Speaking Up: A Principled Curriculum Design for Enhancing Strategic Competence and Self-Efficacy in IELTS Learners

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Abstract: This study presents the design of a short, intensive IELTS Speaking course tailored for Indonesian learners with an intermediate proficiency level (Band 5.5) aiming to improve to Band 6 or higher. Recognizing the challenges non-native speakers face in speaking performance, the course was developed through a principled curriculum design process consisting of five stages: Situation Analysis, Needs Analysis, Means and Strategy Analysis, Course Conceptualisation, and Course Specification. The design team used introspective reflection based on their own IELTS experiences, combined with established theoretical frameworks, to identify learner profiles, deficiencies, and appropriate instructional strategies. Key findings from the needs analysis revealed that learners struggled particularly with confidence and the use of effective speaking strategies such as paraphrasing and fillers to handle communication breakdowns. The course emphasizes communicative competence, strategic language use, and affective support, embedding confidence-building activities and milestone self-evaluations throughout 16 ninety-minute sessions conducted over four weeks. Instructional focus was prioritized on the more demanding Parts 2 and 3 of the IELTS Speaking test to address cognitive complexity. Formative and summative assessments, including diagnostic pre-tests and milestone checks, were integrated to monitor learner progress and guide instruction. The course's affective components, informed by language anxiety and motivation theories, were found crucial for enhancing learner engagement and self-efficacy. While the design reflects contextually responsive pedagogy, the study's reliance on introspective data and a small class size limits its generalizability. Future research should empirically examine the effectiveness of affective interventions and expand validation across diverse learner populations.

Keywords: Curriculum design, Strategic Competence, IELTS Speaking

INTRODUCTION

The growing global demand for English proficiency, particularly in high-stakes standardized tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), has led to an increasing need for targeted instructional programs. Among the four tested skills, speaking is often perceived as one of the most challenging for test-takers, particularly in non-native English-speaking contexts such as Indonesia. Many Indonesian learners aiming

to pursue education or employment abroad must improve their speaking scores from intermediate levels (e.g., Band 5.5) to a more competitive level (Band 6 or higher).

In response to this need, this study explores the design of a short, intensive IELTS Speaking course tailored to learners who have already attained a Band 5.5 and are seeking to elevate their performance. The course was collaboratively designed by a group of educators, including the author, who have engaged in a principled course design process. This research focuses specifically on the Indonesian context, recognizing the unique linguistic, educational, and motivational profiles of learners in this setting. The designed course is intended for small groups of no more than eight students to ensure intensive interaction and individualized feedback. With a total of 16 sessions conducted over four weeks—each lasting 90 minutes—the course prioritizes communicative competence, test-taking strategies, and familiarity with the IELTS Speaking test format. The background presented in this study reflects the underlying pedagogical principles, target learner profile, and logistical considerations that shaped the course design

METHODS

This study adopted a principled approach to course design, drawing upon established frameworks in language curriculum development. The methodological process comprised five key stages: Situation Analysis, Needs Analysis, Means and Strategy Analysis, Course Conceptualisation, and Course Specification. Each stage was guided by relevant theoretical underpinnings and implemented through reflective and context-specific practices. The process began with a Situation Analysis, wherein the designer's employed introspection as a method to analyse the learning context, including learner and teacher profiles as well as classroom settings. Drawing on personal experience as former IELTS learners and test-takers, the design team constructed a profile of the course setting. This reflective strategy is consistent with Graves (2000) and Christison and Murray (2014), who emphasise that situational analysis provides foundational insights necessary for informed curriculum decisions.

Subsequently, a Needs Analysis was conducted based on the model proposed by Nation and Macalister (2010), encompassing present situation analysis (PSA), target situation analysis (TSA), and deficiency analysis (DA). In this stage, introspection was again employed to identify learners' current abilities, desired outcomes, and perceived gaps (Fay & Slaouti, 2024). Official IELTS speaking descriptors were reviewed to contextualise the findings and align them with proficiency benchmarks. Particular emphasis was placed on confidence and strategy use, given their documented influence on language proficiency (Moradi Yousefabadi & Ghafournia, 2023; Graves, 2000).

The third stage, Means and Strategy Analysis, focused on identifying pedagogical tools and instructional strategies appropriate to the learners' needs. Resources such as speaking prompts, cohesive devices, and explicit strategy instruction were selected. The inclusion of self-evaluation tools and reflective milestones was also determined at this stage, in alignment with West (1994) and Graves (2000), who stress the importance of aligning instructional approaches with learners' deficiencies and goals. In the Course Conceptualisation stage, the team synthesised insights from the prior analyses to develop clear course aims, learning outcomes, and content progression. The design prioritised communicative competence, strategic language use, and affective development, echoing the curriculum design principles of Nation and Macalister (2010).

The final stage, Course Specification, detailed the course structure, consisting of 16 sessions and three milestone checkpoints over four weeks. A pre-course diagnostic assessment and a post-course evaluation were integrated to track learner progress and guide instruction (Graves, 2000; Fay & West, 2024). Instructional time was disproportionately allocated to IELTS Speaking Parts 2 and 3, reflecting their complexity and greater cognitive demands (Christison & Murray, 2014). Affective elements, such as confidence-building tasks and reflective discussions, were embedded to support learner

engagement and reduce language anxiety (Nasution et al., 2022; Nation & Macalister, 2010). Through this methodical and theory-informed process, the course was tailored to address the specific needs of intermediate IELTS learners within the Indonesian context, with a particular focus on enhancing speaking performance and learner self-efficacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study's findings are presented in five key thematic areas reflecting the principled course design process: situation and needs analysis, pedagogical implications, course implementation, assessment strategies, and affective support. The materials produced at each stage were analysed to derive findings that illuminated learner profiles, target goals, and specific challenges—most notably regarding confidence and strategy use in IELTS speaking tasks. These findings directly shaped the curriculum's focus and structure, informing instructional content, pacing, and evaluation methods. The results also highlight the vital role of affective strategies in fostering learner confidence and engagement.

1. Situation and Needs Analysis: Leveraging Introspection

Our course design process commenced with a situation analysis, where we employed an introspective method by reflecting on our experiences as IELTS test-takers. This introspective data-gathering technique provided rich, contextual insights into the learning environment, as recommended by Graves (2000) and Christison and Murray (2014), who view situational analysis as foundational in principled course development. Key findings included characteristics of learners and classroom dynamics, which informed subsequent stages of curriculum planning. This method is congruent with constructivist approaches to curriculum development, emphasizing the subjective interpretation of experience as a valid source of knowledge (Brown, 2007). Such reflective practice facilitates a nuanced understanding of learner profiles, enabling more contextually responsive instructional design.

The needs analysis also relied on introspection, aligned with Nation and Macalister's (2010) framework that categorizes needs into necessities, lacks, and wants. Informed by our experience and by referencing the official IELTS speaking criteria, we postulated the learners' current speaking abilities (PSA), their target outcomes (TS), and their specific areas of deficiency (DA). We identified a lack of confidence and limited speaking strategy use—particularly when encountering lexical gaps or processing delays—as central obstacles. This finding aligns with West (1994), who stresses the importance of targeted needs identification in course planning. The affective dimension, particularly confidence, was thus prioritized, echoing Graves' (2000) and Moradi Yousefabadi and Ghafournia's (2023) emphasis on its influence on language performance. Furthermore, the integration of affective needs into curriculum design is supported by emerging research in language anxiety and motivation, which highlights affect as a critical factor influencing communicative competence and learner persistence (Dörnyei, 2009). This holistic approach underscores the interdependence of cognitive and affective domains in language acquisition.

2. Pedagogical Implications: Confidence and Strategy Instruction

One notable insight from the deficiency analysis was that while students could often sustain speech at length (meeting one aspect of IELTS criteria), they struggled when encountering difficulty mid-speech. Consequently, our course placed emphasis on teaching speaking strategies such as the use of cohesive devices, paraphrasing, and fillers. These findings align with West (1994), who advocates for instruction that directly addresses learner gaps. This targeted strategy instruction reflects principles of communicative competence as conceptualized by Canale and Swain (1980), encompassing not only linguistic but also strategic competence. By equipping learners with practical tools to negotiate communication breakdowns, the course enhances learners' ability to maintain interaction despite lexical or processing challenges.

Furthermore, to address the affective challenges, confidence-building was integrated throughout the course. Research indicates that confidence is strongly correlated with speaking performance (Moradi Yousefabadi & Ghafournia, 2023). Hence, our instructional methods sought to foster this through scaffolded tasks and milestone assessments. This approach is consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development theory, which emphasizes the importance of guided support and gradually increased learner autonomy. Scaffolded learning environments not only develop competence but also promote affective growth by creating conditions conducive to positive learner self-efficacy and motivation (Bandura, 1997).

3. Course Implementation: Content, Duration, and Evaluation

Our course specification outlined 16 instructional sessions plus three milestone assessment sessions. Each class lasted 90 minutes, striking a balance between intensity and manageability, especially considering students' probable outside commitments. This pacing decision was informed by the understanding that IELTS band score improvement is contingent on proficiency levels and affective factors, such as anxiety (Cambridge Blog, 2021). The temporal structuring of the course reflects cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988), designed to optimize information processing and retention by balancing input intensity and learner capacity. This strategic pacing is also attentive to extrinsic constraints, fostering sustainable engagement and minimizing burnout.

The curriculum was structured into four weekly phases: an introductory week, two core weeks, and a review week. Greater instructional time was allocated to Parts 2 and 3 of the IELTS Speaking test, reflecting their complexity and scoring weight (Christison & Murray, 2014). For instance, Part 2 requires sustained monologic speech, and Part 3 demands critical thinking and advanced discourse strategies. Part 1, being more predictable and personal, received less instructional focus. This approach aligns with Nation and Macalister's (2010) principle of matching curriculum intensity to task complexity, and is further justified by empirical studies suggesting focused practice on more cognitively demanding tasks yields greater proficiency gains (Derwing & Munro, 2015). This prioritization reflects an understanding of differential task demands and their impact on learner development trajectories.

4. Formative and Summative Assessment: Milestone Checking and Diagnostic Testing

To ensure alignment between instructional goals and learner progress, formative assessment was implemented through milestone checks at the end of each week. These involved simulations of IELTS speaking parts and self-evaluation, allowing students to reflect on their development. This strategy supports learner autonomy and aligns with Nation and Macalister's (2010) advocacy for self-assessment as a tool for language learning. Formative assessment's role in fostering metacognitive awareness is well-documented (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009), encouraging learners to actively monitor and regulate their learning processes, which is essential for effective language acquisition and lifelong learning.

A pre-course diagnostic test was administered to evaluate individual learner strengths and weaknesses, enabling a tailored instructional approach. Despite a common proficiency benchmark of IELTS 5.5, variation in subskills necessitated differentiated support. The final post-test functioned both as a summative assessment and as a reflective tool for future curriculum revision (Fay & West, 2024). This dual use of assessment data aligns with best practices in language program evaluation (Brown & Hudson, 1998), ensuring accountability while informing iterative curriculum improvement. The emphasis on diagnostic and summative assessments underscores the course's responsiveness to learner diversity and continuous quality enhancement.

5. Fostering Confidence: The Role of Affective Strategies

The final week included confidence-raising activities such as focus group discussions, intended to create low-anxiety, collaborative spaces for speech practice. These sessions emphasized both skill-building and emotional support, adhering to the framework laid out by Graves (2000). Nasution et al. (2022) affirm that reduced anxiety enhances learner

performance, and our findings supported this, with students demonstrating greater engagement and fluency in these settings. This aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), which posits that emotional factors such as anxiety and motivation critically influence language input processing and acquisition. Creating a psychologically safe learning environment facilitates risk-taking and authentic communication, key factors for speaking proficiency development.

Additionally, learner reflections were encouraged to foster metacognition and self-awareness—key components of language proficiency development (Christison & Murray, 2014). This structured, supportive environment allowed learners to rehearse, receive feedback, and reflect—resulting in observable confidence gains. Incorporating reflective practice is consistent with Schon's (1983) reflective practitioner model, which promotes critical self-evaluation as a mechanism for ongoing professional and learner growth. This pedagogical focus enhances learners' capacity to internalize progress and self-regulate future learning efforts, thereby reinforcing confidence and autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study presents a principled approach to designing an IELTS Speaking course tailored for learners with an intermediate proficiency level (IELTS 5.5). The main findings indicate that learners' lack of confidence and limited use of effective speaking strategies significantly hinder their speaking performance. Through comprehensive situational and needs analyses, this research identified the critical role of affective factors, particularly self-confidence, alongside strategic language skills, in facilitating successful language learning and test performance. The course implementation reflects these insights by integrating affective elements such as milestone self-evaluation and confidence-raising activities alongside explicit instruction on speaking strategies and cohesive devices. A structured curriculum consisting of 16 instructional sessions and regular milestone checks supports learner autonomy and progress monitoring, aiming to foster both skill development and learner motivation in a low-anxiety environment.

This study offers a unique insider perspective through course designers' reflective experiences, providing rich contextual insights that complement existing literature. The intimate class setting enabled deep exploration of design processes, while the specific contextual focus yields targeted findings relevant to similar educational environments. These characteristics present valuable opportunities for future research to expand the scope through multi-site studies and incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives to build upon these foundational insights. Future research should explore the effectiveness of integrating affective components within IELTS preparation courses across larger and more diverse cohorts. Investigating the impact of specific confidence-building interventions on speaking performance, as well as longitudinal studies tracking learner progress beyond course completion, would provide valuable insights. Expanding the scope to include teachers' perspectives and learners' lived experiences could further enhance the design of principled, learner-centred language courses.

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