

The same question was found equally challenging by the candidate in the extract below:

Extract 53

219 E: what about the relationship <between education (.) and (0.3)
 220 work.> (0.3) how will it change in the future.
 221 (1.6)
 222 C: erm:: (0.4) education and work change in the future in a sense
 223 that? (0.8) erm (2.5) if you need to:: (.) if (.) if (0.4) ye-
 224 (0.2) th- (.) if there is education. (0.4) it would be very
 225 (0.4) er::m (0.7) of course you if you are educated (0.4) work
 226 is very much:: (.) erm at hand (0.3) you know you will always
 227 get a job. (0.5) if you are educated. (0.5) so without erm
 228 (0.3) education (0.6) perhaps:: erm (0.5) work will be:: very
 229 slippery
 (7083t132)

The candidate in the extract above achieved a grade of 7.0 but also failed to get to grips with this topic. The topic of the relationship between education and work is one which candidates should all have some experience of, and may have some opinions, on. However, they may never have thought about how this relationship might change in the future and, in general, the question assumes a very high level of education and professional experience.

To sum up, problematic questions may involve an unmotivated shift in perspective, may require specialist knowledge or experience which may not be available to most candidates, or may be puzzling in some way, eg “are names important?” Questions which may refer to a number of possible items (eg “what does your name mean?”) may generate lengthy repair sequences. A sequence of questions on a particular topic may appear unproblematic in advance of implementation. However, this may nonetheless be a cause of unforeseen trouble for candidates, especially if an unmotivated and unprepared shift in perspective of any kind is involved. Piloting of questions combined with analysis of the resultant interaction is therefore recommended.

4 CONCLUSION

4.1 Summary of findings

Topic is a vital construct in the Speaking Test, in which the organisation of topic must be understood as inextricably entwined with the organisation of turn-taking, sequence and repair and as directly related to the institutional goal. There are a number of interactional resources drawn on by examiners to mark a new topic or a topic shift. Within Part 1 of the Test, these topic boundary markers (TBM) are pre-determined by the script, though examiners occasionally depart from the script. In Parts 2 and 3 of the Test, examiners are free to employ TBMs at their discretion, which leads to a wide variation in how topic boundaries are marked. There are three ways to mark a topic boundary in this corpus, namely unmarked topic boundary, generic marking and explicit marking of topic boundary. When candidates have produced a response to a question, examiners employ a variety of next moves. These are either to: i) move onto the next topic question from the script/frame; or ii) demonstrate to the candidate they expect more of a response, which usually involves particular uses of back channels; or iii) employ a device to seek clarification or expansion on the candidate’s response.

In a similar way to turn-taking, sequence and repair, topic is standardised in furtherance of the institutional goal. In the data, management of topic is almost entirely determined by the examiner’s script and how this script is interactionally implemented throughout each individual interview. There are asymmetrical rights to topic management between the examiner and candidate. These characteristics are directly related to the institutional goal of ensuring validity in the assessment of English speaking proficiency. In the Speaking Test, there is an archetypal organisation which

combines turn-taking, adjacency pair and topic, as follows. All examiner questions (with the exception of the administrative questions) contain two components: a) an adjacency pair component, which requires the candidate to provide an answer; and b) a topic component, which requires the candidate to develop a specific topic. We call this organisation a ‘topic-based Q-A adjacency pair’. So in the Speaking Test, unlike in conversation, topic is always introduced by means of a question. To obtain a high score, candidates need to do the following: a) understand the question they have been asked; b) provide an answer to the question; c) identify the topic inherent in the question; and d) develop the topic inherent in the question. So in the Speaking Test, topic is scripted and entwined with the organisations of turn-taking and sequence in order to ensure standardisation.

In Part 1, candidates answer general questions about a range of familiar topic areas; it is a succession of topic-based question-answer adjacency pairs. In Part 2 (Individual long turn), the candidate is asked to talk on a particular topic and the examiner listens without speaking. The examiner may ask one or two scripted rounding-off questions related to the topic when the candidate has finished talking. Part 3 differs from part 1 in the following ways: there are more abstract and challenging questions and there are no scripted boundary markers for examiners. Although Part 3 is termed ‘two-way discussion’, it is almost identical to Part 1 interactionally, in that it consists of a series of topic-based question-answer adjacency pairs. There are hardly ever any opportunities for candidate to introduce or shift topic and they are generally closed down when they try to do so.

The characteristics of high scoring and low scoring tests in relation to topic are as follows. Candidates at the higher end of the scoring scale tend to have more instances of extended turns in which topic is developed in Parts 1 and 3. There is some evidence that very weak candidates produce short turns with lengthy pauses in Part 2. There are fewer instances of topic trouble in the higher scoring candidates and more in the lower scoring candidates. Candidates gain high scores by engaging with the topic, by expanding beyond minimal information and by providing multiple examples which enable the examiner to develop the topic further. Candidates with low scores sometimes struggle to construct an argument and a coherent answer. High-scoring candidates develop the topic coherently, using markers to connect clauses. Candidates with a high score may develop topic using lexical items which are less common and which portray them as having a higher level of education and social status. Candidates who achieved a very high score typically developed topics that constructed the identity of an intellectual and a (future) high-achiever on the international stage. By contrast, candidates with low scores developed topics in a way that portrayed them as somebody with modest and often localised aspirations. Examiners may take the following features of monologic topic development into account in Part 2: is the question answered; is the topic focus clear or not; is there movement from topic to topic and/or sub-topic; is such movement stepwise, motivated and flowing, or not; is topic development coherent or not; do candidates mark topic/sub-topic shift clearly or not; and for what length of time is the topic developed?

In general, the dataset revealed that there is very little variation in the interaction style of examiners. In cases where there is some variation in the interactional style of examiners, the factors that seem most relevant are: topic shift markers and their use; interruptions to keep candidates on-script or on-topic; use of backchannels; support in repair; deviations from the script; use of follow-up questions; and use of evaluation. Examiners rarely diverge from the brief in the corpus. In the current data, a number of candidates encountered trouble in relation to a series of questions about their names. In Part 3, there is some evidence that even top-level students find some questions intellectually challenging and problematic. Problematic questions may involve an unmotivated shift in perspective, may require specialist knowledge or experience which may not be available to most candidates, or may be puzzling in some way.