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

Paul Seedhouse
Newcastle University
New Directions Conference
Hanoi 2016
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.
- 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 reformulation 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.
Acknowledgement

• This paper draws upon 3 research projects carried out under the IELTS Joint Funded Research Program. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the presenters and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IELTS partners.
Publications


Publication forthcoming