

**Exploring English Majors' Experience in Taking IELTS Speaking Practices:
A Qualitative Study**

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore the experience of students majoring in an English Department in taking the IELTS speaking practices, and whether or not they had challenges during the learning process. A qualitative approach was employed, and for collecting data a WhatsApp voice note application was utilized. Three students studying at a university in Gorontalo, Indonesia, agreed to participate voluntarily. The findings revealed that the students experienced different challenges during the IELTS speaking practices, which were grouped into five themes: (1) students prepared themselves in different ways, (2) students viewed IELTS differently, (3) students encountered some problems during the IELTS speaking practices, (4) students had issues in adjusting their answers to the test duration, and (5) students agreed that the IELTS test is important for their future. It was also found that the students still had challenges in practicing the IELTS speaking tests. For instance, they felt nervous, lacked English academic vocabulary, and even worried about using correct English grammar. The study recommends that students need to do more readings and spend a sufficient amount of time practicing with peers, so they could expand their knowledge and structure their responses well. In addition, lecturers can help students by giving authentic IELTS materials and visualizing the example of IELTS speaking tests in the classrooms.

Keywords: students' experience, IELTS speaking practice, English Department

INTRODUCTION

According to the British Council International Organisation (2021), IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is an international standardized test of English language proficiency administered by the University of Cambridge, the British Council, and IDP Educational Australia. It is accepted by most Australian, UK, Canadian, Irish, New Zealand, and South African academic institutions, more than 3,000 academic institutions in the United States, and various professional organizations. In the context of the English Department of a university in Gorontalo, IELTS has been included in the department curriculum, that is in the subject called Speaking for Academic Purposes.

Speaking for Academic Purposes must be enrolled by students in semester four. The subject comprises several sections of IELTS speaking skills taught at some levels. The final examination of this subject will be about the IELTS speaking test with various topics that are randomly selected by lecturers. Lecturers ask the same question as the students perform the examination. Therefore, students have to expand their knowledge to make up their answers in order to score successfully in any aspect assessed in the IELTS speaking test.

Studies about IELTS have been done extensively. For example, Pearson (2019) examined candidates in IELTS and their perceptions towards test failure. The study showed that the most common reaction arising from the test was anxiety, with one candidate noting: “I got so nervous during the speaking test. I know I could have done so much better”. Another study discussed undertaking IELTS can induce potentially debilitating anxiety in some candidates (Estaji & Tajeddin, 2012; Hamid & Hoang, 2018; Issitt, 2008). This may be particularly prevalent in the speaking test, where there is pressure to perform in face-to-face encounter with the examiner (Issitt, 2008). Yet, to what extent English majors experience IELTS speaking practices in the context of English teacher training institutions remains under-explored. This present study, therefore, aims to fill this void. It asks the following research question: what are the experiences of English majors in taking IELTS speaking practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to British Council (2022), IELTS speaking is divided into three parts. The first part is an introduction by the examiner, continued by general questions on familiar topics. Jackman and McDowell (2001) stated that test takers should perform to their best ability. The second part is about individual long turns. Test takers will be given a task card on a particular topic. The task card helps test takers to make notes in order to expand the answer about the topic itself. In this part, test takers will be asked to prepare and give a short talk of about one to two minutes on a given subject (Tahasoni, 2011). The last part is part three, a two-way discussion. In this part, test takers can take this as a chance to show the ability to support their opinion and obviously the range of grammatical forms and vocabulary.

In the English Department where this study was carried out, IELTS speaking practices are included in the Speaking for Academic Purposes class. This class helps students hone their academic English communication skills, including when performing IELTS speaking tests. The class introduces students to IELTS, which is followed by speaking practices with lecturers acting as examiners and students as participants. The syllabus covers all speaking parts in IELTS and continued with other academic English communication, such as debate and three minutes thesis competitions.

Studies about IELTS test takers have been done extensively. For example, Allen (2016) investigated the washback the university student from the IELTS test in Japan. He found that speaking skills improved significantly, with even bigger improvements in speaking and listening abilities for those who said they prepared more actively for the test. In other words, students have to prepare as well as they need to get the best score. Another example was from Wash (2018) who investigated the effectiveness in taking the courses for IELTS preparation at an accredited IELTS preparation course at a university in Japan. The study revealed that the relationship between preparation courses and significant gains in test scores still lack of conclusive evidence.

The other example was by Maharani and Setyarini (2019). They examined high school students' problem in IELTS writing class and the way of teacher addressed those problems. The finding showed that there were various problems faced by students. Those problems are about limited vocabulary difficulties in constructing ideas, boredom, exhaustion, anxiety, and language barrier. Despite these studies, little is known about what experience English majors students have when following IELTS speaking classes, especially in the context of English teacher training institutions in a province in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative research approach. It perfectly fits into this study, because this study focuses on exploring students' experience in performing IELTS speaking practices. Data were collected from three English majors who voluntarily agreed to participate, and who had enrolled in the Speaking for Academic Purposes classes during the year of 2019/2020. To collect data, a semi-structured interview technique was used. As Covid-19 pandemic restriction was still in progress, interviews were carried out through the use of WhatsApp voice note. Five guiding topics were asked during the semi-structured interview sessions, namely (1) Preparation before IELTS speaking practice, (2) Definition of IELTS, (3) Challenges in learning IELTS speaking, (4) Duration of IELTS speaking, and (5) The needs of IELTS practice for the future. To analyze the data, all interview transcripts were first transcribed. This was followed by closed readings to get familiar with the data. Afterwards, data unit were coded, and developed into themes which best addressed the purpose of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study found the following themes: (1) students prepare themselves in different ways, (2) students view IELTS differently, (3) students encounter some problems during IELTS speaking practices, (4) students have issues in adjusting their answer to the test duration, and (5) students agree that IELTS test is important for the future.

THEME ONE: STUDENTS PREPARE THEMSELVES IN DIFFERENT WAYS

We found that there were students who prepare themselves adequately, while others not.

“Alright, my answer is big no. I have no preparation before the IELTS speaking class. Because sometimes we do not know which topic that what will be selected. Also, there are

some topics that we will choose. So it makes me lazy to prepare or to learn about the topic because the topic will get picked randomly.” (Student 1)

This answer shows that Student 1 might not be fully encouraged to learn to practice IELTS speaking tests before the class begin because the topic was chosen randomly. The students gave a negative answer, considering the reasons came from internal problems. In contrast, Student 2 had a slightly different answer. This is seen in the excerpt below. “Sir F” refers to a lecturer’s name.

“Yes, I do because Sir F as our lecturer in IELTS speaking class always asks us to read something that is related to the topic before the class started” (Student 2)

The answer above showed that this student had prepared himself well. In this case, the material that the lecturer sent some days before class began helped the student study for IELTS speaking tests at home. Another similar answer came from Student 3.

“Yes, I do. I did the preparation for five to ten minutes before the class started. I learned about how the process of the IELTS speaking test and the material that was sent by Sir F. I believed that this practice can improve my speaking” (Student 3)

Student 3 prepared herself by figuring out the way of doing the IELTS speaking test. This student did the practice to prepare for responding to the IELTS speaking test questions given by the lecturer during the class. It clearly seemed that all these students had their own preparation before the class began. Two of them looked excited about learning the IELTS speaking test. These students needed to know some things that commonly happen during the IELTS speaking test that encourage them to practice themselves. By reading the lessons sent by the lecturers, the students attempted to predict the upcoming questions and the proper way to answer them.

Jackman and McDowell (2001) said that most test takers highlighted the ideas that might be the question from the examiner. Test takers wrote it down their papers and started to practice elaborating on the ideas that they have written before. This situation was similar to the case that we found among the participating students of this study. The students purposively wrote down some topics on their papers and went to read those related topics on the material that they got from the lecturers.

THEME TWO: STUDENTS VIEW IELTS DIFFERENTLY

It turned out that some students know IELTS in general, while others had an understanding which specifically pointed out the speaking part only. Based on the result of the interview sessions, we found several opinions which briefly described things that three students knew about the IELTS test. The responses are presented below.

“As I know, IELTS speaking is one of the speaking class in English Department that we have to enroll in fourth semester. This subject taught us to improve our speaking skills, especially for taking IELTS speaking practice. The teacher gave us some topics that we have to choose and explain in front of the class. Each student got four to five minutes to explain their own topic.” (Student 1)

Student 1 believed that the IELTS speaking test could help students to have adequate English speaking skills. Explaining some different topics that the lecturer gave could train students’ minds

in doing the role play in front of the class. Another student also believed that IELTS has three different levels as she said:

“In my opinion, IELTS speaking is one of the parts of IELTS that aims to measure our ability or knowledge in speaking. In IELTS speaking itself, we should answer some questions about ourselves from the examiner. Further, the topic will become deeper and more detailed. At that moment, we need to speak more and longer than before.” (Student 3)

“Well, I define IELTS speaking as a kind of test that should be passed when someone needs to work abroad or get a scholarship” (Student 2)

The excerpt above showed that Student 2 highlighted the benefit of the IELTS speaking test. By improving English speaking skills through the IELTS test, the student could understand the way of communicating various topics when, for instance, attending the IELTS test for overseas study or job placement purposes. We noted that these three students stated their opinion which almost sounded similar to each other. The students explained about the IELTS speaking test that is beneficial for them in improving their English speaking skills. It was because this subject helped the students to speak about many topics by answering the question that was being asked by the lecturer.

Allen (2016) found that having plenty of topics in the speaking part of the IELTS test can significantly increase students' ability in speaking. It could be considered a good way in encouraging students to enrich their knowledge, particularly about the related topic of IELTS. In this case, having the practice of IELTS speaking test in front of other students taught them about the proper way to answer the whole question. Eventually, understanding many topics of IELTS could help the students to enjoy their practice time which set up their comfortable vibes.

Moreover, the students assumed that talking about several topics during the test could assist them to elaborate their answers that make it looked a long explanation. However, these three students sometimes felt challenged towards the stages of the question. Every stage had a level of difficulty which forced the students to think deeper and talk in more detail.

THEME THREE: STUDENTS ENCOUNTER SOME PROBLEMS DURING IELTS SPEAKING PRACTICES

The participating students reported they experienced clueless, nervousness, or even being distracted by grammatical issues. They felt worried about making mistakes that could cause misunderstandings with IELTS examiners. Their responses are listed below.

“I actually felt worried during the class of IELTS speaking. I felt bad about the rules of grammar that sounded difficult to be handled. I was literally afraid of making mistakes in speaking by using an incorrect grammar during the practice of IELTS.” (Student 1)

Student 1 admitted that she felt insecure about attending the IELTS speaking test practices. She felt the pressure when the task requires test takers like her to speak in front of the class. Losing confidence because the lack of grammar was her huge problem. Another student felt different challenge during their IELTS speaking practice.

“Yes, I cannot deny that I felt nervous in front of the examiner. I was thinking about the question that will be asked by Sir F going to ask. I actually read the material, but still got worry about the topic that will be chose by Sir F. ” (Student 2)

Meanwhile, the other student were challenged with clueless situation when the lecturer started the speaking test practices, as he mentioned:

“Overall, I really enjoy the class. I was happy because the experience that I got have improved my speaking ability. To be honest, as an introvert person, I got nervous and shy when I speak in front of the class. However, I felt so much relieved when the practice of IELTS speaking was done.” (Student 3)

“The other challenge that I got is related to vocabulary. There are several formal vocabulary that sounded hard to pronounce. Besides, I also worry about the grammar that I used. Sometimes, I need to convince myself twice whether the grammar is right or not.” (Student 3)

Student 3 revealed that she was too nervous to respond to the test questions. She mentioned some challenges in practicing IELTS speaking such as a lack of English vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. We found that these three students experienced the same problem during their IELTS speaking test in the classroom. Living in a situation that required them to speak English in an interview definitely challenged them. The students revealed that sometimes they cannot handle their anxiety which distracts them in their speechless moment.

Some of these students felt worried about their English grammar mastery capacity because it seemed to be hard to answer the question while considering the correctness of grammar at the same time. Wash (2018) assumed that most of the test takers felt difficult to address the problem of grammar aspect while answering the examiner’s question. It was because the test taker needed to convince themselves that the content and the grammar of their answer have arranged well. This case became the crucial problem that was encountered by all students of this research. Lack of skill in English grammar aspect has challenged their capability in speaking more as they wanted to.

In addition, many unexpected topics in every stage of the IELTS speaking question totally train the students’ minds to expand their knowledge. As stated by Tahasoni (2011), most of the test takers of the IELTS speaking test had an issue answering questions that sounded unfamiliar to them. The test taker will be will usually take more time to think and sometimes become speechless at a certain point in their answer. In this case, the students of this research had experienced the same thing. This case became a reminder for the students to do more practice before the class in order to expand their knowledge.

Apart from this thing, the data of findings showed one thing which sounded interesting to talk about. One of these three students opined that learning the IELTS speaking test was fun. This student enjoyed the process of learning the IELTS speaking test. This student’s excitement has encouraged her to practice more so that she could handle feeling nervous and shy during the class of IELTS speaking test. Eventually, this student believed that the IELTS speaking test could help her in doing great public speaking.

**THEME FOUR: STUDENTS HAVE ISSUES IN ADJUSTING THEIR ANSWERS
TO THE TEST DURATION**

The student sometimes felt that the duration of the test was too long. Running out of time and getting too much time left became students' issues during the IELTS speaking practice with the examiner.

“Yes, I think the duration is enough. However, the problem is my answer was too short. I thought that giving each student five minutes will be the perfect time for them to deliver the answer.” (Student 1)

This excerpt showed that Student 1 had an issue related to the answer that sounded too short. This student seemed to be struggling in making up her explanation to fit the answer with the amount of time which given by the examiner. In contrast, Student 2 did not feel the same way. The detail is outlined below.

“No, I do not because professional things like IELTS speaking test require the students to speak structurally good. Therefore, I have to think and consider the grammar arrangement before I speak it up to the examiner.” (Student 2)

Student 2 has many things to think about in doing IELTS speaking tests. He was thinking out loud about giving his best answer by structuring it well. However, this student felt that the duration was not enough because he had many things to say that he needed more time to answer the questions. Nevertheless, Student 3 revealed a different answer.

“I am not sure because sometimes I think it's enough but sometimes is not. There was a moment when my answers were too short, but there more time left. That made me confused because I don't have additional explanation to say to the examiner. However, sometimes I felt that the time was too short and it forced me to speak fast.” (Student 3)

In this excerpt, Student 3 seemed to be clueless about whether the duration is enough or not. The student could not be calmed and frequently felt confused that she got distracted and had no idea about the things that she needs to talk.

When discussing the adequacy of the IELTS test duration, we heard several answers from these three students. Two of them seemed to be sure about their answer, while there was one student who felt in between. They had different explanations for the reason for their answer. They sounded worried about the length of their answer. In line with this case, Jackman and McDowell (2001) found that students did not feel enough about the duration given by the examiner. The student revealed that they have to structure the answer in their mind first and make a point of every idea that they got. Speaking up about the result of their process of thinking requires lots of time. However, the students mostly felt lost just because they ran out of time.

Allen (2016) contends that the IELTS test takers positively agreed that the duration of the IELTS speaking test was enough. It was because they brilliantly tricked their speechless moment by pauses in a proper way. This thing definitely let them take their time in arranging their idea and keeps them away from the clueless moment. Eventually, the test takers can fit their answer with the duration that was given by the examiner.

Furthermore, the findings showed that there was one student who experienced the feeling of dilemma at the same time about her answer in this interview session. This student was doubted whether the duration was enough or not. The student added that she attempted to remember the appropriate vocabulary to deliver her best answer and fit it into the rest of the time. Nevertheless, the words that the student meant to talk about were sometimes removed which confused her until the end of the time. Eventually, this student felt doubt about the adequacy of the IELTS test duration.

THEME FIVE: STUDENTS AGREE THAT THE IELTS TEST IS IMPORTANT FOR THEIR FUTURE

All of the participating students viewed IELTS speaking as the thing that can help them in speaking English well. They reported that they can use their speaking ability as the milestone to fulfil their dreams. The excerpts of those students' answers are quoted below.

“Yes, of course. This subject is very important to our major, especially for English Department. Through the practice of IELTS speaking, we can improve our speaking skills. Additionally, this subject can teach me about some newly academic vocabulary and the way to expand the idea of certain topic that can impress the examiner towards the answer that we gave” (Student 1)

In the excerpt above, the student assumed that IELTS speaking test is crucially important for students of English Department. Through IELTS speaking test, the students will be able to speak English well in discussing many topics. Besides, the students could expand their academic vocabulary that they able to handle their anxiety while having a conversation in English. Moreover, another student revealed the answer as quoted below.

“Yes, I do. By having good score in IELTS speaking test, I could get a chance to work abroad as I want. Besides, IELTS speaking test could be beneficial for me to live abroad. It was because having good skill in speaking will let me to speak confidently with foreigner. So, that is why I think that this subject is important for my major.” (Student 2)

Student 2 believed this IELTS practice is a thing that people should know about, particularly for English Department students. It is also needed as a requirement for those who want to work or continue their study abroad.

“Yes, it obviously important to learn by English Department students. It could help us to get a scholarship for our education. In this moment, we need to do IELTS test, because some university especially America and in UK don't accept the TOEFL test. In addition, this subject can improve our ability to speak by using a correct grammar. I believed that it will be more useful for us in the future, especially when speaking on many situations.” (Student 3)

The excerpt above describes that the IELTS speaking test that Student 3 got in one of the speaking subjects will be surely beneficial for students in the future. Having the IELTS speaking test with the lecturer gave her the atmosphere of the real test that she would not be surprised of anymore. This speaking subject has totally encouraged this student to speak well by paying attention to the grammar of the whole sentences that she had during the IELTS speaking test.

These participating students strongly agreed that the IELTS test was important for their future. Through the IELTS speaking test, the student believed that their vocabulary will be expanded, particularly academic words. Tahasoni (2011) found that many topics asked during the IELTS speaking practice had good contributions for students. It was about remembering and applying some new academic words that they got. Accordingly, this could help the students to speak more about the ideas they wanted to deliver as their answers. At this point, the knowledge could significantly increase, which would make the test taker more confident and comfortable with their answers.

CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that taking IELTS speaking practices is challenging for the participating students, but also inspiring at the same time. The students reported that they had to read any materials of IELTS first as their preparation before the class started. They felt excited to know many things related to IELTS speaking test because they wanted to do it well in front of the lecturers and their peers. They believed that learning IELTS speaking test could help them to improve their English speaking skills. They also believed that taking IELTS speaking test was beneficial for their future. This study recommends that students need to do more readings and spend a sufficient amount of time practicing speaking English with peers, so they could expand their knowledge and structure their answers well during the IELTS speaking tests. In addition, lecturers can help students by giving authentic IELTS materials and visualizing the example of IELTS speaking tests in the classrooms. As this study examines small number of English majors, future studies investigating larger groups of students majoring in English or other departments on similar topic can be useful.

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