Teaching International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic Writing and Exam Strategies Online to Develop Omani Students' Writing Proficiency

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Abstract

The restrictions imposed by the COVID 19 pandemic have forced educators and students worldwide to adapt to online learning. Language teaching in L2 contexts also had to shift to the online mode without compromising the quality of teaching and learning. This paper examines the perceptions as well as the performance of the participants involved in the online International English Language Testing System (IELTS) course offered by Middle East College, Muscat, Oman via MS Teams, an online teaching platform. Most IELTS courses offered online focus on the improvement of exam techniques; however, the developers of this course designed a syllabus based on a needs analysis to cater to the specific needs of the candidates, which would not only improve their test-taking strategies but also develop their writing skills. Adopting the Test, Teach, Re-test method, a diagnostic test was conducted initially, followed by teaching interventions and post-tests. Interviews with teachers, feedback from students, a comparison of diagnostic test scores with exit level scores, and the use of corpus linguistic methods to examine lexicogrammatical features were carried out to determine the effectiveness of the online course. The results indicated that those students who were not motivated performed poorly, whereas the high achievers were those who engaged in self-study and were, to some extent, autonomous learners. This paper contributes to our understanding of the effectiveness of short-term online language classes for Omani learners as well as provides some recommendations for improving the design and delivery of such courses.

Keywords: academic IELTS, effectiveness, L2 contexts, motivation, Omani students, online learning, writing skills.

Cite as: Narayanan, R., & Mathew, P. (2020). Teaching International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Academic Writing and Exam Strategies Online to Develop Omani Students' Writing Proficiency. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Proceedings of 2nd MEC TESOL Conference 2020*. 49-63. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/MEC2.4>

Introduction

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the commonly used tests for seeking admission to universities world-wide. IELTS has a writing component and considering that it is a high-stakes exam and the challenges faced by EFL writers in academic writing is well-documented, it is crucial to focus research attention on the writing courses and their design, delivery, and effectiveness. The recent shift to an online mode of delivery makes it necessary to address the key issues that relate to teaching writing when planning an online IELTS academic writing course. The aim of the current study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the short-term online IELTS writing course developed by the writing centre at Middle East College for Omani students and investigate whether this course would provide a holistic teaching and learning approach that may be appropriate for supporting the writing requirements of the IELTS exam through a blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning. The study addresses the following research questions:

- How effective is the online IELTS writing course?
- What are the perceptions of students regarding the writing component of the IELTS and the course?
- What factors may have contributed to the progress of students?

An IELTS Academic exam score of Band 6.0 has been prescribed by the Ministry of Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman as a pre-requisite for candidates applying for admissions to postgraduate (PG) courses offered in Oman in the context of preparing the PG students to meet the language requirements of Post Graduate courses offered in Oman. “In general, an overall band score between 6.0 and 7.0 in the Academic modules is accepted as evidence of English language proficiency for higher education institutions around the world” (Feast, 2002, p.71). IELTS academic writing module has two writing tasks. Task One involves writing a report of around 150 words based on a table or a diagram and task Two involves writing a short essay of around 250 words in response to an argument or a problem. Task Two is given more weightage than Task One in marking. Thus, the IELTS writing test provides “a guidance table for users on acceptable levels of language performance for different programmes to make academic or training decisions” (Uysal, 2010, p. 315).

The research paper examines the effectiveness of the exam strategies employed in preparing the learners for the academic writing module, the pedagogical approach to writing, the learners use of metacognitive strategies like self-monitoring, self-assessment of their learning through rubric-awareness and the study also attempts to evaluate the design of the writing course evolving out of identifying learner needs to cater to their specific needs. It also takes into account the perceptions as well as the performance of the learners during the course.

Literature Review

This section reviews the key issues that need to be considered when designing an exam course, including needs analysis, incorporation of exam strategies, feedback mechanisms, and studies of student writing that have identified the linguistic features favoured across disciplines and genres.

The key issues that need to be considered while teaching exam courses are students’ motivation, learner autonomy, learning strategies, ways of testing, and the impact of tests on the learning process itself. Motivation plays a key role in exam courses. Motivation could be “intrinsic” where learners strive for success without any external factor or it could be “extrinsic”,

prompted by external factors like taking an exam for higher education or for a job (Thornbury, 2006). Motivation and application of self-regulated strategies usually go hand in hand. Students who are motivated usually demonstrate self-regulated strategies such as organizing, self-assessment, and self-monitoring far more effectively than those who are less motivated (Mahmoodi, Kalantari & Ghaslani, 2014). When teaching exam classes, by varying teaching techniques, personalizing exam questions, encouraging student-to-student interaction, peer checking and reviewing, a positive attitude could be developed in the learners towards exams. Another important factor is learner autonomy. As Harmer (2001) has suggested, learner autonomy, whilst being a desirable quality of any student, is of particular importance for test-takers. Self-directed learning is a crucial factor for learners requiring an IELTS score and course developers should support such learners with self-directed learning materials that aid in developing learner's ability to identify their strengths and weaknesses and "make informed decisions about their own learning and to improve their test-taking skills" (Morrison, 2011, p.51). Some ways in which learner autonomy is encouraged in exam classes are by having flipped classrooms, a learning and teaching approach that flips the traditional teaching methods. Flipped teaching in exam classes cognitively challenges learners to work out the strategies on their own and makes them more confident as learners. Moreover, students also benefit from being able to access the preparatory materials such as videos of lectures, and lessons outside the classroom (Khan, 2011).

In addition, teaching exam courses also involve inculcating in students the habit of setting goals and objectives such as long or short-term goals focusing on metacognitive strategies such as planning for learning, thinking about the effective practices in learning, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation of learning (O'Malley & Chamlot, 1990). Anxiety or stress caused by exams as pointed out by Prodromou (1995), could prove to be a major obstacle to learning. Hence, while teaching an exam course, a teacher should take such affective filters into consideration and work towards removing them for positive backwash to occur. Practice tests are important for familiarizing the learners with the format of the test, as well as for practicing timing. However, it is important balance between teaching and testing in exam classes, otherwise such tests would be "boring and demoralizing for weaker students", as they do not contribute much to the development of language skills (May, 1996, p. 6).

In language teaching, there has been a shift towards adopting technology to enhance teaching and learning and developing courses that are completely online. Ayres (2003) claims that the online teaching of writing is more well-organized than a regular course as it is easier to access all documentation, student work tutor's feedback and results from the server. Moreover, time constraints in classroom based courses limit the focus on language proficiency development, an area where prospective exam candidates need adequate training and practice. Despite the popularity of online learning, there is a need for further research into the teaching principles and practices that could be adopted to evaluate the learning process and the actual performance of the learners in an online course. The shift to an online mode of learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have forced universities worldwide to adapt to online mode of delivery entirely. Therefore, now more than ever, research on the effectiveness of online writing courses needs to be undertaken considering the high-stakes nature of these courses which often have an impact on a students' academic progress.

One of the key benefits of offering the writing course online is that it facilitates both exam strategies, and the feedback mechanism that is adopted to support the learners thereby improving their overall language proficiency (Ayres, 2003). Feedback constitutes the most important factor in online teaching. As Pell (2019) asserts, in an online mode, it is also equally important to follow up on the action taken by the learners after the feedback to see improvements in the student writing. In fact, the teacher's feedback is more beneficial if it is extended beyond form and grammatical structure to also include band descriptors from the IELTS rubric such task achievement, coherence and cohesion and lexical range (Sanavi & Nemati, 2014). Ebadi and Rahmi (2019) in their study noted that the impact of Dynamic Assessment (DA) on IELTS students' academic writing skills adopted through online synchronous learning is positive. Their study highlighted the "learner's positive perception towards the impact of online DA on academic writing skills" (p.527).

Many recent large-scale studies of student writing at university have attempted to identify the clusters of linguistic devices favoured by genres and disciplines and changes in their frequency across the levels of study. There is increasing evidence that syntactic complexity is achieved by proficient student writers through the adoption of phrasal features characterized by long nominal phrases and dependent phrases (Gardner, Nesi & Biber, 2018; Staples et al., 2016). A nominal group consists of a head noun modified by pre and post modifiers which increase its complexity. These modifiers consist of attributive adjectives, noun pre-modifiers, prepositional phrases, of genitives, and embedded clauses (Bloor & Bloor, 2013; Staples et al. 2016). The prevalence of such features in student writing can be an indicator of proficiency although some studies have reported that there are differences in the type of complexity favoured by different genres and disciplines. Studies (Biber, Gray & Poonpon, 2011; Biber & Gray, 2013) adopting corpus linguistic methods have tried to examine phrasal features in student and expert writing and have all reported that advanced writing proficiency is characterised by a prevalence of these features.

Biber, Gray and Poonpon (2011) proposed a developmental progression index in which students gradually progressed from using clausal features towards a more phrasal style. Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) attempted to test this index by comparing the noun phrases used by two groups of writers. They found that those with a higher level of proficiency writing disciplinary assignments used more noun pre-modifiers and prepositional phrases while the group writing argumentative essays used more attributive adjectives. These studies claim that phrasal features are acquired much later by learners as they progress in their writing proficiency. However, Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) compared phrasal features across two genres and further research is required to confirm their findings while Biber, Gray and Poonpon (2011) based their conclusions on a comparison between conversation and research article corpora. Expansion of research in this area could include studies that compare the development of these features in the same group of learners as they progress through instruction.

Another important finding of studies that examined phrasal features in student writing was that the choice of noun modification was moderated by the situational variables of genre, discipline and level. For example, Staples, Egbert, Biber and Bethany (2016) found that nominalizations were favoured by student assignments in the Social Sciences. Gardner, Nesi and Biber (2018) also reported that the group of linguistic devices used by student writers, including phrasal features, depended on genre and discipline. Nominalizations and attributive adjectives were preferred by

the Social Sciences while pre-modifying features were prevalent in the Hard Science assignments. However, Staples et al.'s (2016) findings regarding the increase in noun pre-modifiers as students progressed across the levels irrespective of genre and discipline, needs to be explored further. Unfortunately, studies of this type have not been applied to the IELTS writing tasks. Studies adopting corpus methods can help identify the linguistic devices used in the writing tasks as well as evaluate the effectiveness of such courses by measuring the frequency and use of grammatical complexity devices before course commencement and at the end of the instructional period. The current study used corpus linguistic methods to compare the use of noun pre-modification devices, noun-pre-modifiers, attributive adjectives in essays written by students participating in the course at the beginning of the course and towards the end. This comparison, across two corpora of IELTS essays, sought to find out if students have used more of these linguistic features as their proficiency increased.

One of the issues in teaching exam courses is too much emphasis being given on testing than teaching. This study explores the effectiveness of an online IELTS course that is specifically designed not only to prepare the students for the IELTS exam but also improve their overall language proficiency. It therefore addresses the gap in the literature by examining the effectiveness of this mode of delivery in increasing the performance of students as well as their perceptions on the course.

Methodology

Participants

All the students who joined the IELTS Course at Middle East College, Oman were required to take an entry level test and were streamlined into two batches, Batch A and Batch B. The sampling size was limited to six participants, as only the students who completed the eight week course (Batch A) were chosen for the study. All the six participants were prospective post graduate students, aspiring to achieve a target score of 6.0 in academic IELTS to be eligible for PG admissions. MS Teams and Moodle were used as e-learning platforms to deliver the online course.

Research Instruments

Data to answer the research questions were gathered through focus group discussions (FGD) and semi-structured interviews involving the students and the teachers. Since the participants were quite few in number, these data collection methods were better suited to gather multidimensional views about the course. A semi-structured interview was chosen for this study as it offers more flexibility in terms of the order in which the topics are chosen and more importantly, "it allows the interviewee to develop ideas and speak more widely on issues" raised by the interviewer (Denscombe, 2007, p.176). Such an interview with open ended questions would provide opportunities for the students express their feelings, emotions and experiences more freely.

Hennink (2014) points out that focus group discussions (FGDs) facilitate "interactive discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews" (pp. 2-3). This method was adopted in this study because the learners could interact freely with their peers and share ideas about the challenges, teaching techniques, and their study habits during the course. Since they were prospective PG students, most of them could speak somewhat fluently in English. The FGD with students was held for about

40 minutes, and the data gathered were thematically analyzed. A semi-structured interview was also conducted with the two writing teachers who taught the course.

For the purposes of comparing the frequency of phrasal complexity devices between essays written by the participants at the beginning and end of the course, two corpora of essays written by the participants were compiled (see Table One). Only essays from Task Two were included in the corpora since this task carries more weight and also because we had a sufficient number of essays. Moreover, since the Task One essays belong to another text type, the corpus design would not have been appropriate. Although there was some discrepancy in the sizes of the two corpora, comparisons were made possible by normalizing the occurrences of each linguistic feature. It was difficult to balance the number of texts and words mainly because students did not write too many essays at the beginning of the course and also because the word count of the essays that they wrote at the beginning were much lower than those they attempted later on. The corpora were then uploaded on the corpus interface *Sketch Engine* and concordance lines featuring noun sequences, adjective-noun sequences, and nominalizations were retrieved. The following queries were used to retrieve instances of these linguistic features from the two corpora, one comprising essays written by students at the beginning of the course (PRECORP) and another (POSTCORP) containing texts that were written by the participants towards the end of the course.

Table 1. *Queries used to retrieve noun pre-modifiers and nominalizations from PRECORP and POSTCORP corpora*

<i>Queries</i>	<i>Retrievals</i>
[(tag="N.*" tag="J.*")] [tag="N.*"]	Adjective-Noun sequences
[(tag="N.*" tag="J.*")] [(tag="N.*" tag="J.*")] [tag="N.*"]	Adjective-Adjective-Noun sequences
[tag="N.*"] [tag="N.*"]	Noun-Noun sequences
[lemma="*.ity .*.tion .*.ment .*.ness" & tag="NN NNS"]	Nominalizations

Table 2. *Composition of PRECORP and POSTCORP*

<i>Corpus</i>	<i>Number of texts</i>	<i>Number of words</i>
PRECORP	16	4735
POSTCORP	8	2102

Procedures

The IELTS Course was designed based on needs analysis (NA) and diagnostic test (DT) results. The goals and objectives of the course had evolved out of NA and DT results and the assessment was guided by these factors. The entry level of the learners ranged from an IELTS band score of 4-4.5 and this course was designed to improve their skills in writing to achieve the required band score of 6 and above to be eligible to do their postgraduate courses. The implementation of the course involved Needs Analysis, Diagnostic Tests, designing the course materials as per the student needs, test-teach-retest model for assessment, and feedback (See Figure One).

Figure 1. Stages in the implementation of the writing course

Needs Analysis

The purpose of NA is to “identify a gap between what students are able to do and what they need to be able to do” (Richards, 2001, p.2) and gather information about learners’ attitudes, goals, language ability, learning preference, their subjective and objective needs. A variety of procedures such as interview, questionnaire, and ongoing classroom observation of the learners’ general performance was used for NA to assess the learner’s preferences, learning style, their language and linguistic competence and their attitude to writing in the context of preparing for an IELTS writing exam (See Table Three).

Table 3. Evidence from NA

<i>Needs Analysis</i>	<i>Summary of the findings</i>	<i>Implications (on course design)</i>
Learning preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most learners prefer to work in pairs or small groups. • There’s not much evidence of learner autonomy within the classroom. Only 1 out of 6 said he likes to work on his own. • Mostly prefer to learn by listening, reading, and sometimes by taking notes in class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Design collaborative learning activities -Need to encourage learner autonomy within and outside of class
Learning Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority of the learners prefer group work and discussions rather than working on their own. • 3/6 learners rely on their teacher to lead the class and expect to be told what to do rather than discovering on their own. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Flipped classrooms need to be included to promote learner autonomy.

Language and linguistic competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing- Have problems organizing ideas in paragraphs. It is often repetitive and lacks coherence. 	Writing: Develop the ability for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -logical organization of paragraphs. -linking words/ cohesion. -summarizing.
Attitude to writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All of them feel that writing is more difficult than speaking. • Learners expect to do all the writing in class. Do not like homework. • Expect the teacher to guide them every step of the way while writing. • 50% of the learners admit that they hardly ever self-correct their writing. • Expect the teacher to write comments and give feedback on their progress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -develop ability to self-correct. -encourage learner autonomy through self-reflective practices. -assign more writing tasks and homework in addition to class work.

Diagnostic Test

A diagnostic test on IELTS Academic writing, which included both Task One and Task Two was administered to identify the learners' strengths and weaknesses and it was "intended primarily to ascertain what learning still needs to take place" (Hughes, 2003, p.15). An analysis of the learners' performance in the DT showed their weaknesses in writing in terms of structure, argumentation, accuracy and lexis (see Table Four).

Table 4. *Analysis of the learners' writing with reference to the diagnostic test performance*

DT	Learners' have issues with:
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - task completion, developing main ideas, organization of paragraphs (Task 2). - the use of complex structures, relative clauses, sentence adverbials and adjectival clauses. (Task 2). - expanding the range of written discourse markers for comparison and contrast (Task 1). - the use of comparatives, appropriate tense and verb forms, especially in passive sentences and spelling.

The aim of the course was to develop the language skills necessary for the preparation of academic writing components of IELTS exam to achieve a score of 6.0 and above (see Table Five for course objectives):

Table 5. *Course Objectives*

Skills	<u>Course Objectives</u> : Learners will be able to:
Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -understand and summarize the main features of tables, charts or graphs using a wide range of discourse markers to compare and contrast, describe a process or procedure. -use linking words, sentence adverbials of time, reason and result, adjective clauses and cohesive devices to compare and contrast, conclude and summarize.

	-write essays such as cause and effect, expressing opinions, presenting an argument, describing a problem and suggesting a solution. -revise, edit, rewrite, give feedback to peers and self-assess according to the rubric.
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Course Design and Syllabus

The course was planned for a duration of 8 weeks with a total of 48 hours that included 32 hours of teaching, and testing, and 16 hours of feedback. Skills based syllabus was chosen for teaching IELTS (academic) writing. The choice of materials was eclectic, selected from a variety of course books to meet the course objectives. Skills development was achieved through exam-type tasks with specific emphasis on task-awareness. Sequencing was done at the macro level of the course, as well as on micro level of weekly lessons. The content was sequenced according to difficulty, frequency and learners' individual needs. Both product and process approaches were adopted to teach writing. Model essays were given to familiarize the learners with the structure and organization of the essay and notice the academic register. In later stages, a process approach was adopted as it helped students "gain greater control over the cognitive strategies involved in composing" (Hedge, 2000, p.308). Writing was taught as a recursive activity in which learners move backwards and forward between drafting and revising, with stages of re-planning in between (Hedge, 2005).

The course plan was designed to ensure that there was a balance between teaching and testing. A good test has to be valid, reliable, and practical and it should not have any negative effects on the teaching programme (Baxter, 1997, p.18). The course included formative as well as summative tests to assess the learning outcomes. Formative tests related to the specific course objectives for writing skills and were given periodically in order to monitor the learning process. Dynamic assessment (DA) tools were used for formatively assessing the learners' progress during the course, which involved supporting the examinee through prompts, hints and leading questions to promote development during the assessment itself. This type of assessment integrates assessment and instruction into a seamless, unified activity and promotes learner development through appropriate forms of mediation that are sensitive to the groups' current abilities (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004). The summative test covered the overall objectives in writing. The evaluation of the course was carried out through systematic observation and feedback from both the students and the teachers, so that changes could be introduced wherever necessary to have a positive backwash in the teaching and learning process.

Results

The semi-structured interview was held with the two writing teachers and the focus group discussion was conducted with six students towards the end of the course to know their feelings and perceptions about the writing course, what they had learnt, and their assessment of themselves and the scores they were likely to achieve in the IELTS exam. The themes identified from the interview and FGDs were: the skills the learners needed to focus on to be successful in IELTS (i.e. to achieve a score of 6 and more); learners' strengths and weaknesses in academic writing; challenges encountered in completing the writing tasks; future needs (in terms of writing support); learners' self-analysis of their writing abilities; the extent to which the learner engaged in self-study and the learner's level of confidence in achieving the required IELTS score in writing.

Focus Group Discussions

In the focus group discussion which was held towards the end of the course, students expressed their views on writing, and what they would probably score in the IELTS exam. All the respondents agreed that they were familiar with the test format and that they felt more confident about attempting the writing tasks. When asked if they were confident about achieving the target score, the majority of them agreed that they were quite confident in achieving the expected score. Students agreed that they are more familiar with the IELTS rubric and also mentioned that practice tests, along with weekly feedback on the writing tasks motivated them to work harder and improve further. The group also mentioned that flipped teaching method adopted aided in their self-study and class preparation as learning materials, and PPTs for the weekly lessons were provided by the course tutor at the beginning of the course. This helped them to organize their materials and prepare for the classes and they could focus better on the course lessons as they knew what to expect from the teaching sessions.

About 80% (4/5) students found the vocabulary that was taught during the course useful, especially the use of linkers. However, three of the participants said that they felt anxious about not knowing enough vocabulary because of some topics. Although most students mentioned that they found it challenging to write complex and compound sentences that were error-free, five of the learners felt that their writing had improved considerably due to feedback and practice sessions. One of the students felt that vocabulary and grammar were his strong points, while two of them mentioned that they had difficulty in using the appropriate cohesive devices in their writing tasks. When asked to rate their familiarity with IELTS vocabulary, four out of six learners felt it was “fair”, while one learner felt it was “very good” and one learner said it was “good”.

There was no extended discussion about the online mode of delivery because five of the learners did not face any problem with the online mode, while one had network issues. They all agreed that there was no difference between face to face and online feedback because the teacher shared the screen on MS Teams during the feedback sessions.

Overall, students agreed that there was considerable improvement in their writing after doing the course. The learners found the test teach retest model useful as they were assessed periodically, they became more conscious of adhering to the time limit and areas of improvement and it also provided them the opportunity to practice in exam conditions. Though their primary reason for doing the IELTS course was to achieve a band score of 6.0 in academic IELTS; two of the learners also added that they were doing the course to improve their language skills. With reference to writing essays, three out of the six students had issues adhering to the time-limit when completing the writing tasks. The hours of self-study ranged from 2-3 hours a day to 2-4 hours per week. Two of the learners studied 2-3 hours a day. Over all, all the learners agreed that practice tests played a crucial role in improving their writing skills. Two out of six felt that they needed more practice in grammar and vocabulary exercises related to the tasks. One respondent suggested that he would need more practice in writing task One. When asked to rate their writing skills in terms of organizing ideas, connecting sentences and using a wide range of vocabulary, the learners agreed that there was considerable improvement. Two learners rated themselves as “very good” in organizing ideas, while three considered themselves “good” and one learner thought that his skill in organization was “fair”. In terms of connecting sentences, two of the learners believed that they

were “very good” and “good”, while two others felt it was “fair”. Overall, students were quite positive about achieving their target score in the writing component. Two of the students who did not write many practice essays during the course confessed that they had hectic work schedules and just did not like writing. Though the students felt quite confident about achieving the target score of 6.0, they also acknowledged the need for more practice in writing.

Semi-structured interviews

During the semi-structured interview, both the teachers stated that the needs analysis of the student samples helped them identify learners’ weaknesses and they could prepare lessons to target individual needs. The teachers also mentioned that anxiety faced by students was considerably reduced due to dynamic assessment tool as they could scaffold the learners during the test at the initial stages of the course and helped them grow in confidence. Though timing was an issue initially, it was resolved through introducing timed writing feature on Moodle. One of the advantages of the online course, which both the teachers and the students agreed upon was the interactive nature of the course. Since it was a small group, the learners could interact during the class, and could also get one to one feedback through online consultations and there were more opportunities for one to one feedback sessions. Real-time class interaction was more productive with the small group, as teachers could focus on individual students. It also proved to be more dynamic and learners could ask questions, receive feedback or get assistance in the process of their writing. This sort of hybrid online learning involving synchronous and asynchronous teaching offered more flexibility in terms of scheduling the class hours. One teacher said that in a traditional class, the teacher dictates the pace, whereas in an online class, the pace of the class was dictated by the learners as there was more scope for discussions, and clarifications during and after the class by having individual on line consultations with the teacher via MS Teams to discuss their progress in writing.

Though there were no technical glitches, monitoring was not easy, according to the two teachers who were interviewed. A timed writing feature was introduced in the later weeks to ensure that the task was completed within the stipulated duration of 20 minutes for Task One and 40 minutes for Task Two.

Student performance based on test scores

By the using test-teach-retest model, we compared the IELTS writing scores of the diagnostic test with the scores of the candidates at the end of the course. The writing scores of candidates showed a considerable improvement in band score from test to retest. Candidates in the summative test scored showed significant improvement in writing compared to the diagnostic test as they demonstrated a better understanding of writing task completion, using cohesive devices and organizing the paragraphs. As Hughes (2003) points out summative tests “establish how successful the learners have been in achieving the objectives. The exit exam scores proved “whether students can do what they have been taught either by testing specific syllabus items or general objectives” (Baxter, 199, p.8). It is evident that the summative test results of the participants of this course show a considerable improvement in their band scores (See Table Six).

Table 6. *A comparison of DT and Exit Exam scores*

Students (n=6)	Diagnostic Test	Exit Exam
	4.5	5
	5	6
	4	4.5
	5	6
	5.5	6.5
	4.5	6

In task One, the exit exam performance showed significant improvement in the learners' ability to summarize information and report main features, making relevant comparisons. When attempting Task Two, the learners were more aware of the purpose of each paragraph and could achieve an overall progression using connectives. Their writing showed improvement in the use of simple and complex sentences, the use of a range of linkers to achieve coherence. Emphasis on editing and revising of the drafts during the mock tests helped them eliminate some of the spelling and grammatical errors and hence learners could avoid those oft-repeated errors in the final exam. The exit exam scores also revealed that four out of six learners who were engaged in self-directed learning, scored better than the two candidates who did not allot adequate time for self-study.

Discussion

The learners who prioritized their specific learning needs and indulged in targeted learning were able to meet their IELTS goals. Setting goals and objectives such as long or short-term goals and "self-monitoring, such as tracking the source of important errors and trying to eliminate them" (Oxford, 1990, as cited in Hedge, 2000, p. 19) were some of strategies used by successful language learners. Hence, there seems to be a significant relationship between self-regulated strategies employed by the learners and their motivation level. When students are motivated to learn, they invariably know how to apply the appropriate self-regulation strategies to achieve their goals (Mahmoodi, Kalantari & Ghaslani, 2014). Self-regulated strategies like planning, self-assessment, self-monitoring, testing regularly, and keeping records of the feedback were some of the metacognitive skills demonstrated by the successful learners of the IELTS course.

The findings clearly indicate that both the students and the teachers of the online writing course found it effective and the students' performance in the achievement test showed an improvement in their band scores. The choice of phrasal features such as noun pre-modifiers were compared across pre- and post instruction corpora to explore what linguistic features may have contributed to a higher score. The frequency of nominalizations was also examined to find out whether their prevalence increased with proficiency.

Table 7. *Comparison of nominal pre-modification in the PRECORP and POSTCORP corpora*

Linguistic features	PRECORP	POSTCORP
Adjective Noun (JN)	134 (58,489.74 pmw)	347 (66,846.47 pmw)
Adjective-Adjective-Noun (JJN)	1 (436.49 pmw)	31 (5,971 pmw)
Noun-Noun (NN)	25 (10,912.27 pmw)	100 (19,264 pmw)
Nominalizations	57 (24,879.97 pmw)	127 (24,465.42 pmw)

As can be seen from Table Seven, there were marked differences between the PRECORP and the POSTCORP in terms of the frequency of noun and adjectival pre-modifiers in per million words (pmw). After seven weeks of writing instruction, comparing the normalized frequencies of these texts written by the same cohort of students revealed that there was an increase in Adjective-Noun, Adjective-Adjective-Noun, and Noun-Noun sequences. The findings suggest that these phrasal features increase as students' IELTS band level increases. Examples 1 and 2 taken from the POSTCORP illustrate the use of adjectival and nominal pre-modifiers (bolded). Comparing the use of these features across the two corpora, it was found that students at the PRECORP phase tended to have more grammatical errors than in the POSTCORP phase (see Example 3). The texts in the two corpora were similar in terms of the frequency of nominalizations although the range of nominalizations is much higher in the POSTCORP (57 types) as compared to the PRECORP (31 types).

(1) *Many people believe that...others think that there are more **significant environmental problems**. (JJN)*

(2) *...especially employees in reaching their destinations, as well as causing **traffic obstruction and delaying emergency services**. (NN)*

(3) *...these days in buying and selling for consumers which change **people lifestyle** [sic].*

Although the findings regarding pre-modifiers and nominalizations are merely indicative owing to the small number of texts included in the two corpora, they do suggest that these linguistic features deserve pedagogic attention for candidates preparing for the IELTS academic writing test. The genre characteristics of the argumentative and opinion-based types of essays in Academic IELTS Task 2 might account for the higher incidence of attributive adjectives in the more proficient texts. Studies of argumentative essay types have also reported this trend although the frequency of NN sequences was not very high in this genre as compared to other text types (Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014). The higher frequency of NN sequences in the POSTCORP texts supports previous findings regarding their more frequent use in expert texts (Gardner, Nesi & Biber, 2018, Staples et al. 2016). Since limited research attention has been focused on the IELTS academic writing tasks in terms of these phrasal features, a fruitful line of inquiry would be to conduct comparisons using larger corpora and involving corpora containing essays at the highest band levels. A clearer picture would then emerge as to the phrasal features that are prevalent in such texts. Comparisons between students of different L1s might also support the development of courses catering to the requirements of specific L1 learner groups. These findings nevertheless contribute to an understanding of the requirements of Omani learners preparing for the IELTS academic writing component.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is evident from the study that the online course was effective in improving the performance of the course participants in terms of the academic IELTS writing component. The course was designed to be learner-centered as the course content and the method of delivery was planned on the basis of the learners' individual needs. Test-teach-retest model, and intervention strategies like the use of dynamic assessment in the early stages helped the course instructors to get a deeper insight into the learners' writing needs. Rubric awareness and practice tests, along with weekly feedback on the writing tasks proved to be beneficial for the learners. The online writing course, in addition to exam preparation also honed general learning skills such self-monitoring, student-

led tutoring to sustain learners' motivation throughout the course. Learner autonomy was encouraged through flipped classrooms, homework and practice tests. The washback effect was reflected in the students' responses as a majority of the learners believed that improving their writing skills would help them not only with the IELTS test, but also in future for their higher education and job requirements. To some extent, the course was successful in changing negative into positive backwash, thereby adding more educational value to the exam preparation activity (Prodromou 1995). A corpus analysis of noun pre-modifiers and nominalizations revealed that they were more frequent in the essays of the same group of learners as their writing proficiency increased.

The authors recommend that formative writing assessments should be administered periodically to monitor the individual student's performance to inform course material design and instruction. Further studies need to examine the linguistic devices prevalent in proficient IELTS writing and compare them to EFL corpora containing essays written by learners with different L1s so that IELTS writing courses can be customized for specific cohorts of learners.

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