IDEAS

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Optimizing Speaking Proficiency
in Indonesian EFL Higher Education:
A Pedagogical Intervention
Using the IELTS Question Framework

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Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of a pedagogical intervention using the IELTS Speaking Part question framework to improve speaking skills among students in the English Education Program at IAIN Parepare. The intervention introduced most students to the IELTS Speaking format for the first time, focusing on familiarizing them with speaking techniques that align with international standards. A pre- experimental design was employed, with a one-group pretest-posttest method. The research involved 57 students from the PBI 2022 cohort, with a sample of 15 students (Class PBI4C) selected through cluster purposive sampling. The primary instrument was a speaking test structured around the IELTS framework, with scores measured on a 0-100 scale to allow for detailed interval analysis. Data analysis, conducted in Microsoft Excel, revealed a significant improvement, as the average score rose from 63.7 (pretest) to 83.17 (posttest). A t-test confirmed a statistically significant difference, with a t-value of 5.91 exceeding the t-table value of 2.14 at a 0.05 significance level. These results suggest that using the IELTS-based framework effectively enhanced students' speaking skills, providing valuable exposure to international testing standards.

Introduction

Higher education plays a pivotal role in equipping students with the English-speaking skills required for academic and professional success in an increasingly globalized world. Effective communication in English is not only a competitive advantage but a necessity for engaging in international academic and professional contexts. However, many Indonesian EFL students face persistent challenges in developing their speaking proficiency. These challenges often stem from gaps in existing pedagogical methods, which fail to provide adequate opportunities for structured speaking practice (Rahman et al., 2022; Ratnasari, 2020). Traditional teaching approaches tend to prioritize grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence, leaving students ill-prepared for real-world interactions.

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) has become a widely recognized global benchmark for assessing speaking proficiency, with its Speaking component focusing on critical skills such as fluency, coherence, and linguistic accuracy (Oo et al., 2021; Riaz et al., 2019). Despite its prominence, the adaptation of IELTS frameworks into classroom pedagogy remains limited. Research indicates that while IELTS-oriented training programs can enhance test outcomes, they often fail to integrate these frameworks into broader pedagogical strategies, limiting their potential to improve students' overall speaking abilities in sustained and meaningful ways (Thorpe et al., 2017; Yang & Badger, 2015).

This gap is particularly evident in the Indonesian higher education context, where low speaking proficiency remains a persistent issue, even within English study programs (Rahman et al., 2022). At the Institut Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Parepare, for example, teaching practices frequently rely on the Indonesian language, reducing students' exposure to English-speaking contexts and limiting their opportunities to practice critical communication skills (Ali et al., 2023; Lumban Batu et al., 2018). These limitations underscore the urgent need for innovative teaching approaches that align classroom instruction with internationally recognized standards like IELTS while addressing the specific challenges of local contexts.

This study seeks to address these pedagogical gaps by integrating the IELTS Speaking Part framework into classroom practices for English Education Study Program students at IAIN Parepare. Unlike previous interventions, which primarily focus on test preparation, this research adapts the IELTS framework for routine classroom instruction, creating a structured and inclusive learning environment that emphasizes speaking practice. By doing so, it advances previous research (Thorpe et al., 2017; Yang & Badger, 2015) and addresses gaps in the application of IELTS standards in regular pedagogical contexts. The novelty of this study lies in its

practical approach to bridging theory and practice, ensuring that students not only meet international standards but also develop the communication skills required for academic and professional success (Bovill et al., 2016).

Beyond its immediate application at IAIN Parepare, the findings of this study have the potential to inform broader English language teaching practices in Indonesia and similar EFL contexts. By demonstrating how the IELTS framework can be effectively implemented in higher education, this research contributes valuable insights for curriculum development and pedagogical innovation, offering a model that can be adapted to diverse educational settings.

To achieve this, the objective of the study is:
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the IELTS Speaking Part framework in improving the speaking proficiency of EFL students in higher education.

Based on this objective, the research question posed is:
- Does the application of the IELTS Speaking Part question framework lead to significant improvements in EFL students' speaking proficiency in higher education?

Method

This study adopts a pre-experimental design, specifically a one-group pretest-posttest format. This design is well-suited for evaluating the impact of the pedagogical intervention based on the IELTS Speaking Part framework. By comparing the speaking proficiency of students before and after the intervention, this design provides insight into the effectiveness of the teaching approach (Gay & Mills, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study were 15 students from the PBI4C class in the English Education Study Program at IAIN Parepare. The class was selected using cluster purposive sampling, which ensures that participants share similar academic backgrounds and English learning experiences. This sampling method is appropriate for focusing on specific groups with relevant characteristics to the research objectives. However, its potential limitation lies in the reduced generalizability of findings to broader populations. Despite this, the method allows for in-depth observation of the intervention's effects within a controlled context. Intervention Process.

The intervention consisted of structured teaching activities based on the IELTS Speaking Part framework, designed to improve fluency, coherence, lexical resource, and grammatical accuracy. The teaching process included:

1. Warm-up activities, such as short impromptu speaking tasks to build confidence.
2. Task-based learning, including simulated IELTS Speaking questions for Part 1 (Introduction), Part 2 (Long Turn), and Part 3 (Discussion).
3. Feedback sessions focused on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary improvement.
4. Peer interaction exercises, where students practiced speaking in pairs or small groups.

The intervention lasted for four weeks, with two 90-minute sessions per week, ensuring sufficient exposure to the targeted skills and allowing students to practice and refine their abilities consistently.

Speaking Assessment and Scoring

Speaking proficiency was assessed using a rubric adapted from the IELTS Speaking framework (Brown, 2014; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2018). This rubric evaluates five key aspects: pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension (Table 1). Scores were assigned on a scale of 1-5 for each aspect, with total scores converted to a 0–100 scale for greater granularity and precision compared to the conventional IELTS Band 0–9 scale.

Table 1. Speaking Skill Assessment Rubric

Aspect	Criteria	Score
Pronunciation	Clear, with no or very few errors	1-5
Fluency	Fluent, with no or almost no pauses	1-5
Vocabulary	Rich, able to use appropriate and precise vocabulary	1-5
Grammar	No grammatical errors	1-5
Comprehension	Fully understands questions or instructions	1-5
Score Range		5-25

Source: Adapted from (Brown, 2014; Brown & Abeywickrama, 2018)

Conversion Formula

The following is a simpler formula to convert scores from a scale of 5-25 to a scale of 1-100:

$$\text{Conversion Score} = \frac{(\text{Initial Score} - 5) \times 95}{20} + 1$$

- Initial Score: Score on the scale of 5-25
- 95: The difference between the upper limit (100) and the lower limit (1) on the target scale.
- 20: The difference between the upper limit (25) and the lower limit (5) on the original scale.
- 1: The lower limit of the target scale (1-100).
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Performance Classification

Converted scores were categorized into performance levels to facilitate interpretation (Table 2).

Table 2. Classification of Students' Score

No	Classification	Score
1.	Excellent	96-100
2.	Very Good	86-95
3.	Good	76-85
4.	Fairly Good	66-75
5.	Fair	56-65
6.	Poor	36-55
7.	Very Poor	0-35

Ethical Considerations

Ethical protocols were followed to ensure the integrity of the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and signed written consent forms before participating. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning pseudonyms and securely storing all data.

Data Analysis

Data from pretests and posttests were analyzed using Microsoft Excel's Data Analysis Toolpak. Statistical methods included:

- Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, to summarize the data.
- Paired t-tests to determine the significance of differences between pretest and posttest scores.
- Variance analysis to evaluate consistency in performance improvements across participants.

These methods provide a transparent and robust approach to evaluating the effectiveness of the IELTS-based intervention in improving students' speaking proficiency.

Results

Participants' Scores in Pretest and Posttest

In analyzing the comparison between students' pretest and posttest results, the findings reveal significant improvements. The pretest reflects the participants' initial speaking abilities, while the posttest showcases their progress after undergoing intervention. This analysis provides critical insights into the effectiveness of the IELTS Speaking Part Question Framework-based learning method in improving students' speaking skills within the specified timeframe.

The data presented in Table 3 summarizes the pretest and posttest scores of 15 participants, showing clear progress in their speaking proficiency. During the pretest, scores ranged from 12 to 22, with an average score of 63.7, categorized as "Fair." Most participants (9 out of 15) were in the "Poor" to "Fairly Good" categories, indicating that many students needed significant improvement in their speaking abilities before the intervention.

Table 3. Students' Scores in Pretest and Posttest

Students' ID	Pretest			Posttest		
	Score	Conv.	Category	Score	Conv.	Category
S1	15	50.5	Poor	20	75.25	Fairly Good
S2	12	35.65	Very Poor	20	75.25	Fairly Good
S3	16	55.45	Poor	22	85.15	Good
S4	18	65.35	Fair	20	75.25	Fairly Good
S5	20	75.25	Fairly Good	22	85.15	Good
S6	20	75.25	Fairly Good	24	95.05	Very Good
S7	19	70.3	Fairly Good	20	75.25	Fairly Good
S8	16	55.45	Poor	22	85.15	Good
S9	18	65.35	Fair	23	90.1	Very Good
S10	16	55.45	Poor	21	80.2	Good
S11	19	70.3	Fairly Good	21	80.2	Good
S12	15	50.5	Poor	22	85.15	Good
S13	22	85.15	Good	22	85.15	Good
S14	17	60.4	Fair	23	90.1	Very Good
S15	22	85.15	Good	22	85.15	Good
Mean		63.7	Fair		83.17	Good

The posttest results, after the intervention, demonstrate substantial improvement, with scores ranging from 20 to 24 and an average score of 83.17, categorized as "Good." A total of 12 participants progressed to the "Good" and "Very Good" categories, reflecting marked improvements in their speaking skills.

Graphical Representation of Score Improvement

To visualize the improvements, Figure 1 presents a bar chart comparing pretest and posttest average scores across all participants. The upward trend clearly illustrates the positive impact of the intervention.
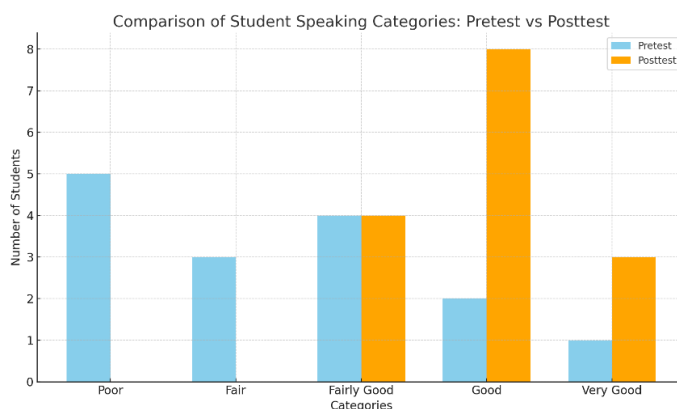

Figure 1. Bar Chart of Pretest and Posttest Average Score

The data show that participants in the "Poor" and "Very Poor" categories during the pretest demonstrated the most notable improvements, with several moving to the "Fairly Good" or "Good" categories. For instance:

- Participant S1 (initially "Poor") achieved the "Fairly Good" category.

- Participant S6, initially in the "Fairly Good" category, progressed to "Very Good," illustrating remarkable improvement.

This variation in progress can be attributed to factors such as participants' prior exposure to English, their motivation levels, or their ability to adapt to the new learning framework.

Categories of Students' Speaking Results

Table 4 categorizes the pretest and posttest scores, highlighting the distribution of participants' speaking proficiency before and after the intervention.

Table 4. Categories of Speaking Scores in Pretest and Posttest

No	Category	Pretest		Posttest	
		Total	%	Total	%
1	Excellent	0	0	0	0
2	Very Good	0	0	3	20
3	Good	2	13.33	8	53.33
4	Fairly Good	4	26.67	4	26.67
5	Fair	3	20	0	0
6	Poor	5	33.33	0	0
7	Very Poor	1	6.67	0	0
Total		15	100.0	15	100.0

Statistical Analysis

The results of the t-test and Pearson correlation analysis support the effectiveness of the intervention (table 5).

The Pearson correlation (0.37) suggests a weak positive relationship between pretest and posttest scores, indicating varying levels of improvement among participants. The t-test results (t-stat = 5.91; p-value = 0.000038) confirm that the improvement is statistically significant, rejecting the null hypothesis (H0) and supporting the alternative hypothesis (H1).

Table 5. t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

	Pretest	*Posttest*
Mean	63.70	83.17
Variance	187.85	37.80
Observations	15.00	15.00
Pearson Correlation	0.37	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0.00	
df	14.00	
t Stat	5.91	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00	
t Critical one-tail	1.76	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000038	
t Critical two-tail	2.14	

These findings demonstrate that the IELTS Speaking Part Question Framework effectively enhances students' speaking skills. The intervention not only improved average scores but also reduced score variability, as indicated by the decrease in variance from 187.85 (pretest) to 37.80 (posttest). This reflects more consistent performance among participants, suggesting that the learning method is robust and applicable across varying proficiency levels.

The results align closely with the research objectives, addressing the initial problem of insufficient speaking proficiency among students. The substantial improvements observed reinforce the practicality and applicability of the IELTS-based framework for EFL learners, particularly in higher education contexts.

Discussion
Challenges in Second Language Acquisition
In the pretest phase, students were assessed before receiving pedagogical interventions based on the IELTS Speaking Part framework. The pretest results indicate the initial speaking abilities of the students, particularly regarding their capacity to deliver ideas monologically, as required in IELTS Speaking Part 2. The average score of 63.7 suggests that the majority of students fell into the "Fair" category, with five students categorized as "Poor" (33.33%) and one student as "Very Poor" (6.67%).

These results align with the updated Second Language Acquisition Theory (Ellis, 2015), which posits that learners of a second language often struggle with speaking due to being in the interlanguage phase, where their language system is still developing and is often influenced by their first language's structure (Arisman & Hasanah, 2023; Ballinger et al., 2020). This explains why many students in the "Poor" and "Very Poor" categories struggle to speak spontaneously and coherently in English.

Additionally, Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 2020) is also relevant in understanding the challenges faced by students during the pretest phase. According to this theory, learning a foreign language can impose significant cognitive load, especially when students are unfamiliar with the expected language structures (Noviasmy et al., 2023; Sweller, 2020).

This clarifies why students experienced difficulties in speaking spontaneously and structurally, as reflected in their pretest results.

Improvement through Communicative Language Teaching

After the intervention based on the IELTS Speaking Part framework, the posttest results showed a significant improvement in students' speaking abilities, with the average score rising to 83.17, placing them in the "Good" category. The majority of students demonstrated significant improvement, with over 50% falling into the "Good" category and 20% in the "Very Good" category. No students remained in the "Poor" or "Very Poor" categories.

This improvement is supported by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) developed by (Nunan & Richards, 2015), which emphasizes the importance of using language in real contexts. The IELTS Speaking Part Question Framework provided students with the opportunity to practice speaking in contexts that simulate real-world situations, ultimately enhancing their fluency and coherence. This improvement is also consistent with recent research by (Csizér & Kálmán, 2019; Enni et al., 2024) which indicated that communication-based approaches help increase students' confidence in speaking.

Evidence of Effective Language Production

The comparison between pretest and posttest results shows that the average score significantly increased from 63.7 to 83.17, with the majority of students experiencing an enhancement in speaking skills. Three students who initially fell into the "Poor" and "Very Poor" categories successfully moved to higher categories after the intervention, affirming the effectiveness of the IELTS Speaking Part Question Framework.

These findings are supported by the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2000), which suggests that students learn more effectively when given the opportunity to produce language orally. The interventions applied in this study provided students with chances to develop their speaking skills through focused and relevant practice. More recent studies have also found that repeated speaking practice with appropriate feedback can accelerate oral language proficiency, which is also reflected in the significant improvements observed in this study (Al Zoubi, 2018; Muallim et al., 2023).

Validating the Intervention's Impact

The results of the t-test analysis indicate that the improvement between the pretest and posttest is statistically significant, with a p-value of 0.000038, well below the threshold of 0.05. This suggests that the intervention provided had a significant impact on enhancing students' speaking abilities.

These findings are consistent with research stating that interventions focusing on language use in real communication contexts can yield significant results in improving speaking skills (Kruk, 2018; Toyama & Yamazaki, 2021). They emphasize the importance of creating a supportive learning environment where students feel comfortable practicing speaking and receiving constructive feedback.

The improvements observed in this study can also be linked to research indicating that practice-based interventions can accelerate the development of speaking skills in a second language (De Bot et al., 2007; Lanvers, 2013). The consistent results from this study with theories and cutting-edge research indicate that the IELTS Speaking framework can be a highly effective strategy in teaching speaking skills.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the IELTS Speaking Part Question Framework is a highly effective tool for enhancing students' speaking skills. The significant improvement observed in students' average scores, which rose from 63.7 in the pretest to 83.17 in the posttest, underscores the efficacy of this pedagogical approach. The statistical analysis, specifically the t-test, yielded a t-value of 5.91, significantly surpassing the t-table value of 2.14 at a 0.05 significance level, indicating a statistically significant enhancement in speaking performance as a result of the intervention.

These findings resonate with established theories in language acquisition, particularly the Second Language Acquisition theory, which highlights the challenges learners face in developing speaking proficiency. Furthermore, the results support the principles of Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasize the importance of real-world context in language learning. However, caution should be exercised in generalizing these results, as the sample size was limited to 15 students, which may not represent the broader population of English language learners. Additionally, the varying degrees of prior English exposure among participants could have influenced the outcomes.

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