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Beyond IELTS: Rethinking ESL Readiness and Academic Writing for Chinese Students in English-Speaking Universities

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the limitations of standardized English language proficiency tests, specifically IELTS, in preparing Chinese students for academic writing and critical thinking in English-speaking universities. Drawing from qualitative research and contextual analysis in Macau and the UK, the paper highlights the gap between test-based learning and the skills required for university success. Key challenges include students' overreliance on rote learning, a lack of critical thinking, and difficulties with academic conventions such as referencing and synthesis. Cultural and structural factors, including large class sizes and teacher-centred pedagogy, further hinder the development of higher-order language skills. The essay argues for a pedagogical shift toward contextualized, reflective, and collaborative ESL instruction that promotes autonomy and academic engagement. Recommendations include integrating metacognitive practices, real-world applications, and policy reforms to support ESL students beyond examination success.

KEYWORDS

IELTS limitations, Academic readiness, Critical thinking, Rote learning

Introduction

As globalization reshapes higher education, increasing numbers of Chinese students are entering English-speaking universities. For example, Buila (2025) points out that according to the 2025 Chinese Overseas Students White Paper by Xinhuanet, most Chinese students choose to study in English-speaking countries, namely the UK, Australia, the US, Canada, and New Zealand. In order to receive university admissions, Chinese students need to satisfy language requirements through high-stakes language assessment, such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). IELTS is developed to evaluate the English proficiency of individuals whose first language is not English (the British Council, 2025). Test takers are required to complete four sections: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Although Chinese IELTS candidates face various challenges, writing is the most difficult component of the exam for them (Li et al., 2022). More than that, the IELTS scores do not always translate into readiness for the complex demands of academic writing and critical thinking in university contexts (Chan et al., 2024; Hyatt, 2013; Pang, 2014). This essay draws upon empirical and contextual insights from ESL education in Macau and the experiences of Chinese students in UK postgraduate programs to reveal systemic limitations in current pedagogical approaches. It proposes a shift toward contextualized, reflective, and critically engaging ESL education.

This paper aims to critically examine the visible gap in academic literacy skills between surface-level proficiency and the deeper academic literacies required in university contexts due to the pedagogical implications of Chinese IELTS preparation teachers on students' academic skills. It refers to ESL writing tasks using Bloom's taxonomy, which classifies cognitive performance, and emphasizes test-oriented teaching that focuses on grammar and structure, referring to the Skill Acquisition model. These frameworks highlight the gap in identifying the superficial writing skills and the higher-level academic writing abilities that are required

in universities.

The present paper adopts a qualitative, literature-based syntheses approach; the study collates studies published in scientific literature, personal reflections within the context, and theoretical discussions. It is best understood as a literature-based analysis with contextual interpretation, prior to the end of primary data collection. Although this technique comes with depth and diversity of knowledge collection, it is also true that no attempt is made towards generalization. On the other hand, it underscores some of the dominant themes and impediments, which are considered to be useful in reforming pedagogy.

One study exploring six Chinese postgraduate students' reflections on their IELTS preparation revealed that while participants valued IELTS for introducing coherence and basic organization, they relied heavily on rote learning, memorized essay structures, and topic predictions (Pang, 2014). The study further emphasized that students struggled significantly with paraphrasing, referencing, and academic vocabulary when writing postgraduate-level essays. Pang concluded that IELTS preparation helped students gain a superficial grasp of essay writing but fell short of equipping them with the analytical and critical thinking skills necessary for success in higher education. His thesis underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that address real academic demands rather than test-specific performance.

While Pang's (2014) study provides insights, its small sample size and unique contextual features imply that its findings might be too specific to the studied context and should be generalized with caution. Nevertheless, similar issues have been mentioned in the works of Lewthwaite (2007) and Sharif (2010), which ultimately reiterate this concept of pedagogical challenges relating to test-centred ESL instruction. Such underlying patterns in context reveal how the writing pedagogy needs to be reflective, as well as align with academic parameters.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based critical review methodology to examine the pedagogical implications of IELTS preparation on Chinese students' academic writing readiness. It synthesises findings from peer-reviewed research to identify patterns, gaps, and pedagogical tensions within ESL writing instruction.

Source Selection Criteria

Sources were selected based on four criteria:

- (1) Topical relevance to IELTS Academic Writing, ESL pedagogy, and academic literacy;
- (2) Credibility and recency;
- (3) Contextual alignment with Chinese students in UK English-speaking Universities;
- (4) Diversity of perspectives, including empirical and theoretical works.

Analytical Focus

The analytical focus centres on three interrelated themes drawn from the literature:

- (1) The gap between surface-level proficiency and deeper academic literacies;
- (2) The pedagogical tensions between test-oriented instruction and university writing demands;
- (3) The cultural and structural factors affecting students' transition to academic discourse.

Synthesis Approach

Findings were synthesised through thematic coding and comparative analysis. Key challenges such as rote-learning, lack of genre awareness, and difficulties with referencing, and critical thinking were mapped across studies to reveal systemic instructional limitations.

Findings and Discussion

Language Proficiency versus Academic Readiness

Many Chinese students preparing to study in English-speaking countries focus on excelling in standardized exams such as IELTS. The writing section, particularly Task 2, introduces students to argumentative essay structures and emphasizes coherence, cohesion, grammatical range, and lexical resources (Kennedy & Thorp, 2007). This format may build some foundational writing skills. For example, Veerappan

and Sulaiman (2012) pointed out that IELTS candidates are expected to compose a well-organized essay, featuring reasonable paragraphing, a clear thesis statement, topic sentences, and well-developed main ideas. Moreover, they also contended that when writing their essays, candidates should present a coherent argument or point of view, accompanied by discussions supported by reasons that evaluate and challenge ideas. Regarding cohesion, they emphasized the importance of using transitional phrases, linkers, sentence connectors, synonyms, and pronouns effectively. Although these criteria can be helpful for creating structural guidelines for brief essays, they may not address the intricacies involved in university-level writing requirements.

To achieve a satisfactory score in the writing section, IELTS candidates are expected to have a comprehensive understanding of these criteria and apply this knowledge to meet the requirements in their essays. In essence, as they engage in IELTS essay writing, candidates are likely to acquire specific writing skills, such as coherence and cohesion, proper grammar usage, and an extensive vocabulary (IDP, 2025). However, it often fails to equip students for the broader demands of university-level academic writing (Coffin, 2004).

Interviews with Chinese postgraduate students studying in the UK reveal that although they found IELTS preparation useful for learning transitional devices and basic structural coherence, they struggled significantly with academic genre conventions, critical thinking, and referencing (Lewthwaite, 2007; Sharif, 2010). Some students relied on rote learning strategies to memorize vocabulary, essay templates (commonly referred to as "moban" in Chinese), and anticipated topics. While test-focused approaches—such as rote learning strategies—may effectively enhance IELTS Writing Task 2 scores, they often fail to cultivate the transferable writing skills essential for success in higher education (Naser & Fatemeh, 2011). Such preparation tends to prioritize formulaic responses over deeper critical engagement with academic discourse (ibid). Academic writing, in contrast, demands a broader skill set, including argumentative coherence, evidence-based reasoning, and adaptability across disciplinary contexts.

Furthermore, some students often encounter difficulties in transitioning to university writing, which demands more than the surface-level fluency measured by IELTS. Skills such as synthesizing multiple sources, paraphrasing, constructing arguments with evidence, and engaging critically with scholarly literature were underdeveloped (Moore & Morton, 2007). For example, the interviewers in Pang's study stressed that when they constructed an extended essay e.g. a 3000-word essay, they still applied the 4-5-paragraph essay structure to their extended essay. This ended up with extremely long paragraphs. In other words, they were not aware of section-based paragraphing writing skills. Moreover, they relied on the basic PEEL (point, example, explanation, and link) organization structure to construct their extended essay paragraph structure, but it ended up lacking structural flexibility to align with their flexible thinking. This gap between test-based preparation and actual academic expectations often led to frustration, lack of confidence, and poor academic performance (Phakiti & Li, 2011).

Cultural and Educational Contexts

These challenges cannot be understood in isolation from the broader educational and cultural background of Chinese and Macau students. In secondary and even tertiary institutions in Macau, classroom instruction often emphasizes grammatical accuracy and standardized test preparation (Yen & Kuzma, 2009). Pedagogical approaches are typically teacher-centered, with little emphasis on communicative-based approaches, such as dialogic interaction, collaborative learning, or inquiry-based exploration (Dehler & Welsh, 2013). As a result, the overall teaching effectiveness may be compromised. The overemphasis on grammar and standardized tests often leads to a lack of depth in students' understanding of the language. They may be able to produce grammatically correct sentences but fail to construct meaningful and coherent discourse in context.

Moreover, the absence of a communicative-based approach means that students have fewer opportunities to develop their critical thinking ability, which is essential for success in constructing extended university-level argumentative essays. For example, Pang's study highlighted a common dilemma observed in many test-takers. A couple of task takers reported dissatisfaction with IELTS Writing's limited space for idea expression, yet struggled to adapt when confronted with the greater rhetorical freedom of postgraduate

essays. This contradiction stems from their reliance on formulaic, pre-learned essay structures during IELTS preparation—strategies that, while effective for short-answer high-stakes exams, may inadvertently suppress critical thinking and original discourse construction.

Large class sizes in public primary and secondary schools limit opportunities for individualized instruction and active engagement. Students are rarely encouraged to challenge ideas, ask questions, or participate in critical discussions. Instead, knowledge is transmitted from teacher to student in a top-down manner, fostering dependency and discouraging autonomy. As a result, when they embark on their study in English-speaking countries, some may find it difficult to freely express themselves in real-life communication scenarios. They might also struggle to engage in spontaneous discussions and present their viewpoints clearly. This may further prevent them from developing their extended essay writing skills, which require the clear presentation of viewpoints. In other words, students may excel in rule-based language components but lack the confidence and competence to apply language in real-world academic or professional contexts (Brown, 2008).

Moreover, heavy reliance on product approach writing and the washback effect of the National Matriculation Entrance Test (NMET) are also contributing factors. The washback effect of NMET, with its exam-oriented education model, has led to a solidification of students' thinking and a dependence on templates (Liao, 2019; Li et al., 2022). This way of thinking and learning is often categorised as product approach writing. This represents a traditional approach whereby students are prompted to imitate a model text, typically presented and analyzed at an earlier stage (Gabrielatos, 2002; British Council, 2024). Usually, the model text is shown to students and then examined in detail at a point in time that comes relatively early in the learning process (British Council, 2024). This early presentation and analysis help students understand the text's features before they attempt to imitate it. Furthermore, model-based instruction, which is especially clear for those who are new to the writing process, may easily result in the inhibition of merits such originality as well as critical thinking, both of which are very essential for academic writing.

Furthermore, the limited exposure to English in authentic communicative settings constrains students' opportunities to practice and internalize the language. Many students socialize primarily within their linguistic or ethnic communities, further reducing their immersion in English environments. This lack of practical exposure reinforces the perception of English as a subject to be studied rather than a tool for engagement, exploration, and academic development.

Finally, cultural differences in writing tasks, such as the prevalence of argumentative essays and the requirement to express personal views, pose challenges for students in the Chinese context (Li et al., 2022). The collectivist cultural values often prioritize conformity and respect for established knowledge over individual voice and critical debate. This contrasts sharply with Western academic conventions that require students to construct and defend original arguments through evidence-based reasoning. As a result, most Chinese students often struggle with this paradigm shift when they study in English-speaking countries.

Academic Expectations and Skill Gaps

The mismatch between IELTS preparation and university-level academic writing becomes more evident when examining specific skills. While IELTS may train students to produce clear, well-organized paragraphs, it often falls short in preparing them for the use of academic sources (Bayliss & Ingram, 2004). In IELTS Task 2, students are not required to reference scholarly material or synthesize viewpoints from multiple texts. Consequently, when they face assignments that require literature reviews, argument construction with citations, or analytical comparisons, some often feel unprepared (Moore & Morton, 2007). This gap reflects a fundamental difference in purpose: IELTS Task 2 is primarily the same as the Skill Acquisition model, which focuses on grammar/vocabulary/sentence structure/coherence and cohesion as well as university writings that use academic literacies including disciplinary knowledge, source integration, and critical engagement with scholarly texts.

Paraphrasing and referencing are particularly challenging. Students accustomed to translating ideas from Chinese into English may struggle to reformulate content in their own words without altering the original meaning. Many express uncertainties about citation conventions and fear accidental plagiarism (Phakiti & Li,

2011). This anxiety, coupled with limited prior experience, hampers their ability to meet academic integrity standards (Strauss, 2012).

Critical thinking is another significant barrier. University assignments often value originality, argumentation, and analytical depth. Students unfamiliar with these expectations may produce descriptive rather than analytical essays, or repeat existing viewpoints without critique (Floyd, 2011). This is aligned with Pang's study, where most of the participants had never heard counterarguments and rebuttals until they engaged in their extended writing assignments. Therefore, their previous educational experiences, shaped by exam-oriented instruction, rarely cultivate the kind of intellectual independence expected in Western academia (Chan et al., 2024).

Grammatical issues often appear in academic writing. Word order problems stemming from Chinese influence persist, with students often applying Chinese syntactic patterns when writing in English. An overemphasis on complex sentence structures during IELTS preparation leads to persistent grammatical errors in university assignments, as students prioritize complexity over clarity and accuracy. This is aligned with Pang's study. The study found a fundamental mismatch between IELTS's focus on sophisticated grammar and postgraduate writing's emphasis on clear communication. Participants also struggled with article use, prepositions, tense consistency, and punctuation in their academic essays.

Toward Contextualized and Reflective ESL Pedagogy

Addressing these challenges requires a reimagining of ESL instruction—one that moves beyond standardized test preparation to embrace contextualized, reflective, and student-centered learning. First, academic writing instruction must explicitly address the gaps between IELTS and university writing. This includes teaching students how to incorporate and cite sources, summarize and synthesize ideas, and engage critically with texts (Veerappan & Sulaiman, 2012).

Workshops and preparatory courses should focus on genre awareness, helping students recognize the conventions of academic writing across disciplines. Scaffolded writing tasks, peer review, and feedback mechanisms can support students in developing their skills incrementally. Encouraging metacognitive reflection—such as asking students to evaluate their writing processes or articulate their revision strategies—can further enhance awareness and autonomy (Duron et al., 2006). While this pedagogic shift can definitely equip IELTS preparation candidates with university-level writing skills, the key lies with teachers. ESL teachers need to change their stereotype of why candidates need to take the IELTS examinations. For example, the fundamental purpose is not just to meet the language requirement, but also to assist test takers in appropriately preparing for university-level writing. Moreover, ESL teachers need to be aware of how to adapt a mix of product and process writing approaches, rather than encouraging their students to memorize answer samples. Educators can draw on Bloom's taxonomy to design tasks that move students from remembering and understanding to applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. This progression aligns with academic expectations and promotes a deeper engagement with content (Bloom et al., 1956).

Second, pedagogical strategies should integrate communicative and collaborative learning. Activities that simulate real-life contexts, such as debates, presentations, and group projects, can help students internalize language use in meaningful ways. Peer interaction fosters not only language practice but also the development of critical thinking through dialogue and negotiation (Ledwith, 2011). Additionally, incorporating technology-enhanced learning tools can further enrich the learning experience. ESL teachers need to provide students with online and digital resources so that they can access a wealth of authentic materials in a more dynamic and engaging environment. By integrating these communicative, collaborative, and technology-enhanced approaches, ESL teachers can better equip students with the comprehensive language skills and adaptability required to thrive in diverse academic and professional settings, thus bridging the gap between IELTS preparation and real-world writing proficiency.

Role of Extracurricular and Community-Based Learning

Language development extends beyond the classroom. Schools and universities should create platforms for students to apply their English skills in authentic settings. Events such as speech contests, essay competitions, and literary recitals allow students to express themselves creatively and build confidence.

Participation in clubs, volunteer programs, or internships can also provide exposure to diverse communicative situations (Lewthwaite, 2007).

In addition to these out-of-classroom activities, technology also offers great assistance in language learning. Generative AI can play a significant role in enhancing these experiences. For events such as speech contests, it can assist students in generating ideas for their speeches, enhancing the content's creativity and coherence. In essay competitions, it significantly enhances writing efficiency and creativity (Bonner et al., 2023; Marzuki et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). By facilitating content generation, it allows writers to quickly produce drafts and explore various ideas. Moreover, it functions as a catalyst for creative thinking, enabling them to approach writing tasks from diverse perspectives. Additionally, generative AI aids in paraphrasing, helping writers present information in new and engaging ways. Another crucial advantage lies in improving writing proficiencies (Bonner et al., 2023; Marzuki et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). As a high-tech aid, generative AI can effectively assist students in correcting grammatical mistakes. It also plays a vital role in enhancing logical reasoning, particularly in ensuring the overall coherence of the text. This support not only improves the quality of writing but also helps students develop essential skills for effective communication. Generative AI also offers a personalized learning experience. Acting as a 'personal tutor', it encourages students to take ownership of their learning process (Wei, 2023), thereby fostering autonomy and confidence. Through extensive language exposure and the provision of ample writing practice opportunities, it caters to the individual needs of learners, enabling them to progress at their own pace.

Feedback from teachers and peers is crucial in these contexts. Constructive evaluation helps students recognize their strengths and areas for improvement, while affirmation of effort encourages persistence. However, in the current educational landscape where automated assessment and feedback have become increasingly popular, the role of educators in creating supportive environments takes on new dimensions and challenges. Educators should strive to create supportive environments where experimentation is welcomed, and mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities (Kennedy & Thorp, 2007). Therefore, written corrective feedback (WCF) should come from both teacher feedback and automated writing evaluation systems. This can foster learners' motivation and progress in ESL writing classrooms (Woodworth & Barkaoui, 2020).

Implications for Curriculum Design and Policy

Policymakers and educational institutions need to rethink the reliance on standardized tests as sole indicators of language readiness. While IELTS can serve as a useful benchmark, its narrow focus often fails to capture comprehensive language skills. It should be complemented with ongoing language support such as workshops, writing centers, and academic writing development courses throughout students' university journeys to truly prepare them for the complex written discourse required in higher education (Hyatt, 2013).

Curricula should be aligned with real academic tasks, incorporating interdisciplinary content and promoting literacy across the curriculum. For example, integrating subject-specific writing tasks into ESL courses can help students understand discipline-based conventions and expectations. Collaboration between ESL instructors and content-area lecturers can further ensure coherence and relevance in instruction (Moore & Morton, 2007).

Language development extends beyond the classroom, and schools and universities should create platforms for students to apply their English skills in authentic settings. Events such as speech contests, essay competitions, and literary recitals allow students to express themselves creatively and build confidence. Participation in clubs, volunteer programs, or internships can also provide exposure to diverse communicative situations (Lewthwaite, 2007). These experiences are particularly important in the context of IELTS preparation, since the exam assesses not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to communicate effectively across varied contexts.

Technology, when carefully positioned within these activities, can amplify their value. Generative AI, for instance, has the potential to scaffold learners' engagement in extracurricular communication tasks. In speech contests, it can support brainstorming and structuring arguments; in essay competitions, it can help students refine drafts, enhance coherence, and develop more nuanced perspectives (Bonner et al., 2023; Marzuki et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). Rather than functioning as a shortcut, AI serves as a creative catalyst,

prompting learners to explore multiple linguistic options and reflect critically on their choices. In this way, AI-enhanced practice aligns with IELTS' emphasis on fluency, coherence, and lexical variety.

Moreover, generative AI can be seen as an extension of corrective feedback practices. Acting as a form of “personal tutor” (Wei, 2023), it provides individualized suggestions for revision, complementing teacher and peer feedback. This blended approach—human and automated—has the potential to sustain learner motivation and autonomy, particularly in writing classrooms where Written Corrective Feedback (WCF) plays a central role (Woodworth & Barkaoui, 2020). Importantly, educators remain essential in mediating these tools, ensuring that feedback is constructive, ethical, and supportive of authentic skill development (Kennedy & Thorp, 2007).

At the policy level, efforts should be made to reduce class sizes, invest in teacher training, and promote innovative teaching methodologies. Evaluation systems should recognize not only linguistic accuracy but also communicative competence, creativity, and critical engagement (Bayliss & Ingram, 2004). Moreover, they should incorporate formative assessments that track students' progress over time, emphasizing authentic language use and context-specific problem-solving abilities.

Conclusion

While standardized exams like IELTS play a significant role in university admissions, they offer an incomplete picture of students' academic readiness. Chinese and Macau students, shaped by exam-driven educational cultures, often arrive at university with limited exposure to critical thinking, academic genres, and authentic communication. To bridge this gap, educators must move beyond rote learning and formulaic instruction toward reflective, contextualized, and student-centered pedagogies.

By fostering collaboration, encouraging metacognitive reflection, and creating opportunities for real-life language use, institutions can better prepare students for the rigors of academic life. Ultimately, English should not be viewed merely as a gatekeeping tool but as a means of participation, expression, and intellectual growth in a global academic community.

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