

# Investigating the use of language functions for validating speaking test specifications

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- Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the presenter and do not necessarily reflect the views of Trinity, its service providers, examination centres and/or distributors.

# Rationale & Aim

- A list of language functions in speaking test specifications is useful for specifying target output language
- Many functions start to emerge at lower levels, but candidates at higher levels also use the same functions with higher linguistic precision and more sophistication (Green, 2012)
- Therefore, there is a potential threat that function lists without enough elaboration might not be as useful as the test designers wish.
- **This study aims to review the language function lists provided in the current Handbook for Trinity ISE exams (Interview component) and if/how the listed functions are actually performed.**

# Trinity Integrated Skills in English (ISE): Interview

## Structure & Duration:

| ISE 0 (A2)   | ISE I (B1)   | ISE II (B2)   | ISE III (C1)  |
|--|--|---|---|
| Topic discussion<br>Discussion of portfolio and conversation | Topic discussion<br>Discussion of portfolio and conversation | Candidate-led discussion of topic<br>Interactive task<br>Discussion of portfolio and conversation | Formal Topic presentation<br>Topic discussion<br>Interactive task<br>Listening task<br>Discussion of portfolio and conversation |
| 8 minutes  | 8 minutes  | 12 minutes  | 20 minutes  |

# Trinity Integrated Skills in English (ISE): Interview

## Example of function list (ISE 0):

### Language requirements

#### Language functions

- ▶ Exchanging greetings and leave-taking
- ▶ Giving personal information
- ▶ Describing people, objects and places
- ▶ Describing daily routines and times
- ▶ Giving dates
- ▶ Expressing ability and inability
- ▶ Giving simple directions and instructions

*\*taken from ISE Exam Information Handbook (2009: 25)*

# Research Questions

1. Are the functions listed for each level (ISE 0-3) in the Handbook actually observed during interviews?
2. Do higher-scoring candidates show a more extensive coverage of the language functions specified in the lists?
3. Do higher-scoring candidates perform the functions with higher degrees of linguistic precision and sophistication?

# Research Design

# Method

32 audio-recordings of ISE interviews were transcribed and closely analysed...

|                      | <b>ISE 0</b> | <b>ISE 1</b> | <b>ISE 2</b> | <b>ISE 3</b> |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Band A (distinction) | 2            | 2            | 2            | 2            |
| Band B (merit)       | 2            | 2            | 2            | 2            |
| Band C (pass)        | 2            | 2            | 2            | 2            |
| Band D (fail)        | 2            | 2            | 2            | 2            |

...to exemplify the language elicited from candidates at each grade of each test, using a modified version of O'Sullivan et al.'s (2002) Observation Checklist.



# Observation Checklist (O'Sullivan et al., 2002)

## Examples:

| <b>Informational functions</b>   | <b>Interactional functions</b>   | <b>Managing interaction</b>             |
|--|--|---|
| Providing personal info.<br>Elaborating<br>Expressing opinions<br>Justifying opinions<br>Comparing<br>Speculating<br>Summarizing<br>Expressing preferences | Agreeing / Disagreeing<br>Asking for opinions<br>Persuading<br>Asking for information<br>Negotiating meaning | Initiating<br>Reciprocating<br>Deciding |

# Phases of Interviews Analysed

| ISE 0 (A2)  | ISE I (B1)  | ISE II (B2)  | ISE III (C1)   |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>Topic discussion</p> <p>Discussion of portfolio and conversation</p> | <p>Topic discussion</p> <p>Discussion of portfolio and conversation</p> | <p>Candidate-led discussion of topic</p> <p>Interactive task</p> <p>Discussion of portfolio and conversation</p> | <p>Formal Topic presentation</p> <p>Topic discussion</p> <p>Interactive task</p> <p>Listening task</p> <p>Discussion of portfolio and conversation</p> |
| 8 minutes   | 8 minutes   | 12 minutes   | 20 minutes   |

# Data Analysis

- **Phase 1: Mapping the ISE function lists with O'Sullivan et al.'s function categories**
- **Phase 2: Coding all candidates' utterances from 32 recordings**

One researcher coded all utterances first according to the mapped function lists. The other researcher then reviewed all codings, and all disagreements were discussed until complete agreement was obtained.
- **Phase 3: Comparing candidates' utterances at different bands & levels**

# Coding and Comparing Utterances

Using Excel spreadsheets...

|    | A    | B     | C    | D     | E          | F          | H  |
|----|------|-------|------|-------|------------|------------|--|
| 1  | Line | ID    | Band | Phase | Function 1 | Function 2 | Utterances   |
| 80 | 79   | XY123 | A    | Conv  |            |            | E: Let' s talk about erm (2) money (.) how important is      |
| 81 | 80   | XY123 | A    | Conv  | EOP        | JUST       | S: .hhhh hhhhhh it' s difficult to say: i think (inaudible   |
| 82 | 81   | XY123 | A    | Conv  |            |            | E: uh huh  |
| 83 | 82   | XY123 | A    | Conv  | ELAB       |            | S: I: teach (.) to little: children (2) an::d I: [ I have my |
| 84 | 83   | XY123 | A    | Conv  |            |            | E: uh huh uh huh [so you                                     |
| 85 | 84   | XY123 | A    | Conv  | AG         | ELAB       | S: yes because (.) some days do (.) I think hhhh again       |
| 86 | 85   | XY123 | A    | Conv  |            |            | E: hmm but from this experience maybe you can unde           |

# Results

# Answers to Research Questions

1. Are the functions listed for each level (ISE 0-3) in the Handbook actually observed during interviews?  
→ **For most of the listed functions, YES.** But there were some functions to be possibly removed (e.g. *Expressing reservations* (ISE 3)) or added to the lists (e.g. *Negotiating meaning* (ISE 0)).
2. Do higher-scoring candidates show a more extensive coverage of the language functions specified in the lists? → **YES.**
3. Do higher-scoring candidates perform the functions with higher degrees of linguistic precision and sophistication? → **YES.**

# Examples for RQ3

## Describing future (ISE 0)

- and I'm going to (.) play with my friends (.) playing basketball with my friends

## Describing the future (ISE 1)

- erm: (.) in the future I erm (.) I would like to study something about cinema but it's very difficult

## Speculating / Hypothesising (ISE 2)

- if now I go out of the coun- go abroad I know my best friend is so sad so I I would probably really miss her

## Speculating / Hypothesising (ISE 3)

- if you feel good about who you are you probably won't get this sort of disease (.) don't you think

# Conclusions



# Summary of findings

- Most of the functions listed in ISE Exam Information Handbook were performed by the candidates during their interviews.
- It was also confirmed that:
  - a) higher-scoring candidates at each ISE level have a more extensive coverage of the language functions specified in the lists, and
  - b) higher-scoring candidates at each ISE level use more sophisticated language to realise these language functions than lower-scoring candidates.

# Implications

- Findings should feed back into the functions lists in test specifications
- Useful information for examiner standardisation training and refining rating scales based on empirical data
- A practical example of how the validation of function lists for speaking tests - qualitative analysis of transcripts using O'Sullivan et al.'s observation checklist

Thank you for listening! 😊

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