

Improving scores on the IELTS speaking test

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This article presents three strategies for teaching students who are taking the IELTS speaking test. The first strategy is aimed at improving confidence and uses a variety of self-help materials from the field of popular psychology. The second encourages students to think critically and invokes a range of academic perspectives. The third strategy invites a close inspection and utilization of the marking criteria published in the IELTS handbook. These strategies were applied to a small group of students who sat the test in September 2005 and their scores are presented and analysed. There is some evidence that the strategies were effective in raising scores on the speaking component.

Introduction

The development of academic speaking abilities is an area of concern to course organizers, teachers, and students, and as Robinson *et al.* (2001: 359) point out, there is a need for research into the topic especially at discourse level. I do not propose to investigate the relationship between the IELTS examination and academic speaking abilities, but do wish to suggest a strategy for effective performance on the oral component of a test, which in practice acts as a gateway to study in UK universities.

In calling for ‘communication strategies’, Dornyei (2001: 97) emphasizes the importance of maintaining a positive self image and the difficulties of getting students to perform tasks which may make them appear inadequate in the eyes of their peers. This is an issue which has probably confronted the majority of people involved in preparing students for the IELTS oral exam; how do we instil confidence in candidates in an arena where confidence is one of the keys to success?

The speaking component of the IELTS test probably induces more tension than the paper sections. Candidates are examined individually. They have to perform in a short time, often after having waited nervously for their appointment. It seems feasible that a candidate could easily underperform if they let the situation intimidate them, and I wanted to provide some effective support strategies, which they could use when the pressure was on.

The IELTS speaking test takes between 11 and 14 minutes and has three parts. In the first section (4 to 6 minutes) candidates are invited to talk about themselves and their interests and to answer questions on familiar topic areas. In the second section (3 to 4 minutes) the candidates talk about a topic suggested on a cue card. The candidate must speak for between one and

one and a half minutes with a few examiner questions at the end. In the third section (4 to 5 minutes), the candidate has the opportunity to discuss issues of a more abstract nature. These issues or topics are thematically linked to part two. For example if the part two question asks for a description of a favourite teacher, then part three will be a discussion of issues related to education. If part two is concerned with a holiday or interesting place, then part three will also be related to travel or tourism, and so on.

The scores on the IELTS test are arranged in bands from 0 to 9, with 9 being the highest. There are four components; listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Reading and listening are marked clerically and their respective bands are divided into two. For example, it is possible to achieve a score of say, 4.5, 5.0, 5.5, 6.0, 6.5, and so on. Speaking and writing are examiner marked and are recorded as whole bands only: 4.0, 5.0, 6.0, etc. In practice this means that a student has the opportunity to improve by one or more whole bands in writing and speaking and as a consequence, work in these areas can have a high level of pay-off. This offers candidates a big incentive to perform well in the speaking section, and with limited time available for IELTS preparation, work on the speaking component has a high level of potential return.

Improving the scores Background

The teaching took place in the context of a pre-sessional (10 and 6 week) programme of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at a UK university. Each student received 20 hours per week of EAP teaching plus IELTS coaching. The IELTS classes themselves were one and a half hours long and were given in the evenings twice a week. Each week was dedicated to one part of the test and the total input received was as follows:

- 10-week students: 200 hours of direct EAP teaching, plus 33 hours of IELTS with 7.5 hours on the speaking component.
- 6-week students: 120 hours of direct EAP teaching plus 18 hours of IELTS with 4.5 hours on the speaking component.

The approach was threefold. Firstly, a great deal of attention was paid to developing students' confidence with an emphasis on using anxiety to good effect. Secondly, students were encouraged to adopt theoretical perspectives to help get started and avoid becoming stuck. Finally, the explicit marking criteria were highlighted and used to elaborate and embellish the students' spoken performances. This involved close scrutiny of the language used in the criteria listed in the IELTS 2005 handbook and in some instances, paraphrasing them.

Improving confidence

Anyone who has been involved with examination preparation knows that overcoming or redirecting tension and nerves is an important element of success. This is compounded in the context of the IELTS test. It is an especially 'high stakes' exam which often takes place at the end of an intensive course, with students under severe pressure to succeed. For the international candidates on our course, being in a new environment can add to the tension, and it could be argued that getting the students in the right frame of mind is as important as teaching the exam skills themselves.

I have found that popular psychology and self-help manuals can be of assistance in this context. By invoking selective quotes and anecdotes,

together with what could be called a little sympathetic aversion therapy, I invite students to confront their fears and get used to speaking in front of their peers in a non-threatening and supportive environment. Creating 'a comfortable environment for students to establish peer trust' (Hansen and Liu 2005: 33) is paramount, and nobody is forced to speak if they are clearly uncomfortable. By *hot seating* the students (bringing them out to the front of the class and asking them IELTS oral exam style questions), who are all volunteers, usually in the middle and towards the end of a session, I encourage them to anticipate the examiner's questions without fear and to look forward to showing what they can do. Cheng and Martin (2005: 95) stress the differences between peer and teacher assessment, and our emphasis is on confidence building. No candidate is left feeling deflated; in fact students often reported how happy they were after the experience. Kondo and Ying Ling (2004: 262) list five strategies for handling language anxiety. Two of these, positive thinking and peer seeking, are relevant here. Students are encouraged to 'enjoy the tension' (ibid: 258) and to empathize with others who may be experiencing the same feelings. An IELTS class can be a tense place and I feel it is important for students to use their collective anxiety, rather than be overwhelmed by it. Also, instead of looking upon the examiner as an interrogator who requires answers, I ask students to regard her/him as a purveyor of stimuli, which are intended to invoke a response. I suggest these simple ideas.

- Feel the fear and do it any way (Jeffers 1991).
- Remember you can improve your score by at least a whole band, so work in this area has a high pay off potential.
- This is your chance to really show what you can do.
- Look upon this as an opportunity not a threat.
- Really *want* the next question.
- Treat the questions as prompts which give you the chance to show your ability.
- Although the examiner controls the exam, you are not powerless.
- Remember the examiner wants you to succeed, not to fail.
- If you often speak in front of people, then speaking in the exam room should be much easier.
- If you don't want to speak in front of the class, then that's fine; just watch other people doing it.

With regard to the final point, in practice all the students volunteered to come out and speak. The reluctant ones became clearly motivated when they saw the positive feedback that their peers and class teacher were giving. I often refer to Dorothy Rowe's (1986) views on introversion and extroversion and suggest to students that they may be quite naturally oriented towards expressing themselves in public, or by contrast may be fearful and hesitant. I try to emphasize that this is a natural state of affairs and they should not blame themselves if they are consumed with trepidation.

Using theoretical perspectives

Here, the main aim is to provide students with a framework for answering examiner questions and there are two considerations. Firstly, the marking criteria suggest that hesitation will be penalized and as anyone who has attended an interview knows, it is easy to slide into incomprehensibility if

you can't assemble an argument relatively quickly. Secondly, the IELTS test clearly operates in an academic context, so a candidate could expect that invoking an academic perspective would be suitable. In other words, by approaching examiner questions from a theoretical position, a candidate could justifiably feel that they were contributing appropriately within the parameters of the discussion.

Students are given a set of (IELTS style) questions and asked to consider how to respond to them. For example:

- What are the advantages of tourism?
- Do you think that the use of computers in schools is a good idea?
- Do you think that women and men should be completely equal in the workplace?
- Do you think it is important to have good friends?
- Are you optimistic about the future of the planet?

Then students are encouraged to consider the questions from a variety of perspectives such as social, cultural, economic, political, philosophical, psychological, historical, and linguistic. Students are then paired up and asked to use these perspectives, if appropriate and to keep their discussions going for at least a minute. The aim is to help candidates feel comfortable in a sustained conversation, and to use the perspectives as props and stimuli for ideas. At this point, it is possible to feel the confidence growing and at a suitable time, students are invited to interview the class teacher, who then gives some model responses. For example:

Well from a *social perspective* I feel that tourism can make contributions to international understanding and to actively encourage contact between different nationalities. *On an economic level*, clearly there are many benefits for the hotel and leisure business with positive effects on employment. *Philosophically*, it can make the world a more tolerant place.

Using the marking criteria

This was in many ways the most interesting part of the programme. Students were given the criteria (see Appendix 1) and asked to check whether they understood the key terms, which were then explained in detail by the class teacher. The next step was to provide students with some expressions taken from the criteria, which could be used in the real examination, as appropriate. For example,

- I am trying to sequence my argument.
- Have I made this clear?
- I am trying to express myself accurately.
- I hope I have been intelligible.

I am trying to encourage the students to focus on producing accurate sentences in an explicitly highlighted context and to use what could be called lexical sophistication (Read 2005: 14). There is no attempt to 'fool' the examiner into over-assessing the candidate's performance; examiners can easily detect this anyway and producing rehearsed sentences is a waste of everybody's time. Rather, the emphasis is upon effective engagement with the criteria. At this point I sometimes refer students to the current research literature and ask them to consider this simple quote:

... as a general principle, more efficient candidates use a wider range of vocabulary than less proficient ones.
(ibid: 13)

Students are then asked to consider how they would use their knowledge of the criteria in the real examination and whether this would be of use to them. I then ask students to be examiner and candidate in a pair discussion with emphasis upon part three of the speaking test. A range of topics is suggested for discussion and the students can select the topics they find interesting. (See Appendix 2 for some part three type questions.)

We end each class with another hot seat session where students are 'examined' by the teacher, in front of the class. This focus is on parts 1, 2, or 3 and lasts for about 5 minutes. At the end the class is asked to award marks in the four areas and the candidate is given a 'grade'. The class is also invited to suggest areas in which the candidate performed well, and where they could improve. The atmosphere at this point is one of healthy and constructive criticism. Students know that they are being evaluated by their peers, not by a real examiner, and that mistakes made in the classroom can have beneficial consequences. Errors, for example, can be highlighted and analysed in a non-threatening atmosphere, and the students sensitized to the mistakes they will make in the real exam. This can help the candidates to realize that they have made an error and correct it without undue panic. Once again it must be emphasized that all of this is optional and nobody is forced to do anything they do not wish to.

The results

A total of 35 students were prepared for the 2005 IELTS examination, but only 13 actually sat it. The others gained entry to their respective departments after a period of negotiation and as a result did not need to sit the test.

Student	Score	Previous score	Hours of IELTS	Hours of IELTS speaking	Hours of EAP teaching	Movement
1	7	—	33	7.5	200	
2	6	7	18	4.5	120	—1
3	7	—	18	4.5	120	
4	7	6	18	4.5	120	+1
5	6	—	33	7.5	200	
6	8	7	33	7.5	200	+1
7	7	—	18	4.5	120	
8	7	6	33	7.5	200	+1
9	7	—	33	7.5	200	
10	7	6	33	7.5	200	+1
11	6	6	18	4.5	120	0
12	6	5	18	4.5	120	+1
13	6	6	33	7.5	200	0

TABLE 1
Details of individual students

The sample size is too small to make significant statistical comment, but observations can be made:

- Eight students achieved a score of 7 or more on the speaking component. This average figure of 6.69 also yields a median of 7.
- Of the five students who had not sat the test before, four achieved a score of 7 and one a score of 6, after a maximum of 7.5 hours dedicated teaching of the speaking component.
- Of the eight students who had sat the test before, five increased their grades by 1 point.
- Of the eight students who had sat the test before, two achieved no movement and one candidate's score decreased.

Discussion

Any discussion of these results is clearly severely restricted by the small sample size, and this is often a feature of literature on the subject of IELTS grade improvement. It is possible, however, to make some general comments and to suggest areas for study in the future. Firstly, there was a clear improvement in students' confidence over a relatively short period and these improvements reflected both their IELTS and general EAP programme. Allied to this, a maximum of seven and a half hours teaching is a minimal input for what are, generally, positive results. It is also important, I think, to accept the fact that three students did not improve, with two non-movers and one whose grade actually deteriorated. This is a cause for concern as the programme has not been effective enough to improve the speaking scores of all the participants and a curriculum review is to be initiated as soon as possible.

By highlighting pressure and deconstructing the marking criteria, it is possible that we are engaged in a demystification process. Although a rather grandiose term, and difficult to measure, it may be one way of inducting students into the UK academic culture and at the same time addressing their immediate needs, that of scoring highly in the IELTS exam. Encouraging students to use a variety of perspectives may also help motivate them to study independently and to consider different theoretical positions. There is some evidence that international students are aware of the importance of acquiring independent study skills and they are receptive to teaching which stresses flexibility and reflection (Lamie and Issitt 2005: 120). If these strategies can promote critical skills, encourage independent learning, and help students to succeed in the IELTS speaking examination, then it will be a worthwhile exercise.

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Appendix 1	Extracts from marking criteria for IELTS speaking (IELTS handbook 2005: 12)
Fluency and coherence	<p>... talk with normal levels of continuity, rate and effort ... link ideas and language together to form coherent, connected speech.</p> <p>The key indicators of fluency are speech rate and speech continuity.</p> <p>The key indicators of coherence are logical sequencing of sentences, clear marking of stages in a discussion ... and the use of cohesive devices ... within and between sentences.</p>
Lexical resource	<p>The range of vocabulary the candidate can use ... the precision with which the meanings and attitudes can be expressed.</p> <p>The key indicators are the variety of words used, (their) ... adequacy and appropriacy, and the ability to circumlocute ... without noticeable hesitation.</p>
Grammatical range and accuracy	<p>The key indicators of grammatical range are the length and complexity of the spoken sentences ... the appropriate use of subordinate clauses, ... the range of sentence structures ...</p> <p>The key indicators of grammatical accuracy are the number of grammatical errors in a given amount of speech ... the communicative effect of the error.</p>
Pronunciation	The key indicators will be the amount of strain caused to the listener, the amount of speech, which is unintelligible, the noticeability of L1 influence.

Appendix 2

Some discussion
topics/questions
for pair work

What are your views on the subject of *tourism*?

What are the advantages of *tourism*? Are there any disadvantages?

Do you think that *education* is the responsibility of government?

What are your views on *health* provision? Do you think it should be the government's or the individual's responsibility?

What can we do as a society to fight *crime*?

Do you think the world will become increasingly *computerized* in the future?
What are the implications?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of the *use of English* as an international language?