

APPLYING DYNAMIC ASSESSMENT TO IMPROVE ENGLISH-MAJORED SENIORS' IELTS SPEAKING PERFORMANCE AT DONG NAI TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSITY

ỨNG DỤNG ĐÁNH GIÁ ĐỘNG ĐỂ NÂNG CAO KỸ NĂNG NÓI TRONG KÌ THI IELTS CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM CUỐI CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG NGHỆ ĐỒNG NAI

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Abstract - Testing and assessment are crucial components in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. Dynamic assessment is considered to be able to inspire learners as well as improve the quality of language teaching. This study seeks to evaluate the efficacy of Dynamic Assessment in preparing final-year English major students for the IELTS, an international English proficiency examination at Dong Nai Technology Univeristy (DNTU). The quantitative results consist of the pre- and post-test scores from the IELTS speaking module. The qualitative findings derive from semi-structured interviews conducted with students in the experimental group. The data are analyzed via SPSS and content analysis methodologies. The findings indicate that the integration of Dynamic Assessment in the instruction of speaking skills enhances learners' English speaking proficiency. Furthermore, the participating students have favorable sentiments towards this form of assessment.

Key words - Dynamic assessment; English speaking; IELTS test

1. Introduction

1.1. Problem statement

The requirement that students pass English proficiency examinations in order to meet graduation standards has become increasingly common across higher education institutions in Viet Nam. This trend is regarded as essential preparation, equipping learners with the linguistic competencies needed to integrate effectively into international workplaces. Among currently used proficiency tests, the IELTS has been widely adopted by universities owing to its high degree of standardization and global recognition. At Dong Nai Technology University (DNTU), the exit requirement for English majors is an overall IELTS band score of 6.5 - a comparatively demanding target for most final-year students. In practice, a majority of English majors at the university encounter substantial difficulty attaining this goal, particularly in the Speaking component, since achieving fluent, spontaneous communicative competence in English remains a considerable challenge for many Vietnamese learners. Recent studies have documented this situation, indicating that students face multiple obstacles in developing speaking skills. These may stem from structural differences between English

Tóm tắt - Kiểm tra và đánh giá đóng vai trò quan trọng trong quá trình dạy và học ngoại ngữ. Đánh giá động được cho là có thể thúc đẩy người học và nâng cao chất lượng giảng dạy ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu này nhằm xác định tính hiệu quả của đánh giá động trong quá trình chuẩn bị cho sinh viên năm cuối chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Công Nghệ Đồng Nai (DNTU) trước kỳ thi IELTS – một kỳ thi đánh giá năng lực tiếng Anh quốc tế. Dữ liệu định lượng là điểm bài kiểm tra đầu vào và đầu ra theo mô-đun kỹ năng Nói của bài thi. Dữ liệu định tính được lấy từ các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với sinh viên trong nhóm thử nghiệm. Các dữ liệu này được phân tích bằng phần mềm SPSS và phương pháp phân tích nội dung. Kết quả cho thấy việc tích hợp đánh giá động vào giảng dạy cải thiện năng lực nói tiếng Anh của người học. Bên cạnh đó, các sinh viên tham gia nghiên cứu thể hiện thái độ tích cực đối với hình thức đánh giá này.

Từ khóa - Đánh giá động; IELTS; kỹ năng nói tiếng Anh

and Vietnamese, socio-cultural factors, and a shortage of authentic communicative environments and opportunities to use English beyond the classroom [1, 2].

At DNTU, although fostering students' communicative competence in English is a primary objective, the teaching of speaking has for many years not been positioned commensurately within the curriculum. Classroom evidence shows that many instructors continue to approach speaking as supplementary or illustrative, relying mainly on asking students to rehearse model dialogues, memorize set sentence patterns, or complete repetitive drills. While such practices can reinforce lexical and grammatical knowledge, they provide limited conditions for learners to develop reflexive thinking and individualized expression in authentic communicative situations. Consequently, many students - despite a reasonably solid linguistic foundation - struggle to articulate ideas, convey affect, or respond flexibly in interaction. This not only undermines communicative confidence but also seriously constrains performance on the IELTS Speaking test, which directly evaluates the ability to deploy English flexibly, coherently, and meaningfully.

Language assessment tools, beyond certifying outcomes, can also play a crucial role in supporting

teaching and learning processes. Within education, a sharper distinction has emerged between standardized (traditional) assessment and dynamic assessment (DA). Standardized assessment typically consists of tightly regulated tests in which learners receive little or no feedback during test performance [3]. Prior research indicates that speaking tests administered in this manner can induce anxiety and stress, adversely affecting test performance [4]. When learners experience heightened apprehension - especially in face-to-face English interaction - tension may suppress actual ability and yield scores that do not accurately reflect their competence. In this context, educators must recognize that assessment is intended not solely to certify end results but also to scaffold learning. As William [5] argues, assessment should emphasize the provision of feedback and support throughout learning rather than focusing exclusively on final outcomes.

In IELTS preparation, the application of effective assessment approaches is central to developing speaking proficiency. DA and formative assessment are two essential approaches, though they differ markedly in pedagogical orientation and objectives. Formative assessment, grounded in constructivist theory, emphasizes monitoring and supporting learner progress through continuous feedback. It encourages students to adjust learning strategies to enhance fluency, coherence, and pronunciation - key IELTS Speaking criteria [6]. By contrast, DA, anchored in Vygotsky's 1978 theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), highlights guided interaction between teacher and learner during assessment. DA aims not only to evaluate current performance but also to uncover and cultivate latent potential through purposeful, mediated support [7]. While formative assessment focuses on sustained support and the development of self-regulation, DA requires the integration of testing, assessment, and instruction so that these processes jointly help learners control language use under exam conditions while simultaneously advancing their broader linguistic development. Accordingly, DA is particularly well aligned with the objectives of IELTS Speaking preparation. This study therefore investigates whether DA can enhance IELTS Speaking performance among final-year English majors at DNTU. Two research questions were formulated:

(1) How does DA influence the improvement of English speaking skills among final-year English majors at DNTU?

(2) How do final-year English majors at DNTU perceive and respond to the application of DA in IELTS Speaking preparation?

1.2. Theoretical background

1.2.1. English speaking skills

Most learners of English as a foreign language encounter considerable difficulty developing speaking proficiency - a skill that demands rapid processing as well as higher-order, creative thinking. One of the greatest

barriers is fear of evaluation, especially in formal communicative situations or examination contexts. Numerous studies have shown that anxiety in using English heightens stress during learning, negatively affecting academic performance and test outcomes, reducing opportunities for practice, and ultimately impeding progress in speaking proficiency [8, 9].

1.2.2. Dynamic Assessment (DA)

Several studies suggest that assessment activities should be embedded throughout instruction rather than confined to terminal stages of a course. Such integration enables instructors to adjust pedagogical strategies responsively to address emerging learner weaknesses [10]. Consequently, educators have shown increasing interest in assessment formats that can be effectively integrated with classroom instruction. DA is considered particularly promising because its function extends beyond measuring achievement to actively fostering linguistic development through guided interaction. In practice, instructors implementing DA provide ongoing support in forms such as prompting questions, strategic hints, or focused reminders that encourage learners to self-discover and self-correct while developing skills [10]. This is when learning and language development can occur most efficiently. DA systematically exploits this principle by designing assessment situations in which learners receive appropriate mediation - graduated hints, guiding questions, or oriented feedback - aimed at incrementally elevating their language use and expanding their actual developmental range [11].

From Vygotsky's perspective [11], DA is simultaneously diagnostic and developmental, as it activates and advances higher psychological functions. These functions do not emerge spontaneously; rather, they are cultivated through interactive mediation by a more knowledgeable other. In this framework, the mediator plays a pivotal role in guiding learners through tasks that transcend their independent capabilities yet remain attainable with assistance - i.e., within the ZPD. In DA, learners are not left to complete assessment tasks in isolation; instead, they participate in dialogic assessment encounters wherein the mediator offers hints, feedback, or leading questions. Through this process, learners progressively transcend current limits and attain higher levels of linguistic performance [12].

DA is implemented through two principal approaches: interventionist and interactionist [3]. In the interventionist approach, the mediator employs a predetermined set of graduated prompts arranged from least to most explicit support. This structure standardizes the assessment process and facilitates comparison of learner progress pre- and post-mediation. In contrast, the interactionist approach is more flexible: the mediator does not follow a fixed script but adapts the type and degree of support contingent on learner responses. Here, assistance constitutes part of a dialogic exchange in which observation, interpretation, and timely mediation co-occur to promote development within the ZPD.

1.2.3. Related studies

The integration of DA into preparation for standardized examinations has drawn growing interest from language educators, particularly in outcome-oriented contexts such as IELTS training. A noteworthy exploratory study by Weisgerber [13] examined the role of DA in improving learners' English speaking proficiency. Focusing on IELTS Speaking scores from seven participants, the study evaluated the specific impact of DA compared with traditional assessment. While overall band differences were not statistically significant, criterion-level analysis revealed differentiated effects: learners receiving DA performed better on grammatical range and lexical resource, whereas those under standardized assessment showed stronger fluency. These findings suggest that distinct assessment approaches may differentially scaffold subcomponents of speaking, and that a judicious combination could yield more comprehensive gains in IELTS Speaking preparation.

In a medium-scale experimental study, Levi [14] incorporated DA into a speaking proficiency preparation program for 73 Israeli secondary students. Using a pre-test/post-test design, learners were allocated to three groups: two experimental (DA) groups and one control (traditional instruction). Results indicated that both DA groups achieved higher post-test scores, whereas the control group's scores tended to decline. Notably, the gains in the DA groups were sustained on a follow-up test administered two weeks later. Levi's findings provide compelling evidence that DA can be effectively embedded in speaking preparation for high-stakes examinations at the secondary level. Similarly, in Thailand, Siwathaworn and Wudthayagorn [15] investigated DA's impact on students with elementary speaking proficiency. Their results showed significant improvements across multiple dimensions, including fluency, pronunciation, and discourse organization.

Both studies underscore the positive role of DA in fostering speaking development among foreign language learners and reinforce the argument that DA can be applied effectively in academic test preparation contexts such as IELTS. However, despite a growing consensus regarding its efficacy, some empirical work has highlighted notable constraints. In an experimental investigation of DA's influence on language development in standardized test preparation, Minakova [7] emphasized that DA is less effective in large cohorts. This limitation derives chiefly from the individualized, interaction-intensive nature of DA, which becomes difficult to implement uniformly in large classes.

Although challenges persist in scaling DA to larger groups, existing research has substantially clarified its pedagogical potential, particularly for enhancing English speaking proficiency among foreign language learners. These positive findings supply a robust theoretical foundation for the present study, which concentrates on the practical impact of DA on Vietnamese learners - specifically, final-year English majors at DNTU preparing for the IELTS Speaking component.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

A total of 40 final-year English majors were recruited through convenience sampling based on availability and willingness to participate [16]. All were enrolled in an intensive IELTS preparation course at DNTU. Acting as the course instructor, the researcher announced the study via the university's online learning management system. The earliest respondents were invited to sit an initial language proficiency screening test consisting of 50 multiple-choice questions covering vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. To ensure relative homogeneity, only students whose scores fell within the intermediate band were retained; those scoring markedly above or below this range were excluded. After screening, 40 eligible students were randomly assigned to an experimental (EXP) group and a control (CON) group ($n = 20$ per group). The moderate sample size was deliberately maintained to preserve the feasibility of implementing DA, which requires intensive interaction and close, individualized mediation.

2.2. Research design

A mixed-methods design was adopted to achieve triangulation - a strategy that combines multiple methods and data sources to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation [16]. The quantitative strand followed an experimental pre-test/post-test design with two equivalent groups to measure change in speaking performance. The qualitative strand comprised in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 students from the EXP group. Participants were assured confidentiality; data were used solely for research purposes, and study findings were to be shared with them to ensure transparency and protect participant rights.

The IELTS Speaking test and the official IELTS Speaking band descriptors were employed to assess students' speaking proficiency before and after the intervention. To enhance score reliability, two additional IELTS-experienced instructors from the faculty independently rated all speaking performances. This procedure enabled the calculation of inter-rater reliability and minimized subjective bias.

The intervention comprised 10 instructional sessions (90 minutes each), delivered twice weekly. For the EXP group, each session was organized into four stages:

1. Preparation: The instructor activated learners' background knowledge of the topic using keyword charts, short videos, or relevant images. This stage aimed to build a conceptual foundation and ensure readiness for subsequent interaction.

2. Interaction: Learners worked in pairs to promote collaborative learning. The instructor posed cognitively stimulating questions, facilitated small-group discussion, and allowed dictionary consultation to maximize support prior to individual spoken production. These supports were intended to reduce anxiety and bolster confidence.

3. Feedback: Immediately after interaction tasks, the instructor provided mediation. Following Davin's

framework [17], prompts proceeded from implicit to explicit: (a) pausing for focused reconsideration; (b) repeating the problematic stretch; (c) highlighting the specific error; (d) offering alternative choices; and (e) supplying the correct form with a concise explanation in accessible language. This graduated feedback enabled learners to notice and self-repair errors during speaking development.

4. Evaluation: The instructor randomly revisited earlier questions to gauge learning effectiveness and retention.

In the CON group, the preparation and interaction stages mirrored those of the EXP group; however, the mediated, graduated feedback phase was not provided, thereby operationalizing the contrast in DA implementation between the two groups.

2.3. Data analysis

Separate analytic procedures were applied to quantitative and qualitative data. For the quantitative data, SPSS was used to compute descriptive statistics (Mean, M; Standard Deviation, SD). Independent-samples tests were then conducted to evaluate the impact of DA on learners’ IELTS Speaking performance. As an initial step, Pearson correlations were calculated between the two raters’ scores on both the pre- and post-tests to establish inter-rater reliability and to confirm consistency while reducing potential scoring bias.

For the qualitative data, content analysis was performed [16]. First, the researchers repeatedly read participant responses to achieve immersion and a holistic grasp of the data. The dataset was then segmented into meaningful units, each unit coded and labeled. This facilitated systematic comparison and contrast across responses. Throughout analysis, relationships among codes were examined and refined to develop an integrated, data-driven thematic structure. To ensure rigor, several measures were implemented. Regarding reliability, two independent coders achieved an inter-coder agreement of 0.86, indicating a high level of consistency. Regarding validity, two research team members reviewed the emergent themes and illustrative

excerpts to confirm that they accurately represented participants’ intended meanings.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Quantitative results

To better understand the change in students’ speaking skills before and after the application of DA, descriptive statistics were calculated for the pretest and posttest scores. The statistics include the Mean (M) and Standard Deviation (SD) for each group. The detailed results are as follows:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for pretest and posttest scores

Group statistics					
	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	CON	20	5.425	1.1616	.2597
	EXP	20	5.400	.9403	.2103
Posttest	CON	20	5.950	.8870	.1983
	EXP	20	6.590	.6231	.1393

The descriptive statistics of the pretest and posttest scores show a clear difference between the two groups after the intervention. Specifically, the pretest mean scores of both groups were almost identical (about 5.4). However, after the intervention, the mean score of the experimental group increased markedly to 6.59, while that of the control group rose only to 5.95.

Results from the independent samples t-test, presented in Table 2, indicate no significant difference between the two groups’ mean scores at pretest ($p = 0.941$). This shows that the participating students’ IELTS Speaking performance was equivalent prior to the intervention. However, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups’ mean scores at posttest ($p = 0.012$). Specifically, the experimental group’s mean score increased sharply after the intervention, demonstrating the positive impact of DA on these students’ IELTS Speaking ability. In other words, students who learned IELTS Speaking through DA outperformed those who received only conventional assessment.

Table 2. Independent samples test results for pretest and posttest mean scores

Independent Samples Test									
		Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper
Pre test	Equal variances assumed	2.289	.139	.075	38	.941	.0250	.3342	-.6515 .7015
	Equal variances not assumed			.075	36.421	.941	.0250	.3342	-.6525 .7025
Post test	Equal variances assumed	1.607	.213	-2.640	38	.012	-.6400	.2424	-1.1307 -.1493
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.640	34.081	.012	-.6400	.2424	-1.1326 -.1474

The quantitative findings answer the first research question by confirming the effectiveness of DA in improving English major students' IELTS Speaking test performance. These findings are fully consistent with the results of Levi [14] and Siwathaworn and Wudthayagorn [15], which showed that DA has a significantly positive impact on learners' English speaking ability. Specifically, both studies affirmed that DA helps learners markedly improve speaking skills, particularly in the context of IELTS preparation.

3.2. Qualitative results

The study clarified two main themes: (i) DA brings learners a sense of achievement, and (ii) DA helps reduce anxiety during the speaking test.

3.2.1. DA brings learners a sense of achievement

The first theme emerging from interviewed students' responses is that DA helped foster their sense of accomplishment. These students believed their performance improved thanks to intervention based on DA principles and procedures. One student (S1) remarked:

"This new teaching method is really effective. When I had difficulties, the teacher gave useful hints, from indirect to direct. Thanks to that, I could recognize my mistakes and correct them myself".

Student 2 added:

"This procedure really suits my learning style... I can use the teacher's prompts to speak more fluently".

Student 3 also confirmed this view:

"With the help of the teacher's hints, I can now do tasks that I had never been able to do before. For example, in Part 2 of the IELTS test, I had never spoken for more than 1 minute, but now I can speak for the full 2 minutes as required. All thanks to the conversations with the teacher, through which I could build the necessary knowledge and strategies".

These findings are fully consistent with the perspectives reported in Poehner and Infante [10] and Poehner and Yu [12]. In DA, the instructor does not leave learners to handle test questions alone but creates dialogues that provide appropriate support, enabling them to transcend the limits of their current ability.

3.2.2. DA helps reduce learners' anxiety during speaking performance

The second theme from participant feedback is that DA helps reduce anxiety during speaking performance. On this issue, Student 5 commented:

"During the course, my desire to speak English increased significantly. Thanks to the guiding questions and accessible materials related to the speaking topics, I gained more vocabulary and ideas to interact with classmates. I am no longer afraid and silent like before".

This comment clearly shows considerable progress in both confidence and English speaking skill thanks to DA. It also reflects the positive impact of guiding questions and accessible materials, which not only expand vocabulary but

stimulate deeper thinking about discussion topics. More importantly, reducing fear and silence marks a major turning point for many foreign language learners.

The findings of this study not only reinforce the earlier results of Sanaeifar and Nafari [18], but also extend understanding of DA's impact in reducing anxiety and improving academic performance. As noted, alleviating tension and fear is crucial for developing communicative skills in foreign language learners, especially in high-pressure situations like the IELTS Speaking test.

In sum, the conclusion of this study is very clear: DA is not only an effective tool for enhancing linguistic competence but also a method that helps students overcome psychological barriers, thereby improving learning efficiency and test outcomes.

4. Conclusion

Testing and assessment are an indispensable part of all teaching and learning processes, because their goal is to provide teachers with information about learners so that curricula and instructional methods can be improved. The results reported in this study show that DA exerts a positive impact on preparing students for proficiency examinations, especially the Speaking skill in the IELTS test. These findings can assist language educators in selecting an appropriate DA model for other skill classes such as Listening, Reading, and Writing. Accordingly, depending on the lesson objectives, teachers can implement a DA model in a suitable manner. In sum, DA can be applied in test-preparation courses to strengthen candidates' confidence and help them develop effective preparation strategies. However, the results of this study still have at least three limitations, as follows. First, during the implementation of DA, some students at times did not recognize that they had made an error or did not perceive the teacher's effort to help them self-correct. Second, because the study was conducted with only 40 intermediate learners, further research with a larger sample, including learners at different proficiency levels, is needed to explore additional potential differences. In addition, this method is quite time-consuming, so it may not be feasible for large-scale classes.

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