

Test Delivery

Andy Roberts
emery-roberts
Independent Aviation English Consultants
Plymouth, England

Summary

This paper focuses on the role of the interlocutor in test delivery. It includes examples of inappropriate behaviour, an explanation of the difficulties this could lead to, and a check list for fair and objective test delivery.

Introduction

In the light of the recent ICAO recommendations for the assessing of English language levels, it is essential interlocutors and test facilitators are able to conduct tests in a fair and objective manner. There are some fundamental requirements test conductors need to fulfil. In theory the procedure to conduct an oral test is straightforward, however in practice there are certain human instincts that have to be withheld. Whether the interlocutor comes from a linguistic or an operations background is immaterial. There is a natural tendency to help somebody who is struggling. Teachers and trainers are used to offering assistance when needed. In a test situation this could seriously bias the results.

A simple solution would be for the facilitator to follow an exam rubric without any deviation. Unfortunately this does not work in an exam situation where interaction, checking and clarifying are among the skills being tested. Models of interaction as practised by IELTS examiners for example, allow the interlocutors to respond and paraphrase when necessary, within limits that the examiners are thoroughly trained in. These examiners are assessed not only on their rating ability but also how they conduct a test. For the purpose of this paper it is the latter that will be considered.

Interlocutor behaviour

One of the prerequisites in any test is that candidates are faced with a similar set of parameters. It is impossible to provide exactly the same conditions for every candidate. However we must endeavour to get as close to this ideal as possible. One of the areas that can influence candidates' performance is that of interlocutor behaviour. ICAO recommend face to face, direct or semi direct testing. Tests of aviation personnel in the past have been (and sometimes still are) conducted using 'chats' between operations personnel and pilots/ATCs. If the candidate was able to hold a conversation on flight connected issues they were deemed to be capable of communicating effectively in English.

The issue of the effectiveness of such tests is a separate one that is starting to be addressed as Aviation tests for English come on to the market. There has been an understanding that if candidates are to be assessed fairly then they must be assessed under comparable test conditions. This equality of test format needs to be applied to how the test is conducted. What seems in theory a relatively straight forward and common sense notion in practice requires a certain amount of training and diligence. The major factor is one of objectivity. An interlocutor needs to be objective. Why? Some will argue that the only way to effectively measure a candidates true worth is to allow the examiner/interlocutor to respond and question according to the candidates' discourse, interjecting whenever necessary to fully extend and investigate the knowledge of the test taker.

This is indeed a wonderful way to find out just what a person knows. But in such a fluid situation it will be impossible for the interlocutor to give candidates an equal amount of input. We then have situations

whereby one candidate may have received a vast amount of information and assistance and another may not. In such a case the candidate may quite rightly claim 'that's not fair. You gave him/her more help than me.'

One way to avoid this is to ensure that the interlocutor says the same thing to each candidate. That they read from a selection of predetermined scripts, each vetted for equality in degrees of difficulty. But in such a situation how do we allow for the possibility of interaction and the measurement thereof? We might just as well have a candidate sat in front of an unresponsive recording. It is necessary to have an objective, responsive interlocutor.

Examples of inappropriate interlocutor behaviour

I: = Interlocutor

C: = Candidate

1

I: How do you put out a fire?

C: You need to use the err... the ex, er ex

I: The extinguisher?

C: Yes, the extinguisher

Don't give the candidates answers. Maybe he/she would have got the word without help, maybe not. In this case we don't know. Nor do we know if he/she understands the interlocutor. As anyone who has learnt another language will know, there are times in a conversation when you reply 'yes' in answer to a question without actually understanding what you are saying yes to.

2

I: How do you put out a fire?

C: Well it depends on the situation

I: Indeed it does. Why, I remember the time I was taking off from Miami. It was an incredibly hot day and we'd been sitting on the tarmac waiting for ages. The engines were pretty hot anyway and when we eventually took off our number 2 engine flamed out. I had it under control quickly but I was a bit concerned for the passengers because it looked a lot more dramatic than it was.

C: Did you turn back?

I: Yes of course we....

Who is being assessed here, the candidate or the interlocutor? Sometimes people find it irresistible to add their own experiences, and to 'show off' their own knowledge. Don't do it!

3

I: How do you put out a fire?

C: Well there are two things that need to happen for a fire to start

I: Actually there are three.

C: Er, yes three.

I: I'm glad I'm not on your plane

C: ?!

Firstly, we are not assessing the candidate's operational knowledge rather his language use. Secondly, what use does the examiners third comment serve?

4

I: How do you put out a fire?

C: It depends on the source of the fire.

I: That's right, excellent.

In this case, the candidate may well think he has answered correctly. Does that mean that if the examiner doesn't say 'that's right excellent' to other questions, the other questions are wrong? Does the candidate keep going until he gets the same response?

5

I: How do you put out a fire?

C: What do you mean?

I: How do you extinguish a fire?

C: Extinguish a fire?

I: Yes how do you stop a fire?

C: Stopper fire. What's a stopper fire?

I: Do you know what a fire is?

C: Yes

I: So how do you put out a fire?

C: Put out?

I: Do you know what put out means?

C: Yes

I: How do you put out a fire?

C: I don't understand

An element of paraphrasing questions is necessary if we want to test the candidate's clarification strategies. But there needs to be a set limit that all interlocutors follow. For example the interlocutor is allowed to rephrase the question once only. If the candidate still doesn't understand, move on to the next question. Interlocutors need to be trained in what is an appropriate paraphrase and what isn't. As mentioned before, asking closed questions doesn't enable us to know if the candidate knows an answer, or is just guessing.

6

I: How do you put out a fire?

C: Well, fire can be very dangerous. I remember when...

(10 minutes of talking) ...of course sometimes fire can be useful. Pre historic cavemen used fire to...

(10 more minutes of talking)

I: Thank you that's the end of the test.

The interlocutor must be able stop the candidate from talking if necessary. The candidate needs to be exposed to the full range of examination tasks and not spend all their time answering the one they feel most comfortable with. The simplest way is to say 'thank you' and move on. The examiners' rubric needs to contain timing limits for each section, which the interlocutor must adhere to.

Interlocutor ethics, reliability and practicalities

As well as the input an interlocutor provides during a test, there are a number of ethical and practical considerations that need to be adhered to. The appendix of document 9835 contains the ILTA (International Language Testing Association) code of ethics. The list refers to acceptable behaviour and includes such items as examiners not knowing the candidates they examine. Ideally this extends to interlocutors as well.

Test location

Consider carefully the room where testing takes place and the position of the candidate and interlocutor within it. While some elements are fairly obvious – the need for quiet surroundings, undisturbed sessions etc- other elements may not be, for example don't have the examiner sat in front of a sunny window or bright light so that the candidate has to squint to see them.

Equipment

Ensure all necessary equipment is available for example;
CD player and digital recording device
timetable
speaking test
assessment criteria (If rater and interlocutor roles are combined)
mark/record sheet
reliable clock

Standardisation

Interlocutors need to be trained and assessed in their ability to deliver fair tests. They should be assessed in the delivery of such tests in a practice environment before interlocuting for real. Once at the required standard, interlocutors need to be regularly checked to ensure that they maintain the high standard of impartiality required for the fair assessment of candidates.

Conclusion

Interlocutor checklist

- Never divulge information about candidates performance
- Do not examine known candidates
- Use a frame for purpose of standardisation- maintain timing and format
- Ensure all candidates are treated fairly and equally
- Make sure the input is similar and delivered in the same manner
- Refrain from making unscripted comments or asides
- Do not prompt candidates who are struggling to find language
- If a candidate exceeds the time limit, move on by saying 'thank you'.
- Indicate clearly that it is the end of the test by saying, 'thank you that is the end of the speaking test'.

As a last point, IELTS examiners are 'examined' in test delivery, and only when they are able to proceed in the correct way are they allowed to examine. In order to ensure that their delivery remains at the necessary high standard, they are monitored and have to re-certify on a regular basis. If this is the case in IELTS, then test delivery in such a 'high stakes' environment as aviation, needs to settle for nothing less.

References

Bachman, L. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Linda Taylor (2003) *The Cambridge approach to Speaking Assessment*. Research Notes. Issue 13

Don Porter (1997) *Dimensions in the Diversity of Language: A Language Testing Perspective*. Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Reading, England

Porter, D., & Shen Shu-Hung. (1991). Gender, status and style in the interview. *The Dolphin 21*. Aarhus University Press.

— — — — —