

Investigating the co-construction of discourse in Trinity College London's Graded Examinations in Spoken English (GESE)

A study conducted for a Masters dissertation at Kings College London

Background and research aims

A key aim of Trinity College London's Graded Examinations in Spoken English is to promote natural interaction between the examiner and candidate. This aim appears to be consistent with the ideas underpinning Interactional Competence Theory (ICT), which regards communicative goals as being 'jointly constructed' by participants (Jacoby and Ochs, 1995: 171). Advocates of this theory argue that since the joint construction of discourse is characteristic of most real-life communication, the provision of opportunities for candidates to demonstrate interactional skills is likely to contribute to the construct validity of an oral proficiency test. Therefore, the aim of the current study was to investigate the extent to which grade 7 of the GESE provides opportunities for the co-construction of discourse to occur between candidates and examiners and whether a case can be made that the exam promotes interactional competence. 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?

Research methodology

The study used conversation analysis to study examiner and candidate discourse during the topic, interactive and conversation phases of GESE grade 7. During the first stage of the study, 10 audio recordings of full grade 7 examinations were transcribed. An analytical framework based on 4 interactional resources defined by Young (2012) was applied to analyse the interactional features that occurred across the 3 phases. According to Young, these resources, which include *sequential organisation and action selection*, *turn organisation*, *repair sequences* and *boundary construction* are typical features of co-construction, and may be 'reconfigured' by the user in a variety of real life communicative situations. The number of occurrences of each feature was counted for both examiners and candidates.

Key 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. 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, which may not be covered to the same extent in the topic and conversation phases of the exam.

Turn organisation

Candidates often took extended turns, which were frequently facilitated by examiners through the use of continuers (for example, *uh huh* or *yeah*). While continuers are characteristic of natural conversation, they were used considerably more frequently by examiners indicating at times an unequal distribution of turn organisation. An alternative discourse feature used in some cases by examiners was to comment on the candidate's contribution, which generally resulted in a greater degree of co-construction. The brief excerpt below demonstrates an example of such a case:

1. C: and now in school we (.) use iPads or (.) 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

In this excerpt, the examiner's comment in turn 6 generates further contributions from the candidate, which help to generate a natural exchange of ideas. A further feature demonstrated in the excerpt is the turn overlap (indicated in turns 7-8, 8-9 and 10-11 by square brackets). Jefferson (1986) regards turn overlaps as features of mutual cooperation, which indicate that speakers have a close understanding of one another. 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.

Conclusions and future implications

The results of this small-scale study appear to suggest that grade 7 of the GESE promotes a number of interactional features that are characteristic of real-life communication. The interactive phase in particular enables candidates to demonstrate follow-up comments and questions to a greater extent than the other phases. 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, although their overall proficiency level in English is likely to influence their ability to do so. In this way, GESE grade 7 appears to tap several aspects of interactional competence. Further studies in this area could contribute to the construct validity of the GESE and inform candidate preparation and examiner training.

References

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