Can Oral Proficiency Exams Promote Natural Conversation?

An Investigation into the Co-Construction of Discourse between Examiners and Candidates

Lucy Passmore, Kings College London: lucy.passmore@kcl.ac.uk

Introduction

Interactional competence (IC) is relevant to assessment and learning as it can facilitate real-life communication in which talk is 'jointly constructed' by participants (Jacoby and Ochs, 1995). A key objective underlying Trinity College London's Graded Examinations in Spoken English (GESE) is to promote natural interaction between the candidate and examiner (Trinity College London, 2010). A unique feature of the GESE is that examiners are not required to follow a script, providing greater potential for the co-construction of discourse to occur. This study aimed to investigate opportunities for the co-construction of discourse between candidates and examiners during the 3 phases of GESE Grade 7 and whether a case can be made that the exam promotes interactional competence.

GESE Grade 7 Exam Phases

Topic discussion phase: The examiner and candidate discuss a topic chosen and prepared in advance by the candidate.

Interactive phase: The candidate is required to respond to a prompt provided by the examiner by asking questions in order to obtain more information by expressing their own views.

Conversation phase: The examiner and candidate participate in a conversation initiated by the examiner on two separate topics.
(Trinity College London, 2010: 7-8)

Research Methods

The study considered two research questions:

1. What opportunities are provided by Trinity College London's GESE examination for the co-construction of discourse to occur?

2. In what ways are these opportunities actually taken up by candidates during the exam?

Conversation analysis was used to study examiner and candidate discourse. Firstly, 10 audio recordings of full grade 7 examinations were transcribed. An analytical framework based on 4 interactional resources defined by Young (2012) was then applied to analyse the interactional features that occurred across the 3 phases. Finally, the number of occurrences of each feature was counted for both examiners and candidates.

Young's (2012) Interactional Resources

1. **Sequential organisation and action selection**
2. **Turn organisation**
3. **Repair strategies**
4. **Boundary construction**

Findings

The transcribed recordings revealed a number of interactional features within the GESE discourse, which could be linked to the resources highlighted in Young's framework. The most significant findings involved the first two resources: *sequential organisation and action selection* and *turn organisation*.

Sequential Organisation and Action Selection

A frequently occurring feature of the above resource was the 'question-answer' adjacency pair. Examiners tended to ask more information-seeking questions than candidates, while candidates were more likely to provide extended answers (see Figure 1). However, this trend was reversed in the interactive phase, with candidates asking significantly more information seeking questions and the examiner providing longer, more detailed answers. In this phase the candidate is required to process and respond to more complex information, giving the exchange more in common with real-life communication. This suggests that the interactive phase provides opportunities for candidates to demonstrate additional interactional features.

Category	Feature	Occurrences in TP	Occurrences in IP	Occurrences in CP	Total
Sequential organisation / action selection	Question	**E:** 91 **C:** 10	**E:** 12 **C:** 57	**E:** 101 **C:** 72	**E:** 204 **C:** 72
	Response	**E:** 11 **C:** 87	**E:** 54 **C:** 7	**E:** 2 **C:** 85	**E:** 66 **C:** 179

Figure 1: Occurrences of questions and answers across the 3 phases of the GESE. (TP = Topic Phase, IP = Interactive Phase, CP = Conversation Phase, E = Examiner, C = Candidate)

Turn Organisation

Candidates often took extended turns, which were frequently facilitated by examiners through the use of continuers (for example, *uh huh* or *yeah*). An alternative discourse feature used by examiners was to comment on the candidate's contribution, resulting in a greater degree of co-construction. Figure 2 opposite demonstrates an example of such a case.

In this excerpt, the examiner's comment in turn 6 generates a natural exchange of ideas. A further feature demonstrated in the excerpt is the turn overlap, which Jefferson (1986) regards as a feature of mutual cooperation. The opportunity for these natural conversational features to occur in the exam is made possible by the fact that the GESE does not require examiners to follow a script.

```
1.  C:   and now in school we (.) use iPads
         (.) or computers
2.  E:   do you?
3.  C:   yes
4.  E:   you have iPads as well?
5.  C:   yes
6.  E:   what a great idea
7.  C:   yeah well they doesn't work really
         great because uh the wifi goes out
         (.) and then it goes in and so
         [its
8.  E:   [yeah yes so of course it's
         [wonderful
9.  C:   [it's off
10  E:   technology but you must have a
.        strong [internet
11  C:          [yes maybe in the future it
.        will be (0.5) like perfect
```

Figure 2: Excerpt from the Conversation Phase of a Grade 7 GESE Exam (C = Candidate, E = Examiner, [= overlapping speech, (.) = micro pause (0.5) = half second pause)

Conclusions

The results suggest that GESE grade 7 promotes several interactional features that are characteristic of real-life communication. It is also possible for examiners to promote co-construction by making comments on the candidates' contributions. In general, candidates took advantage of these opportunities. In this way, GESE grade 7 taps several aspects of interactional competence. Such features may contribute to positive backwash when preparing candidates for speaking exams.

References

Jacoby , S & E. Ochs. 1995. Co-construction: An introduction. Research on Language and Social Interaction , 28(3), pp.171-183).

Jefferson, G. 1986. Notes on 'latency' in overlap onset. *Human Studies*, 9(2-3), pp.153-183.

Trinity College London. 2010. *Graded Examinations in Spoken English (GESE) Syllabus from 1 February 2010.* London: Trinity College London.

Young, R.F. 2012. Social dimensions of language testing. In Fulcher, G. and F. Davidson. (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Language Testing*. New York: Routledge.