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### Discourse competence: A key to enhancing IELTS scores for Vietnamese students

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#### **ABSTRACT**

#### **Keywords**

*Discourse, Discourse Competence, IELTS Scores*

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*IELTS has been one of the most reliable and widely selected test formats worldwide. In Vietnam, this test has been increasingly popular and used as a criterion for university admission. For its increasing significance, the question about how to improve the test scores has attracted attention from the publicity, and there came an agreement that improvements in language competence or proficiency work. There have been thousands of books published and millions of websites created to provide hints, tactics, and strategies for potential test takers. In this paper, the researcher would like to present her study, which delved into the effects of developing discourse competence for IELTS test takers. Sixty university students were randomly chosen and divided into two groups: the control group and the experimental one. They participated in a 12-week action research project. A survey questionnaire was assigned to get their opinions about the teaching approach. Findings indicate that students in the experimental group got better overall IELTS scores than those in the control group. Writing and speaking tests scored higher than the reading and listening ones. Mastery of discourse features affected reading and listening task types at varying degrees. Most agreed that improvements in discourse competence enabled them to satisfy the marking criteria of the writing and speaking test papers. For receptive skills, which are reading and listening, recognizing discourse patterns empowered them to control the time better and increase the accuracy of their answers. However, there were disagreements about incorporating discourse components into the existing syllabus. The difference in student competence, learning time, and motivation did affect the effectiveness of this pedagogy.*

## **Introduction**

Discourse analysis and its applications have become more pervasive in different aspects of English education from pedagogic studies (McCarthy, 1991; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; Tran, 2014) to communication skills training courses (Bachman, 1990; Xaydarovna, 2021). Language practitioners have all acknowledged the close tie between discourse and language testing (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Iwashita & Vasquez, 2015; Shohamy, 1990); however, studies of discourse development competence on the performance of test takers, especially those who are taking IELTS tests are far from sufficient. This research, therefore, was set to look into the effect of incorporating discourse study in an IELTS-oriented class to examine how discourse competence development influenced the learners' language testing competence. The study attempted to clarify what discourse competence was, what components were obliged to be in a discourse-based syllabus, what might cause obstacles and what benefit the learners during the intervention, and how to incorporate a discourse knowledge funnel in an existing language program.

The selection of IELTS test takers as the sample was due to the reliability and validity of the test and the growing ubiquity of this exam worldwide and in Vietnam. The researcher expected that a deep insight into this field of study could empower her to work more on the relevance between discourse study and language testing, particularly some specific test papers such as IELTS, and engage her further in her didactic profession.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Definition of Discourse***

Broad as it is assumed (Stubbs, 1983, p.12; Tannen 1989, p.6-8), discourse has been examined from either a formalist viewpoint as a stretch of coherent language units larger than a sentence (Crystal, 1992, p.25; Harris, 1952, p.7; Partridge, 2006, p.1; Stubbs, 1983, p.1) or a functional approach as "language in use" (Brown & Yule, 1983, p.1; Cook, 1989, p.6; Gee, 2011, p.16; van Dijk, 1997, p.2). Central to his research findings, Harris (1952), the first linguist who referred to discourse analysis, proposed that discourse is the next level of linguistic constituents above sentence. He focused on the structural attributes of discourse and used them as a key point to distinguish discourse from a random sequence of sentences. Following the same approach to defining discourse, van Dijk (1985, p.4) stated that "structural descriptions characterize discourse at several levels or dimensions of analysis and in terms of many different units, categories, schematic patterns, or relations."

Functionally, Fasold (1990, p.65) defined discourse analysis as the study of any aspect of language use, different from a cluster of sentences, which are linguistic constituents isolated from the context of communication. Brown and Yule (1983, p.1) proposed discourse analysis should not be "restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent [...] from the functions which these forms base on to serve human affairs." This viewpoint is in line with van Dijk (1997, p.2), who views discourse not only as "the form of language use" but "what ideas promulgated by it" and Flowerdew (2013, p.16) who considers discourse either "language in its context of use and above the level of sentence" or "ideas and how they are articulated."

## *Discourse Competence*

### *Discourse competence and its components*

As discourse is defined as a stretch of language larger than a sentence, discourse competence is, accordingly, interpreted as the ability to put different units, say, words, phrases, and sentences, into a well-formed, well-connected, and comprehensible text (Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, 2008). Viewing discourse competence in the same way, Brown (2000) called it "the ability to connect sentences and create a meaningful statement" (ibid, p.196), and Nordquist (2020) resting it on the ability to know how utterances form well-formed and meaningful conversations. This definition was found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages issued in 2001, in which discourse competence is the ability to "sequentially arrange sentences to produce coherent and cohesive linguistic units." This framework places a high value on cohesion and coherence, two of the core values of discourse analysis, and other components such as thematic organization, logical ordering, style, and register.

By directing discourse competence to the "mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres," Canale (1983, p.7) stated that communicative competence is inherent to (1) *grammatical competence*, which includes knowledge of the lexicon, syntax, and semantics; (2) *sociolinguistic competence*, concerned with the appropriateness of communication depending on the context including the participants and the rules for interaction; (3) *strategic competence*, a set of strategies devised for effective communication and put into use when communication breaks down (grammatical and sociolinguistic strategies), and (4) *discourse competence*, or how utterances are arranged and made into a meaningful communication unit. Sharing this approach, Bachman (1990) broke communicative competence down into (1) *organizational competence*, or the ability to use vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology; (2) *textual competence* that entails cohesion and rhetorical organization; (3) *pragmatic competence* including functional aspects of language; and finally (4) *sociolinguistic competence* showing dissimilarities in dialect, register, and cultural references.

Functionally, Savignon (1983) interpreted discourse competence as a constitutive component of communicative competence. In other words, it is "the ability to use language in a social context" or a dynamic process that realizes speaker performance in real-life situations. Davies et al. (1999) defined discourse competence as a constitutive component of language communicative competence responsible for the coherence and cohesion of the text". This is also the viewpoint of Xaydarovna (2021).

As such, discourse competence should be perceived as either the ability to analyze discourse as a stretch of coherent language units or the realization of contextualized language use, or both. However, what constructs discourse competence is truly a matter of concern as the mastership of this may enable language users to develop their communicative skills. Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) listed a number of constituents that a learner needs to master for his competence development (Table 1).

**Table 1***Components of Discourse Competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995, p.14)*

<b>Cohesion</b>
Reference (anaphora, cataphora)
Substitution/Ellipsis
Conjunction
Lexical chain (related to content schemata), parallel structure
<b>Deixis</b>
Personal pronouns
Spatial (here, there, this, that)
Temporal (now, then, before, after)
Discourse/textual (the following chart; the example above)
<b>Coherence</b>
Thematisation and staging (theme-theme development)
Management of old and new information
Prepositional structures and their organizational sequences (temporal, spatial, cause-effect, condition-result, etc.)
Temporal continuity/shift (sequence of tenses)
<b>Genre/Generic structures</b>
Narrative, interview, service encounter, research report, sermon, etc.
<b>Conversational structures</b>
<i>(inherent to the turn-taking system in conversation but may extend to a variety of oral genres)</i>
How to perform openings & reopenings
Topic establishment and change
How to hold and relinquish the floor
How to interrupt
How to collaborate and backchannel
How to do pre-closings and closings
Adjacency pairs (related to actional competence), first and second pair parts (knowing preferred and dispreferred responses)

McCarthy (1991) insisted on the inherence of discourse analysis to other branches of linguistic studies, namely, *phonology* which includes pronunciation, rhythm, stress, tone, and intonational units; *vocabulary* which highlights lexical cohesion and competence, register, and modality; *grammar* with grammatical cohesion and textuality, theme-rheme structure, and tense and aspect being the cores; *spoken language* where the principle of Conversation Analysis is presented and discussed at large; and finally *written language* with the analysis of text types, clause relations, discourse patterns, and culture schemata highlighted. Brown and Yule (1983) did not go much beyond the previously discussed issues in discourse study, working on the discourse basics with coherence, staging and discourse structure (theme-rheme), context and co-text, and reference. Their work also specified the significance of information structure where given and new information is recognized based on syntactic, phonological, and psychological analysis.

Regarding the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), in the updated version of its band score descriptor issued by the British Council in May 2023, discourse competence is shown via the requirement of coherence and cohesion, the relevance of content in task achievement criteria, flexibility and accuracy of vocabulary in use, and wide range of syntactic structures in both writing and speaking tests. Looking at the two receptive skills, which are reading and listening, the communicative activities are manifested in the discourse-to-discourse cycle, for example, reading for information, reading and following instructions,

reading for general orientation, listening to a conversation, listening to a lecture, and listening to a public announcement. The question types designed for these two tests require good reading and listening skills and much of their discourse competence, manifested via reference, ellipsis and substitution, lexical and grammatical cohesion, discourse markers, inferring, identifying cues, etc.

Jaroszek (2008), who adhered to the functional approach to language teaching, suggested a range of factors determining the development of discourse competence, of which grammatical cohesive devices, i.e., modality, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunctions of different types, and lexical cohesive devices which are re-lexicalization and reiteration are the two main ones.

### **The Importance of Discourse Competence Development**

Widdowson (1978) sees language teaching as an exercise of scaffolding from one type of discourse to another. He puts forward the discourse-to-discourse scheme that has exerted some influence on the framework provided by the Council of Europe with text-to-text suggested activities in education. Canale and Swain (1980) split communicative competence into grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence, believing that cultivating discourse competence in learners may improve their communication ability. This is also the viewpoint of Sáez and Martín (2005), who acknowledged discourse competence as a part of communicative competence, and thus language practitioners are required to know “which types of discourse are relevant for the language classroom” and “they need to find out what sort of communicative tasks their learners will be involved with” (ibid, p.539).

The significance of discourse competence teaching has long been well-documented. Studies show that discourse markers have been used at different frequencies and appropriacy (Fung & Carter, 2007; Geva, 1992) and have affected the understanding of non-native speakers (Tyler, 1992). More recently, Thomson (2022) agreed that constructing L2 classroom discourse conducive to language learning could build a specific competence for language teachers. For EFL teachers, the cultivation of discourse competence for learners is pivotal because this competence is closely associated with “the integration of the four skills in language teaching” (Sáez & Martín, 2005), the betterment of speaking skills in an L2 class (Hai Ha & Uyen, 2021) or development of communicative skills (Laşcu, 2023). Pan (2021), who defined discourse competence as the capability of students to comprehend and generate texts in four language skills called listening, speaking, reading, and writing, affirmed that teaching students discourse features meant empowering them to generate knowledge, abilities, and attitudinal behaviors in language use. Laşcu (2023) stated in more detail that discourse competence “contributes to the text construction and interpretation” (ibid, p.359); therefore, the mastery of this practice can be considered effective for students to overcome challenges in constructing texts and discourses. Going further into specific language skills, Matiso and Tyantsi (2023) expounded that writing skills could improve provided that the students knew “how to structure a text and connect ideas to generate a coherent piece of writing” (ibid, p.429), while Abdijalilovna (2019) acknowledged the development of students’ discursive competence braiding genre competence, text competence, and social competence in enhancing students’ writing skills. Hellerman and Vergen (2007) suggested that the cultivation of discourse competence in

learners, especially the instruction of discourse markers showed them how to structure a text more effectively, while Lee (2002) claimed that students would be better aware of the coherence of their writing papers if this attribute was elaborated earlier.

Iwashita and Vasquez (2015) investigated the impacts of discourse competence by examining three cohesive devices, namely conjunctions, reference, and lexical cohesion, and two aspects of coherence which are generic structure and theme-rheme organization. They suggested that students be aware of the major discourse features before taking IELTS tests as this enabled them to outperform in the IELTS speaking part 2.

### **IELTS Test Evaluation Descriptors**

For the two productive skills, writing and speaking, the band score descriptor table is presented with four marking criteria each. While writing is assessed based on the requirement of task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resource, and grammatical range and accuracy, speaking is evaluated somewhat differently by looking into pronunciation instead of task fulfilment. The band scores range from 1 to 9.

Test-takers who get maximum speaking band scores can speak fluently without self-correction and hesitation, use cohesive devices accurately, and develop their topics fully and appropriately. Moreover, they should be able to use vocabulary with ultimate flexibility and precision in all the topics given and apply idiomatic language in communication naturally and accurately. These students manifest the natural and appropriate use of a full range of grammatical structures and can produce consistently accurate structures apart from the 'slips' characteristic of native speaker speech. Their speaking is evaluated via a full range of pronunciation features with precision and subtlety, flexible use of these features, and their complete comprehensibility.

Concerning the writing tests, they will be considered satisfactorily fulfilled if the test takers manifest the skills of paragraphing, accurate use of cohesive devices, the ability to produce meaning and well-connected sentences and paragraphs, and the capability to utilize a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Turning to the receptive skills, although the requirement of discourse features' mastery to propel students' performance is not as visible as the productive ones, it is evident that understanding how reading texts and listening discourses are constructed enables learners to make major strikes in their achievements.

### ***Matching the schemata of discourse competence development with IELTS test papers***

Studying IELTS test papers reveals that the knowledge of discourse competence is beneficial for the test takers to fulfill their tasks. Banerjee et al. (2004) investigated students' writing capability through such features as cohesive devices, levels of lexical richness, syntactic complexity, and grammatical accuracy, Iwashita and Vasquez (2015) scrutinized three cohesive devices, which are conjunctions, reference, and lexical cohesion and two features of coherence. Within this paper, the schema of discourse competence development for students

was established by looking into the existing theories, and what is described in the IELTS descriptor table, proposing the following constituent features of discourse cultivated for students to boost their IELTS score. The incorporation of discourse study into the existing syllabus; however, was done via the simplification of relevant concepts. Here below is the paradigm adapted from McCarthy (1991) and Brown and Yule (1983).

**Table 2**

*Didactic Schema of Discourse Competence in an IELTS Oriented Course* (adapted from McCarthy, 1991 and Brown and Yule, 1983)

<b>Discourse and Grammar</b>
Grammatical cohesion and textuality
<i>Reference</i>
<i>Ellipsis and substitution</i>
<i>Conjunctions</i>
Theme and Rheme
Tense and aspect
<b>Discourse and Vocabulary</b>
Lexical cohesion
<i>Synonyms</i>
<i>Antonyms</i>
<i>Collocations</i>
<i>Lexical reiterations</i>
Vocabulary and the organizing of text
Modality
<b>Discourse and Phonology</b>
Pronunciation
Rhythm
Word stress and prominence
The placing of prominence
Intonational units
Tones and their meanings
<b>Coherence</b>
Information structure
Linearization problem
Sequencing
Top-down and bottom up processing
Background knowledge
Inferences
<b>Conversion Analysis</b>
Speech Acts
Turns and turn-taking
Adjacency pairs
Transactions
Interactions
Discourse markers

Preparing students for these discourse constituent features is expected to help them outperform in all four tested skills with emphasis on coherence and cohesion, grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, and interactions.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Questions***

This study addresses these two questions:

**RQ1:** To what extent does the development of discourse competence improve students' IELTS scores?

**RQ2:** What are students' attitudes towards the incorporation of discourse analysis in IELTS oriented courses?

### ***An Action Research Project***

The incorporation of discourse analysis in IELTS-oriented courses was carried out in 12 weeks at a university in the north of Vietnam with the participation of 60 students. The sampled population was divided into the control and the experimental one. This action project aimed to evaluate the effect of discourse competence development on student performance. These students are going to take a test in three to five months. The project was the intervention of a discourse-based learning program, which involved the iterations of planning, implementation, and assessment, as proposed in the action research model of Burns (2010). This four-stage procedure included planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. For the planning stage, the researcher evaluated and selected the paradigm for the fundamental discourse components. The intervention stage, or acting, was carried out by adapting the six-step procedure proposed by Papandreou (1994) in which the preparation step required students to learn the basics of discourse analysis, planning got them ready for IELTS classes, research allowed the students to show their engagement in the IELTS preparation lessons, conclusion and presentation meant these students share their experience working with IELTS tasks with or without the incorporation of discourse analysis in class, and evaluation refers to the teacher's correction and feedbacks.

The research tools are tests, a survey questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview. A pre-test and a post-test were applied before and after the intervention to assess students' performance and for both groups of participants. The test design adapted the ones provided by the Cambridge ESOL Examination Board to warrant the requirements of validity and reliability. The second instrument is a survey questionnaire entailing 30 statements broken down into two main sections, aiming to evaluate students' opinions about incorporating discourse study in the formal pedagogical program, as shown in Table 3. It was delivered to only the experimental group. It used the Likert scale to evaluate student perception levels, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

**Table 3***The Development of Discourse Competence and IELTS Test-Takers' Performance*

<b>PROS</b>	
<b>Discourse and Speaking</b>	
Q1	Understanding discourse features enables me to speak fluently.
Q2	Understanding linearization problems and sequencing supports my developing the speaking topics effectively.
Q3	Using grammatical cohesive devices allows me to create well-connected and meaningful talks.
Q4	Being aware of the significance of lexical cohesive devices strengthens my speaking performance.
Q5	Realizing the correct use of phonological features in a discourse genre enhances my speaking ability.
<b>Discourse and Writing</b>	
Q6	Recognizing the factors contributing to coherence in a discourse secures my production of well-communicated and relevant ideas for my papers.
Q7	Being cognizant of discourse features empowers me to construct a writing paper with flexibility and comprehensibility.
Q8	Using grammatical cohesive devices accurately improves my writing scores.
Q9	Applying different constituents of lexical cohesive devices such as synonyms, antonyms, collocations, and lexical reiterations to my writing paper proves beneficial.
Q10	Comprehending the working principle of theme-rheme or new-given information structure assists my generation of a well-connected writing paper.
<b>Discourse and Reading</b>	
Q11	Having an in-depth insight into grammatical and lexical cohesive devices facilitates my locating keywords in the reading tests.
Q12	Envisaging the use of synonyms or antonyms in a reading text speeds up my locating answers to the reading questions.
Q13	Developing the techniques of top-down and bottom-up processing, sequencing, and inferring eases my problem of reading comprehension.
Q14	Working with vocabulary and its importance in the organization of a text enhances my reading comprehension.
Q15	Identifying lexical reiterations facilitates my finding the main ideas.
<b>Discourse and Listening</b>	
Q16	Being familiar with cultural schemata enables me to grasp the gist more easily.
Q17	Knowing in advance the presence of turns and turn-taking, the adjacency pairs in interactions consolidates my self-confidence in a listening task.
Q18	Being well-informed about discourse markers betters my ability to keep track of the information flow in a conversation.
Q19	Understanding stress and prominence, intonational units, rhythm units, tone units, and their meanings aids my realization of the speakers' implied messages.
Q20	Equipping myself with the discourse properties of modality and shared background knowledge betters my answer prediction.
<b>CONS</b>	
Q21	Developing discourse competence is an easy task for me.
Q22	Absorbing theoretical concepts of discourse analysis is never a simple job.
Q23	Incorporating discourse study in the existing formal education program is impeded by the limited learning time

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Q24	Applying the knowledge of discourse study to solving the problem arisen in the completion of an IELTS test does not work when the test takers are pressed for time.
Q25	Designing a systematic and applicable didactic program about discourse study needs competent teachers.
Q26	Cultivating a good body of discourse features depends on my language competence.
Q27	Nurturing good understanding of discourse analysis among L2 students challenges students regardless of their learning motivation.
Q28	Explaining discourse patterns and properties is not specific enough.
Q29	Understanding the working mechanism of discourse in a speaking performance did not guarantee a good communicative competence of the test takers.
Q30	Implementing a discourse-based syllabus in my IELTS –oriented course lowers my scores.

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A semi-structured interview was conducted with the involvement of 5 participants. Two primary open-ended questions were used together with an additional or secondary request for explanations. The collected data were analyzed thematically.

- (1) To what extent does the development of discourse competence improve your IELTS test takers? Explain why?
- (2) What difficulties are involved in discourse competence development for IELTS test takers? Explain why?

Data triangulation enabled the researcher to gain a more accurate and valid understanding of the impacts of discourse competence development on IELTS test takers' performance.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### ***Discourse Competence Development and the Performance of IELTS Test-Takers***

As can be seen from the table, reading scores experienced the biggest increases with the control group gaining by about 1.2 and the experimental one achieving a higher rate of 1.7. Listening scores reported the second biggest rise of 1.0 for the former and 1.4 for the latter.

The two productive skills, writing and speaking, experienced less significant improvements in student performance. The writing results of the control group were around 0.9, while those of the experimental one were more or less than 1.4. A bigger disparity could be observed in the speaking test scores as the control and the experimental groups reported an upsurge of 0.7 and 1.4 in turn.

**Table 4***Paired Samples Statistics: The Relevance between the Pre-test and Post-test Scores*

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	C-PreR	4.367	30	.9820	.1793
	C-PostR	5.537	30	.8194	.1496
Pair 2	E-PreR	4.450	30	.9409	.1718
	E-PostR	6.183	30	.9421	.1720
Pair 3	C_PreW	4.317	30	.6363	.1162
	C-PostW	5.267	30	.4498	.0821
Pair 4	E-PreW	4.200	30	.6513	.1189
	E-PostW	5.667	30	.4420	.0807
Pair 5	C_PreL	4.917	30	.7202	.1315
	C_PostL	5.900	30	.7120	.1300
Pair 6	E-PreL	4.850	30	.7673	.1401
	E-PostL	6.117	30	.9531	.1740
Pair 7	C_PreS	4.817	30	.6757	.1234
	C-PostS	5.550	30	.6067	.1108
Pair 8	E-PreS	4.750	30	.6663	.1217
	E-PostS	6.000	30	.7878	.1438

A closer look at the statistics provided in Table 5, the paired samples test, the p-value was 0, and this indicates that the test results of all four skills of the control group and the experimental group were positively correlated. It also depicts the probability that the null hypothesis was correct and that the means of the two variables compared were equal. Another point worth mentioning is the difference between the pre-test results of the control and the experimental group. Without intervention, the test scores of the participants had also risen considerably. The mean scores of the reading, writing, listening, and speaking tests were -1.17, -0.95, -0.98, and -0.73 respectively, and these figures indicate considerable improvements in students' test scores. However, when we looked at the data of the experimental group, we realized that the students of this group had made bigger strikes. The biggest increase was -1.73 and this meant a rise of nearly two band scores. The smallest increase was seen in pair number 6 at -1.25.

**Table 5**  
*Paired Samples Test*

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Devia tion	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	C-PreR - C-PostR	-1.1700	.4450	.0812	-1.3362	-1.0038	-14.400	29	.000
Pair 2	E-PreR - E-PostR	-1.7333	.5040	.0920	-1.9215	-1.5451	-18.837	29	.000
Pair 3	C_PreW - C- PostW	-.9500	.4015	.0733	-1.0999	-.8001	-12.960	29	.000
Pair 4	E-PreW - E-PostW	-1.4667	.4901	.0895	-1.6497	-1.2836	-16.390	29	.000
Pair 5	C_PreL - C_PostL	-.9833	.4822	.0880	-1.1634	-.8033	-11.171	29	.000
Pair 6	E-PreL - E-PostL	-1.2667	.4866	.0888	-1.4484	-1.0850	-14.258	29	.000
Pair 7	C_PreS - C-PostS	-.7333	.4097	.0748	-.8863	-.5804	-9.805	29	.000
Pair 8	E-PreS - E-PostS	-1.2500	.5043	.0921	-1.4383	-1.0617	-13.577	29	.000

Despite the improvements in students' test scores, the p-value obtained by comparing the means of two participant groups with pair 1, pair 3, pair 5, and pair 7 (Table 6) indicates that the null hypothesis is less likely to be true. This fact rejects the assumption that the difference between similarly paired observations in the population is zero.

**Table 6**  
*Paired Samples Test*

			Paired Differences					T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
			Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
						Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	C-PreR - E-PreR	-	-.0833	.5584	.1019	-.2918	.1252	-.817	29	.420
Pair 2	C-PostR - E-PostR	-	-.6467	.5482	.1001	-.8514	-.4420	-6.461	29	.000
Pair 3	C_PreW - E-PreW	-	.1167	.4086	.0746	-.0359	.2692	1.564	29	.129
Pair 4	C-PostW - E-PostW	-	-.4000	.4235	.0773	-.5581	-.2419	-5.174	29	.000
Pair 5	C_PreL - E-PreL	-	.0667	.4498	.0821	-.1013	.2346	.812	29	.423
Pair 6	C_PostL - E-PostL	-	-.2167	.6114	.1116	-.4450	.0116	-1.941	29	.062
Pair 7	C_PreS - E-PreS	-	.0667	.4686	.0855	-.1083	.2416	.779	29	.442
Pair 8	C-PostS - E-PostS	-	-.4500	.6345	.1158	-.6869	-.2131	-3.885	29	.001

All in all, the test results strengthened the opinions shared by other researchers that better discourse competence improved student performance in English language learning (Thomson, 2022), especially this ability could exert positive impacts on one or all four language skills (Hai Ha & Uyen, 2021; Laşcu, 2023; Sáez & Martín, 2005). This fact was indicated through the significant rises in test scores of all four English skills of the experimental group compared with the control one, and this was also further justified by the qualitative data taken from the interview. Four out of five surveyed students admitted that discourse competence supported them to complete their test papers better as it helped them to read faster and write more coherently (student one and student two), speak longer (student three), and keep up with the conversations in the listening tests (student four).

Pairing the two variables in another way also reveals some interesting facts (as indicated in Table 7). Before the intervention, except for the reading tests in which the experimental group outperformed, the control group scored slightly higher in the other three skills. However, incorporating discourse in IELTS classes reversed the situation. Post-test results displayed student performance improvements in all four test papers with the most noticeable change observed in reading ( $M = -.6$ ) and the smallest gap in ( $M = -.2$ )

**Table 7**

*Paired Samples Statistics: Difference between the Control and Experimental Group*

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	C-PreR	4.367	30	.9820	.1793
	E-PreR	4.450	30	.9409	.1718
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Pair 3	C_PreW	4.317	30	.6363	.1162
	E-PreW	4.200	30	.6513	.1189
Pair 4	C-PostW	5.267	30	.4498	.0821
	E-PostW	5.667	30	.4420	.0807
Pair 5	C_PreL	4.917	30	.7202	.1315
	E-PreL	4.850	30	.7673	.1401
Pair 6	C_PostL	5.900	30	.7120	.1300
	E-PostL	6.117	30	.9531	.1740
Pair 7	C_PreS	4.817	30	.6757	.1234
	E-PreS	4.750	30	.6663	.1217
Pair 8	C-PostS	5.550	30	.6067	.1108
	E-PostS	6.000	30	.7878	.1438

### ***Test Takers' Attitudes towards the Incorporation of Discourse in their IELTS Oriented Classes***

Findings from the survey show that the surveyed students generally supported discourse study. Of the twenty statements asking for their opinions about the benefits of discourse competence development, ten received their agreement. For the speaking parts, the sampled population agreed that using grammatical cohesive devices supported them in creating well-connected and meaningful talks ( $M=4.27$ ;  $SD=0.49$ ) and enhanced my speaking performance ( $M=4.27$ ;  $SD=0.49$ ). There was little difference when it comes to writing skills as the students strongly agreed grammatical cohesive devices facilitated their writing ( $M=4.27$ ;  $SD=0.50$ ) and lexical cohesive devices such as synonyms, antonyms, collocations, and lexical reiterations improved

their writing scores ( $M=4.50$ ;  $SD=0.5$ ). As for reading skills, the students admitted that the ability to envisage the use of synonyms or antonyms in a reading text enabled them to locate the answers faster ( $M=4.2$ ;  $SD=0.56$ ). When they applied the techniques of top-down and bottom-up processing, sequencing, and inferences, they could better their reading comprehension ( $M=4$ ;  $SD=0.55$ ). What stands out from the table is the complete agreement of students about the positive impact of discourse competence development on their listening sections. They acknowledged that being familiar with cultural schemata enabled them to grasp the gist of a listening activity more easily ( $M=4.2$ ;  $SD=0.55$ ), knowing in advance the presence of turns and turn-taking, as well as adjacency pairs in interactions, consolidated their self-confidence in a listening task, and being well-informed about discourse markers bettered their keeping track of the information flow in a conversation ( $M=4.4$ ;  $SD=0.5$ ). Another point worth mentioning is the knowledge about modality and shared background knowledge bettered the prediction for listening answers.

The only thing the students did not agree with is the correlation between the understanding of phonological properties such as stress, prominence, intonational units, rhythm units, and tone and the enhanced capability to realize the implied messages in a conversation ( $M=2.32$ ;  $SD=0.57$ ).

**Table 8**

*The Benefits of Discourse Competence Development*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1	30	1	3	2.10	.607
Q2	30	3	5	4.00	.695
Q3	30	4	5	4.37	.490
Q4	30	4	5	4.27	.450
Q5	30	2	3	2.40	.498
Q6	30	2	4	3.03	.490
Q7	30	2	3	2.50	.509
Q8	30	4	5	4.27	.450
Q9	30	4	5	4.50	.509
Q10	30	2	4	2.93	.583
Q11	30	2	3	2.73	.450
Q12	30	3	5	4.23	.568
Q13	30	3	5	4.03	.556
Q14	30	1	3	2.23	.626
Q15	30	2	5	3.27	.785
Q16	30	3	5	4.20	.551
Q17	30	4	5	4.27	.450
Q18	30	4	5	4.43	.504
Q19	30	1	3	2.37	.556
Q20	30	3	5	4.07	.450

The survey results show that a majority of the participants agreed with the positive impacts of the intervention. They placed a high value on the role of coherence and cohesive devices in enhancing their test performance, as indicated by Davies et al. (1999) and Lee (2002), who highlighted the role of coherence in writing tests. The students, furthermore, supported the incorporation and its influence on the improvements of their language skills as discourse

competence is an integral part of communicative competence (same as Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Hai Ha & Uyen, 2021; Laşcu, 2023; Xaydarovna, 2021).

These findings coincided with the interview from which we realized that students appreciated the application of a discourse-based syllabus. They agreed that this knowledge funnel *was helpful* (student two), *constructive* (student five), *beneficial* (student one, student four), and *okay* (student three). The students admitted that their scores changed positively after the intervention (student one, student two, student four, and student five). They could be better aware of the presence of discourse properties in the reading texts (student two), the role of cohesive devices in improving the quality of the writing paper (student one, student four, and student five), the possibility of accelerating their reading, writing, and speaking performance if they are provided with the techniques of processing a text (student four and five), the ability to locate the listening answers by paying attention to discourse markers (all five students), and interpret the listening messages thanks to the realization of tone, rhythm, and intonational units (student two, student four).

**Table 9**  
*The Problems of Discourse Competence Development*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q21	30	1	4	2.10	.885
Q22	30	4	5	4.57	.504
Q23	30	3	5	4.30	.702
Q24	30	3	5	3.87	.434
Q25	30	4	5	4.70	.466
Q26	30	3	5	4.40	.675
Q27	30	3	4	3.33	.479
Q28	30	3	5	3.73	.583
Q29	30	4	5	4.23	.430
Q30	30	1	3	2.13	.571

Referring to the challenges caused by the implementation of a discourse-based syllabus, although most students agreed with the positive impacts of discourse competence development on their test performance, they did not share their opinions about the statement that the understanding of discourse features could help them speak fluently ( $M=2.1$ ;  $SD=0.62$ ). The standard deviation figures showed some disagreements between the surveyed population. Most did not believe in the possibility of developing fluent speaking owing to the intervention. Another noted feature is students' admission that their reading comprehension could not be enhanced even when they realized the association between vocabulary use and the organization of text ( $M=2.2$ ;  $SD=0.62$ ).

Turning to the findings about student perception of the problems encountered by students, of ten statements provided, the participants did not show their consensus with two questions. The first is the difficulty of incorporating discourse study in the existing syllabus, and the second is the influence of time constraints on this task. The students did not agree that cultivating discourse competence is straightforward with a means equal to 2.1; however, what stands out is the significant difference in the opinions submitted with  $SD$  equal to 0.9. Added to this, they

rejected the statement that the implementation of a discourse-based syllabus in my IELTS-oriented course lowered their IELTS scores ( $M=2.1$ ;  $SD=6$ ).

Regarding other statements about the challenges of carrying out the discourse-based didactic program, there was a consensus in the sampled population. The extrinsic factors for these obstacles were time pressure and teacher competence, getting trivial agreements than the intrinsic ones. Test takers stated that limited learning time adversely affected the use of discourse knowledge to solve the problems arising in the tests and that incorporating the discourse-based syllabus under the condition of learning time constraints was problematic. The complexity of discourse patterns and theoretical concepts hindered the realization of this task, and the instructions, which were not specific enough, impeded student comprehension. The mean scores of these statements ranged from 4.3 to 4.57. Regarding the intrinsic factors, motivation and language competence were the two primary rationales wreaking havoc on student performance with the former having a stronger impact on the learners ( $M=4.4$ ) than the latter ( $M=3.3$ ).

These statistical findings aligned with the interviews' results because the participants did not have enough time to spend on this task (student one, student two, student four, and student five). They just wanted to focus on the IELTS mock tests and practice test papers (student three), so they were unwilling to learn discourse-related theories (student three). They said boosting vocabulary retention was problematic, let alone learning theoretical concepts in discourse study (student two, student three, and student five). The interviewees stated frankly that their teacher sometimes felt confused and failed to explain the discourse-related theories straightforwardly and effectively (student three and student four). The findings also suggested that good preparation for the incorporation was necessary, and instructions for specific features of discourse were preferred (Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

## **Conclusion**

This action project aimed to evaluate the effects of discourse competence development on IELTS test taker performance. The statistical findings showed considerable improvements in the test scores of all four skills, though at varying degrees. However, analyses of the survey questionnaire and the interview revealed some problems concerning the study of discourse analysis and learning in an IELTS-oriented course. First, the intervention is not an easy task to do because of time constraints. Generally, an IELTS-oriented class is a crammed course in which students study intensively and laboriously. Also, it is solely an extra-curricular commitment and thus cannot garner full attention from students. The division of efforts, brainpower, and time may impede student competence development. The program, if expected to be fruitful, should be well-prepared and integrated into the official English teaching curriculum at school. Second, theoretical concepts and numerous discourse paradigms are never simple for the novice. For those who aim to score low on an IELTS test, say 4.5 or 5, learning English basics is the optimal goal, so getting discourse knowledge is deemed trivial. This fact concerns researchers about when to apply this didactic intervention, what is selected, and who is the beneficiary. Third, the accomplishment of a pedagogical program depends primarily on the practitioners, both the givers and the takers, so for the intervention, teachers

should be the pioneer masters who are competent enough to deliver the course, attentive to address the arisen problems, and inspiring to captivate the students in a mundane course as such. However, this is still a concern, and a question awaits a satisfactory answer, as indicated by the sampled students in the survey and the interview.

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