

The IELTS Speaking Test: Interactional Design and Practice in a Global Context

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The IELTS speaking test

- One component of the IELTS test: International English Language Testing System.
- Predominantly used to assess and predict whether a candidate has the ability to communicate effectively on programmes in English-speaking universities: readiness to enter.

The IELTS test

- Over 7,000 certified examiners administer over 2.7 million IELTS tests annually at over 1,100 locations, in 140 countries. High-stakes test.
- Independent research programme.
- Reporting on 3 IELTS-funded research projects – 2005-2014.
- Reports available on IELTS website.

Corpora

- Total of 257 audio recordings and transcriptions of 11-14 minute speaking tests.
- 3 separate IELTS-funded research projects:
- The Interactional Organisation of the IST: 137
- Topic Development in the IST: 60
- The Relationship between Speaking Features and Band Descriptors: 60 (15 at each level)

Principles of Conversation Analysis (CA)

- Order at all points in interaction
- Empirical, bottom-up analysis
- Why that, in that way, right now?
- Interaction as action (why that) expressed by means of linguistic forms (in that way) in a developing sequence (right now)

Interactional Organisations

- Turn-taking
- Sequence (adjacency pairs)
- Preference
- Repair
- Topic

Why do CA for speaking tests?

- Validation
- Insights into the process rather as well as the product
- Can be combined with quantification in a mixed methods approach
- Enables fine-tuning of test items and procedures

The organisation of turn-taking and sequence

- Closely follows the examiner instructions and script.
- Part 1 is a succession of question-answer adjacency pairs.
- Part 2 is a long turn by the student, started off by a prompt from the examiner and sometimes rounded off with questions.
- Part 3 is another succession of question-answer adjacency pairs.

Institutional 'fingerprint'

- All examiner questions contain two components a) an adjacency pair component, which requires the candidate to provide an answer b) a topic component, which requires the candidate to develop a specific topic.
- 'Topic-scripted Q-A adjacency pair' (extracts 1 & 2)

How and why does interactional trouble arise?

- Trouble arises for candidates when they do not understand questions posed by examiners; they usually request question repetition. Sometimes, they ask for a re-formulation or explanation of the question.
- Sometimes interactional trouble can be created (even for the best candidates) by questions which are topically disjunctive.

How is repair organised?

- Examiners have training and written instructions on how to respond to repair initiations by candidates.
- In part 1, in response to a candidate's repair initiation, examiner instructions are to repeat the test question once only but not to paraphrase or alter the question.
- The organisation of repair in the Speaking Test is highly constrained and inflexible; it is rationally designed in relation to the institutional attempt to standardise the interaction and thus to assure reliability.

How is repair organised?

- Examiners very rarely conduct repair in relation to candidate utterances. This is because the institutional aim is not to achieve intersubjectivity, nor to offer formative feedback; it is to provide data to assess the candidate's talk in terms of IELTS bands (Extract 3).

Applying CA

- How can CA inform test design and examiner training?
- Locating problems and fine-tuning
- Topic disjunction
- Recipient design

Topic disjunction

- Do you enjoy watching films?
- How often do you watch films?
- Do people generally prefer watching films at home or in a cinema?
- Would you like to be in a film?

Topic disjunction

- 8/32 candidates had a problem with the question – see extract 4
- Unmarked and unmotivated shift in perspective to a fantasy question.
- Implications for question design.

Recipient design and rounding-off questions

- The (optional) rounding-off questions at the end of part 2 provide a short response to the candidate's long turn and closure.
- Talk on "a piece of equipment which you find very useful".
- "Does everyone you know use this piece of equipment?"

Recipient design and rounding-off questions

- These types of questions are sometimes topically disjunctive in practice as they may not fit into the flow of interaction and topic which has developed.
- Create trouble when they are worded in such a way that they ignore the local context in which they are produced.
- See extract 5.

Recipient design and rounding-off questions

- However, some examiners modified the rounding-off question to provide good recipient design, which maintains the flow of the topic and interaction and avoids interactional trouble.
- See extract 5 .

Model for Application

- Microanalysis shows how trouble arises with specific test features.
- Microanalysis also shows how some examiners avoid this trouble.
- This suggests a solution for training of examiners: extract 6.

The Relationship between Speaking Features and Band Descriptors: A Mixed Methods Study

- Grading criteria distinguish between levels 5, 6, 7 and 8. To what extent are these differences evident in ISTs?
- The quantitative measures showed that accuracy and fluency do increase in direct proportion to score. Grammatical range and complexity was lowest for band 5, but band 7 scored higher than band 8 candidates.

The Relationship between Speaking Features and Band Descriptors: A Mixed Methods Study

- Which speaking features distinguish Tests rated at levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 from each other?
- Qualitative analysis shows no single speaking feature that distinguishes between the score bands. In any given IST, a cluster of assessable speaking features lead towards a given score.

LPIS as predictors of oral performance

- Universal problem of assessment:
- To what extent can oral performance in one variety of institutional discourse be used as a predictor of performance in another variety of institutional discourse in the future?

Speaking Test interaction and other speech exchange systems

- A very clear example of goal-oriented institutional interaction.
- Extremely high degree of pre-allocation of turns. The examiner also reads out scripted prompts.
- Test tasks are similar to some L2 classroom tasks.
- Some sequences are similar to those in University seminars and tutorials.

Speaking Test interaction and other speech exchange systems

- Repair in Speaking Test interaction differs significantly from interaction in classrooms and university settings, in which the achievement of intersubjectivity is highly valued and omnirelevant.
- Standardization is the key concept re instructions for examiners, so patterns of interaction are very restricted.

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Publications

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- Seedhouse P. (2013). Oral proficiency interviews as varieties of interaction. In Ross, S. & Kasper, G. (Eds.) *Assessing Second Language Pragmatics* (pp. 199-219) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Publication forthcoming

- Seedhouse, P. and Nakatsuhara, F. (forthcoming). The Discourse of the IELTS Speaking Test: Interactional Design and Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.