

## Relationship between Perceived Intercultural Competence and IELTS Speaking Performance among Iranian EFL Learners

**Rezvan Atashpanjeh**

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran

**Mohsen Shahrokhi \***

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Shahreza Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran

### Abstract

The present study is an attempt to investigate if there is a relationship between intercultural competence and IELTS speaking performance among Iranian EFL learners and to investigate if IELTS training courses improve Iranian's EFL learners' intercultural competence. To do so, 40 Iranian male and female EFL learners who were studying pre-IELTS and IELTS courses were chosen through the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). The participants' ages ranged from twenty-one to fifty-three. They were all given a questionnaire adopted from Matveev (2002) including 23 items with 7 options ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree in order to assess their intercultural competence before and after attending the IELTS speaking course. The participants were also checked through the IELTS speaking mock test before sitting for the real IELTS speaking interview in order to compare their speaking performance after passing the course. To do so, a quantitative design based on a correlational method was employed to analyze the data and find possible answers to the research questions of the study. The findings revealed that IELTS training courses improve Iranian EFL IELTS learners' intercultural competence and there is a mild correlation between perceived intercultural competence and IELTS speaking performance of Iranian EFL learners. The study revealed implications fruitful for both the teachers and the EFL learners attending IELTS training courses.

**Keywords:** Intercultural competence, Speaking skill, IELTS

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The way through which encoding, transmitting, and interpreting messages occur is determined by culture (Lauring, 2011). As national cultures strongly influence a population's communication patterns, the way people communicate can change the culture that they live in and share over time (Kunst, 1997). As we begin the next millennium, the importance of effective intercultural relations in both global and domestic context is well recognized (Brislin, Cushner, Cherie & Yong, 1986; Hammer, 1989, 1999; Kaeley, 1989). As Bhawuk and Brislin (1992, p.416) suggested, to be effective

in another culture, “people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures”.

Communicative competence is the aspect of our competence that enables us to convey and interpret messages and to negotiate meanings interpersonally within specific contexts (Hymes, 1972). The term intercultural competence, as a component of communicative competence, refers to the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways. Intercultural communication shapes the way people contend with changes, deliver messages across borders and cultures, and revisit the fundamental properties of time and space (Monge, 1998). Intercultural competence development is regarded as a core capability in the 21st century among EFL learners and it includes cultural self-awareness, as well as understanding people’s experiences from diverse communities, and the capability to adapt one’s mindset and behavior to bridge across differences (Hammer, 2011).

Hammer, Kunst, and Wiseman (1978) distinguished three major factors of intercultural communication competence: the ability to deal with psychological stress, the ability to communicate effectively, and the ability to establish interpersonal relationships. Sarbaugh (1979) identified variables that help determine the success of intercultural interaction: social organization roles and role prescriptions, thought patterns, organization of time and space, and worldview. Other researchers used different variables to examine intercultural communication competence (Croskey, 1982; Pavitt & Haigh, 1985; Samovar & Porter, 1991; Spitzberg, 1983, 1989; Wiseman, Hammer & Nishida, 1989). In order to be competent in intercultural communication, being able to adopt would be necessary. According to some authors, along with cognitive and emotional competence, intercultural competence would be one of these basic life competences (Mrnjaus, 2013).

The extent to which one’s intercultural competence is developed could be traced through different communication skills, specifically speaking skill. Speaking skill affects intercultural competence to a large extent. Speaking skill is considered as one of the most essential components of language proficiency. Diverse methods have been applied to improve all English skills such as speaking for adult learners. Speaking is a major purpose for both language teachers and learners all over the globe. Wogsuwana (2006) argued that speaking skills can be taught and it is not related to the talent. Wogsuwana (2006) further argued that speaking is regarded essential for oral communication. Staab (1992) noted that in order to speak in the best way possible some speaking activities including discussion, role play, simulation, information gap, brain storming, storytelling, interview reporting and playing cards are provided that could be applied both in ESL and EFL classroom settings. As Burns (2013, p. 232) note: “speaking is a complex mental process combining various cognitive skills, virtually simultaneously, and drawing on working memory of words and concepts, while self-monitoring.” There are some standard tests available through which speaking skill is assessed. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) assesses the ability of its participants in listening, reading,

writing and speaking. As English has become an international language, more and more people tend to use it around the world as a medium of post-school study.

### **CONCERN OF THE STUDY**

Intercultural competence has been addressed at different institutions of higher education, due to the importance that it has. There is a significant difference between theoretical and practical notions which are related to intercultural competence. Vadopija-krstanovic and Brala-vukanovic (2012) recognized that in formal education, both in theory and practice, focusing on intercultural competence is essential. They also believe that intercultural competence needs to be better integrated into the curriculum. In this study, intercultural competence of IELTS training course participants was explored before and after passing the course. The findings of this study can help IELTS instructors to focus on the areas the learners may have not noticed. Additionally, the syllabus of IELTS courses can be designed in a way that addresses the intercultural competence of IELTS training course participants.

An investigation into the learners' intercultural competence can shed light on the problematic areas. Therefore, IELTS teachers can provide learners with more practice in those areas. Learners themselves can be helped by raising their knowledge regarding the intercultural competence.

Speaking is one of the four macro skills necessary for effective communication in any language, particularly when speakers are not using their mother tongue. As English is universally used as a means of communication, English speaking skills should be developed along with the other skills so that those integrated skills will enhance communication achievement. Most of the participants of IELTS exam are those who long to emigrate and consequently face a new culture. For the researchers of this study, as IELTS instructors, it is a concern that whether IELTS course through which the Iranian EFL learners will improve their intercultural competence will lead them to communicate well in a new culture frame or not. Moreover, previous studies within the frame work of intercultural competence did not pay sufficient attention to the unique features which are learnt through passing IELTS speaking training courses and the enhancement of intercultural competence of its participants.

### **OBJECTIVES**

The major objective in this research was whether there is any significant relationship between intercultural competence and IELTS speaking performance. The second objective of this study was to what extent intercultural competence is enhanced as a result of attending an IELTS training course in Iran. Based on the mentioned purpose of the study, the researchers put forward the following research questions:

- RQ<sub>1</sub>. Do IELTS training courses significantly improve Iranian EFL learners' intercultural competence?
- RQ<sub>2</sub>. Is there any significant relationship between perceived intercultural competence and IELTS speaking performance of Iranian EFL learners?

The answers to the research questions were predicted by formulating the following null hypothesis:

- H01. IELTS speaking courses do not significantly improve Iranian EFL learners' intercultural competence.
- H02. There is not any significant relationship between perceived intercultural competence and IELTS speaking performance of Iranian EFL learners.

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

To find the answer to the research questions, a quantitative correlational Ex-post facto design was taken. The main variables were the speaking skill performance and the intercultural competence of the IELTS training course participants; the relationship between the main variables was going to be checked through IELTS training courses as an intervening variable.

### **Participants**

To conduct the study, some 60 Iranian EFL learners who were studying IELTS and pre-IELTS courses and were either at Intermediate and advanced level were selected as the participants of the study. They were selected based on their performance on an English language proficiency test which was an Oxford Quick Placement Test. From among these 60 students, 20 were excluded because of insufficient language proficiency or not answering their writing section in the test. Of the remaining 40 students, according to Oxford Quick Placement Test level chart, 30 were advanced (scores between 48 and 60) and 10 were intermediate (scores between 38 and 50). The students were of both sexes and they ranged in age between 21 and 53. Among them, a group of 15 EFL learners who participated in the study were those who participated via the internet, especially, through Whatsapp groups. They were contacted and asked to take part in the study by answering the Oxford Quick Placement Test and filling out the accompanied questionnaire. They were the students who had been studying a private course with the researcher of this thesis and did not attend any English institute at that time. The native language of all participants was Persian and all of them were learning English as a foreign language. They all answered a Oxford Quick Placement Test accompanied by an intercultural communication competence questionnaire (ICCQ) in which they had to state their idea based on 7 options ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

### **Instruments**

#### ***Oxford Quick Placement Test***

To identify the proficiency level of the participants, and to select the intermediate and advanced learners of English, an Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was administered before attending the IELTS course. It was used to assess the participants' proficiency. It also enabled the researcher to have a broader view of what level the participants were at. This test consisted of 60 items of general English knowledge (grammar and vocabulary). In each item, the part in question was left blank and four alternatives were provided. The

participants received instruction to choose just one of the four multiple choices which they considered as the correct response and marked it on the answer sheet in the provided 30 minutes. This test was administered before attending the IELTS course in order to manifest the participants' homogeneity in terms of English language proficiency. It also enabled the researcher to have a broader view of what level the participants were at. The test also included a writing section of 120 words which had to be done in a separate 30 minutes.

### ***Intercultural Communication Competence Questionnaire***

In order to come up with a richer and more profound data, another instrument that was used in this dissertation, was an Intercultural Communication Competence questionnaire (ICCQ) adopted from Matveev (2002), consisted of 23 items that was answered by the participants in order to assess their intercultural competence before and after attending the IELTS speaking training course. This questionnaire was designed in order to understand how different respondents perceive different dimensions of intercultural communication competence and its relationship with the IELTS speaking course. The ICCQ's theoretical frame work was based on the integrated intercultural communication competence model, which was rooted in Abe and Wiseman's (1983) abilities model and Cui and Awa's (1992) concept of intercultural effectiveness. The model was based on four underlying dimensions that described a level of intercultural competence of a team member including; interpersonal skills, team effectiveness, cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy. Therefore, 23 questions of the ICCQ around the mentioned dimensions of intercultural competence were constructed that each of which prompted the respondents about one dimension and were randomly distributed in the questionnaire to ensure unbiased answers. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked through the pilot study conducted by Matveev (2002) and was reported to be 0.88.

### ***IELTS Speaking Mock Test***

Another instrument that was employed in this study was IELTS speaking mock. The structure of both mock test and the real test are the same and include three sections that take 11 to 14 minutes. The mock test was administered at the end of the course by the language institute and the researchers of the study to measure the participants' speaking performance after attending the IELTS training course.

### **Procedure**

In order to investigate the effects of IELTS training courses on Iranian EFL learners' intercultural competence, a structured procedure was designed to collect the data. At the beginning of the study, an OQPT was administered. The total score of the test was 100. The questions were designed in multiple-choice format. Every correct answer was given +1 point and every incorrect one was given 0 point. In this test no penalty was included. In order to perform the OQPT test, 60 Iranian intermediate and advanced level EFL learners who aimed to attend the test to participated to check their homogeneity. During the 15-session IELTS speaking training course, the participants were taught how three sections of the interview would be. They were informed about section one of the interview through which they introduced themselves and their identity was confirmed.

The questions of this part included general ones on familiar topics, such as home, family, work, studies and interests. The most recent IELTS speaking tests' questions that had been administered throughout the world, would be practiced with them. They would learn what to answer and how to answer in each part. In the second section in which the participants were asked to talk about a particular topic in a cue card, they were given one minute to think and take notes and 1 to 2 minutes to talk about the topic and the questions which were followed. In the third section, which is a two-way discussion, the examiners were asked further questions which were related to the topic of the second section. These questions were designed to provide an opportunity to discuss more abstract issues and ideas.

After the course the participants' intercultural competence was checked by the intercultural competence questionnaire. Afterwards, they sat for an IELTS speaking mock test to see if their performance on IELTS speaking test had any relationship with intercultural competence or not.

### Data analysis

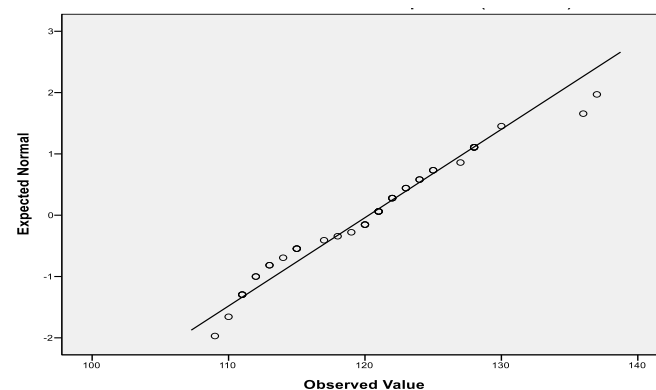
Both descriptive (mean, percentage, standard deviation) and inferential statistics were used. In order to check the participants' improvement in terms of intercultural competence a one-sample t-test was used. In order to check the relationship between participants' speaking performance and their intercultural competence Kendall's tau-b correlation Coefficient was used.

## RESULTS

The present study employed a quantitative design based on a correlational method to seek answers to the research questions. Before any statistical analysis, the collected data underwent the required preliminary checks to pave the way for using the appropriate inferential statistics.

### Checking Assumptions

The collected intercultural competence scores of the participants were checked through tests of normality and for outliers.



**Figure 1.** Q-Q Plot of Intercultural Competence Scores

According to Figure 1, the data looks approximately normal observationally. However, to make sure the data is normally distributed both *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* and *Shapiro-Wilk* tests were used as displayed in the following table.

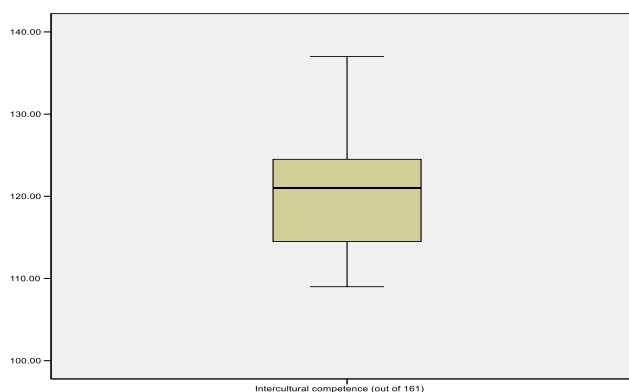
**Table 1.** Tests of Normality for Intercultural competence scores

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Intercultural competence	.101	40	.200*	.962	40	.196

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

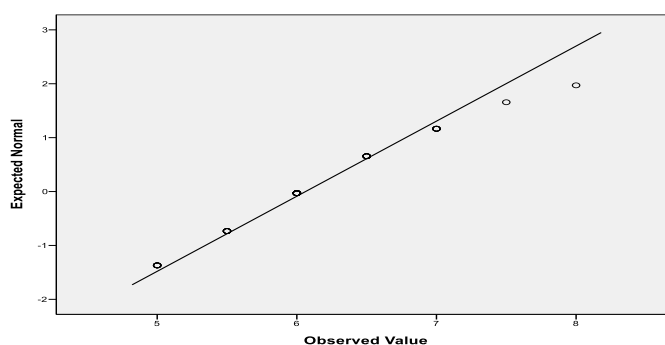
a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As Table 1 indicates, the significance values for both *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* and *Shapiro-Wilk* tests for normality are greater than 0.05. Therefore, the data is normally distributed. Moreover, the box plot in the following figure displays no significant outlier.



**Figure 2.** Box plot for intercultural competence scores

Furthermore, the IELTS speaking scores of the participants were checked through tests of normality and for outliers.



**Figure 3.** Q-Q Plot of IELTS speaking scores

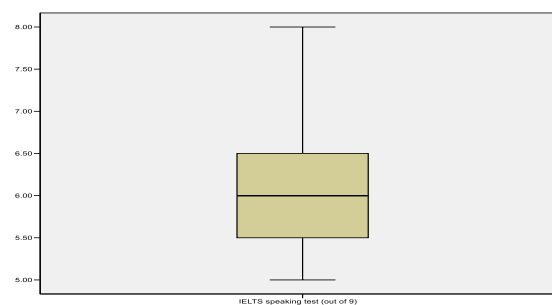
Although the data in Figure 4.3 looked observationally normal, the normality tests, namely *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* and *Shapiro-Wilk* tests did not confirm the normal distribution of data.

**Table 2.** Tests of Normality for IELTS speaking test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
IELTS speaking test	.210	40	.000	.926	40	.012

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

According to Table 2, the significance values for both *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* and *Shapiro-Wilk* tests for normality are smaller than 0.05. Therefore, the data is not normally distributed. In addition to normality, the data was checked for the existence of outliers. The box plot in the following figure displayed no significant outlier among IELTS speaking scores.

**Figure 4.** Box plot for IELTS speaking scores

The collected data, accordingly, underwent further meticulous statistical analysis whose details are presented as follows.

### First Research Question

The first research question of the current study was formulated to check whether IELTS training courses significantly improve Iranian EFL learners' intercultural competence. In this regard, drawing upon an ex-post-facto design, the participants of the study were measured regarding their intercultural competence. The scores collected for participants' perceived intercultural competence range between 0 and 161. Accordingly, the mean score for all participants could be compared against the average score of the intercultural competence test (that is, 80.50). This would mean that if the mean score for all participants was less than 80.50, the participants did not enjoy the required intercultural competence. And, if the mean score for all participants was more than 80.50, it could reveal to what extent their IELTS speaking ability is improved. To this end, the descriptive statistics for intercultural competence scores were measured.

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics for intercultural competence scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Intercultural competence	40	109.00	137.00	120.2750	6.93925	48.153
Valid N (listwise)	40					



As Table 3 reveals, the mean score for participants intercultural competence was greater than the average score (80.50). Accordingly, to make sure the difference between the participants' mean score for intercultural competence ( $M = 120.27$ ) and the average score (test value = 80.50) is significant or not a one-sample  $t$  test was run.

**Table 4.** One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 80.50					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Intercultural competence (out of 161)	36.252	39	.000	39.77500	37.5557	41.9943

As displayed in Table 4, a one-sample  $t$  test was conducted to compare the mean of sample with a test value of 80.50. The preliminary assumption testing, as reported in Table 4.1, was conducted to check for normality with no violation noted. The results revealed a significant difference between the mean score of participants for intercultural competence ( $M = 120.2750$ ,  $SD = 6.93925$ ;  $t(39) = 36.252$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and the average score for intercultural competence (80.50). An inspection of the mean suggests that the mean for sample is significantly greater than 80.50. Therefore, it could be concluded that IELTS training courses significantly improve Iranian EFL learners' intercultural competence.

## Second Research Question

The second aim of the present study was to find out whether there is any significant correlation between perceived intercultural competence and IELTS speaking performance of Iranian EFL learners? In order to achieve this objective, the participants IELTS speaking scores and their intercultural scores were checked for normality and outliers (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2) before conducting correlational statistical analysis.

Because the data failed one of the assumptions of *Pearson's product-moment* correlation (that is, normality, as displayed in Table 4.2), a nonparametric test, namely *Kendall's tau-b* ( $\tau_b$ ) correlation coefficient (*Kendall's tau-b*, for short) was run to measure of the strength and direction of association that exists between the two variables, that is, participants IELTS speaking scores and their intercultural scores.

**Table 4.5.** Kendall's tau\_b Correlations

		Intercultural competence	IELTS speaking
Intercultural competence (out of 161)	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.239*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.049
	N	40	40
Kendall's tau_b IELTS speaking test (out of 9)	Correlation Coefficient	.239*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.049	.
	N	40	40

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\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

As displayed in Table 4.5, the *Kendall's tau-b* correlation was run to determine the relationship between IELTS speaking scores and perceived intercultural competence scores amongst 40 participants. There was a moderate, positive correlation between perceived intercultural competence and IELTS speaking scores, which was statistically significant ( $\tau b = .239, p = .04$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Although many studies have been conducted on intercultural competence alone, there has not been enough studies on the issue of improving intercultural competence of Iranian EFL learners after passing international courses such as IELTS. Developing learners' intercultural competence has long been one of the major goals of second language instructional programs.

One similar study which supports the results of this study is conducted by Juan and Flor (2008) via which teaching intercultural communicative competence through activities from face-to-face tandem learning, making up questions to a native speaker to role playing were all included. However, the study is different as face-to-face IELTS interviews are considered as activities suitable for fostering learners' intercultural communicative competence which differentiates this study from other similar studies by bringing opportunities for all learners to get engaged in face to face tandem. The questions that are practiced via taking an IELTS speaking course include items about culture of both the home country and the target country. It includes advanced level of students who participate in IELTS training course as an international course. Through encountering three sections of speaking test, knowing cultural notes, play an essential role in enhancing intercultural competence of the learners.

In another similar study, conducted by Smrekar (2015) communication and language learning was investigated. It emphasizes that culture learning is an essential part of language learning which supports the findings of this study. It is felt that intercultural competence should be addressed in EFL lessons. Language learning and cultural notes are not separated parts as language is learnt through the frame of culture.

As the first hypothesis of this study states the intercultural competence of Iranian EFL learners is developed while taking an IELTS speaking course. IELTS learners encounter informal questions about their life in the first section of the test such as home town, job, free time, hobbies and interests and their field of study. Spontaneously, cultural aspects are highly considered while answering these questions. Integration into a foreign society, especially when moving to another country which is the most important goal of IELTS learners is the most important reason for learning cultural notes. What should be noted here is that the development of intercultural competence needs a large degree of motivation as well. Such motivation might lie in the English language itself (Smrekar, 2015). Cultural notes are highly considered from the first moment of the interview. For instance, eye contact which is ignored a lot of time in our culture, should be noticed during the whole interview. Shaking hands for opposite genders is religiously forbidden for Muslims and this is another cultural difference that should be considered while performing the interview. In section two of the test the learners will be encountered with

cue cards on which a subject including two or three questions are included. To be able to talk about the the subjects of cue cards, culture plays a crucial role as well. The guidance of a good teacher to help the IELTS learners what to say and how to say would be very helpful during the preparation courses. Most EFL classrooms at present are focused on the language, in particular, grammar and vocabulary learning but in an international exam preparation course such as the IELTS speaking preparation course, a vast knowledge of cultural notes would be essential as well. Finally, the third part of the interview involves a two-way discussion between the participant and the examiner which necessitates the knowledge of cultural aspects during the whole debate. The cultural dimension of language is central to communication (Bennett,1998). As the language being talked is English, learning about the differences and similarities of cultures should be included during the preparation courses.

The second hypothesis of this study, states that there is a moderate positive correlation between perceived intercultural competence and IELTS speaking performance of Iranian EFL learners which indicates that other parameters except from cultural aspects should be included for the development of speaking skill. Therefore, a moderate correlation is logically expected. Grammar, semantic rules, vocabulary range, coherence and cohesion, self-confidence, proficiency, accuracy, fluency each play a unique role in speaking skill.

### **CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this research have shown that intercultural competence can be learnt through training in EFL language courses and it affects the speaking skill of the learners significantly. The EFL teachers and learners are both benefited from the findings of this study. The teachers especially the IELTS teachers will try to explain the differences that exist in the culture of the learners with the culture of English-speaking countries while teaching how to answer the questions of each section in their classes. They will know that providing the pupils with the information about the culture of target countries will affect the speaking skill significantly and the participants will get better scores in their real performance for an international face to face interview such as the IELTS speaking test. The teachers will try to provide the learners with every cultural difference that might exist between the two cultures and the quality of their classes to a large extent. It proves that it is not necessarily needed to learn about the culture of a region by traveling or living there for a long time when this opportunity is not provided for the learners and they can elevate their knowledge about cultural differences that might exist through learning and education as well. Knowing the cultural notes is also considered as a good motivation for the learners to attend the speaking courses instead of trying to work on this skill as a self-study which can be beneficial for language schools and IELTS teachers economically.

The participants of IELTS speaking courses are those who long to emigrate to one of English speaking countries and start a new job or continue their education there and knowing the cultural differences not only helps them to develop their speaking skill and get a better score in the IELTS interview but it also provides them with the chance of learning the information that will be very useful for them after their emigration. Therefore, IELTS participants as the EFL learners will be benefited as well through the results of this study.

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