Monitoring the effects of exam renewal:
Multiple views on preparation material

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Outline

• Background
  • ECPE speaking test
  • Exam Renewal
  • Initial validation research
• Textbook analysis
  • Speaking focus in ECPE test preparation materials (pre- and post-2008)
    • Comparing the language presented in the materials and the language elicited during the exam
  • Gathering data on test preparation practices
The ECPE

- Examination for the Certificate of Proficiency in English
- Four sections: writing, listening, reading, and speaking.
- Aimed at very advanced learners of English with an educational level of upper-level secondary school and above.
Exam renewal – the old speaking test

• A structured oral interaction between one test taker and one examiner

• Two phases
  • Warm-up conversation
  • Discussion of topics relevant to the test taker

• Issues identified
  • the quantity of talk produced by the test taker
  • the range of talk elicited (in terms of functions, vocabulary, topic development, syntactic complexity)
Exam renewal – the new speaking test

- A semi-structured multistage task involving two test takers and two examiners

- Five stages
  - Introductions and small talk
  - Summarising and recommending
  - Consensus reaching
  - Presenting and convincing
  - Justifying and defending

http://www.cambridgemichigan.org/resources/ecpe/support-materials
Aims of the new ECPE speaking test

- Capture different interactional relationships and patterns
- Generate more interaction (e.g. # of turns, requests for clarification)
- Tap a variety of language functions
Validation research – initial steps

Plough, MacMillan, and O’Connell (2011)

• Compared the language elicited during the ‘old’ test with the language elicited during the ‘new’ test.
• Markedly different language functions
Validation research – next steps

• More detailed analyses of the language, particularly how the functions are realised in test taker speech as multi-word expressions / formulaic sequences

• Explore the influence of this aspect of the test upon the preparation materials i.e. textbooks.
Washback of the ECPE speaking test

Stages in the study:

• Broad content analysis of the speaking instruction in ECPE textbooks (pre-new test and post-new test)

• Analysis of the language input provided: instruction on multi-word expressions

• Use of the language input in ECPE preparation classes
### Broad content analysis

#### Average proportion of the book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-new test</th>
<th>Post-new test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Describing the test</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance on how to behave during the test</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific language guidance</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Models</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice opportunities</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answer key</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>5.2%</strong></td>
<td><strong>11.2%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instruction on multi-word expressions

Examples from Stars & Stripes Teacher’s Book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommending</th>
<th>COCA*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The ______ should</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’d recommend that</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One way would be to</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer ___ to ____</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* - Corpus of Contemporary American English (Spoken Corpora)
Multi-word expressions / formulaic sequences

“a sequence … of words or other elements … that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar” – Wray (2002: 9)

BUT

How might we identify them?
  • Native speaker intuition?
  • Frequency in a corpus?
Focus on function?

Examples from test performances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I’d recommend that</th>
<th># of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>make a recommendation</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>our recommendation</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we recommend</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we are recommending</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Focus on function?

Examples from test performances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I prefer _______ to _______</th>
<th># of occurrences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I prefer _______</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer _____ I think</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer _______ because</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer _______ too</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

• Not much language guidance provided

• A lot of the language guidance comprises suggested phrases

• In textbooks about the new test these suggested phrases are often explicitly associated with functions.
Summary

BUT

• Are the suggested phrases formulaic sequences?
• What of their lack of presence in actual test-taker speech?
• Have we reached a dead end?
References


