

Sources and Countermeasures of Students' Anxiety in Oral Examination – Take the IELTS speaking test for example

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Abstract. As English teaching in China has always been "cramming method", students' shortcomings with oral English make them become anxious. Based on the three sources of anxiety — the familiarity of the text content, the language proficiency level and feedback from others, this study has conducted semi-structured interviews on six IELTS candidates and tried to summarize the countermeasures to overcome anxiety proposed by the interviewees, aiming at helping IELTS candidates reduce their anxiety about the oral test and providing certain reference value for future research on traditional oral English teaching.

1. Introduction

English plays an important role as an international language. Today, with global development, IELTS has become the world's most popular English language proficiency test for higher education and immigrants. Although English teaching in China varies from region to region, they all pay more attention to written examination, that is, students' listening, reading and writing ability, ignoring the importance of oral ability. Therefore, many IELTS candidates feel anxious when preparing for the speaking test and are afraid to speak English, which will affect the IELTS oral test score.

According to the 2018 White Paper on the Academic Performance of IELTS Candidates in Mainland China, IELTS candidates have improved slightly in various English skills in the past five years (2012-2017), but their speaking scores are still the lowest among the four skills, which shows that speaking is an important reason for the low overall score of IELTS.

Therefore, it is of great practical significance to study how IELTS candidates overcome anxiety and improve their oral performance. Based on the IELTS speaking test, this study will analyze the causes of students' anxiety about the speaking test in detail, and try to find out the effective ways to improve the speaking test.

2. Literature Review

The definitions and related studies are illustrated. The author will do the research based on them.

2.1. Definition and the Theory of Foreign Language Anxiety

Spielberger (1983) defines anxiety as "the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry

associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system".[1] Language anxiety is a complex psychological phenomenon unique to language learning, which is caused by the particularity of the learning process.

Horwitz & Cope (1986) proposed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale for the first time. They believed that foreign language learners would have three kinds of anxiety in the learning process: communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation and test anxiety.[2]

2.2. Source of Anxiety for the IELTS Speaking Test

According to Li, the oral anxiety of Chinese college students can be divided into internal and external reasons. Among them, the internal reasons mention that students' oral anxiety is caused by their weak English foundation, fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence and other reasons, resulting in oral communication barriers (2023).[3]

We often say that foreign language anxiety (FLA) especially exists in oral expression, when students think they have to express in English, they will have a strong sense of tension, and more concerned about other people's impression and judgment of their fluency (Chen Peng, 2022).[4] When students lack a lot of oral practice, it will lead students be afraid of speaking English in public, and can not improve learning efficiency (Liu Hui & Li Shuhua, 2022).[5] Besides, Sucharat Rimkeeratikul (2017) proposed that students' English proficiency would affect their anxiety level when communicating in English.[6]

In addition, Kevin Zaragoza (2019) said that although the IELTS speaking test is only conducted between the examiner and the candidate, challenges and difficulties related to fluency can be observed. The reason for this is that examiners are perceived as

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inefficient, harsh, deficient in language, showing undesirable facial expressions, and non-experts.[7] Fearing of negative feedback from teachers or raters may negatively affect students' communication with teachers or other classmates(Price, 1991)[8]. Han Luo (2014) showed in his research that respondents' perception of the difficulty level of Chinese language was significantly positively correlated with oral anxiety. This means that students who find Chinese more difficult are more likely to feel anxious. [9]What's more, content familiarity and task repetition also have an impact on oral performance of English learners, with participants producing more complex sounds in familiar conditions and increasing their fluency (Xuyan Qiu, 2020).[10]

According to the above previous literature, there are three main sources of students' oral test anxiety: text content familiarity anxiety, the level of language ability anxiety and others' feedback anxiety.

2.3. Influence of Anxiety on Speaking Test

Studies have shown that both foreign language anxiety and test anxiety are significantly negatively correlated with test scores. In addition, there is a strong positive correlation between foreign language anxiety and test anxiety (Salehi M, Marefat F 2014).[11]

Naser Oteir I and Nijr Al-Otaibi A (2019) believe that anxiety related to foreign languages has a negative impact on foreign language learning. Students who feel anxious when learning a foreign language may become miserable, worried, forgetful, resulting in students unable to speak, that is, affect oral fluency.[12]Von Worde R (2003) demonstrated that anxiety can negatively affect the language learning experience in a number of ways.[13]Anxiety can cause students to feel nervous and unsure of themselves when expressing, which can make it difficult for students to concentrate, causing them to be distracted or unable to focus during the learning process (Maria Eva Damayanti & Listyani Listyani, 2020).[14]

Aydin S, Akkaş F D, Türnük T (2020) confirm that anxiety can lead to physical problems, affect academic performance, and reduce emotional state. In terms of test scores, anxiety can lead to a decline in students' performance, which can affect students' learning effectiveness and prevent them from reaching their full potential. In addition, anxiety can cause students to worry about test results and worry that they will not perform as well as others, which further aggravates anxiety.[15]

2.4. Empirical Studies on the Improving Oral English Effectively

Zhang proposed that there is a correlation between the use of chunks and oral fluency. The more chunks learners produce in spoken language, the less time they spend pausing and the more fluent they become in spoken language (2022).[16] In addition, speaking more and communicating more in real life is one of the best ways to improve oral expression skills(Duan Li, 2023).

[17]Paying more attention to listening to native English speakers is a great help in correcting pronunciation and intonation errors as well as strengthening auditory understanding. In addition, try to talk with them in English, from simple sentences to complex sentences, and you will not worry about your oral expression ability for a long time. At the same time, recite English poetry, prose, etc., through reciting to enhance oral ability; Create an English environment, including using English in and out of class, participating in English activities, marking furniture in English at home, etc. Taking a variety of subject training, not only limited to common questions, but also through different topics to expand knowledge and vocabulary are of great help to improve oral English; The way of thinking is also very important, and learners can try to think in English when learning English (Huang L, 2010).[18]

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

As mentioned above, this research intends to find out the source of students' anxiety of oral English based on the IELTS oral test, and try to find out their effective ways to improve oral English fluency. Therefore, this research will discuss the following questions.

- (1) Do the candidates have anxiety during the IELTS speaking test?
- (2) What causes IELTS candidates become anxious during IELTS test?
- (3) How do the candidates overcome anxiety?

3.2. Research Subjects

Six participants were recruited from several IELTS training institutions for this study, and the information is summarized in Table 1. The IELTS speaking score of the participants is 5-6. The reasons for preparing for IELTS are mainly divided into language requirements of overseas universities and improving English language skills. Preparation time ranges from 2 months to nearly half a year. Candidates B and C have just graduated from high school, so they did not fill in majors.

The participants have different majors, educational background and IELTS speaking score, which enhances the generality of the findings to some extent.

Table 1. Information about the Participants

Name (Anonymity)	Gender	Age	Majors	IELTS Speaking Score
A	F	23	Communication	5.5
B	F	20	/	6
C	F	18	/	5
D	F	22	English	5.5
E	M	21	Computer Science	5
F	M	21	Law	6

3.3. Research Instruments

The interview can help the author understand the oral test anxiety from IELTS participants and ask them for their good methods of practicing speaking, which would help the author to put forward with the suggestions about reducing oral test anxiety. This study uses the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews to capture and analyze students' ideas and reveal candidates' perspectives to the maximum extent possible. Interviews were conducted online in Chinese and the author recorded with candidates' consent for later analysis. Before conducting the interview, in order to ensure that the research questions were clear, the authors developed a detailed interview guide, including questions to be asked and possible follow-up questions, to ensure that the objectives of the interview were clear (Roulston K 2010).[19] Based on the research questions, apart from the interview quotes, confidentiality notes and concluding remarks, the interview is divided into four main parts based on the previous literature and the research purpose of this paper: 1. Anxiety from language proficiency level 2. Anxiety from the familiarity of text content 3. Anxiety from others feedback 4. Countermeasures to overcome oral test anxiety. During the interview, the author would timely change the content of questions according to the respondents' answers.

4. Results and Discussion

In the semi-structured interview, the researchers extracted specific interview records from the respondents' answers to analyze the three sources of anxiety.

4.1. Anxiety from Language Proficiency Level

According to the respondents' perception of their own English language level, the author organizes it into Table 2.

Table 2. Participants' perception of their own English Language Level

Name	Perception of English Language Level
A	I believe English is my advantage subject.
B	I have studied English for about 8 years, so my foundation is good.
C	I think my English is very average.
D	As an English major, I don't think I have mastered English very well.
E	My English is awful
F	As a non-English major, I believe English is my advantage subject

When the author asked each respondent about the influence of language ability on anxiety, all respondents said that their language proficiency would be improved due to adequate preparation for the test, thus reducing their anxiety. According to table 2, the level of language

proficiency does not make them feel anxious in the IELTS speaking test.

Candidate F said: "IELTS test is a very expensive test, and unlike listening and reading tests, the oral test cannot make me have a definite understanding of my mastery degree through a long time of practicing, so the uncertainty of speaking ability is one of the important reasons for my anxiety, but after sufficient preparation, it does reduce some anxiety." In addition, if the IELTS candidates do not make adequate preparation before the exam, they would lack the corresponding vocabulary and grammar, sometimes they may even not understand the examiner's questions, which may lead them have nothing to talk during the test (candidate C, D).

Interestingly, candidate E said that his English is very poor and this kind of language is too hard for him, but he was only nervous when he had been waiting for the test. He hardly be anxious about the low language level during the IELTS speaking test. This is inconsistent with the findings of Han Luo (2014).[9] Despite the respondents felt that English was difficult, they did not feel more anxious. However, the candidate also said that he is well prepared before the exam, which is one reason he does not feel anxious.

4.2. Anxiety from the Familiarity of Text Content

When it comes to familiarity with text content, all respondents consistently express anxiety.

First of all, because the questions in part 1 and part 2 of the IELTS speaking test has a detailed question bank, respondents said that they will carefully prepare possible answers before the exam, therefore, in the exam, although they still have pauses, they would perform better. In addition, candidate B said, "Because there is a question bank that can prepare for the questions in advance, I feel I can finish the questions with enough time. If you have enough time, you can also complete the corresponding answer for each question, and then refine it to make your answer more attractive to the examiner and highlight your own characteristics." However, when it comes to unpredictable questions like part 3, respondents report feeling more anxious. candidate D said, "The examiners are foreigners, their thinking style are not consistent with ours, so I need to change my way of thinking during the test." Candidate A believes that sometimes, although the question is a relatively familiar topic, such as society, but the her answers to the questions would be more subjective, which lead her always give insufficient reasons. What's more, the questions in part 3 are very extensive, sometimes they even ask some very strange questions, and the candidates have no corresponding ideas when answering them, which makes them very anxious (Candidate B). Candidate E claimed, "During the test, when I was given the question I was not familiar with, my mind went blank. I was worried that I had not spoken enough and would lose my mark." In addition, Part3, which requires timely responses, is more difficult overall than Parts 1 and 2, and makes the test takers more anxious

(candidates B, F), which is consistent with previous research.

4.3. Anxiety from Others Feedback

When it comes to anxiety caused by feedback, most respondents said that the feedback of the examiner has a great impact on their performance during the IELTS speaking test. Candidate A said that IELTS speaking score is very subjective, in the process of the test, she would be very worried about the lack of resonance with the examiner's communication, and when speaking, she involuntarily notices the examiner's expression changes. When the examiner nods and smiles, that is, positive feedback, then the output will be more fluent, whereas if it is negative feedback, such as frowning, it will become anxious and affect the output (candidate E). In addition, the lack of communication with native English speakers is also one of the important reasons. Candidates B and C both said that in their daily lives, they lack opportunities to communicate with foreigners. When they realize that they have to communicate with foreigners during the exam, they will feel more anxious and worry that they will not understand what they want to express. In addition, whether in daily oral practice or in the exam, being observed and evaluated by others will increase the tension and become less confident (candidate D).

The majority of participants will predict their performance by the examiner's feedback, resulting in anxiety about the examiner's evaluation and affecting the language output, which is consistent with previous studies. However, candidate F believes that the scoring standards have been published on the official website of IELTS, so the examiner factors have little impact on his psychological state. Although the examiner's personal communication mode is not the same, but the actual oral score will be judged according to the actual performance of the candidates.

4.4. Countermeasures to Overcome Oral Test Anxiety

Based on the respondents' answers, the researchers tried to sum up three strategies that could help students overcome oral test anxiety.

(1) Speak more and practice more to ensure regular oral practice. One of the best ways to improve oral expression ability is to find a suitable partner for dialogue or supervision, in the process of slowly developing the ability to think in English, long-term persistence can effectively relieve anxiety. Candidate B said that during the two months of preparation for the exam, she used English as much as possible every day. At the beginning, it was really difficult, and she even felt embarrassed when speaking English with others. However, after persisting for a period of time, the tension and embarrassment were well relieved, and she also had more content to communicate with the examiner in the exam.

(2) Fully prepare for the exam and enhance confidence in dealing with the exam. In previous

interviews, all respondents mentioned that they would be more confident and less anxious when answering questions on familiar topics. In China, the question bank of Parts 1 and 2 of IELTS speaking test is very complete, so the candidates can practice fully before the test to relieve the anxiety of the speaking test. Candidate A said that in the model exam, she was not fully prepared, even if she was asked the questions in the question bank, she still could not answer, which had led to a lot of anxiety in the exam. However, before the formal exam, she practiced all the questions in the question bank again, and when she got familiar questions, she was obviously less nervous.

(3) Create an examination atmosphere to achieve the "desensitization" of the examiner's feedback. IELTS speaking test focuses on the communication and expression of candidates' wishes, and the situation has a relatively important impact on their learning attitude and learning quality. They should build appropriate English learning environment to provide good external conditions for oral English learning (Liu Hui & Li Shuhua, 2022)[5], which can effectively eliminate feedback anxiety. In the interview, candidate D pointed out that she would use photos of several foreign examiners and practice her oral English in front of them in her daily practice, which could effectively help her relieve exam anxiety.

5. Conclusion

This survey interviewed six candidates who had participated in the IELTS test, aiming to understand the sources of anxiety of candidates in the speaking test and the countermeasures to overcome anxiety. Through semi-structured interviews with 6 candidates, the results show that in the IELTS speaking test, candidates have the greatest anxiety about the familiarity of the text content, and the anxiety about the unprepared topic content will be greatly increased; The examiner's feedback will affect the examinee's output to some extent; Adequate preparation and practice will help candidates gain confidence and reduce anxiety about the speaking test.

However, there are still some shortcomings. First of all, although the author have prepared an interview guide, the questions written by the author are not highly targeted for the responses of interviewees were not fixed, which may affect the reliability of the semi-structured interview. Secondly, the sample size is not large enough to represent of all of the IELTS candidates, which reduces the validity of this study in some degree.

For further research, two suggestions are put forward: first, expand the number of participants to increase the scientific reliability and representativeness of data; The second is to further explore and study students' foreign language anxiety, which is a long-term and comprehensive study.

It is hoped that future studies can more comprehensively and deeply explore the sources and countermeasures of students' foreign language anxiety,

put forward new viewpoints and effective suggestions, and achieve more research results.

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