

The Influence of Planning Time on Oral Performance in the IELTS Speaking Test: A Study of ESL Candidates

W.R.I.U. Nilaweera

SLIIT City Uni, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka. ishadhinilaweera@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In the current era, English is increasingly recognized as a vital global language for communication in the international economy and society, leading to a growing demand for English proficiency. Zaremba (2006) notes that, of the four core English skills, speaking is often regarded as the most crucial for effective communication. In ESL contexts, speaking is particularly significant because it involves an interactive process of producing, receiving, and processing information (Brown, 1994).

Speech is viewed as a "real-time" activity that requires rapid planning, organization, and expression (Bygate, 1987). Therefore, planning plays an essential role in speaking, with research indicating that it has a consistently positive impact on L2 oral production (Ellis, 2005). Pre-task planning, in particular, helps learners structure their speech and improve both its content and quality (Elder & Wigglesworth, 2010).

The current study examines strategic planning, a type of pre-task planning focused on preparing both the content and its expression for the task at hand. Over the last two decades, research has shown that strategic planning benefits second language speech in areas such as fluency, complexity, and accuracy (Skehan, 1998).

While many studies have explored how learners use planning time in classroom settings, less attention has been given to how ESL candidates utilize planning time in language testing situations (Elder & Wigglesworth, 2010). This is especially relevant for standardized tests like the IELTS, which rigorously assess speaking skills. As such, the objective of this study is to investigate how different planning times impact the oral performance of ESL candidates in Part 2 of the IELTS speaking test. The following research question is addressed through the study: What impact does varying planning time have on the oral production of candidates in Part 2 of the IELTS speaking test?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Population and Sampling

The study targeted a group of 143 candidates enrolled in IELTS preparation courses at Westgate College and ICBT Campus in Matara. Using convenience sampling, a subset of this population was chosen to reflect the larger group (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigam, 2013). Upon examining the band scores from two IELTS mock speaking tests given at both institutions, it was determined that 48 students achieved a band score of 6.0 in speaking. The researcher assumed that these 48 participants, all receiving the same score in both tests, had similar proficiency levels and therefore were selected for the study. The participants, aged between 21 and 33 years, all came from Sinhala-speaking backgrounds and were learning English as a second language. They also intended to take the IELTS test in the near future.

- Data Collection Tools

In this study, two face-to-face speaking tests, similar to Part 2 of the IELTS speaking task, were used as the data collection method to gather quantitative data. Each test was centered around a distinct cue card. The first cue card required participants to talk about an event that had a major influence on them, while the second asked them to describe a country they would like to visit.

- Data Collection Process

In this study, 48 students were selected through convenience sampling. After obtaining consent from all participants, they were grouped using systematic random sampling. Each participant was assigned a number between 1001 and 1048, and based on the remainder when divided by 3, they were allocated to one of three groups: Group A (remainder 0), Group B (remainder 1), or Group C (remainder 2). Each group was assigned different planning times: 30 seconds for Group A, 1 minute for Group B, and 2 minutes for Group C. Unlike the study by Elder and Wigglesworth (2010), this study did not include a "no planning" condition. The study was conducted by two trained IELTS examiners, following the standard guidelines for the IELTS speaking test. Along with the varying planning times, participants were given 15 seconds to review a cue card before completing two speaking tasks similar to those in IELTS Part 2. Participants' responses were recorded for later analysis.

- Data Analysis

The quantitative data which was collected through speaking tests was analysed using SPSS software. ANOVA test was used to compare the performance of three groups under different planning times. In analysing the data, the overall oral performance of the three groups was compared.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

ANOVA Analysis

How the total marks affected with regards to the students' planning time is presented.

Table 1: ANOVA test results of total marks

ANOVA					
V7					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	14.632	2	7.316	62.320	.000
Within Groups	10.917	93	.117		
Total	25.549	95			

According to the data presented in the above table, P value equals to .000. It suggests that there is a significant difference between the performances of three groups.

Table 2: Post hoc test results of total marks

Multiple Comparisons							
Dependent Variable: V7							
	(I) Time	(J) Time	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Tukey HSD	30 seconds	1 minute	.859375*	.085656	.000	.65536	1.06339
		2 minutes	.792969*	.085656	.000	.58895	.99699
	1 minute	30 seconds	-.859375*	.085656	.000	-1.06339	-.65536
		2 minutes	-.066406	.085656	.719	-.27042	.13761
	2 minutes	30 seconds	-.792969*	.085656	.000	-.99699	-.58895
		1 minute	.066406	.085656	.719	-.13761	.27042

The table results indicate that, in comparisons between the 30-second group and both the 1-minute and 2-minute groups, the P value is less than 0.05 (P=.000, P<0.05). This suggests that the 30-second group achieved significantly higher oral performance than the other two groups. However, when comparing the 1-minute group with the 2-minute group, the P value exceeds

0.05 (P=.719), showing no significant difference in their overall scores. This is depicted in the means plot.

3.2. Correlation analysis

The Pearson correlation was used to evaluate the association between two variables, focusing on shared variance, the direction (positive or negative) of their relationship, and the strength of their correlation (Chee, 2015). The findings demonstrate how planning time relates to candidates' scores in fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, pronunciation, and overall performance.

Table 3: Correlation analysis of time and five sections

Correlations							
		Time	Fluency	Lexical	Grammar	Pronunciation	V7
Time	Pearson Correlation	1	-.707**	-.543**	-.343**	-.571**	-.628**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.001	.000	.000
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
Fluency	Pearson Correlation	-.707**	1	.732**	.566**	.697**	.867**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
Lexical	Pearson Correlation	-.543**	.732**	1	.723**	.760**	.917**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
Grammar	Pearson Correlation	-.343**	.566**	.723**	1	.670**	.830**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
Pronunciation	Pearson Correlation	-.571**	.697**	.760**	.670**	1	.887**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96
V7	Pearson Correlation	-.628**	.867**	.917**	.830**	.887**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	96	96	96	96	96	96

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The table results indicate a negative linear relationship between planning time and the different sub-sections of the speaking test. Pearson’s r analysis demonstrated a strong negative correlation for fluency, with an r value of -0.707, implying that students who allocated more time for planning achieved lower fluency scores than those who planned for less time. For the remaining four sub-sections—lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, pronunciation, and overall score—the correlation with planning time was moderate, with r values between -0.3 and -0.7.

3.3. Discussion

This study investigated the effect of different planning times on candidates' oral performance. ANOVA and Tukey post hoc tests comparing the 30-second, 1-minute, and 2-minute planning conditions showed a P value of .000 (P<0.05) for the 30-second group, indicating that candidates with only 30 seconds of planning time produced notably more fluent and accurate language, with increased lexical density and better pronunciation. Furthermore, the 30-second group achieved higher overall scores, suggesting superior performance compared to the 1-minute and 2-minute groups across five sections. However, these results contrast with earlier studies, such as that of Li, Chen, and Sun (2015), who found that 1 minute or more of planning improved fluency, accuracy, and lexical diversity. Similarly, Elder and Wigglesworth (2010) found no significant performance differences with different planning times, though they did support brief planning periods in language proficiency assessments.

A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to assess the relationship between planning time and candidates' oral performance. Results indicated a negative R value in all sections, demonstrating a strong negative correlation; as planning time increased, overall performance decreased. Fluency, in particular, had the highest negative R value (-0.707), suggesting that additional planning time negatively impacted fluency and coherence more than other sections.

These findings suggest that, although candidates may believe that more planning time would be beneficial, extending planning time (up to two minutes) does not enhance performance.

4. Conclusion

Several studies have investigated the advantages and disadvantages of allowing planning time before oral tasks. However, further research within testing contexts is necessary to fully understand its impact on oral proficiency exams and how it might shape the test construct. Although the current study focuses solely on the IELTS speaking test, future studies could extend this analysis to other international proficiency exams. Additionally, past studies (Ellis, 2009; Elder and Wigglesworth, 2010) and this study have concentrated mainly on intermediate and advanced learners, highlighting the need for more research on how planning time affects oral performance among ESL learners across various proficiency levels.

5. Acknowledgment

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6. Keywords

ESL learners, Part 2 of IELTS, Planning before speaking, Speaking proficiency

7. References

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