

Difficulties experienced by Vietnamese lecturers teaching IELTS speaking at university level and some suggested solutions

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Abstract. In Vietnam nowadays, the Vietnam National University, Hanoi in particular, a new standard for English proficiency is set; that is the required overall score of 5.0 on the IELTS or equivalent. Thus, many universities emphasize the development of IELTS skills. While efforts have been made to teach the four macro skills of writing, reading, listening in many language colleges, far less attention is paid to teach necessary techniques to develop good IELTS speaking skill. To bridge the gap, this paper aims at exploring the difficulties experienced by lecturer teaching IELTS speaking to Vietnamese students at university level and to find out the solutions regarding this issue. Through a questionnaire survey on 189 lecturers and 92 students of IELTS preparation courses, the study found that lecturers have encountered numerous difficulties when teaching IELTS speaking to Vietnamese students such as error correction, overcoming nervousness, using the cue card, helping students improve their critical thinking in answering abstract issues. The study also explores lecturers' perceptions of the difficulties when teaching students IELTS speaking as well as the factors that help learners to develop their speaking skills. Students' questionnaire also helps to explore the lecturers' difficulties from the students' point of view. Suggested solutions for each problem are given by experienced lecturers through interviews. This work hopes to both contribute to the existing body of IELTS research as well as to pave the way for future studies in this field.

Keywords: IELTS, teaching, English speaking, Vietnam, challenges, difficulties of Vietnamese lecturers.

1. Introduction

IELTS is the most widely used international test of English, with 4 million test takers world wide. (Benson, P. & Voller, P, 1997). Together with the globalization of education and a growing demand for good English-speaking

skills in the job market in particular, this trend has been placing a greater emphasis on the teaching of IELTS speaking skills in Vietnam (Bachman, L, 1990).

Vietnamese universities have responded to the demand for English studies by providing those courses of IELTS in fields of Language Teaching, Business Administration, Business Finance, Computer Science, Environmental Science and Telecommunications. In Vietnam

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universities nowadays, the new standard for English is set which some IELTS overall of 5.0 or equivalent. (Dörnyei, Z, 2002) According to the 16+23 programs at Vietnam National University, students should get certain score of IELTS in order to be admitted to some major. For general students, they should get around 4.5 IELTS (Brick, J, 1991). For the fast track students, they should get above 6.5 IELTS in field such as Information technology of Vietnam National University. According to 322 program of the government, students should also get 5.5 IELTS in order to apply for the scholarship provided by the state to travel overseas to study at English-medium universities. Courses for those students are offered at Hanoi University and the Foreign Trade University. At Hanoi University, students should get an overall of 6.0 IELTS in order to apply or to transfer to some majors such as Banking and finance, IT, Tourism, IBM etc. At the Foreign Trade University, one of the conditions that students can enter the master course without having to take the exam is that they have an overall IELTS score of 5.0 or above. (Bachman, L, 1990).

At the Foreign Trade University, if the students achieve band 6 of IELTS, they will have chance to receive a scholarship sponsored by Bedfordshire University of £1500. Therefore, IELTS is also a crucial part of language learning and teaching at universities in Vietnam.

IELTS speaking skill, as a new standard of foreign language in Vietnam and regarded as one of the most important skills to gain has been taught at earlier stages in Vietnam universities. (Brick, J, 1991). Despite its importance, for many years, teaching IELTS speaking has been undervalued and English language lecturers have continued to teach speaking just as a repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues. (Briton, J, 1991). Although an IELTS certificate is recognized by more than 6000 institutions across 120 countries (Brown, A., & Hil, K, 2002), only few research studies have been conducted about

IELTS teaching in Vietnam context (Gardner. H,1999). There are even fewer ones carried out on difficulties of Vietnamese lecturers in teaching speaking skill in IELTS.

Therefore, this paper attempts to examine the difficulties of lecturers when teaching IELTS and to suggest suitable teaching techniques to suit Vietnamese students for effective IELTS teaching method.

This problem can be tackled through answering the following questions:

1. From lecturers' perspective, what are their biggest difficulties when teaching IELTS speaking to Vietnamese students at university level?
2. From students' perspective, what are lecturers' difficulties when teaching IELTS speaking?
3. What teaching techniques do lecturers suggest to overcome those difficulties?

Teaching IELTS speaking skill in a foreign language context such as Vietnam has some potential difficulties. (Benson, P. & Voller, P, 1997). It is a matter of great concern that most of our tertiary learners can not speak English fluently even when they have learnt and have been taught the language for a minimum of 7 years of their life i.e. from grade 6 to Upper Secondary level. What are the reasons behind it? For researchers in the field of English language teaching and training the basic duty is to observe, find, identify and determine these difficulties through useful research tools such as survey questionnaires, for the collection of quantitative data and classroom observations, and group interviews for the collection of qualitative data.

The population of this study consisted of university lecturers from various universities in Hanoi. The students' sample was chosen from 5 different universities and this facilitates the process of the survey. The sample consisted of 92 students. The students took part in the questionnaire survey to reveal what they think are the difficulties of the lecturers in teaching them IELTS speaking. The lecturers' sample

consisted of 189 lecturers of English language in Hanoi to participate in the survey. These students and lecturers came from five universities in Hanoi, namely: ULIS (University of languages and international studies), Vietnam National University (54 lecturers), HUT (Hanoi University of Technology) (28 lecturers), NEU (National Economics University) (27 lecturers), Hanoi University (27 lecturers), and Foreign Trade University (23 lecturers). The questionnaires of the students and lecturers are the same for comparison purpose. There were 31 IELTS speaking difficulties for the respondents to rate.

To achieve the goals of this study, the researcher designed a questionnaire in a way

that it included four categories: difficulties in teaching IELTS in general, difficulties in teaching IELTS speaking part 1, difficulties in teaching IELTS part 2, difficulties in teaching IELTS part 3. The questionnaires, and the observation revealed the difficulties facing by lecturers in teaching IELTS speaking and some of the solutions to those difficulties are suggested by experienced lectures through group interview.

In short, to answer research question number 1 and 2, the following table sums up the most common difficulties of lecturers when teaching IELTS in different parts of the speaking test:

	Part	Difficulties
From lecturers' perspective	In general	Error correction
	IELTS speaking part 1	Help the students overcome their nervousness right in the first 4 minutes of the first part
	IELTS speaking part 2	Helping students to use the cue card effectively
	IELTS speaking part 3	Help students improve their critical thinking in answering abstract issues
From students' perspective	In general	Helping students to have a good self-study method for pronunciation at home
	IELTS speaking part 1	Helping students overcome the anxiety in IELTS speaking
	IELTS speaking part 2	Helping students to utilize the time effectively.
	IELTS speaking part 3	Helping students improve their critical thinking in answering abstract issues.

To answer research question number 3, various solutions suggested by the interviewed lecturers include:

- To reduce the size of the IELTS class to the smallest if it is possible.
- To make the IELTS classroom environment less formal and more friendly, one where students can make mistakes without looking or sounding inept.
- To choose topic that relates to the students and that is easy for the students to talk about.
- To encourage students not to be afraid of making mistakes.
- To emphasize the use of graphic organizers to help the students to plan a clearer and more structural
- To giving helpful feedback on students' work and assignments through out various

methods such as whole-group feedback; assignment return sheets; model answers; posting comments of common errors.

- To try to correct students only when the meaning is unclear and results in communication breakdown.

To tell the students to use as much of English as they can, avoid to speak Vietnamese in class.

- The students' talking time should be more than the teacher's talking time
- To make the students aware that they can use the cue card as the structure of the talk.
- To ask the students to use some IT application at home to help them to improve their pronunciation, they can record their own speech, listen to the native speaker and imitate them.

It is hoped that this thesis will shed some light into the area of teaching IELTS preparation courses (IELTS speaking in particular) of lecturers of English in Vietnam. As such it is hoped that a larger research project in this area would be conducted so that even more effective IELTS preparation could be achieved.

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Nghiên cứu về những khó khăn của giảng viên Việt Nam trong dạy kỹ năng nói IELTS ở cấp độ Đại học và một vài giải pháp

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Trong sự chuyển mình của Việt Nam hiện nay, các trường Đại Học ở Việt Nam đã đặt ra mức chuẩn mới cho trình độ tiếng Anh của sinh viên theo chứng chỉ IELTS tạo ra đẳng cấp mới cho lĩnh vực dạy và học tiếng Anh ở các trường Đại Học ở Việt Nam. Sự gia nhập quốc tế và sự cạnh tranh toàn cầu khiến cho việc dạy và học kỹ năng nói trong IELTS vô cùng quan trọng và cấp thiết trong các trường Đại học ở Việt Nam. Trước đây, rất nhiều bài đã nghiên cứu về các kỹ năng nghe, nói, đọc viết

nói chung, có rất ít bài nghiên cứu về kỹ năng dạy và học IELTS nói riêng. Nghiên cứu về kỹ năng dạy nói IELTS lại càng hiếm. Vì vậy, bài này hi vọng sẽ đem tới kết quả nghiên cứu đáng tin cậy về vấn đề nóng hổi này. Qua việc nghiên cứu và điều tra 189 giảng viên và 92 từ 5 trường Đại học khác nhau, nghiên cứu đã cho thấy giảng viên Việt Nam gặp rất nhiều khó khăn trong việc dạy kỹ năng nói trong IELTS, khó khăn chủ yếu tập trung vào sự thiếu tự tin của sinh viên do 12 năm học ở phổ thông rất ít được nói tiếng Anh, sửa lỗi sai, giúp sinh viên sử dụng bảng gợi ý hiệu quả trong phần 2 kỳ thi nói IELTS và giúp sinh viên có tư duy phê phán để có những câu trả lời sâu cho các câu hỏi trừu tượng trong phần 3 của kỳ thi nói IELTS. Một vài giải pháp gợi ý đã được đưa ra qua phần phỏng vấn nhóm các giảng viên có kinh nghiệm dạy kỹ năng nói IELTS