



Original Research

A pragmatic analysis of deictic expressions used in the IELTS speaking test

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This study investigates the role of deictic expressions in the IELTS speaking test, addressing a gap in research on how test-takers across proficiency levels use deixis in spoken language assessment. While previous studies have examined general discourse features in language testing, little attention has been given to the frequency, functions, and distribution of deixis in assessing spoken proficiency. The study analysed a corpus of 30 IELTS speaking test transcripts, covering proficiency levels from low-intermediate to advanced. Using Levinson's classification of deixis, the study employed quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative discourse analysis to examine variations in the use of personal, temporal, and spatial deixis. The findings revealed that personal deixis was the most frequently used, followed by temporal and spatial deixis. However, the results of One-Way ANOVA test showed no significant differences in deixis usage across proficiency levels. These findings contribute to English language teaching and assessment by highlighting how deixis functions in test-taker discourse, offering insights for IELTS preparation and speaking proficiency evaluation. The study indicates the need for further exploration of discourse features in language assessment.

KEYWORDS: language assessment, spoken discourse, deixis, language proficiency

CRedit AUTHOR STATEMENT: Fadi Al-Khasawneh: Validation, Writing – Original Draft, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing

CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author declared no conflict of interest

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author, Fadi Maher Al-Khasawneh, at fadialkhasawneh1983@gmail.com, upon reasonable request

FUNDING: Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University, Large Group Research Project under grant number RGP2/48/45

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The author extends his appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at King Khalid University for funding this work

ARTICLE HISTORY: Submitted November 12, 2024 | Revised January 22, 2025 | Accepted February 17, 2025

FOR CITATION: Al-Khasawneh, F. (2025). A pragmatic analysis of deictic expressions used in the IELTS speaking test. *Training, Language and Culture*, 9(1), 65-77. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2521-442X-2025-9-1-65-77>



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1. INTRODUCTION

The English language is recognised as the lingua franca or universal language, and it is extremely important all over the world as a method of global communication for people who want to interact. English is a significant international language, emphasising the importance of English Language Teaching (ELT). ELT is critical for teaching students how to use spoken and written English effectively, allowing them to communicate productively in a variety of contexts and circumstances (Crystal, 2003). This proficiency entails not just language competency

but also language awareness, which includes linguistics concepts such as Pragmatics and Deixis. The study of deixis, in particular, is highly relevant to language assessment contexts such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking test. Deictic expressions, which include pronouns, demonstratives, and adverbs of time and place, are essential for creating coherence, cohesion, and referential clarity in spoken communication (Fuh, 2024). In high-stakes assessments like the IELTS speaking test, where test-takers must demonstrate their ability to communicate effectively in real time, understanding

how deictic expressions are used can provide critical insights into their communicative competence and strategic language use. Despite the importance of deixis in spoken interaction, there has been limited research on its role in the IELTS speaking test, making this an underexplored area with significant implications for language assessment and teaching.

Pragmatics and Deixis are both linguistic subfields that examine meaning but from different angles. Semantics is largely concerned with the links between word meanings, particularly the denotative and connotative correlations of lexical elements. Pragmatics, on the other hand, investigates how the environment of language acts and shapes meaning. It demonstrates that language understanding is not the only factor influencing utterance interpretation; environmental signals also have a significant impact (Huang, 2014).

Deictic phrases serve an important function in communication because they tie discourse to certain contexts and promote referential clarity. These language features, which include pronouns, demonstratives, and place and time adverbs, interact dynamically with the utterance context, allowing speakers to successfully transmit meaning within a shared communicative space. Deixis is considered pragmatic since it directly tackles the interaction between language structure and contextual usage (Levinson, 1983).

Deictic expressions allow researchers to investigate how language users modify their communication tactics in response to situational environment, social dynamics, and communicative aims. Several research works have shown the importance of deictic phrases in language testing settings. Hutaaruk (2018) emphasised the significance of comprehending how test takers use deictic terms to build coherence and cohesiveness in written speech. Ningish and Megawati (2022) investigated the use of deictic phrases in talk channels to convey interpersonal connections and negotiate common understanding during conversational interactions.

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking test is an important component in determining an individual's ability in English language communication. Understanding how test takers utilise deictic phrases throughout the speaking exam might give useful insights into their language use and communicative tactics. Deictic statements are critical for indicating referents in conversation and situating speakers in context. Researchers can discover patterns of language use, techniques for coherence and cohesiveness, and the efficiency of test-takers' communication tactics by conducting a pragmatic study of deictic phrases in the IELTS speaking exam.

Despite the widely recognised importance of English Language Teaching (ELT) in developing effective communication skills its role in high stakes spoken language assessments like the IELTS speaking test remains underexplored. Existing research has primarily focused on deixis in natural conversation or written texts, with limited attention to how test-takers use deictic expressions in real-time, high-pressure assessment scenarios. This gap is significant because the IELTS speaking test requires

test-takers to demonstrate not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to use language pragmatically and strategically in real-time interaction. Understanding how deixis functions in this context can provide valuable insights into test-takers' communicative strategies, coherence-building techniques, and overall language proficiency. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by examining the use of deictic expressions in the IELTS speaking test, focusing on their frequency, distribution, and functional roles in test-takers' spoken responses.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the role and impact of deictic phrases in the IELTS speaking test, to identify patterns of language use, strategies for coherence and cohesiveness, and the effectiveness of test takers' communication tactics within this specific assessment context. This study aims to give useful insights into the disciplines of language assessment, ELT education, and pragmatic linguistics through a pragmatic analysis of deictic statements in the IELTS speaking exam. The current study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions.

1. What type of deixis is most frequently used by IELTS-speaking test-takers?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference in the use of deictic expressions among IELTS-speaking test-takers with varied band scores?
3. What are the functions of deictic expressions employed by IELTS-speaking test-takers?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the study of how the environment impacts the use of language to convey meaning. It investigates how speakers and listeners consider numerous aspects like social context, common knowledge among participants, and the intended meaning of the words stated (Bardovi-Harlig, 2022). Researchers use pragmatic analysis to better understand the complexity of human communication and how people manage language in everyday encounters. Scholars can get insights into the complex subtleties and hidden meanings of human verbal exchanges by broadening their grasp of pragmatics (Shahi, 2022).

According to Levinson (1983), deixis belongs to the area of pragmatics since it directly addresses the link between language structure and the environment in which it is employed. Al-Khawaldeh (2022) stated that words that refer to things, places, and people in the world, and indeed all languages, may be regarded as referential in nature. In other words, the speaker or writer's reference seeks to help the hearer or reader identify a person, place, or object in a specific text. The link between pragmatics and deixis is important since deixis is an essential component of pragmatics. Deictic statements frequently act as pragmatic markers, conveying distinct meanings within a given situation. Pragmatics provides a framework for understanding how deixis works in communication, particularly how speakers and listeners negotiate meaning by interpreting deictic phrases using shared contextual knowledge (Saffah & Al-Hindawi, 2021).

2.2. Deixis

Deixis is a language phenomenon in which words receive meaning by their context in connection to the speaker, listener, time, location, and circumstance. It is essential for understanding and interpreting language since it provides reference points and clarifies meaning. Understanding deixis is critical for efficient communication and understanding of spoken and written language (Talmy, 2020). Lyons (1975) defined deixis as the pointing function of language, in which words or phrases naturally refer to specific things, times, or locations within the context of a speech occurrence. Hwang (1986) viewed deixis as the relationship between language and the contextual factors that determine its interpretation. In a similar vein, Levinson (2006) defined deixis as the use of linguistic components to indicate referential or indexical features of a speech context, while Agbo and Odinakachi (2023) viewed deixis as a reference technique whose meaning is determined by the context in which it is employed.

2.3. Classification of deictic expressions

Deictic expressions are language techniques that are often used to refer to distinct items or locations relative to both the speaker and the listener. These phrases play an important role in communication because they allow speakers to identify certain individuals, objects, or places within a given situation (Todisco et al., 2020). A number of researchers (Fillmore, 1975; Huang, 2014; Levinson, 1983; Lyons, 1977) classified deictic expressions, each offering a distinct perspective on their functions and scope. Fillmore (1975) introduced the concept of the deictic centre (origo), which refers to the speaker's position in space and time as the reference point for interpreting deictic expressions. He categorised deixis into person, spatial, temporal, discourse, and social deixis, emphasising that these elements shift based on the speaker's context. His framework laid the foundation for understanding how deixis functions dynamically in communication. Huang (2014) built on Levinson's work, incorporating cognitive and cross-linguistic perspectives on deixis. His approach emphasises how deixis interacts with context and culture, making it relevant for comparative studies across languages.

Levinson's (1983) classification expanded earlier works by introducing three types of deixis (i.e., person, spatial, and time). Person deixis refers to language features that encode information about the participants in a communicative transaction, such as the speaker, listener, and those referenced in discourse. Personal pronouns (e.g., *I, you, he, she, we, they*) and possessive pronouns (e.g., *my, your, his, her, our, their*) are crucial to person deixis because they define persons' interpersonal connections and roles within discourse settings (Levinson, 1983).

Person deixis helps speakers manage the complicated social dynamics of communication by identifying who is speaking, who is being addressed, and who or what is being referred to. Furthermore, these deictic expressions aid in the negotiation of roles, power relations, and social hierarchies during interactions.

Speakers can selectively use personal and possessive pronouns to indicate respect, familiarity, solidarity, or distance, hence influencing the interaction's tone and interpersonal connection (Indrasara, 2021).

Spatial deixis refers to phrases that indicate the location or direction of things, entities, or events to the speaker and listener. Spatial deictic components include demonstratives (e.g., *this, that, these, those*) and spatial adverbs (e.g., *here, there, near, far*), which assist to orient humans within physical or mental space (Levinson, 1983). Spatial deixis is an important component of language that allows speakers to communicate about the placement or direction of things, and it also helps humans navigate both physical and mental space, supporting successful communication by giving reference points for spatial connections (Wijaya, 2023).

In addition, the significance of spatial deixis extends beyond verbal communication. Non-verbal cues such as gestures, body language, and facial expressions also contribute to the spatial deixis system. For instance, pointing, nodding, or eye gaze can serve as powerful indicators of spatial relationships, reinforcing and complementing the verbal expression of spatial deixis. The seamless integration of verbal and non-verbal spatial deixis enhances the accuracy and effectiveness of interpersonal communication, allowing individuals to convey their intentions and meanings more explicitly (van der Mescht, 2023).

Time or temporal deixis is a linguistic phenomenon in which language is employed to indicate time links between occurrences or referents in speech. It entails using language features such as verb tenses, adverbs, and temporal expressions to position occurrences or referents in time relative to the speech act or another reference point inside the discourse (Levinson, 1983). Temporal deixis like *yesterday, today, and tomorrow*, as well as verb tenses like past, present, and future, are frequently used to convey temporal deixis. These linguistic components facilitate the understanding of the temporal linkages between events and the establishment of a temporal frame of reference by speakers and listeners (Yule, 1996).

Subtle language cues, such as deixis markers – words like *now, then, later, and before* – that designate certain temporal reference points can also be a part of temporal deixis. When understanding temporal deixis in conversation, interlocutors' shared knowledge and contextual elements are also very important. Temporal deixis is a key component of language that enables speakers to place occurrences and referents in context and promotes coherent discourse amongst interlocutors (Marmor, 2008). Lyons (1977) examined subjectivity in deixis, emphasising how deictic expressions reflect a speaker's perspective. He argued that deixis is not only about physical location but also involves psychological and discourse-related positioning. His work contributed to understanding deixis in relation to pragmatics and cognition.

The present study adopted Levinson's (1983) classification of deixis for many reasons. First, Levinson's (1983) classification is widely recognised for its comprehensive and systematic

approach, categorising deixis into person, spatial, temporal, discourse, and social deixis. This clear typology makes it an effective tool for analysing deictic expressions in both spoken and written discourse. Unlike earlier models, Levinson's framework is firmly grounded in pragmatics, integrating well with concepts such as Grice's maxims and speech act theory. In addition, his classification has been successfully applied in various linguistic studies, demonstrating its robustness and adaptability across different languages and cultural contexts. Second, Levinson's (1983) classification is a strong theoretical foundation and cross-linguistic relevance. By refining previous approaches from Fillmore (1975) and Lyons (1977), Levinson (1983) offers a structured and widely accepted categorisation that facilitates precise analysis of deictic expressions. His model has been extensively cited in pragmatics and discourse analysis research, validating its effectiveness in studying deixis in real-world communication. Given its clarity, interdisciplinary applicability, and proven success in prior studies, Levinson's classification remains a highly suitable framework for investigating deixis in various linguistic contexts.

2.4. International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a globally recognised examination that evaluates the English language proficiency of individuals. It is widely accepted by educational institutions, employers, and government agencies as a benchmark to assess the English language skills of non-native speakers seeking education, employment, or migration opportunities in English-speaking countries. IELTS measures the four core language skills – listening, reading, writing, and speaking – fairly and accurately. Developed and managed by the British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, and Cambridge Assessment English, IELTS offers a standardised and reliable assessment of English language competency across the world, ensuring a level playing field for all test takers. With its extensive reach and comprehensive evaluation, IELTS plays a crucial role in facilitating individuals to achieve their academic and professional endeavors globally (Read, 2022).

A nine-band scale is used by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to assess a person's English language competency. An experienced user with a Band 9 score exhibits total mastery of the English language and can convey thoughts clearly and concisely in any situation. While Band 7 suggests a competent user who can handle complicated language effectively despite some mistakes, Band 8 indicates a very good user with occasional slight errors. Band 5 denotes modest users who can accomplish basic communication but frequently make mistakes, whereas competent users, attaining Band 6, may display good communication but with occasional faults. Band 4 refers to restricted users who have a rudimentary knowledge in familiar contexts, whereas Band 3 denotes very limited ability with frequent failures in communication. Bands 2 and 1 represent users that use the English language infrequently or never,

respectively, and have little to no understanding of more than a few words. A thorough evaluation of a person's English language competency in a variety of domains, including speaking, reading, writing, and listening, is provided by these bands.

2.5. Previous studies

Several recent studies (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023; Ningish & Megawati, 2022; Rahayu, 2018; Sahusilawane et al., 2023; Simamora & Novi Suryani, 2022; Sugianto & Muslim, 2022) have been conducted to investigate the use of deictic expressions in various genres. Al-Hamzi et al. (2023) examined the usage of deixis in Friday sermons delivered by Muslim preachers in Yemen. The researchers investigated the shape, purpose, features, and frequency of three main categories of deixis: personal, spatial, and temporal. A total of 65 Yemeni Arab sermons were translated into English from various offline and online sources. The findings revealed that all three forms of deixis are used in the sermons, with the time deixis being the most dominant, followed by person deixis, and spatial deixis. With regard to spoken proficiency assessment, Ningish and Megawati (2022) investigated the presence of deictic expressions in Lera Boroditsky's speech on how language changes the way we think. The data of this study have been obtained from the TED talks channel on YouTube. The researchers evaluated the data by using Levinson's (1983) classification of deixis. The results showed that all categories of deixis were used in Lera Boroditsky's speech, and each deictic expression has a distinct meaning depending on the context or situation presented in the speech.

Rahayu (2018) studied the errors made by Indonesian students when they use deictic expressions. The researcher analysed the collected data by using Richard's Error Classification Criteria. The findings of this study revealed that students used all categories of deixis except those at a discourse level. Also, it was found that students have committed some errors in the use of deixis, but they were able to correct them. Sahusilawane et al. (2023) explored how meaning is expressed and understood by speakers and listeners by examining the pragmatic aspects of deixis and reference in song lyrics. They also investigated how different kinds of deixis can convey meaning and establish a relationship between the listener and the songwriter. The findings of this study highlighted the importance of context in identifying the referents of deictic expressions and how the songwriter's intended message is shaped by deixis and reference.

In a similar vein, Simamora and Novi Suryani (2022) examined the deictic expressions used in political discourse with a focus on the Indonesian president's speech delivered on Indonesian Independence Day in 2019. The findings of this study revealed that all types of deixis are present in Jokowi's speech, with personal deixis being the most prominently used. The functions identified include establishing participant roles, encoding spatial locations, indicating temporal points, demonstrating token-reflexivity, and delineating social differences relative to participant roles, social status, politeness, and respect. Sugianto and Muslim (2022) explored the use of deixis in online learning

via a WhatsApp group. The results of this study showed the presence of all deixis types – personal, social, discourse, place, and time. Person deixis was the most frequently used followed by social, discourse, place, and time deixis.

The above-mentioned research underscored the importance of deixis in communication across various genres and situations, with a focus on its intricate domain. Regardless of their differences, these researchers emphasised how deixis forges connections between speakers or authors and their audiences or participants. Each study emphasises the significance of context in interpreting deixis, highlighting how the situational context of communication shapes language features. For instance, Al-Hamzi et al. (2023) examined the use of deixis in Friday sermons in Yemen, while Sahusilawane et al. (2023) explored its pragmatic aspects in song lyrics. Meanwhile, Simamora and Novi Suryani (2022) scrutinised deixis in political discourse, particularly in the Indonesian president's speech, and Sugianto and Muslim (2022) examined its usage in online learning through WhatsApp. Despite their diverse contexts and methodologies, these studies collectively enhance our understanding of deixis by shedding light on its different types, functions, and implications in various communicative settings. Whether in religious sermons, song lyrics, political speeches, or online interactions, deixis remains an essential element in constructing and interpreting meaning, highlighting its widespread presence and significance in human communication.

The review of literature on the use of deixis has revealed that the primary focus was on lexical and grammatical features rather than the pragmatic functions of deixis in test-taker responses in international English tests such as IELTS. The role of deictic expressions in assessing coherence, cohesion, and fluency in IELTS speaking and writing tasks remains underexplored. Furthermore, there has been little attention to how non-native speakers use deixis in IELTS speaking test, particularly in terms of pragmatic appropriateness and contextual adaptation. Previous studies have also seldom examined the impact of deictic misuse on IELTS band scores, leaving a gap in understanding how test-takers' use of deixis influences their overall language proficiency assessment.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1. Research design

The present study employed a sequential mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative techniques to get a thorough comprehension of the function and influence of deictic expressions in the IELTS speaking test. The sequential mixed methods design encompasses a methodical and staged approach to gathering and examining qualitative and quantitative data, with one method influencing the other. In this design, one stage of the study typically precedes the other, and the conclusions derived from each stage are assimilated to yield a holistic comprehension of the research subject (Dawadi et al., 2021). The present study used quantitative statistical quantitative analysis to help identifying patterns and trends in the use of deictic

expressions across test-taker responses. It also allows for objective measurement of the frequency of deixis, distribution, and variation among different proficiency levels. The findings obtained from quantitative analysis can provide generalisable insights, making it possible to compare deixis use across a larger dataset (Gries, 2021). The qualitative method in this study was used to analyse the contextual meaning and pragmatic functions of deictic expressions in spoken discourse. It also explains how test-takers use deixis to establish cohesion, coherence, and reference in their responses. Qualitative methods, in general, provide interpretive depth, offering insights into why certain deictic expressions are preferred or misused (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015).

3.2. Data collection

The corpus of this study included (30) IELTS speaking tests selected from YouTube videos using a methodical process. The videos selected for this study were publicly accessible sources from official IELTS-affiliated channels such as the British Council and Cambridge IELTS. The purpose of this selection was to adhere to the official IELTS format and standardised testing conditions, including the presence of certified examiners and structured prompts. Several criteria have been implemented for the selection of videos. First, only videos showing complete IELTS Speaking Test sessions (Parts 1, 2, and 3) were included to ensure the data represented the full structure of the test. Second, the selected videos were distributed to various proficiency levels, (10) tests from the lower intermediate level (e.g., Band 4-5.5), intermediate (e.g., Band 6-7), and high level (e.g., Band 7.5-9). This selection allows the researcher to examine the difference in the use of deictic expressions among IELTS-speaking test-takers with varied band scores. Third, only videos with clear audio and video quality were selected to ensure accurate transcription and analysis of deixis. Fourth, the researcher made efforts to select videos from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to examine the use of deictic expressions across different contexts. Finally, the study adheres to ethical research guidelines by focusing solely on the linguistic analysis of deictic expressions rather than personal attributes of speakers.

3.3. Data analysis

The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative analysis procedures to describe and interpret the data obtained for this study. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26.0 software was used to analyse the quantitative data. Descriptive statistics were used to present the frequency and distribution of deictic expressions that have been used by IELTS-speaking test-takers. In addition, the One-Way ANOVA test was utilised to examine the relationship between the use of deictic expressions and language proficiency and whether these differences were statistically significant.

The researcher also used qualitative analysis to identify the patterns and functions of the used deictic expressions. This analysis involves the use of content analysis to identify the function of deictic expressions in the IELTS speaking test. Content

analysis is a research strategy that methodically examines textual, audio, or visual material to uncover patterns, themes, and underlying meanings (Rahimi & Tafazoli, 2022). It entails methodically classifying and categorising data material according to predetermined criteria or research topics. Content analysis may be used on a variety of data formats, including written texts, transcripts of interviews or speeches, social media postings, news stories, advertising, and other modes of communication. To conduct content analysis for the study, the researcher transcribed the speaking test videos into written texts. The coding categories have been defined and followed by a thorough analysis to identify patterns and themes in the functions of deictic expressions across different proficiency levels of the test-takers. The reliability of this study has been ensured through recruiting two independent raters, who reviewed the transcribed data for more accuracy in identifying and categorising the deictic expressions.

Inter-coder reliability was measured using Cohen’s kappa (κ) coefficient, yielding a value of 0.967, which indicates an almost perfect agreement between the raters. Additionally, findings were cross-checked with sample responses from official IELTS practice materials to validate their alignment with authentic test discourse. While some variability in test conditions may exist, this study acknowledges these limitations and suggests future research using official IELTS tests.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Overall frequency of deixis use

This section outlines the results obtained to address the first research question: *What type of deixis is most frequently used by IELTS-speaking test-takers?* The frequency of each type has been calculated, organised, and tabulated in the following table (Table 1).

Table 1
Frequency of using deixis by IELTS-speaking test-takers

TYPE OF DEIXIS	FREQUENCY	TOTAL
Person Deixis	636	1864
Place Deixis	598	
Time Deixis	630	

The above table shows the frequency of deixis used by IELTS-speaking test-takers. The results revealed that person deixis was the most common type, accounting for 636 instances, followed by time deixis with a total of 630 occurrences, and finally, place deixis with 598 occasions of a total of 1885 occurrences. The most commonly used deixis used by the participants was person deixis, which includes pronouns like *I* and *you*, *me* and *your*.

4.2. Variation in the use of deixis

This section presents the results obtained to answer the second research question: *Is there a statistically significant difference in the use of deictic expressions among IELTS-speaking test-takers with varied band scores?* The researcher used the chi-square test to investigate the potential significant differences between the use of deictic expressions and various language proficiency levels of the test-takers (Table 2).

Table 2
Analysis of deixis use across varied language proficiency levels

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY	PERSON	SIG.	PLACE	SIG.	TIME	SIG.	TOTAL	SIG.
Low Intermediate	234	.429	203	.063	226	.529	1864	.835
Intermediate	233		148		177			
High	169		247		227			
Overall	636		598		630			

The data in the above table shows that the use of deictic expressions appeared in 1864 instances distributed to three types (i.e., person, place, and time deixis). The total number of using deixis revealed no statistically significant differences with

varied language proficiency levels (Sig=.835). The results depicted that the total number of *person* deixis used by the test-takers was 636. Low-intermediate proficiency test-takers used person deixis more frequently than other test-takers, with 234

instances, followed by intermediate-level test-takers with 233 occurrences, and high-level test-takers with 169 occasions. However, there was no statistically significant difference between the use of person deixis attributed to language proficiency level (Sig= .429). The overall frequency of *place* deixis was 598, and this category was used 247 times by high-level test-takers, followed by low-intermediate individuals with 203 instances and intermediate individuals with 148 instances. Despite these numerical differences, there was no statistically significant difference between the use of *place* deixis and language proficiency level (Sig=.063. The frequency of *time* deixis used by the test-takers was 630, and it is distributed to 227 times used by high-level individuals, followed by 226 instances reported by low-intermediate test-takers, and 177 times reported by intermediate individuals. Again, there was no statistically significant difference between the use of *time* deixis attributed to varied language proficiency levels.

Table 3
Frequency of person deixis used by IELTS-speaking test-takers

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY	I	ME	YOU	YOUR	ITS	TOTAL
Low Intermediate	66	42	59	36	31	234
Intermediate	69	36	55	41	32	233
High	56	29	40	28	16	169
Overall Frequency						636

The above table highlights different patterns in the use of *person* deixis among IELTS-speaking test-takers at various proficiency levels. Low-intermediate test-takers reported a remarkable use of *I* and *you*, with 66 and 59 occurrences, respectively. This frequency indicates an emphasis on addressing the other person and referring to oneself, which are signs of basic communication skills. *Me* and *your*, which are used 42 and 36 times respectively, come a close second. This indicates a subtle balance between self-reference and direct interaction with the other person. *It* is used 31 times, which is rather less than expected, given that it is a less often-used pronoun in interpersonal communication. This suggests that its use is restricted to this level of skill.

This breakdown emphasises how *person* deixis is fundamental to building relationships with others and communicating meaning in communicative situations. It also shows how language resources gradually expand and become more varied as competence levels rise. The following shows instances of *person* deixis as reported by low-intermediate test-takers.

... *I didn't think my future but right now I think about my future...* (Individual 8)

.... *for example, studying with videos seeing the videos and watching the movies that can help me to stay well...* (Individual 3)

4.3. Functions of deictic expressions

The current section provides answers to the third question of this study: *What are the functions of deictic expressions employed by IELTS-speaking test-takers?* To address this question, the researcher analysed the content of IELTS-speaking test-takers. This approach entailed carefully reviewing spoken responses from IELTS-speaking test recordings to locate and categorise occurrences of deictic expressions.

4.3.1. Person deixis

Person deixis is defined as language features that encode information about the participants in a communicative transaction. Person deixis may include personal pronouns (e.g., *I, you, he, she, we, they*) and possessive pronouns (e.g., *my, your, his, her, our, their*) (Levinson, 1983). The following table presents the data obtained regarding the *person* deixis used by IELTS-speaking test-takers (Table 3).

... *okay so you mean a repair something is better than buying a new one...* (Individual 1)

... *literally you can be in your home watching movies taking a shower cooking or doing something...* (Individual 10)

... *and then I studied a book its name was deep work...* (Individual 7)

I and *you* continue to be the most commonly used pronouns at the intermediate level, with a total of 233 deixis occurrences – 69 and 55, respectively. This implies that in communication circumstances, self-reference and direct interaction with the interlocutor will continue to be important. On the other hand, their utilisation is somewhat less than at lower skill levels, suggesting a little change in linguistic focus. Meanwhile, there are 36 and 41 instances of *me* and *your*, respectively, indicating a balanced use of self-reference and addressing the other person. At this level, 'its' is also the least used person deixis with 32 occurrences, which is consistent with the pattern shown throughout skill levels. The following depicts some excerpts of *person* deixis as reported by intermediate test-takers.

... *at the moment I would say my closest friend is my brother...* (Individual 1)

... *will take some hiking boots with me what could be possible dangers...* (Individual 4)

... a bit weird because you know writing letter in front of someone who... (Individual 6)

... um I heard that by exercising your feeling gets more positive... (Individual 5)

... and the best part is its coffee... (Individual 9)

Compared to lower proficiency levels, there is a noticeable drop in overall usage at the high proficiency level, which is defined by 169 total instances of *person* deixis. *I* and *you* continue to be the most used *person* deixis despite this fall, with 56 and 40 occurrences, respectively, despite their sharp decline in frequency. Though with a higher level of language skill, this persistence reflects a persistent concentration on self-reference and direct connection with the interlocutor. On the other hand, there are significant decreases in the frequency of *me*, *your*, and *its*, with 29, 28, and 16 instances, respectively. This decrease, which reflects the advanced competence level, points to a move towards the use of more intricate language structures and a wider word range. The following excerpts reveal the use of *person* deixis as reported by high-level test-takers.

Table 4
 Frequency of place deixis used by IELTS-speaking test-takers

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY	THIS	THAT	THESE	HERE	THERE	IN	ON	AT	TOTAL
Low Intermediate	78	48	17	15	23	22	0	0	203
Intermediate	41	24	18	23	11	30	1	0	148
High	65	39	36	33	18	32	17	7	247
Overall Frequency	598								

The table above provides a complete overview of the frequency and usage patterns of *place* deixis among IELTS-speaking test-takers across different proficiency levels. The statistics show variable frequency of distinct forms of location deixis. The most used *place* deixis among Low Intermediate test-takers were *this* and *that*, which occurred 78 and 48 times, respectively. These demonstratives are most usually used to describe items or locations in the speaker's immediate surroundings. In contrast, the use of *these* appears to be less common, with only 17 instances, indicating a lower tendency to refer to many things or locations at once.

Furthermore, there was a moderate use of *here* and *there*, which denote the closeness or distance between items or locations, with 15 and 23 instances, respectively. Surprisingly, no prepositional words like *in*, *on*, or *at* are recorded, showing a limited focus on describing places with greater detail or precision. The following excerpts show the *place* deixis as reported by low-intermediate test-takers.

... yes, sir, I guess **this** is an industrial cities or... (Individual 1)

... because I've heard **that** we got lots of dreams when we were asleep... (Individual 5)

... I would love to cook more because I actually enjoy the process of cooking... (Individual 1)

... she did it back to **me** obviously at some point she was my first best friend... (Individual 7)

... emotionally with a certain project and **you** need a practical overview... (Individual 8)

... communicating with **your** peers gaining knowledge from them... (Individual 6)

... since its beginning we have seen so many advances and it continues to grow... (Individual 3)

4.3.2. Place deixis

Place deixis refers to expressions that inform the speaker and listener about the position or direction of things, entities, or occurrences. Place deixis may include demonstratives (e.g., *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*) and spatial adverbs (e.g., *here*, *there*, *near*, *far*) that help people navigate physical or mental space (Levinson, 1983). The following table presents the *place* deixis used by IELTS-speaking test-takers (Table 4).

... the good thing is that **these** book channels are very uh variety types... (Individual 7)

... I came to Guadalajara which is a city **here** in Mexico... (Individual 10)

... so, I like to live **there** with my future husband... (Individual 9)

... there are many many types of monuments **in** Bangladesh... (Individual 6)

The use of *place* deixis among test-takers with intermediate level showed that expressions such as *this* and *that*, were the most frequent deixis with 41 and 24 occurrences, respectively. These demonstratives likely serve to specify or refer to objects or locations within the immediate context of the speaker, albeit with slightly lower frequencies compared to the Low Intermediate level. Furthermore, *these* is used quite frequently (18 occasions), showing a tendency to refer to many things or locations at the same time. The use of *here* and *there* is particularly significant, with 23 and 11 instances, respectively, indicating a concern for closeness or distance when referring to items or locations. The test-takers at this level reported using *place* prepositions such as *in* and *on*, with 30 and 1 occurrences respectively.

This implies a continued emphasis on deixis usage at a more immediate or concrete level, rather than providing exact location information. The following excerpts outline the use of *place* deixis as reported by intermediate test-takers.

... because *uh* the road like it's so crowded **this** time in the streets (Individual 1)

... you lost something, and you probably cannot find **that**... (Individual 8)

... to travel for days taking pictures and checking out **these** animals... (Individual 7)

... we have **here** in Turkey as well like going on to one of... (Individual 4)

... and I lived **there** until three years old, so I don't really remember... (Individual 5)

... I was **in** an international school in China back then... (Individual 8)

... like watching videos **on** mobile phone and also... (Individual 10)

For test-takers with high language proficiency, the use of *place* deixis indicates a solid understanding and application of *time* references. The notable *place* deixis used at this level were *this* (65), *that* (39), *these* (36), *here* (33), and *there* (18). Furthermore, the frequencies of *in* (32), *on* (17), and *at* (7) demonstrate a thorough understanding of prepositional phrases and their suitable use in a variety of contexts. These numbers are much greater than at lower competence levels, showing a better understanding of spatial orientation and position descriptors.

Table 5
Frequency of time deixis used by IELTS-speaking test-takers

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY	NOW	BEFORE	AFTER	WHEN	SINCE	UNTIL	WHILE	TOTAL
Low Intermediate	73	51	45	39	18	0	0	226
Intermediate	55	38	34	23	19	5	3	177
High	61	31	29	37	26	24	19	227
Overall Frequency								630

The results revealed that the most frequent *time* deixis used by low-intermediate test-takers were *now*, *before*, and *after*, which appeared in 73, 51, and 45 instances, respectively. The use of *when* and *since* seems to be less common, with only 39 and 18 instances. However, test-takers at this level did not report using time conjunctions such as *until* and *while*, and this demonstrates their present level of language proficiency and communicative skills. The following excerpts depict the use of *time* deixis as reported by low-intermediate test-takers.

... *uh* **now** Karshan is famous for its souvenirs especially rose-water... (Individual 2)

... **before** I come to the tenth grade, I used to watch TV a lot... (Individual 8)

The following excerpts outline the use of *place* deixis as reported by high-level test-takers.

... you know **this** is something that I could you know just get around... (Individual 1)

... a situation before solving it and thinking outside **that** box... (Individual 9)

... always like **these** numbers have you ever forgotten an important... (Individual 6)

... active voice and the like one quick tip **here** is listen to the question... (Individual 5)

... I love the fact that my friends are right **there**, and I can speak to them... (Individual 8)

... perhaps not allow children **on** the internet until they... (Individual 4)

... but I like walking and hiking as well so a holiday **in** the countryside... (Individual 7)

... and I have seen groups of people **at** the table not talking to... (Individual 10)

4.3.3. Time deixis

Time or temporal deixis is a linguistic phenomenon in which language is employed to indicate time links between occurrences or referents in speech. It entails using verb tenses, adverbs, and temporal expressions to position occurrences or referents in time relative to the speech act or another reference point inside the discourse (Levinson, 1983). Table 5 depicts the *time* deixis used by IELTS-speaking test-takers.

... and **after** a while I think of addiction to internet, so I try to use paper books... (Individual 5)

... **when** I travel to a country I always go around and see traditional buildings... (Individual 6)

... I like to live there because it has been my dream **since** I was a child... (Individual 9)

The most frequent *time* deixis used by intermediate-level test takers was *now* used 55 times, indicating a tendency to allude to current events or ongoing acts during their discourse. Following closely, the word *before* appeared 38 times, suggesting a common reference to events or acts that occurred before a given period of time. Similarly, the word *after* appeared 34 times, indicating a concentration on occurrences that occurred after a

'Friginal et al. (2017) emphasised the importance of time deixis in organising discourse and creating a temporal framework for listeners. This is particularly relevant in high stakes speaking assessments, where coherence and clarity are key evaluation criteria. In the context of the present study, many IELTS speaking tasks require test-takers to discuss events or plans that are temporally situated, such as describing past experiences or future goals. This encourages the use of time deixis to provide a clear timeline for the narrative. Galaczi and Taylor (2018), have shown that task requirements significantly influence the linguistic features produced by test-takers. Tasks that focus on temporal sequencing naturally elicit more time deixis'

certain period or activity. *When* was used 23 times, demonstrating a tendency to indicate certain periods in time during their conversation. The word *since* was used 19 times, indicating a tendency to identify the beginning point of a timeline or activity. However, intermediate test-takers used *until* 5 times and *while* 3 times, indicating a weaker tendency to relate to temporal constraints or simultaneous acts. The following excerpts illustrate some *time* deixis as reported by intermediate-level test-takers.

... have many friends right **now** I would say my closest friend is my brother... (Individual 1)

... nearby the animals in Africa **before** going on a safari and I will take... (Individual 3)

... I don't think that they have a lot of time to exercise **after** work because... (Individual 6)

... you said uh what is my hobby **when** you use the... (Individual 5)

... **since** um two years ago and I'm trying to continue my educational... (Individual 8)

... kilometre distance **until** my University and I usually walked there and it's... (Individual 9)

... I found that **while** answering me she was saying you know... (Individual 7)

The use of *time* deixis among high-level test-takers revealed that the most frequently used deixis was *now*, which appeared in 61 instances. The deixis *before* was used 31 times, implying a conscious reference to previous events or activities within their speech. Similarly, the word *after* was used 29 times, demonstrating an emphasis on events that occurred after specified moments or acts. The term *when* was used 37 times, demonstrating competence in referring to specific periods in time to improve speech clarity and coherence. In addition, *since* was used 26 times, demonstrating a mastery of expressing the start of timelines or acts inside their tales. The words *until* and *while* were the least frequently used deixis which occurred in 24 and 19 instances, consecutively. The following excerpts provide some *time* deixis as reported by high-level test-takers.

... the reality is most of us do it online **now**... (Individual 10)
... to come out so around spring or early summer **before** it gets too hot... (Individual 7)

... disables their phones **after** two hours of using them... (Individual 5)

... I'd imagine that **when** I was younger I... (Individual 3)
... I've been using it **since** I was 14 that's about eight years... (Individual 8)

... perhaps not allow children on the internet **until** they are old enough... (Individual 6)

... I do like to read fashion magazines once in a **while** though... (Individual 2)

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the present study revealed that person deixis was the most commonly used type among the participants, followed by time deixis and place deixis successively. The most common person deixis used by the participants were pronouns like *I*, *you*, *me*, and *your*. This finding is consistent with the studies of Al-Hamzi et al. (2023), Ivanova (2016), and Maziad (2019), which find those pronouns as being the most frequently used in person deixis. The frequent use of person deixis can be attributed to the extreme importance of person pronouns in maintaining engagement and direct interaction between the speaker and listener. Levinson (2003) noted that person deixis is vital for shaping social relationships, as speakers often utilise it to express their identity, authority, and engagement in conversation. In addition, Yule (1996) emphasised that personal pronouns play a crucial role in deixis as they connect statements to both the speaker and the listener, making them essential for effective communication. Another justification for this result may be due to the nature of the IELTS speaking test that require discussing personal experiences, opinions, and relationships, which naturally leads to frequent use of person deixis. For example, questions like *Tell me about yourself* or *What do you think about this issue?* prompt the use of *I* and *you*.

The results also showed that time deixis was the second most used category. The participants of this study tend to use place deixis such as *now*, *before*, and *after* to situate events relative to the moment of speaking. This result contradicts the findings of Sugianto and Muslim (2022) study, who found place deixis to be the least frequently used category. Friginal et al. (2017) emphasised the importance of time deixis in organising discourse and creating a temporal framework for listeners. This is particularly relevant in high stakes speaking assessments, where coherence and clarity are key evaluation criteria. In the context of the present study, many IELTS speaking tasks require test-takers to discuss events or plans that are temporally situated, such as describing past experiences or future goals. This encourages the use of time deixis to provide a clear timeline for the narrative. Galaczi and Taylor (2018), have shown that task requirements significantly influence the linguistic features produced by test-takers. Tasks that focus on temporal sequencing naturally elicit more time deixis.

Despite its importance, the least used category in this study was place deixis. Place deixis (e.g., *this*, *here*, *there*) relies heavily on a shared spatial context between the speaker and listener. In the IELTS speaking test, the context is abstract and not visually supported, making it difficult for test-takers to use place deixis effectively. Levinson (2003) highlighted that place deixis requires a shared physical or mental context to be meaningful. In the absence of visual aids or a concrete spatial setting, speakers may avoid using spatial references to prevent confusion. IELTS speaking tasks often focus on personal experiences, opinions, and plans rather than spatial descriptions. This reduces the need for place deixis, as test-takers are less likely to describe physical locations or spatial relationships. Kasper and Roever (2005) found that task design significantly influences the use of deictic expressions. Tasks that focus on personal narratives or abstract topics elicit less place deixis compared to tasks that require spatial descriptions. Furthermore, place deixis is cognitively more complex than person and time deixis because it requires speakers to mentally map spatial relationships and communicate them effectively. This complexity may discourage test-takers, especially lower-proficiency learners, from using place deixis. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) indicated that spatial references are acquired later in second language learning and are used less frequently by lower-proficiency learners. This aligns with your finding that place deixis was the least frequently used category.

The findings of this study revealed no statistically significant differences in deixis usage across proficiency levels. This is in line with the findings of previous studies (Al-Hamzi et al., 2023; Ningish & Megawati, 2022; Rahayu, 2018; Sahusilawane et al., 2023; Simamora & Novi Suryani, 2022; Sugianto & Muslim, 2022), which revealed that deixis is a fundamental aspect of spoken language, essential for establishing reference and managing interactions. Yulfi (2017) argued that deixis is a core feature of human language, present in all languages and used by speakers of all proficiency levels. Bardovi-Harlig (2013) pointed out that deictic expressions are acquired early in second language learning. This reflects the fact that deixis is a basic linguistic skill that is mastered early in language learning. One justification for the absence of statistically significant differences in the use of deixis may be due to some methodological limitations. The relatively small sample size of the study (30 test-takers) may be insufficient to detect meaningful differences in deixis usage. Researchers indicated the importance of sample size and representativeness in language testing research. Small or unrepresentative samples can lead to difficulties in detecting true differences.

In addition, the design of the IELTS speaking tasks may not have elicited significant variations in deixis usage across proficiency levels. For instance, if the tasks emphasised personal experiences and opinions, they might have promoted the use of person deixis (such as *I* and *you*) across all proficiency levels, potentially obscuring any differences in the use of place and time deixis. Kasper and Roever (2005) found that task design significantly influences the linguistic features produced by test-

takers. Tasks focusing on personal narratives or abstract topics may not elicit the full range of deictic expressions. One of the limitations of the current study was the method used to measure and analyse deixis usage. It focused only on frequency counts and did not account for the complexity or accuracy of deictic expressions, so it may have overlooked important variations. Galaczi and Taylor (2018) emphasised the importance of using sensitive and nuanced measures to assess linguistic features in high stakes speaking assessments. Frequency counts alone may not capture the full picture of deixis usage.

6. CONCLUSION

The main goal of the current study was to investigate the use of deixis among IELTS-speaking test-takers, focusing on how different forms of deixis – person, time, and place – are utilised. This study aimed to address the gap in research regarding the use of deixis in IELTS, as very few studies have focused on this area. Based on the results of the present study, several conclusions have been drawn. It was observed that various forms of deixis, including person, time, and place deixis were used by the IELTS-speaking test-takers. In this context, the personal pronoun deixis has emerged as the most prevalent aspect of the test-takers. Personal deixis indicates the identity, perspectives, or relationship of the speaker, listener, or referents in a conversation. It aids in determining the responsibilities and placement of persons or entities in the communication environment. This is followed by the use of time deixis which ranked second among the test-takers. This type of deixis allows speakers and listeners to comprehend when an event occurred or will occur. Time deixis can be conveyed using linguistic features such as tense markers, adverbs, and temporal expressions. The role of time deixis is critical for expressing temporal links and organising speech cohesively. The least commonly used deixis among the test-takers was place deixis. It was used to indicate the location of entities or events concerning the speaker or other reference points in the discourse. It helps establish spatial relationships and provides context for understanding where something is situated.

The results of this study provide several promising recommendations for future research in the domain of deixis usage among language learners, particularly in the context of language proficiency tests such as the IELTS. First, comparative analyses could be conducted to explore the patterns of deixis use among test-takers of various language proficiency tests, such as Cambridge or TOEFL tests. Such analyses may shed light on whether deixis usage varies depending on the specific language test being taken. In addition, future studies could investigate the sociolinguistic factors that may impact the use of deictic expressions, such as social status, age, or gender. Investigating such factors could enrich our understanding of communicative competence.

Furthermore, investigating the pedagogical implications of teaching deictic expressions could be valuable. The study's findings suggest that focusing on deixis can enhance IELTS preparation by helping test-takers use language more effectively,

thereby improving their performance. This step allows researchers and practitioners to develop instructional materials aimed at enhancing the awareness of deixis usage. In addition, employing critical discourse analysis of written and spoken language samples from various language proficiency tests could be useful to investigate the use of deictic expressions in authentic communicative contexts and its contribution to coherence and cohesion in test-takers' responses. Language teaching can benefit from integrating deixis into curricula, aiding students in grasping

contextual language usage. In terms of test evaluation, recognising the role of deixis can lead to more accurate assessments of candidates' language proficiency. Understanding these implications can inform language teaching methodologies and test evaluation processes, ultimately leading to more effective language instruction and assessment strategies. Pursuing these recommendations could advance our understanding of deixis usage among language learners and its implications for language testing, teaching, and communication.

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