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## **The Commonalities of Topical Development in IELTS Examination and NNS-NNS Conversation**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Background: Standardised tests like IELTS Speaking examination has various parameters to gauge the English speaking competency of an individual. . However, there are doubts whether conversations that occur in standardised tests bear resemblance to real-life conversations. Since these tests assess an individual’s conversational proficiency, it is important to examine the resemblances in order to understand whether a natural conversation can take place in tests.*

*Objective: To understand the differences between the IELTS speaking interview and real-life conversations.*

*Methods: The paper is heavily reliant on qualitative data. An original discourse between two NNSs from Bangladesh pursuing postgraduate degree in England was recorded for the purpose. They engaged in conversation in a non-institutionalised environment.*

*Result: Although the questions for IELTS examinations are pre-set unlike in genuine conversation, the former bears similarity with real-life conversations. Both speakers act as 'examiners' in conversation: Speaker A initiates conversation through topic changes or topic fading, while Speaker B uses back-channelling to allow Speaker A to keep the floor.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Speaking, IELTS, topical development, NNS.*

## 1. Introduction

Social interactions are a necessary part of life. Verbal communication, in particular, is the most widespread form of human interactions, thus making it an integral part of spoken proficiency in L2 learning. An individual's L2 conversational skills are tested through language proficiency examinations like IELTS and TOEFL to measure L2 oral competence, but it is often argued that these fabricated tests rarely bear resemblances to naturalistic interactions that happen in a daily basis. The paper delves into this to find out the mentioned similarities and uses the framework of topical development presented by IELTS and Gardner for the purpose.

According to Klimczak-Pawlak (2014), Kachru's framework of concentric circles is an imperative tool while assessing World Englishes. The three circles, termed as Inner, Outer, and Expanding, respectively refer to native speakers of English, speakers of English as second language, and users of English as a foreign language. The circles represent the various cultural roles, acquisition models and language spread (ibid.). Bangladesh falls into the second group, i.e. the Outer circle, where English was imposed on its citizens during the Imperial Rule. Although Kachruvian model displays the polycentricity of the English language, there are limitations to this artificial construct. Some places where English is used as an L1, L2 or FL are not inclusive in the model; this happens since some countries are not acknowledged by all. For instance, China does not recognize Taiwan as an independent nation (Schmitz, 2014). However, Kachru's model classifies the Englishes geographically, meaning that

the changes in the English of Outer circles in their relocated settings are not recognised (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Regardless of all the arguments, the language plays a vital role in Bangladesh. It serves as one of the official languages of the country, being used for numerous other fields including social, educational, administrative, literary, and even entertainment (Berns 1995 as cited in Klimczak-Pawlak, 2014). The language has a great influence in all aspects of lives of the people; this depicts English as an important means of communication in that country.

The communication that takes place can be of two kinds (Burns and Seidlhofer in Schmidt, 2013)

1. Transactional communication: general purpose is transaction of products and service (ibid.). An example would be placing a booking at a travel agent.

2. Interactional communication: general purpose is to establish and manage social relationships, such as casual conversations between friends.

However, real life interactions are usually a mixture of the two kinds stated above.

### 1.1 The hidden meaning of 'interactions'

Harvey Sacks (1992), inspired by Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, stumbled across "a 'wild' possibility" (op. cit., p.xvi) when he was faced with a problem, which led him to ask a question as to whether 'talk' is a more structured and organized expression Schegloff (1992) reports that Sacks recognised talk "as an object in its own right" (p. xviii). Sacks gradually analyses conversations to reach to a

conclusion. He primarily explains that there are numerous ways they fit one another, as though a part of a puzzle with multiple dimensions (Jefferson, 1995). The notion was further developed by Jefferson and Schegloff.

O’Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter (2007) define conversation analysis (or CA) as a framework that helps to analyse in detail the “‘local’ aspects of interactions” (p.226). The importance of CA lies in the fact that it places focus to activities that occur spontaneously, and dissects boring, pedagogical talk methodically (University of Leicester, n.d.). Thus, CA helps to explore the organisation and underlying meaning that may lay hidden in an individual’s expression of thoughts.

Despite its usefulness, CA does have some shortcomings. He (2004) recognises a major one: CA does not focus on introspective features, which may play an important role in language (cited in O’Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter, 2007). Moreover, the system is incapable of keeping track of learning over a longer period, since it focuses on the local context. Rampton, Roberts, Leung and Harris (2002) provide another drawback, explaining that the method is unable to provide proof of an individual’s learning curve with time.

## 1.2 Literature on non-native speakers

In the past, it has been often asserted that NNS conversation is a poor reflection of native speaker (Prodromou, 2008). Views are changing in this regard and many have articulated how L2 user conversations have their own set of rules. Aston (1993 *ibid.*) examines how L2 users utilise their available resources for the creation of convergence

and comity in order to establish and sustain a friendly relationship. Kasper (1989) suggests how L2 users might have to follow different principles of conversation to be a successful speaker. Resemblances still exist; as Kasper (1989) points out in results he found from Bochum data that learners tried to use the opening moves similar to the control group of English native speakers. However, Kasper mentions that the methods used to implement individual moves were mostly insufficient (*ibid.*), meaning that despite all the similarities, NNS conversations are unique in their own way and will not necessarily resort to NS principles all the time.

One such similarity that does exist is topic introduction, and Kasper (1989) talks about it in the context of non-educational discourse (a term used by Kasper to refer to face-to-face conversations). Along with other exchanges (please refer to Appendix 1) that are important for an opening conversation, Kasper mentions how this feature is also an integral part of any conversation, regardless of whether this is a conversation opening for NS or NNS.

Having stated that, the question arises how topical development takes place in a conversation.? A study of how topics are developed between two speakers has been discussed in the section below; the paper in question highlights aspects of topic development that are observed by examiners to initiate conversation and encourage the other speaker to engage further in the interaction.

## 1.3 Topic development in IELTS Speaking Test

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the most popular

ways of testing an individual's English proficiency. Tests are taken by international students to provide a proof of their level of English competence, which is marked with a band score in between of 0 to 9, ranging from 'did not attempt the test' to 'expert user'. The score is calculated based on the points received in the four parts of the test- Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. The article shall focus on the Speaking part of the test (IELTS, n.d.).

The IELTS Speaking Test is divided into three parts:

Part 1 (Introduction)

Part 2 (Individual long turn)

Part 3 (Two-way discussion)

The paper magnifies on the third part. In this section, a discussion follows with participation from both parties, which is supposed to be connected through theme to the topic prompt presented in the second part. The paper examines how this topic-prompt based conversation is analysed. Though Seedhouse and Harris (2011) produce a simple definition of topic: that it is "'subject' or 'subjects' of a conversation" (p.7); they also discuss the complications that arise if the analysis is based on this definition (Seedhouse and Harris, *ibid*). Therefore, the study employs CA approach for topic analysis. This helps to magnify on aspects of initialisation and shifts of topics, along with topic endings- an overall perspective of the participant is taken into account as the interactions unfurl. The latter aids in analysing how people have varying ideas of the same topic (Sacks, 1992, as cited in Seedhouse and Harris, 2011). Nevertheless, it is supposed to be an interaction heavily controlled by the examiner, who is more responsible for its regulation.

This, therefore, brings forward the debate that a power play is in place - the examiner holds more power and raises the question as to how different it is to real-life conversations, where both the speakers are supposed to have equal rights over their turns (please refer to Appendix 1). As per Seedhouse (1996), a real conversation takes place when there is no pedagogical expectation from it and that too in a non-institutionalised setting. Also, the communicators should be of equivalent status to each other.

To find out whether real-life interactions and IELTS examination interviews are different, this paper does a comparison between the two using raw data collected by the researcher. For comparison purposes, the paper uses IELTS strategy of topic analysis with Gardner's topical development, as discussed in the following sections.

#### 1.4 Types of topical development

Gardner (1987) presents different kinds of topical development that occurs in a spoken conversation - these are essential when attempting to analyse a conversation in terms of topic management. The features are given below, and will later be picked up in Section 4.2:

Topic introduction: this takes place when the first topic of a conversation is introduced, right after the primary stages of greeting, identification, and others have been completed.

Topic continuation: when an exchange occurs, the primary presupposition in that respective exchange may be connected to the primary presupposition that was present in the exchange right before that. This connection may continue for several adjacent exchanges, thus causing topic

continuation. Storytelling, with comments and responses from the listener, is an example of topic continuation.

Topic shift: if a primary presupposition involved in an exchange cannot be connected to the previous exchange, but can, instead, be connected to an earlier exchange. Also, when the earlier exchange, in turn, is connected to the previous exchange through topic continuation, topic shift occurs at that time. There are three sub-types:

- If the topic hits a dead end, it is possible that in order to continue the ongoing sequence, the speaker may refer to a thread from earlier adjacency pairs (please refer to Appendix 1).

- 'Topic shading' (Hurtig 1977 as cited in Gardner, 1987, p.139) takes place when the topic in question is stretched forward.

- 'Topic fading' (ibid., p.139) acts as a bridge between topic shift and topic change/topic recycling and topic reintroduction, meaning that topics of previous exchanges are referred to, at the same time, preparations are also made for a new/recycled/reintroduced topics. (Gardner, 1987).

Topic recycling: this happens when the primary presupposition present in an exchange cannot be connected with the previous sequence of exchanges, but can, however, be connected to a sequence of exchanges that occurred much earlier through topic shift.

Topic reintroduction: it bears similarity to topic recycling, the difference being that the primary presupposition present in a particular exchange is linked with sequence of exchanges that occurred much earlier, one that is not related to the preceding sequence through means of topic shift. An instance

would be going back to an interrupted topic after injecting the speaker's own comments. Topic change: this is the second topic or later topics that are brought in after topic introduction - the structure bears resemblance with topic introduction. The new topic portrays no connection with any of the previously occurred exchanges in the history of discourse.

Topic avoidance: Gardner explicitly mentions that this "needs some comments" (p. 139); it has been explained as a psychological feature which does not have a specific structure, but can be generally said that the speakers need to recognise the topic to develop further on it.

## 2. Method

Due to the nature of this research, qualitative method of data collection seemed most appropriate. It was crucial to gather original discourse between two participants in a natural environment. It can be challenging to find entirely authentic data with ethical restrictions. However, to maintain ethical conventions, the participants were informed beforehand and a recording (audio transcript in Appendix 3 and transcription conventions in Appendix 2) was done with their permission. For ethical purposes of this paper, they will be termed as Speaker A and B. A and B are from Bangladesh, thus making them NNSs. They are pursuing their Masters degree in different streams. Speaker A sat for an IELTS examination, where she got an overall IELTS score of 8. Speaker B did not sit for an IELTS examination because the university waived the requirement for her, but for the record, she did sit for TOEFL, where she got 114/120, which roughly equals to a score of 8 in IELTS. The parties were provided with the

liberty to choose the topic of discussion as well as the setting. This is done with the intention of making participants comfortable, hence ensuring maximum chances of a natural conversation. They decided to speak about their work experience back in their home country. The setting of the conversation was an empty common room of one of the university halls. The participants were informed of the entire research through an information sheet before the recording session. The resultant conversation included effective characteristics of a qualitative interview—there was a natural flow and detailed responses (Dörnyei, 2007). Although they were aware of the time frame, they exceeded it. Therefore, some parts of the conversation have been edited out of the transcript, and the ending of the conversation was included. The participants were made to sign the consent forms after the session and kept in case of future references.

### 3 Results

The interpretations of the conversations lead to the understanding that both speakers perform the role of an IELTS examiner from time to time during the course of their conversation. The analyses show that any one of the speakers navigates the conversation for sets of exchanges, thus acting as the ‘examiner’.

Nunan (1987) says that in a genuine conversation, any speaker is free to take the floor. As demonstrated in Section 4.1, A seems to be the one who raises more questions and follows the conventions of topic boundaries (that too, without any conscious knowledge of it). Following the findings in Section 4.2, a pattern can be noticed where Speaker A takes the initiative

more to change a topic or resort to topic fading. Thus, Speaker A acts as the ‘examiner’ in the conversation, navigating the conversation through her questions and statements.

Nevertheless, there are times when Speaker B manipulates the conversation. Speaker B usually uses back-channelling such as “mmm” and “hmm” as listener response and to let Speaker A keep the floor. If referred to 4.1, there are instances of B making clarification requests. In 4.2, B implements topic avoidance to remain in her chosen topic of discussion, ensuring that the stream of conversation goes along that subject. Thus, B performs the role of an IELTS examiner in certain occasions.

### 4. Discussions

The following sections examine the ‘roles’ of the participants during the conversation. In addition, a glossary has been attached as Appendix 1 to explain some terms used in the paper.

#### 4.1 IELTS analysis

The IELTS report by Seedhouse and Harris (2011) focuses on topic development; the characteristics of topic management as conducted in the Speaking Test are similar to the recorded conversation. The similarities are discussed in the following paragraphs, along with adequate support from conversation extracts.

Seedhouse and Harris (2011) mention how marking of topic boundaries are done in three ways:

1. Unmarked topic boundary happens when the examiner asks a question directly without any additional interactions to proceed to the next topic.

Extract 1

show that there would be a change in topic. Speaker A does use “because” (line 70) with

- 2 B: It was amazing? Actually I really love teaching so from the beginning I have always been wanting to  
3 teach in a school :and it was a very good experience I would say [I used to teach in]
- 4 A: [how old would your] students be=  
5 B: =my  
6 students were about (.) 10 I think (1.0) 11 to 13 age group=  
7 A: =oh okay so I guess they were a bit more mature like I  
8 have heard that the younger students sometimes get really out of hand

From the extract above, it can be seen that A poses a direct question in line 4 without any explicit topic shift markers. B follows this shift and instead of finishing her previous sentence in line 3, she chooses to answer the question she was asked.

2. Generic marking of topic boundary occurs when topic shifting takes place without the presence of any explicit statements

Extract 2

- 65 B: none of them were from (.) uh English medium background=  
66 A: =really?  
67 B: yeah (..) most of-  
68 A: - the teachers [too?]  
69 B: [yeah yeah]  
70 A: because I heard that ABC employed teachers from their own school  
71 B: not really: in my floor (.) I had teachers who were like (..) thirty-[fiveish]  
72 A: [:oh okay]=

In the extract above, A simply changed the topic of discussion from B’s colleagues to how ABC supposedly recruits teachers from their own school. This was done very casually, without any proper statement to

the intention to justify her previous expression of surprise (“really?”). Nonetheless, the topic lasted for a brief time, before B went back to what she was talking about (line 71). This can also be deduced as an instance of topic avoidance, since B refused to stray away from her current topic of discussion.

3. Explicit marking of topic boundary is another way, in which a change or shift in topic is marked by examiners through usage of explicit markers.

Extract 3

Here, Speaker A uses “do you know” as an explicit marker of topic change, and



- 23 B: (tch) [it's some]  
 24 A: [do you know] something that I noticed that [aaah in back]  
 25 B: [mmm]  
 26 A: in back in back in the times [when I was a student]  
 27 B: [mmhmmmmhmm]  
 28 A: there was a really formal relationship between [teachers and students]  
 29 B: [hmmhmmmm]

proceeds to talk about student-teacher relationships during her school days. She reinforces this further by saying “something that I noticed”, which clearly foreshadows that the upcoming topic will consist of her personal perspective.

A section in the IELTS report (ibid.) has been dedicated to possible examiner follow-ups in response to candidate’s answers. Three possible methods are given:

1. Proceeding to the next topic question: to explain this further, Extract 1 is again helpful; this is because in response to B’s previous comment, A proceeds to the next topic by asking a question in line 4. Similar phenomena can be noticed in lines 16 and 45, where new questions are posed to move on to the next topic.
2. Informing the candidate that an elaborate response is expected: this can be seen in line 25 of Extract 3, where B uses back-channelling (refer to Appendix 1) to

acknowledge A’s statement, and at the same time, encourages the speaker to continue. Longer bouts of back-channelling can be noticed in Extract 3 - here, B’s response in lines 27 and 29 are certainly longer than usual back-channelling. A uses repetition in line 26 to buy time to form her words, which is one of the many purposes of repetition: Paltridge (2008) reports how individuals resort to using repetitions when they think about what they want to voice and speak at the same time. B senses this apprehension within A to work out her way to form the words, hence, using longer back-channelling elements in order to encourage her to speak further.

3. Using a device for clarification request or elaborated candidate response: The following devices can be employed in placing a clarification request or for eliciting elaborated candidate response:  
 “a. Scripted why? questions

- 10 A: [mmhmm yeah yeah]  
 11 B: is like the age when they are you know starting to know a lot of different things [and everything]  
 12 (chuckles)  
 13 A: [yeah yeah]  
 14 B: and yeah b-b-b-but it was  
 15 amazing [not-not] as bad [not as]  
 16 A: (ohhh) [did you] have any like student crushes=



- b. Unscripted why? questions
- c. Unscripted miscellaneous prompts” (op. cit., p.80)

The first two categories are absent in the transcription. None of the speakers pose any ‘why’ questions. However, they resort to the third category to ask for a response, and to allow the other speaker to keep the floor.

#### Extract 4

For example, in lines 10 and 13, Speaker A uses prompts such “mmhmm” and “yeah yeah” to return the floor to B. Other instances can be found in lines 22, 35, 42, 51. Through these back-channel markers, she also encourages B to continue talking.

#### Extract 5

- 58 B: [mmhmm]
- 59 A: where I had just uh around like seven colleagues in the same room
- 60 B: mmm hmm
- 61 A: so I didn't get to work with too many people but we were all really close because we came from the  
62 same background=
- 63 B: = .hhh yeah that's a good thing the problem with in my case was none of them were of my [age]
- 64 A: [:oh]
- 65 B: none of them were from (.) uh English medium background=
- 66 A: =really?
- 67 B: yeah (..) most of-
- 68 A: - the teachers [too?]
- 69 B: [yeah yeah]
- 70 A: because I heard that ABC employed teachers from their own school
- 71 B: not really: in my floor (.) I had teachers who were like (..) thirty-[fiveish]

Similarly, Speaker B uses such prompts in lines 58, 60 and 69 for the same purpose.

#### 4.2 Gardner's topical development

Using Gardner's theory to analyse the above, produces a number of findings.

Topic introduction: The evidence of topic introduction is transparent in line 1, when B poses a direct question, thus signalling the beginning of a topic.

Topic continuation: This can be seen through lines 4-15, with discussion being solely on student's age group and their maturity level. This can also be seen quite clearly in line 63 of Extract 5, when B continues almost instantly from where A left off in line 62, as seen from the latched utterance.

Topic shift: Two kinds of topic shift can be detected in the conversation. Firstly, topic

shading can be seen in line 88, where B talks about being treated like a child. In the previous exchanges, the discussion was based mostly on how she is unable to get along with her colleagues because the age difference affected their topics of discussion, which A picks up on and provides her personal opinion of how “they tend to also treat you like a child”, thus leading to a stretching of the initial topic. Secondly, topic fading can be detected in line 45 in Extract 6, the line that brings up the question regarding rules of adding students on Facebook. This was mentioned earlier in line 30, when A talks about students adding their teachers on Facebook. In the lines between, the discussion wavers on students’ approach towards teachers, before A brings a direct question in line 45 to promote the change in topic.

Extract 6

- 30 A: but nowadays students are like te-adding them up on Facebook they're mo more friendly [with the  
31 teachers]
- 32 B: [oh? yesss]
- 33 A: [and like they confide you onn]
- 34 B: [they stalk you on Facebook]=
- 35 A: -yeahhh-
- 36 B: = ((oh my god)) they stalk you on Facebook
- 37 A: so it's a whole [another dynamic]
- 38 B: [(small laugh)]
- 39 A: right now=
- 40 B: =another dynamic but I have (,) had students who have you know been really respectful  
41 towards (,) [me]
- 42 A: [okay]
- 43 B: and very sincere and there were some students who were like you know I don't like to do this I don't  
44 like to do that why do we have to study so much (chuckles) [you know]
- 45 A: [so like did you] have any rules about adding

Topic change: There are quite a few instances of topic change present in the conversation, as seen in lines 4, 16, 45 and 57. In line 4, the change occurs with A posing a question, and similar scenarios take places in lines 16 and 45. In line 57 in Extract 5, A changes the topic of discussion not with a question, but with a statement: she starts sharing her personal experience with colleagues in one of her previous jobs.

Topic avoidance: An instance can be noticed in line 71 (Extract 5) where B avoids elaborating further on the question asked by A in line 70. Instead, she continues her statement from line 67, commenting on the age of her colleagues.

##### 5. Limitations of the paper

Regardless of relevant cautionary measures taken, there are certain limitations to note,

which in turn, may have limited the outcomes:

1. As discussed earlier, the conversation is not entirely a natural one, so it is evident that the speakers are very aware and more organized about what they are saying. Observer's paradox is unavoidable; speakers are more conscious about what and how they speak once they know they are being recorded (Meyerhoff, Adachi, Anna and Strycharz, 2011).
2. The study is based on one discourse between two participants, and not over a number of days, which might have yielded more data, thus helping to come up with a better conclusion.
3. The unavailability of IELTS results for the Speaker B might be slightly questionable, since one might say the conversion from TOEFL to IELTS result may not bear the perfect accuracy that an IELTS result would have provided.
4. One can argue that the conversation is compromised owing to the fact the participants know each other. The comfort zone present between the two is not equivalent to the relationship shared by the IELTS examiner and candidate

## **6. Tackling the limitations**

Since observer's paradox is an obvious presence, steps suggested by Meyerhoff et al. (2011) have been observed to make maximum elimination of that phenomenon: "these include modifying the number of people in an interview, the kinds of topics discussed, and the activity" (p.132). The individuals used for the study were friends, which helped to avoid extra nervousness that usually arises while holding a conversation with somebody new. The topics of discussion, as mentioned earlier, were left entirely on the speakers, with no external

pressure from the researcher. The activity itself was portrayed in a simple way in front of the participants, which basically required them to converse between themselves while the conversation is recorded in the cell phone; the device was kept alongside other cell phones, which helped to reduce chances for any anxiousness concerning with a recording device in sight (since people are more accustomed to seeing cell phones these days).

Though the second point is a genuine concern, the aim of this paper was to conduct an in-depth analysis of small data rather than barely scratching the surface of long series of raw information.

It is true that both IELTS and TOEFL are markers of the individual's level of English. However, the test results have been mentioned to provide an idea of the participant's proficiency level of English. The accurate results would not have made much of a difference to the study that was conducted, since the paper aims to explore topic development in general between NNSs.

Lastly, although an IELTS examiner is not entirely acquainted with the candidate, the first two parts of the Speaking test help to establish a rapport between the two. Hence, both situations do pertain similarities: in both instances, the participants have the minimum level of comfort zone that ought to help them maintain a free-flow conversation.

## **7. Conclusion**

Therefore, the claim that IELTS is fabricated and not a reflection of real-time conversations does not ring true. As seen in the discussion above, both circumstances are more similar than dissimilar. The common

convention that speakers have equal say in an interaction is not necessarily true; the control that a speaker has in the interaction varies from one set of exchange to another. In a normal conversation, one speaker is perhaps a bit more active when conversing about an area that interests her more, while the other one might be an initiator during another set of exchange.

Regardless, the study conducted for this paper has its own limitations, but care has been taken to address them. Nevertheless, further research can be conducted on wider range of data and analyse exchanges between NNSs of different countries to find whether outcomes vary from one circumstance to the next.

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