



# Cambridge English Centenary *Symposium on Speaking Assessment*

## **Interactive communication**

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In his analysis of the nature of spoken language ability from a cognitive science perspective, Field (2011) noted that most forms of speaking are *reciprocal*, i.e. they involve more than one person, with participants in the spoken encounter switching regularly between the roles of speaker and listener. As they do this, the speaker needs to be attuned to their partner's contribution, while the listener assumes a responsive and dynamic role with the power to maintain the direction of the discourse, or to alter it in a way that may not have been intended by the previous speaker. The exchange between speaker/listeners is characterised by features such as repetition of lexical and syntactic patterns, topic development, and co-ordination of the participants' respective contributions to the emerging discourse through a process of *turn management* which may sometimes involve *repair*. Field (2011) emphasised the substantial cognitive demands that are imposed upon the speaker/listener in a reciprocal (or dialogic) speaking task due to the fact that such an encounter typically takes place under the pressure of real time and often under conditions that bring additional pressures, e.g. lack of topic familiarity, constrained linguistic resources, or an asymmetrical power relationship between participants.

Over the past half century, psycholinguistic accounts of speech production (e.g. Levelt 1989, 1999) together with sociolinguistic accounts of spoken interaction in both L1 and L2 (e.g. Beebe 1980, Coates 1993, Hymes 1972, Wolfson 1989) have significantly improved our understanding and description of the nature of spoken language ability for the purposes of teaching, learning and assessment. Research in sociolinguistics led to the notion of *interactional competence* (Kramsch 1986), according to which *talk-in-interaction* is co-constructed by the participants according to personal characteristics and social conventions (see also Markee 2000). From the 1990s onwards, the application of qualitative research methodologies, such as discourse and conversation analysis, permitted the close scrutiny and detailed identification of differing patterns of talk-in-interaction. This in turn enabled the construct of speaking ability to be enriched in the fields of language pedagogy and assessment (Bygate, Skehan and Swain (Eds) 2001, Lazaraton 2002, McNamara 1997).

From a language assessment perspective, the notion of co-construction in spoken interaction has important implications for the design and use of speaking tests. A range of different test formats has been developed over the years for assessing speaking proficiency but the extent to which these formats permit *reciprocal* interaction to take place can vary significantly. Compare, for example, a speaking test taken over the telephone or through a computer laboratory, with a face-to-face interview or a group oral test (see Fulcher 2003, Luoma 2004 and O'Loughlin 2001 for specific examples of speaking test formats and their features). Even within the narrower range of direct (face-to-face) speaking test formats, patterns of reciprocal interaction can vary, depending upon whether the participants are equal partners in the exchange (e.g. peer candidates in a paired discussion), or whether they are

assigned different roles and responsibilities (e.g. an interviewer who leads the interaction and a candidate who is obliged to follow that lead). It has been argued that testing students' speaking ability in pairs (or in groups) may allow them to demonstrate their interactional competence or interactive communication skills more broadly than in the traditional one-on-one oral proficiency interview format (Taylor and Wigglesworth 2009). Recent years have seen a growth in the use of paired and group speaking test formats, enabling more research to take place in this area and thus provide empirical evidence to support or refute such an assertion (e.g. Brooks 2009, Galaczi 2008, May 2009, Nakatsuhara 2013).

Direct speaking test formats permit the elicitation of a sample of talk-in-interaction so that we can evaluate this for what it tells us about a test taker's interactive communication skills, i.e. their ability to engage in the co-construction of spoken language in a purposeful manner. However, the design and use of such speaking test formats raises a number of issues and challenges for test providers. First, such formats necessarily involve listening as well as speaking skills (Field 2011) though this is not always adequately accounted for within the construct definition. Secondly, a range of interlocutor variables has been shown to impact on speaker performance and score outcomes. Research suggests that features such as interlocutor gender, age, personality, acquaintanceship and conversation style co-operate to shape the spoken exchange (Berry 2007, Brown 2003, O'Sullivan 2002), as well as the asymmetrical distribution of power between interviewer and test taker. Even in paired or group tasks between peers, interlocutor variables such as proficiency level and intelligibility have been shown to influence outcomes (Nakatsuhara 2013). A third issue relates to how raters assign scores to individual test takers on the criterion of interactional competence or interactive communication, and what such scores mean (Fulcher and Davidson 2007, Taylor and Wigglesworth 2009). According to He and Young (1998), interactional competence is not a trait that resides in an individual, nor is it independent of the interactive practice in which it is constituted. Finally, it could be argued that the traditional notion of interactive communication is largely premised upon face-to-face spoken interaction involving physical proximity (i.e. two or more people in the same room). The recent growth of internet-based communication opportunities, much of it 'face-to-face' but using Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) (e.g. via Skype, Facetime), may mean that current understanding of interactional competence or interactive communication will need revising to take account of the impact of technology.

This presentation will briefly review how we currently understand the construct of interactive communication as it relates to spoken language proficiency. We will consider some of the challenges and (as yet) unresolved issues over how we adequately account for it in our speaking assessment practices and we shall reflect on some possible directions for future research and test development.

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