

# IELTS スピーキング試験のための文法範囲を向上させるために、スマートフォン の録音と自己評価を利用する

## Using smartphone recordings and self-assessment to improve grammar range for the IELTS Speaking exam.

セレブリアコフ アレクサンドラ  
Alexandra Serebriakoff

### 概要

IELTS スピーキングセクションでバンドスコア 5.5-6 を目指す中級者に共通する問題は、文法範囲の低さである。このプロジェクトでは、28人の大学生が12週間にわたり、スマートフォンの動画を使った短い文法の自己分析活動を毎週行った。文献レビューでは、スピーキング試験における問題の原因と影響について論じ、治療活動の教育学的根拠を示している。結果のセクションではデータを分析し、結果として文法の多様性が増加したことの統計的妥当性を検証している。生徒の授業中の文法範囲は有意に増加し、その効果は2回の模擬試験でも持続した。

### Abstract

A common problem for intermediate students trying to get band scores of 5.5-6 on the IELTS speaking section is low grammar range. In this project 28 University students completed a short weekly grammar self-analysis activity using smartphone videos for 12 weeks. The literature review discusses the causes and effects of the issue in speaking exams and gives the pedagogical rationale for the treatment activity. The results section analyses data and examines the statistical validity of the resulting increase in grammar variety. The students' in-class grammar range increased significantly, and the effect persisted into two mock exams.

**Keywords:** IELTS Speaking, Grammar Range, Smartphones, Transcription

### Introduction

**Statement of the problem and research questions.** IELTS is a very important exam for my students. Created by Cambridge University, IELTS is used for immigration, work visas, admission to study abroad programs and parts of many universities' entrance criteria. (IELTS.org) In the teaching context of this project, the top performing first year undergraduates at a Japanese university are prepared for a yearlong study abroad program through an intensive academic English course covering the IELTS exam. These students start the year speaking at roughly mid-B1 level and are seeking to get scores of 5.5 to 6.5 by the end of their first academic year. The reward of achieving higher scores is the eligibility to attend more prestigious foreign universities and take more interesting classes in a year-long study abroad program. In addition, there is the possibility of financial rewards in the form of

scholarships from both their university and the Japanese government. Thus, they are highly motivated and keen to improve their English in all skill areas. As their teacher it is my job to strategically train the students to maximize their scores and avoid common pitfalls.

This paper relates to a project looking to improve students' scores in the speaking section by training them to increase the variety of grammar forms they use. Having taught IELTS in Japan for 13 years, I have noticed that a lack of grammar variety and over-reliance on simple sentences is a key issue for most mid-level students. Yet, despite encouragement, practice, assignments and more, changing this habit has proved challenging. In the spring semester of 2023, 28 students, from a university in Kyoto, Japan, participated in a self-analysis and training program to increase their spoken grammar variety. By listening to smartphone recordings of their own performances, students learned to assess and improve their answers. Greater language awareness and key exam strategies could be practiced quickly and efficiently.

This paper will cover the first semester of the project where the students participated in twelve weekly short activities to vary their spoken grammar and the effect this had on two mock speaking exams.

### **Research questions**

1. Can students be trained to increase their grammar range by themselves using this activity?
  - a. Does the variety of grammar used in their first attempt rise over the semester?
  - b. Can students use the checklist to raise their grammar variety on a second attempt?
  - c. Is the increase sustained under exam conditions?

### **Literature Review**

**The IELTS Speaking Section.** The IELTS speaking section is a one-on-one interview between the candidate and the examiner and typically lasts 11-15 minutes. It follows a standard 3-section format with topics and questions changing between candidates and sessions. The first section is an 'easy' question and answer section based on personal topics: hobbies, vacations, shopping etc. The second section, known as the 'long turn' sees the candidate prepare for 1 minute before speaking alone for 2 minutes on a longer topic of personal interest such as 'a favorite book', 'a long journey' or 'a

celebrity they would like to meet'. The final section asks candidates to discuss, speculate, compare, and make predictions about wider non-personal topics of general interest such as consumerism, environmental problems, and medical advances.

The examiner rates the candidate's performance in four key areas: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and Pronunciation.

**How to raise your score.** A lot of research has been conducted with recorded speaking exams with known scores to find the factors which correlate with a higher IELTS score. Seedhouse et al. (2014) showed that band scores cannot be attributed to just one specific speaking feature, rather "clusters of speaking features" work together to separate the bands. Accuracy, fluency, complexity, and grammatical range all increase with band score. Kang et al (2023) analyzed the effects of many different speech factors and found that rate of speech was the greatest predictor of band score. Interestingly, they also found that grammatical complexity had a negative correlation with score – as students attempting complicated structures and sentences often suffered fluency and accuracy penalties.

This trade-off between complexity and accuracy was also shown by Roothoof & Breeze (2019). While error rates with simple grammar greatly diminished with band score, rates with complex grammar increased with band score as candidates tried to use it more often. For example, in 15 exams band 5 speakers made four uses of the passive tense with a zero percent error rate, compared to 14 band 7 speakers who had an 8% error rate with over 74 uses of the tense.

Thus, while students make errors with complex grammar, higher band scores show increasing instances of higher-level grammar such as passive structures, indirect questions, conditionals, and relative clauses.

In another quantitative study of grammatical range, Seedhouse et al (2014) studied 60 recorded IELTS speaking exams graded at the bands of 5, 6, 7, and 8+. They found that band 5 had the lowest number of verb forms with a mean score of 7.67. Band 6 recordings had slightly more at 7.8, whereas 7s and 8s had significantly more with 12 and 11.6 respectively.

These findings are consistent with the publicly available IELTS Speaking Band Descriptors.

The criteria for receiving a grammar score between 4 and 7 are:

*4. Can produce basic sentence forms and some short utterances are error-free. Subordinate clauses are rare and, overall, turns are short, structures are repetitive and errors are frequent.*

*5. Basic sentence forms are fairly well controlled for accuracy. Complex structures are attempted but these are limited in range, nearly always contain errors and may lead to the need for reformulation.*

*6. Produces a mix of short and complex sentence forms and a variety of structures with limited flexibility. Though errors frequently occur in complex structures, these rarely impede communication.*

*7. A range of structures flexibly used. Error-free sentences are frequent. Both simple and complex sentences are used effectively despite some errors. A few basic errors persist.*

(Reproduced from Speaking Band Descriptors, a PDF available at IELTS.org)

From these official guidelines we can confirm that some grammatical errors are expected and tolerated even for a 7 and that to move from the low score of 4 to 5 some attempts at “Complex Structures” must be made by the candidate.

So why is this so often a problem for candidates?

**The issues with Grammar Range and the speaking exam.** There are a number of reasons why B1/B2 candidates often fail to use a variety of grammar forms despite their knowledge of them. Firstly, one such stumbling block particular to students of this level is a fear of making grammatical mistakes. This leads to an overreliance on simple sentences and grammar despite the ability and knowledge to use more complex and interesting structures. Particularly in ‘perfectionist cultures’ such as Japan, there is a great deal of anxiety around speaking English for fear of making mistakes. Students prefer giving correct if simple responses, rather than being embarrassed by making a mistake. (Ellis 1991, Ohata 2005, Takahashi 2005). However, as is written in the band descriptors and demonstrated by quantitative research of real IELTS exams, mistakes in grammar forms are no

barrier to higher scores. Examiners allow for errors in more difficult structures even at band 7, but a candidate will struggle to attain a 5 if they do not even try.

Secondly, there is a preponderance of ‘easy’ IELTS questions that do not elicit candidates to use different grammar forms. IELTS speaking questions usually focus on personal likes and opinions such as “What do you do in your free time?” and thus an unwary candidate might respond only about themselves using just the present simple tense. As Roothoof and Breeze (2019) observed in 3 out of 8 of their samples not one use of the third person -s morpheme was recorded. IELTS questions seem designed to be easy (to allow lower-level candidates to answer them) and be interesting enough to provoke natural and fluent conversation for all candidates. Therefore, a candidate trying to maximize their score must introduce their own complexity to their answers, for example comparing their current free time activities to what they did in the past or those of their friends and family.

Thirdly, a lack of exam strategy/focus on ‘answering the question’. As Morska (2016) discusses, candidates “miss the whole point of the speaking test requirements” and try to answer the questions as quickly and succinctly as possible rather than attempting to ‘show off’ and ‘score points’ by demonstrating the full range of their language competencies. Thus, in answer to the questions “What kind of music do you like?” they might respond:

*“I like jazz music.”*

Whereas a strategic candidate trying to impress the examiner could say:

*“I’ve always been a big fan of jazz music. I dare say I wouldn’t have learnt to appreciate it so much had my parents not taken me to so many concerts in my youth.”*

This would be a very unnatural thing to say during a normal conversation, but a speaking exam is not a casual chat with a friend. Candidates need to be trained to ‘see behind’ the question for the target language it is trying to elicit and ‘score points’ by playing the best high-level grammar, vocabulary, and idioms they have in their deck (brain).

These three factors, I believe, greatly hinder candidates at this critical B1-B2 boundary and this is why I think training to expand their grammar variety will help to boost their speaking scores. The

next section will cover the pedagogical rationale for why smartphone recordings and self-transcription will be used to achieve this goal.

**Self-awareness and self-transcription for speaking improvement.** To improve their speaking skill, a learner needs to receive feedback on their current performance, strong points, weak points, errors etc. When surveyed, students typically state a preference for explicit teacher feedback and correction. However, this is not always practicable, efficient, or worthwhile, especially in a larger classroom setting. Frequent teacher-led correction can disrupt the class, embarrass the students in front of their peers and be discouraging and frustrating. Corrections may not be remembered long-term or even fully understood by the student. In addition, with limited class time, it is not possible for a teacher to listen to and provide feedback to each student on an individual basis. (Oladejo 1993, Truscott 1999)

Thus, self-correction can be more efficient and effective (Gower et al.1995, Harmer, 2004 Harmer, 2007, Khansir & Pakdel. 2018) and doing so requires improved language awareness. (Carter, 2003 and Dormer, 2013) Dormer writes that students will grow in both fluency and accuracy when they are able to analyze their output for errors and fix any issues and then attempt to avoid similar errors in the future.

**Self-correction of speech through self-transcription.** In many studies student self-transcription has been used for self-awareness and self-correction. (Lynch, 1998, 2001 and 2007, Stillwell et al, 2010 and McCormick, & Vercellotti, 2013) In each of these studies students were asked to transcribe recordings of their own speech in a variety of discourse types; monologues, free-conversation and role-plays. After which the students spent time analyzing and correcting errors and deficiencies in their transcripts. These were then compared to teacher-created and corrected transcripts before being performed again by the students.

These studies generally found that students were able to identify problems in their transcripts (although they tended to focus on particular kinds of issues, namely grammar accuracy, slips and

pauses.) The students who spotted the most errors tended to improve the most in the second performance. (McCormick, & Vercellotti, 2013) They state that “Without explicit training, students were able to notice their own errors, especially grammar errors, but the learners had different levels of noticing.”

However, despite the gains these students made, self-transcription is challenging to utilize frequently in the classroom due to the length of time required to carry it out. A short two-to-three-minute dialogue may take a couple of students thirty minutes to transcribe. For example, in Lynch’s 2007 study three ninety-minute classes were required to record, transcribe, correct, and re-record a simple dialogue. So, while self-transcription can be effective to raise students’ self-awareness and lead to self-correction, it is not very time efficient.

**Self-correction from listening only.** In the academic year of 2022-2023 the researcher conducted a similar project investigating student speaking self-improvement via self-analysis of smartphone videos. (Serebriakoff 2023) Instead of transcribing their speech, students simply watched videos of themselves answering set questions from a classmate before being asked to improve their answers for a second recording. Improvement was guided by one of three different methods: a tailored worksheet, group peer correction or free correction with no guidance.

Compared to the above-mentioned studies, students made far fewer corrections, likely being unable to notice errors with only one or two listens. In fact, many errors persisted into the second recording. Instead, the most frequent improvements were to fluency, and lengthening of responses via reformulation or including additional information.

However, the use of video gives two advantages over transcription, firstly, reviewing the recording can take place moments after the student finishes speaking, resulting in instant feedback, and secondly reducing time taken by this activity. Using smartphone videos meant that the initial recording-analysis-correction-second recording procedure only took one 90-minute class and thus during a yearlong speaking skills course was able to be repeated twelve times. This enabled students

to build on their increased language awareness, become very familiar with their strengths and weaknesses and, in the end, review a year's progress in their speaking skill.

The methodology of Serebriakoff (2023) was similar to the current study with a number of improvements and changes to fit with a different learning context and course goal.

**What is a grammar form and how do you count them?** This paper concerns a classroom intervention to raise students' spoken grammar variety. Quantifying grammar variety necessitates the creation of a list of grammar forms and the counting of these items. The grammar forms, the items under assessment, were chosen by an ESL teacher and may not match the way a linguist might view the English language. For example, there is much debate amongst linguists about the existence of an English future tense. (Sarkar, A.1998, Huddleston, et al. 2002). While it may be the case that in actuality English does not have a true future tense, it is generally more helpful for English second language students to be taught as though it does, particularly in the heavily grammar focused Japanese teaching context.

Thus, in this paper students are assessed on their use of 'the future tense'. Things like 'used to' and 'opinion adverbs' (such as personally/fortunately etc.) are counted as separate grammar forms. While technically a mix of grammar, vocabulary and lexical chunks, this approach closely matches ESL textbooks and therefore the way the students are used to thinking about the grammar of English.

### **Method**

**Intervention to train students to assess and improve their own grammar range.**

**Goal and rationale.** By asking students to listen to their own recordings and make note of their grammar variety, students will be able to gauge how well they are performing in this crucial aspect of speaking. A second performance and assessment will allow them to quickly improve and therefore reinforce the goal of using a wider range of grammar forms. Repeating the activity 12 times over the semester will emphasize this goal and train students to automatically employ more variety in their speech, a habit that will hopefully continue into mock and official exams and thereby boosting their speaking score.



**Participants and context.** The project was conducted at a private university in Kansai, Japan, over the first 14 weeks of the Spring 2023 semester. There were 28 first-year students comprising the top two classes of the year who study an intensive IELTS program as part of their EAP course. The intervention was conducted once, weekly, during the students' speaking class. The EAP syllabus for the course was centrally designed and covered a lot of material, thus the intervention was designed to fit within the course plan and take up only 20-25 minutes of the 100-minute class. This was done with the kind cooperation and support of the head of department and homeroom teachers.

**Participant consent** During the first class of the semester the project was explained to the participants. A Japanese consent form detailing the project was handed out to students. It was explained that all students would be completing the activities but that if they wished their data would not be included in the study. After reassuring the students that the researcher would not possess or have access to their voice recordings, all students gave their consent to be part of the project.

**Data Collected.** While attendance was generally high, a number of students missed some sessions over the 14 weeks of the study. The activity was conducted twelve times during normal class sessions. A special procedure was followed for Weeks 8 and 14, in which the students took mid-term and final speaking exams. In a few cases students would arrive late or need to leave the class early resulting in only half of the before/after data being collected. A table summarizing this is below.

Student's data collected per session												
Session	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
First attempt	28	28	28	28	27	28	27	27	26	25	22	25
Second attempt	28	28	28	28	27	28	27	26	26	25	24	25

For the post examination transcription data, as it was a take-home assignment a number of students failed to return it. Twenty-four and twenty-two students completed the full exam transcripts for the mid-term and final exam sessions.

**An intervention to raise grammar range.** The activity typically took 20-25 minutes to perform and ran through the following stages.:

1. Students were set three IELTS Speaking Part 1 style questions and given five minutes to think and plan.
2. Each student recorded their first attempt on their smartphone with a partner. The partner asked the questions and held the phone.
3. Students listened to their recording while completing a checklist of various grammar forms and items.
4. Each student counted their own 'yes' checks to give themselves a score.
5. They then had some time to rethink their answers, adding more grammar variety if possible.
6. Students made a second recording with their improved answers.
7. They listened again and completed a second version of the checklist, comparing their new score with their previous attempt.
8. The researcher collected the worksheets at the end of the activity.

**The checklists.** The checklists were designed to be quick and simple for students to fill in. Each grammar point was listed in English and Japanese with a short example or some target words. For each point there were options for 'Yes', 'No' and 'Maybe' along with a space for writing an example of a sentence they had used.

The length and scope of the checklist changed throughout the sessions. Initially it was kept short and included a number of very simple grammar forms, such as 'Present Simple' to ensure all students scored something on their first attempt. As the weeks progressed and the students became used to the activity more grammar items were added, and simple ones were dropped. New grammar items were chosen from either that week's textbook unit, giving students the opportunity to practice newly taught material or a dedicated IELTS grammar textbook. (Hopkins & Cullen 2007). These items would be highlighted to emphasize them to the students. Occasionally the order and organization of the checklist would be rearranged to improve it. Below are the grammar items that featured on the Week 1 and Week 12 lists. To save space the check boxes have been removed and only the grammar items themselves are given.

Items on the Week 1 List	Items on the Week 12 List
<p><b>Tenses 時制</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Present simple 現在形 e.g. I like J-pop.</li> <li>2. Present continuous 現在進行形 e.g. I'm looking forward to a concert next week.</li> <li>3. Present perfect 現在完了 e.g. I've always loved pop music.</li> <li>4. Past simple 過去形 I bought a CD.</li> <li>5. Past continuous 過去進行形 I was listening</li> <li>6. Will future Will 未来 I will buy...</li> <li>7. Going to future Going to 未来 I'm going to buy</li> <li>8. Present continuous for future 未来の現在進行形</li> </ol> <p><b>Adjectives 形容詞</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. Adverbs to modify adjectives 形容詞を修飾する副詞 really/so/extremely</li> <li>10. Comparatives 比較形容詞, bigger, smaller, more expensive</li> <li>11. Superlatives 最上級の形容詞, the biggest, smallest, most expensive</li> <li>12. Frequency expressions 頻度表現 Every day, twice a week, sometimes</li> </ol>	<p><b>Tenses 時制</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Present continuous 現在進行形 e.g. I'm looking forward to a concert next week.</li> <li>2. Present perfect 現在完了 e.g. I've always loved pop music.</li> <li>3. Past simple 過去形 I bought a CD.</li> <li>4. Past Perfect 過去完了 Before I started Uni I had never lived alone. (New Experience)</li> <li>5. Used to 過去の習慣</li> <li>6. 4 different future expressions</li> <li>7. Passive 受動文法 It is built, It was built, It has been built</li> <li>8. Connectives 接続詞 -despite, however, even though</li> <li>9. And → Not only but also e.g. Not only is it hot, it's also humid.</li> <li>10. Time clauses 時間条項 as soon as, when, every time, while, before</li> <li>11. Conditionals - if 条件付き文法 - もし 1st If I have time, I'll 2nd If I had more money, I'd</li> </ol> <p><b>Adjectives and adverbs</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Adverb + Adjective 副詞+形容詞 extremely spicy, so tasty, really big</li> <li>13. It's 形容詞 to DO X. It's important to use/ It's easy to eat/ It's fun to go</li> <li>14. Comparatives 比較形容詞, bigger, smaller, more expensive</li> <li>15. Superlatives 最上級の形容詞, the biggest, smallest, most expensive</li> <li>16. Superlative phrase The most exciting film I've seen is... The most interesting place I've visited... The tallest mountain I've climbed</li> <li>17. Frequency expressions 頻度表現 Every day, twice a week, never</li> <li>18. Opinion adverbs 意見副詞, Personally, (Un)fortunately, Surprisingly, Obviously, Basically, Hopefully, Apparently, Luckily</li> <li>19. Opinion relative clause 意見関係節 ... which is fantastic! ... which I really hate. ... which I find really fun.</li> </ol>

**Self-assessed mock exams.**

In week 8 and 14 students were set a full IELTS speaking mock exam conducted by either the researcher or two other teachers. Students recorded their exam on their own smartphones for a special self-assessment activity. They were instructed to transcribe their responses as accurately as possible, including hesitations, slips and pauses. Then the students had to fill out another grammar variety checklist to discover how many grammar forms they would use under exam conditions.

The results from these checklists differ quite considerably from the normal weekly sessions for a number of reasons. Firstly, with their transcribed answers at hand students can more accurately count grammar forms used. Secondly, instead of three part-one-style questions, students had a full IELTS speaking exam taking around 15 minutes. This gave them far longer to speak and more opportunities with different question types prompting a greater variety of grammar forms. Thirdly, , they had no preparation or note-writing time, (apart from the one minute called for in part 2), thus under more exam-like conditions they may struggle to use trickier forms on the fly.

**Results**

The results section will be organized to answer the previous research questions.

**Does the grammar variety of their first attempt rise over the semester?**

**Session 1.** The data in the table below is from the students' first recordings in week one. It serves to highlight the need for grammar variety practice as despite understanding the goal of the task and the importance of grammar range in IELTS speaking, very few of the students were able to use more than a couple of different grammar forms. 11 out of 28 students used only present simple tense and made no use of other basic things such as adjectives and frequency adverbs. This would likely result in a lower band score for these students in an official IELTS exam.

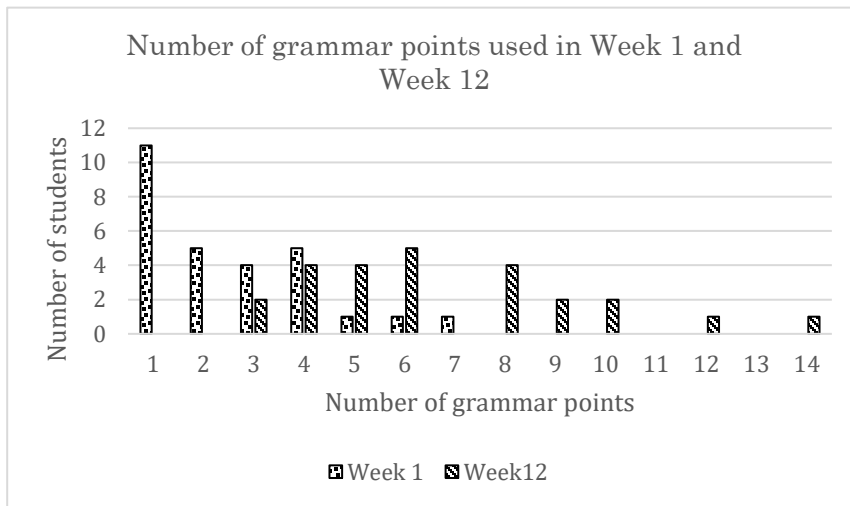
Number of grammar forms used by students in their first recording in week 1							
Number of grammar forms used	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Number of students	11	5	4	5	1	1	1

Percentage of students	39%	18%	14%	18%	4%	4%	4%
------------------------	-----	-----	-----	-----	----	----	----

**Session 12.** Below is the corresponding table for Week 12. For clarity the four students who used more than ten grammar forms have been grouped together. Their individual scores are listed in brackets.

Number of grammar forms used by students in their first recording in week 1								
Number of grammar forms used	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10+ (10:2, 12:1, 14,1)
Number of students	2	4	4	5	0	4	2	4
Percentage of students	8%	16%	16%	20%	0%	16%	8%	16%

The graph below shows the Session 1 and Session 12 first performance histograms together. A clear difference and increase in the variety of grammar used can be seen. Is this difference



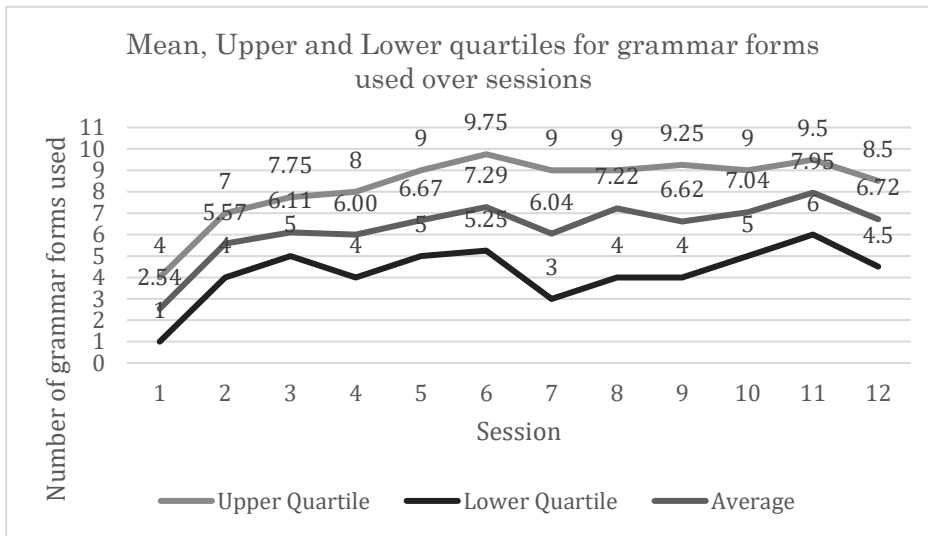
statistically significant?

If the null hypothesis is that the 12 weeks of grammar variety practice had no effect on the students, what is the probability of getting a week 12 distribution like this?

- Mean<sub>Week 1</sub> = 2.54, Mean<sub>Week12</sub> = 6.72, Standard Deviation<sub>Week 12</sub> = 2.76
- Therefore, Standard Error<sub>Week 12</sub> = 0.554
- Thus, Mean<sub>Week 12</sub> is 7.5 Standard Errors away from Mean<sub>Week 1</sub>
- This results in a two-tailed P-Value of less than 0.0001

Thus, there is a highly significant difference between the Week 1 and 12 results supporting the idea that the grammar activity increases the variety of grammar used.

In the graph below the mean, upper and lower quartiles for the first performance grammar variety over the whole training period are given. It can be seen that the mean grammar variety



increases from 2.54 to between 6.5 and 8 towards the end of the semester. There is also quite a difference between the higher and lower students in the class, with the former being almost twice as much as the latter. For all students

grammar variety does increase significantly from their first session. However, improvement does plateau after a few weeks. This is to be expected as there are only so many different grammar forms a student can fit into three short answers before it becomes totally unnatural.

We can say though, that a targeted grammar variety raising task can increase the amount of grammar forms they will automatically use to answer simple speaking questions.

### Can students use the checklist to improve their grammar range on the second attempt?

The table below shows the average number of grammar forms used by students in their first and second attempts over the twelve sessions. The averages range from 1.2 to 3.3 extra grammar forms used in the second attempt.

Average grammar forms used in each session												
Session	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1st time Mean	2.5	5.6	6.1	6	6.7	7.3	6	7.2	6.6	7	8	6.7
2nd time Mean	5.5	7.8	8	8.4	8.1	10.2	8.7	8.4	9.5	9.5	10.3	10
Increase	3	2.2	1.9	2.4	1.4	2.9	2.7	1.2	2.9	2.5	2.3	3.3

If we consider individual instances there were 332 paired data for the students who completed both attempts during the 12 sessions. Of these 273, or 82%, increased the number of grammar forms used by an average of 2.98 additional grammar forms. 40 of the remainder reported zero changes and 19 used less grammar in the second attempt.

Looking at how different students reacted by averaging their increases over the 12 sessions we find some differences. The lowest average added grammar was 0.64 and the highest was 4.33. 64% of students added 2 or more grammar forms on average.

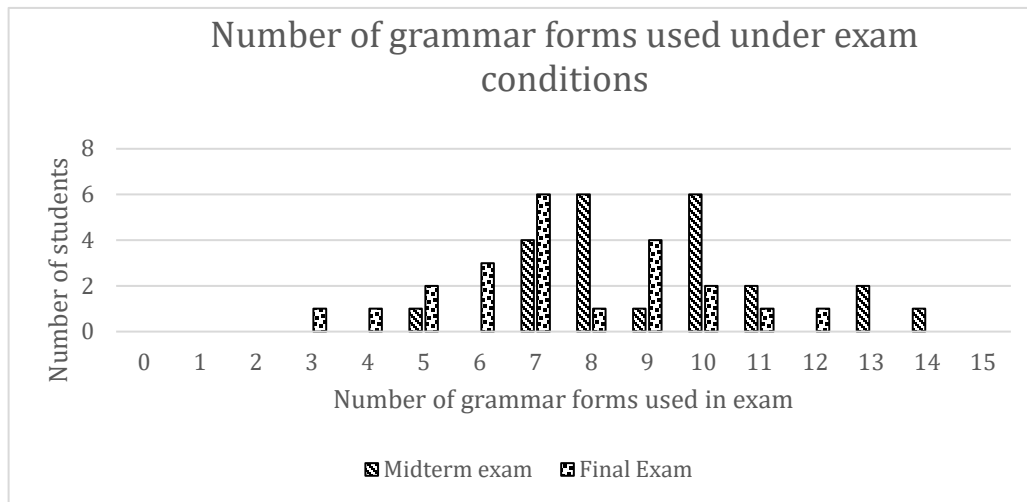
<b>Students' average additional grammar forms</b>					
<b>Average grammar forms added</b>	Below 1	Between 1 and 1.99	Between 2 and 2.99	Between 3 and 3.99	4 and above
<b>Number of students</b>	4	6	10	5	3

While the majority of students did consistently increase the number of grammar forms used in the second attempt by at least two, the fact that a significant proportion did not, 36%, suggests some additional support or changes to the procedure might be beneficial.

#### **Is an increase in students' grammar variety sustained under exam conditions?**

The students' speaking skills were tested twice under exam conditions. As the transcription and analysis was a take-home assignment a number of students failed to return the papers. 23 and 22 students' data was received for the mid-term and end-of-term exam respectively. Unfortunately, some data bias is introduced at this point as more diligent students are more likely to return assignments. Students who failed to return the papers tended to be students who scored lower on average generally. This is a perennial problem in the education field.

However, from the data received, there were some interesting findings. The mean reported grammar variety for the first and second exams were 9.2 and 7.45 respectively. The histogram for the results is below.



The dip between the two is unexpected but statistically significant as the 99% confidence intervals do not overlap.

Considering only the 19 sets of paired data (excluding students who returned only one of the exam reports), 15 students reported less grammar variety on the final exam, 1 the same amount and only 3 an increased amount. While this may partially be due to changing the instrument, discussed more later, it would not explain all the changes.

Nonetheless, given my experience with low grammar variety in students' mock exams, a mean grammar variety of 7.45 still represents a large improvement over their initial performances. Thus, it is highly likely that the effect of the training, increased grammar variety, will persist in the real exam and thus hopefully assist in raising their band scores.

### Discussion

This study showed that a focused 20-minute weekly activity trained students to use a greater variety of grammar forms in an IELTS speaking test. From initially using basic sentences in the present simple, lacking adverbs and conjunctions, the participants in this study began to use far more different types of grammatical forms. By listening to their own recordings and assessing themselves they became responsible for their own progress. By grading their own performance, they became motivated to try new language and think more strategically about the exam. By repeating the questions immediately after they felt empowered to improve and learnt how to expand their skill.



I was very pleased with the results of this study and look forward to developing it further in the next academic year. I will aim to be able to increase the effectiveness and see clear impacts on students' performance in real exams.

Training worksheets and activity plans were created for the second semester to continue the students' progress. These sessions will be carried out by two different researchers while I am away on maternity leave. This data will be added to the current data to see how a year of training affects student habits. This will also show the potential for the activity plan to be used by other teachers in different contexts.

Despite the generally positive results, there are some aspects of this study that need to be discussed in greater detail.

**Self-reporting.** This study relied heavily on students' self-reported use of different grammar forms. This was both a feature and a weakness of the study design. The overarching goal of the study is to make students self-aware. Many researchers (Gower et al.1995, Harmer, 2004 Harmer, 2007, Khansir & Pakdel. 2018, Carter, 2003 and Dormer, 2013) have shown that self-correction and self-awareness lead to language improvement. The grammar checklists were designed to clearly show to students that they were either succeeding or failing in a key exam skill. They either did or did not use the past tense and their lists would highlight ways to improve.

On the other hand, self-reporting poses a large accuracy problem. Firstly, it relies on students correctly identifying which grammar forms they used. McCormick & Vercellotti (2013) found that students often incorrectly corrected their own transcripts. The grammar checklists were designed to minimize this problem by including the Japanese name for the grammar form and an example, however it is undeniable that an unknown amount of inaccuracy is included in the results.

Ideally, recordings would be checked by the researcher, but this was not possible at this institution for privacy reasons.

**Post-exam transcripts.** There were a number of confounding differences between the in-class activity and the post-exam transcript analyses. Firstly, as students were asked a full set of questions,

they had far more opportunities and prompts to use a wider variety of grammar. Secondly, as students worked from their own transcription rather than listening only once or twice to their recording it can be safely assumed that the data for these performances is more accurate. However, in the mock exam they lacked both preparation time and a handy list of grammar forms to be used. Additionally, the students' motivation was different – score well to get a good grade for the class, rather than explicitly use more grammar. Along with that there was inherent stress and anxiety that comes from high-stakes testing.

**Changing the lists.** The items included on the grammar checklist changed throughout the study. As new, more difficult, forms were added, more basic forms were consolidated or removed entirely. This was done partly to encourage and push the students to try harder, by removing the 'easy points'. But also, to keep the checklist to a manageable size and easy-to-use. The normal weekly worksheet remained as one double-sided sheet of A4 paper.

However, by frequently changing the lists, comparing grammar variety between them is challenging. Perhaps, in later weeks, 2-3 more points could be added to students' scores as we can safely assume they would have used things such as adjectives and the present simple. In the next iteration of this study different designs of grammar list will be developed to avoid this problem in future.

**Progress plateau** After a couple of sessions, the mean first performance grammar variety plateaued at a number between 6 and 8. This may partly be due to the changing list as described above but may also be due to the length of allowable student response. As said before, with only three part-1 style questions to answer using a multitude of grammatical forms is both very challenging and unnatural. Perhaps looking at expanding grammatical range for part-2 and part-3 questions would increase student progress.

It might be interesting to investigate which grammatical forms are used. Can students be encouraged to deliberately make use of the more challenging forms and interesting sentence patterns?

### **Conclusion**

Grammar range is a key area of weakness for students at the 4-6.5 band score level. Students will have studied many different forms and are often quite capable of using them but frequently fail to do so. They are usually focused on directly answering the examiner's questions rather than strategically 'scoring exam points'. Therefore, training students to add a variety of grammar items to their answers should be a priority for their teachers. This study trialed an activity that aimed to build students' self-awareness of the grammar items they were using and to push them to add greater variety to their answers.

The literature review showed that while a number of different speaking aspects contribute together to predict a student's band score, grammar variety should increase with score. (Seedhouse Roothoof, H. et al, 2014 and Roothoof and Breeze, 2019) It also revealed that rate of speech was a key factor, thus, using more complex grammar may be a negative if the student finds it too difficult. Therefore, a lot of practice in using higher level grammar should be conducted to avoid lowering a student's fluency too much.

The data gathered from the students showed that the activity had some success in raising the number of grammar forms used both in short class activities and under exam conditions. The activity was quick and easy to conduct, taking around 20 minutes of class time, and once familiar with it, students were able to work together with minimal instruction.

I believe that focusing on increasing grammar variety is an efficient use of students' limited classroom time. Adding more grammar forms to a response is a simple strategic move that will maximize the band score they receive. It is language students already know and have practiced but that they simply forget to use. Training that pushes students to add more variety will help them in all areas of their speaking skills. However, training must be conducted over a long period of time to ensure that they can use it naturally and fluently. The activity described in this paper, while needing improvement, did meet this goal. Further research will develop the activity and make it more accessible for other teachers to use in their classrooms.

**Further research.** A second semester's worth of data is being gathered with the same set of students. This data will be analyzed to see the effect of a year-long training program. The experiences of the different teachers conducting the activity will be included in a redesign process aimed at making the activity more useable in other teaching contexts. In the next academic year, a similar project will be conducted with a new set of students. Improved study design will hopefully overcome some of the limitations in this study.

### References

- Ellis, R. (1991). Communicative competence and the Japanese learner. *JALT Journal*, 13(2), 103-129.
- Huddleston, Rodney; Pullum, Geoffrey (2002). *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 131–136, 190, 208–210. [ISBN 9780521431460](https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780521431460).
- Hopkins, D., & Cullen, P. (2007) "Cambridge Grammar for IELTS Student's Book with Answers and Audio CD" Cambridge University Press, 2007
- IELTS Homepage: *Ielts home of the IELTS English Language Test*. IELTS Home of the IELTS English Language Test. (n.d.). <https://www.ielts.org/>
- IELTS in CEFR scale*. IELTS in Cefr Scale. (n.d.). <https://www.ielts.org/about-ielts/ielts-in-cefr-scale>
- Iwashita, N., & Vasquez, C. (2015). An examination of discourse competence at different proficiency levels in IELTS speaking part 2.
- Kang, O., Egbert, J., & Miao, Y. (2023). Speaking and writing features: Distinguishing IELTS proficiency levels and progression over time. IELTS Research Reports Online Series, No. 1/23. British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia. Available at <https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/research-reports>
- Morska, L. (2016). Teaching English for the IELTS Tests: Fitting the Necessary Criteria. *Ostrava Journal of English Philology*. Volume 8.
- Ohata, K. (2005). Potential sources of anxiety for Japanese learners of English: Preliminary case interviews with five Japanese college students in the US. *TESL-EJ*, 9(3), n3.
- Roothoof, H., and Breeze, R. 2019. IELTS: Investigating the development of 'grammatical range and accuracy' at different proficiency levels in the IELTS Speaking test. IELTS Research Reports Online Series, No. 1. British Council, Cambridge Assessment English and IDP: IELTS Australia. Available at <https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/research-reports>
- Sarkar, A. (1998). "[The Conflict Between Future Tense and Modality: The Case of Will in English](#)". *University of Pennsylvania Working Papers in Linguistics*. 5: 90–117
- Seedhouse, P., Harris, A., Naeb, R., & Üstünel, E. (2014). The relationship between speaking features and band descriptors: a mixed methods study. *IELTS Research Reports Online Series*.
- Serebriakoff, A. (2023) A comparison of three different L2 speech self-improvement methods : initial findings, Baika Women's University Faculty of Cultural and Expression Studies Bulletin, No. 19, p. 44-63
- Takahashi, M. (2005). The efficacy of grammar instruction in EFL classes in Japan. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, the department of English Linguistics of Kobe Shoin graduate school of letters.