

Accommodation in Oral Proficiency Interviews

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This paper aims to provide readers with awareness of various usage and potential consequences of convergent accommodation/foreigner talk, used by the examiners, during oral proficiency interviews (OPIs). The focus is placed not only on the different forms of accommodation, but also the strategies and intentions the examiners have in “accommodating,” together with the reaction and feelings of the interviewees who are being “accommodated.”

口述英語力テスト(Oral Proficiency Interviews)が行われる際ネイティブスピーカーであるインタビュアーがとる行動の中にどのような順応傾向がみられるかを検証している。順応傾向とは、ネイティブではない受験者に対して意識的に、もしくは無意識的にインタビュアーがとる話し方の傾向性で、間の取り方、話すスピードなどいろいろな要素の中には、受験者に対して肯定的に作用するもの、逆に否定的に作用するものがある。インタビューをする側の視点だけではなく、受験者にそのような要素が実際にどう感じられ理解されるかを探っている。

Howard Giles' accommodation theory (1975, 1979) suggests that when people interact, they either try to make their speech similar to that of their interlocutor to emphasize social cohesiveness (convergence) or to make it different in order to emphasize social distinctiveness (divergence). Needless to say, various kinds of accommodation take place

during an oral proficiency interview. As the “distinction” between the examiner and the interviewee is clear, divergent accommodation undoubtedly takes place. However, in addition, convergent accommodation with the intention to provide support to the interviewees is likely to occur.

Oral proficiency interviews (OPIs) come in varied styles: Some attempt to stay close to “real” communicative settings, and there are others that are pre-scripted or tape-mediated. As oral proficiency tests are to reflect the types of interaction nonnative speakers are likely to encounter in the target culture, OPIs should take the form of a natural conversation.

IELTS, the *International English Language Testing System*, provides an assessment of whether candidates, non-native speakers of English, are ready to study or train in the medium of English. An IELTS interview, conducted and rated by a qualified IELTS examiner, is semi-scripted and takes the form of a natural conversation.

Ross and Berwick (1992) point out that native-nonnative conversations consist mainly of one participant’s attempts to help the other achieve understanding. In regard to OPIs, such as IELTS interviews, which incorporate the style of interaction between a nonnative speaker and a native speaker, that is, if they are to reflect the types of conversation nonnative speakers are likely to experience outside of the

test situation, it is very natural to expect many instances of foreigner talk or convergent accommodation to appear in the interviews.

There are many factors that cause a person to shift their speech-style.

According to the similarity-attraction model proposed by Byrne (cited in Giles & Smith, 1979), the more similar our attitudes and beliefs are to certain people, the more likely we are attracted to them. Some obvious intralingual convergences are those of pronunciation, speech rate and message content. In theory a speaker who converges on all three levels should be more highly appreciated than one who converges on only one or two. However, as in the example Giles and Smith (1979) provide, if an American visitor adopted what he considered a typically English mode in the presence of British audience, and if the convergent shifts were large, the audience may show negative reactions. Inappropriate convergence can be seen as patronizing, condescending, or even threatening. There is a need for awareness in types of convergent accommodation which are inappropriate.

The focus of this research, therefore, is to analyze how an examiner uses accommodation, with the intention to converge, in the interview rating process. This study, using the setting of IELTS interviews, not only focuses on the types of accommodation used, but also the strategies and intentions the examiners

have in “accommodating,” together with the reaction and feelings of the interviewees who are being “accommodated.”

Methodology

Two trained female IELTS examiners and two Japanese female interviewees are involved. These participants were chosen carefully in order to eliminate issues in gender and age difference. Four interviews were conducted as each examiner interviewed both interviewees.

The interview methodology was identical to the IELTS Speaking Module prior to the revision in 2001. The interviews were audiotaped and videotaped. Immediately after each interview, the videotape was replayed first for the examiner to do a retrospective discourse-based interview, and then again for the interviewee. While one was doing the retrospection interview, the other completed the written reflection. After collecting all the data, each of the four interviews, the retrospective interviews and the written reflection was observed carefully with particular attention to accommodation.

Findings and Interpretations

Examples of accommodation were collated and classified mainly according to the categorization found in Ross and Berwick (1992). The accommodation exponents obtained from their study have been used as the basis

of my analysis. In addition, several modifications were made according to my findings.

The following 12 accommodation exponents are dealt with and analyzed in this study. The first seven exponents are from Ross and Berwick (1992), and the remaining ones are the additional five exponents which have been observed in this study.

Accommodation exponents by Ross & Berwick (1992):

1. Display question: Asking for information known to the examiner or that the examiner believes the interviewee ought to know.
2. Comprehension check: Checking on the interviewee’s current understanding or of the interviewee’s immediately preceding utterance.
3. Clarification request: Asking for a restatement of an immediately preceding utterance produced by the interviewee.
4. Or-question: Asking a question and immediately providing one or more options from which the interviewee may choose an answer.
5. Fronting: Foregrounding a topic and setting the stage for the interviewee’s response.
6. Grammatical simplification: Modifying the syntactic or semantic structure of an utterance so as to facilitate comprehension.

7. Lexical simplification: Choosing what is assumed to be a simpler form of a word or phrase.

Additional accommodation exponents

8. Topic abandonment: Ending the topic in order to lessen the pressure for the interviewee to continue on.
9. Content-support question: Asking leading questions to get the interviewee to expand.
10. Rephrasing: Rephrasing what the interviewee has said for confirmation.
11. Facial expression / Body language: Showing interest using various forms of facial expression and body language.
12. Frequent response: Responding frequently in order to help the interviewee to continue on.

For each exponent, a variety of examples were acquired from the data. As well, comments from the written reflection and the retrospection interviews revealed various underlying thoughts and feelings both the examiner and the interviewee have during an OPI. The following two sections provide some interesting findings that were made in this study. They show some examples and comments from the examiners (E-1 and E-2) and the interviewees (I-1 and I-2). Comments from the interviewees have been translated from Japanese.

[A] Accommodation exponents by Ross & Berwick

1) Display question

Asking for information the examiner believes the interviewee ought to know may be the most common way of starting off an interview.

Example 1.

“So where are you from?”

“Yeah? uhm Where? Which part of Tokyo?”

“Uh-huh ...(pause)... How long have you lived in Machida?”

“Uh-huh and where did you live before that?”

Display questions are used with the intention of relaxing the interviewees. Both interviewees commented that questions familiar to them are easy to answer and make them feel at ease. However, they pointed out that native speakers sometimes expect interviewees to know things they actually do not know, for example, political or historical issues of Japan, and felt these kinds of questions are testing one’s knowledge, not one’s speaking ability. They both admitted that, in the past, they had had some embarrassing experiences being put on the spot.

2) *Comprehension check*

Both examiners were unaware of how frequently they were providing comprehension checks. A few examples found in the data were “Do you see what I mean?” “Okay?” and even a very direct “Do you understand?” From an interviewee’s point of view, being given a chance to inform the examiner whether she has understood or not is very helpful as it is difficult to interrupt and say that one does not understand.

3) *Or-question*

Or-questions guide the interviewee to “stay on the track” (E-2). E-2 was conscious of the fact that she uses many or-questions, however, when asked whether she was aware of “when” she uses them, she was not sure. It may be that this type of questions are asked when the examiner feels it is difficult for the interviewee to answer.

Example 2.

E-2: Is this a day trip or....?

Example 3.

E-1: Would you say it is a challenging task for you teachers, or not so much.

4) *Fronting*

Fronting is for focus. Setting the stage prepares the interviewee to smoothly engage in a conversation. One

of the two types of fronting observed is described below.

Example 4.

E-1: I’ve also read that they’re thinking of introducing a shorter week.

I-2: Yes.

E-1: What do you think about that?

Using phrases such as “I’ve read that..” makes it non-threatening or less required that the interviewee should know the answer. “What do you think about introduction to a shorter week?” would be much more insistent.

5) *Lexical simplification*

Each lexical simplification took place when the interviewee indicated a need for clarification. One of the three types observed was highlighting the base word as in the following example.

Example 5.

E-1: Alex likes cooking, uhm.. heavy metal music and he has a pet cat.

I-1: Pardon?

E-1: He has a cat.

I-1: Oh.

E-1: He has a pet cat.

According to E-1, she “knew straight away that the word ‘pet’ was the problem” as she had been aware, that the word ‘pet’ was not very familiar to the Japanese speakers of English despite the fact that it is a loan word. When asking I-1 if such was the case, she replied that she could not pinpoint the word because what she heard was something like “pekkya!” I-1 said, “I would have had no trouble if E-1 had articulated more clearly.”

[B] Additional accommodation exponents

6) Topic abandonment

When an examiner is unable to understand fully what the interviewee has said, instead of pushing the interviewee any further, one may end the topic with the intention of helping.

Example 6.

E-2: Why is it (=refers to a place) so famous?

I-1: Umm. I didn't know exactly, but every year, like Japanese (unable to transcribe) I don't know..so like president.

E-2: Uh-huh.

I-1: I don't know... I don't know how to say in English..

E-2: Uh-huh.

I-1: But they came every year to visit

E-2: Oh, I see.

I-1: Yeah.

E-2: You mean from the capital?

I-1: Yeah, like..

E-2: Like Edo?

I-1: Yeah.

E-2: Or Kyoto?

I-1: Uh-huh.

E-2: I see. Well, it must be a nice place.

E-2 explained that in such situation, maintaining the topic “becomes a drag” and it not only is hard and frustrating on her side but she imagines it is worse on the side of the interviewee. To the interviewee this abandoning of the topic is certainly accommodating. “It was my limit!” said I-1, “But as I am not in a position to change the topic, there is really nothing I can do expect to repeat myself or try saying something else. And I find the more I do it, the worse the situation becomes!”

7) Content-support question

Content-support questions help the interviewee to expand.

Example 7(a).

E-2: So where do you prefer living; Machida or Mie?

I-1: Uh.. maybe in Machida in Tokyo because Tokyo is more fun.

When an examiner asks a question, one expects the

interviewee to respond by volunteering information. In this example, however, I-1 supported her answer with only “because Tokyo is more fun,” and so has made E-2 to accommodate.

Example 7(b).

E-2: (pause) Why is it more fun?

I-1: like..(laughs).. cause Mie is country.

E-2: Right. In what ways is Mie a country?

I-1: like.. come to Tokyo I can enjoy, you know, I can shopping like you know it has many thing or..

E-2: So one of the reasons you prefer Machida is that there're many interesting places to go shopping. Do you have any other reasons?

I-1: Uh..not only shopping places but also entertainment places..

E-2 said this is very typical in Japan. Students learning English have trouble expanding their answers, not due to their speaking ability but rather their custom. In Japan, it is impolite for people to continue on talking about something that has not been asked.

8) Rephrasing

Example 8.

I-2: So we have to plan the lesson which is good for each kid. That is the biggest thing.

E-2: Right, right, right. To accommodate everybody.

I-2: Yes, and..

Rephrasing appears frequently in NS-NS conversations. Although E-2 had no recollection, I-2 remembered this exchange. “I was struggling because I didn’t know how to best describe my thoughts. But when E-2 responded, I thought I was saved!” It seems that to an interviewee, this kind of response is helpful as it is a good indication that she has made herself understood.

9) Facial expression / Body language

Maintaining eye contact, nodding, and smiling mean “what you’re saying is very interesting, so keep talking.” During the interviews, the examiners sat leaning slightly forward with their hands together on the desk most of the time. On the contrary, some sit very comfortably as if they are watching TV in a lounge, but this may make an interviewee feel uneasy and pressured. In the questionnaire, both interviewees indicated that they believe an examiner’s behavior and attitude are two big factors that affect their performance.

10) Frequent response

Responding frequently, using “uh-huh,” “yeah,” “hmmm,” is a way of projecting that everything is okay, and showing that the examiner has responded so “it’s your turn!”. On the other hand, there are times when

an examiner does not say much and just waits after posing a question. As an interviewee, one is aware of what is being expected and knows that she needs to say something, but when one cannot think of anything to say, silence is a real pressure.

Implications

From the observations made, various exponents of accommodation have been confirmed throughout each interview, as would be the case in native-nonnative exchanges in a non-interview setting. Researchers have raised some variables to consider regarding reliability of OPIs. Shohamy (1983) found that different speech style and topic affect the interviewees' performance, while Douglas and Selinker (cited in Ross & Berwick, 1992) pointed out that the context of the test setting influences the performance of a nonnative speaker. In addition, I feel strongly that there is a need to focus on methods of accommodation examiners use as one of the factors that affect the interviewees' performance.

Although the importance of focusing on accommodation phenomena has been emphasized, this

is not easily done. From the examples and comments obtained, quite a few accommodation exponents were found to be unconsciously provided by the examiners. This being the case, there is a potential difficulty in standardizing or training accommodative talk. However, as foreigner talk or convergent accommodation is inseparable from the majority of OPIs, there is a need to direct the examiners to taking notice of it.

Awareness towards various convergent accommodation may be the key. It is vital that the concept of accommodation be considered in interview guidelines and training programs. There is a need for examiners of OPIs to be aware of their use and potential consequences of accommodation exponents. The results obtained in this study, despite the fact that it is based on a very small sample, provide some indication of one of the ways in which OPIs can be refined. Directing the examiners' attention to the discourse of accommodation during OPIs is essential as this will help to ensure uniformity and maximum consistency of the assessment.

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