# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# SPEAKING PRACTICE IN PRIVATE CLASSES FOR THE TOEFL iBT TEST: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

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## Abstract

This chapter presents a research study conducted at an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) one-to-one course focusing on speaking skills, in order to find out if the course met the students' learning needs and prepared them to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language–Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT). The study was grounded on the theoretical principles of teaching ESP, needs analysis, task-based teaching, and language assessment. The instruments for the data collection were: initial and final questionnaires; an audio recording of two speaking tasks on the first and last day of class; and the teacher-researcher's diaries at the end of every class containing the students' perceptions of their performance in class. The results revealed the students' satisfaction regarding the course methodology and material, as well as the students' perception of improvement in their speaking and writing skills. The students' narratives also indicated the importance of teacher-student interaction and praised the attention given by the teacher to their emotional aspects. The study contributes to the field of ESP and language assessment, and fills the research gap that exists in the teaching of speaking skills in private classes.

## Introduction

The increasing number of students seeking to study graduate courses in English speaking countries has led to an unprecedented demand for the Test of English as a Foreign Language–Internet-based Test (TOEFL iBT). Many universities in English-speaking countries require international

candidates to show proof of language proficiency through a minimum TOEFL iBT score.

The current literature on teaching and learning in private lessons in preparation for standardized language proficiency tests is greatly lacking. Although there is a wide range of books, academic papers, and courses in language schools aimed at preparing students for the TOEFL iBT, there is little research on the preparation of students in private lessons.

According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), private classes can be considered the purest form of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), because the need of each student determines their learning. Moreover, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) suggest that ESP should be considered an approach for language teaching, and they emphasize that the learning should be based on the students' needs. In other words, all the decisions as to the content and methods of teaching in an ESP course should be based on the students' needs.

This chapter presents the findings of a research study carried out in Sao Paulo, Brazil, with 17 students attending private preparatory classes for the TOEFL iBT proficiency test. The course was developed by the researcher and it was adapted and modified for each student.

# Background

## English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), ESP courses aim at helping students perform adequately in the target-situation, i.e., the situation in which they are going to use the language being learned. The main characteristics of this teaching approach are: the student's awareness of why he/she is learning the language and satisfying the student's needs for the language use in the new context. Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) consider ESP an approach. They claim that ESP should reflect teaching with a different methodology from those used in general English teaching. The greatest concern regarding ESP teaching should be the needs analysis and the preparation of students to communicate efficiently in tasks related to their studies or work (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). This view is also corroborated by Basturkmen (2010) who states that ESP teaching involves the discussion of the students' needs and the role these students will play in their working and studying environments. Basturkmen (2010) also emphasizes that ESP courses aim at teaching the language and communication abilities that specific groups of students will need to make themselves understood in working, studying and social

contexts. Therefore, ESP courses need to focus on teaching language and communicative abilities.

## Needs Analysis

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), a needs analysis should gauge the students' learning needs and not the teachers' teaching needs. For them, the difference between an ESP course and a general English course is not so much the nature of the need, but the awareness of such need. This is one of the most important aspects for ESP course design, which should be divided between the target-situation needs (what the student must do in the target-situation), that can be further subdivided into necessities, lacks and wants, and the student learning needs (what the student should do to learn).

Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) also consider needs analysis extremely important for ESP courses, as it allows for a much more focused course. They claim that needs analysis is the process to determine "what to do" and "how to do" a course (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998, p. 121).

The data collection for the needs analysis can be carried out through questionnaires, interviews, surveys, assessments and discussions. Long (2005, p. 19) states that "in changing times, educators are increasingly relying on their needs analysis results in order to develop new courses." But he also warns that the respondents are usually the very same students who are not always aware of what they will need in the target language (L2). One example is the international students who are preparing to attend graduate courses in English-speaking countries.

## Tasks in ESP

For Willis (1996), task-based teaching should: stimulate students to use the target language collaboratively and meaningfully; allow students to participate in a complete interaction and to use different communication strategies; and help students develop self-confidence to reach their communicative goals. Based on the consensus of several researchers and educators, Skehan (1998) suggested four criteria to define a task: (i) the meaning is essential; (ii) the focus is on the objective; (iii) the task product must be assessed, and (iv) there must be a relation to the real world. A similar concept was also proposed by Willis (1996), as for her, tasks are activities in which the target language is used by the learners with a communicative objective in order to reach a result. Willis (1996) highlights that task-based teaching should give the learners the freedom to

choose their linguistic form in order to reach an objective, that is, to convey their ideas. This way, language is used as a vehicle to reach the objectives of the task with emphasis on meaning and communication, not on correct production of linguistic forms.

Timing is an important aspect because one of the main characteristics of the TOEFL iBT is the limited time (few seconds) test-takers have to prepare the answers before carrying out the tasks. Willis (1996) mentions that learners must know how to start a task and how long they have to prepare and carry it out. Ellis (2003, p. 127) discusses the effects of planning, which he calls "strategic planning", in the learners' oral production during communicative tasks. He defines strategic planning as:

> "The process by which learners plan what they are going to say or write before commencing a task. Pre-task planning can attend to prepositional content, to the organization of information or to the choice of language. Strategic planning is also referred to as pre-task planning." (Ellis, 2005a, p. 50)

Based on Skehan (1998), Ellis (2003) recommends a set of criteria to determine the level of fluency, accuracy and complexity of foreign language production in communicative tasks (Table 13-1).

**Table 13-1: Classification of production variables in oral communication tasks (Adapted from Ellis, 2003, p. 117).**

| Aspects | Measures |
|---|---|
| Fluency | Number of words and syllables per minute<br>Number of pauses (one/two seconds or longer)<br>Number of repetitions and reformulations<br>Number of words per turn |
| Accuracy | Number of self-corrections<br>Percentage of error-free clauses<br>Use of verb tenses/articles/vocabulary/plurals/negatives<br>Ratio of definite and indefinite articles |
| Complexity | Number of turns per minute<br>Lexical richness<br>Amount of subordinate clauses<br>Frequency of use of prepositions and conjunctions |

Ellis (2005a) recommends that, when the learner has the opportunity to make use of the strategic planning before the task, his language production will be more fluent and show more complexity. Although there are many

studies about strategic planning in language laboratories and classrooms, Ellis highlights the need for more studies to verify the benefit of such planning in exam contexts. The effects of strategic planning in exam contexts can be a little different from those in classroom settings. Ellis (2005b) mentions that one reason might be that learners feel pressure in assessment contexts and the results might not be the expected ones. The preparation and adjustment to the restricted timing for answering the test tasks receives special attention in a preparatory ESP course.

## Tests and Assessments

Language assessments play an essential role in Applied Linguistics, operationalizing its theories and supplying researchers with data for their analysis of language use (Clapham, 2000). McNamara (2000) also discusses this issue, as language tests are of great importance to many people, working as gateways in key educational and employment moments. This is the case of the TOEFL iBT test, through which international students may or may not be accepted in English-speaking universities. Therefore, this is a high-stakes test as it is a pre-requisite for student admission in graduate studies. High-stakes exams require a long preparation because the result will be critical for the academic future of these learners.

Proficiency tests such as the TOEFL iBT or the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) are not based on a course content. Instead, they assess the adequacy of the students' language for future use in the target situation and their ability to attend academic courses delivered through the medium of English (Jordan, 1997).

The concept of washback (or backwash) is another very important aspect related to preparatory courses discussed by Scaramucci (2011), among many other scholars. She explains that the concept refers to how outside exams–especially high-stakes ones, such as college entrance exams and some language proficiency tests–can potentially have an impact on the teaching and learning process, the curriculum, material development and on the attitudes of students, teachers and the school involved in the exams. Washback in teaching and learning is undeniable and it is out of the control of test developers (Scaramucci, 2009).

This chapter looks at a preparatory course for the TOEFL iBT which was influenced by the test as it was developed taking into account the test constructs, how the test is applied, and above all, the students' needs. The aim of the research study was to investigate how this ESP course met the

learning needs of the students and prepared them to take the TOEFL iBT in a one-to-one class environment.

# The Study

This is a qualitative exploratory research study. The main research questions that guided the study were:

1.  What are the students' needs with regards to taking the TOEFL iBT?
2.  How do students perceive their language development during the TOEFL iBT preparatory course?
3.  How do students perceive the TOEFL iBT preparatory course?

The investigation strategy underlying the research questions was the case study, as proposed by Stake (1988) and  Johnson (1992), as it is a research approach which allows the investigation of a specific situation within a specific context. Stake (1988) considers the case study not only a methodological choice, but mainly the choice of the object to be studied. He adds that the main feature of case studies is the presence of the researcher in the context, the contact and the direct involvement of the researcher with the activities of the case, always reviewing and reflecting about the events.

The research context was the preparatory course for the TOEFL iBT, developed by the researcher. The course comprised private lessons focusing on the speaking tasks of the test. The data collection was carried out over a period of 24 months.

## Participants

The participants of this study were 17 students attending the preparatory course for the TOEFL iBT. They were 7 female and 10 male young adults, mostly (71%) between 21 and 30 years old. All but one were graduate students, most of them had advanced levels of English, and only three were at an intermediate proficiency level. Their language proficiency level (basic, intermediate, intermediate/advanced or advanced) was classified informally on the first day of class, taking into consideration their grammar level, their capacity to express themselves without hesitations and their vocabulary mastery. In order to protect the students' identity, their names have been omitted and each student is identified by the letter 'A' followed by a number, from 1 to 17.

## Data Collection

The study data collection instruments and the procedures for the data collection helped to answer the three research questions. The data collection was divided into three consecutive phases. Table 13-2 provides a summary of the data collection procedures in each phase of the project, and the procedures in each of these phases is explained in detail in the following sections.

**Table 13-2: Data collection procedures in each phase of the study.**

| Phase | Procedure |
|---|---|
| 1st | • initial questionnaire<br>• recording of student's initial speaking task<br>• assessment of student's initial speaking task |
| 2nd | • interview at the end of each class |
| 3rd | • recording of student's final speaking task<br>• assessment of student's final speaking task<br>• final questionnaire<br>• student's score on the TOEFL iBT test |

### Phase 1

The initial questionnaire was used to find out and analyze the students' learning needs. From the tabulation of the data, it was possible to understand the target audience profile and their needs and tailor the course content for each student.

The initial oral production recording of each student responding to sample Task 1 and 2 of the TOEFL iBT Speaking Section, aimed to provide some data for each student, such as fluency, lexical richness, accuracy, time used to formulate answers, attitude and reaction to the limited time for responses. Task 1 of the TOEFL iBT Speaking Section asks the test-taker to give a personal opinion about a topic, and Task 2 asks the test-taker to make a personal choice between two options and give reasons and examples.

The recordings were assessed according to similar criteria used by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) who are responsible for the TOEFL iBT, and the theoretical framework by Ellis (2003) (see Table 13-1 above) regarding fluency, complexity and accuracy of oral production. Based on these criteria, an evaluation form was developed for the speaking task

output. As in the TOEFL iBT, the scores ranged from 1 to 4 (1 = weak, 2 = fair, 3 = good, and 4 = excellent).

## Phase 2

The second phase of data collection occurred at the end of each class. An interview consisting of three open-ended questions was carried out with each participant, in order to understand and evaluate the perceptions of students with regards to their oral production difficulties and the activities they performed during that lesson. The three interview questions were:

1. What did you think of today's lesson activities?
2. What difficulties did they present for you?
3. How was your performance today compared to the last class?

With the transcription of all the answers, the data were classified into three categories elaborated *a priori*; i.e., activities, difficulties and performance (see Bardin, 2011). The themes emerged after the analysis of all the responses which were initially grouped by similarity of content. The topics that were most often mentioned and later on guided the analysis were: cognition, affection and methodology.

## Phase 3

In the third and final phase of data collection the final questionnaire was used in order to find out if the course had met the students' specific needs raised in the beginning of the course, and the level of support the course offered them to take the TOEFL iBT.

Also, the students' performance on sample Task 1 and 2 of the TOEFL iBT Speaking Section was recorded. The content of this recording was compared with the initial speaking tasks recording and provided information for analysis of the development of students' speech production. As with the initial oral production, the evaluation of these final tasks was performed using the same evaluation form.

The analysis of the participation and performance of the 17 students aimed at evaluating the adequacy of the course from the students' perspective and assessing their linguistic ability.

# Results and Discussion

## Students' Needs

The data from the initial questionnaire showed that the majority of the participants indicated that the reason for choosing the ESP course was due to its specific focus (44%), followed by the fact that they considered one-to-one tutoring more efficient than classroom teaching and learning (26%).

In terms of their course expectations, most students reported that they wanted to obtain the minimum score required for entering their desired study programs (71%), and enhance their speech production (41%). These data confirm the importance of the ESP course for preparing candidates for a language proficiency test.

With regards to the test constructs, the study investigated how students felt when speaking English under time pressure. This information was taken into account during the lessons as it was necessary to ensure that students were able to adapt to the time limitations of the test. Out of the 17 students, 11 confirmed in the initial questionnaire that they could not express themselves well under pressure. Students reported that they felt nervousness, discomfort, anxiety, and panic.

From the answers to the initial questionnaire, it was possible to detect that fluency to express themselves in the English language and the development of complex ideas were two items with which most students had difficulty (29%).

Students were also asked to report how they evaluated each of their English language skills using the TOEFL iBT scale. The data from this question helped to better tailor the course to the needs of the students. Table 13-3 presents the results of the students' answers.

**Table 13-3: Student perceptions of their language skills before the course.**

|  | Language skills before the course | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | **Excellent** | **Good** | **Fair** | **Weak** | **Total** |
| **Reading** | 9 | 6 | 2 | 0 | **17** |
| **Listening** | 7 | 8 | 2 | 0 | **17** |
| **Speaking** | 0 | 11 | 6 | 0 | **17** |
| **Writing** | 3 | 7 | 4 | 3 | **17** |

Note: $N = 17$

The results showed that all students considered their oral production either fair (6 students) or good (11 students) before the course started. That was a good indication that they needed to improve this skill during the course. It should be noted that as all the students needed to reach a minimum score of 85% in the test, considering their speaking ability was just 'good' was not enough to reach the desired score. This need was also highlighted in the initial questionnaire as their main reason for attending the course was the enhancement of their speaking ability. Writing skills were also worked on extensively throughout the ESP course, as this was the only skill rated as weak (3 students). Interestingly, students reported having greater difficulty in language production (speaking and/or writing) and less difficulty in language comprehension (listening and/or reading).

## Students' Performance

With regards to student language development and performance, the final questionnaire data at the end of the course showed that fluency and vocabulary were still a problem for students. Although 35% of students mentioned fluency as the greatest difficulty in speaking English even after they attended the course, and 29% of them signaled a lack of vocabulary as something that would still hinder their oral production, the vast majority (71%) felt more confident at the end of the course (see Figure 13-1 below).

The perceptions of students regarding factors that are more measurable, such as lack of vocabulary or grammar, cause them less concern or are even minimized when compared to the more subjective factors, such as fluency and objectivity when describing details and reasons in the strictly timed answers. Interestingly, all these factors are interrelated, because the grammar and the vocabulary level will influence the fluency and the objectivity of the answers within the 45 seconds allowed in the TOEFL iBT.

At the end of the course 47% of students claimed to feel more confident and fluent in English (see Figure 13-2 below). The high number of answers related to greater confidence (71%) shows that one of the main initial difficulties of the students was overcome by the end of the course.
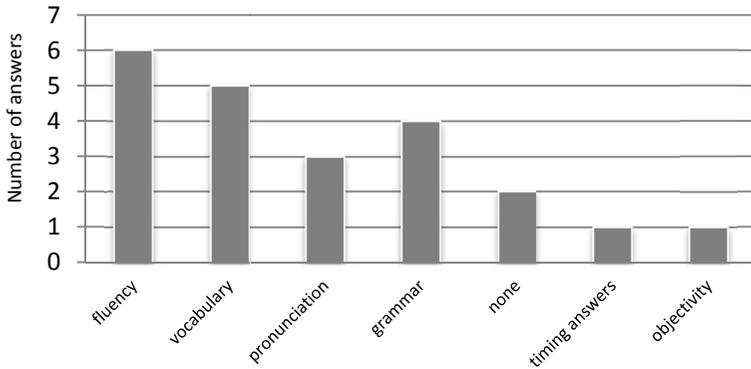
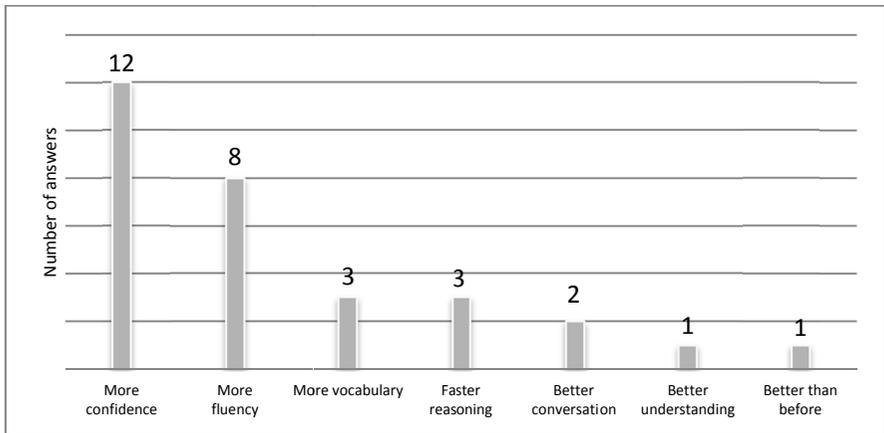Figure 13-1: Difficulties with language at the course ($N = 17$).



Figure 13-2: Student perceptions of their language ability at the end of the course ($N = 17$).

The increase in students' self-esteem was always one of the objectives and concerns during the course, as the emotional factor influences students' performance. Furthermore, helping students gain more confidence meets the assumptions of task-based learning as Willis (1996) claims it is essential to develop students' confidence so that they reach their communicative goals.

In the final questionnaire, students were asked to rate (on a scale of 0 to 5) their level of learning as a result of the activities in the regular classes. Figure 13-3 shows the results.
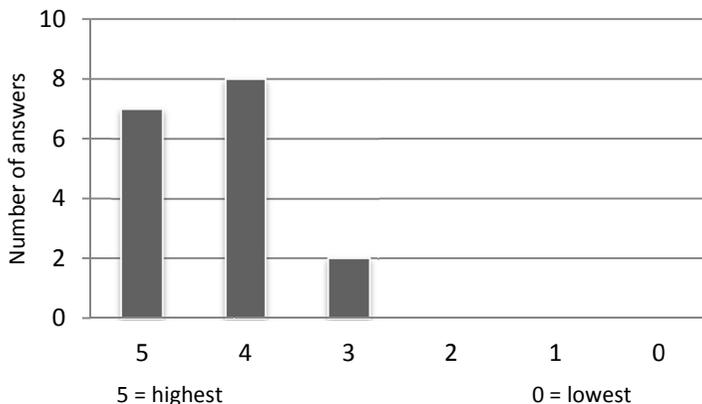


Figure 13-3: Student self-perceived learning ($N = 17$).

Results showed that 7 students (41%) rated their learning with the highest score (5) and 9 students (47%) each gave a 4 for their language ability at the end of the course. According to these results, it can be inferred that the ESP course met the needs mentioned by the students in the initial questionnaire at the beginning of the course.

In both the initial and final questionnaires students were asked to rate their four language skills. This question offered four response options: excellent, good, fair and poor. The following two figures (Figure 13-4 and Figure 13-5) show the evolution of this perception from the students' point of view, while Table 13-4 compares the initial with the final student perceptions.
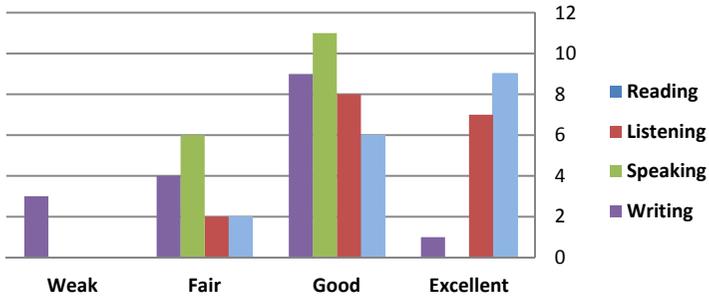
Figure 13-4: Students' perceptions of their language skills before the course (*N* = 17).
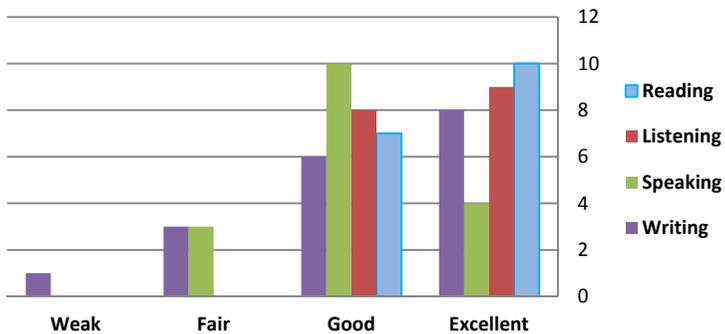


Figure 13-5: Students' perceptions of their language skills after the course (*N* = 17).

**Table 13-4: Change in students' perceptions (*N* = 17).**

| Skill | Perception | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | Same | Better | Worse |
| Reading | 12 | 4 | 1 |
| Listening | 12 | 4 | 1 |
| Speaking | 9 | 7 | 1 |
| Writing | 5 | 11 | 1 |

Looking at the results above, it can be noted that students perceived a general improvement in all four skills. The number of students (11) who felt an improvement in their written production was 63% higher than the number of students (7) who noticed an improvement in their oral production. With regards to speaking skills which was the focus of the ESP course, among the 17 students, eight of them perceived their speaking skills as "good" in the beginning and at the end of the course, while two of them considered their speaking skills excellent at the end of the course.

Both the performance on Task 1 and the performance on Task 2 were assessed according to criteria set *a priori* (general description, delivery, language, topic development, and organization), on a scale from 1 (weak) to 4 (excellent). Thus, with regards to their outcome on both Tasks at the start and at the end of the course, Figure 13-6 shows the average improvement for each student (A1 to A17).
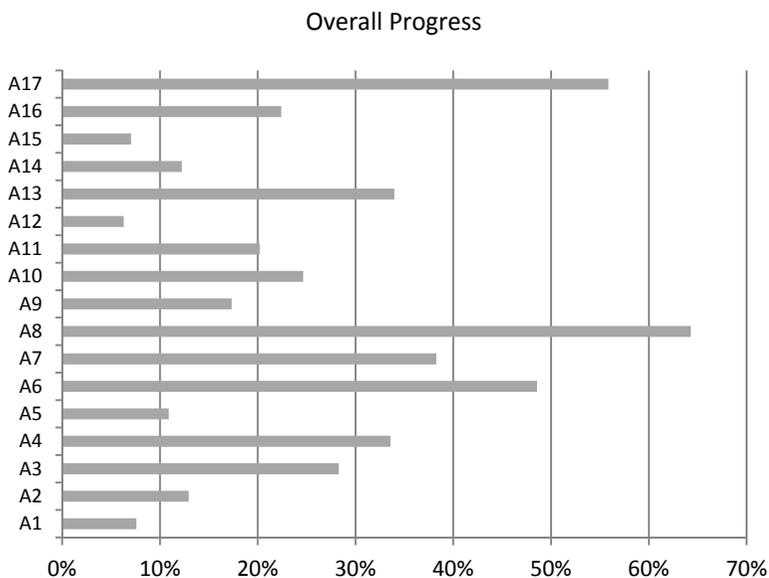
Overall Progress



Figure 13-6: Student improvement in Task 1 and Task 2 ($N = 17$).

In terms of the extent to which the course had met students' expectations, almost all students (94%) had their expectations exceeded or totally met. To examine to what extent the course contributed to the students' language development according to their expectations, students' initial expectations and needs were contrasted with their perceptions at the end of the course. Initially 41% of students needed and wished to improve

their speaking skills and at the end of the course 33% of the students stated that their oral production had improved significantly, and three of the students were positively surprised with how much they had improved.

At the end of the study, and from a careful analysis of the data (see Figure 13-4 and 13-5), it was possible to quantify the improvement perceived by students in all four language skills. All findings were compiled into a single spreadsheet; the data were then compared and analyzed with the goal of finding the most usual pattern of improvement among the different students, as well as the most common correlations among the skills studied. Table 13-5 summarizes the results of this analysis.

Surprisingly, the improvement in the perception of written production was much higher (38.7%) when compared to the improvement of oral production (17.6%), although the latter was the main focus of the preparatory course for the TOEFL iBT.

**Table 13-5: Average perceived overall improvement in language skills.**

|  | **Before** | **After** | **Increase** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Reading** | 1.65 | 1.47 | 12.0% |
| **Listening** | 1.71 | 1.53 | 11.5% |
| **Speaking** | 2.35 | 2.00 | 17.6% |
| **Writing** | 2.53 | 1.82 | 38.7% |

Note: $N = 17$

The average perception of all students for each one of their skills was taken into account, both at the beginning of the course and at the end of it. From these values, the median variation was calculated. As the figures show in the table above, in the comprehension skills, i.e., reading and listening, there was only an increase of 12.0% and 11.5% respectively in the way students viewed their improvement.

The course in question, having a narrower focus, was able to help students improve more than one communicative ability, because even though it focused in the practice of the speaking skills, the wide variety of materials and extra writing content to support this focus may have also helped students develop their other language skills such as writing.

## TOEFL iBT Test Scores

The total score for the TOEFL iBT Test is 120 points, composed of a maximum of 30 points for each skill (Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing). The Table 13-6 below shows the final scores obtained by each of the students who attended the ESP course.

**Table 13-6: Students' final TOEFL iBT score.**

| Students' Final Scores | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Student | Score aimed | Score obtained | Reading | Listening | Speaking | Writing |
| A1 | 90 | 94 | 24 | 25 | 23 | 22 |
| A2 | 90 | 106 | 26 | 26 | 26 | 28 |
| A3 | 90 | 102 | 24 | 29 | 27 | 22 |
| A4 | 80 | 85 | 22 | 22 | 21 | 21 |
| A5 | 100 | 104 | 24 | 26 | 26 | 28 |
| A6 | 100 | 102 | 25 | 27 | 24 | 26 |
| A7 | 100 | 106 | 29 | 29 | 25 | 23 |
| A8 | 90 | 89 | 23 | 24 | 20 | 22 |
| A9 | 80 | 84 | 20 | 21 | 21 | 22 |
| A10 | 100 | 100 | 25 | 27 | 26 | 22 |
| A11 | 100 | 94 | 26 | 21 | 23 | 24 |
| A12 | 100 | 99 | 26 | 24 | 26 | 22 |
| A13 | 109 | 114 | 30 | 30 | 27 | 27 |
| A14 | 100 | 85 | 20 | 18 | 20 | 20 |
| A15 | 100 | 111 | 29 | 28 | 26 | 28 |
| A16 | 80 | 92 | 24 | 28 | 20 | 20 |
| A17 | 80 | 91 | 19 | 25 | 23 | 24 |

According to the students' scores above, it can be said that there was indeed much learning along the course as the majority of the students (13 of them, or 76%) obtained a higher score than what they needed to be accepted in their graduate courses. Among the four students who did not reach the desired score, two of them had an intermediate level of English with grammar difficulties, and the two others had serious anxiety issues during the test.

Since 2006, ETS publishes a report with the average scores of students around the world. The figures reflect each skill and the total score. The average score in the period when the present study took place was 80 points (see Table 13-7).

**Table 13-7: Comparative table of the TOEFL iBT scores.**

|  | Total Score | Reading | Listening | Speaking | Writing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Overall Average (2006-2013)** | 80 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 21 |
| **Brazil Average (2006-2013)** | 85 | 21 | 22 | 21 | 21 |
| **ESP Course Average** | 98 | 24 | 25 | 24 | 24 |

As can be seen in Table 13-7 the Brazilian test-takers average was 85 points, 6% above the world average. When comparing the Brazilian test-takers' scores between 2006 and 2013 with the scores of the 17 students of the ESP course, it is apparent that the average for the participants in this study (98 points) is 15% higher than the average for the Brazilian test-takers (85 points). Thus, it can be concluded that the course met its goal, i.e., to offer high-quality teaching with a focus on the specific needs of the students.

## Conclusion

Through the data obtained in the initial needs analysis, I had the opportunity to investigate students' needs and tailor the ESP course to achieve certain goals, aligned with the needs and weaknesses of each student. Based on the initial questionnaire, it was possible to detect that for most students (53%) oral fluency was the greatest difficulty. After the course, it was found that this problem was indeed overcome, not only in terms of students' perceptions, but also in terms of the evaluation of their speaking skills in the initial and final speaking tasks. The study also showed that students experienced an increase in their self-esteem and self-confidence to express themselves in English. The feedback and the

encouragement given to students during the lessons proved to be effective as it generated confidence, comfort and lowered students' stress levels.

The data on general development as perceived by the students were essential in determining the appropriateness of the course. The skills of written and oral comprehension showed a large equivalence (12.0% and 11.5%, respectively). Surprisingly, the results also showed an increase of 38.7% in the students' writing skills which was not the primary focus of the ESP course.

Research in the ESP approach in the form of individual one-to-one lessons is scarce, especially those that combine one-to-one tutoring and preparation for standardized proficiency tests, which is why this research study makes a significant contribution to the field of language teaching and assessment. It is hoped that this work can be an important tool for all those involved in the teaching and learning of ESP courses; not only those responsible for course design, but also for teachers who are in direct contact with students, as it provides data on course design focusing on the development of speaking skills and methodological procedures in the context of teaching and learning languages.

## Acknowledgement

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