

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE APPLICATION OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS IN IELTS SPEAKING MODULE.

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore one of the IELTS modules, speaking where the assessment uses Critical Thinking to discuss topics in the 3rd part. How different parts in the speaking module is divided and tested is explained in detail. Critical thinking skills in combination with Bloom's Taxonomy are experimented with the key words used in part 3 by the examiner to test the language proficiency and the ability of the test taker to analyze and evaluate different topics in a limited time. An overview is generated evaluating the maximum number of IELTS test takers from Asia and how their Critical thinking skills are compared to their western companions which could probably affect their testing score using the second language in IELTS Speaking. The paper concludes with the importance of Critical thinking in life situations and an appeal to spread in all the disciplines to bring about standard of human thinking and thus life in total.

Key words: Critical Thinking, Modules of IELTS, Speaking module, Expectations of the examiner, Bloom's Taxonomy, 21st century skills, Key words in Speaking, Asian Test Takers.

Introduction

The four successful skills of the 21st century holds Critical thinking also along with Communication, Collaboration and Creativity. Critical thinking is not an independent discipline like mathematics, history or geography. The skills Critical Thinking, analysis, evaluation, argumentation and problem solving are a fundamental set of tools that can be applied in many disciplines in preparing the students. These skills are ultimately useful in the field of academic and professions. It is known that each discipline has its own content. Critical thinking supports to analyze information, evaluate the evidences, and to organize rational arguments within the given context. Critical thinking skills can be compared to the tool box and each discipline or field has its own different ways of using them. It has been conveniently used in IELTS also. English language testing at a stage is not just for examining grammar and vocabulary of the candidate. On the contrary, it is to assess how capable a test taker is to analyze, evaluate and discuss complex and broad topics using English language. It can also be considered as, whether the candidate is capable of using specific vocabularies and grammatical range for the critical thinking discussions as it is very significant in the real-world situation. Among the modules Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking of IELTS, the testing system demands the candidates to use critical thinking in Writing module where it is required to write an argumentative essay on a topic and in Speaking part 3

where the examiner uses variety of critical thinking keywords to discuss various topics with the examinee. This paper tries to explore the application of Critical thinking in IELTS speaking module.

IELTS - International English Language Testing System.

The International English Language Testing System, also known as IELTS, is a standardized test that is designed to help the candidates to achieve their ambition of working, studying or moving to a country where English is the primary language of instruction or language of communication. IELTS was established in 1989, and it has gained a huge popularity and necessity throughout the world contemporarily. For more than 30 years, IELTS has set the standard for English language testing which is trusted by governments, employers and educational institutions. IELTS tests were booked by 40,00,000 test takers worldwide last year and there are 12500 organizations that trust IELTS. There is a global partnership established among the British Council, IDP Australia and Cambridge University Press & Assessment. The IELTS test assesses the four skills of English Language that are Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. The candidates have to choose the test that suits to their university education, for the visa and to the professional association.

4 Modules of IELTS

IELTS exam is conducted in two formats Academic and General. IELTS Academic and IELTS General Training are designed to cover the complete language abilities from non-user or middle user to expert user. The Academic version is for the candidates who want to study in an English-speaking country or to look for professional registration. (Example, Doctors, Nurses, and Engineers.) The General version is preferred by the test takers who want to work, train, or migrate to an English-speaking nation. The content, context and purpose of the tasks are the difference between the Academic and General versions. The time allocation, the number of words of the responses and reporting of scores are same for both the versions.

Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking Details.

Module	Time Allotted	Items
Listening	30 Minutes (10 more Minutes to transfer the answer)	<p>1. Section 1 has a conversation between two speakers (for example, a conversation about travel arrangements)</p> <p>Section 2 has one person speaking (for example, a speech about local facilities).</p> <p>Section 3 is a conversation between two main speakers (for example, a discussion between two university students, perhaps guided by a tutor)</p>

		Section 4 has one person speaking about an academic subject.
Reading	60 Minutes	<p>Academic</p> <p>Three reading texts and all the topics are of general interest to students at undergraduate or postgraduate level.</p> <p>General Training</p> <p>Section 1 contains two or three short texts or several shorter texts, which deal with everyday topics.</p> <p>Section 2 contains two texts, which deal with work.</p> <p>Section 3 contains one long text about a topic of general interest.</p>
Writing	60 Minutes	<p>Academic</p> <p>Task 1: Test takers describe a graph, table, chart, map, process, pie chart or diagram in their own words.</p> <p>Task 2: Test takers discuss a point of view, argument, or problem.</p> <p>General Training</p> <p>Task 1: Test takers write a letter in response to a given everyday situation.</p> <p>Task 2: Test takers write an essay about a topic of general interest.</p>

Among all the 4 modules of the IELTS Test, Speaking is a participatory activity and that is the main reason for this to be an important skill. IELTS Speaking is conducted in an oral interview form in a realistic scenario. This is conducted in person with a qualified examiner. The results are scored using a scale 1 to 9, with both full and half bands being used.

The Expectations of the examiner – IELTS Speaking.

Criteria	What does the criteria mean?
Fluency and Coherence	It refers to the ability to talk with normal levels of continuity, rate and effort, and to link ideas and language together to form coherent, connected speech.
Lexical Resource	This criterion refers to the ability to use a range of vocabulary and to express meanings and attitudes with precision.
Grammatical Range and Accuracy	This refers to the ability to use a range of grammatical items accurately and appropriately.
Pronunciation	This criterion refers to the ability to use a range of phonological features consistently and accurately to convey meaning.

The examiner holds his evaluation sheet to check the Production skills, Communication Skills, and the Language Skills of the test taker. The elements assessed in Production Skills are Rhythm, Number and Length of pauses, Stress, Intonation, and Sounds. Fluency, Clarity, Coherence, Confidence, and Cultural Appropriacy are observed in the Communication Skills. In Language Skills, Grammatical Accuracy, Grammatical Range, and Vocabulary Range are assessed.

3 Parts	The Kind of Turns	Explanation and Examples
Part 1 (4 - 5 Minutes)	General Questions About Self and Everyday Situations.	Examiner interviews candidate using verbal questions requiring short answers and the topics are familiar and concrete.
Example of Part 1.		Flowers a. Do you ever have flowers in your home? b. When did you last buy flowers? c. Have you ever grown flowers yourself? d. Do people use flowers on special occasions in your culture?

<p>Part 2 (3 - 4 Minutes)</p>	<p>Individual Long Turn Monologue.</p>	<p>Examiner asks candidate to speak for 1-2 minutes on a particular topic based on written input on a task card. Candidate has one minute to prepare, and may write some notes. The topics are more detailed. Examiner might conclude by asking one or two short follow up questions.</p>
<p>Example of Part 2.</p>		<p>Describe a famous person who you think is a good role model for young people.</p> <p>You should say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who this famous person is • what you know about him/her? • why he/she is a good role model for young people • and explain how you feel about this famous person being a good role model for young people.
<p>Part 3 (4 - 5 Minutes)</p>	<p>Conversation On Abstract Topics</p>	<p>Examiner generates a discussion relating to the topic introduced in Part 2. The candidate is expected to generate longer responses to these questions.</p>
<p>Example of Part 3.</p>		<p>Role models</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - (evaluate) how important it is for young people to have good role models. - (suggest) what the qualities of a good role model might be. - (comment on) the view that everyone can be a role model for someone.

3rd Part of the Speaking

Part 3 of speaking in IELTS has topics that demand discussion on abstract and complex topics. It is true that the candidates who prepare for the IELTS, have to face several challenges and one of them is Part 3 of speaking test. The questions and the topics are phrased in such a way that

the candidate has to provide well-reasoned arguments and support opinions with examples and evidences that are relevant to the topic. It is vivid and obvious that Part 3 of the IELTS speaking test needs the test taker to show CRITICAL THINKING skills by analyzing and evaluating ideas. The trainers instruct the candidates that they should practice to think critically about various topics and grow in the ability to express the responses clearly and logically.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a rational response to questions that cannot be answered definitively and for which all the relevant information may not be available. It is defined here as an investigation whose purpose is to explore a situation, phenomenon, question, or problem to arrive at a hypothesis or conclusion about it that integrates all available information and that can therefore be convincingly justified. Moore was able to identify some common features which can define Critical Thinking more clearly. According to his research Critical Thinking is:

- A judgement of whether something is good, bad, valid, or true.
- Rational, or Reason-based.
- Skeptical Thinking.
- Productive Thinking – not only challenging ideas, but producing them – coming to conclusions about issues.
- Carefully reading beyond the literal meaning of the text.
- Awareness of the entire process.
- Ethical or activist – in other words, not neutral.

Bloom’s Taxonomy

The most popular example of Critical Thinking is perhaps Bloom’s Taxonomy. It categorizes the way people learn into three domains and one of them is cognitive domain which stresses on the intellectual outcomes. This particular domain is further divided into levels. There are key words and types of questions being asked to support the establishment and encouragement of Critical Thinking.

Categories	Description	Key Words
Cognitive Domain		
Knowledge	Exhibiting previously learned material by recalling facts, terms, basic concepts and answers.	Define, Describe, Identify, Know, Label, List, Match, Memorize, Name, Outline, Recall, Recognize, Repeat, Reproduce, Select, State, Tell
Comprehension	Demonstrating understanding of facts and ideas by organizing, comparing, translating, interpreting, giving descriptions and stating main ideas.	Associate, Characterize, Classify, Compare, Comprehend, Convert, Defend, Differentiate, Distinguish, Estimate, Explain,

		Extend, Generalize, Give Examples, Infer, Interpret, Paraphrase, Predict, Rewrite, Show Relationship Of, Summarize, Translate
Application	Solving problems by applying acquired knowledge, facts, techniques and rules in a different way.	Apply, Change, Compute, Construct, Demonstrate, Discover, Exercise, Experiment, Manipulate, Modify, Operate, Organize, Practice, Predict, Prepare, Produce, Relate, Show, Solve, Systematize, Use
Analysis	Examining and breaking information into parts by identifying motives or causes; making inferences and finding evidence to support generalizations.	Analyze, Break Down, Compare, Contrast, Deconstruct, Determine, Diagram, Differentiate, Discover, Discriminate, Distinguish, Examine, Identify, Illustrate, Infer, Investigate, Observe, Outline, Relate, Select, Separate
Synthesis	Compiling information together in a different way by combining elements in a new pattern or proposing alternative solutions.	Build, Choose, Combine, Compile, Compose, Construct, Create, Design, Develop, Estimate, Formulate, Imagine, Invent, Make Up, Originate, Plan, Predict, Propose, Solve, Solution, Suppose, Discuss, Modify, Change, Original, Improve, Adapt, Minimize, Maximize, Delete, Theorize, Elaborate, Test, Improve, Happen, Change
Evaluation	Presenting and defending opinions by making judgments about information, validity of ideas or quality of work based on a set of criteria.	Accept/Reject, Appraise, Calculate, Compare, Conclude, Consult, Contrast, Criticize, Critique, Decide, Defend, Describe, Discriminate, Discuss, Estimate, Evaluate, Explain, Interpret, Judge, Justify, Measure,

		Relate, Summarize, Support, Value
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Critical Thinking Words in IELTS Speaking Part 3.

There are sixteen words that are used mostly in the 3rd Part of IELTS Speaking. These key words are also part of Bloom’s Taxonomy in different categories from lower order thinking to higher order thinking.

01	Account for	02	Agree/Disagree	03	Assess	04	Comment on
05	Compare	06	Consider	07	Contrast	08	Describe
09	Evaluate	10	Explain	11	Give Reasons	12	Identify
13	Outline	14	Predict	15	Speculate on	16	Suggest

Critical Thinking Speaking Part 3 Key Words and Bloom’s Taxonomy Categories.

	Words Used in IELTS Speaking Part 3	Example Questions from IELTS Speaking Part 3	Bloom’s Taxonomy - Categories of Cognitive Domain
01	Account for	Account for - The increasing demand for foreign language speakers in the modern workplace.	Analysis, Knowledge.
02	Agree/Disagree	Agree/disagree - it is hard to make decisions because there is too much information on the internet.	Evaluation, Comprehension.
03	Assess	Assess - the advantages and disadvantages of owning a home.	Evaluation, Synthesis, Comprehension.
04	Comment on	Comment on - the view that everyone is a natural storyteller.	Knowledge, Evaluation.
05	Compare	Compare - shopping in shopping centers/malls and street markets.	Analysis, Comprehension, Evaluation.
06	Consider	Consider - whether a country should try to grow all the food that its population needs.	Analysis, Application, Evaluation.
07	Contrast	Contrast - punishments and rewards as ways of encouraging people to behave well.	Analysis, Evaluation, Comprehension.
08	Describe	Describe - situations when people often have to wait in your country.	Knowledge, Evaluation.
09	Evaluate	Evaluate - the extent to which digital images can be trusted to portray the truth.	Evaluation.

10	Explain	Explain - why many people are interested- in the private lives of famous people?	Comprehension, Evaluation.
11	Give Reasons	Give reasons - why some people prefer to start their own business.	Analysis, Knowledge.
12	Identify	Identify - situations in which adults can feel proud of themselves.	Analysis, application, Comprehension.
13	Outline	Outline - the benefits that reading stories can have for children's development.	Knowledge, Analysis.
14	Predict	Predict - whether people will continue to read fiction in today's digital age.	Application, Synthesis, Comprehension, Evaluation.
15	Speculate on	Speculate on - whether anything from this century will interest archaeologists in the future.	Application, Synthesis, Comprehension, Evaluation.
16	Suggest	Suggest - how watching films/movies from different countries can promote greater intercultural understanding?	Synthesis.

An Overview.

IELTS test is the test of language and not the test of knowledge. It is primarily designed to assess the proficiency of English Language of the test taker. But at the same time, one can not deny the fact that the candidate who registers for the test should have wide knowledge about broad topics although not in depth. The actual purpose of IELTS is to evaluate how well the candidate can understand and use the English language in different situations. Everyday situations, general topics and a variety of accents are used in the test to communicate efficiently in real-life scenarios. However, there is indirect connection found between language and knowledge. Even though the IELTS Speaking doesn't test particular knowledge, it is irrefutable that the assessment involves Critical Thinking skills which are interconnected with language proficiency. As the language is a medium in communication, analyzing topics, discussion on different perspectives, supporting the arguments, and justifying with examples need the assistance of language. The IELTS is a language proficiency test, but critical thinking skills and a basic information of the topic definitely affect the performance of the test taker.

Critical thinking is possible if the person has the basic foundation of knowledge. If the test taker doesn't have basic understanding about the topics discussed in part 3 of IELTS speaking, the response can not have proper analysis and the responses could be either irrelevant or very peripheral. This will deviate him from using relevant vocabularies, sentence structure and grammatical range with accuracy. Critical thinking does involve different points of view. In a condition of panic of the assessment and the time constraint, the candidate might present the points not in an orderly manner that could eventually confuse the examiner and thus affecting the score

in the speaking module. Within 4 to 5 minutes in the 3rd part of the speaking, the examiner generally tries to ask at least 6 questions adding key Critical thinking words to it and expects an organized response. Though Critical thinking is encouraged, the insufficiency of the time leaves the candidate unable to address the wholesome aspects of the topic. Not every candidate is aware of Critical Thinking and the structure of the responses to be presented in an organized way. In such a state of the candidate, concentrating on Critical thinking can outdo the fluency of speaking that will directly affect one of the expectations of the examiner. In addition, the naturalness, spontaneity, and the smoothness of the speaking will be disturbed.

It is also very important to note that there are debates about whether Asian students show lower level of critical thinking in comparison to the Western counterparts. Out of 39 nationalities who take IELTS test around the world, 26 countries' students are Asian. The studies suggest that Asian international or immigrant students normally possess lower level of English proficiency when compared to their native English-speaking companions. Eventually, the Asian students may be more "cognitively overloaded" when they use English language in critical thinking tasks. The level of proficiency of English language becomes the reason for their lower critical thinking presentation. It is true that when the candidates use the second language, there is a detrimental effect in the performance of the cognitive tasks. On the basis of these findings Takano and Noda (1993) suggested that the use of a foreign language would cause temporary decline of thinking ability as a result of heavier cognitive processing load. When it comes to 3rd part of speaking in IELTS, adults suffer more from language deficiency though they might be aware of the content to speak and the students who appear in this exam for their higher studies might not suffer with the language part but the broad knowledge of the content part to present responses to the topics. On the whole, organizing responses to the critical thinking questions in the test of this kind on the spot is indeed a tough task.

The speaking module examiners assess the ability of the test taker to analyze, evaluate and discuss the topics. If the candidate aspires to achieve higher score in part 3, he/she has to actively demonstrate critical thinking skills. A significant enhancement of critical thinking skill by proper practice would definitely create a strong impression on the examiner.

Conclusion.

we realize or we don't realize, we are bound to use Critical Thinking in everyday life. From very simple choices of choosing the breakfast to the major decisions of life involves Critical thinking. When faced with challenges, we need Critical thinking skills to solve the problems considering the best solutions. In the age of information where we are bombarded with loads of information, we need to analyze and evaluate the authenticity of what we read, listen and watch. In order to understand complex issues, we need to look at them from different perspectives and these skills come handy. Effective communication is beyond just conveying the message which otherwise demands tailoring the message to the specific audience, different viewpoints, and present them with clarity and conviction. As used in the IELTS, Critical thinking should be widely

used in all the disciplines in order that the quality and the standard of human life improves to a greater extent.

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