SPEAKING AS ANXIETY IN IELTS EXAMINATIONS: A CASE STUDY IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF BANGLADESHI EXAMINEES

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is a good form of anxiety among IELTS examinees around the world. Examinees well efficient in speaking often fail to claim a good score in this particular kind of band. They think of it as a big hurdle to speak before an examiner, create own story for conversation and make understand the examiner what message and information he possesses. This scenario happens to both native and non-native speakers, though non-natives go through a great struggle in the way of speaking. The purpose of this paper is to highlight IELTS speaking as a form anxiety and stressful matter. IELTS candidates find speaking session non-interactive but a way of demonstration which leads the candidates towards obstacles in getting good score. In fact, speaking in IELTS examinations requires some specific techniques in which examinees can make a positive impression upon examiner's minds overcoming all kinds of psychological barriers like stress, and anxiety and confusion in the way of speaking. This paper will focus on the anxieties in terms of IELTS speaking, scenario of speaking performance in IELTS and lack of speaking performance and possible remedies from psychological backdrops. In addition, this paper will concentrate on the conduction of research work in the context of Bangladeshi examinees where IELTS examination has become popular for many academic and professional or vocational reasons.

Keywords: Anxiety, Conversation, IELTS, Impression, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) which is known as standard test measure of an examinee's language skills on four different aspects like reading, writing, listening and speaking. Khan (2010) told that IELTS popularly known as the International English Language Testing System aims to evaluate the language proficiency of non-native speakers of English and tests their listening, reading, writing and speaking skills for academic and vocational purposes.

Of the four skills, reading and listening are known as receptive skills and speaking and writing are considered productive skills-that is to say an examinee's understanding, communicative, written and oral proficiencies are measured ensuring certain features of validity. It is not unlikely to say that Bangladeshi speakers are by far anxious about the speaking module of IELTS test. The reasons for their anxiety are that they are not well-confident, well-accustomed and well-communicative in speaking. To Bangladeshi IELTS speaking examinees, speaking in English is an ingrained problem which is a psychological

phenomenon. Despite having all sorts of anxieties, candidates must sit for IELTS examination for professional or academic purposes.

"IELTS is considered an important and crucial test for Bangladeshi candidates because it gives them access to a world of opportunities. It is a prerequisite for admission into university, further and higher education, employment and immigration" (Khan 2010).

It can be cited from Ahmed (2018) about anxiety which is a vital factor in the process of language. MacIntyre (1999) opined that anxiety functions as a factor in the progress or recession of second language acquisition. It leads to the reinforcement- might be positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement to the learners of non-native English speaking countries.

Fear and anxiety are considered as highly detrimental to the process of learning. In fact, anxiety can be illustrated as a potential indicator of success or failure for the students of second language (MacIntyre 2017). Phillips (1992) conducted a study to exhibit the relationship between anxiety and learners' oral test score. He identified that anxiety had a moderate and negative correlation with results of oral test.

It is common in speaking tests that tasks are assigned randomly to candidates. Thus it assumes that different topics are of equivalent difficulty (Khabbazbashi 2017). Students do not display same kind of reactions of test anxiety in oral examinations. It can be observed that some students are comfortable, whereas other students feel a lot of stress which might impact the results of exam negatively (Sayin 2015). Ur (1996) relevantly opined that speaking apparently seems to be most important of all the four skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing. People who know a particular language are regarded as 'speakers' of that language as if speaking included all branches of knowledge. Thus many learners are usually inclined to speak.

This paper will explore relevant two different stories from IELTS speaking candidates, the related literature, research methods and instruments and subsequently results and discussion.

IELTS SPEAKING: PSYCHOLOGICAL OR PEDAGOGICAL TEST?

Bachman (2014) pointed out that as a part of the any language assessment common interpretations we come to the conclusion about test takers' language ability which is the validity on the basis of assessment results. In addition, Bachman [3] identified three different approaches to language ability which are (1) ability-focused, (2) task-focused, and (3) interaction-focused.

In this case, IELTS speaking test covers all of the three approaches especially ability focused and interaction focused where test taker's ability or competence on the language is tested as well as they are invited to participate in conversation like Task 3 in speaking test.

Figure 1: Interview Structure (Brown, 2002)

Part 1: Introduction and Interview (4–5 minutes)
Examiner introduces him/herself and confirms candidate's

identity.
Examiner interviews candidate using verbal questions based on familiar topic frames.
Part 2: Individual long turn 3–4 minutes (including 1 minute preparation time)
Examiner asks candidate to speak for 1–2 minutes on a particular topic based on written input in the form of a general instruction and content-focused prompts.
Examiner asks one or two questions at the end of the long turn.
Part 3: Two-way discussion (4–5 minutes)
Examiner invites candidate to participate in discussion of more abstract nature, based on verbal questions thematically linked to Part 2 prompt.

Ahmed (2018) reported that candidates in IELTS face much difficulty in the speaking module in comparison with other modules like listening, writing and reading. It poses a great dilemma for the non-native speakers who suffer from a sort of anxiety, though they are adequately guide lined and prepared before the speaking test. Since speaking is a real life event and face to face conversation, it needs more sophisticated care, practice oriented session for the students and effective means to implement it in the ESL situation. IELTS speaking test happens between candidate and examiner which is face to face conversation or real life conversation on particular topics. Candidates think face to face conversation is more psychological panic-oriented which makes them unrestful and fidgeting even before the test. We think of two major standard tests like TOEFL or IELTS which are popular around the world. While TOEFL examinations are computer-based speaking test, IELTS examinations are face to face speaking test. Advancement of modern technology has influenced the popularity in computer-based test as a good replacement of face to face oral test (Galaczi 2010).

Sayin (2015) emphasized that face to face oral tests are traditional pattern of evaluating speaking performance of candidates. It has gained much popularity in the last decade which has had impact upon business life and interviews and the changing pattern of language teaching. Brown [7] advocated that interview of conversational language proficiency is one of the popular techniques for the evaluation of oral language proficiency. This kind of test includes face-to-face interview which is believed that the interviewer will have a context in which to test candidates' communicative and interactional skills.

Ur (2010) mentioned that candidates have certain restrictions on the use of language. Learners remain inhibited in the classroom through foreign language because it is the real-time exposure to an audience. Speakers of non-native countries possess the fear of making mistakes when they produce words, intensely think about the comments or criticisms they receive from audiences and what audiences think about them as speakers. Similarly, IELTS speaking test takers go through a series of psychological misconceptions and backlogs

which in fact deter them to expose before the examiner as a natural speaker.

The barriers of communication in speaking test. He talked the relationship between the tester and the candidate is unusual and uneven that the candidate speaks with a sense of superiority and is not interested to take the initiative. As a result, only the one style is elicited and many of the determiners are not taken into consideration for the performance of candidate (Hughes 2002).

In case of the discussion mentioned above, it can be summed up that IELTS speaking is basically focusing on the affective factors like anxiety, stress and impression of candidate. The more the removal of psychological complexity will be, the more the candidates ensure a degree of certainty in test. On the contrary, it requires some practices precisely methodical practice, preparation and production. Since it requires the presence of tester and candidates, candidates should have preparations like natural conversation and discussion.

TWO RELEVANT STORIES REGARDING IELTS SPEAKING TEST

In this section of the paper I will share two practical and experiential stories on IELTS speaking test which include impressions, instructions, preparations and practical features.

RIHAM'S STORY

Riham, though original name has not been disclosed here, was a final year undergraduate student of a public university in Bangladesh. He was registered for IELTS examination because he had an ambition to seek for scholarship at some western countries or North America.

His preparations were good enough and he was very confident about the speaking module, though he was very proficient in other modules like listening, reading and writing. In Bangladesh IELTS test is conducted by British Council and IDP Australia and, of four modules, listening, reading and writing are taken in one day.

Speaking test happens usually either two or three days before or after the listening, reading and writing test. At the scheduled time and venue, he reached the test center with all necessary belongings. When his turn came for speaking, he entered the room maintaining all of the formalities of test. He was surprised to find his university teacher as his test examiner. He expected his test conductor would be any foreigner with whom he can talk naturally and in a nervous free manner.

When he faced his teacher, he started to be going down psychologically. In third part of IELTS, he was asked to give a mini lecture on the topic provided by the examiner. He could not gather ideas and speak before his examiner, though the topic was not very unfamiliar. In a word, he was stammering and getting obstructed in the way of conversation.

SAIFA'S STORY

Saifa, though this is not her original name, was an employee of non-government organization of Bangladesh. She had relatives who were residing in Canada and they motivated her to apply for immigration for PR (Permanent Residency).

In order to achieve a good score in IELTS, she took help from local language center and practiced all of the modules of IELTS especially speaking which seemed to be much problematic for her. She told that she was good at grammar and its application. She was not confident in conversing and discussing with others because she did not speak in English with anyone in her previous educational and professional life, though she could speak moderately well when she remained alone. Thinking that she would speak before IELTS examiner around 12 to 15 minutes in English, she started feeling shaky and nervous.

The effect of previously thought negativity and demoralization regarding IELTS speaking happened in her actual test. As a form of consequence, she did not achieve a good score in speaking as well as in overall band score. In fact she was suffering from xenophobia (a psychological disorder or fear speaking before unknown) which resulted in frustrating picture in real test.

I have presented actual picture of two different candidates about IELTS speaking who are actually reflecting many other candidates in the Bangladeshi context. Since they are non-native speakers, they have linguistic limitations and psychological barriers in setting up natural conversation. Moreover, they possess misconceptions about standard tests like IELTS, they often cannot earn a standard score which is a miserable experience to many other Bangladeshi candidates.

The purpose of the study was to demonstrate the actual picture of IELTS speaking test by Bangladeshi speakers. Participants came up with their individual viewpoints and markings on what they found matching with their original impressions. One of the striking purposes of this study included suggestive measures for the language centers and candidates in order that they would be more careful and problem solving individual in this kind of test. Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995) augmented that we should not overlook feedback from test users because important information may be picked up from this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

A survey was conducted among IELTS examinees of Bangladesh who sat for the test for both professional and academic purposes. The number of participants was 140 who attended the original test at the appointed schedule and venue. Participants' age ranges were tentatively

between 20 to 40. The reasons for sitting IELTS test are for higher education, immigration, attending short course at foreign university and obtaining scholarship purposes.

Participants took official permissions duly and subsequently attended the exam center at the appropriate time. Attended participants were distributed with a questionnaire furnished with 5 questions and the instructions on how to mark them were written clearly for accurate results. Participants were instructed to write one comment about their recently attended IELTS speaking test in a plain language. They were also assured that they would neither be judged nor assessed their performances in order to reduce their anxiety and ensure spontaneity. Being announced everything in detail, survey work started and it took nearly 30 minutes to complete the whole process. Afterwards all of the questionnaires were taken from the participants with expressing gratitude for slotting their valuable time for participating survey work.

DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study explores what impressions they have in face to face speaking activity. In fact face to face communication appears as a large scale challenge and a form of frightening to the IELTS speaking examinees. Data were gathered based upon anxiety or fear in the way of speaking.

Right after that, examinees have a great form of discomfort and mental instability if they hear about foreigner as IELTS examiner. In our sub-continent, this scenario poses as a great dilemma for the examinees. In my study I have focused on the factors regarding rapport between Bangladeshi examinees and foreign IELTS examiners. How they think about the instructions for the speaking test in order to reduce candidates' anxiety.

Participants marked all of the questions on questionnaire from their basic understanding and all of the collected data were analyzed with MS Excel software in order to ensure more surety and quantified value.

FINDINGS

Table: 1-(Survey Report Organized by British Council, Bangladesh)

Questions/ Determiners	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	No comment	Very comfortable (%)	Comfortable ((%))	Uncomfortable (%)	No comments (%)
Face to Face Conversation	35	40	50	15	25	28	35	10
Foreigner as IELTS Examiner	25	45	65	5	17	32	46	3
Treatment of IELTS Examiner	50	60	25	5	35	42	17	3

	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	No response	Very comfortable	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	No response
Impression about Speaking Section 3	20	35	75	10	14	25	53	7
Comments about IELTS Instructions	50	60	24	6	35	42	17	4
Mean	11.2	9.6	18.64	3.44				
Standard Deviation	13.87	11.51	23.05	4.3				

Figure-1 shows nine different columns titled as "Questions/Determiners", "Very comfortable", "Comfortable", "Uncomfortable" and "No response" on the one hand. On the other hand, it displays "Percentages of Very comfortable", "Comfortable", "Uncomfortable" and "No response" along with "Mean" and "Standard Deviation".

It was discussed earlier that the number of participants was 140 who attended the survey work right after completing their IELTS examination on speaking organized by the British Council Bangladesh.

Firstly, on the determiner of "Face to face Conversation" 35 people marked "Very comfortable", 40 people marked "Comfortable", 50 people marked "Uncomfortable" and 15 people expressed "No response". In this case, the percentage of each determiner is described as 25% for "Very comfortable", 28% for "Comfortable", 35% for "Uncomfortable" and 10% for "No response".

Secondly, on the determiner of "Foreigner as IELTS Examiner", 25 participants commented "Very comfortable", 45 participants "Comfortable", 65 "Uncomfortable" and 5 "No response". In this connection, the percentage of each determiner is 17% for "Very comfortable", 32% for "Comfortable", 46% for "Uncomfortable" and 3% for "No response".

Thirdly, on the determiner of "Treatment of IELTS Examiner", 5o people marked it "Very comfortable", 60 people marked "Comfortable", 25 people marked "Uncomfortable" and 5 people marked "No response". Likewise, the percentage of each determiner is stepped out that 35% for "Very comfortable", 42% for "Comfortable", 17% for "Uncomfortable" and 3% for "No response".

Fourthly, on the determiner of "Impression about Speaking Section 3", 20 participants commented "Very comfortable", 35 participants "Comfortable", 70 "Uncomfortable" and 10 "No response". In this determiner, the percentage of each determiner is 14% ("Very comfortable"), 25% (Comfortable), 53% (Uncomfortable) and 7% (No response).

Fifthly, on the determiner of "Comments about IELTS Instructions", 50 participants commented "Very comfortable", 60 participants marked "Comfortable", 24 participants marked "Uncomfortable" and 6 participants marked "No response. In this determiner, the percentage of each determiner is stepped out that 35% "Very comfortable", 42% for "Comfortable", 17% for "Uncomfortable" and 4% for "No response".

From the Figure-1, the "Mean" is for "Very comfortable" (11.2), "Comfortable"

(9.6), "Uncomfortable" (18.64) and "No response" (3.44). To add to this, the "Standard Deviation" is "Very comfortable" (13.87), "Comfortable" (11.51), "Uncomfortable" (23.05) and 4% "No response" (4.3).

DISCUSSION

From the discussion mentioned above, it can be understood that test takers in speaking have a kind of deficiency in speaking test, though this kind of deficiency is not only related for performance in actual test but also for psychological and motivational factors. Candidates felt face to face conversation as a major obstacle in IELTS speaking test because they could not make sentences, gather ideas and feel mental obstruction as they were not habituated in natural conversation.

Test takers assumed that they would feel easy and communicative if they found local examiner, though it is merely a psychological aspect and does not imply that foreign examiner poses a negative role in speaking module. In fact test takers had much difficulty when they turned in part 3 in the speaking session. This part of the speaking required candidates to get involved in thematic and subjective discussion with examiner which in many cases seems to be tough one to the non-native speakers.

It can be assumed since Bangladeshi test takers are non-native, they suffer from a kind of inertia or a fact of xenophobia which was mentioned earlier in this paper which makes them unnerving before the examiner. Skehan (2004, 17) opined that in any oral performance, it is possible to get some positive and negative factors. He further told that 'familiar tasks' ensures 'greater accuracy and "task difficulty relates to a number of factors including abstract or unfamiliar information and complex retrieval".

Comments from Test-Takers

Participants were asked to write their individual comments on the comment box what they felt about IELTS speaking test. Statements from candidates are stated below:

"I think speaking is the hardest module of all the modules I have come across. As I am a non-native speaker, I cannot produce sentences like native speakers that I find in movies, news and television programs." (*One of the candidates remarked such.*)

"Speaking before IELTS examiner what I do not know is not an easy and enjoyable matter. I can speak very well before my friends or when I remain alone. However in IELTS speaking test, like previous I feel shaky and nervous." (*One of the participants remarked such.*)

"I am confident in speaking when I find local examiner in IELTS. I make a disorder before the foreign examiner because I do not understand his/her pronunciation and even I

need to be careful in understanding their words as they are faster in speaking than local examiner." (*One of the participants remarked such.*)

IELTS Speaking Test: Major Challenges

Hartono (2019) identified that performance of test-taker on the speaking module was found negative which was correlated with test-taking anxiety. Test anxiety and test-takers' performance varied from weak to moderate negative relationship which was on the independent speaking section of the TOEFL iBT (Huang and Hung 2013). The association between anxiety factor and second language speaking performance among international students who took part in a speaking-based IELTS test in Australia (Woodrow 2006).

In the citations discussed in this part of the paper show that Bangladeshi IELTS test-takers go through similar kind of experiences which appear as big challenges to be dealt with constructively. Ballard and Clanchey (1991) pointed out a similar kind of experience that learning strategies and techniques in many Asian and South Asian countries often focus on the memorization and imitation which indeed result in an approach to knowledge that compels the conservation of existing knowledge. What Ballard and Clanchey (1991) commented on the educational situation of Asian and South Asian countries found a close similarity in the education system of Bangladesh

Khan (2006) in one of her articles positively presented the actual scenario of education especially the mode of class conducting and the role of teacher inside the class. She discussed that teacher plays the role of authority figure in the classroom in Bangladesh and the rapport or relationship between teacher and student is entirely formal and institutionalized. Teaching and learning manner are conventional and teaching in class is teacher-oriented. She further told that the concept of Western learner-oriented classroom and speculative approach is alien to learners of Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi candidates are a product of the Tertiary, secondary and primary (TESEP) culture which is known as the traditional educational ethos. No scope for the cultivation of creative lateral thinking is identified. Teachers indulge memorization and regurgitation at work (Khan 2006).

In this regard, when these learners sit for the test, they are at a loss to make sense of western values and customs and thus they do not perform satisfactorily. Bangladeshi test takers are highly concerned about personality, external factors like dress code, behavior pattern and salutation and background information. In a report published in IELTS blog titled as IELTS Speaking: The psychological aspects which assured that IELTS examiners are not supposed to take your traits of personality into their account. Whether you are likable or not will not affect them including your score.

Education policy and planning commission of Bangladesh are largely responsible not to make learners independent and self-exposing. Teachers are greatly fond of reflecting the principles of Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) which has enormous teaching and learning drawbacks.

The test formats, question patterns and allocation of marks of different questions. She came to the recommendation that the authority should include an oral segment in the English examination (Khan, 2010). Podder (2013) emphasized that the gap between policy and practice

to assess oral skills in the English examination at the secondary and higher secondary levels deteriorates the situation greatly. For this reason Bangladeshi test-takers usually expose negative or harmful washback which shows the down of curve from positivity to criticism.

Test-takers need to maintain beneficial washback what Wall (1996) reported that washback has an umbrella impact which is widely concerned with the effect of test on individuals, policies, inside and outside of class.

CONCLUSION

The study of this paper entails that the test-takers of Bangladesh experience a series of psychological and test administrative complexities. At the findings of the paper, it has been presented that candidates were not very comfortable about the determiners set in the questionnaire. They even expressed their comments in the comment box directed at the bottom of questionnaire. Since they were non-native test-takers, they found speaking as a psychological rather than a pedagogical test. It is worth mentioning that they thought face to face conversation or real environment of interview as a great hurdle which they could not meet up successfully. In addition, Bangladesh is a country which has volatile and changeable education policy which does not include the authority of learners and manifestation of individuality. This academic scenario often drives the candidates to maintain a sort of inhibition within them. Bangladeshi test takers have linguistic limitations and they cannot understand what foreign examiners say before them. In the study it has been pointed out Bangladeshi candidates usually prefer to find local examiners-which they think is a form of relaxation. Preparing presentation within one minute on some thematic topics like 'humor', 'open air concert' or 'you as change maker' make them retarded and they think the task would be very difficult because they need to make up ideas in foreign language. The study conducted among the participants was not adequate to come to the conclusion that speaking appears as anxiety to IELTS test takers. The study has its limitations because it was not comprehended native and non-native candidates irrespectively. On the questionnaire, more than five questions needed to be set and survey work should be conducted more than five hundred candidates to ensure its maximum reliability of test result. In spite of having some limitations, this paper attempted to exhibit the impressions of Bangladeshi test takers in IELTS speaking test. In fact this paper would be a further research for test administrators and IELTS examiners to quiz non-natives considering social, cultural and educational aspect at the time of test.

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