

# Analysis of Errors in Graph Writing Committed by Vietnamese Learners of IELTS – A Case Study in Vietnam

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**Abstract:** *This article analysed the errors made in the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) graph writing by 60 Vietnamese learners of Advanced IELTS at an English centre in Ho Chi Minh city, Viet Nam. The analysis was based on the theoretical framework developed by the Cambridge IELTS Consultant – Dane (2023) and Châu (2024). 60 IELTS graph writings done by these learners at the beginning of an advanced IELTS course were collected and assessed after they had learned the first lesson on graph description. The study was qualitative-oriented. Various kinds of errors were found and described in detail to find out their causes as the basis for the solutions to be put forward. The research results showed that the errors of word repetition, wrong information, missing words, wrong words were the most common among other errors made in each writing due to a variety of reasons. The implications withdrawn from these error causes could help learners of Advanced IELTS in general and the Vietnamese ones in particular have a good insight into the requirements of the graph task, the way to manage the task time allocation, the steps to develop a full graph writing to minimize and even avoid errors in their IELTS graph writing to describe graphs effectively and successfully.*

**Keywords:** error analysis, graph writing, IELTS Vietnamese learners, case study, Viet Nam

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## INTRODUCTION

Most of learners or candidates of IELTS (International English language Testing System) in general and their Vietnamese counterparts in particular, have faced great challenges and committed a lot of errors in their writing task 1 relating to graph, pie chart, bar chart, table and process. This may result from several reasons. Firstly, it requires an integrated skill of vocabulary, grammar, especially logic analysis of the

whole illustration to spotlight the general trend of the writing, its striking feature and the final thought of the writer in order to ensure the cohesion and the coherence of the writing. This may even be more demanding for those who are not the native speakers of English or the learners of English as a foreign language. In addition, within a restricted amount of 20 minutes, IELTS learners or examinees ought to complete their task 1 academic writing of at least 150 words, which could be a great pressure on them if they are not well-prepared for it. Nonetheless, the problem has so far not yet been studied at large. This paper accordingly focuses on analyzing different kinds of errors committed in the *graph* writing (as one of the subcategories of IELTS task 1 writing) by 60 Vietnamese learners of Advanced IELTS at an English centre in Ho Chi Minh city, Viet Nam to find out the causes of the problems and hereby put forwards implications to solve them. Hopefully, the findings from the research could help improve IELTS learners' or test takers' graph writing so that they could gain more success in their learning IELTS as well as in doing their IELTS graph writing test.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

For graph writing task, IELTS learners or test takers are required to describe the information shown and make comparison (Lin, 2016). The major challenge for them is they ought to understand the topic, the focus of the graph to make the general comments, give detailed description on the data given in the graph and give their final thoughts withdrawn from the description within the restricted allocation of time of 20 minutes in at least 150 words. To deal with the problem, various renowned authors have written books on IELTS writing task 1 and how to prepare for it. Some authors introduced the theory through given exercises of filling the blanks with suitable words (particles or lexical words) learned in the lesson or answering questions related to the guided graph writing (Brown & Richards, 2017; Carter, 2003). Some used exercises/tasks arranging from the low to the advanced level combined with one or two IELTS learners' or IELTS test takers' graph written answers with the concluding paragraph and mainly gave general comments on the accuracy level of the learners' writings so that IELTS learners or preparators could decide on the better illustrated writing for reference (Mitchell, 2014). Others (Warner, 1992) tended to consolidate the theory via the advanced charts and graphs writing exercises without model writings but those with conclusion paragraph.

In addition, Sahanaya, Lindeck and Stewart (2013) presented the graph lessons systematically, meticulously, comprehensively from the draft outline to the real writing, how to write the outline and develop it into a full writing including the introduction, the general trend or comment, the detail and the concluding paragraph with the illustrating exercises and models. In addition, the specifically formularized syntactic structures, the lexical units under such parts of speech as nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs to describe the trend of changes (*increase/decrease slowly*,

*moderately, significantly ...*) or the state of constancy (*remain constant at ...*), the striking features like the spike of the data (*reach a peak, peak at ...*) and how to incorporate the data (*start at, finish at ...*) with the visibly persuading illustrating figures and even the particles like conjunctions (*while, whereas ...*) were also introduced in their books to help learners grasp the lexical and syntactic features of the writing task. This could help IELTS learners or test takers gain a better insight into the overall structure of the graph writing task with the details inside so that they could confidently and independently apply the acquired grammatical and lexical knowledge to their writing without always depending on the given model writing under the filling or questioning - answering exercises.

Apart from these books, there have been so far so few scientific studies on IELTS academic writing task 1 worldwide. Yu, Rea-Dickins, Kiely, University of Bristol (2017) when investigating the cognitive processes of candidates taking IELTS Academic Writing Task 1 found out that the effects of different graphic prompts on the cognitive processes were clearly evidenced in the mean scores of the writings, in the use of vocabulary, and in whether and how they would make comparisons or trend assessments, following the graphic conventions in presentation, interpretation and reproduction. In addition, potential psychological impact of graph familiarity on their task performance was clearly expressed as they discovered that there was a strong relation between academic writing 1 performance and writing ability in relation to topic-based essays. More significantly, special training had a strong influence on this writing task sub-type performance especially in terms of whether the participants tried to make interpretations, prediction and comments by linking the graphic information with their domain knowledge about the graphs. Furthermore, Anh (2020) in her Master thesis on the discourse features of 20 IELTS writing task 1 answer samples in the 8-9 band score on process description revealed that the preferred layout was that of introduction, overview, first detailed description, second detailed description. Besides, sequencing words, synonym and repetition were used to ensure the cohesion and coherence of the process writing task.

Nevertheless, hardly any official publications have analyzed the actual observed errors in graph writing task committed by IELTS learners in general and IELTS Vietnamese learners in particular, which is in urgent need to study. As a result, the author of this article has carried out this research to fill the research gap.

## **TYPES OF IELTS GRAPH WRITING ERRORS**

**Errors** reveal the vacancy in learners' knowledge and occur when they do not adhere to regulations (Ellis,1997). The nine types of common errors in IELTS Task 1 writing involve:

(1) *Putting figures in the introduction, the general comments, the summary/conclusion:* The introduction should only give the brief information on the task topic, and the general comment, the summary/conclusion should only sum up key groups/trends/exceptions without figures. Otherwise, these paragraphs could become overloaded with the details or data just like the detailed paragraph, which could cause the overlap of information and make a cumbersome and too long writing extending too far beyond the set or regulated number of words of writing task 1.

(2) *Having an introduction, general comments or summary/conclusion that is too long or too short:* The reason is IELTS learners or candidates cannot grasp the topic of the writing task 1 to write introduction. Moreover, they cannot select the most important information in the graph to write the general comments, the summary or conclusion. This could result in the raking of all data and leave no imprint on the writing: these parts are either too short or too long to be accepted. In this way, the writing could be confusing for the readers due to ambiguous topic, scattering or non-focus information. As a result, one sentence is usually enough for the introduction including the topic and the time given (if any), one or two (or very occasionally) 3 sentences for the general comment, the conclusion.

(3) *Using contractions (e.g. 'don't for 'do not', ...):* Never use contractions in IELTS Academic task 1 or Task 2. They are only acceptable in IELTS General Task 2 for informal letters.

(4) *Using too many figures from the data:* IELTS learners or IELTS test takers have a habit of listing all data separately in the order that is seen in the chart (e. g. from left to right, or top to bottom). Examiners say that this is one of the most frequent reasons for a low score. It is necessary to scientifically analyze, group the data, select the key figures of groups, not lists of figures (e.g. "They are all around 100") rather than report each individual figure in a large group to achieve a high mark.

(5) *Failing to describe striking features:* IELTS test takers could not achieve a high mark (e.g. Band 7 or over) unless they show that they can do this by paying attention to the highest number, the most common feature illustrated in the graph. They can use the phrases "The highest number, the most common . . ." and mainly describe the most noticeable features that they can see rather than describing all the data presented in the illustration without emphasizing the noticeable features especially in the general comment or conclusion paragraph.

(6) *Inadequate word number:* The examiner will notice if IELTS candidates write much less than 150 words. It is advised that IELTS test takers keep counting the words while doing IELTS task 1 writing to ensure the required number of at least 150 words. Most high-quality IELTS Task 1 writings are between 150 and about 170 words, depending on the complexity of the Task.

(7) *Not using the data units correctly or misunderstanding the zeros:* IELTS learners or test takers should identify the terms on both axes of the charts,

including any information that tells them if this is in one, two, hundreds/thousands/millions etc. Apart from this, they should not misunderstand zero as a measurement unit on the horizontal axis when writing about the time; for example, *from year 0 to year 3*, *from the first year 0 to the tenth year*, etc. Instead, they are advised to write as *during the first three years*, *within 10 years*, etc.

(8) *Using the wrong tense*: If there is no time specified, the simple present tense or simple past could be used to make it vivid or reporting what happened respectively. If the time is obviously in the past, use the simple past. If there is an estimate for the future, “X is predicted/forecast/estimated to grow/decline etc.” could be used.

(Retrieved on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2024, from <[https://lingoconnector.edu.vn/IELTS-writing-task-1-data-essays/Dane Truong-Cambridge IELTS Consultant \(2023\)>](https://lingoconnector.edu.vn/IELTS-writing-task-1-data-essays/Dane%20Truong-Cambridge%20IELTS%20Consultant%20(2023)>))

(9) *Using words incorrectly*: IELTS learners or candidates lacking the knowledge of words including particles *or/and* lexical words could commit errors in their task 1 writing because they cannot use these lexical units properly. For instant, they are unable to use suitable conjunctions to link ideas in different clauses or sentences or paragraphs, which could make the whole writing incohesive and incoherent. This results in the readers’ or examiners’ confusion and misunderstanding when reading the writing.

(Retrieved on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2024, from <<https://onthiIELTS.com.vn/cac-loi-thuong-gap-trong-task-1-va-cach-khac-phuc/> Châu Nguyễn (2022)>

Additionally, the errors found out from the IELTS graph writings under investigation include *excessive word number*, *redundant word*, *repetition of word*, *repetition of idea*, *missing words*, *missing information*, *wrong figure*, *wrong information*, *missing letter*, *overemphasis/intensifier*, *wrong word/phrase order*, *wrong/missing punctuation*, *wrong paragraph division*.

### ***Error Analysis***

There are various means that have been employed to collect the foreign language acquisition data. There are also different types of analysis of the data that researchers have used to come to a better understanding of the foreign language acquisition process. One of these types is error analysis.

Error analysis in Corder (1986)’s and Richards’ (1992)’s terms is: ‘The study and analysis of the errors made by foreign language learners by the comparison between learners’ interlanguage (learners’ version of the target language) and target language forms. Error analysis can be carried out to: (i) identify strategies learners use in language learning; (ii) identify the cause of learners’ errors; (iii) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials’.



In this way, the analysis of errors in general and that of graph errors in particular could help discover the areas of difficulty which learners have really encountered and its value would be to direct the teachers' attention to these areas so that they could devote special care and emphasis to the improvement of language teaching materials and method for overcoming, or even avoiding these difficulties.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### ***Data Collecting Instruments and Research Subjects***

The research instruments were 60 graph writings written by 60 IELTS Vietnamese learners in three advanced classes, at the beginning of the advanced courses after their having finished the Intermediate level courses of three months at an English centre in Ho Chi Minh, Viet Nam. The learners did the graph writing of at least 150 words within 20 minutes as required for an actual IELTS graph writing task under the oversight of the researcher as teacher so that she could assess the graph writing ability of their learners to promptly adjust her teaching for other types of IELTS writing task 1 during this course. These graph writings were then collected and evaluated by the author of this paper as an IELTS teacher. Various types of errors in these learners' graph writings were detected and analysed on the qualitative approach to find out the causes and the solutions for the problems.

### ***Textbooks and Test Books***

The textbooks of Academic Writing Practice for IELTS (Carter, 2003), Graph Attack (Warner, 1992), and a series of Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS test books had been used by the teacher (as the author of this paper) and these advanced level IELTS learners for further advanced exercises and mock tests for the authentic IELTS test. These books were utilized in continuity following the Intermediate level IELTS book of Preparation and Practice – Reading and Writing (Academic module) (Sahanaya et al., 2013) for the strong points mentioned in the Literature Review. More significantly, the books had been designed to meet the needs of students preparing to take the IELTS test and offer a complete guide from the basic level to the advanced level to gradually develop the required task 1 writing skills for learners via their practicing a range of writing skills of upward trend orientation. More noticeably, the test book set of Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS with the simulation tests on Writing Task 1 accompanied by the model or sample writing at the end of these test books could reflect the format of the IELTS test and help learners get familiar with as well as better prepare for the actual IELTS test to get the 6.5 – 7.0 band score.

These IELTS textbooks and test books had been chosen for teaching these learners from the Intermediate to Advanced IELTS level as they satisfy the criteria set by Bloom (1956) with the taxonomy of educational objects. He classified thinking according to 6 cognitive levels of complexity from the lowest level to the highest one

including (1) knowledge, (2) comprehension, (3) application, (4) analysis, (5) synthesis, (6) evaluation.

- (1) *Knowledge*: defined as the remembering of previously learned material from specific facts to complete theories, which was to remind the learners of the appropriate information.
- (2) *Comprehension*: related to the ability to grasp the meaning of material which could be shown by translating material from one form to another (words to numbers and vice versa), by interpreting material (explaining or summarizing) and by estimating future trends (predicting consequences or effects). These learning outcomes could go one step beyond the simple remembering of material and represent the lowest level of understanding.
- (3) *Application*: referring to the ability to use learned material in new and concrete situations. This could include the application of such things as rules, methods, concepts, principles, laws, and theories. Learning outcomes in this area might require a higher level of understanding than those under comprehension.
- (4) *Analysis*: involving the ability to break down material into its component parts so that its organization structure could be understood. This might include the identification of parts, analysis of the relationship between parts and recognition of the organizational principles involved. Learning outcomes here might represent a higher intellectual level than comprehension and application because they might require an understanding of both the content and the structural form of the material.
- (5) *Synthesis*: regarding the ability to put parts together to form a new whole. This might involve the production of a plan of operations (research proposal, outline), or a set of abstract relations (scheme for classifying information). Learning outcomes in this area might stress creative behaviors, with major emphasis on the formulation of new patterns or structure.
- (6) *Evaluation*: concerning with the ability to judge the value of material for a given purpose. The judgements could be based on definite criteria including internal criteria (organization) or external criteria (relevance to the purpose) and the students might determine the criteria or be given them. Learning outcomes in this area ought to be the highest in the cognitive hierarchy because they would contain elements of all the other categories, plus conscious value judgements based on clearly defined criteria.

The focus of using Bloom's taxonomy in education aims to shift the thinking processes of students from information gathering to information processing. This requires active participation not passive recollection - a constructivist approach. This was quite suitable with the choice of the above-mentioned IELTS textbooks and test

books for teaching the advanced IELTS learners to equip them with knowledge from the basic to the advanced level so that they could proactively develop their graph writing skill to do their writing test confidently and effectively. In this way, IELTS learners and test-takers could grasp the theoretical knowledge of describing graph, understand it, apply it to analyze the component parts as specific details of the graph and group the data into a new whole and then appraise or evaluate the value of the data given in the graph to highlight the striking features for giving the general comment and the conclusion of the graph.

### ***Data Coding Process***

The data were coded under the names of various kinds of errors committed in these learners' graph writings as aforementioned: Excessive Word Number (EWN); Lengthy Introduction, General Comment, Conclusion (LIGCC); Details in Introduction, General Comment, Conclusion (DIGCC); Redundant Word (RedW); Repetition of Word (RW); Repetition of Idea (RI); Too Many Figures (TMF); Fail to Describe Striking Features (FDSF); Inadequate Word Number (IWN); Missing Words (MWs); Missing Information (MI); Cursory Introduction, General Comment, Conclusion (CIGCC); Wrong Tense (WT); Wrong Figure (WF); Wrong Word (WW); Wrong Information (WI); Missing Letter (ML); Overemphasizer/Intensifier (O/I); Wrong Word/Phrase Order (WW/PO); Wrong/Missing Punctuation (W/MP); Wrong Paragraph Division (WPD); Contraction (C); Wrong Data Unit/Misunderstanding Zero (WDU/MZ). These types of errors were calculated in the number and percentage to be evaluated of the frequency of occurring.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION – ANALYSIS OF ERRORS IN GRAPH WRITING COMMITTED BY VIETNAMESE LEARNERS OF IELTS**

In this part, the writing errors of the advanced IELTS learners under survey were analyzed representatively based on the first given graph writing task extracted from page 29 of the test book of Cambridge Practice Test for IELTS 5 (Jakeman & Dowell, 2006) as illustrated below.

### **WRITING TASK 1**

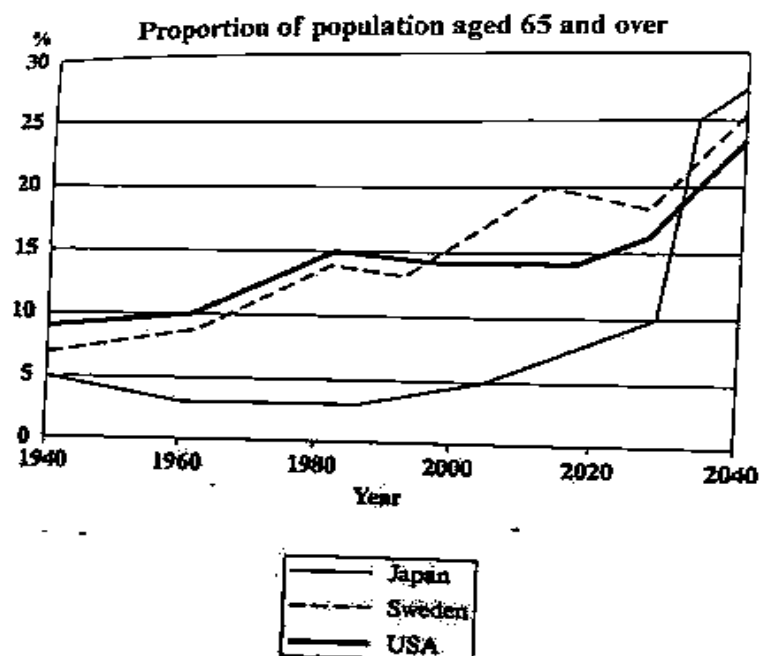
You should spend about 20 minutes on this task.

*The graph below shows the proportion of the population aged 65 and over between 1940 and 2040 in three different countries.*

*Summarize the information by selecting and reporting the main features and make comparisons where relevant.*

Write at least 150 words.





**Excessive word number (EWN)**

More than half of the IELTS Vietnamese learners’ graph writings (N = 39 # F = 65%) were too long with *excessive word number* far beyond 150 words which ranged between 174 and 293 words. This was due to various sub-errors as described below.

*Details in Introduction, General Comment, Conclusion (DIGCC)*

Chart 1 showed that IELTS learners or prospective IELTS test takers tended to give too many details in the introduction, general comment or/and conclusion (N = 12 # F = 20%), which often made these contents too long making up N = 45 (# F = 75%) which echoed frequently repeated errors of this kind in each writing. This may be because they had not deeply understood what they ought to write in these paragraphs. They gave figures, used lengthy expression on the duration of time as presented in the underlined in brackets which should have been left out.

(5.1) The graph shows the ratio of the population aged 65 and over within 100 years (1940 – 2040) in Japan, Sweden and the USA.

In this introductory paragraph, the temporal phrase of 1940 – 2040 was unnecessary and should have been deleted to avoid a clumsy introduction.

(5.2) Generally, the percentage of the population aged 65 and over in the USA and Sweden will increase from 1940 to 2040 with slight drops (of 1 percent) in between while that in Japan will decrease (by 2 percent) from 1940 to 1980 before a dramatic increase in the number of elderly people in that country.

Instead of detailing the information in the general comment, the IELTS learners or test takers could have shortened it by crossing out the details in parenthesis as corrected above.

#### *Redundant Word (RedW)*

This was the case where IELTS learners used unnecessary words, redundant synonyms as they did not know that these words shared the same meaning, or they used the passive with more words instead of the active structure with fewer words. This type of error made up to N = 120 # F = 200%, which unveiled that this type of errors occurred too frequently in each graph writing.

(5.3) The graph (below) shows the percentage (of the proportion) of the population aged 65 and over from 1940 to 2040 in Japan, Sweden and USA.

Learners copied the word *below* from the question of the task which became redundant in this introducing example. In addition, the prepositional phrase *of the proportion* was spare with the word *proportion* sharing the same meaning with *percentage*.

(5.4) Specifically, from 1940 to 1980, the proportion in Sweden and USA (was) increased slightly (6%).

In this detail paragraph, learners used the passive with the redundant word *was* other than the active structure which they should have used to save time and avoid a graph writing with excessive word number.

#### *Repetition of Word (RW)*

Learners frequently used repeated words with the highest number and percentage (N = 384 # F = 640%) in their writing due to various reasons. Firstly, their grammatical knowledge was not rich enough and they then wrote the same structure with the same word in it. Also, they could not use a wide range of vocabulary to indicate the changes in the graph relating to the upward, downward trend or the fluctuation of the given data but reuse the words from the given task as illustrated in the underlined as follows.

(5.5) In summary, the proportion of the population aged 65 and over in three countries will increase.

In this conclusion, the IELTS graph writer copied a large bulk of structure and words from the task (the underlined) instead of paraphrasing it as possibly corrected in the italic below to show their creation in writing.

In summary, *the percentage of 65- year - old and -plus aging population in these countries* will increase within 100 years.

(5.6) From 2000 to 2040, the proportion of the population aged 65 and over of Sweden will increase gradually to 25% while the Japan's and USA's increase rapidly.

The repetition of the long noun phrase *proportion of the population aged 65 and over* from the given task and the verb phrase *increase* to express the changes made the detailed body paragraph monotonous. Instead, IELTS learners or graph writers could have condensed the sentence and replaced verb *increase* with *grow* as revised in the italic.

From 2000 to 2040, *this aging population* of Sweden will *increase* gradually to 25% while the Japan's and USA's *grow* rapidly.

#### *Repetition of Idea (RI)*

Lacking striking idea to develop in the writing, some learners (N = 21 # F = 35%) repeated ideas especially in the general comment and conclusion graph, which made the writing overloaded but missing key features as requested in the task.

(5.7) In general, the proportion of population aged 65 and over rose from 1940 to 2019 and it could soar between 2019 and 2040 in Japan, Sweden and USA.

We could see that the idea of rising aging population was repeated in the general comment and the concluding paragraph of the graph writing without making comparison of the level of surging in the aging population between these countries as required in the given task. As a result, the information in the italic could have been added to the conclusion as presented below.

To sum up, not only the proportion of population aged 65 and over in USA and Sweden will rocket but also in Japan from 1940 to 2019. *However, this percentage will soar most remarkably in Japan between 2030 and 2040.*

#### *5.1.5. Too Many Figures (TMFs)*

This kind of error was attributed to several learners' giving too many figures in their writings (N = 36 # F = 60%) without grouping the data expressing the similar trend or feature across various fragments of time given in the graph, which failed to highlight the striking features (N = 57 # F = 95%). This made the data scattered and not concentrated leading to an overcharged writing.

(5.8) Specifically, from 1940 to 1982, the rate of people aged 65 and over increased slowly in Sweden and USA. It started at 7 percent and 9 percent respectively. Between 1940 and 1960, in Japan this rate dropped slightly from 5

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percent to 3 percent. From 1960 to 1985, this proportion remained constant at 3 percent.

These sentences in the detailed body paragraph could have been revised in a more condensed way (in the italic) as follow.

Specifically, from 1940 to 1982, the aging population increased slowly in Sweden and USA by 7 percent and 6 percent respectively while in Japan this rate dropped slightly from 5 percent to 3 percent.

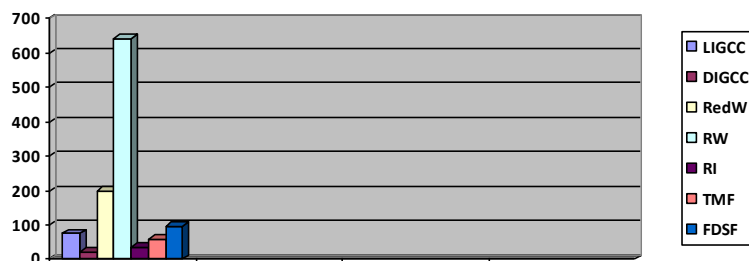


Chart 1 Excessive Word Number

### ***Inadequate Word Number (EWN)***

Contradictory to the overwhelming problem of excessive word number, few IELTS Vietnamese learners or writers in the study encountered the challenge of having not written adequate word number in sixty graph writings (N = 12 # F = 20%) ranging from 96 words to 143 words within 20 minutes. This may have resulted from the following variety of sub-errors.

#### ***Missing Words (MWs)***

In this case, IELTS learners skipped the words/phrases as a cohesive device to link ideas, paragraphs, or missed the particles in certain set grammatical structures. Chart 2 revealed that this sort of errors accounted for the third large number (N = 288) and frequency (F = 480%) in their graph writings, which indicated that there were quite a lot of words missed in each writing not only in the short but also in the lengthy one. The more sentences they wrote, the more words they were apt to miss in their graph writing.

(5.9) *Specifically*, from 1940 to 1980, there was a slight increase of about 5 percent in *the* rate of the people aged 65 and over in USA and Sweden.

The word *specifically* should have been used as a transitioning word from the general comment to the detailed body paragraph. In addition, *the* as an article should be inevitable in the syntactic pattern: *the + Noun (N.) + of + the + Noun (N.)*. These words should have been supplemented in italics as above.

#### *Missing Information (MI)*

The problem occurred so often in each learner's writing (N = 171 # F = 285%) and may have been caused by many learners' inability to describe and analyze meticulously the vital information especially in the detail body paragraph due to the inadequate comprehension of the graph information, the inability to locate specific information and perceive trends and patterns as well as their prior knowledge about the conventions of graphs. Learners only listed some cursory data from the graph and omitted the pivotal ones with the latter deep analysis. This may have originated from the fact that they had not deeply understood the requirement of each paragraph of the graph writing task in terms of the content and the length. Aside from this, IELTS learners or graph writers were unable to develop the ideas from the outline into the detailed body paragraph even though they had known what to write in it may be due to their lack of training to respond to the task promptly because this was the first mixed graph writing of the advanced course that they did. This affirmed the research result of Yu, Rea-Dickins, Kiely (2017) that special training had a strong influence on the way IELTS learners dealt with the graph writing task.

(5.10) Let us turn to Japan, there was a slight decline in the proportion of elder people from 1940 – 1990 before it began to rise. The figure will soar dramatically from 2030 and peak at 27 percent in 2040.

In this illustrating sentence, the peak value of 27 percent as the striking feature in the graph should have been described (as added in italics) other than missed out.

#### *Cursory Introduction, General Comment, Conclusion (CIGCC)*

Apart from the *missing information* in the detailed body paragraph, *Cursory introduction, general comment and conclusion* written by more than half of IELTS learners or graph writers under investigation (N = 33 # F = 55%) also compounded the problem of inadequate word number in the graph writing. Let us consider the following illustrating introducing paragraph in which the italic supplementary detailed enumeration of the three countries from the graph could have improved the short introduction paragraph and avoid plagiarism of the words and phrases from the given writing task and show the writer's creation.

(5.11) The graph indicates the fraction of the aging population between 1940 and 2040 in different countries *including Japan, Sweden and USA*.

In addition, we could scrutinize the following concluding paragraph in which the comparison of the level of surge in Japan's aging population with the other two



nations (*in italics*) could solve the abrupt writing style problem encountered by the participants in the research in accomplishing their graph writing task fruitfully.

(5.12) In summary, the rate of population aged 65 and over within 100 years in Japan, USA and Sweden is expected to grow. *However, Japan's will surge most exponentially.*



Chart 2 Inadequate Word Number

### ***Miscellaneous Errors (ME)***

#### ***Wrong Tense (WT)***

Chart 3 uncovered that lots of learners surveyed committed many wrong tense errors in each piece of their writing when describing this graph (N = 180 # F = 300%). This mainly due to their inability to properly fragment various phases of time in the illustration in reference to the point of time when the learners are living and describing the graph, which made them misuse the past tense instead of the future tense (*from 1940 to 2040: upward trend in the future*) as shown in the following general comment.

(5.13) In general, the percentage of the aging population *will increase (increased)* in all of the three countries. Besides, that in Japan surged faster than in the other two countries.

#### ***5.3.2. Wrong Figure (WF)***

As many as 120 errors of wrong figures (N = 120 # F = 200%) occurred in the IELTS Vietnamese learners' or writers' writing. Because of the time pressure, they mistook the figures in the graph or misused the way to express figure approximation in their writing.

(5.14) The ratio of the elderly population in Sweden and USA slowly surged from 1940 to 1980, from 7% (5%) to 14 % (19 %), from 9% to 15% respectively.

(5.15) In USA, from 1980 to 2020, the percentage of the aging population dropped slowly from 15% to *just under 15%* (under 15%).

The *infinite* phrase *under 15%* should have amended with the added adverb *just* for a more precise approximation.

#### Wrong Word (WW)

Too many wrong words were also employed in each IELTS learner's graph writing (N= 261 # F = 435%). This problem may have resulted from the fact that learners failed to grasp the use of words to express the upward, downward or fluctuation trend of the graph over the time given in the task.

(5.16) *Specifically* (Specially), for USA, the fraction of the aging population *soared* (declined) slowly between 1940 and 1980.

In this example, *specifically* or *in detail* instead of *specially* meaning *exceptionally/particularly* should have been used to start the detailed body paragraph after the general comment paragraph as taught by their teacher. Verb *soared* expressing the upward trend in the given time as illustrated in the graph should have been utilized other than *declined*.

#### Wrong Information (WI)

The IELTS learner's frequent misuse of *tense*, *figure*, *word* mentioned above in each writing resulted in wrong information error, which constituted the second highest number (N = 321 # F = 535%).

(5.17) Turning to Japan, the ratio of aging population between 1940 and 1960 decreased slightly; then from 1960 to 2022 (2030), it *rose* (rise) slowly from 3% to *just under 10%* (10%).

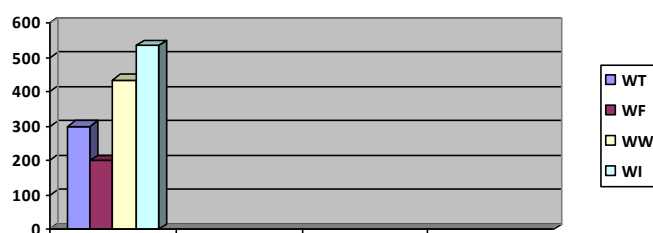


Chart 3

Miscellaneous Errors

***Other Kinds of Errors (OKE)***

Other kinds of errors ranging from N = 0 (# F = 0) to N = 48 (F = 80%) not significantly affecting the content of the graph writing could be presented as follow.

***Missing Letter (ML)***

According to Chart 4, this problem constituting N = 48 # F = 60% was related to the case where lots of IELTS graph writers skipped some letter(s) of certain words due to test pressure, failing to remember the elements of words or their formation.

(5.18) As for Sweden, there was a gradual *growth* (*grow*) in the percentage of the aging population from 7% to around 15% between 1940 and 1980.

The noun *growth* after the adjective *gradual* should have been used instead of the verb *grow* in the italic underlined in brackets.

***Overemphasizer/Intensifier (O/I)***

Errors of this kind (N = 6 # F = 10%) involved the usage of intensifiers or overemphasizers such as extreme adjectives or adverbs presenting the writer's subjective attitude and infringing upon the reader's or examiner's freedom of expressing viewpoint when evaluating the IELTS learners' and prospective IELTS test takers' graph writing answer.

(5.19) Generally, it could be seen (*clearly*) from the graph that the ratio of elder population in these countries will jump steeply.

The adverb *clearly* in this general comment should have been crossed out to avoid imposition to be in line with the tentative modal auxiliary verb *could* in the subjunctive past showing the objectivity of the writer. In this case, IELTS graph Vietnamese writers preferred using such intensifiers as, *clearly*, *obviously*, *apparently*, *certainly*, *surely* ... to show their optimistic stance in opinion (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 104). This again echoed the interference of Vietnamese culture into their IELTS graph writing, which had been confirmed by Thê (1999, p. 165). Instead, the native English writers tended to use tentative modifiers namely *possibly*, *perhaps* ... to show their pessimistic attitude to avoid imposition on the reader or the examiner for negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 136).

***Wrong Word/Phrase Order (WW/PO)***

Several IELTS learners in the research committed this type of errors (N = 36 # F = 60%) due to the lack of syntactic knowledge relating to the noun phrases, verb phrases, adjective phrases, adverbial phrases and their right positions in a clause or sentence, which had disrupted the streamline flow of ideas in the writing.

(5.20) However, from 2030 to 2040 Japan will increase rapidly by 17% the fraction of aging population.

In this sentence of the detailed body paragraph, the complicated noun phrase *fraction of aging population* should have been teamed with the possessive adjective phrase *Japan's* in front of the verb phrase *will increase* as its subject as corrected below to avoid causing readers' confusion.

However, from 2030 to 2040 *Japan's fraction of aging population* will increase rapidly by 17%.

#### 5.4.4. Wrong/Missing Punctuation (W/MP)

Some IELTS writers made errors of wrong punctuation (N = 9 # F= 15%) maybe because they were under the time pressure or they had forgotten the way to make sentences or express ideas causing the allegedly incomplete flow of ideas.

(5.21) The graph demonstrates the rate of people aged 65 and over in Japan, Sweden and USA from 1940 to 2040

The additional full stop at the end of the above introduction made it a sentence with a complete idea.

The graph demonstrates the rate of people aged 65 and over in Japan, Sweden and USA from 1940 to 2040.

#### Wrong Paragraph Division (WPD)

This kind of errors often occurred (N = 18 # F = 30%) when IELTS learners could not remember the structure of a graph writing involving its paragraph division, which resulted in the unclarity of the writing.

(5.22) The graph illustrates the percentage of the population aged 65 and over in Japan, Sweden and USA from 1940 to 2040. It could be seen from the graph that it will jump fast in these countries.

The separation of the introduction paragraph from the general comment body paragraph to ensure the transparency could be illustrated with the two separate paragraphs and the additional transition cohesive device of *generally* to start a general comment paragraph as follows.

*The graph illustrates the percentage of the population aged 65 and over in Japan, Sweden and USA from 1940 to 2040.*

*Generally, it could be seen from the graph that it will jump fast in these countries.*

*Contraction (C)*

Fewer errors of *contraction* were found in these IELTS writers' writings (N = 6 # F = 10%). Perhaps learners had not grasped the difference between the spoken and written style in English or had wanted to race against time to finish their writing on time and paid no attention to the full form of words. This kind of errors made the graph writing unacademic and less formal.

(5.23) *Let's* turn to the rate of population aged 65 and over in USA and Sweden.

Academically, the abbreviation 's should have been replaced by *us* after the verb *let* to assure the formality of an academic writing.

*Let us* turn to the rate of population aged 65 and over in USA and Sweden.



Chart 4

Other Kinds of Errors

More worriedly, the error of *repetition of words* occurred most frequently in each IELTS learners' graph writing (N = 384 # F = 640%), followed by that of *missing word* (N = 288 # F = 480%), *redundant word* (N = 120 # F = 200%), *wrong word* (N = 261 # F = 435%), *wrong tense* (N = 180 # F = 300%), *missing information* (N = 171 # F = 285), *wrong figure* (N = 120 # F = 200%), *wrong information* (N = 321 # F = 535%) compared to other errors, revealing that IELTS Vietnamese learners under investigation were lacking the knowledge of words, grammatical structures, tenses necessary to describe graph and could not analyze the graph effectively leading to the missing information, inadequate and/or incorrect information. This may have resulted from the fact that they had not grasped the vocabulary, the syntactic expression, grammar rules in English as a foreign language and the proper technique to analyze and describe graph as well. On the contrary, the error of overemphasizer/intensifier to indicate these learners' subjectivity in expressing viewpoints when describing graphs constituted only a much smaller number and percentage (N = 6 # F = 10%), which



proved that these learners were not significantly influenced by the Vietnamese language as their mother tongue where this linguistic means is normally preferred (Brown & Levison, 1987, p. 106).

Most noticeably, two or more of the above (sub)types of writing errors were repeatedly committed and compounded, scattering throughout each IELTS graph writing (from the introduction to the general comment, the detailed and the concluding paragraph) by each IELTS graph writer (N = 60 # F = 100%) in the research, which made the writing clumsy and unconvincing. The following could be given as an illustrating example:

(5.24) *The graph below shows the proportion of the population aged 65 and over between 1940 and 2040 in three different countries. Generally, proportion of population aged 65 and over in Japan, Sweden and USA is increased. From 1940 to 1960, USA and Sweden were grew (over 8%).*

In this example, IELTS graph writers made the errors of *Redundant Word* (the adverb *below* was unnecessary); the auxiliary verb *were* was unnecessary in the structure of the intransitive verb *grew*), *Repetition of Words* given in the task (*shows the proportion of the population aged 65 and over between 1940 and 2040 in three different countries*), *Missing Word* (*the* was missing before the word *proportion* in the complex noun phrase *proportion of the population aged 65 and over* and should have been added); the words *'s aging population* were missing after the words *USA and Sweden* and should have been supplemented; the missing adverb *slightly* to describe the detailed level of increase of the USA and Sweden's aging population in the detailed paragraph should have been added), *Redundant Words and Wrong Tense* (*is* should have been deleted from the present tense passive verb phrase *is increased* and the simple future active phrasal verb *will increase* to refer to future time should have been used instead), *Missing Information, Missing Words and Cursory General Comment* (the lack of describing the striking features in the general comment paragraph with the suitable words), *Wrong Paragraph Division* (the general comment paragraph started with the adverb *generally* as a cohesive device to shift from the introductory paragraph to it should have begun a new paragraph), *Wrong Paragraph Division and Missing Word* (the adverb *specifically* should have been supplemented before the prepositional phrase *from 1940 to 1960* to transit from the general comment paragraph to the newly detailed paragraph fragmented for the sake of clarity and cohesion), *Wrong Figure* (*over 8%* referring to an infinite percentage above the value of 8% should have been revised as the finite ratio of *by 1%* showing the exact level of surge of 1%), *Wrong Information* (due to *Wrong Figure, Wrong Tense*). The correction of these combined errors could be as below.

The graph illustrates the percentage of the aging population of 65 and plus within 100 years in Japan, Sweden and USA.

Generally, *this ratio will increase in all the three nations, among which Japan's will surge most significantly.*

*Specifically, from 1940 to 1960, USA and Sweden's elderly population grew slightly by 1%.*

#### 5.4.7. Wrong Data Unit/Misunderstanding Zero (WDU/M0)

Compared to the above-mentioned kinds of errors, no *wrong data unit/misunderstanding zero* error was found in the survey. This may be because these learners of advanced IELTS could have already understood the data measurement unit in the graph even in the first writing of the course.

Briefly, it could be seen that there were 4 major groups of errors in the IELTS learners' graph writings including *excessive word number* ( $F = 1125\%$ ), *inadequate word number* ( $F = 820\%$ ), *miscellaneous errors* ( $F = 1470\%$ ) and *other kinds of errors* ( $F = 205\%$ ), which could be illustrated in Chart 5.

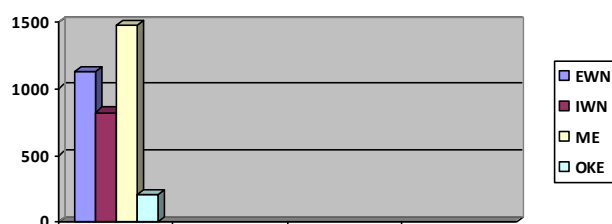


Chart 5 Major Groups of Errors

Out of these, *miscellaneous errors* constituted the highest percentage related to learners' use of wrong tense, wrong figure, wrong word and their describing wrong information in their graph writing due to their limited knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, their inability to locate specific information and perceive trends and patterns of changes in the graph(s) and making comparison judgements.

*Excessive word number error* ranked the second highest, associated with graph writers' lengthy introduction, general comment, conclusion, their giving details in these paragraphs, their use of redundant word, repeated word, expressing repeated ideas, describing too many figures and failure to describe striking features. This error group was attributed to the learners' lack of the prior knowledge on the content and conventions of graphs.

The third common was *inadequate word number error group*, which was linked to graph writers' graph writing missing words, missing information, cursory introduction, general comment and conclusion. This may have been because of the writers' shortage of the knowledge of the discriminated linguistic symbols and conventions used in graphs and that of the ways they were meaningfully configured to graph readers. What's more, IELTS graph describers may have failed to do the local to global search of graphic information (see also Guthrie, Weber, and Kimmerly, 1993), constantly check the graphic information against their prior knowledge about the subject/topic or the content of the graphs, the lack of graphicacy explanatory skills and other scientific reasoning skills to have the effective cognitive processes of completing the graph task.

Another group of writing errors involving *missing letter, overemphasizer/intensifier, wrong word/phrase order, wrong/missing punctuation, wrong paragraph division, contraction* was also the warning problem for these IELTS learners under investigation. This problem may have originated from the IELTS learners' failure to manage the writing time due to their first mixed graph writing unfamiliarity of the advanced IELTS course and therefore could not have time to check over what they had written.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### *Conclusion*

In conclusion, most of IELTS learners in the study committed various kinds of writing errors belonging to the above-mentioned major groups of errors due to their limited knowledge of English as a foreign language including vocabularies, grammar, and techniques used to appropriately analyze and describe the mixed graph. As a result, they sometimes had to resort to what they had known in Vietnamese language as their mother tongue to do it, which had to some extent resulted in graph writing errors. In other words, grasping the graph description language in English and the rule to describe IELTS graph in general and mixed graph in particular could be the key to minimize or even avoid errors.

Different from the previous closely related studies, this research has analyzed the observed errors in IELTS mixed graph writings committed by advanced IELTS Vietnamese learners to find out their causes as mentioned above, upon which the following specific implications could be put forward to solve the problems.

### *Implications*

#### *Practical Implications*

\* For learners

To describe graph successfully, IELTS learners should remember some rules:

+ *Understanding Task's Requirement*

IELTS graph writing writers or prospective IELTS candidates should grasp the topic, the focus and the structure of the writing task to organize the ideas into an outline before developing it into a full writing of at least 150 words within 20 minutes. A good task 1 writing including graph should meet the following standards.

- Task fulfilment (TF): This is related to the fact that the IELTS graph essay writer has answered the question or not. As a result, understanding the topic of the graph task, graph essay writers should describe, emphasize the key information of the graph in the detailed body paragraph following the critical trend in the general comment to make a good impression on the reader or examiner. The concluding paragraph should demonstrate writer's final thought on the graph by their writing something new that does not extend too far beyond what the illustration shows. They could mention future implications or past deduction or present inference to reveal their creativity in their writing.

- Cohesion and coherence (CC): The writing should ensure the logic, cohesion and coherence through the writer's proper use of cohesive devices to link clauses, sentences, paragraphs, ideas from the beginning to the end of the writing to make sure that the graph essay is easily understood and well-organized.

- Vocabulary (V): The lexical units used by the writer should be appropriate to avoid wrong words, missing letters, wrong information and varied to avoid repetition of words as well.

- Sentence structure (SS): Writers should master a wide range of grammatical aspects such as tense, aspect, mood, active voice, passive voice, punctuation, sentence pattern and its elements to assure their variety and accuracy when describing graphs.

(Sahanaya et al., 2013, p. 131)

To satisfy the above demands to avoid the problems that IELTS graph writers or the potential IELTS test takers may encounter, they should follow the advice below.

+ *Spending Appropriate Time Allocation on Outline*

To ensure a time fund of 20 minutes on graph writing, it is better for IELTS graph writers to spend 2 or 3 minutes analyzing the graph and making the graph writing plan (after having read the graph task requirement carefully and got the instruction right), which could encompass topic, general comment, specific detail and conclusion.

When planning an outline, it is important to:

- know exactly what is required to complete the task

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- brainstorm similar words from the topic so that the subjects of the sentences in the graph writing can be written in the IELTS learners' or IELTS test takers' words
- determine the time fragment so that the correct tense is used
- develop a general statement that gives an overall impression on the graph
- decide which significant details will be discussed to reflect the task requirement
- draw a relevant conclusion or summarize what has been written.

(Sahanaya et al., 2013, p. 104)

It is noticeable that the notes on the outline should be in abbreviated form to save time. They should also be organized in the same way as the IELTS candidates are going to write in their graph essay.

+ *Mastering Steps to Develop a Full Graph Writing from the Outline*

The following steps should be followed to develop the above outline into a full graph essay within 17 to 18 minutes.

- Write one sentence to turn the topic from the outline into an *introduction* of the writing. Remember to use the IELTS graph writers' own language without copying the given words from the task.

- Briefly present in one or two sentences for the *general trend* paragraph of the data from the sketched general comment notes in the outline to demonstrate the relationship between the data or show a trend. Especially the general trend of upward, downward, fluctuation or the most common, the biggest as the striking features or any special changes of the data over time need to be spotlighted. Remember to avoid describing lengthily the details of the graph to evade the too long writing.

- Write the *detailed* in one or two body graph(s) developed from the detail notes in the outline depending on the given data and the requirements of the writing task. In other words, more in-depth description of the data that expands the writer's general statement is needed. In this (these) paragraph (s), the changes such as increase, decrease, their levels or constancy in grouped data should be described specifically in number or percentage with the comparison between many lines in the graph to bring out the distinguished features (for integrated/mixed graph with many lines).

- Use the phrases of *in conclusion* or *to conclude* to summarize the key points and give the new final thought of the IELTS graph writer by giving implications, recommendations, based on the general comments and data analyzed in the detailed body paragraph.



- If time permits, the graph essay writer should check over what they have written in their finished graph writing task to minimize or even avoid the unexpected mistakes or errors made in their writing to have a good band score.

+ *Reviewing Vocabulary and Grammar*

At this IELTS advanced level, most graph writers have learned the basic rules of lexical units and grammar. However, they may happen to forget and misuse them due to constrained time and test tension when describing mixed graphs. Accordingly, reviewing to utilize them properly in the graph writing is essential.

+ *Referring to the Sample Writing and Frequently Practicing Writing About Graph*

The graph writing sample from IELTS teachers (after their analysis of the learner's writing errors committed from their graph essays) or from some IELTS books could also help. In this way, IELTS learners or test takers as graph writers could learn and practice the way how to develop each part in the writing from the introduction, the general comment, the detailed, to the concluding paragraph to have an overall view of the whole writing and do the IELTS graph essay well because practice makes perfect.

\* For teachers

+ Teachers of IELTS graph tasks should introduce the graph writing requirements in terms of task fulfilment, cohesion and coherence, vocabulary, sentence structure, to their learners to help them know what they should do to meet them.

+ Aside from this, guiding learners to determine the topic, its focus, time fragment of the graph, tense, how to make the graph writing outline and how to develop it into the full writing within an allocated time is a pivotal role of an IELTS teacher.

+ In addition, the teacher should remind their IELTS learners of frequently reviewing vocabulary and grammar related to graph description to use them suitably.

+ Equally importantly, when assessing IELTS learners' graph writing, teachers should name the errors for easier correction and draw the learners' attention to them to avoid committing them.

+ More significantly; as for correction process, the teacher should analyze the graph and give the possibly optimal graph writing response of the teacher or the students as the sample to their students to refer to, then point out the causes of errors from a list of common errors from their learners' writing, give the correction, and let learners have a peer-discussion on the errors of their classmates' writings so that learners could learn from each other and from the teachers' sample to further understand the graph task in the most natural way. In this way, learners could have a look back at their writing to improve it, which encourages students to be more active and allows them to think critically in class. This could be another form of peer editing

or revision in which students are asked to read and comment on their classmates' writing and suggest ways to improve it.

Not the same as the study of Perdani (2020) who investigated the effectiveness of peer-correction technique applied in students' paragraph writing in a Composition 1 Class in one of the universities in Bandung, or that of Mai (2022), who studied the attitudes of non-English speaking students at Tra Vinh University towards error correction in writing skills, including teacher and peer correction, discovered their perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of both types of corrective feedback; the current research analyzed the actually observed errors committed by Vietnamese learners in an advanced IELTS course at an English center in Ho Chi Minh city, Viet Nam upon which some practical implications have been suggested as above to help learners do their graph writing tasks effectively.

Finally, the findings from the current research could be used as the reference for IELTS graph writing task/test design, as well as other language test tasks that use graphs as prompts, particularly for reading, listening and especially writing assessments to satisfy valid, efficient test requirements.

#### *Theoretical Implications*

The research findings of integrated/combined IELTS graph writing errors could supplement the theory on language error analysis as a whole and that of graph writing error analysis as well. Indeed, learners have not only made a single kind of certain errors as assumed by previous error researchers but also various types of errors in their graph writing mainly due to their lack of knowledge on the English linguistic patterns, graph convention, to re-present or re-produce the non-graphic and graphic information as continuous discourse in written form in English as a foreign language. And this again could help better the design of task/test including IELTS graph writing, reading and listening task/test and assist teachers in thoroughly analyzing and correcting all kinds of possible errors for learners for the utmost improvement of their writing, reading and listening skill.

Generally, this paper's author has analyzed various kinds of errors made by the Vietnamese learners of IELTS in their graph writing at the beginning of an advanced IELTS course to find out their causes, from which some specific practical and theoretical implications have been put forward. Hopefully, these implications could help learners of IELTS in general and those Vietnamese learners of advanced IELTS in particular improve their graph writing skill which could contribute to their good band score in their actual IELTS test.

#### **LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

There still leaves open for the possibility of further research into the analysis of errors committed by learners of IELTS at the advanced level in other types of task 1 writings

such as charts (pie charts, bar charts), tables, process; which were not dealt with in this paper.

Furthermore, the data collecting instruments used in this study were mainly learners' IELTS graph writing answers, which should have been added with questionnaires and interviews for learners so that both the objective and subjective causes of their writing errors could have been withdrawn to better ensure the reliable recommended solutions.

Moreover, the sample population in this qualitative study was 60 graph writings written by 60 IELTS Vietnamese learners in three advanced classes at an English centre in Ho Chi Minh city, Viet Nam. Therefore, the sample size could be larger for a qualitative and quantitative research into the analysis of IELTS writing task 1 errors committed by the Vietnamese learners of IELTS at the intermediate or advanced level at English courses in other cities in Viet Nam because IELTS writing errors could be made by learners at any level of education in different teaching and learning environments.

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