Speaking Proficiency and Critical Thinking Ability in IELTS Speaking Test Training Course under the "Smart Classroom" Mode

Xiaoli Cheng[1,2,a,*], Yan Huang[1,b]

[1]Faculty of Foreign Language, Gongqing College of Nanchang University, Gongqingcheng, Jiangxi, China
[2]Faculty of Education, Languages, Psychology & Music, SEGi University, Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
[a]chengxiaolifaye@163.com, [b]jojozi2022@163.com
[*]Corresponding author

Abstract: This research is a qualitative study which aims to explore the development of EFL learners' speaking proficiency as well as the critical thinking ability which contribute to their oral performance in the IELTS Speaking Test training course (ISTT) under the "Smart classroom" mode. In the study one participant was interviewed using a semi-structured interview methodology with the finding that under the mode, sufficient input and engagement, and interaction between learners and teachers played a mediating role in ISTT. And these result in significant gains at speaking resource building and improvement in thinking and logic, which the Peer Review session can trigger their ability to think and respond quickly as the critical think requires. As for the teachers, implications have been given from this study on how to explore the learners' critical thinking and their speaking proficiency as a language speaking trainer. Last but not least, mock tests and peer study is also shown to be constructive in this research for the development of their speaking performance.

1. Introduction

This research is aiming to explore the development of the EFL learners' speaking proficiency as well as their critical thinking's growth in the IELTS Speaking Test Training Course (ISTT) under the "Smart classroom" mode. A participant who has attended the course for 8 weeks took part in to the research and joined into a semi-structured interview. It is shown that with the assistance of "Smart classroom" technique, learners' engagement and interaction between peer and teachers would contribute more than before to their input proficiency, which would significantly lead to the enhancement of their speaking accuracy and fluency. Furtherly the "Long Turn" session provoked learners to better their thinking which is demonstrated that their response to the questions are quick, organized and logic. This research, which can be a proposal, also inspires the future language

speaking trainers in this field on how to advance EFL learners' critical thinking and speaking proficiency. In addition, mock viva in training course like the speaking test will be recommended as a practice to promote participants' engagement.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Vygotsky's (1997)[15] socio-cultural theory, language can be seen as a social and cultural phenomenon which EFL learners can obtain both the language and the cultural knowledge from the way of behavioural practice which a language is applied. And during this practice, boundaries between the use and the learning of a language will be eliminated. Mcleod (2023) [13]pointed out that the dominant way to obtain the cognitive development which can result from an internalization of language is effective when it is progressing with the interaction in both social and material environment. As it is urged by the socio-cultural theory to explore the new social environment of EFL learners' language learning in the new era since the hybrid learning is largely applied. Thus, in this study, learners who get involved in this training course can achieve both effective cognitive strategies and knowledge of the culture of the world (shown in Figure 1) to enhance their language speaking skills and critical thinking strategies.
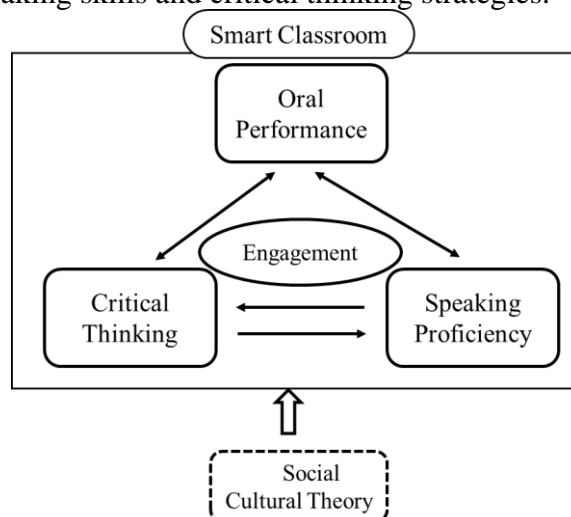

Figure 1: Application of Social-cultural Theory in ISTT

In this framework, participants' oral performance is promoted with engagement which has been enhanced under the "Smart classroom" mode as well as critical thinking skills and speaking proficiency. As critical thinking is a way for people to build the new knowledge, the critical thinking ability can also be developed when learners are able to express their thoughts accurately and fluently when they internalize the concepts appropriated through participation in social activities[12]. During the process, language performance is growing as their speaking proficiency have been improved.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this study is qualitative with an interview protocol. Participant selected for the interview is an English major and she has participated in this training course when she was a sophomore. For the ethnical consideration, a consent letter has been given to her to get the permission for data collection before the start of the interview and to keep her information confidential, she was coded pseudonymsly as the interviewee. Five specific questions (seen Table 1) have been designed based on the research objective mentioned above and two research questions as

following:

RQ 1. How does the EFL learners' ability of critical think be enhanced from the ISTT under the "Smart classroom" mode?

RQ 2. In which ways could the ISTT under the "Smart classroom" mode facilitate the participant' speaking proficiency?

Data has been collected from the interview which was semi-structured, as the response from the participant might be further diversified and flexible (Chen, 2020; Giordani, 2022) [3][7]. The interview was recorded by a video tape and transcribed by the software Otter, afterwards data has been analysed with coding, as the thematic analytical approach always dose.

Table 1: Interview guidance for the participant

Q1: Can you tell the benefit you got most from the ISTT?
Q2: What is critical thinking in your opinion?
Q3: Has your ability of critical thinking been developed in this training and can you tell in which way?
Q4: Do you think your speaking proficiency has been enhanced through the training and give some examples for illustration.
Q5: Do you think the "Smart classroom" changed your engagement in this training?

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The interviewee at the beginning of the interview accepted that she gained a lot benefit from this training course, even she adapted some of the teaching methods and designs in this course and applied in a language school when she was an intern there. And she mentioned her speaking proficiency as well as the critical thinking development in the following sections.

4.1. Development of Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is generally regarded as a way of thinking people use to look at the world as well as an attitude to learning (El & See, 2019)[6]. Critical thinking as a goal of education, involves careful thinking directed to a goal which requires to think further about the concept's definition with complex analysis rather than just accept or repeat simply other's ideas. Therefore, people should not blindly make an easy agreement to other's opinions even if they are authorized. Scholars like Dewey (2010)[4] regarded this new concept as reflective thinking, which advocates bold questioning and cautious assertion.

Therefore, people need to keep caution when they are given answers or definitions from others as critical thinking requires, unless abundant and active investigation along with sufficient and continuous research has been employed before the identity is widely approved. As for the interviewee, she thought that critical thinking in her learning refers to the ability to develop a way to think reasonably, logically with diversified and multiple answers.

4.1.1. Development of Logic Thinking

At the beginning of the interview, when the interviewee spoke out the benefit of the training course, she mentioned that she has been able to express her idea in a more logical way as she would consider the correlation of her sentences when she attempted to give an oral statement. She said that:

"I think the biggest achievement for me is I try to consider the correlation between the point and the evidence, in another word, whether my evidence can support my statement"

4.1.2. Development of Diversified Thoughts

While the interviewee was answering the question on critical thinking, the expression of "not just a simply answer" appeared from time to time. As the British Council explains that one of the standards of the IELTS Speaking Test is the level of language logic rather than correction of the response, to think critically and have a different answer is always encouraged in the course. In the training course, she experienced to think much deeply and widely rather than just find out the answer.

She mentioned this as "when we need to talk something on a question, I tried to think deeply, I mean, not just find out an answer because there may be other possibilities. We need to widen our eyes from different perspectives".

4.1.3. Development of Multiple Answers

The interviewee also posed a very important factor on critical thinking in the interview which is making multiple answers. She believed that learners should consider an answer from multiple perspectives rather than simply accept it with true or false. Consequently, statements with merits and defects can be made comprehensively when people speak out.

The interviewee described that "when I practiced in the "discussion" part, I tried to learn discuss a problem or an issue from as many perspectives as I can. Not just right or wrong, but to talk about different solutions or comments on these topics."

4.2. Development of Speaking Proficiency

Speaking proficiency defines a person's language speaking competence, and it is reflected from the perspectives of fluency and accuracy, or understanding of sentences grammar (Cho & Krashen, 2019)[2]. It is semantically the capability of language usage in speaking which has a distinction with different surface forms (Katz, 1970)[9].

4.2.1. Expanding Lexical Resource

When the interviewee was talking about her improvement, she said her word bank is "larger", she furtherly had an explanation on the word "larger" --- it refers to the expansion on similar words which have some differences on usages, like the words *skinny, thin* and *slim*. And with the building of the vocabulary, she learnt to use these similar words explicitly.

She explained that "I was taught that use a correct word is important if we want to speak good, so we need to learn how to choose the most suitable word among those which have similar meanings."

Additionally, she thought that some original expression like slangs or folks can make the statement less "Chinglish", and this is also a skill she learnt from the course, which she thought could enhance her speaking proficiency.

She pointed out that "if you want to speak good, then speaking with some original words is important, and you also need to try to avoid the 'Chinglish' expressions".

4.2.2. Improving Grammar Accuracy

The interviewee admitted that the grammar accuracy of her expression has been highly promoted after the course. She was trained to pay attention to tense and forms of her sentences and tried to avoid these grammar mistakes. After several weeks' training, the fluency of these grammar mistakes has been reduced and her expressions tended to be more coherent and fluent.

She mentioned "after practice, I think I start to pay attention to if my sentences are grammatically correct, and I often tell myself not to make the tiny mistakes like missing a pronoun."

4.2.3. Promoting Discourse Coherence

The interviewee highly perceived that the coherency of her language is much improved. As she elaborated that she learnt to focus on the connection between phrases and tried to use more conjunctions like however, whereas and what's more, etc to make the discourse more organized (Seen Figure 2).
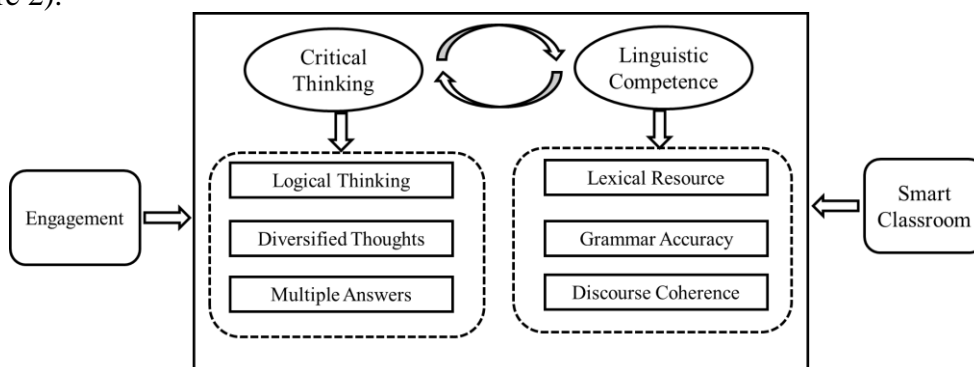

Figure 2: Development of Critical Thinking and Linguistic Competence

5. Conclusion

Result from the study shows the development of speaking proficiency and the critical thinking of EFL learners and the benefit they obtain from the training course.

5.1. Benefits EFL Learners Obtained from ISTT Course

Frow the interview, it is perceived that ISTT benefited EFL learners a lot, in both the development of critical thinking and enhancement of speaking proficiency. Meanwhile such course also promoted learners' peer work as they communicate and have peer review with each other, which would booster their engagement.

5.1.1. Learner's Development of Language Proficiency From ISTT

The optimal outcome requires participant' linguistic fluency (Zhang & Ardasheva, 2019)[17]. The interviewee admitted that language proficiency is the most important factor to make EFL learners succeed (Gong, 2023)[8]. And this training course with the "Smart classroom" mode contributed to the factor, as learners make best of the functions to practice their language skills like speeches imitation, journal reading, vocabulary building, etc., both in the classroom and online without limitation of time and space.

5.1.2. Learners' Development of Critical Thinking from ISTT

The IELTS, according to the British Council, is an integrated language test with requirements of language proficiency, logical constructions as well as critical thinking and creative ideas (Kaviani & Mashhadi Heidar, 2020)[10]. ISTT under the "Smart classroom" mode with interactive activities would be beneficial to learners' intercultural communication development. Peer review brings great benefit to learners' critical thinking improvement as they need to mark others' work comprehensively and fairly.

5.2. Suggestions on Critical Thinking and Speaking Proficiency Development

The thing challenge EFL learners' speaking most is incompetence of elaboration and explanation, due to the lack of knowledge and logic. A large amount of reading tasks can actually mediate language acquisition process (Ellis, 2008)[5].

Speaking is a process of output of context verbally, including one's pronunciation and linguistic and social cognition (Krashen & Mason, 2020)[11], which would reflect their thinking. Building the connection between speaking and the linguistic and social cognition which will be feedback of your reading will be constructive. Bernhardt (Bernhardt, 1991)[1] pointed out, "taking a cognitive perspective means examining the reading process as an interpersonal problem-solving task that takes place within the brain's knowledge structures". Wide and effective reading will be helpful for learners to expand their vision and cognition through their knowledge development and literally to comprehend different discourse.

As for the trainers, it is suggested to optimize their teaching plans with more activities online and offline in multiple forms. Activities like imitating and peer review will promote learners' engagement, for example, learners like the "Long Turn" part a lot because they have to make a quick response logically in a short time. During this process, people will think about syntax when they have a language output actually (Swain, 1995)[14]. And EFL learners, as it is obviously seen that, need abundant interaction as an output practice which will facilitate their language acquisition Wen (2018)[16].

Speaking is always a barrier for EFL learners in China, because it is not just a language proficiency but also relevant to their intercultural communication competence. However, data from the British Council shows EFL learners play poorly in IELTS Speaking Test, ranking lower than that in most countries which the IELTS are held. Since it is proved that ISTT is effective in helping EFL learners to develop their communication competence by improving their critical thinking and using the language comprehensively, research on this type of training is far from sufficient. Despite of the benefit of the ISTT, not many EFL learners can obtain this training unless they want to have the IELTS due to the much expense. Wide adoption of this training course in college is still not an easy way. Like other research, limitation in this study is unavoidable. A further study needs to be conducted with more interviewees, and the trainers also should be involved to make the research more holistic.

References

[1] Bernhardt, E. B. (1991). A psycholinguistic perspective on second language literacy. Aila Review, 8(1991), 31–44.
[2] Cho, K. S., & Krashen, S. (2019). Pleasure reading in a foreign language and competence in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Teflin Journal, 30(2), 231-236.
[3] Chen, J. (2020). SPOC-based flipped learning model applied in interpreting teaching. International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (JET), 15(17), 4-13.
[4] Dewey, J. (2010). The need for a philosophy of education (1934). Schools, 7(2), 244-245.
[5] Ellis, R. (2008). The study of second language acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press., 50-51.
[6] El Soufi, N., & See, B. H. (2019). Does explicit teaching of critical thinking improve critical thinking skills of English language learners in higher education? A critical review of causal evidence. Studies in educational evaluation, 60, 140-162.
[7] Giordani, A. (2022). Structuring and financing utility-scale renewable energy investments: an interview-based analysis, 30-31.
[8] Gong, J. (2023, February). The Concept, Content and Implication of Krashen's Input Hypothesis. In 2022 4th International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2022) (pp. 1208-1213). Atlantis Press.
[9] Katz, J. J. (1970). Interpretative semantics vs. generative semantics. Foundations of language, 220-259.
[10] Kaviani, M., & Mashhadi Heidar, D. (2020). The Effectiveness of critical thinking on enhancing productive skills among Iranian EFL pre-intermediate learners. Applied Research on English Language, 9(3), 303-324.
[11] Krashen, S., & Mason, B. (2020). The optimal input hypothesis: Not all comprehensible input is of equal value.

CATESOL Newsletter, 5(1), 1-2.

[12] Mahn, H. (1999). Vygotsky's methodological contribution to sociocultural theory. Remedial and Special Education, 20(6), 341–350.https://doi.org/10.1177/074193259902000607

[13] Mcleod, S.A. (2023). Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development. Simply Psychology,10(6),41-43.

[14] Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. Input in Second Language Acquisition, 15, 165–179.

[15] Vygotsky, L. S. (1997). The collected works of LS Vygotsky: Problems of the theory and history of psychology (Vol. 3). Springer Science & Business Media.

[16] Wen, Q. (2018). The production-oriented approach to teaching university students English in China. Language Teaching, 51(4), 526-540.

[17] Zhang, X., & Ardasheva, Y. (2019). Sources of college EFL learners' self-efficacy in the English public speaking domain. English for Specific Purposes, 53, 47–59. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2018.09.004.