

Areas of difference between more and less successful candidates

Method: The findings in this section are based on corpus analysis of 14 successful and 14 less successful Grade 7 and 8 candidates from L1 Spanish or Italian backgrounds. The successful candidates were defined as those who were awarded mark 'A' on their performance, while the less successful candidates were awarded mark 'C' or 'D'. All of the findings are based on the Interactive task.

Area 1: Interaction and communication – the case of questions

Finding: More successful speakers ask more questions (both direct and indirect) while less successful candidates rely more on declarative sentences or chunks to move the conversation forward.

Communicative implications: Well-formed questions lie at the core of successful interaction. Whereas declarative sentences in some cases can function as questions (eg the interrogative nature of the sentence can be indicated by rising intonation), their function in the conversation may not be as easy to determine as that of genuine interrogative sentences. The use of such sentences can thus cause breakdown in the flow of the conversation when the examiner is trying to figure out how the sentence contributes to the conversation (eg is it meant to function as a comment, question or a suggestion).

Example 1: More Successful Speaker (MSS)

<S> *ah okay so you like going to the mountains*
 <E> *er it might be nice to go to the mountains perhaps it depends*
 <S> *it can be cold <.> **do you like cold or hot?***

Example 2: Less Successful Speaker (LSS)

<E> *well I I have to go to China*
 <S> *ah okay I think that er you will learn er something like this this language*
 <E> *mm but he's h-he's not he's not he hasn't been paid so if his boss has no money*
 <S> *yeah*
 <E> *the business will close*
 <S> *er erm*
 <E> *he will have no job and*
 <S> ***she she can't change the the boss he her boss***
 <E> *sorry sorry*
 <S> ***erm she can't change her boss***
 <E> *er she's he's tried but erm*
 <S> *it's difficult*

Area 2: Interaction – engaged and active listenership

Finding: More successful speakers show more support as listeners than less successful speakers.

Communicative implications: Success of communication does not rest solely on successful speaking strategies: appropriate listening skills are of equal importance in helping the conversation to flow naturally. Good listeners help to co-manage the conversation by sending signals to the speaker. These signals are sometimes termed 'back-channel cues' and provide information to the speaker about the position of the listener (eg is the listener following the conversation, would the listener like to change the topic, etc). The use of these markers distinguishes 'active' or 'engaged' listeners from 'passive' listeners. These markers are, for example: **mm, okay, yes, yeah, uhu, oh, no.**

Example 3: MSS

<E> have you heard of t'ai chi?
<S> er
<E> it's a very old Chinese exercise
<S> **uhu** no I don't know it
<E> and it looks very similar but it works on an inside energy
<S> **ah**
<E> in the body so you are you are bending
<S> **mm**
<E> in a very good position your pelvis
<S> **mm**
<E> eye neck and your
<S> **ah**
<E> because it's very important to be grounded in life
<S> **uhu**

Example 4: LSS

<S> and <.> and <.> and only give him a bit of money
<E> yeah but but he I mean he he actually needs a hundred pounds I mean you know if he doesn't have if he doesn't if he can't pay the bill then he's going to be in trouble really <.>
<S> **erm then** <.> well erm <.> let me think please <.> you know it it's a hard situation because er i-if if he is asking you for more money
<E> mm <.> well it's not more money I mean this is the first time to be to be fair it's the first time that he's asked me but I know that if I give him the money it won't be the last time
<S> **okay then** er try to try to give the money to him and then erm don't give more money

Area 3: Interaction – fluency and hesitation

Finding: More successful candidates used fewer hesitation markers ('er', 'erm' or unfilled pauses) than less successful candidates.

Communicative implications: A certain level of fluent flow is necessary for effective communication. At the same time, dysfluency markers such as 'er' and 'erm' are also a natural part of spoken, unplanned discourse produced by both native and non-native speakers. These markers indicate the place in which the speaker searches either for the right word (lexical gap) or for an idea (information gap). However, a high density of these markers can hinder conversation and distract from the message. As the high number of dysfluency markers is often a result of lower L2 proficiency and vocabulary size this is not something that can change in short term.

However, L2 speakers could be taught strategies that would enable them to deal with these lexical gaps in a more natural way, eg by using a range of expressions as conversational 'place-holders' which would make their speech appear more natural yet allow them to search for information, reformulate the message or seek a clarification. These are, for example: 'right', 'say again?', 'I mean', etc.

Example 5: LSS

<S> you should **erm** <.> **erm** ask her if they if she would like to play to play to swim
<E>
<S> another <.> another sport <.> but **erm** if she like it very much **erm erm** she <.> **erm** <.> she <pause=6> **er** she
<E> yes she does and erm you know she's very good she's very really good at playing football
<S> **erm** and **erm er** it is a good idea to to make **erm er** all the possible for

Area 4: Interaction – taking responsibility for the conversation

Finding: More successful speakers take a more active part in the conversation and assume responsibility for its continuation.

Communicative implications: Being an active partner in a conversation does not mean that one has to talk a lot or most of the time (see also the point on active listenership). Active partners also help to move the talk along by creating opportunities for the other participant/s to contribute to the conversation by asking questions and offering comments and suggestions which the other speakers can react to. All of these contribute to a smoothly flowing conversation.

While more successful speakers make contributions which are easy to react to/follow, less successful candidates often let conversation fade. In these situations, the examiner has to take the initiative in moving the conversation forward, by asking questions or introducing new topics.

Example 6: LSS

Prompt: <E> okay erm more and more people seem to be doing their most of their shopping on the internet these days I prefer seeing things in the shops

(...)

<E> because it's cheaper i-is it cheaper?

<S> erm something yes er something no erm is cheaper erm isn't cheaper yes but er if er erm but erm the erm someone had to er get you er think so you paid this person so erm is the same price

<E> really

<S> so

<E> **okay erm am I right to be worried?**

<S> erm

<E> **am I right to be worried about the internet?**

<S> erm <>

<E> **do you think that I'm correct?**

<S> yes

<E> worrying

<S> yes yes

<E> mm

<S> yes yes

<E> mm

Example 7: LSS

<S> I but I think if she seem you can you can lend some money your friend is a bit is a good things because she she needs money

<E> mm

<S> things

<E> so do I

<S> yes er is there er a crisis in your country?

<E> er yes there is

<S> **yes**

<E> yeah er everybody is erm is struggling yeah

<S> **yes Spain too**

<E> **yeah**

<S> **yes**

<E> **er unless it's it I'm I'm just worried as I say that if I lend him the money**

<S> yes

Area 5: Interaction – clarifying the prompt

Finding: Less successful speakers did not fully understand the prompt and did not seek sufficient clarification.

Communicative implications: Understanding the prompt is crucial for the development of the conversation. A failure to do so prevents the candidate from engaging effectively in the conversation or leads to a potential communication breakdown. As the linguistic skills of the candidates taking the exam are still developing, the situations where they fail to understand a sentence or fail to recognise a word may be quite common. However, there are effective strategies that can be used to seek clarification from the examiner ranging from more simple ('Can you repeat, please?') to more complex ones (eg asking further questions about different aspects of the prompt to gather more information and help understanding).

Example 8: LSS

<E> alright erm my neighbour often uses the train without paying for a ticket he doesn't see anything wrong with it but I'm not so sure

<S> is your **your daughter** oh sorry is

<E> my **neighbour**

<S> yeah

(...)

<S> yes but you are you're mo= er you're erm **her mother** and <.> he <.> he needs I don't know I </S>

Example 9: LSS

<E> a friend of mine has just been offered a great job abroad **her family** don't want to go and I'm not sure how to advise **her**

(...)

<S> it's interesting and er what is job?

<E> er a professorship at the University Of Vienna

<S> ah and is it a good er erm er opportunity for **him**?

<E> absolutely **she's** been trying for years to get a position like this

<S> and why does **his family** opposite

<E> I I I I guess **the kids** are just used to you know their environment their friends they don't want to go

<S> okay and how old is is he?

<E> she's thirty five

<S> **has he got a family?**

<E> mm

<S> and sh= is erm **has he has he got a wife?**

<E> erm no she hasn't

Example 10: LSS → MSS

<E> okay er <.> excuse me a friend of mine asked me to lend him some money recently I understand his situation but I'm not sure if I should do it

<S> some money you

<E> mm

<S> **can you**

<E> a

<S> **repeat please?**

<E> yeah a friend of mine

<S> **a friend**

<E> a friend of mine asked me to lend him some money recently

<S> uhu

<E> I understand his situation but I'm not sure if I should do it

<S> erm erm er do you think the your **your friend** have a a bad time?