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INVESTIGATING CHALLENGES IN TOEFL IBT INTEGRATED SPEAKING: EVIDENCE FROM HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAM STUDENTS AT PTIT, VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Integrated Speaking in the TOEFL iBT exam presents significant cognitive and linguistic demands as it requires test-takers to synthesize information from multiple input modalities (reading and listening) before producing an oral response. This study investigates the primary subjective and objective challenges faced by non-English major students enrolled in the High-Quality (HQ) program at the Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology (PTIT), Vietnam, where the English curriculum is benchmarked against the TOEFL iBT standard. Data were gathered through a mixed-methods approach involving a quantitative survey ($N = 120$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 12$) with students working at the B1 CEFR proficiency level. Findings reveal three dominant categories of difficulty: linguistic limitations (insufficient vocabulary and limited listening synthesis), lack of systematic instruction in speaking strategies, and affective barriers (low self-efficacy and anxiety). Based on these empirical insights, targeted pedagogical solutions are proposed, including structured note-taking frameworks, integrated skills scaffolding, and strategy-based instruction to enhance student performance.

Keywords: TOEFL iBT, Integrated Speaking, Tertiary Education, High-Quality Program, Language Challenges, Pedagogical Solutions, PTIT.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent years, higher education institutions in Vietnam have increasingly adopted international standardized tests to benchmark the English language proficiency of their graduates. At the Posts and Telecommunications Institute of Technology (PTIT), the High-Quality (HQ) tertiary program integrates TOEFL iBT training into its core curriculum to enhance students' academic mobility and global competitiveness. Among the four macro-skills, the Speaking section of the TOEFL iBT—specifically the Integrated Speaking tasks—remains a major hurdle for non-English major engineering and technology students.

Unlike Independent Speaking tasks, which require test-takers to express personal opinions on familiar topics, Integrated Speaking requires test-takers to read a short academic passage, listen to a related lecture or conversation, synthesize the key information, and deliver a coherent spoken response within tight time constraints (45 to 60 seconds) (ETS, 2023). This multi-modal processing imposes a heavy cognitive load on learners (Bae & Bachman, 2010).

While existing literature has extensively examined generic speaking anxiety and language barriers among Vietnamese EFL learners (Nguyen & Tran, 2019; Le, 2020), empirical research focusing specifically on Integrated Speaking challenges within specialized institutional contexts like PTIT remains limited. Most HQ students at PTIT enter the program with an intermediate proficiency level (CEFR B1 or equivalent) and lack systematic, formal training in academic speaking prior to university. Consequently, they experience heightened cognitive overload, affective distress, and strategic confusion when handling integrated tasks.

This study addresses this empirical gap by answering two central research questions:

- What are the primary subjective and objective challenges experienced by PTIT High-Quality program students in TOEFL iBT Integrated Speaking tasks?
- What pedagogical solutions can be implemented to systematically address these challenges within the university context?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Nature of TOEFL iBT Integrated Speaking

Integrated speaking assessment is grounded in communicative language testing theory, which posits that real-world academic communication rarely occurs in isolation (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Task completion relies heavily on the interrelationship between receptive skills (reading and listening comprehension) and productive skills (oral delivery). According to Cumming (2014), integrated tasks provide higher construct validity because they simulate authentic academic tasks such as summarizing lectures or synthesizing course materials. However, Frost et al. (2020) emphasize that performance on integrated tasks is heavily moderated by the test-taker's listening capacity and note-taking efficiency.

2.2 Constructive and Affective Challenges in EFL Contexts

Research on non-native English speakers reveals that performance breakdowns in integrated speaking stem from both cognitive-linguistic factors and affective variables:

- **Linguistic and Cognitive Processing:** Learners at the CEFR B1 level often struggle with rapid auditory processing and online information extraction (Sawaki et al., 2013). When required to read and listen simultaneously, working memory capacity becomes saturated, leaving insufficient cognitive resources for linguistic encoding and articulation (Sweller, 2011).
- **Strategic Competence:** Canale and Swain (1980) highlight strategic competence—the ability to compensate for breakdown in communication—as crucial for task completion. Many EFL learners lack explicit strategies for structural scaffolding, note-taking, and time management (Macaro, 2006).
- **Affective Factors:** Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (FLSA) significantly hinders oral production (Horwitz et al., 1986). Low self-efficacy and fear of negative evaluation often cause speech hesitation, prolonged pauses, and task avoidance during timed test environments (Pajares, 2002).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Context and Participants

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. The target population comprised $N = 120$ second-year students enrolled in the High-Quality program at PTIT, Hanoi campus. All participants were majoring in non-English disciplines (Information Technology, Electronics & Telecommunications, Business Administration) and were taking a compulsory TOEFL iBT preparation course. The participants' baseline English proficiency was predominantly at the B1 level based on institutional diagnostic tests.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

- **Quantitative Survey:** A 25-item questionnaire scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) was administered to all 120 participants. The questionnaire was structured into three main dimensions: (A) Linguistic & Cognitive Difficulties, (B) Strategic & Instructional Gaps, and (C) Affective & Motivational Barriers. Internal consistency was robust ($\alpha = 0.88$).
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Follow-up interviews were conducted with $n = 12$ randomly selected students to gather qualitative insights into their specific test-taking experiences and perceived learning obstacles.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using SPSS (v.26) to generate descriptive statistics (Means, Standard Deviations). Qualitative interview data were transcribed and categorized using thematic analysis (Brauner & Clarke, 2006).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Quantitative Findings

The descriptive statistics derived from the survey ($N = 120$) highlight significant challenges across all three investigated dimensions.

Table 1: Quantitative Findings

Dimension	Survey Item / Construct	Mean (M)	SD	Key Indicator
A. Linguistic & Cognitive	Difficulty synthesizing listening and reading content under time pressure	4.35	0.68	High cognitive overload
	Insufficient academic vocabulary to paraphrase source texts	4.18	0.72	Over-reliance on verbatim copying
B. Strategic & Pedagogical	Lack of prior systematic training in formal academic speaking	4.42	0.61	Instructional gap in secondary school
	Inability to take organized, usable notes while listening	4.12	0.79	Weak note-taking strategy
C. Affective & Motivational	Anxiety due to the 15-30 second preparation time limit	4.51	0.55	Severe time-induced speaking anxiety
	Low self-confidence in oral fluency and pronunciation	4.05	0.83	Low self-efficacy

Note: Scale ranges from 1.00 (Lowest difficulty) to 5.00 (Highest difficulty).

4.2 Qualitative Discussion of Main Challenges

4.2.1 Challenge 1: Baseline Linguistic Deficits and Cognitive Overload

Interview responses confirmed that the B1 level baseline acts as a major bottleneck. Students reported that processing high-density academic lectures while attempting to retain key details overwhelms their cognitive processing capacity. As Participant S04 noted:

"I spend so much effort trying to catch the main idea of the audio that I don't have enough time to plan what to say. When the timer starts, my mind goes blank."

This aligns with Sweller's (2011) Cognitive Load Theory; when input processing consumes all available working memory, output generation degrades rapidly. Furthermore, due to limited vocabulary, students frequently resort to reading aloud exact phrases from the stimulus text, leading to severe point deductions in delivery and topic development.

4.2.2 Challenge 2: Absence of Systematic Speaking Strategy Instruction

The vast majority of participants (85%) had received traditional high school English instruction focused primarily on grammar and reading comprehension. Consequently, they lack foundational speaking mechanics—such as discourse markers, stress-timed rhythm, and cohesive devices. More importantly, students demonstrate poor note-taking strategies during the listening phase of integrated tasks. Notes are often unstructured, fragmented, or missing key conceptual links, making them unhelpful during the 15-to-30-second preparation phase.

4.2.3 Challenge 3: Affective Barriers and Lack of Targeted Motivation

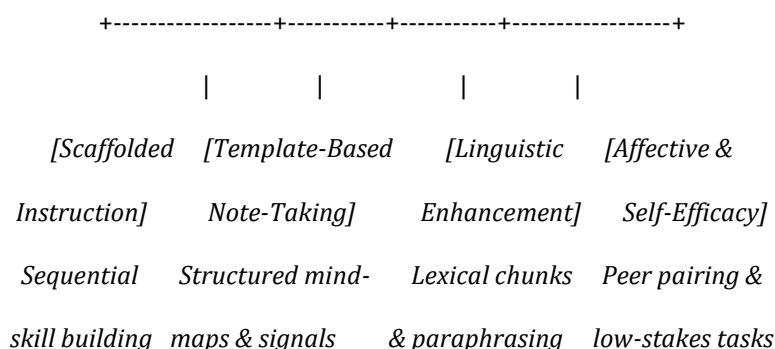
The strict countdown timer of the TOEFL iBT environment intensifies Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). Students reported high levels of panic during the 15-second preparation window for Task 2/Task 3. This

anxiety breeds a self-reinforcing cycle of low self-efficacy: repeated failures during practice sessions diminish motivation, leading to passive classroom participation and avoidance of speaking practice.

5 PROPOSED PEDAGOGICAL SOLUTIONS FOR PTIT HIGH-QUALITY PROGRAM

To mitigate these challenges, a multi-tiered pedagogical framework tailored for PTIT's institutional context is proposed.

FOUR-PILLAR PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION FRAMEWORK



5.1 Solution 1: Implement Explicit Note-Taking and Template Scaffolding

- **Matrix Note-Taking:** Teachers should introduce structured note-taking frameworks (e.g., two-column grids separating *Reading Key Point* vs. *Listening Counter-Argument*).
- **Standardized Speech Templates:** Provide students at the B1 level with transitional formulas and functional language templates (e.g., "*According to the reading passage..., however, the professor in the lecture argues that...*"). This reduces online cognitive planning load and allows students to focus on content delivery and fluency.

5.2 Solution 2: Skill-Integrating and Vocabulary Scaffolding Activities

- **Dictogloss and Summarization Exercises:** Before exposing students to full-length TOEFL practice sets, instructors should utilize short dictogloss tasks to train listening synthesis and rapid paraphrase generation.
- **Lexical Chunking:** Instead of isolated word lists, instruction should focus on academic collocations and signal words (e.g., "*on the contrary*", "*illustrates the concept of*"), enabling students to construct coherent sentences rapidly.

5.3 Solution 3: Constructing a Low-Anxiety, High-Efficacy Learning Environment

- **Micro-Speaking and Gradual Timing:** Initially relax the official 15-second preparation constraint. Allow students 45 seconds to plan, gradually reducing preparation time over the semester as confidence increases.
- **Formative Peer Feedback:** Incorporate audio recording assignments via learning management systems (LMS). Peer and self-evaluation using simplified TOEFL iBT rubrics foster self-reflection, lower affective filters, and increase intrinsic motivation.

6 CONCLUSION

This study evaluated the multi-dimensional challenges encountered by non-English major students in the High-Quality program at PTIT when facing TOEFL iBT Integrated Speaking tasks. The empirical evidence demonstrates that poor performance is driven by a combination of baseline linguistic constraints (B1 level), lack of prior strategy training, and high speaking anxiety.

To bridge this gap, instructional design at PTIT must shift from passive test exposure to explicit, strategy-based pedagogical scaffolding. By equipping students with structured note-taking tools, functional discourse templates, and a progressive timing environment, institutions can enhance both student self-efficacy and performance in high-stakes international assessments. Future research should empirically measure the long-term effectiveness of the proposed intervention framework across multiple cohorts.

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