Enhancing IELTS Speaking Scores: A Comparative Analysis of High and Low Performers and Effective Strategies for Improvement

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Abstract: This paper examines the challenges of achieving high IELTS Speaking scores, particularly due to preparation constraints and subjectivity in assessment. It contrasts speaking features of high and low scorers across four key areas: fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. The study offers strategies for improvement, focusing on topic development, vocabulary, and grammar, aiming to enhance candidates' performance.

Keywords: IELTS Speaking; Assessment criteria; Comparative analysis; Strategies for improvement

1. Introduction

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has been widely adopted as a reliable and valid approach to assess the English language proficiency of candidates since 1989 [1]. Moreover, IELTS combines four tests to evaluate candidates' different language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing tests. The IELTS scores would be recognized as one of the academic criteria to apply to dissimilar foreign higher educational institutions, such as the United Kingdom and Australia. However, the IELTS Speaking test (IST), which performs as a more subjective output assessment, is recognized as more challenging than the other three components of IELTS and candidates cannot have a better speaking test performance [2]. As a result, it is essential to discover some effective strategies IELTS candidates can apply within the limited test time in order to facilitate their speaking scores.

Therefore, this paper will first introduce the general information of the IST and investigate the factors influencing the IELTS speaking score in order to analyze the relationship between candidate talk and their speaking scores. In addition, based on the analysis of the relationship between those two aspects, it will provide some possible effective strategies to help candidates achieve a high score.

2. Introduction of the IST

Before analyzing the relationship between the test performance of candidates and the score they receive in the IST, it would provide a space to explain the general process of IST and the standard of its assessment.

Although the four components are included in the IELTS, and the final score of it depends on the mean of these four parts, however, the result of each part still has independent and specific assessable criteria. Accordingly, the evaluation standard of the IST provides four aspects to assess the test performance of candidates, which are based on fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation. The assessment of fluency and coherence includes that candidates should show their ability to the connection of their discourse within the appropriate speech rate and continuity. For further explanation, candidates would use a clear and logical way to link their ideas and have limited self-correction and hesitation during their discourse if candidates prefer to achieve a higher score on this part of the assessment. Similarly, the assessment of lexical resource includes that candidates should show their ability in the usage of lexical items. In other words, candidates should use various language flexibly and appropriately when they are given different topics in order to have a better performance on this part. Moreover, grammatical range and accuracy evaluate the ability to the various and accurate usage of grammatical resources. For instance, showing a proficient ability to widely use complex but correct structures during communication could help candidates to achieve this part completely. Likewise, to better perform on the evaluation of pronunciation, it should pay more attention to providing comprehensible interactive content. Nevertheless, different candidates would have dissimilar performances to achieve these four aspects. Thus, a nine-band grading system [3] is also adopted in the IST in order to divide numerous candidates into different English levels. For specific explanation, band one means the extremely limited user who communicates with the examiner hardly while band nine means the expert user who has an excellent performance on the previous four aspects.

During the IST, there is only one examinee for face-to-face communication. Accordingly, the whole process of IST would take 11 to 14 minutes to answer the provided questions. The limited time would be divided into three different parts for examinees to complete. The first part is called the introduction [3], which will take about four to five minutes. During this period, the examiner would introduce the general process of the IST and identify the examinee' identity. Then, the examiner would choose some basic topics that relate to daily life, such as families, interests, or studies. The examinee should give a short answer with several sentences. Later, the second part, the individual long turn [3], would provide the card with a more specific topic and the examinee should make more descriptions than that in the first part. The examinee would be given one minute to think and organize the content that they will speak in the latter one to two minutes. After that, the examiner would offer one or two related questions to ask them. Following the second part, a two-way discussion (the third part) [3] would last the remaining minutes to promote a more in-depth conversation between the examiner and examinee through several questions that thematically connect with the topic in the second part. In the last part, the questions would be more complicated and flexible, and the examinee needs to provide the answer with a deeper explanation. In other words, the third part provides a chance to show the examinee's higher English proficiency.

3. Relationship between candidate discourse performance and their speaking score

On the one hand, according to Douglas [4] and Brown [5], owing to the fact that there is a range of factors influencing the examiner to give the judgment for the candidate's speaking performance, the relationship

between the candidate's discourse performance and the score they receive from the IST cannot be significantly correlated. However, based on the assessment criteria of the IST discussed in the previous content, it seems that the final score candidates receive from the IST still should basically depend on the degree of the achievement of the four evaluation aspects (fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation) because the higher speaking score should have a higher requirement on those four aspects [2]. In other words, if candidates can have a better performance on those four aspects, such as widely using complex sentences with changeable lexical items, they can receive a high score in the IST. As a result, in order to display the specific differences in interactive performance between lower and higher IELTS speaking scores and then have a further explanation of the relationship between candidate performance and their IELTS speaking score, the following content will compare the different speaking transcripts in the IST based on the three assessment aspects (fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy), since the assessment aspect of pronunciation is difficult to analyze through the paper transcript.

3.1. Fluency and coherence

As the band descriptors depict the degree of achievement in the lower score (below band 5) and the higher score (above band 7) of this aspect, it can be seen that the higher score concentrates more on logical coherence and topic development.

According to **Figure 1**, it shows that the candidate is struggling with the question the examiner asks. The multiple and noticeable pauses between lines 151 and 154 and the candidate's response of "I don't know how to say" in line 151 show that the candidate cannot fully understand the provided question and can hardly organize the content that he would speak, thus the candidate just gives a simple and incomplete answer without fluency and fully developing the topic. In other words, the discourse performance of this candidate displays the description of band 4 in the aspect of fluency and coherence. As a result, the candidate in the speaking transcript of extract 1 received a low score (score 4.0).

```
145  E:  what would you like to change about your eating habits:.
146      (1.4)
147  C:  my eating habit uh
148      (0.2)
149  E:  m::.
150      (2.3)
151  C:→i don't know how to say ah (0.2) because (0.7) I'm not (5.5)
152      maybe I will- hhh .hhh I (rarely) think (0.5) so:: (1.7) I
153      know:: (2.4) ((inaudible)) for me (.) I just (0.7) (I need for
154      other paper) er::: (0.3) I just eat only
155      (1.1)
```

Figure 1. Extract 1 [6]

On the other hand, the IST result of the candidate in **Figure 2** achieves a score of 8.0. Although the candidate has a long hesitation (line 130) before he answers the question and some noticeable pauses (lines 130 to 134) still exist in the response, the hesitation in the beginning normally occurs in the conversation because candidates need to think and organize the content relating to the question [7]. Plus, those pauses occurring in the discourse do not disrupt the fluency of the response. It is content-related instead of trying to consider words or grammar, which means that those pauses can divide the long content into several parts to

facilitate comprehension. Additionally, in lines 131 and 133, the linking words "also" and "so" connect the personal argument and explanation of this question, which shows the logical coherence of the candidate's response. Moreover, according to the response to the question, the candidate does not simply provide the answer. By contrast, the candidate fully develops his answer by giving a detailed description of explaining the reason rather than just staying on the answer "I think commercial English is very useful for business."

```
128   E:   why did you choose to learn English and not another language
129        (0.6)
130   C:   erm:: (1.8) in hong kong I think commercially (0.3) erm English
131        is very useful (0.9) for business and also erm (0.3) in hong kong
132        there is a lot of (.) people coming from different countries
133        (0.2) so if you can speak a good English you can communicate with
134        those people (0. ) who do not know cantonese or speak mandarin
135        (0.2)
```

Figure 2. Extract 2 [6]

3.2. Lexical resource

Lexical resource in the IST represents the level of personal education [6]. In other words, the flexible use of advanced words or appropriate idioms can show a higher degree of personal English proficiency. Likewise, as the band descriptors depict the degree of achievement in the lower score (below band 5) and the higher score (above band 7) of lexical resource, it can be seen that the higher score concentrates more on the diversity of vocabulary but limited repetition.

The analysis in **Figure 3** primarily emphasizes the use of lexical items but lacks integration with issues related to fluency and coherence. For instance, in lines 105 and 110, the candidate repeatedly uses similar phrases to describe the function of the chosen equipment (spoon), such as "because yeah I like to eat" and "because you can use it in for eat." Similarly, according to the response of the candidate, the use of simple lexical items, such as "useful," "nice," and "good," is frequent in the content. In other words, the multiple repetitions and the frequent use of easy words would result in the response discourse displaying the low English ability of the candidate. As a result, the candidate in the speaking transcript of extract 3 received a low score (score 5.0).

```
99    E:   all right (0.3) now remember you have one to two minutes for this (0.2)
100        so don't worry if I stop you when your time is up can you start speaking
101        now please
102   C:   mm (0.2) yeah I think equipment is spoon (0.3) yeah
103   E:   mm
104   C:   spoon because (.) yeah I like to eat (0.7) and: erm I use it (0.7) when I
105        was child erm the first equipment in for eat that I learn
106   E:   =uhum=
107   C:   = is spoon I remember many good memory about spoon in my childhood
108        because (0.6) I usually I usually just pring pring prong and also yeah I
109        threw it away and other dish (.) yeah think spoon is quite useful because
110        you can (0.3) use it in for eat and also for ((inaudible 0.2)) with spoon we
111        can (yartec) the water or other away in liquid from (0.4) yeah spoon is
112        very nice
```

Figure 3. Extract 3 [3]

On the contrary, the candidate in **Figure 4** achieves a high score (score 9.0) because the response of the candidate shows the proficient ability to use advanced lexical items, such as the appropriate but uncommon

lexical item "exclusivity" in line 80, or the flexible use of phrases "sort of" and "a sense of" in line 79 and 80. Moreover, in line 130, the candidate uses "attire" to replace the word "clothes" used by the examiner in the question in order to avoid recycling the lexical item, which can facilitate the exhibition of higher lexical proficiency rather than hinder it. Although there is a short turn of self-correction in line 79 ("it's erm it sort of"), it does not reduce the fluency and coherence of the discourse. Additionally, the candidate uses "because" (in line 79) as a linking function to further develop his response instead of only providing a simple answer "I like it" (in line 79).

```
77  E:    m hm: (0.3) what do you enjoy about using computer
78        (1.2)
79  C: → erm::: (0.6) I like it because it's erm (0.5) it sort of gives
80        you a sense of exclusivity not many people know how to use the
81        computers well these days
(41 lines omitted)
123 E:  he he he he (.).hhhh what kinda clothes do you li::ke
124        (0.4)
(5 lines omitted)
130 C: → more formal attire (0.7) makes me look
131        better anyway (0.2) °yeah°
```

Figure 4. Extract 4 [6]

3.3. Grammatical range and accuracy

The range and accuracy of grammar use is another element influencing the IST score of candidates. Based on the description of the high score in IST band descriptors, the common features of the high score in the aspect of grammatical range and accuracy should display a high level of grammatical complexity [3].

In **Figure 5**, the candidate receives a score of 9.0 because the discourse displays the candidate's grammatical competence completely. For instance, in lines 109 to 111, the candidate develops the reason why he is not interested in fashion by using a subordinate clause, which is grammatically appropriate and displays the characteristic of native speaker speech. Thus, it can facilitate the candidate to achieve a high score in the grammatical section. Likewise, in line 110, the candidate chooses to use the adjective word "fashionable" to replace the original noun word "fashion" that appeared in the question, which also displays the candidate's English competence.

```
101  E:   fashion (.) are you interested in fashion?
102        (0.3)
103  C:   not interested in that no[::]
107  E:   =why not?
108        (0.5)
109  C: → erm (0.2) I don't fee::l (0.6) I don't think it's necessary to
110        be fashionable as long as you are comfortable in what you are
111        wearing?
```

Figure 5. Extract 5 [6]

The response in extract 5 is short, which may not fully display the candidate's ability in the aspect of grammatical range and accuracy. For another example, in **Figure 6**, this candidate also achieves a high score (score 9.0). It can be seen that the candidate constructs a range of clauses to express the content, such as the

adverbial clause of time (see in line 144, "when I was a child"), which is used to display the situation in the past, or the adverbial clause of cause (see in line 149, "because it allows"), which is used to develop the topic further. Similarly, apart from displaying the complexity of syntax, the candidate also displays a high ability to use various tenses. For instance, in lines 144 to 145 and lines 147 to 149, the past tense, the present perfect tense, and the present tense are used to develop the candidate's perspective of this topic fully. Likewise, the pronoun "that" in line 143 is used to replace the description ("have the programs in your community changed much since you were a child") in the question skillfully in order to avoid functionless repetition which has a potential negative influence on the IST score [3].

```
141 E: .hh ↑have the programs in your community changed
142    much(0.1)since you were a child.
143    C:→↑hh(.) >I never really thought of that
       before<(0.1).hh
144    I guess(.) >when I was a child< most of the programs(.) >at
145    the community center< would be::(.)either age
146    restricted, or:: separated by gender(.)so:
147    maybe::(0.1)nowadays(.) I- >I've seen a lot of
148    programs< are: co-ed, and >their also open to<  all
149    ages(.) and I think this is great(.)because it <allows>
150    the community to::(.)come together >no matter what< age,
151    or gender.
```

Figure 6. Extract 6 [8]

On the contrary, the candidate in **Figure 7** does not have a better performance in the aspect of grammatical range and accuracy. According to the response to the question in lines 123 to 128, the candidate only uses the simple clause to link the idea and repeatedly uses "stronger" and the word "sport" used by the examiner in the question. The basic sentence form and wide use of simple lexical items do not provide a positive improvement to the IST score. Therefore, the candidate in extract 7 received a low score (score 4.0).

```
120  E:  m.hm (1.2) do you think children should be encouraged to take
121      an interest in sports?
122      (.)
123  C:  ye::s:: (0.3) [because] (0.4) it's not (stronger) =
124                   [why::?]
125  C:  =(1) the- er (1.2) if our children? (1.1) don't like sport
126      (0.3) they will no (0.6) there (0.2) maybe er::: (1) no:: (.)
127      stronger (0.7) oh:. (2.3) the happy (0.2) was (0.5)
128      was then er sport
129      (0.5)
```

Figure 7. Extract 7 [6]

Although there is a challenge to analyze the aspect of pronunciation through the paper transcript, according to the band descriptor, achieving a higher score involves a full range of pronunciation features, such as the correct stress of each lexical item, the appropriate intonation, or the minimal influence by L1 (native language) accent, which could also be contributed to understanding the candidate's discourse easily.

4. Potential effective strategies facilitating the IST score

Based on the above analysis of the speaking features of a high IST score, it could be found that a high IST score displays proficient ability in the aspect of topic coherence and development, advanced and diverse lexical choice, and grammatical complexity and precision. In addition, based on the findings of Seedhouse [6], he pointed out that candidates can follow several steps to improve their IST score, "(a) understand the question they have been asked; (b) provide an answer to the question; (c) identify the topic inherent in the question; and (d) develop the topic inherent in the question." Therefore, the following content will provide some potential positive strategies that can contribute to achieving a high IST score according to the speaking features of a high IST score and the findings of Seedhouse.

4.1. Comprehension of the question

Seedhouse *et al.* argued that the topic "has adapted to play a central role in IST interaction" [3]. In other words, an understanding of the IST topic is essential for test communication. Thus, full comprehension of the question asked by the examiner is essential before candidates answer the question because full comprehension could contribute to further providing and developing the answer to the question [6]. However, although the comprehension of the question does not fully rely on the candidate's language, it could mainly depend on the familiarity of each question [2]. In other words, the unfamiliar or incomprehensible question can result in a misunderstanding of the question. Then, candidates would not answer the question directly or even would fail to answer the question, which not be beneficial to achieving a higher IST score [6]. Thus, it is significant to improve the ability to comprehend the question completely.

The strategy that could help candidates facilitate the comprehension of the question is focusing on the analysis of the IST question [2]. In fact, some language training institutions, such as New Oriental or New Channel, would provide information about the IST for candidates. The information includes the IST questions that would be tested in the next exam and the related model answer of a high score. Then, those training institutions would guide candidates to look through all the IST questions in detail and advise them to use the answer for reference in order to help them better prepare for each question and topic tested in the IST. Thus, candidates would not fail to answer the question due to the unfamiliar topic. On the one hand, having a detailed analysis of the IST questions has a positive impact on improving the IST score. Being familiar with the IST question and topic is beneficial to the test performance of candidates [2]. On the other hand, under the teaching approach of those language training institutions, candidates should pay attention to avoid using the answer for reference provided by institutions completely. Relying on the reference answer would influence candidates' speaking performance as they try to recall the memorized answer [2]. As a result, in order to achieve a high score, candidates can preview the IST questions and try to understand each of them but avoid relying on the provided model responses.

4.2. Development of the topic

According to the analysis of the speaking features and their related score, the lower IST score displays a lack of ability in the development of the topic, such as candidates' responses in extracts 1, 3, and 7. Candidates only provide a simple answer with frequent repetition, which cannot fully analyze the topic from different perspectives. Thus, the development of the topic is essential for the higher proficiency display and even for facilitating a high score [3].

The strategy pointed out in the research by Issitt [2] could positively help candidates develop the topic.

Issitt argued that combining brainstorming and free speaking in the daily speaking exercise can increase the perception of the topic, so candidates can be expected to improve in topic development in the IST. As Issitt's suggested, after the comprehension of all the topics, candidates should consider responding to those questions under each topic within a short time, which can stimulate personal ideas. For example, providing the IST question like "Do you think it is important to have good friends?" [2], candidates should assemble the argument and provide the reason from different perspectives quickly, such as social or psychological. The quick brainstorming gives an opportunity to improve the speed of the response, which can contribute to expanding the perception of different topics within the limited test time. After the quick brainstorming, candidates should use one of the perspectives of the question to have the one-minute sustained talk. For instance, candidates could stand on the social perspective to express the advantages of having good friends in detail.

Moreover, based on the findings of Alghonaim [9], the lack of ability in the development of the topic could be due to the lack of background information. Candidates do not have sufficient background information to support the development. Therefore, the strategy "reading-based task" supported by Alghonaim [9] could enrich the background information. Candidates can obtain the ideas from the previous reading task, which gives a direction to develop the topic in the IST. For example, candidates can read some academic articles about the education topic and summarize the main argument and the supporting explanation. Those useful ideas can provide sufficient information to support the development of the related topic in the IST.

4.3. Input of lexical items and grammatical knowledge

According to the analysis of the speaking features in a high score (see extracts 2, 4, 5, and 6), it displays the ability to frequently use uncommon or advanced lexical items rather than repeating the words used by the examiner, and the ability to use complex grammar through different clauses. Although it suggests that over-relying on the model answer does not contribute to achieving a high score [10], it is beneficial to achieve the appropriate input of lexical items and grammatical knowledge based on those model answers with a high score owing to the fact that it is easier to understand and remember the usage of advanced lexical items and complex grammar in the context instead of in isolation [9]. Candidates could pick up a useful lexical resource or grammatical structure based on the model answer with a high score and try to adopt it in the IST to display diverse knowledge on the assessment aspect of lexical resource and grammatical range and accuracy.

5. Conclusion

All in all, due to the limited time for preparation and the subjective property of the IST, candidates hardly have a better performance on the IST and receive an unsatisfied result [2]. This paper compared the different speaking features between the lower and the higher IST scores based on the IST assessment criteria, where the high IST score displays a high ability in the four evaluation aspects (fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation). Based on the positive speaking features of the high score, it provided several effective strategies through the understanding and development of the topic and the appropriate input of lexical items and grammatical knowledge to help candidates the improvement of their IST score.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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