International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation.

Do Free Discussion Courses Matter? Evaluating the Differential Impacts of Input-Based Instruction and Proficiency Level on IELTS Speaking Scores

Armin Vali [1], Shahabaddin Behtary [2*], Azadeh Mostofy [3]
[1] MA in ELT, Self-Employed Researcher, Tehran, Iran
[2] Lecturer in ELT, Department of English, Ardabil Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran
[3] MA in ELT, Freelance Researcher, Ardabil, Iran

* Corresponding Author: **Shahabaddin Behtary**

Article Info

ISSN (online): 2582-7138
Volume: 06
Issue: 02
March-April 2025
Received: 09-01-2025
Accepted: 10-02-2025
Page No: 716-724

Abstract
This article investigates the effects of input-based free discussion courses on IELTS speaking scores of EFL learners who, despite adequate language processing knowledge and comprehension capability, struggle with demonstrating fluency and accuracy in speaking performance. Drawing on Social Learning Theory, Schema Theory, and Interaction Hypothesis, the study examines how informal discussions can facilitate language practice, knowledge of various schemas, negotiation of meaning, as well as spontaneous language use, which ultimately contribute to the development of speaking proficiency. A true experimental design was employed with 242 Iranian EFL learners. The participants were split into two experimental groups and two control groups across B1+ and B2+ proficiency levels based on the Oxford Placement Test. The experimental groups received explicit input on linguistic resources and test strategies during communicative activities while the control groups had no exam-oriented input but just limited linguistic feedback. Findings from a 2×2 between-groups MANCOVA indicated significant positive effects of input-based instruction and proficiency level on overall speaking performance. Moreover, input-based treatment was influential on fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation components of speaking performance separately. Implications, limitations and further avenues of research are also discussed.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54660/.IJMRGE.2025.6.2.716-724

Keywords: Free Discussion Courses, IELTS, Input-Based Instruction, Language Proficiency

1. Introduction

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) exam is a globally recognized and authenticated means of assessment of English proficiency. Given the incontrovertible role of the test, a significant number of individuals, educational institutions, and language program developers have sought effective strategies aiming to prepare individuals for the test in the most effective and efficient manner possible in the highly competitive market. Standing at the opposite end of the spectrum from established language courses that are designed to primarily focus on exam formats and model responses with a high focus on comprehension and competence, input-based free discussion courses aim to emphasize developing communicative competence through authentic language input, collaborative knowledge construction, and open-ended discussions. Primarily based on Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (1982), schema theory (Anderson, 1977), social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) [9], and interaction hypothesis (Long, 1983), these courses plan to engage students in meaningful natural discussions providing targeted language-oriented feedback, aiming to enhance productive language skills through social interaction, corrective feedback, and socio-cognitive development which play the most significant role when it comes to naturally fluent and accurate performance in the IELTS speaking exam (Ortega & DeKeyser, 2007; Ostovar-Namaghi, Morady Moghaddam, & Veysmorady, 2024) [43, 44]. Empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of input-based instruction and the scope of its interplay with various

other elements and constituents, considered to have an effective role in improving IELTS speaking performance, is considerably limited (Alimohamadi & Poordaryiaenejad, 2015; Aridasarie & Tabiati, 2022; Bagheridoust & Khairullah, 2023; Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Ginting, Dalimunte, Dalimunte, Kurniati, & Adelita, 2023; Hussain Mir, 2022; Liu, 2023; Sert, 2015; Shen & Yu, 2022; Shevelova-Harkusha, 2023; Solihin, Ari Dwi Intan, Dita Rezkia, & Mayang, 2023) [4, 7, 8, 16, 27, 32, 37, 51, 35, 53, 55]. The present study aims to fill the theoretical and empirical gap through the comparison of summative performance of participants while endeavoring to delve into more effective pedagogic strategies to not only enhance IELTS speaking scores but ultimately inform course designers and curriculum developers in the design and implementation of more effective preparation programs to improve learners' English proficiency.

Literature Review

1) Theoretical Background

Key factors such as constructivism, schema theory, social learning theory, interaction hypothesis, and output hypothesis accentuate the effectiveness of free discussion in English Language Teaching (ELT) via concepts such as knowledge co-creation and fluency development (Anderson, 1977; Bandura, 1977; Long, 1981; Piaget, 1972; Swain, 1985) [9, 38, 46, 56]. As pointed out by Mackey and Oliver (2000) [40], learning through observation and interaction, emphasized through social learning theory, allows students to imitate peers, which enhances vocabulary and communication strategies. Active construction of knowledge by ELLs is posited by Constructivism through collaborative discussions fostering diverse perspectives thereby improving critical thinking and speaking proficiency (Brooks & MacArthur, 2008; Fosnot, 1996;) [26].

Understanding how people process cognitive information, particularly in cognitive psychology and education, shaped the foundation upon which the interplay of cognitive sciences and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) was established (Anderson, 1978; Rumelhart, 1974, 1980) [6, 48, 49]. Inspired also by the earlier works of Piaget (1972) [46], scholars shifted their focus to the positive impacts of activating learners' schemata in language acquisition, stressing the role of prior knowledge in SLA (Hatch, 1983; Schmidt, 1990) [30, 50]. Others examined reading comprehension performance improvement and second language processing (Carrell, 1984; Eisterhold, 1986) [15, 22], ultimately paving the way for further research demonstrating how schema theory enhances teaching practices through contributions to effectively connecting cognitive theory to language learning contexts (Alimohamadi, & Poordaryiaenejad, 2015; Mahmoudi, 2017) [4, 41].

While scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) [61] is proven essential in better balancing learner support and autonomy, the sociolinguistic theory (Hymes,1972) [33] illuminated the positive role of social contexts and learner autonomy, ultimately leading to the introduction of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000) [19], Also, the Interaction Hypothesis introduced by Long (1980) goes on to signify that the negotiation of meaning during classroom discussions improves fluency via prompting clarification and elaboration among peers. Later, the Output Hypothesis by Swain (1985) [57] went on to point out the favorable influence of providing learners with opportunities for expression and feedback and the pivotal role of language production for acquisition (Skehan, 1998) [54].

Despite all the above-mentioned positive implications of communicative classroom activities, Krashen (1985) [35] pointed out that unstructured discussions and unfamiliar language could overwhelm learners, thereby hindering their acquisition despite the beneficial effects observed on confidence, fluency, and accuracy in the learning atmosphere.

2) Empirical Background

The positive influence of employing a communicative approach to language teaching has long been established (Canale & Swain, 1980) [14]. With regards to the effectiveness of corrective feedback and negotiation of meaning on overall speaking performance, research by Kawaguchi and Ma (2012) [34] indicated that when native English speakers collaborated with no-native English Language Learners (ELLs) of different proficiency levels in task-based activities, the error rates decreased between the pre- and post-test, alongside a noticeable improvement in overall speaking performance.

Research has also identified the importance of context and learning environment as a major contributing factor in learner uptake, particularly concerning the shape of corrective feedback (Liu, 2023) [37]. Utilizing Lyster and Ranta's (1997) [39] taxonomy of teachers' corrective feedback, Sheen (2004) [52] used a variety of corrective feedback techniques with recast being the most frequent across various language immersion settings including, that of Korea, France, New Zealand, and Canada. The findings of this research indicate that noticeable instances of focus on form, as seen in partial or salient recast, are the most effective types of feedback among others used in this study. Despite these findings being further confirmed by Bao, Egi, and Han (2011) [10], it is also worth mentioning that, elicitation, clarification requests, repetition, and metalinguistic feedback are four other types of corrective feedback that, under certain conditions, were previously proven to have been more effective than recast by Lyster and Ranta back in 1997 [39].

When it comes to the interplay between cognitive interactionist and social interactionist perspectives in SLA, corrective feedback is believed by Althobaiti (2014) [5] to bridge the gap. This is extensively discussed by Ortega and DeKeyser (2010) and later Sert (2015) [51] where they consider metacognitive and metalinguistic elements in L2 acquisition and performance. Ultimately, it was Barkaoui *et al*. (2013) [11] and later Fernandez (2018) who empirically tested the effectiveness between and within the cognitive, metacognitive, and communicative strategies used by IELTS candidates in part 3 of speaking on their performance. In his 2018 study, Fernandez combined previous categorizations by Huang (2013) and Swain *et al*. (2009) [58], which amounted to 18 various strategies, concluding that while some significantly affected speaking score improvement, learner knowledge about the language and strategies played a pivotal role in their positive or negative influence on speaking performance and score. The most thorough and extensive study on how and to what frequency specific strategies are employed by ELLs has been presented in Alhemaid (2024) [1], taking into consideration the frequencies of overall strategy-use, approach strategies, communication strategies, cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, affective strategies, and social strategies, as elicited via three methods, namely, observation, individual reflection, and group reflection. However, the conditions and results account for the development of general speaking skills and do not specifically concern the IELTS test.

3) Implications of the Study

The literature reviewed indicates that despite the strong theoretical underpinnings of the aforementioned concepts, namely the contribution of social interaction on the acquisition of cognitive and metacognitive competencies and strategies signified by a wide spectrum of research conducted in the realm of cognitive linguistics, corrective feedback, and interactionist approaches, there have been very few instances where the effectiveness of such proposed treatments has been quantitatively tested, and even fewer have been conducted as per the particular specifications of IELTS speaking performance descriptors (Heidari Vincheh *et al*. 2024; Tuan & Nam, 2024) [31, 60]. To be more specific, most have taken overall speaking improvement and the frequency of specific socio-cognitive strategies into account and had a relative disregard for individual components comprising what is identified as speaking performance indicators following the standards of the test, namely fluency, lexical range, grammatical range, accuracy and pronunciation. The extent of the influence a specific treatment would have on individual constituents of speaking ability indicators needs accounting for. The present study aims to address this gap in research by specifying the extent to which a combination of improving communicative competencies through free discussion and input-based instruction positively affects IELTS speaking performance. The results of this study could present a possibility for the future development of more efficient and effective speaking preparation courses and curricula, focusing on developing individual speaking skills as per the scoring criteria of the IELTS test with a higher level of input and output accuracy with the level of language proficiency considered. Touching upon the aforementioned issues, the following research questions can be presented:

- Does input-based instruction affect EFL learners' overall speaking performance in terms of a linear combination of fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation while controlling for their pretest scores?
- Does proficiency level affect EFL learners' overall speaking performance in terms of a linear combination of fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation while controlling for their pretest scores?
- Does input-based instruction interact with proficiency level in influencing EFL learners' overall speaking performance in terms of a linear combination of fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation while controlling for their pretest scores?
- Does input-based instruction affect EFL learners' fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation separately while controlling for their pretest scores?
- Does proficiency level affect EFL learners' fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation separately while controlling for their pretest scores?
- Does input-based instruction interact with proficiency level in influencing EFL learners' fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation separately while controlling for their pretest scores?

Materials and Methods

1) Participants

In this study, 242 students (121 males and 121 females) in the form of two groups of prospective IELTS candidates were involved. The first group consisted of 121 non-native (male and female) English language learners selected through the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) at level B1+. According to OPT descriptors, this level includes understanding main points in spoken and written texts, communicating on familiar topics, and producing simple written content. Students should demonstrate a basic grasp of grammar and vocabulary, enabling them to engage in straightforward conversations and interactions. Overall, the test evaluates functional language use in everyday contexts, what constitutes the abilities of intermediate students according to the CEFR. The group was divided through randomized and stratified selection into two experimental and control subgroups of 60 and 61, both designated to participate in free-discussion courses. The experimental group received explicit linguistic input, including grammatical and lexical resources, as well as strategies on how to develop and organize thoughts into exam-oriented discourse, aiming to improve overall linguistic and exam-based performance. On the other hand, the control group also participated in a free-discussion course with the same curriculum, with the exception being the omission of the linguistic and exam-oriented input. Students in this group were expected to develop speaking proficiency and performance independently through open discussions and reliance on their knowledge and strategies with delayed feedback after each session on language use.

Simultaneously, the second group, consisting of 121 non-native (male and female) English language learners selected through the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) at level B2+ and thereby classified as upper-intermediate learners. This distinguishes them from B1+ proficiency students by their enhanced listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills. They can understand more complex texts, express themselves fluently on a wider range of topics, and produce structured written content with improved grammar and vocabulary. Additionally, B2+ students are better at negotiating meaning in conversations and demonstrate greater independence in using English in various contexts. Overall, they are more effective communicators compared to B1+ proficiency students. Here also, the participants were divided into experimental and control groups (60 and 61 students respectively) with the first group designated to receive the aforementioned explicit input. The input and strategic developments of both proficiency groups receiving explicit input in both experimental groups were the same, as were the procedures designated for the control groups in not receiving input and merely focusing on independent improvement and limited linguistic feedback. Table 1 below presents the profile of the participants from the perspectives of proficiency level, grouping and gender.

Table 1: Composition of Participants Based on Proficiency Level, Grouping, and Gender

Proficiency Level	Grouping	Gender	Total	Grand Total	Great Grand Total
B1+	EG	29 M	60	121	242
		31 F			
	CG	31 M	61		
		30 F			
B2+	EG	30 M	60	121	
		30 F			
	CG	31 M	61		
		30 F			

Note: EG = experimental group; CG = control group; M = males; F = females

Four certified IELTS speaking mock-examiners also participated in evaluating the candidates.

2) Design and Variables

This study employed a true experimental design with experimental and control groups. The present study investigated the effects of two independent variables of instruction type (with two levels of input-based and no input treatment), and proficiency level (B1+ and B2+) on the four dependent variables (fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) of IELTS-based speaking performance scores.

3) Procedures

In this study, 242 ELLs were selected through an official language proficiency test (OPT) from non-native (Iranian) English language learners, considering candidacy in the IELTS exam, and were categorized into two main groups with the proficiency levels of B1+ and B2+. Alongside the OPT, the general IELTS speaking performance assessment was administered both before and after the entire course had been conducted. Using stratified random sampling, both groups were divided into two experimental and control groups. The experimental groups in each proficiency group received the same lexical, audio-visual, and strategic exam preparation input regardless of their designated proficiency levels and tested at the end of the academic semester parallel to their final examinations, while the control groups only participated in an IELTS subject based free-discussion courses thereby not including the aforementioned explicit input and only aiming to focus on output of previously learned material and including merely language based delayed feedback. The evaluation was done at both stages by certified IELTS speaking mock-examiners with the standards of the IELTS exam performance indicators (fluency and coherence, grammatical range and accuracy, lexical resource, and pronunciation, each calculated from 5 with a total of 20). This system was crucial in more meticulously evaluating the impact of the course on the students' speaking skills and overall performance.

4) Analyses

Four 2×2 ANOVAs and a 2×2 between-groups MANCOVA were run in this research project. Different other analyses as the prerequisites for the above statistical calculations were also employed. They are as follows: Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, Mahalanobis distance value, different correlations as well as linearity checks, Box's M test, Levene's test, and Bonferroni adjustment.

Results

To check for the existence of prior differences between the pretest scores of experimental and control groups from the two viewpoints of input-based instruction and proficiency level, four 2×2 ANOVAs were run on the four-pretest dependent variable scores of fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The results showed that, except for fluency, the three other pretest variables of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation can be considered as control variables. The existence of multiple dependent variables and at the same time multiple control variables paved the way to the implementation of a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA).

Table 2 below shows the descriptive statistics for the posttest scores of students on fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Treatment	Proficiency Level	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Posttest Fluency	Experimental Group	B1+	4.575	.3297	60
		B2+	4.692	.3693	60
		Total	4.633	.3535	120
	Control Group	B1+	3.844	.4791	61
		B2+	3.721	.3479	61
		Total	3.783	.4215	122
	Total	B1+	4.207	.5503	121
		B2+	4.202	.6041	121
		Total	4.205	.5766	242
Posttest Grammar	Experimental Group	B1+	4.608	.3693	60
		B2+	4.733	.3956	60
		Total	4.671	.3862	120
	Control Group	B1+	3.861	.4576	61
		B2+	3.820	.3296	61
		Total	3.840	.3977	122
	Total	B1+	4.231	.5592	121
		B2+	4.273	.5845	121
		Total	4.252	.5712	242
Posttest Vocabulary	Experimental Group	B1+	4.633	.4103	60
		B2+	4.708	.3716	60
		Total	4.671	.3916	120
	Control Group	B1+	3.852	.4015	61
		B2+	3.893	.3430	61
		Total	3.873	.3724	122
	Total	B1+	4.240	.5631	121
		B2+	4.298	.5423	121
		Total	4.269	.5524	242
Posttest Pronunciation	Experimental Group	B1+	4.633	.4205	60
		B2+	4.575	.4201	60
		Total	4.604	.4196	120
	Control Group	B1+	4.016	.3158	61
		B2+	3.779	.3711	61
		Total	3.898	.3633	122
	Total	B1+	4.322	.4824	121
		B2+	4.174	.5617	121
		Total	4.248	.5278	242

As a start for inferential statistical analyses, after checking for the prerequisites of applying a MANCOVA (univariate and multivariate normality, multicollinearity and singularity, correlations among control variables, linear relationship among dependent variables and control variables and further among control variables themselves, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, Levene's test of equality of error variances, and Bonferroni adjustment), a 2×2 between-groups MANCOVA was run on the existing data, the results of which are presented as follows.

Table 3 below demonstrates the results of multivariate tests to find the effects of independent variables (input-based treatment and proficiency level) on the combined dependent variables (fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation). In the first place, it indicates that the three control variables of pretest scores on grammar (p =.403), vocabulary (p =.528), and pronunciation (p =.597) have no effects on the final combined posttest scores.

Table 3: Multivariate[a]

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.728	155.292[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.728
	Wilks' Lambda	.272	155.292[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.728
	Hotelling's Trace	2.677	155.292[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.728
	Roy's Largest Root	2.677	155.292[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.728
PreGrammar	Pillai's Trace	.017	1.011[b]	4.000	232.000	.403	.017
	Wilks' Lambda	.983	1.011[b]	4.000	232.000	.403	.017
	Hotelling's Trace	.017	1.011[b]	4.000	232.000	.403	.017
	Roy's Largest Root	.017	1.011[b]	4.000	232.000	.403	.017
PreVocabulary	Pillai's Trace	.014	.798[b]	4.000	232.000	.528	.014
	Wilks' Lambda	.986	.798[b]	4.000	232.000	.528	.014
	Hotelling's Trace	.014	.798[b]	4.000	232.000	.528	.014
	Roy's Largest Root	.014	.798[b]	4.000	232.000	.528	.014
PrePronunciation	Pillai's Trace	.012	.694[b]	4.000	232.000	.597	.012
	Wilks' Lambda	.988	.694[b]	4.000	232.000	.597	.012
	Hotelling's Trace	.012	.694[b]	4.000	232.000	.597	.012
	Roy's Largest Root	.012	.694[b]	4.000	232.000	.597	.012
Treatment	Pillai's Trace	.695	132.081[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.695
	Wilks' Lambda	.305	132.081[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.695
	Hotelling's Trace	2.277	132.081[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.695
	Roy's Largest Root	2.277	132.081[b]	4.000	232.000	.000	.695
Proficiency	Pillai's Trace	.045	2.749[b]	4.000	232.000	.029	.045
	Wilks' Lambda	.955	2.749[b]	4.000	232.000	.029	.045
	Hotelling's Trace	.047	2.749[b]	4.000	232.000	.029	.045
	Roy's Largest Root	.047	2.749[b]	4.000	232.000	.029	.045
Treatment * Proficiency	Pillai's Trace	.034	2.070[b]	4.000	232.000	.085	.034
	Wilks' Lambda	.966	2.070[b]	4.000	232.000	.085	.034
	Hotelling's Trace	.036	2.070[b]	4.000	232.000	.085	.034
	Roy's Largest Root	.036	2.070[b]	4.000	232.000	.085	.034

a. Design intercept + pregrammar + prevocabulary + prepronunciation + treatment + proficiency + treatment* proficiency
b. Exact statistic

Based on the above table, the first three research questions can be answered. Let us repeat them here and provide answers for them.

RQ1. Does input-based instruction affect EFL learners' overall speaking performance in terms of a linear combination of fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation while controlling for their pretest scores?

Table 3 shows that the treatment in the form of input-based instruction has a significant influence on all four dependent variables as a whole, F (4, 232) = 132.081, p =.000, Wilks' Lambda =.305, partial eta squared =.695.

RQ2. Does proficiency level affect EFL learners' overall speaking performance in terms of a linear combination of fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation while controlling for their pretest scores?

Table 3 proves that proficiency level has a significant effect on combined dependent variables, F (4, 232) = 2.749, p =.029, Wilks' Lambda =.955, partial eta squared =.045.

RQ3. Does input-based instruction interact with proficiency level in influencing EFL learners' overall speaking performance in terms of a linear combination of fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation while controlling for their pretest scores?

Table 3 highlights that the interaction of the two independent variables of input-based instruction (treatment) and proficiency level has no significant effect on all four dependent variables taken together, F (4, 232) = 2.070, p =.085, Wilks' Lambda =.966.

Table 4 below details the results of tests of between subjects effects to seek the effects of independent variables (input-based instruction and proficiency level) on dependent variables (fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) separately. To begin with, it pinpoints that none of the three control variables has any effect on any of the four dependent variables separately. This is evident in p values of control variables: pretest score of grammar on posttest scores of fluency (p =.405), grammar (p =.187), vocabulary (p =.096), and pronunciation (p =.162); pretest score of vocabulary on posttest scores of fluency (p =.123), grammar (p =.201), vocabulary (p =.736), and pronunciation (p =.993); pretest score of pronunciation on posttest scores of fluency (p =.722), grammar (p =.681), vocabulary (p =.343), and pronunciation (p =.106).

Table 4: Test of between-subjects effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Posttest Fluency	45.003[a]	6	7.500	50.185	.000	.562
	Posttest Grammar	42.652[b]	6	7.109	46.441	.000	.542
	Posttest Vocabulary	39.701[c]	6	6.617	45.949	.000	.540
	Posttest Pronunciation	33.053[d]	6	5.509	37.996	.000	.492
Intercept	Posttest Fluency	34.127	1	34.127	228.342	.000	.493
	Posttest Grammar	38.129	1	38.129	249.094	.000	.515
	Posttest Vocabulary	49.135	1	49.135	341.211	.000	.592
	Posttest Pronunciation	48.942	1	48.942	337.571	.000	.590
PreGrammar	Posttest Fluency	.104	1	.104	.695	.405	.003
	Posttest Grammar	.268	1	.268	1.750	.187	.007
	Posttest Vocabulary	.403	1	.403	2.799	.096	.012
	Posttest Pronunciation	.285	1	.285	1.966	.162	.008
PreVocabulary	Posttest Fluency	.358	1	.358	2.393	.123	.010
	Posttest Grammar	.252	1	.252	1.646	.201	.007
	Posttest Vocabulary	.016	1	.016	.114	.736	.000
	Posttest Pronunciation	1.159E-5	1	1.159E-5	.000	.993	.000
PrePronunciation	Posttest Fluency	.019	1	.019	.127	.722	.001
	Posttest Grammar	.026	1	.026	.170	.681	.001
	Posttest Vocabulary	.130	1	.130	.903	.343	.004
	Posttest Pronunciation	.382	1	.382	2.632	.106	.011
Treatment	Posttest Fluency	42.238	1	42.238	282.610	.000	.546
	Posttest Grammar	40.366	1	40.366	263.712	.000	.529
	Posttest Vocabulary	37.930	1	37.930	263.397	.000	.528
	Posttest Pronunciation	30.373	1	30.373	209.495	.000	.471
Proficiency	Posttest Fluency	.023	1	.023	.154	.695	.001
	Posttest Grammar	.075	1	.075	.487	.486	.002
	Posttest Vocabulary	.652	1	.652	4.529	.034	.019
	Posttest Pronunciation	.335	1	.335	2.309	.130	.010
Treatment * Proficiency	Posttest Fluency	.862	1	.862	5.765	.017	.024
	Posttest Grammar	.392	1	.392	2.564	.111	.011
	Posttest Vocabulary	.006	1	.006	.039	.843	.000
	Posttest Pronunciation	.409	1	.409	2.822	.094	.012
Error	Posttest Fluency	35.122	235	.149			
	Posttest Grammar	35.971	235	.153			
	Posttest Vocabulary	33.841	235	.144			
	Posttest Pronunciation	34.071	235	.145			
Total	Posttest Fluency	4358.250	242				
	Posttest Grammar	4454.000	242				
	Posttest Vocabulary	4483.000	242				
	Posttest Pronunciation	4434.000	242				
Corrected Total	Posttest Fluency	80.125	241				
	Posttest Grammar	78.624	241				
	Posttest Vocabulary	73.541	241				
	Posttest Pronunciation	67.124	241				

a. R Squared = 562(adjusted R Squared =550)
b. R Squared = 542(adjusted R Squared =531)
c. R Squared = 540(adjusted R Squared =528)
d. R Squared = 492(adjusted R Squared =479)

The remaining three research questions can be answered by the above table.

RQ4. Does input-based instruction affect EFL learners' fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation separately while controlling for their pretest scores?

As it can be seen in Table 4, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of.0125, input-based treatment has a significant influence on fluency, F (1, 235) = 282.610, p =.000, partial eta squared =.546; grammar, F (1, 235) = 263.712, p =.000, partial eta squared =.529; vocabulary, F (1, 235) = 263.397, p =.000, partial eta squared =.528; and pronunciation, F (1, 235) = 209.495, p =.000, partial eta squared =.471.

RQ5. Does proficiency level affect EFL learners' fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation separately while controlling for their pretest scores?

A close look at Table 4 reveals the fact that, with a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of.0125, proficiency level does not influence fluency, F (1, 235) =.154, p =.695; grammar, F (1, 235) =.487, p =.486; vocabulary, F (1, 235) = 4.529, p =.034; and pronunciation, F (1, 235) = 2.309, p =.130.

RQ6. Does input-based instruction interact with proficiency level in influencing EFL learners' fluency, grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation separately while controlling for their pretest scores?

It is apparent from Table 4 that, while observing Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of.0125, the interaction of input-based treatment and proficiency level does not affect fluency, F (1, 235) = 5.765, p =.017; grammar, F (1, 235) = 2.564, p =.111; vocabulary, F (1, 235) =.039, p =.843; and pronunciation, F (1, 235) = 2.822, p =.094.

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to accentuate the constructive contribution that collaborative discussions, and in particular, input-based instruction, make to knowledge and schema co-creation and fluency development. This concept has been emphasized by theories such as constructivism (Piaget, 1972) [46], schema theory (Anderson1977), and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) [9]. The findings provide significant insights into various aspects of how input-based instruction positively impacts the speaking performance of EFL students with regard to their preparation for the IELTS

exam. Concerning the relationship between speaking performance and the effectiveness of input-based interactive discussions, the findings are shown to be in alignment with previous research (Alimkulova & Gainanova, 2024; Kurniawan & Ghozali, 2024; Sevarakhon, 2024) [3, 36].

Based on the data accumulated, it was discovered that when it came to the interaction between input-based instructions and proficiency level, while independently and significantly contributing to overall speaking improvement, their interaction would not meaningfully affect overall speaking performance. To reiterate, observations indicate that while a notable impact is observable by the independent influence of the level of proficiency on overall verbal expression improvement, the effect is relatively modest compared to the significant independent role that input-based instruction plays in improving overall speaking aptitude suggesting that all learners can benefit from input-based strategies regardless of their level of proficiency which supports the observations made by Shevelova-Harkusha (2023) [53] and Rahimi and Fathi (2022) [47]. These findings reinforce the idea that the effectiveness of communicative activities involved remains stable across varying proficiency levels and thereby indicating that input-based instruction plays a more significant role in improving overall speaking performance compared to level of language proficiency.

Furthermore, the study confirmed that input-based instruction significantly impacts specific components of oral communication, including fluency, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. However, contrary to the moderate effect of proficiency level on overall speaking performance with the combined results of all speaking components considered, the constructive contribution on individual components was insignificant. Ultimately, the interaction between input-based instructions and proficiency level was also proven to have been insignificant when it came to their impact on the aforementioned individual components of speaking, which is similar to their contribution to overall speaking performance, signaling that while a combination of both would have an incontrovertible effect on the development of speaking performance, their interaction has no effect either way.

These results correspond to the core concepts of cognitive psychology and schema theory, promoting the activation of learners' prior knowledge thereby enhancing language acquisition (Anderson, 1978; Carrell, 1984; Hatch, 1983; Schmidt, 1990) [6, 15, 30, 50]. The necessity of scaffolding and structured feedback, have also been emphasized by the research findings as proposed by Krashen (1982) [35] and supported by Mackey and Oliver (2000) [40]. The findings of the study contribute to understanding of how input-based free discussion can effectively influence the speaking performance indicators of EFL students. While findings align with previously established literature on the benefits of engaging students in communicative activities, this research underscores the need for further exploration of how different instructional strategies can affect specific socio-linguistic elements which are considered effective in meaningful and correct communication. The continuation of future research in this realm could emphasize the importance of investigating these dynamics more precisely to better enhance the effectiveness of teaching practices in applied linguistics and exam preparation settings. Courses can therefore be tailored or adjusted to meet diverse learner needs in various educational contexts which opens new doors for educational systems and institutions to entertain a more adaptive and liberal outlook to more modern learning approaches.

Conclusion

The present study aimed to establish the significance of the effects of communicative and knowledge co-construction activities within guided free-discussion classes on the overall IELTS speaking achievement of language learners through the means of input-based instruction and investigated the significant impacts of such activities on individual constituents of IELTS speaking production criteria with the hopes of developing more effective courses and lessons to improve competence and performance by individuals wishing to participate in the test. The treatment was proven to have had a positive impact on the overall summative performance of ELLs as well as on the constituents of scoring criteria of the IELTS test. The results further indicated that despite the insignificant interaction between proficiency and input-based instruction, engaging learners in content and language-oriented discussions, fosters co-creative language schemata development through cognitive interaction resulting in more productive and impactful communication and test outcomes. It was also proven to enhance the employment of various communicative strategies in speaking as a result of observation, individual and group reflection, and corrective feedback. When dealing with more abstract and complex issues commonly presented in the speaking parts of the IELTS test and social discussions, language learners were better able to perform, deduct and discuss in a more elaborate, logical, effective and linguistically profound manner. This improvement in language production is achieved by enhancing language accuracy through corrective interaction and feedback which optimizes schemata and socio-linguistic awareness, knowledge of strategic measures, as well as enhancing their self-esteem, communicative abilities, and test outcomes. The results further established that alongside purely linguistic knowledge and performance indicators, cognitive and communicative development of language learners must also be taken into due consideration when it comes to designing and executing various course curricula as language learners tend to mostly find it difficult to perform in test settings and language production tasks, not simply because they lack knowledge or linguistic proficiency, but because of the simple absence of schematic consciousness and social or even subjective awareness, which could fall under what Graziano and Webb (2015) [28] identify as the Attention Schema Theory beyond what can be construed as part of target language knowledge. However, the findings of this research are subject to some limitations which must be recognized in terms of the number of participants, their willingness to participate in a novel and previously unestablished course with possibly debatable results. Despite these limitations, new avenues for further research in the field of interaction between social cognitivism in SLA and test performance need to also be considered, perhaps concerning other language proficiency tests. Similar effects could also be analyzed on writing production and pragmatic acquisition with the aim of better establishing the effectiveness of guided socio-cognitive processes in more effective language acquisition and competence. This would open the doors to more specific analyses of socio-cognitive treatments on productive performance criteria as well as other confounding and moderating variables in play.

References

1. Alhemaid A. Developing speaking strategies among adult English-as-an-Additional-Language (EAL) learners in performing the IELTS speaking tasks,

mediated by audio-recorded and video-stimulated individual verbal reflection [Doctoral Dissertation]. 2024.
2. Ali Bhutto A, Ahmed R, Khan AA. IELTS in Pakistan: Preparation practices, activities & test-taking strategies. The Dialogue. 2024;19(1):47–59.
3. Alimkulova D, Gainanova V. The effective ways of improving students' speaking skills via practicing in the IELTS speaking club. Scientific Collection «Interconf». 2024;186:459–465.
4. Alimohamadi F, Poordaryiaenejad A. Incorporating schema in the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' L2 speaking ability. Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research. 2015;2(8):100–110.
5. Althobaiti N. Corrective feedback: A bridge between cognitive interactionist and social interactionist perspectives. American Journal of Educational Research. 2014;2(10):950–954.
6. Anderson RC. Schema-directed processes in language comprehension. In: Lesgold AM, Pellegrino JW, Fokkema SD, Glaser R, editors. Cognitive Psychology and Instruction. 1978.
7. Aridasarie Z, Tabiati SE. Behind a spoken discourse: Idiomatic expressions in IELTS speaking test. ELT Forum: Journal of English Language Teaching. 2022;11(3):169–178.
8. Bagheridoust E, Khairullah YK. A comparative-correlative study of test rubrics used as benchmarks in assessing IELTS and TOEFL speaking skills. English Language Teaching. 2023;16(6):1–12.
9. Bandura A. Social Learning Theory. Prentice Hall; 1977.
10. Bao M, Egi T, Han Y. Classroom study on noticing and recast features: Capturing learner noticing with uptake and stimulated recall. System. 2011;39(2):215–228.
11. Barkaoui K, Swain M, Lapkin S. Test-takers' strategic behaviors in independent and integrated speaking tasks. Applied Linguistics. 2013;34(3):304–324.
12. Bartlett F, Kintsch W. Perceiving, recognising, remembering. In: Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1995. p. 186–196.
13. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology. 2006;3(2):77–101.
14. Swain CMM. Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. Applied Linguistics. 1980;1(1):1–47.
15. Carrell PL. Schema theory and ESL reading: Classroom implications and applications. The Modern Language Journal. 1984;68(4):332–343.
16. Cheng HF, Dörnyei Z. The use of motivational strategies in language instruction: The case of EFL teaching in Taiwan. Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching. 2007;1(1):153–174.
17. Cumming A. Metalinguistic and ideational thinking in second language composing. Written Communication. 1990;7(4):482–511.
18. Daif-Allah A, Khan M. The impact of open discussion sessions on enhancing the oral communicative abilities of Saudi English language majors at Buraydah Community College. English Language Teaching. 2016;9(6):108–120.
19. Deci EL, Ryan RM. The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. Psychological Inquiry. 2000;11(4):227–268.
20. Doehler ZP, Marian KS. Functional diversification and progressive routinization of a multiword expression in and for social interaction: A longitudinal L2 study. The Modern Language Journal. 2021;106(S1):23–45.
21. Dörnyei Z, Ottó I. Motivation in action: A process model of L2 motivation. Working Papers in Applied Linguistics. 1998;4:43–69.
22. Eisterhold JC. Verbal aspect and background/foreground distinctions in radio commentaries (narratives, pragmatics) [Doctoral Dissertation]. Northwestern University; 1986.
23. Eliyeva T. A scientific approach to improving IELTS speaking scores: Best practices and techniques. Journal of Azerbaijan Language and Education Studies. 2024;1(1):28–34.
24. Ellis R, Sheen Y. Reexamining the role of recasts in second language acquisition. Studies in Second Language Acquisition. 2006;28(4):575–600.
25. Firth A, Wagner J. Second/foreign language learning as a social accomplishment: Elaborations on a reconceptualized SLA. The Modern Language Journal. 2007;91(3):800–819.
26. Fosnot CT. Constructivism: A psychological theory of learning. In: Fosnot CT, editor. Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives, and Practice. 2nd ed. Teachers College Columbia University; 1996. p. 8–33.
27. Ginting RS, Dalimunte AA, Dalimunte M, Kurniati EY, Adelita D. A critical review of IELTS speaking test. JL3T Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching. 2023;9(2):138–155.
28. Graziano MS, Webb TW. The attention schema theory: A mechanistic account of subjective awareness. Frontiers in Psychology. 2015;6:500.
29. Hanh L, Duc N. Using group discussion to improve the EFL students' speaking skills at Dong Nai Technology University, Vietnam. European Journal of Foreign Language Teaching. 2022;6(1).
30. Hatch EM. Psycholinguistics: A Second Language Perspective. Newbury House Publishers, Inc.; 1983.
31. Heidari Vincheh M, Mirzaei A, Roohani A. A cognitive diagnostic approach to IELTS speaking test: unveiling the subskills and test-takers' perceptions. Language Testing in Asia. 2024;14:42.
32. Hussain Mir S. Perceptions of IELTS test takers towards speaking in Pakistan. Annals of Human and Social Sciences. 2022;3(2):264–274.
33. Hymes D. On communicative competence. In: Sociolinguistics. 1972. p. 269–293.
34. Kawaguchi S, Ma Y. Corrective feedback, negotiation of meaning and grammar development: Learner-learner and learner-native speaker interaction in ESL. Open Journal of Modern Linguistics. 2012;2:57–70.
35. Krashen SD. The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications. Addison-Wesley Longman Ltd.; 1985.
36. Kurniawan Y, Ghozali I. Scaffolding implementation in IELTS speaking skills to Indonesian EFL learners. Journal of English Language Literacy. 2024;1(1):8–16.
37. Liu Y. IELTS speaking teachers' attitudes towards oral corrective feedback: A pedagogical perspective. Frontiers in Educational Research. 2023;6(13):87–91.
38. Long MH. Input, interaction, and second-language acquisition. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences. 1981;379(1):259–278.
39. Lyster R, Ranta L. Corrective feedback and learner uptake: Negotiation of form in communicative classrooms. Studies in Second Language Acquisition. 1997;19(1):37–66.
40. Mackey A, Oliver R. Interactional feedback and children's L2 development. System. 2000;30(4):459–

477.
41. Mahmoudi S. Investigating the effect of cultural schemata activation on EFL learners' listening comprehension. English Language, Literature & Culture. 2017;2(6):99–104.
42. Octaberlina LR, Muslimin AI. Fostering students' speaking ability through English club activities. Arab World English Journal. 2022;13(3):414–428.
43. Ortega L, DeKeyser R. Meaningful L2 practice in foreign language classrooms: A cognitive-interactionist SLA perspective. In: Practice in a second language: Perspectives from applied linguistics and cognitive psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2007. p. 180–207.
44. Ostovar-Namaghi SA, Morady Moghaddam M, Veysmorady K. Empowering EFL learners through cognitive apprenticeship: A pathway to success in IELTS speaking proficiency. Language Teaching Research. 2024.
45. Patton MQ. Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice. 4th ed. Sage Publications; 2015.
46. Piaget J. Intellectual evolution from adolescence to adulthood. Human Development. 1972;15:1–12.
47. Rahimi M, Fathi J. Employing e-tandem language learning method to enhance speaking skills and willingness to communicate: The case of EFL learners. Computer Assisted Language Learning. 2022;37(4):924–960.
48. Rumelhart DE. Notes on a schema for stories. Representation and Understanding. 1974;211–236.
49. Rumelhart DE. Schemata: The building blocks of cognition. In: Spiro RJ, Bruce BC, Brewer WE, editors. Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension. Erlbaum; 1980. p. 33–58.
50. Schmidt RW. The role of consciousness in second language learning. Applied Linguistics. 1990;11(2):129–158.
51. Sert O. Social Interaction and L2 Classroom Discourse. Edinburgh University Press; 2015.
52. Sheen Y. Corrective feedback and learner uptake in communicative classrooms across instructional settings. Language Teaching Research. 2004;8(3):263–300.
53. Shevelova-Harkusha O. Communicative activities for developing students' speaking skills in English lessons. Pedagogy. 2023;145(1):47–57.
54. Skehan P. A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning. Oxford University Press; 1998.
55. Solihin S, Ari Dwi Intan A, Dita Rezkia U, Mayang S. Issues with the speaking section of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS): An assessment critique. ELS Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities. 2023;6(3):540–545.
56. Swain M. Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In: Gass SM, Madden CG, editors. Input in Second Language Acquisition. Newbury House; 1985. p. 235.
57. Swain M. Large-scale communicative language testing: A case study. In: Lee YP, Fok ACYY, Lord R, Low G, editors. New Directions in Language Testing. Pergamon Press; 1985b. p. 35–46.
58. Swain M, Huang S, Barkaoui K, Brooks L, Lapkin S. The speaking section of THE TOEFL IBT™ (SSTIBT): Test-takers' reported strategic behaviors. ETS Research Report Series. 2009;(2):i–118.
59. Swain M, Lapkin S. Focus on form through collaborative dialogue: Exploring task effects. In: Researching pedagogic tasks: Second-language learning, teaching and testing. 2001.
60. Tuan PT, Nam NT. Enhancing IELTS speaking skills through blended learning: A pedagogical action research. International Journal of English Language Studies. 2024;6(2):101–104.
61. Wood D, Bruner JS, Ross G. The role of tutoring in problem solving. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry. 1976;17(2):89–100.