Measuring Grammatical Range in Improving the Rating of IELTS Speaking Part

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Abstract

In this paper, the important role of grammatical range in obtaining a higher score in IELTS has been analyzed. It has been also shown that band descriptors 6, 7 and 8 mostly tend to employ complex grammatical structures and most of the present findings state that their discourses contain some errors. Four complex grammatical forms have been defined and analyzed: conditionals, relative clauses, passives, and indirect questions which if candidates use more of, they will earn a higher band score even utterances lacking enough grammatical accuracy according to the studies examined in our paper.

Keywords: IELTS; Speaking section; Grammatical range; Grammatical accuracy; IELTS band descriptors; Four complex grammatical forms

I. Introduction

IELTS is one of the most prominent international English tests that needs to be taken by those who want to immigrate or study in any parts of the world. It has four sections named: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. One of the most challenging parts is believed to be the speaking section, since candidates are required to present their own speech production which is the only part in the test that they can prove their mastering knowledge and ability in English language.

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English language has become the international language of communication all around the world; thus, linguists developed IELTS test as one of the assessment tests to measure the proficiency level of those who want to immigrate to another country for academic goals or living purposes. Therefore, there are two models of this test: general and academic IELTS and examiners evaluate IELTS candidates through four sections: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. In this study, the main focus is on the speaking section and to analyze and dispute the effective features to alter band descripts of IELTS and consequently the final score of this test.

Each part of the IELTS test consists of a set of criteria to evaluate the level of language proficiency of examinees correctly, accurately and in accordance with linguistic standard level. Most findings indicate that there are four band descripts to assess the IELTS candidates. These four key indicators of assessment are as follows according to Brown: Fluency, grammatical range and accuracy, lexical resource, and pronunciation, (Brown, 2002). In this research, grammatical range and its role in improving the band descripts of IELTS speaking test is going to be the main domain to discuss and analyze.

Grammar is identified as an essential element to interpret scores not only on the oral production of a test, but also on other parts like in writing. Therefore, grammatical ability correlates highly with the overall proficiency of test-takers and creates different levels of examinees performance. Apparently, there isn't any separate section assigned to grammar in IELTS test; yet, it is included as one of the main criteria in band descriptors table to score its test-takers. The complete assessment of grammar holds accuracy and complexity. Accuracy as Rimmer defines it is "control of structures and freedom from error", (Rimmer, 2006) and range means the variety of grammatical structures that test-takers employ. As mentioned above, this article examines the idea of grammatical range/complexity and its part in changing the final score of candidates throughout their oral communication part of IELTS test.

This study has tried to identify four important types of compound grammatical constructions which are examined to be harder and more challenging to employ by candidates. Conditionals, relative clauses, passives, and indirect questions are the four compound forms that are going to be discussed here. Furthermore, this research has tried to present that more attempts to use these complex grammatical structures occur through oral production of higher proficient levels that correlate negatively with their grammatical accuracy to some extent.

II. Literature Review

Over the past few decades, extensive research has been done to distinguish linguistic features of IELTS speaking performance and to determine their parts as an altering IELTS authentic band descriptors as the main objective of their studies. The domains of linguistic features contain vocabularies, grammar, fluency, content and rhetorical organization. However, the present study concentrates on grammatical domain due to its scope of

limitation. Among research papers on grammar, a number of which have been derived from in this study are listed in the following: in [1], the authors focus on grammar as it is "central to language description"[1], and therefore, they explore the importance of complexity of form and structure and its high correlation with overall proficiency of candidates' performance in the IELTS speaking section. In [2], the authors investigated the development of grammatical range and accuracy at different proficiency levels in the speaking part of IELTS. The authentic statistical data in the present paper has been deduced from [2] and [3]. In [4, 5] the authors aim to provide enough empirical linguistic evidence to present the relationship between candidates' talks and the scores they receive.

In [6], Wayne Rimmer evaluates grammatical complexity (GC) with a focus on unit length and subordination used by test-takers in the writing section through quantitative method. His research showed that "Both unit length and subordination are essentially quantitative methods of GC in that they can be counted, compared and subjected to statistical analysis", [6]. Kang and Yan in their study [7] confirmed that "grammatical errors in certain features as formation of conditional structure increased with proficiency and this is the tension between complexity and accuracy".

Doctor Joukoulian in her research [8] stated that in teaching grammar and sentence structure to non-native learners both the communicative approach and the traditional approach would be more effective and efficient teaching techniques.

M.A. Shams in his study [9] investigated the role of linguistics and intelligence or non-linguistic factors in the Iranian IELTS candidates' speaking performance. Another Iranian researcher, Seyed Amir Alavi in his paper with Dr. Heidari, [10] expressed that candidates' grammatical knowledge has an impact on the oral communication part of the speaking (OCS) test in a way that this knowledge has been stored, processed and produced by them.

Romer findings in [11] indicated that the rating scale of the IELTS treats lexis and grammar separately in assessing candidates' talks by defining the distinct band descriptors "Lexical Resource" and "Grammatical Range and Accuracy". His research proved that rating scales of IELTS specifies two separate scoring categories for lexis and grammar or structure and he believes these two features should be integrated into one category to assess test-takers performance.

III. Research Question, Method and Procedure

The aim of this study is to make an effort in showing the role of complex syntax in improving the band scores of IELTS speaking section. The main focus of our research is to answer the following questions:

RQ1: Which complex grammatical structures (e.g. Relative clauses, passives) are used in IELTS bands 4-8 and how does their accuracy develop? A number of researchers like Kang (2013) found that complex structures were mostly employed from band 4 and up, but the error rates increased as their usage went up. Roothoof and Breeze, on the other hand, found out that some complex structures like relative clauses did not follow the same pattern, since

error rates gradually decreased from band 4 to 7, and in band 8; though, the usage rate went up. In this study, it has been tried to show that first of all, there is a correlation between grammatical range and accuracy and that these two essential linguistic features are entwined together; however, in some situations, this relationship between them untwined especially in the practical part of IELTS test, which many factors are involved like time limitation.

RQ 2: Which grammatical structures distinguish IELTS band descriptors 4-8? Which types of errors are distinctive of a specific band level? Do higher bands make less mistakes using compound sentences than lower bands? In the present study, by relying on the works of other researchers tries to find a convincing answer to these question (Qualitative method). This study embodies an analysis of candidate discourse on the IELTS speaking test. The overall aim of the study is to try to highlights the score point on the scales measured according to test-takers' ability to use complex sentences uttered throughout their oral production of the test.

IV. Proposed Analysis and Discussion

In this part of this research, first, it would be imperative to state the meaning of grammatical range and grammatical accuracy as these two important language elements are intermingled together in order to form a correct and meaningful spoken or written text.

IV.I Grammatical Range/Complexity and Accuracy

As mentioned earlier, grammatical range and accuracy are considered as foremost and indispensable component of any language and many theoretical linguists assert that "grammar is central to language description and that language tests consistently identifies grammar as a significant factor in differentiating score levels and characterizing overall proficiency." (Wayne Rimmer, the Gordon Knot, p.1). Accuracy means the correct use of structure and produce error-free constructions. Range is the various types of grammatical constructions that is the number of complex structures used by native or non-native speakers. In this study, the main aim is on complexity and to clarify how these complex grammatical forms can change the rating in bands 4-5, 6-7, and 7-8.

IV.II Complex Grammatical Forms in Bands 4 to 8

Non-natives' language ability is proven when their discourse contains their mastery of grammatical structures in the target language. Therefore, grammar counts "as a significant factor in interpreting scores and grammatical ability correlates highly with overall proficiency and distinguishes between different levels of test-takers performance", (Rimmer, 2006). Thus, for our analysis of grammatical range, we focus on four grammatical structures which are regarded as being more complex: conditionals, relative clauses, passives, and indirect questions. As table 1 below presents an overview of the average error rates for these four structures in bands 4 to 8, (Roothoof and Breeze, 2019).

Table 1: OVERVIEW OF MEAN ERROR RATES FOR COMPLEX STRUCTURES

	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6	Band 7	Band 8
Conditionals	0%	10.2%	10.7%	27.8%	2.7%
Relative clauses	31.6%	18%	4.7%	2.2%	3.2%
Indirect questions	75%	40%	0%	33.3%	3.3%
Passives	0%	0%	0%	8.1%	1.4%

AS observed here in Table 1, error rates in conditionals and passives were assured to be higher than in the lower bands since fewer attempts are made to use these structures in lower bands. On the other hand, the error rates for relative clauses and indirect questions decreased in higher bands.

1) Conditionals

Conditional structures are identified as one of the most challenging and striving subordinate clauses for IELTS candidates to use and therefore, it is implied that conditional types would be used more frequently in higher band levels. Additionally, second and third conditionals are counted as more complicated than first and zero conditionals according to Roothoof and Breeze's study and many other researchers.

First of all, most mistakes test-takers make are related to the correct usage of tenses when they are trying to employ different types of conditional forms even type 1 which is probably the easiest one to use. The following examples show some of these typical errors candidates make in different band levels:

"If someone else come here too, she will post the same one" (band 5).

"If I want to book ticket or if I want to buy clothes it's a useful tool too" (band 6).

"If I have a lot of money, I would travel around the world" (band 4).

"Suddenly there was a waterfall and we musted go under it" (band 4).

As observed in the above examples, IELTS test-takers have problems identifying the correct usage of tenses and they also forget about other minor grammatical accuracy like third person (s) or article use etc.

As table 2 at the end of our study shows, the highest error rate occurs in band 7 for all conditional types since candidates obviously used this structure more than other bands especially with conditional type 2.

E.X.: *a)* If I felt relaxed then I have to swim in the beach. (band 7)

- *b)* It will be very successful if I will study here in England a master. (band 6)
- c) If your teacher could actually, you know, should give you a little attention I think that'll be definitely uplift the child. (band 8)

Interestingly though, there were errors with conditional type 1 too as in example (a) and a past tense is used or in example (b) (will) is overused. Therefore, it can be concluded

that there would be a discrepancy between using grammatical complexity and accuracy particularly when test-takers make an effort to succeed while performing their oral production of the test in a limited period of time. Okim Kang and Xun Yan in their study affirm that "the frequency of errors tended to decrease as proficiency increased, in contrast, grammatical errors in forming a conditional structure increased with proficiency", (Yan, 2018).

2) Relative Clauses

Relative clauses, that are included under the category of subordinate clauses, are also employed mostly by higher proficient candidates in the speaking part of IELTS. There are a number of findings which show that examinees with a speaking band 4 use just one or two relative clauses and their sentences contain a number of errors, while test-takers with band score 6 to 7 or higher tend to use relative clauses more frequently and with less errors. *EX: "I can do anything what I wanna do." band 7 "I'd like to talk about my neighbor who she is my middle school teacher." band 4.* (*Breeze, 2019*)

As table 3 ((Roothoof and Breeze, 2019) (see Table 3 in appendix) shows at the end of this study, there is a remarkable difference between the number of relative clauses attempted in bands 4 and those in band 8. Bands 7 and 8 also contain more than twice the number of relative clauses in their discourse than bands 5 and 6. Furthermore, the error rate decreases slightly from band 7 to 8. Therefore, obviously higher proficient candidates attempt using more relative clauses with lower extent of error rates but, they don't fear making mistakes. Another research by Ashabul Kahfi Susanto also explains that various complex syntactical constructions are spoken by candidates with higher or highest scores because they have the ability and knowledge to develop the topic of their speech through using different types of subordinate clauses and tenses as in examples below. (Susanto, pp. 4.8.Syntax, Extract 11)

"I guess when I was a child most of the programs at the community center would be either age restricted, or separated by gender. So maybe nowadays I've seen a lot of programs are co-ed, and I think this is great. Because it allows the community to come together no matter what age or gender." Band 9

There are three types of common errors that test-takers mostly make during their discourse. One of them according to Roothoof and Breeze is that they use the wrong relative pronoun (as in example 1). The other mistake is using an excessive pronoun as in example 2. The third type of mistakes which they make less frequently is the lack of any relative pronoun, (example 3).

- 1) I know a lot of people which speak English very well. (band 5)
- I can do anything what I wanna do. (band 7)
- 2) I'd like to talk about my neighbor who she is she is my middle school teacher. (band 4)
- 3) If you have enough money you can, you do do you want. (band 4)

As observed with conditionals, higher levels tend to use less of this complicated structure and they rarely use conditional type 3, but relative clauses are employed more from band level 4 and up and the error rates also decreases in higher bands. Table 3 presents a significant difference between the number of relative clauses attempted in band 4 and those in band 8. Bands 7 and 8 especially used this structure twice the number attempted in bands 5 and 6 and the error rates are respectively lower too in these higher bands.

3) Passive Structure

Passive structure is known as a complex and complicated syntactical form that more attempts used by test-takers are proved to be from level 4 and up. Breeze and Roothoof in their research state that passive structures are hardly used in the three lowest levels, while there is a sudden increase with 75 efforts of using passive as Table 4 presents here at the end, (Breeze, 2019). The following examples used correctly by IELTS candidates band descriptors 6 to 8:

Some computer films will be opened there,(band 6).

Practical knowledge should be given more because it's not always the rider's fault, (band 7).

In terms of the plastic usage that is being done, recycling of the human waste that is generated there, (band 8).

Table 4 also shows that interestingly, the error rates increases in band 7, which could be explained by more usage of this structure in this band level comparing to the other band levels. IELTS candidates generally make two main mistakes using passive in their discourse. The first common one is that they employ passive against passive, which means they cannot distinguish parts of speech when they are trying to express an idea as in examples 1 and 2 below. The second prominent error made by test-takers is that they overuse passive, (examples 3 and 4).

- 1) When I immigrate to Canada I have applied for the you see, but I haven't admitted yet (band 7).
- 2) It's a good piece to be, to be look, (band 7).
- *3) You don't know what it will be happened, (band 5).*
- *4) If there is a task that I needed to be done, (band 8).*

However, here complexity outweighs accuracy and candidates who make an effort to use compound sentences like passive, receive a higher band score; even though, their utterances contain some errors, which some linguistic theorist might view these type of errors as not to be ignorable.

4) Indirect Questions

Indirect questions are another type of subordinate clauses which are not used by IELTS candidates as much as relative clauses, so we cannot rely on the findings very much. However, it is observed again that indirect questions are employed mostly by band 4 and higher bands and the three lowest levels hardly try using this complex structure. Interestingly though, there is a correlation between the error rate and usage rate in higher band scores. As table 4 (Roothoof and Breeze, 2019) (see Table II in appendix) represents, more attempts for using indirect questions occurs in higher bands: 4 times more in band 4 than band 3, and 10 times more in band 5 than 4, 12 at band 7 and finally 28 at band 8. Consequently, statistical findings are not reliable enough in terms of quantity. However, apparently, there is a connection between the proficiency level of non-natives and the usage rates of indirect questions as a form of complex grammar.

Candidates should consider two important factors about indirect questions: 1) the order of a wh-clause is the same with that of a sentence, not a question.

Ex: I don't know what people do on the weekends.

2) The word order of indirect questions with auxiliaries.

Ex: I don't know why they are here. I don't know who these people are.

There are a number of mistakes that test-takers make while employing indirect questions throughout their discourse. First, they may forget to change the word order of questions into sentences.

Ex: I don't know why are they here.

I don't know what is she talking about.

Second, they tend to overuse subject or object of wh-clause as in the following examples:

I know a lot of people who they speak English very well.

She went to a shop where she bought a gift there.

Third, candidates also forget to use the correct wh-word.

Ex: I know a lot of people which speak English very well

He doesn't know which to go.

They knew whose went there.

As a result, test-takers should be notified to practice more if they wish to use indirect questions and teachers can provide good speaking activities in classrooms for them to apply this structure correctly and accurately. It should be taken into account that indirect questions are mostly used by high proficiency levels so teachers need to consider the level of their students beforehand.

IV.III. Unbounded correlation between Grammatical Range and Grammatical Accuracy

IELTS examiners do not only consider accuracy when they check grammar, but they should also pay attention to the range of structures used by examinees in the speaking section of IELTS test. In the present study, it has been tried to focus on the use of the four complex structures which are structurally or developmentally more complex: conditionals, relatives, passive, and indirect questions. It was found that more attempts at these structures would likely to be increased at higher band levels. For instance, one passive structure used in band 4, four in band 5, seven in band 6, but 72 attempted passives in band 7. However, this means that error rates for these structures would be higher in the top band levels than in the lower ones. Interestingly, the highest error rate, both for conditionals, passive forms and indirect questions proved to be in band 7. It should be noted here that band 7 is characterized by the highest number of conditional errors mainly due to more usage of conditional type two that were not attempted much in other band levels. The other complex structure, relative clauses did not follow the same pattern, since the error rates for relative clauses gradually decreased from band 4 to 7; although, in band 8 they again increased but slightly. Therefore, it is inferred that first, complex grammatical constructions are mostly employed by higher proficient candidates of IELTS and generally band levels higher than 4 or 5, but there has not been observed a regular and fixed up and down changes in error rates with some higher bands as bands 6 to 8. Second, the error rate increases with higher band descriptors since the usage of these compound structures rises. Third and most important of all, it is concluded that more efforts using complex syntactical forms enhance the rating score of IELTS band descriptors.

Annie Brown in her study expresses that "complex structures are attempted but these are limited in range, nearly always contain errors and may lead to the need for reformulation". (Brown, 2002) Furthermore, other factors such as fluency, lexicology, and delayed speech are also involved in scoring the speaking part of IELTS test. On the other hand, it is well known that "grammar is central to language description and a construct validation of language tests consistently identifies grammar as a significant factor in differentiating between score levels and characterizing overall proficiency" (Rimmer, 2006). As a result, more proficient candidates should take into account that using subordinate structures would increase their band scores even if they contain grammatical errors. Some IELTS expertise believe that there is an intertwining bound between grammatical range and accuracy; however, the fourth important point this paper suggests is that using grammatical complexity outweighs grammatical accuracy on the scale and that intertwining relationship between the two criteria has to be unbounded. Most of the analyzed studies in the present paper suggest that using relative clauses and passives have more significant impact on scoring grammatical range in IELTS speaking test than the other two structures.

V. Conclusion

To conclude, the objective of this study was to show that "grammar lies at the heart of language, and consequently language testing" as Rimmer suggests, (Rimmer, 2006). Thus, the correlation between employing grammatical range/complexity and band descriptors has been analyzed here. As a result, this research tried to express that candidates who attempt using more complex subordinate structures, obtain a higher band score; even though their complex syntactical constructions contain some errors. Furthermore, the four type of subordinate structures are employed mostly by higher proficient test-takers from bands 4 and

up. As many linguists believe, there is an intertwining relation between grammatical accuracy and grammatical range and both of these language bases are required to be used together in order to produce correct and communicative discourses. However, here it is explained that there is a discrepancy between these two linguistic elements and complexity outweighs accurate and error free constructions.

Future studies could be designed to analyze and discuss the other types of complex syntactical structures and their relation with grammatical accuracy through qualitative or quantitative methods in different sections of IELTS test and specifically the speaking section.

A remedial approach could also be planned in ESL classrooms to improve IELTS students' ability to employ complex structures correctly and accurately through some good free-practice or controlled-practice activities in pairs or in groups.

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APPENDICES

TABLE 2. ERROR RATES FOR RELATIVE CLAUSES

Transcript	Band 4		Band 5		Band 6		Band 7		Band 8	
	No. of errors/ No. of OCs	Error rate (%)								
1	0/1	0	0/1	0	0/15	0	0/6	0	0/13	0
2	0/1	0	0/2	0	1/6	16.7	0/4	0	0/15	0
3	0/1	0	2/9	22.2	1/2	50	0/4	0	0/10	0
4	2/3	67	2/2	100	0/5	0	0/7	0	0/14	0
5	NC	NC	0/2	0	0/3	0	0/8	0	1/20	5
6	0/1	0	0/4	0	0/6	0	1/11	9	0/10	0
7	NC	NC	0/7	0	0/5	0	0/27	0	1/21	4.8
8	0/1	0	0/9	0	0/6	0	0/20	0	1/4	25
9	1/3	33.3	3/6	50	0/4	0	0/19	0	1/20	5
10	1/1	100	0/6	0	0/2	0	2/19	10.5	0/13	0
11	1/1	100	0/2	0	1/9	11.1	1/8	12.5	0/23	0
12	1/1	100	3/3	100	0/15	0	0/13	0	1/14	7.1
13	NC	NC	0/5	0	1/5	20	0/23	0	1/6	16.7
14	0/3	0	0/1	0	0/1	0	0/16	0	0/6	0
15	0/2	0	1/2	50	0/2	0				
Total	6/19	31.6%	11/61	18%	4/86	4.7%	4/185	2.2%	6/189	3.2%

TABLE 3. ERROR RATES FOR INDIRECT QUESTIONS

Transcript	Band 4		Band 5		Band 6		Band 7		Band 8	
	No. of errors/ No. of OCs	Error rate (%)								
1	2/2	100	NC		NC		NC		0/1	0
2	NC									
3	NC		NC		NC		0/1	0	0/4	0
4	NC		0/4	0	NC		NC		NC	
5	NC		NC		0/3	0	NC		0/1	0
6	NC		NC		NC		0/2	0	NC	
7	NC		0/1	0	0/5	0	1/4	25	NC	
8	1/1	100	NC		NC		1/2	50	0/8	0
9	NC		1/1	100	NC		NC		0/2	0
10	0/1	0	NC		NC		NC		1/4	25
11	NC		3/3	100	0/2	0	2/2	100	0/1	0
12	NC									
13	NC		NC		NC		0/1	0	0/1	0
14	NC		0/1	0	NC		NC		0/8	0
15	NC		NC		NC					
Total	3/4	75%	4/10	40%	0/10	0%	4/12	33.3%	1/30	3.3%

TABLE 4. ERROR RATES FOR THE PASSIVE

Transcript	Ban	d 4	Band 5		Ban	d 6	Ban	d 7	Ban	d 8
	No. of errors/ No. of OCs	Error rate (%)								
1	NC		NC		NC		1/2	50	0/16	0
2	NC		NC		NC		1/7	14.3	NC	
3	NC		NC		0/1	0	0/3	0	NC	
4	NC		NC		NC		1/3	33.3	0/13	0
5	NC		NC		0/1	0	NC		0/8	0
6	NC		NC		NC		1/9	11.1	0/5	0
7	NC		NC		NC		0/11	0	0/7	0
8	NC		0/3	0	NC		2/6	33.3	0/1	0
9	NC		NC		NC		0/4	0	0/2	0
10	NC		NC		NC		0/11	0	0/4	0
11	NC		NC		0/5	0	0/4	0	1/10	10
12	NC		NC		NC		0/7	0	0/3	0
13	NC		0/1	0	NC		NC		NC	
14	0/1	0	NC		NC		0/7	0	NC	
15	NC		NC		NC					
Total	0/1	0%	0/4	0%	0/7	0%	6/74	8.1%	1/69	1.4%

TABLE 5. CONDITIONAL STRUCTURES IN ALL BAND LEVELS

Transcript	Bai	nd 4	Bar	nd 5	Bai	nd 6	Baı	nd 7	Band 8		
	No. of errors/ No. of OCs		No. of errors/ No. of OCs			No. of errors/ No. of OCs		No. of errors/ No. of OCs		No. of errors/ No. of OCs	
1	N	1C	0	/4	0	/3	0	/5	0,	/8	
2	0/2		1/2		0/2		0/6		0/3		
3	0)/3	1	/5	1	/4	0	/1	0.	/3	
4	0)/1	1	/5	0/	10	2	/4	1.	/2	
5	N	1C	0	/4	4	/9	0	/2	0.	/2	
6	0)/5	0	/1	0	/7	0	/2	N	С	
7	0)/1	1	/9	0	/1	0	/2	0.	6	
8	N	NC		0/2		1/6		1/2		0/1	
9	0	0/2		NC		2/5		1/1		NC	
10	0)/3	0/3		0/3		1/1		0/2		
11	N	1C	1/8		0/2		2/2		0/2		
12	0	1/6	0/1		0/3		1/1		0/5		
13	0	1/6	0	/4	0	/5	0	/5	0.	1	
14	0)/6	0/1		0/6		2/2		0/2		
15	0)/1	N	C	0	/9					
Total no. of first conditional errors	0/34		2/45		4/70		2/28		0/36		
Total no. of second conditional errors	0/2		3/4		4/5		8/8		1/2		
Total no. of conditional errors	0/36	0%	5/49	10.2%	8/75	10.7%	10/36	27.8%	1/37	2.7%	