

The dual personality of ‘topic’ in the IELTS Speaking Test

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This article investigates the central role of topic in the IELTS Speaking Test (IST). Topic has developed a dual personality in this interactional setting: topic-as-script is the scripted statement of topic on the examiner’s cards prior to the interaction, whereas topic-as-action is how topic is developed by the candidate during the course of the interaction, which is consequential for the grades they receive. The key interactional structure in the IST is the ‘topic-scripted Question–Answer adjacency pair’ produced by the examiner. In order 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. Comparing the two personalities of topic enables methodological analysis and evaluation of the interaction and can be used for preparing candidates for the IST.

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Background information on IELTS and the IELTS Speaking Test

The IELTS Speaking Test (IST) is one of the four components of IELTS, the most widely used English proficiency test for overseas applicants to British and Australian universities. In 2017, over 7,000 certified examiners administered over 3 million ISTs annually at more than 1,100 centres, in over 140 countries around the world (<http://www.ielts.org>). IELTS ‘measures the language proficiency of people who want to study or work where English is used as a language of communication’ (ibid.). There is a 9-band grading system from 1 (Non User) to 9 (Expert). IELTS includes tests of Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. The Speaking Test length is 11–14 minutes.

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The IST is administered face-to-face with a trained examiner. Examiners award a band score for each of four criterion areas: Fluency and coherence 25%; Lexical resource 25%; Grammatical range and accuracy 25%; Pronunciation 25%. There are three main parts, as follows. *Part 1 (Introduction)*: candidates answer general questions about themselves, their homes/families, their jobs/studies, their interests, and a range of familiar topic areas. *Part 2 (Individual long turn)*: the candidate is given a verbal prompt on a card and is asked to talk on a particular topic. The examiner then asks one or two rounding-off questions. *Part 3 (Two-way discussion)*: the examiner and candidate engage in a discussion of more

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abstract issues and concepts which are thematically linked to the topic prompt in Part 2.

Topic in the IST

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A detailed account of the design and development of the IST can be found in [Taylor and Falvey \(2007\)](#), [Weir, Vidakovic, and Galaczi \(2013\)](#), and [Seedhouse and Nakatsuhara \(2018\)](#). There have been a number of research studies of interview tests in general and the IST in particular (e.g. [Brown 2006](#); [Taylor 2011](#)). However, relatively few studies have directly

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considered topicality as a focus of analysis in interview tests. [Kasper and Ross's \(2007\)](#) work into multiple questions in interview tests shows that it is common for interviewers to ask multiple questions on any one given topic, which holds true for the IELTS context. [Lumley and O'Sullivan \(2005\)](#)

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investigated the contribution of topic to task difficulty in relation to an interview test in Hong Kong; topics were investigated in relation to gender bias. [Fulcher and Márquez Reiter \(2003\)](#) identify 'topic' as a factor relating to task difficulty in speaking tests. [Gan, Davison, and Hamp-Lyons \(2008\)](#)

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investigated topicality in peer group oral group assessment situations, and concluded that this kind of assessment allowed for the negotiation and management of topic by the participants, in ways that are closer to that of ordinary conversation. This article investigates the role of 'topic' in the IST, based on three funded Conversation Analysis studies of real IST test data, the reports on which are available at <https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/research-reports>. In the IST, the topic of the talk is predetermined by the central IELTS administration, written out in advance in scripts, and is introduced by the examiner. Examiner frames in part 1 contain a series of connected questions on a topic, for example 'where you live':

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■ Do you live in a house or a flat?
■ Tell me the good things about your house/flat.
■ What is the area like where you live?
■ Would you recommend this area as a place to live? (Why/why not?)

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Candidates are evaluated on (amongst other things) their ability to develop a nominated topic. The Band Descriptors (see the Appendix) describe spoken performance at the nine IELTS bands, based on the following criteria: Fluency and coherence; Lexical resource; Grammatical range and accuracy; and Pronunciation. Topic is employed in the IELTS Speaking Band descriptors to differentiate levels. In some cases it is mentioned under 'Fluency and coherence'. It is used to differentiate band 8 'develops topics coherently and appropriately' from band 9 'develops topics fully and appropriately'. At lower levels it is mentioned under 'Lexical resource' and differentiates band 3 'has insufficient vocabulary for less familiar topics' from band 4 'is able to talk about familiar topics but can only convey basic meaning on unfamiliar topics'. According to [Galaczi and ffrench \(2011: 149\)](#), topic familiarity is recognized as a crucial variable in relation to candidate performance and it is vital that topics selected should not favour particular types of candidate. Hence, topics are trialled in the IST and reviewed prior to implementation.

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The dual personality of topic in the IST

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I now introduce the concepts of *topic-as-script* and *topic-as-action* in relation to IST interaction. Topic-as-script is the scripted statement of

topic on the examiner's cards prior to the interaction, whereas topic-as-action is how topic is developed or talked into being during the course of the interaction. Whether and how candidates develop topic-as-action is consequential for the grades they received and therefore of direct relevance to the institutional business of valid assessment of oral proficiency. This presentation of a 'dual personality' of topic in the IST enables analysis and evaluation of interaction in the IST, as we will see below. 3.5

How does topic fit into the interactional organization of the IST? In parts 1 and 3 of the IST, there is an archetypal organization which combines turn-taking, adjacency pair, and topic-as-script, as follows. All examiner questions contain two components: (a) an adjacency pair component, which requires the candidate to provide an answer to a question; and (b) a topic component, which requires the candidate to develop a specific topic. This organization can be called a 'topic-scripted Question-Answer adjacency pair'. So in Parts 1 and 3 of the IST, unlike in ordinary conversation outside the educational context, topic-as-script is always introduced by means of a question. In order 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. Therefore, in the IST, topic is scripted and entwined with the organization of turn-taking and sequence in order to ensure standardization of input to the candidate. 3.10 3.15 3.20 3.25

The following two sections outline how topic development looks in high-scoring and low-scoring test performances.

High-scoring topic development

Extract 1

- 35 E: okay (0.7) so uh:: what qualifications or certificates (0.8) do you hope to 3.30
 36 get (1.3)
- 37 C: well (1.1) after I: (0.5) get my degree in May I'm hoping to:: (1.3) uh:m
 38 >probably work in England for a while and in order to do that I have to 3.35
 39 do further exams< hh (0.5) unfortunately bu:t uh:m (1.1) ·hh then I just
 40 hope to: (0.6) progress further i- in my field ((inaudible)) (0.2)
- 41 E: okay okay (0.7) ↑let's uh move on to talk about some of the activities
 42 you (0.6) enjoy in your free time (0.7) when do you have free time? (1.3) 3.40
- 43 C: rarely hh heh (0.3) ·hh uh::m (0.5) I try to pace myself generally (.) in
 44 terms of: getting a lot of work done during the week so I ca:n at least
 45 relax a bit at the weekends (0.5) I like to:: look at movies go shopping:
 46 hh heh (0.5) uhm have a chat with friends and (0.6) 3.45
- 47 E: okay and uh::m (1.5) what free time activities are most popular where
 48 you live? (1.6)

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(Part 1: score 9.0)

In the above extract, the 'topic-as-script' has been predetermined and is read by E in lines 35 and 41. Let us analyse how C develops 'topic-as-action' from this. The question 'what qualifications or certificates do you hope to get?' could be answered quite directly and drily as 'I hope to get an MBA.' However, C constructs a four-phase narrative presenting a vision of his/her future. The topic is developed as an action which develops a personal identity and which has the potential to engage the listener with him/her on a personal level. In lines 41 and 42, E introduces two topics-as-scripts, namely what the activities are that C enjoys in his/her free time and the question of when s/he has free time. Of particular note is the way in which C engages in lines 43-46 with these two scripted topics in reverse order and connects the two. In line 43 C's utterance 'rarely' answers the second question, but the answer to the first question about free-time activities does not come until line 45. C very skilfully manages a stepwise transition of topic in lines 43-45 to move seamlessly from the second topic-as-script to the first. The topical action required is to move from 'lack of free time' to 'free-time activities' and this is accomplished by the explanation of pacing him/herself to work hard during the week to free up relaxation time at the weekends. C's development of topic-as-action works on a number of levels simultaneously. It projects an image of C as someone who is ambitious and hard-working, internationally mobile, gaining a number of qualifications, someone who plans their time carefully and has a clear vision of their life and their future. If we ask how C has taken a topic-as-script and developed it into a topic-as-action in this case, it is predominantly that C has developed a narrative of his/her personal life which projects a certain identity and enables a listener to engage with this. Moreover, the narrative is carefully structured in relation to temporal sequence; lines 37-40 portray four different time phases, one of which is not in linear order, whereas lines 43-46 show the ability to present generalizations about time. In extract 1 we see how C developed a topic-as-action and this simultaneously provided action on other levels: (a) it answered the questions; (b) it projected C's identity; (c) it displayed C's level of linguistic and interactional competence; and (d) it displayed C's competence in engaging in the testing activity. So although topic-as-script in this setting is static, monolithic, and predetermined, topic-as-action can be complex, dynamic, and entwined with multiple actions on multiple levels.

Low-scoring topic development

However, not all candidates develop topic-as-action so successfully. In extract 1, we saw that C answered the questions and developed the topics. High-scoring candidates appear to be able to develop a topic-as-action concisely and without carrying on for too long, bearing in mind

limitations of time in the IST. This demonstrates their competence in the assessment activity as well as their linguistic and interactional competence. In contrast to the successful example above, a candidate response may in principle (a) answer the question but fail to develop a topic-as-action; (b) fail to answer the question, but say something which bears some tangential relationship to the general topic-as-script; or (c) fail to answer the question or develop the topic-as-action. In cases (a) and (b), candidates will not achieve the highest scores for their responses, and will receive the lowest ratings for case (c). The extent to which a candidate develops the topic-as-action seems critical, especially when the examiner makes a rating decision for Band 6, because its Fluency and Coherence descriptors specify that the candidate 'is willing to talk at length'. This suggests that the candidate needs to develop the topic-as-action to be awarded Band 6. An example of a candidate answering questions without developing a topic-as-action is provided below:

Extract 2

142 E: do you think that you will travel *mor::e* in the *future* 5.5
 143 (0.4)
 144 C: → y[eah] 5.20
 145 E: [whe]n you're older.
 146 (0.3)
 147 C: → yeah 5.25
 148 (0.5)
 149 E: because you enjoy it (0.9) okay now ((name omitted)) in this
 150 part (0.7) i'm: *going* to give you a *topic*
 (Part 1: score 4.0) 5.30

In the above extract, lines 144 and 146, the candidate (score 4.0) does provide minimal answers to the questions, but does not engage with the topic in any way. We might also say that C provides a response to the topic-as-script but does not develop a topic-as-action. By contrast with the previous extract, there is virtually no display of linguistic competence or development of identity, and little evidence of competence relating to the assessment activity; it is possible that this is due to a lack of understanding of what is required, or a lack of training, but we have no basis for speculation on this. Answers may also develop a topic-as-action which bears some tangential relationship to the general topic-as-script, but which develops the topic in a different direction, as in the extract below:

Extract 3

40 E: okay (0.6) let's talk about public transport (0.5) what 5.45
 kinds of public
 41 transport are there (0.3) where you live (2.0)
 42 C: it's eh (0.5) I (0.4) as eh (0.4) a (0.3) person of eh (0.4)
 ka- Karachi, I 5.50
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- 6.5 43 (1.1) we have many (0.8) public transport problems and (0.7) many eh
- 44 we use eh (0.4) eh buses (0.4) there are private cars and eh (.) there are
- 45 some (0.3) eh (0.4) children (0.4) buses (0.8) and eh (1.9) about- (0.2)
- 6.10 46 about the main problems in is the (0.4) the number one is the over eh
- 47 speeding (0.5) they are the oh eh (0.5) the roads (0.8) and eh (.) they are
- 6.15 48 [on]
- 49 E: → [I] didn't ask you about the problems (0.6) my question was (0.6) what
- 50 kinds of public transport are *there* (.) where you live (0.7)
- 6.20 (Part 1: score 6.0)

In line 49 above the examiner explicitly treats the candidate's answer as trouble in that it did not provide a direct answer to his/her question, even though it was on the generic topic of public transport.

6.25 **The function of the topic-scripted Question–Answer adjacency pair**

From a testing perspective, this archetypal organization of topic-scripted Question–Answer adjacency pair in the IST is highly successful in generating differential performance between candidates. A single examiner move requires candidate moves on multiple levels in response, which can be used by raters to distinguish levels of performance in relation to multiple issues. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the IST, it is essential to ensure standardization of prompts, input, and behaviour by examiners, so that some students are not advantaged or disadvantaged by comparison to others. At the same time, however, it is also essential that the talk produced by candidates in response to the examiner prompts is diverse and differentiated, so that the candidates can be reliably assigned to their correct level of proficiency in the Band Descriptors. There is therefore a tension between the homogeneity required of the examiner input and the heterogeneity of candidate output required for the assessment mechanism to function. We saw above that topic in the IST has developed a dual personality of topic-as-script and topic-as-action in service to the institutional goal of valid assessment of proficiency. The significance of this dual personality of topic is that it is exactly embodies the identified homogeneity required of the examiner input and the heterogeneity of candidate output required for the assessment mechanism to function. In this way, topic in the IST has become adapted to the institutional business.

6.45 **Topic in the Part 2 'Individual long turn'**

In Part 2 (Individual long turn), the examiner gives the candidate a scripted verbal prompt, which is written on a card. After about one minute's preparation, the candidate is asked to talk on that particular topic and the examiner listens without speaking, although some examiners provide back-channelling.

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In this section, we analyse the long turn from the perspective of topic development, using as our analytical procedure a focus on how the candidate develops topic-as-action from the topic-as-script. In the candidate's long turn in Part 2, the expectation is that the candidate will (a) answer the question or complete the task; and (b) provide an extended development of a topic. In the extract below, the task is to 'describe a job you think would be interesting'.

Extract 4

265 C: → okay i think this job is er:: (1.3) *being* a doctor (0.3) 7.5
 266 *medical* practitioner (1.6) especially those who:: (0.5) erm 7.10
 267 (1.6) treat er (0.5) very (0.6) *common* diseases (0.4) not
 268 → specialist (2.2) i think it's (0.3) quite *interesting* because
 269 er you- (0.3) you *meet* a lot of people (1.4) *different* kinds of 7.15
 270 people (1.1) and er (0.7) *people* who are having *problems* (0.3)
 271 people who are- *people* who are in *pain* (0.6) and er (0.7)
 272 you have to *try* as much as you *can* (0.7) to:: *make* them feel 7.20
 273 *better* (1.4) or try to solve your *problems* you cannot solve
 274 you- you put them in a state that they will feel *more* at ease
 275 (0.4) °with with him° (0.9) for *example* eh somebody (0.3)
 276 selling ah:: (0.6) let's say:: (0.8) erm::: (2) *selling* er:: 7.25
 277 let's say:: (1.7) MALAria (0.4) the illness is *common* in my
 278 *pla::ce* (1) okay (0.4) the patients who have this ((inaudible))
 279 condition erm:: (0.3) *vomiting* and all (1) this is *very*::: 7.30
 280 (0.2) ah:: troublesome (0.4) it (makes (0.2) makes you feel
 281 (mistaken) (0.7) (it's all) (.) it's up to the *doctor* to *make*
 282 you *relax* (0.4) even though your sick nearly won't go away 7.35
 283 (0.8) right after you see the *doctor*? but (0.7) the doctor must
 284 try to (0.3) er:: *talk* you to:: (1.2) er:: *feel* at *ease* (0.5)

(Part 2: score 9.0)

The first point to note is that the candidate (score 9.0) clearly completes 7.40
 the task 'describe a job you think would be interesting'. Having identified
 the job of medical practitioner, all of the subsequent talk is related to this
 job and why it would be interesting. In line 265, the candidate identifies
 the generic term 'doctor' and then narrows the focus to the sub-topic 7.45
 of types of doctor, moving to medical practitioner and non-specialists
 who treat common diseases (lines 266–68). In line 268 the topic shifts
 in fluid fashion to why the job is interesting, the reason being because
 you meet many people and have to try to cure them. There is then an
 exemplification of an illness (malaria), which then leads to a description of 7.50
 symptoms and how patients feel and how the doctor should communicate 7.51

with patients. So within the overall topic of the doctor's job, there is a good deal of flowing development of sub-topics as well as shifts of perspective, presenting illness from the patient's and doctor's perspectives.

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In this section we have seen that, although it is difficult to perform an analysis of Part 2 candidate extended turns in terms of turn-taking and sequence, it is much more feasible to do so in terms of topic development. This is precisely because we have identified topic as the key construct in the interactional architecture of the IST, with its dual personality delivering the institutional business. The idea that an analytical procedure or methodology can emerge from the structure of interaction is a familiar one in conversation analysis. Therefore, when we wish to analyse IST interaction, a key analytical procedure should be to trace how the candidate develops topic-as-action from the topic-as-script. This procedure helps us understand how score relates to talk, an issue that is explored further in [Seedhouse and Nakatsuhara \(2018\)](#).

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Conclusions

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[Sacks \(1992: 541\)](#) argues, in relation to ordinary conversation, that topical organization is an 'accessory' to turn-taking and sequence. By contrast, topic in the IST has adapted to become the central organizing mechanism for the interaction and the key means of delivering the institutional business of valid assessment of oral proficiency. The topics-as-scripts are the templates on which the interaction is based throughout the test. Topic-as-script is an integral part of the topic-scripted Question-Answer adjacency pair, the core organization in Parts 1 and 3, whilst a topic prompt is provided to candidates in the Part 2 'Individual long turn'. The dual personality of topic enables standardization of input to candidates at the same time as enabling differentiation of candidate output into scoring bands. Topic-as-script is the same for all candidates, as it is necessary that they all receive the same input. However, when the question is answered by the candidate, we see how topic is developed as an action. Topic-as-action is heterogeneous and this differentiation by candidates enables differentiated assessment of their oral proficiency. Therefore, this 'dual personality' of topic is a key driver of the business of assessment of differential performance. Topic is employed in multiple ways on multiple levels and is both the vehicle and the focus of the interaction.

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This article has shown that topic plays a vital role in the IST and this may be the case with other language interview tests. In order to understand the relationship between topic development and score, it is vital to understand how the interaction is organized; this understanding also provides us with a methodology for analysis and evaluation of the interaction. Since many classes throughout the ELT world prepare candidates for the IST and other language interview tests, the implications for teaching are as follows. A useful procedure when preparing candidates for language interview tests is to look at transcribed interaction in real tests involving high-scoring and low-scoring candidates, as we have done in this article. The interaction can be analysed by comparing the two personalities of topic, as we have seen above. The strategies that high-scoring candidates employ when developing topic can then be noted and learnt by candidates. Indeed, some of the strategies for topic development we have seen high-scoring

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candidates employ above could also be learnt for more general L2 use outside the assessment setting.

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Study 2

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Study 3

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The author

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book chapters in the area of applied linguistics and language teaching. Working with colleagues in Computing Science over 10 years, he has received three grants to build kitchens which use digital technology to teach users languages and cuisines

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**Appendix:
 Transcription
 Conventions**

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 CAPITALS
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 ((inaudible 3.2))
 (guess)
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 hhHA HA heh heh
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indicates the point of overlap onset
 indicates the point of overlap termination
 (a) turn continues below, at the next identical symbol
 (b) if inserted at the end of one speaker's turn and at the beginning of the next speaker's adjacent turn, it indicates that there is no gap at all between the two turns
 an interval between utterances (3 seconds and 2 tenths in this case)
 a very short untimed pause
 underlining indicates speaker emphasis
 indicates lengthening of the preceding sound
 a single dash indicates an abrupt cut-off
 rising intonation, not necessarily a question
 an animated or emphatic tone
 a comma indicates low-rising intonation, suggesting continuation
 a full stop (period) indicates falling (final) intonation
 especially loud sounds relative to surrounding talk
 utterances between degree signs are noticeably quieter than surrounding talk
 indicate marked shifts into higher or lower pitch in the utterance following the arrow
 indicate that the talk they surround is produced more quickly than neighbouring talk
 a stretch of unclear or unintelligible speech
 a timed stretch of unintelligible speech
 indicates transcriber doubt about a word
 speaker in-breath
 speaker out-breath
 laughter transcribed as it sounds
 arrows in the left margin pick out features of especial interest

Additional symbols

ja ((tr: yes))
 [gibee]
 [æ]
 < >
 C:
 E:

non-English words are italicized, and are followed by an English translation in double brackets.
 in the case of inaccurate pronunciation of an English word, an approximation of the sound is given in square brackets
 phonetic transcriptions of sounds are given in square brackets
 indicate that the talk they surround is produced slowly and deliberately (typical of teachers modelling forms)
 Candidate
 Examiner