioning analysis across examinee groups has also contributed to understanding potential test bias and fairness (Birjandi & Amini, 2007). The reliability and validity of automated essay scoring systems have been critically examined, with evidence suggesting that such systems may display both over-stability and oversensitivity (Automatic

Essay Scoring Systems Are Both Overstable and Oversensitive, 2023). Issues of accuracy, fairness, and generalizability in automated essay scoring systems continue to be investigated (Yang et al., 2024). The potential application of artificial intelligence in ESL writing assessment, particularly for IELTS writing tasks, has also been explored, highlighting both diagnostic potential and ethical concerns (Sun, 2023).

Although the existing body of IELTS writing research provides extensive insights into linguistic errors, pedagogical interventions, discourse features, and assessment validity (Pratama & Munandar, 2024; Divsar & Heydari, 2017; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Azizi & Majdeddin, 2014), it remains largely fragmented across isolated analytic traditions. Performance-oriented studies typically privilege grammatical accuracy and lexical control without sufficiently integrating rhetorical, cognitive, and strategic dimensions of writing. This lack of an overarching synthesis highlights the need for a scoping review that can consolidate the field by mapping its dominant thematic concerns, examining the methodological and analytical paradigms through which knowledge has been generated. This study should also take into account the documented challenges faced by IELTS candidates alongside the solutions proposed in the literature (Zakhvatova & Pankratova, 2023; Ho, 2025). Accordingly, the present study aims to identify the main themes in IELTS writing research, to examine the research paradigms, data collection methods, instruments, and analytical techniques employed, and to explore the key challenges candidates encounter and the instructional or assessment-based solutions reported across studies. Similarly, pedagogical research often demonstrates the effectiveness of instructional techniques such as probing, genre-based instruction, and culturally responsive teaching (Rahman et al., 2023; Farid & Saifuddin, 2018;), yet these interventions are rarely evaluated longitudinally or linked systematically to assessment constructs. Moreover, although cross-linguistic transfer has been widely documented in rhetorical and lexico-grammatical domains (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Sadeghi & Maleki, 2015;), its interaction with task type, feedback practices, and automated assessment remains underexplored (Yang et al., 2024; Sun, 2023). This gap further underscores the need for a systematic synthesis that identifies key research themes, examines prevailing methodological approaches, and consolidates candidate challenges and proposed solutions across the IELTS writing literature. Finally, although assessment research raises important concerns regarding test validity, authenticity, and algorithmic scoring bias (Moore & Morton, 1999; Birjandi & Amini, 2007; Automatic Essay Scoring Systems Are Both Overstable And Oversensitive, 2023), few studies adopt an integrative framework that links learner performance, pedagogy, and technology within a unified explanatory model. These theoretical and methodological fractures highlight a clear need for a systematic, PRISMA-based synthesis capable of

consolidating research themes, methodological practices, and pedagogical implications—precisely the gap addressed by the present study. In this respect, the present study aims to explore the following key questions:

1. What are the main themes explored in the research conducted on IELTS writing?
2. Which research paradigms, designs, data collection instruments, and data analysis techniques are commonly used in the studies on IELTS writing?
3. What challenges do IELTS candidates face in the IELTS writing test, and what solutions have been proposed for these challenges in the literature?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a scoping review to fulfill three main aims (Charef & Bouguerba, 2025). These were: (1) to identify the main themes in research on IELTS writing, (2) to examine the research paradigms, data collection methods, instruments, and analytical techniques used, and (3) to explore the challenges IELTS candidates face and the solutions found in the literature. The descriptive review method facilitated the combination and synthesis of findings from various studies. This provided a broad understanding of teaching concerns, results, and assessment methods related to IELTS writing.

IELTS writing is complex, and there are few extensive studies in EFL contexts on this topic. (Nguyen & Le, 2022). Therefore, an exploratory part was added to the study. This involved a systematic content analysis to find patterns in IELTS writing instruction, common challenges, and solutions. The primary goal was to identify themes that guide educators, policymakers, and curriculum planners. This would support them in creating effective, evidence-based instructional practices for IELTS writing preparation.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

This review was conducted following the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency and methodological rigor. The procedure involved four sequential phases: identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, and inclusion. In the identification phase, researchers search multiple databases to gather all potentially relevant studies and remove duplicates. During the screening phase, titles and

abstracts are examined to eliminate clearly irrelevant works and retain only studies aligned with the review focus. The eligibility evaluation phase involves a full-text assessment of the remaining studies, applying predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological soundness. Finally, in the inclusion phase, only studies that fully meet these criteria are selected as the final evidence base for the scoping review. The databases consulted included Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ResearchGate, covering works published between 2000 and 2025. Every stage was documented based on PRISMA standards to maintain consistency and minimize researcher bias. (Rethlefsen & Page, n.d.).

While the studies were collected from a broad range of scholarly sources, several journals appeared most frequently, including *the International Journal of English Language Teaching*, *the International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, *the Journal of Teaching Language Skills*, and *Language Testing in Asia*. Their recurrence highlights their impact on the scholarly discourse surrounding IELTS writing pedagogy and related linguistic research. The review procedure involved multiple filtering stages, including title and abstract screening, full-text analysis, and application of inclusion and exclusion criteria consistent with PRISMA guidelines.

Search Strategy

A list of targeted keywords was created to capture literature related to instructional, pedagogical, and evaluative dimensions of IELTS writing. Major search terms included *IELTS writing pedagogy*, *IELTS writing instruction*, *test preparation*, *IELTS writing performance*, and *assessment criteria*. Boolean connectors were utilized (e.g., “IELTS writing” AND “pedagogy” OR “culture”) to refine the search results.

Inclusion Criteria

This review incorporates scholarly works that meet several predefined inclusion standards. First, only peer-reviewed journal articles, academic book chapters, and conference proceedings published in the English language between 2000 and 2025 are considered. The selected studies must address issues directly related to IELTS writing, including pedagogical approaches, instructional strategies, teaching innovations, and developments in writing assessment practices. Furthermore, research investigating the psychometric properties of the IELTS writing module, particularly its validity and reliability, is included.

Both empirical studies and conceptual or theoretical contributions are taken into account to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the literature.

Exclusion Criteria

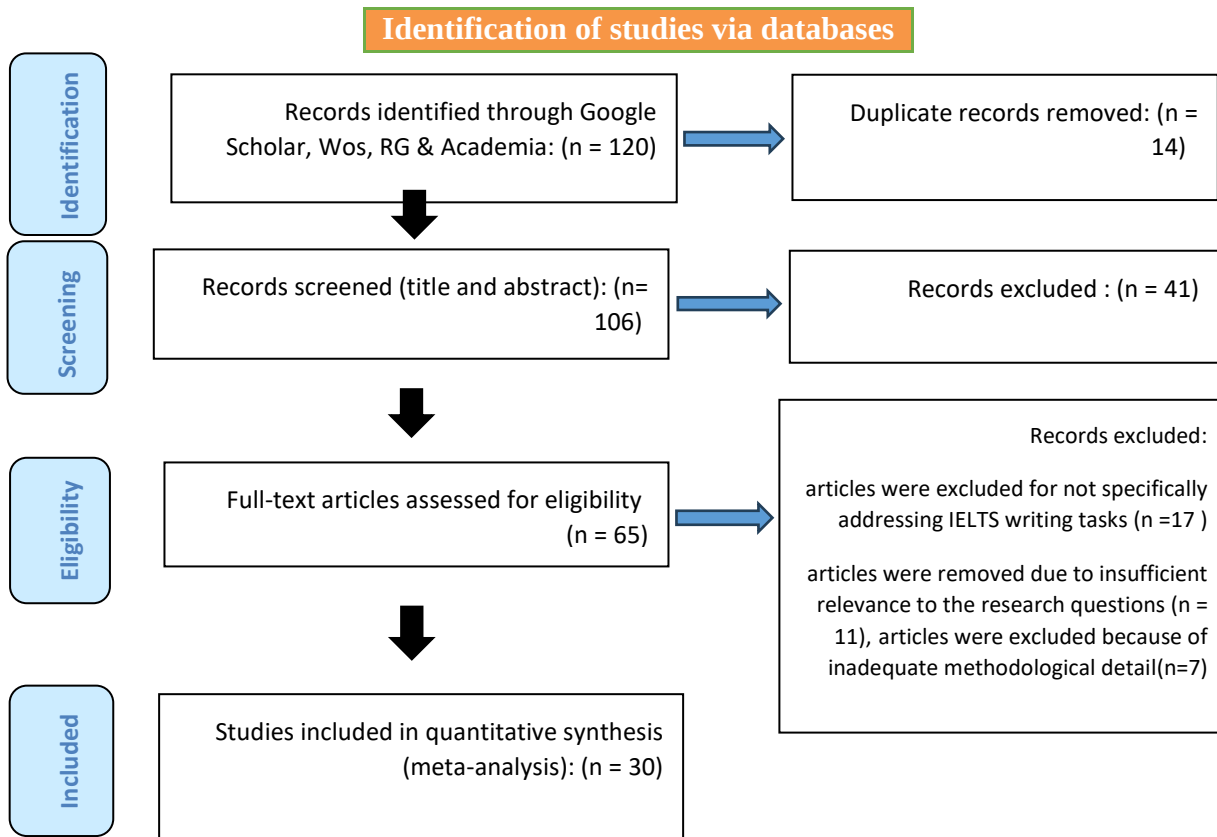
Studies are excluded if they do not focus explicitly on IELTS writing, such as those examining other test components (e.g., listening, reading, or speaking). In addition, unpublished or non-peer-reviewed materials—including doctoral dissertations, master’s theses, editorials, and informal reports—are not included in the review. Finally, publications appearing outside the designated timeframe of 2000–2025 are excluded to maintain consistency and relevance within the scope of the review.

3.3. PRISMA Flow Diagram

The PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021) was used to systematically document the screening and selection process of studies in this review. Based on the database search, a total of 120 articles related to IELTS writing were initially identified from Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ResearchGate. After removing 14 duplicate records that appeared more than once across databases, 106 unique articles remained. During the title and abstract screening stage, 41 articles were excluded because they were not directly related to IELTS writing and instead focused on other language skills or general EFL writing. This resulted in 65 articles being retained for full-text eligibility assessment. In the eligibility phase, 17 articles were excluded for not specifically addressing IELTS writing tasks, 11 articles were removed due to insufficient relevance to the research questions, and seven articles were excluded because of inadequate methodological detail. Finally, 30 articles met all inclusion criteria and were retained for qualitative content analysis in the final review.

Figure 1.

PRISMA Flow Diagram



3.4. Final Dataset and Data Categorization

Following the PRISMA-based identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion procedures, the final dataset of this scoping review consisted exclusively of peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2025 that directly addressed IELTS writing. All included studies fulfilled the predefined inclusion criteria in terms of relevance to IELTS writing pedagogy, learner performance, assessment, cross-linguistic influence, or technological applications. After duplicate removal and full-text eligibility checking, the final body of literature formed the empirical foundation for the descriptive synthesis. Each study was independently coded across three analytical dimensions corresponding to the three research questions: (1) thematic focus, (2) methodological characteristics, and (3) learner challenges and proposed solutions. This multi-layered coding ensured analytical triangulation and comprehensive coverage of the field.

3.5. Data Analysis

The collected data on IELTS writing research themes, methodological practices, learner challenges, and proposed solutions were subjected to a thorough inductive content analysis to identify patterns, main themes, and categories. This structured process included several steps: familiarization, open coding, refining themes, developing categories, and final validation. This multi-step method ensured both depth and accuracy in capturing the research landscape of IELTS writing.

In the first phase, all included studies in the final PRISMA-filtered dataset were read multiple times to develop a thorough understanding before formal coding began. Each article was treated as a single unit of analysis and examined across three analytical dimensions derived directly from the research questions: thematic focus (RQ1), methodological characteristics (RQ2), and learner challenges with corresponding solutions (RQ3). Open coding was applied to titles, abstracts, methodologies, findings, and discussion sections to extract key phrases, concepts, and analytical features directly from the data without relying on any pre-established framework. To facilitate systematic organization and transparency, Microsoft Word's Track Changes and Comment functions were used for annotation and labeling. While some codes were drawn verbatim from the reviewed studies, others were paraphrased to maintain conceptual clarity and analytical coherence.

Following the initial coding phase, conceptually similar and overlapping codes were merged to form broader thematic groupings. Redundant items were removed, and closely related ideas were clustered to generate higher-order categories. As a result of this refinement process, the dataset was consolidated into five main thematic categories addressing IELTS writing research: linguistic features of writing, cross-linguistic and cultural transfer, pedagogical interventions, assessment and washback, and AI-based or automated feedback systems. In parallel, methodological features were structured into categories of research paradigms, research designs, data collection instruments, and analytical techniques. Likewise, learner-related data were organized into major challenge categories and corresponding solution categories. Throughout this phase, a balance was maintained between data-driven categorization and interpretative analysis in order to preserve both explicit surface patterns and deeper conceptual relationships.

In the subsequent phase, further refinement of categories and subcategories was undertaken. Broad themes were either expanded to accommodate multiple closely related concepts or subdivided into more specific subthemes where necessary. Methodological categories were refined to distinguish between quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods paradigms, as well as between different design

types, instruments, and analytical procedures. Similarly, learner challenges were further differentiated into grammatical, lexical, discourse-level, rhetorical, strategic, and time-management domains, while proposed solutions were refined into pedagogical and technological intervention clusters. During this stage, conceptual overlap across categories was carefully checked to ensure that the final framework remained both comprehensive and logically structured.

The final stage involved a thorough review and validation of the categorized dataset to ensure internal consistency and analytical credibility. The entire dataset was re-examined to verify accurate category alignment and thematic coherence across all three analytical dimensions. Cross-category checks were conducted to ensure that each study was consistently represented in terms of its thematic orientation, methodological profile, and challenge–solution alignment. Any ambiguities in coding decisions were resolved through iterative comparison and refinement. This final validation phase resulted in a unified and stable analytical framework that provided a coherent, systematic, and reproducible representation of research trends, methodological practices, and pedagogical implications in IELTS writing research.

4. Results

The scoping review retained 30 studies from the uploaded reference list after PRISMA screening and eligibility checks (see Methods and PRISMA flow). The sample reflects a range of publication articles and geographical foci (e.g., China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Iran, Russia, and other EFL/ESL contexts). Data extraction focused on three domains mapped to the research questions: (1) thematic focus, (2) methodological choices, and (3) candidate challenges and proposed solutions.

Research Question 1: The first research question addressed the main themes explored in research on IELTS writing. Analysis of the included studies identified four major thematic domains and twelve sub-themes (see Table 1). The most frequent domain was Linguistic Features of IELTS Writing Performance (grammar, lexis, cohesion), followed by Pedagogical Interventions, Cross-linguistic Transfer & Cultural Influence, and Assessment / AI & Washback.

Table 1

Thematic frequency of included studies (n = 30)

Theme 1: Linguistic features	Grammar & clause structure; lexical complexity; cohesion/coherence	12
Theme 2: Cross-linguistic transfer & culture	Rhetorical transfer; grammatical transfer; pragmatic/cultural framing	6
Theme 3: Pedagogical interventions	Genre-based instruction; model essays & noticing; blended/online teaching	7
Theme 4: Assessment, washback & AI	Validity/reliability; washback; automated scoring & computational analysis	5

The distribution of studies across the four domains is summarized in Table 1. These themes align with the emphasis in the literature on both micro-linguistic features (e.g., clause structure, lexical profiles) and applied pedagogical concerns (e.g., genre-based instruction, model essays), with an emergent but rapidly growing focus on AI and automated scoring.

Theme 1 (Linguistic Features): Studies in this domain analyzed clause complexity, error taxonomies, lexical profiles, and phraseological competence; many employed corpus- or text-based analyses to correlate linguistic measures with score indicators. Theme 2 (Cross-linguistic transfer & culture): Several studies focused on negative transfer effects from L1 (e.g., preposition errors, rhetorical sequencing) and on how cultural norms influence pragmatic choices in essays. Theme 3 (Pedagogy): This cluster emphasized genre-awareness, use of model essays and noticing, and the design of blended learning or workshop interventions. Theme 4 (Assessment & AI): Emerging work examined test validity, washback on instruction, and early investigations of AI/automated scoring applied to IELTS-writing-like essays.

Research Question 2: The second research question dealt with the research paradigms, designs, instruments, and data analysis techniques which are commonly used. The methodological landscape across the 30 included studies is heterogeneous. I categorized design choices into broad paradigms (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods), primary data-collection instruments, and typical analytic techniques.

Table 2*Research paradigms and primary designs (n = 30)*

Paradigm/design	Description	Number of studies using
Qualitative (textual/rhetorical/corpus-informed qualitative analysis)	Close discourse, genre analysis, thematic/content analysis of essays	12
Quantitative (statistical analysis, automated metrics)	Lexical metrics, error rates, correlational studies, and experimental comparisons	8
Mixed-methods	Combination of quantitative text metrics and qualitative interviews/observations	10

Note. Some studies classified as qualitative made substantial use of corpus counts; others combined classroom experiments with textual scoring. Counts refer to studies that explicitly identified the paradigm in their method sections. The next table shows the Data collection instruments and analytic techniques.

Table 3*Data collection instruments and analytic techniques*

Instrument / analytic technique	Typical use	Number of studies
Corpus/textual datasets (collected essays, model essays)	Frequent basis for linguistic and lexical analyses	9
Manual textual analysis / rhetorical/genre analysis	Thematic coding, discourse analysis, SF-Linguistics (SFL) analyses	11
Surveys/questionnaires (teachers or test-takers)	Eliciting perceptions, washback effects, and preparation strategies	7
Interviews/focus groups (teachers, test-takers)	In-depth perceptions, classroom practices	6
Classroom interventions / quasi-experiments	Pre/post interventions, model-essay training, genre teaching	5
Automated scoring / computational features (AI tools, automated metrics)	Feature extraction, automated essay scoring comparisons	3
Statistical analysis (correlations, regressions, significance testing)	Linking linguistic features to scores or outcomes	10

It should be mentioned that incidence counts reflect that many studies used multiple instruments/techniques (e.g., a mixed-methods study using corpus analysis plus interview counts in both rows). All instrument and technique classifications are derived from method descriptions in the included studies. Textual and corpus-based methods dominate when the goal is to describe linguistic features

(Theme 1). These studies often report lexical dispersion, TTR, or other lexical indices, clause-level counts, and error taxonomies using manual annotation or automated extraction. Qualitative genre and discourse analyses (e.g., systemic-functional or rhetorical analysis) are used to assess coherence, thematic progression, and metadiscourse features. Mixed-methods designs are common when researchers link linguistic descriptions to pedagogical practice or learner perceptions (combining text metrics with surveys or interviews). Automated approaches and AI-related analyses are present but still limited in number; these studies typically focus on feature extraction and proof-of-concept comparisons between human and machine indicators.

Research Question 3: The last aim of the study was to look for the challenges IELTS candidates face in IELTS writing test, and the solutions which have been proposed for these challenges in the literature. Synthesis of the 30 included studies yielded a consistent set of candidate challenges (linguistic, strategic, and affective/practical) and a parallel set of proposed solutions (pedagogical and technological). Table 4 provides a challenge–solution matrix with short descriptions and representative study incidences drawn from the included literature.

Table 4

Challenges and proposed solutions

Challenge (category)	Typical description/evidence	Solutions proposed in the literature	Representative incidence
Grammatical errors & clause complexity	Frequent clause-level errors, misuse of complex structures, and limited grammatical control (affects band descriptors).	Focused grammar instruction integrated with genre practice; error-focused feedback; scaffolded clause-building exercises.	Challenge (n ≈ 12); Solutions proposed (n ≈ 8)
Limited lexical range & phraseology	Over-reliance on basic vocabulary, poor collocations, and weak phraseological competence.	Lexical profiling instruction; phraseology/idiom teaching; model-essay noticing to acquire formulaic sequences.	Challenge (n ≈ 10); Solutions (n ≈ 7)
Cohesion/coherence & discourse organization	Transfer effects in prepositions, argument sequencing, and rhetorical moves (notably in Persian-, Chinese-, and other L1 contexts).	Contrastive instruction; raising metarhetorical awareness; targeted exercises addressing typical L1→L2 transfer errors.	Challenge (n ≈ 6); Solutions (n ≈ 5).

L1 negative transfer (rhetorical & grammatical)	Transfer effects in prepositions, argument sequencing, and rhetorical moves (notably in Persian-, Chinese-, and other L1 contexts).	Contrastive instruction; raising metarhetorical awareness; targeted exercises addressing typical L1→L2 transfer errors.	Challenge (n ≈ 6); Solutions (n ≈ 5)
Task interpretation and time management	Misreading prompts, misallocating time to Task 1 vs Task 2, and failing to meet task requirements.	Test-strategy training; timed practice; explicit task-feature checklists during preparation.	Challenge (n ≈ 7); Solutions (n ≈ 6)
Validity, washback, and test-preparation focus.	Narrow test-oriented instruction that neglects academic writing authenticity; concerns about alignment with university writing.	Curricular alignment efforts; integrating authentic academic assignments with IELTS practice; teacher training for balanced washback.	Challenge assessed (n ≈ 5); Solutions proposed (n ≈ 4)
Emerging: automated concerns AI / scoring	Questions about fairness, overreliance on machine feedback, and the sensitivity of automated scoring systems.	Use AI as a diagnostic aid (not sole assessor); combine automated feedback with teacher mediation; develop transparent feature-based reports.	Emerging challenge (n ≈ 3); Solutions proposed (n ≈ 2)

Incidence numbers in the matrix refer to how many of the 30 included studies discussed each challenge or proposed corresponding solutions; many studies discussed multiple items, so counts overlap. All challenge/solution pairs and incidence estimates are extracted from the included references. The literature converges on the importance of integrating linguistic remediation (grammar, lexis) within genre- and task-focused instruction rather than teaching these elements in isolation. Several empirical studies report gains when model-essay noticing and genre instruction are combined with targeted feedback. Cross-linguistic transfer appears repeatedly as a root cause for recurring error patterns in specific L1 populations (e.g., Persian, Chinese, Vietnamese). Contrastive and awareness-raising pedagogies are frequently recommended. AI and automated scoring are promising for large-scale diagnostic screening and feature extraction, but the literature warns against using these systems without human oversight due to concerns about validity and fairness.

5. Discussion

The first aim of this study was to identify the main themes explored in IELTS writing research. The findings of this review demonstrate that the literature is primarily concentrated on four interrelated thematic domains: (a) linguistic features of IELTS writing, (b) cross-linguistic transfer and cultural

influence, (c) pedagogical interventions and instructional design, and (d) assessment, washback, and emerging AI-based evaluation. The strong dominance of linguistic feature analysis across the reviewed studies confirms that IELTS writing scholarship remains largely grounded in a product-oriented orientation that prioritizes grammatical accuracy, lexical sophistication, cohesion, and rhetorical structure as core indicators of writing quality (Estaji & Hashemi, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Pratama & Munandar, 2024). Several studies emphasize clause complexity and grammatical control as decisive predictors of IELTS band performance (Pratama & Munandar, 2024; Zakhvatova & Pankratova, 2023), while others foreground lexical diversity and phraseological competence as central to higher band achievement (Estaji & Hashemi, 2022). Cohesion and coherence have also received substantial attention through theme–rheme progression and metadiscourse analyses (Sun et al., 2024). These findings collectively indicate that IELTS writing research conceptualizes writing proficiency as a multi-dimensional linguistic construct rather than a purely grammatical skill.

The second prominent theme involves cross-linguistic transfer and rhetorical influence, which reflects the strong interest in how L1 rhetorical conventions shape IELTS performance. Empirical studies focusing on Persian, Chinese, Russian, and Vietnamese learners consistently report negative transfer effects in areas such as prepositions, clause ordering, rhetorical structuring, and collocations (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Talebi, 2014; Kwan, 2024; Zakhvatova & Pankratova, 2023). These findings directly support the importance of viewing IELTS writing not merely as a testing phenomenon but as a site of intercultural and interlingual negotiation.

Pedagogical intervention studies form the third major thematic cluster. Genre-based instruction (Damayanti et al., 2023), model essay use (Nguyen & Le, 2022; Bagheri & Zare, 2009), probing techniques Rahman et al., 2023), and blended learning designs (Jiang & Huai, 2022; Narayanan & Mathew, 2021) are repeatedly reported as effective instructional responses to writing difficulties. These studies provide strong empirical justification for the pedagogical orientation of the present review. The final thematic domain, though smaller in scope, concerns assessment, washback, and artificial intelligence. Critical analyses of IELTS validity and authenticity (Green, 2019; Uysal, 2010; Moore & Morton, 2007; Azizi & Majdeddin, 2014) coexist with emerging studies on automated essay scoring and AI-supported assessment (Tang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024; Sun, 2023). This signals an important methodological shift in the field toward computational approaches, though human rating validity remains a central concern.

The second research question examined the paradigms, designs, instruments, and analytical techniques employed in IELTS writing studies. The findings reveal a clear methodological pluralism, with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method approaches all well represented. A large proportion of studies rely on text-based and corpus-informed analyses, reflecting the discipline's long-standing engagement with linguistic features as measurable indicators of proficiency (Divsar & Heydari, 2017).

Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020). Quantitative approaches are frequently used to establish relationships between linguistic variables and writing scores (Pratama & Munandar, 2024; Ahmadi & Mansoordehghan, 2015; Ahmadi et al., 2019), while qualitative designs dominate genre analysis, discourse interpretation, and teacher cognition research (Ananda et al., 2018; Clark & Yu, 2022; Sun et al., 2024). Mixed-methods studies often combine pre-/post instructional treatment with textual analysis and learner perceptions, enhancing the ecological validity of findings (Damayanti et al., 2023; Narayanan & Mathew, 2021).

The growing inclusion of AI-based feature extraction and automated scoring systems (Tang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024; Georgiou, 2024; Sun, 2023) indicates a methodological expansion beyond traditional classroom-based research. However, critical studies caution that automated systems remain both oversensitive and overstable, raising concerns regarding fairness and interpretability (Automatic Essay Scoring Systems, 2023). These patterns validate the appropriateness of the present study's PRISMA-guided scoping review combined with content analysis, which is well-suited to synthesizing heterogeneous methodologies.

The third research question addressed the challenges IELTS candidates face and the solutions proposed in the literature. The findings reveal that learner difficulties cluster consistently around four core problem areas: grammatical accuracy and clause complexity, lexical limitation and collocational misuse, weak cohesion and rhetorical organization, and L1 negative transfer. Grammatical problems, especially in clause embedding, sentence boundaries, and agreement, remain the most frequently reported challenge across national contexts (Pratama & Munandar, 2024; Zakhvatova & Pankratova, 2023; Divsar & Heydari, 2017). Lexical weaknesses include restricted vocabulary range and inappropriate collocations, which directly affect lexical resource scores (Estaji & Hashemi, 2022). Cohesion problems manifest in weak thematic progression and insufficient metadiscourse control (Sun et al., 2024). Negative transfer from the mother tongue is consistently identified as a root cause behind many of these linguistic difficulties. Persian and Chinese learners, in particular, exhibit transfer-related errors in rhetorical

organization, prepositional usage, and verb–noun constructions (Mahmoodzadeh, 2012; Talebi, 2014; Kwan, 2024). These findings confirm that IELTS writing performance is deeply shaped by interlanguage development rather than surface-level test strategies alone.

In response to these challenges, the literature strongly endorses genre-based pedagogy, model essay noticing, and contrastive rhetorical instruction as effective solutions (Damayanti et al., 2023; Nguyen & Le, 2022; Bagheri & Zare, 2009; Sadeghi & Maleki, 2015). Instructional innovations such as blended learning (Jiang & Huai, 2022), online IELTS coaching (Narayanan & Mathew, 2021), and strategy-focused training (Seetharaman, 2023) further demonstrate how pedagogical design can directly mediate writing performance. Washback-related challenges also persist. Several studies warn against overly test-driven instruction that restricts broader academic literacy development (Green, 2019; Lewthwaite, 2007; Liu, 2019). Meanwhile, the introduction of AI into IELTS preparation is viewed as promising but pedagogically incomplete without teacher mediation (Sun, 2023; Tang et al., 2024).

6. Conclusion and Implications

The dynamics of IELTS writing research were investigated in this study with a specific focus on dominant research themes, methodological practices, learner challenges, and proposed instructional solutions. The main findings indicate that IELTS writing research is largely shaped by analyses of linguistic features, particularly grammar, lexical complexity, cohesion, and discourse organization, alongside strong attention to cross-linguistic and cultural transfer. Pedagogical interventions such as genre-based instruction, model-essay analysis, and blended learning have been widely adopted to address these challenges. However, persistent difficulties—including grammatical inaccuracy, limited lexical control, weak coherence, rhetorical transfer, and task management issues—continue to affect learner performance. Despite these challenges, the diversity of instructional contexts and learner backgrounds offers valuable opportunities for refining IELTS writing pedagogy through targeted and context-sensitive approaches.

The solutions identified in the literature, such as genre-based instruction, contrastive rhetoric teaching, focused written feedback, strategy training, and the use of AI-supported diagnostic tools, provide practical instructional pathways for addressing these challenges. Genre-based and task-focused instruction helps learners internalize the structural and rhetorical demands of IELTS writing, while model

essays and feedback promote noticing and self-regulation. Strategy training improves learners' ability to manage time, interpret tasks accurately, and structure responses effectively. Moreover, emerging AI-based feedback systems, when pedagogically mediated, can enhance formative assessment and individualized learning support. Together, these solutions contribute to establishing a more structured, responsive, and effective IELTS writing learning environment.

Given that effective IELTS writing instruction requires constant pedagogical adjustment and methodological awareness, this study highlights the importance of continuous professional development for instructors. Teachers need sustained training in genre-based pedagogy, contrastive analysis, feedback literacy, and digital assessment practices in order to respond effectively to learner needs. Educational policies should support the development of specialized IELTS writing curricula and provide access to updated instructional and technological resources. By equipping teachers with evidence-based tools and strategies, institutions can improve the quality and consistency of IELTS writing preparation.

This study contributes to the field by offering a structured PRISMA-based synthesis of IELTS writing research that integrates thematic trends, methodological characteristics, and pedagogical implications within a single analytical framework. Unlike studies that focus on isolated linguistic features or instructional techniques, this review brings together performance analysis, discourse features, pedagogy, cross-linguistic influence, and assessment into a unified comparative perspective. As such, it provides a comprehensive reference for teachers, researchers, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking to enhance IELTS writing instruction and assessment practices.

Despite its systematic design, this review has several limitations. First, only studies published in English were included, which may have led to the exclusion of relevant research published in other languages. Second, the review was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, potentially omitting valuable insights from dissertations, book chapters, and conference proceedings. Third, although the review covered 25 years, some early foundational work may not have been captured. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the scope and generalizability of the findings.

The findings of this study offer important implications for educational practice and policy. Teachers should be equipped with instructional strategies that both address learner difficulties and capitalize on the pedagogical opportunities inherent in IELTS preparation. Professional development programs should prioritize training in genre-based instruction, contrastive rhetoric, feedback practices, and task-based strategy instruction. Furthermore, fostering inclusive, supportive, and goal-oriented

writing classrooms is essential for enhancing learner engagement and performance. Finally, the thoughtful integration of technology and AI-based feedback tools can support personalized learning and efficient assessment, provided that such tools are used under informed pedagogical guidance.

The findings reinforce the view that IELTS writing must be understood as a linguistically complex, rhetorically structured, and culturally mediated academic literacy practice. From a theoretical perspective, the dominance of genre, discourse, and transfer-based studies supports a shift away from narrow accuracy-based models toward functional and contrastive frameworks of writing development (Damayanti et al., 2023; Ananda et al., 2018; Sadeghi & Maleki, 2015).

Pedagogically, the evidence clearly favors integrated instructional approaches, where grammar, lexis, and discourse are taught within authentic genre contexts using model texts, contrastive awareness, and systematic feedback. For policymakers, findings on washback and authenticity highlight the need to align IELTS preparation with broader academic writing goals (Green, 2019; Moore & Morton, 1999). Finally, AI-based assessment tools should be treated as diagnostic supplements rather than autonomous evaluators (Sun, 2023; Tang et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024).

Future research on IELTS writing should prioritize longitudinal and experimental designs to capture learners' developmental trajectories better and establish stronger causal links between instructional practices and writing performance. Comparative cross-linguistic studies are also needed to deepen understanding of how rhetorical, grammatical, and pragmatic transfer operates across diverse language backgrounds and task types. Additionally, more attention should be given to the integration of AI-based assessment and feedback tools, particularly their pedagogical effectiveness, ethical implications, and alignment with genre-based and strategy-focused instruction. Together, these directions can strengthen the theoretical, methodological, and applied dimensions of IELTS writing research.

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