

A Comparative Analysis of IELTS Written Answers: An Application of Systemic Functional Approach

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Abstract: This essay makes a comparative text analysis based on Halliday's systematic functional grammar. The two texts analyzed below are selected from the authentic examination papers of International English Language Testing System, or IELTS henceforth. This essay starts with a brief introduction to IELTS and to methodology, followed by extensive analysis of the two texts. By drawing comparison to demonstrate how metafunctions are realized respectively in each text, I will try to explain why one text writer excelled the other in terms of linguistic performances. There is theoretical foundation supporting the assessment of their scores rather than relying on intuitive impression.

Keywords: IELTS Writing; Comparative analysis; Systematic functional grammar

1. Brief Introduction to IELTS and Theoretical Framework

IELTS test is one of the world's most credible language proficiency tests that assesses candidates' English mastery. Within its 9-band scale, higher band score marks better language ability. Data analyzed in this essay are taken from two IELTS handbooks published by Cambridge University Press. Each handbook is comprised of four authentic examination papers with answers as a reference to future candidates preparing for their exams. The first text is taken from IELTS 9 Test 1, and is henceforth referred to as Text A, the anonymous candidate who composed this text during the exam is accordingly referred to as Candidate A. Similarly, the second text taken from IELTS 11 Test 3 is labelled Text B, and its author Candidate B. The band score of Text A is not revealed but marked by the examiner as "a very good answer". By contrast, Text B is explicitly given a band-7 score. It is logical to posit that a "very good answer" has scored band 8 or above.

The analytic tool this essay draws on is Halliday's systematic functional grammar³. A comprehensive review of the framework itself is beyond the scope of this essay. Therefore, the author simply stresses the points relevant here. It is believed that language is described by context of culture and context of situation. The former is realized by genre and the latter by registers, namely field, tenor and mode. Each register variation corresponds to one of the three metafunctions of language: Ideational, Interpersonal and Textual. As exam compositions, the content of both texts are dictated by the task descriptions. The candidates are required to discuss two sides of a coin, which sets the tone for what they can present in their writings. The genre is analytical exposition, and the success of each text is largely dependent on the persuasiveness of their arguments.

2. Comparative Analysis of the two texts

Now let's take a closer look at how lexical-grammatical resources are drawn from the language system to realize ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning.

2.1 Field: The Ideational Function

2.1.1 Transitivity Analysis: Process, Participants and Circumstances

There are 6 process types and processes are typically realized by verbal groups¹. Every process is counted in each text and enlist them in Table 1. It is justified to say that both candidates are good users of written English for they have skillfully shifted between different process types. Having said that, there are differences between two texts. To begin with, Text B includes Mental Process describing the writer and the participants' opinion explicitly ("I agree...", "I believe..."), thus the presence of the writer is salient to the reader, increasing the interactivity of the text. In comparison to this, there is no sign of Mental Process in Text A, the author hides

his evaluation and creates an air of neutrality in his composition. Secondly, Text A consists of more abstract and technical terms such as “programmed to” and “inhibited by” compared to generic terms in Text B. Last but not least, verbs used in Text B is often repetitive, while Candidate A makes use of variations to describe the same thing. For example, under Behavior Process type, the verb phrase “learning a language” occurs three times in Text B, which is monotonous compared to the multiple ways to express the same meaning of acquiring language such as “pick up” “study” and “gain” in Text A.

Table 1. Transitivity Analysis: Process Types in Text A and Text B

Process Type	Text A (29)		Text B(34)	
Material	15	52%	13	38%
	introducing, is recommended, has been adopted, facilitate, be brought in, deliver, is diminished, is standardized, be faced with, undoes, change, be addressed, encourage, contribute, make		erased, traveling, to happen, trying, pursue, looking for *2, have gone, omitted, help*2, broaden, satisfy	
Behavioral	5	18%	4	12%
	have begun studying, pick up, are not inhibited, learning, gain (a better understanding)		learning a language *3, acting	
Mental	0	/	8	24%
			know*2, mean, understand*2, thinking, agree, believe	
Verbal	1	3%	2	6%
	Referred to		many many say, all of this being said	
Relational	7	24%	7	20%
	are programmed to, allows for, maintains, benefit from, are (generalists), resulting in, become		become*3, concerns, allows, is (the first poem), have	
Existential	1	3%	0	/
	There is (no advantage if...)			

Resources of nominal groups are exploited to describe participants. A prominent feature of Text A is the frequent occurrence of nominalization (“flexibility”, “their command of”) and asymmetrical nominal groups (“educational authorities or individual schools”, “enthusiasm and progress”). Clearly this is not the case with Text B. By doing so Candidates A manages to leave out human agency and to bring in more abstract notions, making his argument more substantial. But Candidate B still relies heavily on pronouns to express his meanings. Another prominent feature is the passive sentences, which occurs 10 times in Text A and only once in text B. The passives foreground the information in its front, which is usually the participants. In terms of Circumstance, both Text A and B are time circumstantial as the adverbs such as “traditionally”, “earlier” (Text A) and “today”, “nowadays” (Text B) appear in both texts.

So far, the transitivity analysis gives evidence that Candidate A gets the slightly better of Candidate B in language practice. I now turn to other features worthy of comment.

2.1.2 Lexical Features and Clause Types

As can be seen from table 1, the process types, or the verbal groups are denser in Text B than in Text A. However, Text A appears to be denser on first sight. This is probably due to the use of passives sentences and lexical variations that offers multiple layers of information. Both Candidate A and Candidate B deploys a range of complex clause types.

2.2 Tenor: The Interpersonal Function

The interpersonal function is of course, realized through tenor. In essence, the ultimate goal of both texts is to persuade the examiner. Both candidates are aware of the interpersonal relationship behind the answer sheet and go all lengths to make their arguments as clear as possible. They make exclusive use of declaratives, making their compositions monologic. Table 2 below shows different strategies applied. On the one hand, frequent use of high modality “should” marks intense certainty in Text B, compared to more moderate expressions in Text A. On the other hand, attitudes are expressed more covertly in Text A than B, for attitudinal lexis is

not as conspicuous as overt statement such as “I believe” and “they should” to the reader. Text A includes relatively medium modality and more attitudinal lexis. In an analytical exposition, it is more effective to appear sensible and dispassionate. Therefore, it can be summarized that interpersonally, Text A adopts a more formal tenor than Text B.

Table 2. Tenor Analysis:

	Text A	Text B
Modality	will (2), may/may not (2), have to (1), could (1), can (1), should (1)	will (1), should/shouldn't (4)
Attitudinal Lexis	Positive and negative, in its favor, however, much more easily, greater, more frequent, shorter, easier, better, disadvantages*2, a great variety of, more achievable	almost, all, more and more popular, however, understand more, never...had

2.3 Mode: The Textual Function

Textually, both texts unfold with marked themes that lead to the topics to be discussed. “Traditionally” in Text A and “Many, many say” in Text B indicate the background information on the issue. Throughout both texts, the persistent and stringent adherence to text structures construct a typical written form. However, the way Candidate A organize his written discourse is where he has an advantage over Candidate B. In Text A, the argument is pushed forward by making the rheme of the last sentence the theme of the next, creating a rather natural flow of the text. For example, “This policy” in the first paragraph is the opinion mentioned in preceding sentence. He paraphrases what has been dealt with before and transforms it into a new topic. The themes are unmarked, yet not in the least abrupt to the reader. Whereas Text B resorts to more mark themes to introduce new topics. The adept manipulation of written mode by Candidate A is highly credited.

Another textual feature worthy to note is that clauses in both texts are linked by various conjunctions, “showing some grammatical intricacy in sequencing and linking different clause types (Halliday, 1985).” They correct use of various conjunctive relationships is one of the reasons that make both texts stand out. The conjunctions are used in right place, serving to carry the argument forward.

3. Conclusion

In the light of analysis above, I conclude that ideationally, Text A is more persuasive; interpersonally, Text B is more interactive; textually, Text A outclasses Text B. The differences in realizing metafunctions in their texts is perhaps why candidate A scored a higher band compared to candidate B. Both texts can be used as a good reference to IELTS test takers. By looking at them at close range, we have a better idea of how to draft a written composition in an exam.

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