

Original Paper

Enhancing IELTS Speaking Skills through Blended Learning: A Pedagogical Action Research

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Abstract

This pedagogical action research aimed to assess the impact of a blended learning approach on improving IELTS speaking skills among students. Traditional teaching methods in IELTS courses often faced limitations regarding insufficient practice time, inadequate feedback, and a lack of community and interactivity among students.

Results indicated a significant improvement in participants' speaking performance based on pre-test and post-test scores. The blended learning environment garnered positive feedback from most participants, enhancing engagement, interaction, and satisfaction levels. However, challenges with asynchronous online feedback surfaced, signaling areas for refinement.

This study underscores the value of blended learning in overcoming traditional teaching limitations, offering insights into its potential for fostering improved IELTS speaking skills through enhanced engagement and comprehensive feedback mechanisms.

Keywords

blended learning, IELTS speaking skills, pedagogical action research, student engagement, feedback mechanisms

1. Introduction

The mastery of speaking skills holds a pivotal place in language education, especially concerning assessments like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Proficiency in spoken English is not only an essential communication tool but also a crucial determinant in achieving academic and professional goals, making it a cornerstone of language education. Within the context of IELTS, where language competency is evaluated across various aspects, the speaking component stands as a significant determinant of language fluency, coherence and communicative effectiveness.

However, traditional teaching methods employed in IELTS courses often encounter inherent limitations in adequately nurturing and evaluating speaking skills. One prevalent issue lies in the restricted time allocated for students to engage in meaningful practice, reflection, and interaction during speaking lessons. Limited opportunities for students to exchange thoughts, receive comprehensive feedback, and engage in reflective practices with both teachers and peers contribute to dissatisfaction and hindered skill development. Furthermore, the lack of a strong sense of community and interactivity among students within IELTS classes poses a considerable challenge to fostering a conducive learning environment for spoken English proficiency.

To combat these challenges, blended learning emerges as a promising pedagogical approach in language education. Blended learning, the amalgamation of traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning elements, presents an innovative avenue to address the shortcomings of conventional teaching methodologies. By integrating digital platforms and online activities, blended learning endeavors to offer a dynamic and comprehensive learning experience that extends beyond the limitations of the physical classroom. The incorporation of online tools and resources allows for increased engagement, asynchronous interaction, and the provision of additional learning materials, enabling a more personalized and holistic learning environment.

This research aims to delve into the realm of blended learning specifically tailored to enhance IELTS speaking skills. The primary objectives revolve around designing and implementing a blended IELTS speaking course within an on-ground IELTS class. Through this course, the study aims to gauge the effectiveness of the blended learning model in improving the overall course efficacy and enhancing students' IELTS speaking performance. Furthermore, the research endeavors to evaluate the satisfaction levels of students regarding the course's impact on their speaking abilities.

By delving into the realm of blended learning in the context of IELTS speaking skills, this study seeks to contribute meaningful insights into the potential of innovative pedagogical approaches. It aims to bridge the gaps observed in traditional teaching methodologies, offering a pathway to not only elevate language proficiency but also enrich the overall learning experience within IELTS education.

2. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study centers around a pedagogical action research design, aiming to actively engage in the process of improving teaching practices and educational outcomes within the context of IELTS speaking skills. This approach involves a systematic inquiry into teaching and learning practices, with a focus on enhancing the effectiveness of the blended learning model in an on-ground IELTS speaking course.

The blended learning model integrated into the IELTS speaking course is a strategic combination of traditional face-to-face instruction and online learning elements. The course structure entails students meeting face-to-face every two weeks for two-hour sessions within a physical classroom. The remaining course activities are conducted online through a dedicated platform. These online components encompass

various instructional activities, such as discussion boards, audio recording assignments, and interactive tasks related to IELTS speaking topics.

The participant demographic comprises 30 ELT (English Language Teaching) students enrolled in a 16-week IELTS course at the Institute of Equest Education in Hanoi, Vietnam. The course duration allows for a comprehensive exploration of the effectiveness of the blended learning model in enhancing IELTS speaking skills within a substantial timeframe. The participants' experiences and perspectives form the central focus of the research, facilitating a thorough assessment of their satisfaction levels and performance improvements.

Data collection methods encompass a multifaceted approach to gather comprehensive insights. These methods include participant satisfaction surveys, standardized open-ended interviews, classroom observations, and pre-and post-tests. The surveys and interviews are designed to capture participants' perceptions, experiences, and satisfaction levels regarding the blended learning environment and its impact on their IELTS speaking performance. Classroom observations provide qualitative data on the dynamics of face-to-face interactions, while pre-and post-tests offer quantitative measures of speaking performance improvements.

Qualitative data gathered through interviews and observations undergo thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns, themes, and perceptions among participants. This analysis method involves systematically coding and categorizing qualitative data to derive meaningful insights. The open-ended nature of interviews and observational notes allows for a nuanced exploration of participants' experiences within the blended learning environment.

Quantitative data derived from surveys and pre-and post-tests are subjected to statistical analysis. Statistical tools such as descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, or analysis of variance (ANOVA) may be utilized to assess the significance of improvements in speaking performance before and after the implementation of the blended learning course. These quantitative measures offer empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing students' IELTS speaking skills.

The combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted aspects of the blended learning approach in IELTS speaking education. By triangulating data from various sources, this research aims to offer robust findings and insights into the efficacy of blended learning models in improving language education outcomes.

3. Results and Discussion

- Improvement in speaking performance

The study's pre-test and post-test comparison revealed a statistically significant improvement in participants' IELTS speaking performance following the implementation of the blended learning course. Quantitative analysis of the test scores indicated a notable enhancement in speaking abilities, highlighting the efficacy of the blended approach. Participants exhibited a more substantial command of language,

fluency, coherence, and lexical resource post-course, demonstrating the tangible benefits of the pedagogical intervention.

- Participant satisfaction levels

Participant satisfaction surveys and interviews yielded overwhelmingly positive responses regarding the blended learning environment. A majority of students expressed high levels of contentment and appreciation for the course structure. They valued the opportunities for both teacher and peer feedback through online platforms, indicating a preference for this multifaceted approach over traditional methods. Participants noted increased engagement, improved interaction with peers and instructors, and a heightened sense of community within the class.

- Feedback Impact on Student Performance

Instructors' feedback was generally well-received, considered valuable in guiding students through speaking tasks and providing constructive criticism. However, peer feedback faced challenges, with many participants expressing dissatisfaction due to perceived inadequacies in quality and depth. Weak peer feedback hampered the learning experience for some students, underscoring the importance of refining peer review processes within the blended model. Nonetheless, the act of reviewing others' recordings positively impacted self-assessment skills and encouraged reflective learning.

- Challenges in implementation

The study unearthed several challenges in implementing blended learning. One significant issue pertained to the asynchronous nature of online feedback. Weaknesses in the online platform's feedback mechanisms, particularly in peer-to-peer interactions, posed a hurdle in maximizing the potential benefits of collaborative learning. Technical glitches and variations in internet access further compounded these challenges, affecting the timely delivery and reception of feedback.

- Discussion and implications

The findings underscore the immense potential of blended learning in enhancing language education, particularly in improving speaking proficiency. The statistically significant improvement in speaking scores aligns with existing literature emphasizing the benefits of technology-integrated learning environments. However, the nuanced nature of peer feedback, although crucial for holistic learning, requires careful structuring and monitoring to ensure its effectiveness.

The study's results highlight the critical role of feedback in shaping students' speaking skills. While instructor feedback was generally well-received, enhancing peer feedback mechanisms emerges as a key area for improvement. Strategies to train students in providing constructive criticism and fostering meaningful interactions on online platforms could substantially elevate the quality of peer feedback, enhancing its impact on learning outcomes.

Comparing these findings with existing literature emphasizes the importance of a balanced approach to blended learning. Successful implementation requires addressing technical challenges and refining feedback mechanisms to maximize its benefits. Theoretical frameworks advocating for socio-constructivist learning align with the study's emphasis on collaborative learning through peer interactions.

The results emphasize the positive impact of blended learning on IELTS speaking skills, showcasing its potential in addressing the limitations of traditional teaching methods. While challenges exist, the overall satisfaction levels and performance improvements signal the promise of this pedagogical approach. Refinements in peer feedback mechanisms and technological enhancements stand as essential pathways for optimizing the blended learning experience in language education.

4. Conclusion

The study's findings showcase the efficacy of blended learning in enhancing IELTS speaking skills. The results revealed a significant improvement in speaking performance, as demonstrated by the marked advancement in participants' pre-test and post-test scores. This improvement underscores the effectiveness of the blended learning model, affirming its role in augmenting language acquisition, especially in oral proficiency.

Moreover, the research illuminated participants' satisfaction with the blended learning environment. Despite initial skepticism, students exhibited contentment and appreciation for the increased engagement facilitated by blended learning. The ability to receive feedback from both instructors and peers through online platforms was perceived as highly beneficial. However, challenges were noted, primarily regarding the quality and timeliness of online feedback from peers, signaling an area for improvement in future implementations.

The significance of blended learning in IELTS speaking courses is evident from the positive impact on student engagement, interaction, and overall learning experience. This model effectively bridges the limitations observed in traditional teaching methods, offering a comprehensive approach that integrates face-to-face interactions with online learning, fostering a more holistic learning environment.

Moving forward, future research endeavors could delve deeper into refining the online feedback system within blended learning setups. Addressing the challenges faced, particularly enhancing the quality and timeliness of peer feedback, would further optimize the effectiveness of this approach. Additionally, expanding the study's scope to include a more diverse participant pool across various educational contexts could yield insights into the applicability and adaptability of blended learning in diverse linguistic settings.

In conclusion, this study underscores the transformative potential of blended learning in augmenting IELTS speaking skills. The integration of face-to-face interactions with online platforms not only enhances speaking proficiency but also fosters a more interactive, engaging, and satisfactory learning environment. As technology continues to evolve, further exploration and refinement of blended learning methodologies promise to revolutionize language education, catering to the evolving needs of language learners in diverse educational settings.

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