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“DEVELOPING LEARNERS’ CREATIVE THINKING THROUGH IELTS SPEAKING STRATEGIES”

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Abstract

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) promoting creative thinking is a crucial element of preparing learners for dynamic communication in both professional and real-world situations. This research examines how IELTS Speaking tasks can be used for developing creative thinking while promoting speaking proficiency among different levelled EFL learners. The study investigates some effective approaches and common challenges faced by students, and proposes different activities designed around IELTS Part 1 themes as well as evaluates the impact of these tasks on learners’ confidence, language fluency, and originality. Drawing from theories of creativity in language learning, communicative language teaching, offering practical insights and classroom strategies for integrating creative thinking development into exam-oriented speaking classes. The findings will reveal how productive and receptive skills enhance learners’ ability to speak effectively with increasing creativity and fluency in English.

Keywords

EFL Learners; speaking lessons; creative / imaginative thinking, IELTS Speaking strategy; productive vs receptive skills, English language learning; oral speaking /exam.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the role of creative thinking in education, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Language is not only a means for communication but also an average tool for personal expression and imaginative engagement. As global communication skills become more valued, educators are increasingly encouraged for nurturing just *linguistic accuracy* and the ability to think *creatively* and *speak extensively* within one's knowledge. Despite this, many speaking lessons, especially using strategic and standardized exams such as IELTS, TOEFL often rely on repetitive drills and

formulaic responses, which limit learners' opportunities to engage creatively. While these tests often face criticism for promoting ordinary responses, they *can* support the development of critical thinking skills—if they are approached in creative ways and thoughtfully.

The research is going to address a key question: ‘‘How can the structured format of IELTS, specifically Speaking Part 1, typically known for its *short, predictable questions*, be transformed into a platform for encouraging creative thinking, especially among basic level learners?’’ IELTS Speaking mainly focuses on *everyday topics* and *familiar themes*, making it an accessible entry point for beginner-level students (A1–A2). While its simplicity is often seen as a limitation in fostering *critical or imaginative thinking*, this study views it as an opportunity—a flexible framework where creative, supportive speaking tasks can be integrated to strengthen both oral skills and cognitive flexibility.

In many EFL classrooms, especially at the lower proficiency levels- commonly in the first year of university, some students struggle with confidence and may feel hesitant to go beyond minimal answers. Their focus is often limited to *producing grammatically correct sentences* rather than *sharing original thoughts or experiences*. This lack of self-expression can hinder both *language development and learner motivation*. Therefore, by introducing scaffolded, creativity-enhancing activities of IELTS Speaking Part 1 practice, this study proposes a *more dynamic and student-centered approach* to oral communication training while integrating some engaging skills.

While investigating the integration of creative questions-prompts of IELTS, such as *hypothetical questions, imaginative storytelling, and personalized reflections*, into IELTS-style speaking tasks in English class within the curriculum of the university, it aims to explore how such practices can enhance learners' creative thinking and speaking performance. It further explores how such tasks, supported by visual aids, sentence starters, and guided interaction, can help learners overcome *linguistic barriers* and become more *confident, fluent, and inventive* in their spoken English. By doing so, the research contributes to the evolving field of EFL pedagogy where exam preparation does not come at the expense of creative language use, but rather supports its development.

Literature Review

The integration of creative thinking into language learning is supported by various educational and cognitive theories that emphasize the role of *imagination, flexibility, and personal expression* in the development of communicative competence for learners. Within the context of the research, the three main theoretical frameworks inform the design and implementation of the study: Integrating Receptive and Productive Skills to Enhance Speaking through creative thinking, scaffolded instruction for learners, and the pedagogical potential of IELTS Speaking Part 1.

Creative thinking in Language Learning Vs Productive and Receptive skill:

Creative thinking in language learning refers to the learner's ability to generate *original ideas*, express *unique perspectives*, and use language in *flexible and imaginative ways*. According to Torrance (1974), *creativity includes fluency (generating many ideas), flexibility (producing diverse ideas), and originality (generating novel ideas)*. In a language classroom, these approaches can be nurtured through *open-ended tasks, imaginative storytelling, and personal narratives* that go beyond rote repetition or mechanical drills. Scholars such as Maley and Peachey (2015) argue that creativity is not an add-on to language instruction but a core component of meaningful language use that *enhances motivation, learner engagement, and cognitive development*.

Another important and relatively theoretical idea is Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning. Bloom's Taxonomy is another useful framework that can be applied to speaking and creativity in language learning. It outlines a hierarchy of cognitive skills, beginning with **remembering** and progressing to **creating**. The **creating** level involves synthesizing information to form new structures, ideas, or perspectives, which directly applies to learners using language creatively. This theory supports the notion that language learners need to engage in higher-order thinking skills—such as problem-solving, idea generation, and applying linguistic knowledge in novel ways—to improve their speaking competence. (Bloom, 1956).

Integrating Receptive and Productive Skills to Enhance Speaking

Language learning requires a combination of various skills that enable effective communication. As two fundamental categories of language skills are receptive skills and productive skills, there are many different ways to approach these two categories, and many different activities. So, four primary language skills in language learning can be reflected in receptive and **productive** skills. They are crucial in English classrooms, as they contribute to

both understanding and producing language effectively.

1. **Receptive Skills enhance Listening and Reading:**

As receptive Skills enhance Listening and Reading, they provide the foundation for students to understand and absorb language, which they can later use in their speaking, and by integrating both **receptive** and **productive** skills to enhance students' ability to speak more effectively, think critically, and engage creatively.

Listening: It models speaking performances, by providing students with recordings of academic discussions, debates, or presentations that showcase creative thinking. For example, you can use TED Talks, academic interviews, or debate videos relating to current academic issues, learners will listen for both **structure** (how the speaker organizes their ideas) and **content** (how the speaker uses creativity to explain or analyze a topic).

Reading: Academic Articles or Essays, through provided academic texts or articles presenting a unique or creative approach to a topic. Encourage them to focus on how the author organizes and develops their ideas creatively.

Integrating Both Skills to Develop Speaking and Creative Thinking: Scaffolded Instruction gradually increase the complexity of tasks, starting with receptive skills and progressing to productive speaking tasks and for Critical Thinking and Reflection, it encourages students to think critically about the content they hear and read, and then use this understanding to engage in creative speaking tasks. By doing this way it ensures students are prepared and confident to use language creatively in speaking.

2. **Productive Skills (Speaking and Writing):**

Productive skills are essential for students to actively produce language, expressing their ideas clearly and creatively in academic contexts. These skills include speaking and writing, both of which are integral for effective communication and critical thinking.

Speaking: Creative Speaking Tasks: Encourage students to think critically and use language creatively. Tasks include debates, problem-solving, and discussions where students present novel ideas on academic topics.

Writing supports speaking as follows: Pre-Speaking Writing Tasks, before speaking, students write their ideas to help them organize thoughts and express ideas clearly.

By combining receptive and productive skills with a focus on creative thinking, these

tasks push them to think outside the box. Through these strategies, students not only improve their speaking proficiency but also cultivate a mindset that allows them to engage with academic topics more effectively and creatively.

3. Scaffolding instruction

Speaking is often considered the most anxiety-inducing skill for EFL learners, particularly at lower levels of proficiency. According to Horwitz and Cope (1986), learners often fear negative evaluation, lack of confidence, or struggle to retrieve vocabulary during spontaneous speaking tasks. Therefore, speaking tasks must be designed to lower affective filters and build learners' self-assurance through repetition, peer support, and structured output.

Numerous studies support the idea that strategic approaches like scaffolding speaking practice enhances fluency and learner confidence. Nation and Newton (2009) emphasize the value of task repetition and gradual complexity in helping learners internalize structures and improve performance over time. Scaffolding, derived from Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), refers to the *temporary support* provided by teachers to help learners perform *tasks* they cannot yet complete independently. For basic level learners, scaffolding is essential in developing both linguistic competence and confidence, helping learners manage cognitive skills, reduces anxiety, and gradually builds autonomy.

4. Pedagogical Approach of IELTS Speaking task:

Implementing IELTS Speaking as Pedagogical Approaches intentionally develops creative thinking in Speaking lessons in an environment that values originality, personal expression, and risk-taking and can be a valuable approach in language learning, especially for improving speaking skills, fostering critical thinking, and encouraging real-world communication. Several instructional approaches have been proven to support the development of creativity while simultaneously advancing communicative competence.

As a tool for class, IELTS Speaking tasks in a pedagogical context, several theoretical frameworks can support and justify the integration of these tasks into language learning. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) emphasizes the use of real-world tasks for language learning, focusing on *fluency and meaning* rather than form alone. IELTS Speaking tasks align with this framework by encouraging students to engage in tasks

that mirror real-life communication situations. Similarly, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) prioritizes communication as *the main goal of language learning*, promoting interaction and real communication. The tasks provide learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning and respond to questions, reflecting the principles of CLT.

Bloom's Taxonomy, which categorizes cognitive skills from basic recall to *higher-order thinking*, is also relevant, particularly in IELTS Speaking Part 3, where students are required to engage in analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of ideas through encouraging students to develop critical thinking skills. Bloom, B. S. (1956). Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlights the role of social interaction in learning, and IELTS Speaking tasks facilitate language development through interaction with others, either with an examiner - teacher. These theories collectively support the use of IELTS Speaking tasks in language education, promoting communicative competence, critical thinking, and effective language learning.

Integrating IELTS Speaking tasks into classroom teaching, educators will create engaging, practical, and effective learning experiences that help students develop both their speaking skills and critical thinking abilities. Key strategies of IELTS include fluency, pronunciation awareness, vocabulary enrichment, interactive speaking etc, they can be enhanced through activities like *debates, role-playing, problem-solving tasks, and structured presentation as mentioned class activities*. As main resourceful materials for our university -Shihihutug has been using a series of several text books and coursebooks for the training since our school started to implement the EAP program from the Oxford university, 2018. Namely, *Q: Skills for Success, Listening and Speaking* ; Oxford EAP textbooks support this process by incorporating task-based learning, critical thinking activities, and real-world speaking scenarios, guiding students from controlled practice to independent speaking. The coursebook introduces different themed discussion topics (e.g., social media, AI, globalization), structured speaking tasks, pronunciation drills, all designed to improve coherence, engagement in academic conversations. By integrating these strategies, instructors could help students build confidence, refine critical thinking; communication skills, and develop proficiency in both collaborative or independent academic speaking tasks. These Elements Enhance EAP Speaking Classes by integrating these strategies can help students:

- Build academic speaking confidence.

- Develop structured and critical communication skills.
- Improve listening and response abilities.
- Gain proficiency in collaborative and independent speaking tasks.

As instructors and teachers, we adapt these materials to align with EAP course objectives, ensuring that students develop the necessary speaking skills for academic and professional success.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative method aiming to explore and enhance learners' creative thinking through IELTS Speaking Part 1 tasks in a real classroom setting. The research is particularly matched for classroom-based inquiries as it allows for *reflection, experimentation, and improvement* of teaching practices while addressing students' specific learning needs. The methodology focuses on a four-week intervention involving scaffolded speaking tasks designed to foster creativity in different classes 1-2nd course learners. The process involves 4 different stages: *targeted participants, research instrument, procedural action, and assessing the activities*.

- 1. Participants:** Particularly our university students are trained with EAP -english for academic purposes for the first 2 years of academic study, in which we aim to enhance the learners' basic skills including writing, reading, listening and speaking. Within the EAP classroom, they have merely 2 hours of reading and writing class or listening and speaking class in a week respectively in total 6 hours. So having limited class hours for each skill, their academic skills are seemingly not improved within only class topics, specifically today's hot topic- speaking skill and in the content of their coursebooks, so it demands necessarily to improve their speaking skills beyond the program. The study involves a purposive sample of 17–20 EFL learners aged 17 to 20 with 4 groups, for each group consisting of roughly 20 students around, all of whom possess beginner to pre-intermediate level speaking proficiency (CEFR A1–B2). The learners are often exposed to the topics like IELTS speaking in their speaking assignment, in other words the Listening and Speaking coursebook's contents have input familiar topics like *family, hobbies, studies, work*, also it used simple clear language, practiced common questions to encourage them to expand their answers more engaging. For example, level 2 Unit 5 LS coursebook -''What does it mean to be a part of a family?'' The unit can integrate different stages of IELTS in the lesson, for part 1 strategy, asking personal

questions that encourage learners to speak naturally and extend their answers as follows: *"How many people are in your family?"; "What do you like to do together as a family?"; "Who do you get along with the best in your family?"*

Students should practice answering these questions in full sentences, adding details where possible (e.g., describing family events, sharing personal stories or traditions). They also should focus on expanding their answers, avoiding simple "Yes" or "No" responses. For example, instead of just saying "I live with my parents. I have two siblings," a student could say: "I have two siblings. My older brother is studying in the United States, and my younger sister is in high school. We are very close, and we love to travel together during the holidays."

And for part 2, they need to organize ideas and develop more structured responses while emphasizing the full time - 2 minutes speaking after jotting down ideas in one minute using descriptive language with examples to make their responses richer. In the last part, they need to express opinions clearly and develop ideas with supporting reasons because the responses could be abstract, thought-provoking questions related to the given topic. For example, within the concept of family, *"Do you think family roles have changed in modern society?" "What do you think is the most important quality for a family to have?" "How do you think family influence affects a person's life choices?"* With more engaging and thoughtful conditions, students should practice expressing their opinions and supporting them with reasoning and examples, develop their answers and avoid one-word responses. They should be encouraged to link ideas together (e.g., using phrases like "On the other hand," "In contrast," or "For example").

- 2. Research Instrument:** Standard IELTS Part 1 questions were used at the beginning and end of the intervention to assess changes in fluency, creativity, and language use. First, we organized peer and self-evaluations while learners used simplified rubrics to assess their own and their peers' speaking performances with a focus on creativity, clarity, and confidence in structured models answers provided later in the task. And then as an instructor, classroom observations were conducted through documenting classroom interactions, learner behavior, and responses to tasks. Lastly, for further study, we are aiming the following -Teacher Notes and Audio Recordings: Selected speaking sessions were recorded and analyzed for thematic patterns in student speech.

- 3. Procedure:** The research followed four key phases, analyzing, intervening, implementing, assessing within 4 weeks.

Phase 1: Needs Analysis (Week 1)

- A starting speaking task was conducted using standard IELTS Part 1 questions.
- A short learner survey gathered information on students' attitudes toward speaking, perceived challenges, and prior experiences with creative tasks.

Phase 2: Intervention Design (Week 2)

- Speaking tasks were adapted to include both standard IELTS questions and creativity-focused extensions.
- Materials such as sentence starters like discourse markers, and model answers were prepared to support learners, and they were asked to create their own versioned speaking answers using some original resource.

Phase 3: Implementation (Week 3)

- Each lesson focused on one Part 1 topic (e.g., food, preferences, childhood experiences).
- Lessons included: Warm-up or brainstorming, Guided vocabulary and sentence pattern activities, Creative extension task similar to the IELTS task (e.g., "What makes food attractive.") Individual discussion with teacher monitoring and reflection and peer feedback in writing prompts
- Teacher provided scaffolding through modeling, corrective feedback, and encouragement.

Phase 4: Assessment and Reflection (Week 5) A post-intervention speaking task using new IELTS-style questions with optional creative extensions, and also designed reflective journals produced by the teacher and student feedback forms were collected, Speaking samples were rated using a simplified rubric focusing on: Sentence length, Vocabulary use, Creativity/originality, Relevance to topic, Fluency and confidence (Appendix 2)

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate that integrating creative thinking tasks into IELTS Speaking Part 1 practice can positively impact EFL learners' speaking performance,

confidence, and expressive ability. Through a four-week intervention, learners exhibited noticeable progress in their willingness to participate, ability to produce extended responses, and use of imaginative language. This section presents key findings categorized into thematic areas and discusses their implications in relation to the research objectives and existing literature.

1. Increased Speaking Confidence: During the period, learners showed a marked improvement in their comfort level during speaking tasks. Pre-intervention recordings revealed short, hesitant answers, often limited to 2–3 words or memorized phrases. By Week 4, most students were able to produce full sentences, initiate brief conversations with peers, and respond to follow-up questions with greater ease.

2. Development of Creative Thinking: The participants began to demonstrate increased flexibility and originality in their speech. When presented with tasks such as opposing responses- “I do not ...” optional response questions like “do you like store shopping OR e-shopping?” students engaged in hypothetical thinking and storytelling, even if basic in structure. Responses are expected to be more personalized and detailed compared to the initial stages of the study for post-intervention speaking tasks, which have not been implemented yet within our study deadline, we are aiming to complete it in the last week of the class where the students' examples or imaginative scenarios that were not present in their starting point of responses. For instance, instead of simply saying “I like watching movies,” one learner responded: *“If I had a big home cinema, I would watch every new movie with popcorn and friends every weekend.”* This progression supports Maley and Peachey’s (2015) claim that creative prompts encourage learners to use language in meaningful, engaging ways.

3. Improved Use of Vocabulary and Sentence Structure

There was a moderate but noticeable improvement in learners’ vocabulary range and sentence complexity. While learners continued to make grammatical errors, their speech became more fluent and less dependent on rote expressions. Classroom observations showed an increase in spontaneous word use, particularly adjectives and connectors (e.g., “because,” “so,” “if”). For further and extended activity, we will use more interactive tactics like visual aids, sentence frames, and role-play cards contributed to this development by scaffolding learners’ output.

The findings of this study support the central argument that IELTS Speaking Part 1, when adapted with creativity-enhancing tasks, can serve as an effective platform for improving both language proficiency and creative thinking in beginner EFL learners. This study extends the work of Richards (2013) and Liu & Liu (2021) by showing that creative thinking is not limited to advanced learners or artistic tasks, but can be cultivated even at early stages of language learning. The combination of scaffolded instruction and open-ended prompts provided a safe, engaging, and productive learning environment where students could experiment with language and build confidence. However, the study also highlights certain limitations. While creativity improved, some learners still relied heavily on structured phrases and needed prompts to sustain their speech. This suggests that the development of creative speaking is gradual and must be reinforced consistently across the curriculum.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore how creative thinking can be developed through IELTS Speaking Part 1 tasks in beginner-to pre-intermediate levelled students. The findings confirm that, with thoughtful adaptation and appropriate class tactics can go beyond their traditional exam-preparation role and become powerful tools for fostering creativity, fluency, and learner confidence. The four-week classroom intervention demonstrated that learners responded positively to creative prompts, showing increased willingness to speak, greater originality in their responses, and improved ability to express personal ideas. The integration of scaffolded support—such as prompt questions, sentence starters, and peer collaboration—was particularly effective in helping learners participate in imaginative, yet structured, speaking tasks.

To sum up, IELTS Speaking tasks can serve as a springboard for creative language use when approached through a pedagogical lens that values student expression, cognitive engagement, and supportive classroom dynamics. The study reinforces the idea that creativity and exam preparation are not mutually exclusive and that even beginners can engage in meaningful, imaginative speaking with the right guidance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for language teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers interested in combining creative thinking with

exam-based speaking practice:

1. Reframe IELTS Questions Creatively

Teachers should consider extending standard IELTS Part 1 questions with open-ended or hypothetical follow-ups. These creative extensions stimulate learner imagination and allow for more expressive language use.

2. Scaffold Imaginative Tasks for Low-Level Learners

Beginners benefit greatly from structured support. Visual prompts, sentence frames, and role-play cards help reduce cognitive load and make creative tasks accessible to all proficiency levels.

3. Emphasize Fluency and Idea Generation over Accuracy

In the early stages of creative speaking tasks, the focus should be on fluency and idea development. Teachers should encourage risk-taking and provide positive reinforcement rather than over-correcting errors.

4. Use Reflective Tools for Deeper Learning

Reflective journals, self-evaluations, and peer feedback help learners track their progress, recognize moments of creativity, and build awareness of their speaking habits.

5. Integrate Creative Speaking Regularly

Creative thinking tasks should not be treated as occasional add-ons but embedded regularly in speaking practice. A consistent approach supports long-term growth in confidence, fluency, and expression.

6. Encourage Peer Collaboration

Pair and group speaking activities enhance interaction, provide peer models for creativity, and increase learner motivation through shared storytelling and idea exchange.

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