

# *The Influence of College Students' Spoken-English Self-esteem on IELTS Speaking Performance under the Social Comparison Theory*

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, the Chinese IELTS speaking level is lower than that of other modules, such as reading, writing, and listening. It can be improved by expanding the way of learning spoken English through TikTok's app. The group of College students is a key time when the ideological concept is gradually mature and gradually know themselves, and learning spoken English in this software environment may produce the psychological behaviour of social comparison, it may produce spoken-English low self-esteem and affect the IELTS speaking performance. In order to study the impact of spoken-English low self-esteem on IELTS speaking performance, this paper will understand the basic theories through the existing research literature on Social Comparison Theory, the emotion of foreign language learning, academic performance and so on, and summarize the reasons for social comparison in real learning life. A conclusion that from the social and academic dimensions, college students are compared with different users through this short video interaction and push function, and self-cognitive bias leads to spoken-English low self-esteem, which positively or negatively affects attention, pressure, social willingness and self-confidence by affecting learning efficiency and motivation, resulting in a positive or negative correlation between IELTS performance and oral low self-esteem. The purpose of this paper is to extend the research on the foreign language learning emotions and IELTS-specific modules and to provide reasonable learning suggestions for college students learning IELTS speaking in an online environment.

**Keywords:** IELTS, Self-abasement, Spoken-English, Score, TikTok.

## 1. Introduction

IELTS performance can reflect English ability to a certain extent. Besides, IELTS speaking is an important part of the IELTS test, which will represent students' ability to speak English. The existing studies have deeply expressed the specific research of IELTS writing, listening and reading modules. However, there is a lack of relevant research on speaking modules. At present, the performance of IELTS speaking in China is lower than that of other modules [1]. In order to improve their performance, college students will improve their English skills and level through different learning methods to lay the foundation for finally getting a satisfactory IELTS result. The traditional IELTS

speaking teaching is a closed form of “teacher-textbook-student-textbook-result” and mainly follows the form of learning contents taught by teachers and communication between teachers and students, with the main focus on teaching IELTS problem-solving skills to improve IELTS speaking scores [1]. Now, with the coming of the information age, the short video platform Tiktok has emerged with colourful functions and has become increasingly rich. It has become one of the ways college students learn how to speak IELTS. However, the short video platform is rich in content and variety, which will cause some college students to compare with other users with this psychology in learning spoken English and will cause low self-esteem. Some studies have shown that most of this comparison comes from the upward comparison that the network presents environmental conditions superior to their own real conditions, thus resulting in negative emotions, and these negative emotions will affect various behaviours in the later period, thus affecting foreign language learning [2]. One such behaviour is defined by a globally recognized psychology theory postulated by Festinger in 1954 called Social Comparison Theory. It contains historical and philosophical concepts, and it demonstrates that the comparison between people is made because of social status or different environments from a cognitive perspective [3]. Internet Comparison and Real Social Comparison are two branches of Social Comparison Theory; the former can be described as people comparing with a reference object in the network for self-evaluation [4]. On the TikTok short video platform, this phenomenon can be explained that individuals will compare their own perceptions with different information on this platform through the interactivity of short videos [5], such as family conditions, body management, and daily life content, then make a self-evaluation [2]. Both of these two branches include upward and downward social comparisons [6]. Consequently, when the users compare with the high status or other upward users, the gap between their cognitive conception and the contents that people compare with will be huge, causing some emotions such as jealousy, low self-esteem and so on [7]. In the practical application of this theory, a lot of studies are currently more on different emotions between colleagues and different ages, and it is mostly used in real social comparison [6]. However, in online social comparison, for example, there are some studies that show the specific influence of negative feelings of low self-esteem after using Tiktok that need to be researched [8]. Therefore, the Network Social Comparison Theory can also be used in the study of low self-esteem in spoken English and its effect on IELTS speaking performance. Research on the emotions of foreign language learning has mainly focused on anxiety, pleasure, and boredom. However, the emotions of low self-esteem and confidence have yet to be explored. Although ample studies have deeply explored the relationship between positive emotions and learning efficiency and achieved great results, research on negative emotions such as low self-esteem and the correlation between these emotions and English speaking performance is still relatively limited, especially in the study of self-esteem in IELTS speaking performance. This thesis will analyse the reasons why people will feel low self-esteem with social comparison on the Tiktok platform from social and academic perspectives. Based on the Social Comparison Theory, the study will analyse the correlation between spoken English low self-esteem and the final IELTS performance. What’s more, this thesis gives a reference for improving the national IELTS speaking level and helps scholars to grasp the dynamics of the current research. At the same time, it extends the scope of the study on language learning emotions and combines it with IELTS speaking. Furthermore, this study will provide some reasonable suggestions for college students who are studying for IELTS speaking on the Tiktok platform, aiming to establish correct values in the online environment.

## **2. Comparison of the Network Society Causes Reasons for Low Self-esteem in Spoken-English**

This present age is progressing, and a huge network living environment has gradually been formed, which has become an essential need for everyone’s life. The application of intelligent networks is

greatly convenient for people's lives and studies, and there is a certain commonality between real life and online life. Through these efforts, in reality, a health network environment will be built effectively. The common denominator between the real world and the online world is that both of them can achieve the goal or concept with communication and interaction, while especially the internet, in particular, is characterized by the ample functions that will facilitate the execution of behaviours and ideas. Therefore, the elements from the real world can identify the reason for the different situations that emerge under a specific condition. Based on that, this section will analyze the reasons for the social comparison of the network environment causes the spoken-English low self-esteem from social and academic dimensions of reality.

## 2.1. Social Dimension

The feeling of anxiety is expressed in the form of nervousness, fear and restlessness, while low self-esteem is always expressed by depression, lack of confidence, self-esteem and so on. Therefore, anxiety can be caused by the addition of low self-esteem, and in turn, anxiety can also produce low self-esteem [9]. Both of them will be interfered and affected by some information and additional occupation of cognitive resources, and lead to the competition of psychological resources.

The essence of socialising is communication with each other; the best way to interact with people in real life is face-to-face, with body language and dialogue. In the network environment, such as TikTok short video platform will provide functions of private messages or send voice, then users can achieve communication in this environment [10]. So, whether online or in reality exists, social behaviours are different in form. In the social behaviour of learning spoken English, some studies show that the main form of social interaction between the student and teacher or peers in the classroom atmosphere is the use of language and body movement to communicate with each other, and the reason for low self-esteem of the oral English is due to the obstacles of students' cognitive structure and individual differences [1]. Some high self-esteem students tend to pay too much attention to negative comments from teachers or peers and worry about what others think, so these students will compare themselves to some specific element with peers, such as language fluency, English pronunciation, vocabulary difficulty and grammatical structures. As a result of feeling low self-esteem to others in these elements, and students may perceive themselves as having a lower level and lack of confidence. This emotion is particularly in group activity, where the tendency of marginalization, reduced expressiveness, diminished social communication and even the feeling of depression. These behaviours illustrate that some students lack self-awareness when socializing [11], and this spoken-English low self-esteem emotion occurs not only in the real world-class but also in the social life after class, especially based on the context of self-comparison. For example, when college students communicate with people in English on certain occasions, they always compare themselves through the differences in spoken English and then increase their low self-esteem. College students often participate in various volunteer activities, especially international ones, where this low self-esteem feeling is more obvious. When communicating with foreign people in English, college students will compare with each other and think that other students are superior. If they encounter some communication difficulties, college students may doubt their language ability, which will aggravate the emotion of spoken-English low self-esteem. In the TikTok platform, because of the interactive function in this environment, users can express their own ideas or feedback in the comment area at the bottom right corner of the video, set up a fan learning group or chat room in voice communication, and different users can chat with each other in English so that the purpose of the people-to-people communication in the network and real-world social activities will be reached [9]. From this, it can be inferred that the reason for low self-esteem when learning and attending social activities on the TikTok platform is that college students will pay attention to the feedback, oral response and the content of their own voice recording in the comments or the learning chat room

when learning spoken-English. Thus, they may compare these contents with their learning ability. For example, the users' abilities of grammar, pronunciation, fluency and positive feedback from others posting their own, and they may think these abilities of their own are far from others or find many oral mistakes when they practise spoken English, thus creating an emotional of low self-esteem and make them lack confidence.

## 2.2. Academic Dimension

In general, students assess their English-speaking ability (academic ability) through regular oral quizzes or term exams, which may be spontaneous or required by some schools. The exams in school usually take the form of face-to-face dialogues or questions, but the test online is always completed by recordings uploaded to the system for scoring. These two ways of assessing academic performance are generally based on phonetics, grammar, diction, fluency and so on, and emphasize the output of spoken English [12]. Song Hongbo and Wang Yue's study concluded that students may compare their test performance, such as English phonetics, and speaking proficiency, with other people when learning spoken English in real class or real life, and behaviour will cause English speaking low self-esteem, then finally affect individual's judgement of learning spoken-English [13]. In addition, a fact in the research from Wu Wensheng is that when the emotion of English speaking low self-esteem occur to the students, some of the students will think that their ability to study spoken English is weaker than others, and they can't study well, even produce self-abandonment behaviour [14]. Students will also compare themselves through the test performance, and they will think the final result is lower than what they expected. Then, they will match their own effort and the final result; if there is a low match between them, they may be disappointed in their own academic ability and produce the emotion of low self-esteem. TikTok's short video platform has a push function and network personalisation characteristics; users will receive some specific information from this platform [5]. Students can follow the pushed video to read and practice with it, and they can do so through the limitation of the learning scope [15].

Students can also assess their speaking ability through the online speaking quiz. For example, this platform will push test links and official recommendations to users, such as the New Oriental IELTS Pro software. Some test results will be accompanied by overall data analysis, which can help students find mistakes or learn about their English level. Besides, students can upload their own speaking recordings and listen to others' responses as references. By uploading their short video of the speaking task, students can get some evaluation and feedback from the comment section that will further improve their speaking performance.

Both online and offline tests are used to assess English speaking ability, so the reason for low self-esteem in spoken English in an online environment can be introduced by reality. After getting the results of the online test on the TikTok platform, some programs are able to show the results of specific parts and the level of speaking. This situation may cause some students to have negative self-perceptions, thinking that some parts of knowledge and academic ability are weaker than others in the data, resulting in low self-esteem [16]. Some college students may face the need for online testing after learning in the network environment, and it can be found that low self-esteem is more prominent among such students. Sometimes, these students feel that they have not mastered knowledge commonly mastered by others, such as phonetics, spelling, and syntax, which creates a sense of lagging and negative emotion. In addition, because of the problems of recognition by the system, some students may believe that they are not capable of learning, which will enhance their anxiety and reinforce the release of low self-esteem.

### 3. The Effect of Low Self-Esteem on IELTS Speaking Performance

The speaking part of IELTS covers the testing of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and other aspects; it simulates a foreign situation in which students have to explain their own ideas and concepts and predict their spoken English ability in the real environment. College students, who are gradually maturing in their values, conceptions and behaviour, are mostly sensitive and confused about their future and the meaning of life. Students may face some difficulties and compare themselves with other users when practising spoken English on the TikTok platform, causing low self-esteem and even other undesirable consequences. From the social and academic dimensions, it explains the reason for low self-esteem in spoken English in the context of network social comparison. However, whether the low self-esteem in speaking affects IELTS speaking performance needs to be explored. However, it will first analyzed by the effect on learning efficiency and motivation in low self-esteem, and then infer the relationship between this emotion and the final IELTS speaking performance.

It is known in the study of Xu Jinfen that low self-esteem is not conducive to learning spoken English, but confidence can promote this learning, and both of them can directly predict the efficiency of learning [17]. The feeling of confidence will motivate students to expand their mindset and potential to improve study efficiency. On the contrary, the feeling of low self-esteem will have a negative effect on English study; if students are unable to resolve the stress to regulate this feeling, it will decrease the efficiency of learning in the end. Meanwhile, in Song Hongbo's study, he believed that after passing the social comparison, the motivation to learn will be weakened, but the anxiety of learning will be increased, and it will make students unable to fully commit to spoken English, distract the attention of learning and finally decrease the study efficiency. It will deepen the generation of social comparison and then reduce the motivation and willingness for social activities of learning [13]. Therefore, college students should promote learning efficiency by strengthening their learning attention, working memory, and social willingness, regulating emotions in positive ways, building a reasonable goal and studying, such as constructing learning content in a communicative environment for learning spoken English. These factors can change the final performance with a significant positive correlation by affecting learning efficiency and motivation [18]. In the IELTS speaking test, due to the lack of daily practice of spoken English, some college students show a low willingness to participate in social activities and even persist in developing an emotion of low self-esteem. It will create a vicious circle, further affecting their speaking performance and confidence. Individual differences should be excluded in some studies. Some college students might be able to regulate their low self-esteem and turn it and some factors of this emotion into a motivational psychological mechanism to push themselves to better learning efficiency, then finally increase their academic performance. However, in this case, low self-esteem still exists and remains the same, which means that there is a positive correlation between this emotion and the final performance. Current studies show that the relationship between these two aspects is complex and must take into account the factors of gender, age and intelligence level. Therefore, low self-esteem will often have a negative correlation with academic performance and sometimes has a small degree of positive relationship with it [18]. Some educational strategy studies have found that if teachers find ways to increase the rate of participation in spoke-English, have positive encouragement, and focus on practising fluency for college students, their feelings of anxiety and low self-esteem will be reduced, and a more pronounced negative correlation will be produced between final performance and this feeling [18]. In Bagalay's study, it was also shown that it is beneficial for college students to have more communication with native speakers in English; this can relieve anxiety and low self-esteem [16]. In the strategy of the IELTS speaking test, positive feedback will be given to the students through dialogue between the students and the examiners, and this will play a role in alleviating stress and low self-esteem. It can be assumed that if students can reduce their

low self-esteem during the test, they will be more positive in showing the result of their usual learning efficiency and increase their motivation to study, thus getting a higher final performance than they expected. However, perhaps a few students should consider individual differences and might feel stronger anxiety and low self-esteem when interacting with the examiner. This emotion may stem from the language background of the examiners that they are native English speakers, students always worry about not understanding the questions that the examiners ask or they strive too much to make a standard that they speak like the native speakers' pronunciation, the feelings of low self-esteem and other negative emotions will be caused by these thoughts. However, students can encourage themselves to express themselves better, devote more attention and have a better understanding of the examiner's questions, take notice of the pronunciation issues and so on. It can be analyzed that IELTS speaking performance may also be subjected to this complication, and the result reflects the different correlation, such as positive or negative, between low self-esteem and academic performance; it shows that this emotion can indirectly affect IELTS speaking performance in a variety of ways and have two kinds of results.

#### 4. Conclusion

The above analysis concludes that the reason for the low self-esteem of spoken English in the network environment is through social comparison. From the social dimension, it is because the interactivity of the TikTok platform makes students pay attention to the information from the comments, private messages and feedback from the chat room, compare themselves to speak English with other users and cause the bias of self-perception. Drawing a conclusion from the academic dimension that college students will use some APP pushed by the TikTok platform to evaluate their spoken-English ability, and based on the rich function of this platform, students may compare the academic results of others and their effort for the degree of match of their final result with their own, thus causing the low self-esteem feeling. At the same time, this emotion will positively or negatively affect IELTS learning efficiency and motivation and change college students' attention, confidence, social willingness and stress levels, which have positive or negative correlation effects on IELTS speaking performance. Learning IELTS speaking on the TikTok platform is a good choice; the rich function of this platform makes it convenient for college students to learn spoken English, but it is a normal psychological phenomenon of low self-esteem caused by social comparison in a network environment. Therefore, college students should achieve correct self-perception in this environment, face the possible low self-esteem emotion positively, and turn this emotion into learning motivation. For college students, it is important to encourage them to engage in more oral output, improve their concentration on studying, and give positive psychological hints to themselves regarding every low self-esteem as an opportunity to discover the gaps in their knowledge. Therefore, students can have oral communication with foreign people on this platform to relieve the pressure of studying. When obtaining online information, take the best content and apply it to their learning methods. In the IELTS speaking test, using these methods can help students feel more relaxed and confident in this exam, which will hopefully lead to progress in IELTS performance.

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