

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CANDIDATE TALK AND THE SCORE THEY RECEIVE IN THE IELTS SPEAKING TEST¹

Ashabul Kahfi Susanto²

Newcastle University
School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences
Address: King George VI Building, School of ECLS, Queen Victoria Road,
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU
United Kingdom

Email: ashabulunhas@gmail.com

Telephone: +6281241395809

Abstract

The focus of the study was on how features of candidate talk in the IELTS Speaking Test (IST) relates to the high and low score they receive. Overall, the aim of this study was to identify the candidate discourse feature that distinguishes their English proficiency levels in the IST. Therefore, this study demonstrated as follows. Firstly, the organisation of the interaction of the IST. Secondly, the function of Conversation Analysis (CA) approach applied in the IST. Lastly, the important discussion is to classify the relationship between the candidate talk and the score that they were given in the IST. Furthermore, the study found the classifications of interaction in the IST that indicates the high and low score of the candidate speaking performance in which to identify the candidate talk in relation to the lexis, syntax, and other forms of language they produce, and also how they develop their personal identity by showing that the candidate is a high achiever for their future goals during the speech in the IST. Additionally, the data of spoken interactions between the examiner and the candidate were taken from IELTS official website and YouTube, and the data transcripts would be based on the transcription conventions of conversation analysis.

Keywords: Candidate Talk, IELTS Speaking Test, High- and Low-scoring Candidate, Conversation Analysis.

1. Introduction

It is commonly understood that several tests have been provided to measure the academic speaking or oral ability of the students as one of the requirements to enrol the

¹ The publication of this paper is funded by Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) Scholarship

² MA Student in Cross-Cultural Communication and Applied Linguistics, Newcastle University, UK

university level especially in the English-speaking countries, and one of which is IELTS speaking test (Ducasse & Brown, 2011). However, Issitt (2008: 131) has suggested that taking the IELTS speaking test would be “more tension” for the candidates as they are assessed in a short time individually, and also due to having waited for several times would make them nervous. Therefore, Issitt (2008) proposed several strategies dealing with the IELTS Speaking Test in his study. Consequently, the issues regarding of how to identify the spoken discourse of candidates which includes their form and function of the language use, and the “behaviour of the oral examiner” in the speaking test on how the examiner gives support to the candidate, and a number of interactions established among interviewer and interviewee, have recently been a research interest for most researchers (Taylor, 2000; O’Loughlin, 2002; Seedhouse, 2012).

In regard to concerning the criteria of how to measure the English-speaking ability of the candidate, Brown *et al.* (2005) as cited in Brown (2006) pointed out that there are four major points which included in the assessment of speaking performance, as follows; a) the linguistic competences of the candidate, which includes the grammar and lexical resources; b) the fluency which considers the rate of the speech, pause, and repair; c) the pronunciation; and d) the content of the speech. In addition to that, there are two major issues, linguistic capability and interactional issues in which the students may fail in Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs) (He, 1998; Seedhouse, 2012). However, Douglas argues that it seems to be unequal in speaking test to give a similar score to the candidate by only relying on grammar, fluency and coherence, vocabulary and pronunciation in which “the speakers may produce qualitatively different performance and yet receive similar ratings” (1994: 125). Additionally, Douglas (1994: 126) points out that in the study of Douglas and Selinker (1993), in most of speaking proficiency test, although the candidate produces a “rhetorical complexity” in his talk, it would not be assessed based on its category, but it would be evaluated based on the grammar, since the rhetorical complexity is not in the scoring category, and the assessment of grammar would be more relevant to it.

Furthermore, for the purpose of the discussion, the primary focus of this study is to comprehend the relationship between candidates talk and the score they receive in the IST. According to the study of Lazaraton (2002: 161), she identified the “live examination performance” on how to see the connection between candidates talk and their score in which it focuses on the language features produced, and the different scores that the candidates received. In addition to that, Lazaraton (2002: 161-162) adds

that “there has been a very little published work on the empirical relationship between candidate speech output and assigned ratings” (see also Seedhouse, 2012: 3). Therefore, it is key to observe this particular matter, as the embodiment of identifying the relationship between candidates talk and their scores would “provide valuable input for validation processes” (Seedhouse *et al.*, 2014: 5).

Therefore, this study will attempt to demonstrate as follows. Firstly, the organisation of the interaction of the IST. Secondly, the function of CA approach in the IST. Lastly, the relationship between the candidate talk and the score that they get in the IST based on the observations of Seedhouse *et al.* (2014). In addition to that, the classifications of interaction in the IST that indicate the high and low score of the candidate speaking performance in order to identify the candidate talk in relation to the lexis, syntax and other forms and functions of language they produce, and also how they develop their personal identity by showing that the candidate is “a high achiever” for their future goals during the speech in the IST (Seedhouse, 2012: 1; Seedhouse *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore,, the data of spoken interactions between the examiner and the candidate from IELTS official website and YouTube, and the data transcripts would be based on the transcription conventions of Seedhouse (2004) and Atkinson & Heritage (1984) of conversation analysis.

2. The Interactional Organisation of the IELTS Speaking Test (IST)

The substantial matter that needs to be understood before identifying the connection between candidate speech and the band score they receive is the interactional organisation of the IST, as it could act as a catalyst for comprehending the institutional goal of the IST, and also to differentiate its interactional organisation and “the benchmark of free conversation” (Seedhouse & Harris, 2011: 6). In addition, the other key issues that will be exemplified in this study is the relationship between candidate talk and the score that they will get. Thus, Seedhouse (2012: 10) suggests that it should bear in mind to understand the background of “how the interaction is organised” and how the function of the interactional organisation in order to distinguish “the high- and low-scoring behaviour” of the candidate.

Furthermore, it is important to know the overview of the interactional organisation in the IST as follows (Seedhouse & Egbert, 2006; Seedhouse & Harris, 2011, Seedhouse, 2012). It is illustrated that the organisation of turn-taking and sequence in the IST has

positively linked to the rule of the IST. In part 1, it is a question from the examiner and subsequently the candidate answers adjacency pairs. In part 2, it is a long turn speaking by the candidate, “started off by a prompt from the examiner and sometimes rounded off with examiner question” (Seedhouse, 2012: 10). In part 3, it is a question from the examiner, and candidate answers adjacency pairs, this part is basically the same with the part 1, but the question in part 3 would be more complex, and there will be an engagement of a discussion between the examiner and the candidate. In order to follow the institutional goal of the IST, Seedhouse & Harris (2011: 14) describe that the topic provided by the examiner is “pre-determined” as it has been “written out in advanced in script”, and the examiner should follow the script without any additional information.

Another thing to be considered is how the interactional organisation could be able to distinguish between the high- and low-scoring tests (Seedhouse, 2012). Furthermore, Seedhouse & Harris (2011: 15) describe that in part 1 and part 3 of the IST, the component of “turn-taking, adjacency pairs and topic” are all gathered in the basic organisation of the IST. In this case, Seedhouse & Harris have divided two elements of all questions asked by the examiners; the first element is “an adjacency pair”, in which the candidate should respond or answer the question of the examiner, and the second element is “a topic”, in which the candidate should develop or provide more explanation and description about the topic given. This particular organisation classified as “topic-scripted question-answer (Q-A) adjacency pair” (2011: 15). From this classification, Seedhouse (2012: 11), therefore, presents the concepts of “topic-as-script” and “topic-as-action”. As a consequence, this concept could lead to determining the candidates’ score in the IST which will be demonstrated further in the discussion.

3. The Function of Conversation Analysis (CA) Approach in the IELTS Speaking Test (IST)

In order to identify the relationship between candidates talk and their score in the IST, it is substantial to employ the Conversation Analysis (CA) approach, as Seedhouse (2012) suggests that CA is not only functioned to comprehend the interactional organisation, but also to analyse the speaking performance of the candidate in the IST. Also, Seedhouse (2004: 12) examines that the purpose of the CA analysis is to “develop an emic perspective” or participant perspective in order that the participant would be able to “achieve the organisation and order” of the interaction in which both of the interlocutors could have a shared understanding of their action when they talk, in

terms of turn-taking, adjacency pair and sequence of their interaction. Additionally, it is the belief of Seedhouse (2012: 8) that CA analysis is more appropriate to identify “low- and high-scoring candidate” in the IST, “as it is an inductive approach which examines the micro-detail of the interaction” which analyses both verbal and non-verbal behaviour of the interlocutor.

Furthermore, several studies have applied the CA approach to identify the candidate discourse in the speaking test as follows. In the study of Lazaraton (2002), she undertook the CA approach by observing the comparison between the discourse produced by the candidates and their band scores in the IST in order to make sure the suitability of how to comprehend the speaking assessment of the candidate’s discourse in the language testing context. Additionally, Seedhouse (2011) points out that the implementation of CA approach is also used in the study of “Richards and Seedhouse’s (2005) model of “description leading to informed action” (p. 39). In this context, they have suggested that in order to create equality among candidates in the Speaking Test, it is, then, substantial to assure the “validity by standardisation of examiner talk”.

Moreover, Seedhouse & Harris (2010) also employ the CA approach in their study. They classified the high- and low-scoring candidate in the IST by examining candidate responses in part 1 and 3. In addition to that, they found that the candidate who accomplished the high score has a tendency to elaborate the topic given by providing more instances and explanations in his talk. On the other hand, the low- scoring candidate tends to respond the examiner with a long pause, a short turn and provides less contribution to the speaking test (see also Seedhouse, 2014).

Therefore, by understanding the function of CA model from several studies, as above mentioned earlier, in analysing the spoken interaction of oral proficiency test, it is, then, argued that the use of CA approach would be more appropriate to be employed in this study by investigating of how to see the relationship between candidate discourse and their band scores.

4. The Relationship between Candidate Talk and the Score in the IST

In this part of the study will attempt to outline the relationship between candidate talk and the score they receive in the IST. Although the candidate talk or discourse feature is not categorised produced in the band descriptors of the ITS, it is the belief of Seedhouse *et al.* (2014) that the performance of the candidate talk would impress the

examiner, as it could be able to give a significant influence on their score.

Furthermore, the outline of this analysis will be based on the study of Seedhouse, (2012) and Seedhouse *et al.* (2014). As above mentioned, the spoken discourse of the candidate will employ CA approach based on the transcription conventions of Seedhouse (2004) and Atkinson & Heritage (1984). For the purpose this analysis, this study will attempt to illustrate the comparison between a high- and low-scoring candidates in order to comprehend its difference.

4.1. Topical Coherence

Topic is a key feature of candidate success in the IST, as Seedhouse & Harris suggest that in order to achieve a high score in the IST, the candidate requires following the instruction as follows; “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” (2014: 12). In this context, it will be compared the high- and low-scoring participant in relation to the way they coherently address the topic given.

Extract 1

1 E: ↑Do you think that's::(0.1) the way that(.)the:: news
2 any reported is generally goods: em::(0.1)in er:: or
3 in different media, newspaper, on television,(0.2)and
4 radio.
5 C:→m:::(0.3)I thought er:::(0.3)newspaper(.)is quite good
6 fo::r(0.2) our causes er:: in not just [meing::](0.2)
7 [yun](0.2) it's m::: ((say in whisper)) reading
8 newspaper is quite (0.1) I think is quite good hobby(.)
9 [yeah]

The extract 1 exemplifies the low-scoring candidate (score 4.0), in which he struggles more to answer the question proven by the way he displays a hesitation marker, 'er::' and 'm::' with lengthy pauses. The most crucial issue is that he could not address the question coherently, as he was previously asked about his opinion regarding the news from different types of media such as; newspaper, radio, and television, but eventually, he only describes his opinion about the newspaper. In addition to that, in his final statement, he utters that “I think it's quite a good hobby” in line 8. From his

statement, it can be noticeable that he misleads with the question, as he, further, talk about his hobby. Therefore, this feature of discourse fails to provide the information about the topic coherently.

Extract 2

118 E: .hh >what are some important< programs(.)for
119 communities, to provide their residents.
120 C:→well(.)I think that(.)a very important program↓is
121 athletic(0.1)because(.)>many people say<(0.1)a
122 healthy population ↓is a happy population(0.2)so I
123 think(.)it's important >for the community leaders< to
124 ensure that(.)the sports club like tennis, football,
125 are available and to all of their residents.

On the other hand, the candidate in extract 2 is the embodiment of high-scoring candidate (score 9.0). The participant in this extract has successfully addressed the topic with the coherent and succinct response in line 121. Additionally, in order to link his argument coherently, he uses the markers 'so' in line 122 to connect the clauses, and also, he use the adverbial clause for reasoning 'because' in line 121, it is, then, proven by his ability to link his talk logically in a proper sequence.

4.2. Controlling Trouble/Repair

Extract 3

90 E: .hh(.) er:: ↑what characteristics are:
91 advantages(.)and:: which are disadvantages for social
92 leaders.
93 C:→m:: a hard question.
94 can I: just think for a [moment.]
95 E: [↑sure] >take your time<.

96 C:→okay.
97 (0.3)
98 well:: I guess if I had to think(.)of er:: a key
99 personality trait(.)for a good leader(0.1)it would be::
100 confidence(.)>if a person is< confident(.)they can
101 really gain the respect and:: trust >of their audience<.

102 On the other hand(.)a disadvantages of >a good leader
103 would be someone< who:: displays(.)socially
104 irresponsible behaviour like, drinking, orgambling.

The candidate in extract 3 receives the high score (9.0). In this context, the candidate has successfully controlled the trouble occurs in her speech by repairing the question to the examiner in line 94. The candidate just wants to make sure whether her interpretation regarding the question is relevant to her further response. Also, although the candidate initially struggles with the topic, she still produces a discourse in line 93, in which the candidate simultaneously responds by saying ‘a hard question’. This particular action can be a strategy for the candidate to think about the topic rather than just keeping silent or using a filler. Ultimately, after asking for clarification, the examiner, then, confirms the candidate repair in line 95, and agree with the candidate interpretation.

Extract 4

36 E: ↑what kind of things, >do you think people will enjoy<
37 doing in the ↑future.
38 C:→what kind of people .hh(0.2)m::
39 E: what kind of hobby(.)would be popular(.)in the future.

The extract 4 is positively different from extract 3, as this extract embodies the low-scoring candidate (score 3.0). In this situation, the candidate finds it difficult to answer the question, she, thus, tries to repair the question displayed in line 38. However, instead of repeating the question, the examiner directly moves to the following topic in line 39, which is more specific about the previous question.

4.3. Display Engagement with the Topic

Extract 5

54 E: being in the public <eye>(.) famous people are watched
55 by everybody(.) >what are the < advantages (0.1) and
56 disadvantages of that.
57 C: → oke (.) the advantages i: s er: > there a lot of people <
58 watching you, so: you become famous (.) a: :nd > there a
59 lot of < things (.) which you can do correctly and er: :
60 politically right er: : because er: : y' know er: : there
61 is media watching you (.) and you can (.) > go ahead < and
62 pass the message, to: : the media (.) in a right way (.)
63 the disadvantages er: : that's er: : > you have to be <
64 diplomatically correct (.) at time if there are certain
65 things (.) which are: : incorrect still (0.1) you have to
66 go ahead a:nd do that (.) which er: : doesn't make
67 sense (0.1) because > there a lot of < political leaders
68 they: : - they are into corruption m: : like in india and
69 the: : (0.2) well er: : at time there are something (.) which
70 are wrong, but er: they have to do it.
71 E: > why d' they have to do it. <
72 C: → because (.) > there are a lot of < political pressure a:nd
73 the: : if they don't do it (.) > the political party < would
74 not support them a:nd ((laughing)) in the end (.) they
75 they have to resign.
76 E: do you think (.) the media plays a role (.) in ↑ there.

In extract 5, the candidate achieves a high score in the IST (8.0). In this example of talk indicates that the candidate fully engages with the topic, and it is displayed in line 57, he successfully responses and develops the advantages of being a famous people, and also in line 63, he does not forget to address its disadvantages. Furthermore, the candidate engagement with the topic also impressed the examiner to ask the following question in line 71. Consequently, it can be clearly seen that the candidate develops the topic with more elaborations and supported by the evidence, as Seedhouse (2012) examines that the engagement of the candidate with the topic given is elaborated “beyond minimal information and by providing multiple examples” (p. 21). Therefore, candidate talk in extract 3 is classified as the concept of “topic-as- action” introduced by Seedhouse (2012: 11).

4.4. Successful Repetition & Identity Construction

Extract 6

105 E: .hh er:: if you could be a leader in your
106 neighborhood. (0.2) What social issue would you address
107 C: →so:: what you are asking is (.) <if I were a leader> what
108 social issue (.) I would like to [change]
109 E: [yes] exactly.
110 C: →Okay ↓ well (.) a hot topic in my community
111 is:: (.) the:: >high cost of< post secondary
112 education (0.1) many students in er:: >college and
113 university< really struggle to pay their tuition
114 fees (0.1) so:: if I were a leader (.) I would try and make
115 er:: strong initiative (.) to create >some sort of
116 program< with either free:: or subsidized (0.1)
117 >post secondary education<.

In extract 6, the candidate achieves the high score (score 9.0). There are two major factors why the candidate in extract 8 gets a higher score. Firstly, she has successfully repeated the question of the examiner, by confirming her understanding about the topic to the examiner in line 107 and 108. Subsequently, the examiner provides a positive response to the candidate by saying ‘yes, exactly’ in line 109. Therefore, the candidate can continue her speaking confidently, as she considers that she is on the right path.

Another factor that indicates the candidate in extract 8 receives 9.0 band score since she successfully constructs her personal identity in line 114 until the end of her talk, as Seedhouse *et al.* (2010) examine that the candidate who can show the aspect of his identity in the speaking test may give a positive impact on his score. In this occasion, the candidate demonstrates her intellectual and modesty that she is a missioner proven by her concern in the educational setting. This particular discourse was successfully addressed by Seedhouse (2012) and Seedhouse *et al.* (2014), in which it can give a positive impression to the examiner.

Extract 7

126 E: and the:: ↑what training(.)do you need for you:r(.)job.
127 C:→.hh m:: in fact .hh m:: there is no::(.)a very m:: very
128 well designed system: in this field(0.3)a::nd my job
129 i:s dental system(0.1)bu::t(0.3)>everyone can be a
130 dental<(0.2)assistant I think.

The candidate with a low score (score 5.0), on the other hand, tend to develop the topic by displaying that he is a modest person and “often localised aspirations” according to Seedhouse (2012: 30). In her talk, the candidate is asked about the training that she needs for her job in line 126. However, in her respond, she illustrates that her job is not a well-designed system in her job in line 127 and 128. Moreover, by showing her modesty, she considers that everyone can be a dentist. From, this example, it can be noticeable that the candidate does not portray her job as optimistically well designed. In addition to identity construction in the candidate talk, Lazaraton et al. (2008) present the concept of Language Proficiency Identity (LPID), they suggest that this particular area or analysis need to more investigated, especially how the impression of the examiner in relation to the candidates’ LPID which they construct during the talk (see also Seedhouse, 2012: 31).

4.5. ‘Colloquial’ delivery

Extract 8

77 E: the use of >famous people< in the::advertising(.)in
78 other things(.)d’you think there is an: negative
79 effect(.)especially on young people.
80 C:→er:: at time(.)yes:: >there are some of<
81 the advertisements(.)which are not or not er:::
82 y’know(0.2)they- they are offensive(0.2)to the younger
generation

The high-scoring candidate is exemplified in this extract (score 8.0). The candidate in this interaction has proven her ability to impress the examiner by displaying her ‘colloquial delivery’ or “native-speaker delivery” (Seedhouse, et al., 2014: 19) such as; ‘y’know’ in line 82. Although in fact, the candidate is not a native

speaker of English, she is still able to sound like a native speaker in this particular context. Seedhouse & Harris examine that this certain discourse has a positive impact on the score of the candidate, as it would be able to establish a “holistic impression of the examiner” (2014: 19).

4.6. Lexical Choice

Extract 9

84 E: ↑How important are:: leaders (.) to a community of people.
85 C:→oh:: I think that:: good leadership is absolutely
86 ↑vital for the progress, and stability of: er:
87 a| community(0.2)Humans are social by nature and::
88 having strong individuals >guide them<. is
89 essential(.)for their development.

The candidate in extract 9 exemplifies a high-scoring participant in the IST (9.0). The candidate successfully develops the topic by using a relatively less common lexical choice, in which he uses the words such as ‘vital’, ‘stability’, ‘individual’ and ‘essential’. Moreover, the way the candidate develops the topic and the choice of lexical items indicate that she is an educated and an intellectual person and has a high level of social status (Seedhouse, 2012).

4.7. Hesitation Marker

Extract 10

30 E: ↑what- what are the most popular types of hobby
31 in korea(.)now(0.1)↑what the most people like to
do.
32 (3.2)
33 C:→(ca)er::(1.2) many koreans like reading
34 .hh and talk about(2.0)m:::(2.5)talk abou:t others(.)
35 [yeah] .hh m:::(2.5) m:: and some:: person(1.3)er::
36 like to(1.2)go to the movies (0.2)

The low-scoring candidate tends to doubt and display any hesitation in the talk. The extract 10 exemplifies the candidate who gets a low score (3.0). In this analysis, the candidate is indicated to be less fluent and struggles more to answer the question

and tend to display any hesitation markers such as; ‘m:::’ and ‘er:::’ in line 33, 34, and 35. Consequently, this particular feature of speaking, portraying floor holders or hesitation markers may influence the candidate’s score in terms of fluency as it is depicted in the band descriptors (Seedhouse et al., 2014).

4.8. Syntax

Extract 11

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141 E: .hh ↑have the programs in your community changed
142     much(0.1) since you were a child.
143     C:→hh(.) >I never really thought of that
144     before<(0.1).hh
145     I guess >when I was a child< most of the programs >at
146     the community center< would be::(.) either age
147     restricted, or:: separated by gender >so:
148     maybe::(0.1) nowadays > I- >I’ve seen a lot of
149     programs< are: co-ed, and >their also open to< all
150     ages > and I think this is great >because it <allows>
151     the community to::(.) come together >no matter what< age,
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The candidate in extract 11 achieves a high score (score 9.0) because of her ability to develop the topic using a complex sentence. Seedhouse (2012: 24) examines that the capability of the candidate “to develop the topic is often linked to the ability to construct syntax”. It can be clearly seen that the candidate in extract 11 uses a complex syntax and construct the sentence with subordinate clause, using an adverbial clause for reasoning, ‘because’ in line 149. In addition to that, she displays her ability to use a variety of tense, in line 144 she uses a past tense, in line 147 she constructs a perfect tense, and in line 149 until the end of the talk, she uses a present tense. Therefore, the use of complex sentence and the ability develop the topic are linear to each other, as it could lead to increasing the candidate’s score in terms of grammar.

5. Conclusion

As above seen, this study has presented the institutional organisation of the IST (Seedhouse *et al.*, 2006; Seedhouse, 2012), the function of CA approach in relation to analysing the micro-detail of a conversation (Seedhouse, 2004) in the IST, and the primary discussion of this study is to analyse the relationship between candidates talk and the score they receive in the IST. In addition, it can be proven from the analysis above that the speaking feature of the candidate has a positive relation to the discourse they produce during the test (Seedhouse, 2012; Seedhouse *et al.*, 2014). Therefore, it is suggested that this particular investigation needs to take into consideration for the purpose of creating a valid and reliable oral speaking test, especially in the IELTS Speaking Test.

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