



The Role of Topic in Language Proficiency Interviews

The Test Takers' Perspective

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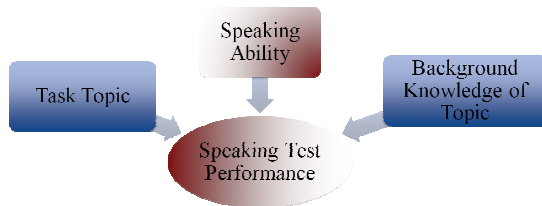
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Project Aims

- Examine the role and influence of test task topics on speaking performance in Language Proficiency Interviews (LPIs)
- Investigate the extent to which there is an interaction between a test taker's background knowledge of topic and test task topics in speaking performance
- Elicit test takers' perceptions of task topic difficulty and attitudes towards topic effects on their performance

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Why is this important?



- Variability?
- Differences in speaking scores?
- Validity threat?
- Fairness issues?
- Test taker attitudes?

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Null Hypotheses

- **H1:** The choice of task topics will have no effect on test task performance scores, measures of fluency, complexity, lexical range, language functions and qualitative self-report estimates of difficulty (in line with Weir, 2005¹:231)
- **H2:** Test takers' background knowledge of task topics will have no effect on test task performance scores, measures of fluency, complexity, lexical range, language functions and qualitative self-report estimates of difficulty
- **H3:** If test takers' proficiency levels are controlled for, variable degrees of background knowledge of topic will not affect performance scores and/or the above measures.
- **H4:** (Any) interaction between task topics and test takers' background knowledge of topics is not large enough to be translated into differences in performance scores in parallel tasks of LPIs.

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Research Design

Data Collection (Participants)	Data Scoring (Raters)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sample <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 82 Participants – L1: Farsi • Theoretical Framework <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Socio-cognitive framework of speaking test validation (Weir, 2005) • Design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Parallel Forms Reliability • Instruments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – C-tests (A, B, C) – LPIs (A&B or AA&C) – Questionnaires 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data Preparation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dividing tests into task topics – 82 (participants) x 10 (tasks) = 820 speaking test items – Batches of data (common item linking) • Rater Instruments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Task Equivalence Questionnaire² – Rating Scale – Observation Checklist³ – Task Fulfillment and Topic Development Scale

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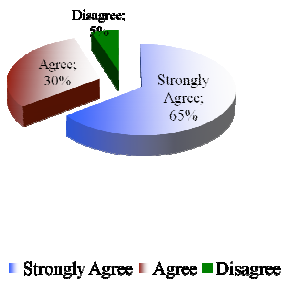
Test Taker Attitudes

- **Questionnaire**
 - I think that the choice of topics might affect my final score
 - I think that having more ideas about a topic might affect my final score
 - I think that there is an element of 'luck' involved in the topics I get
 - I think that the choice of topic is not important if my English is good enough
 - I think that the choice of topic is not important as long as I have good vocabulary
- **Response Structure**
 - SD D Undecided A SA

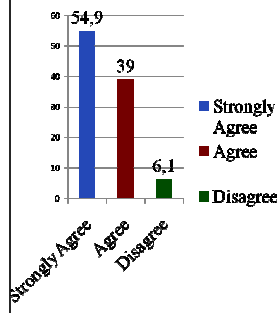
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Preliminary Results

Choice of Topic Affects Final Score

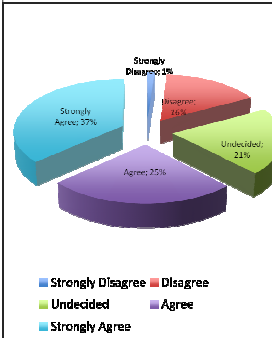


Having More Ideas Might Affect Score

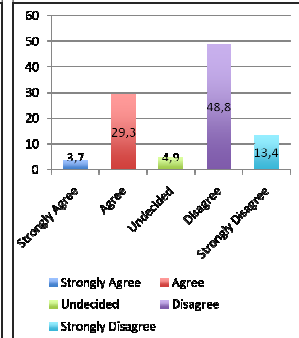


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There is an element of 'luck' in choice of topics

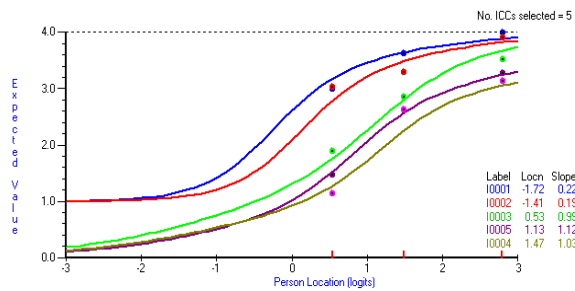


Choice of topic is not important if your English is good enough



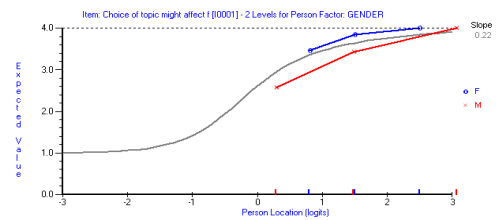
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Item Characteristic Curves (Questionnaire)



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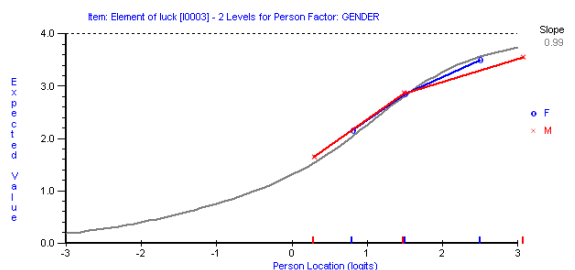
Other Findings Differential Item Functioning (Choice of Topic Affecting Final Score)



Item	GENDER			
	MS	F	DF	Prob
I0001	3.8088	8.69533	1	0.004
I0002	4.11609	5.60736	1	0.020693

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Element of Luck in Choice of Topics: No DIF



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Conclusion

- Test takers have strong attitudes towards topic effects on their performance
- Topic effects in LPIs merit an investigation
- It is important to examine whether the test takers' perceptions reflect the reality of topic effects on scores in LPIs

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Next Steps

- Data Analysis
 - Quantitative analyses of speaking test scores across several criteria (fluency, vocabulary, functions, topic development, etc.)
 - Qualitative analyses of the content of LPIs to shed light on how (and if) test takers signal any topic-related issues
 - Qualitative analyses of raters' comments and interpretations of rating scales in relation to problems which could be attributed to topic and/or topic unfamiliarity

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References

- ¹ Weir, C.J. (2005) *Language Testing and Validation: An Evidence-based Approach*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- ² Weir, C., O'Sullivan, B. and Horai, T. (2006) *Exploring difficulty in Speaking tasks: an intra-task perspective*. In *IELTS Research Reports: Volume 6*, eds. P. McGovern and S. Walsh, United Kingdom, Australia: IELTS Australia and British Council, pp. 119-160
- ³ O'Sullivan, B., Weir, C.J. and Saville, N. (2002) Using observation checklists to validate speaking-test tasks. *Language Testing*, 19 (1), pp. 33-56.

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR
ATTENTION!

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