

## **Impact of Gender on Discourse of Oral Proficiency Testing**

**(The Case of IELTS)**

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### **Abstract**

This study was carried out to find out whether the gender of the interviewer and interviewee influence the discourse of oral proficiency tests. In oral interviews such as the case of the IELTS, it is possible that the gender of interviewer and interviewee have an impact on the discourse produced from the interview, thus modifying the results of the interview. A total of 83 FCE students of Simin Educational Institute participated in this study. Based on their scores on a TOFEL test, the participants of the study were rank-ordered and then divided into 3 groups: high (HG), intermediate (IG), and low (LG) proficiency groups. Thirty of them (15 male and 15 female) from the top of the list were assigned as the main group of the study who formed the experimental group. Following HG in the list, another 30 (15 male and 15 female) were selected and assigned as the pilot group who took part in the standardization and validation processes of the IELTS speaking test. The rest of the participants (LG) were eliminated from the study. The data collected for the main part of this study consisted of the audio-taped performances of 15 male and 15 female candidates who undertook the IELTS interview on two different occasions, once with a male and another time with a female interviewer, thus yielding in 60 interviews. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed regarding five pre-determined gendered discourse variables, namely interruptions, overlaps, minimal responses, talk time, and topic selection. The results of the analysis

and the indices produced from the Chi-square calculations indicated that the gender of interviewers and candidates did not have a significant impact on the discourse produced from the IELTS oral proficiency interview.

**Key Words:** Oral Proficiency Interview, Gender, Candidate, Interruptions, Minimal responses, Overlaps, Talk time, Topic selection.

### **Introduction**

The world has shrunk into a smaller place than it used to be and people from diverse personal, social, and cultural backgrounds come together thus necessitating the need to interact and communicate through a shared linguistic medium which more often than not tends to be English, and this is the reason why people all over the world are trying to learn it. One of the major skills of this language which is indispensable for communication is speaking and the ultimate measure which determines if a learner has mastered the speaking ability is an oral proficiency interview (henceforth OPI) the typical of which is the IELTS OPI.

Recent research into oral proficiency interview shows that there are a number of factors that can affect the results of oral interviews. Factors including interviewer variables such as the amount of support they give to candidates, the amount of rapport they establish with candidates, the extent to which they follow the instructions relevant to their role (Young and Milanovic, 1992; Lazaraton, 1996; McNamara and Lumley, 1997), peer variables and the influence of peer feedback on self- and peer assessment of oral skills (Bachman and Palmer, 1989; Williams, 1992; Stefani, 1994; Jafarpur, 1991; Rolfe, 1990; Patri, 2002), performance condition, accommodation, task types and their properties, and the influence of those properties on candidates' performance (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Douglas, 2000), and finally, rater variables and examiner background (McNamara, 1990; Wesche, 1992; Brown, 1993) have all been almost studied.

Yet another key, though less touched, factor which is thought to have potential effects on the discourse of OPI is gendered language use in communicative style. A plethora of studies have been conducted in the field of language and gender (Lakoff, 1975; Swaker, 1975; Zimmerman and West, 1975; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Fishman, 1983; Tannen, 1990; and Coates, 1993) which suggest that male and female speakers differ in their conversational styles. These studies reported female conversational style as being collaborative, cooperative, supportive, and friendly. While male conversational style was characterized as being controlling, uncooperative, unsupportive, and aggressive. The very general consensus seems to be that men are concerned with power whereas women are concerned with solidarity.

Jennifer Coates (1993) in her pioneering book 'Women, men, and language' argued that women and men speak differently and the reason seems to lie in their communicative competence. Therefore, language users, she formulated, "have different sets of norm for conversational interaction". She went further ahead and concluded "women and men may constitute different speech communities" (p.140). If this is the case, it should have fateful implications in language testing since it implies that the construct of communicative competence is not gender neutral. It is especially highlighted in testing spoken interaction where speakers of the same or different gender, or as in Coates' terms speakers of the same or different speech communities, may have a face-to-face interaction in an oral interview.

Applying this to the oral interview context, Sunderland (1995) put forth that male and female interviewer communicative styles per se might influence OPI in general and the oral discourse produced in particular. Another possibility, she identified, was that the behavior of interviewers of either gender may vary according to whether they are paired with a male or female candidate. In both cases it is possible that the gendered behavior of the interviewer will influence the outcome of the test by either strengthening or undermining candidates' performance. In addition, a candidate's output, realized in discourse, may also vary according to their own gender and

whether they are being interviewed by a male or female interviewer. Thus the gendered language use and the above-mentioned possibilities might unwantedly vary the discourse produced from an OPI which, in turn, may potentially modify the outcomes of the interview.

O'Loughlin (2002) studied the influence of gender on both the discourse and test scores produced from an IELTS speaking test. The discourse variables under study were overlaps, interruptions, and minimal responses. The discourse analysis did not indicate any clear gendered pattern on the use of each of these variables. The test score analyses also revealed that the gender of candidates and raters did not have a significant impact on the rating process. The results produced from O'Loughlin's data conflict with other recent studies regarding the impact of gender on both discourse and test scores.

There have been a number of recent studies which have examined the possibility of a gender effect in the rating of candidates by their interviewers in speaking tests. In most cases, these research studies have shown some kind of gender effect on the scores assigned to candidates by raters of either gender. These studies, however, do not indicate consistent results. Porter (1991a) reported that candidates scored more highly with male raters while O'Sullivan (2000) reported higher scores with female raters. Yet more interesting findings were reported by Buckingham (1997) who claimed higher scores to have been achieved by candidates when paired by a rater of the same gender.

Concerning the impact of gender on discourse a plethora of studies have been conducted each investigating a unique aspect of discourse. A great deal of work on sex-differentiated discourse styles has followed the line of argument popularized by Lakoff (1975) that women mark stylistically their greater deference or politeness than men. These studies have investigated discourse from a variety of gender-related perspectives such as interruptions, and overlaps (Zimmerman and West, 1975; Coates, 1993, 1996), verbosity or talk time (Swaker, 1975; Coates, 1993), topic

selection (Lakoff, 1975; Coates, 1993), and minimal responses (Zimmerman and West, 1975), etc. The following is a briefing of the findings concerning the five discourse features under investigation in this study.

One of the very famous findings from the research into discourse and gender is the extent to which interlocutors interrupt each other in conversation (Zimmerman and West, 1975). Coates (1993, p.109) defined interruptions as:

*Violations of turn-taking rules of conversations. The next speaker begins to speak while the current speaker is still speaking, at a point in the current speaker's turn which could not be defined as the last word. Interruptions break the symmetry of the conversational model; the interrupter prevents the speaker from finishing their turn, at the same time gaining a turn for themselves.*

Based on the previous research, Coates (1993) suggested that same-sex interlocutors are unlikely to interrupt each other. On the other hand, in mixed-sex conversations men frequently interrupt women while women rarely interrupt men. In sum, the finding that men interrupt women so frequently is often argued to indicate that men act as if in mixed-sex conversations they have more right than women to speak. This is very clearly indicative of the fact that men assert their power on women, neglect their rights, and regard them as subordinate.

Overlap is another sort of irregularity identified in turn-taking patterns by Zimmerman and West (1975). Coates (1993, p.109) defined overlaps as:

*Instances of slight over-anticipation by the next speaker: instead of beginning to speak immediately following current speaker's turn, next speaker begins to speak at the very end of the*

*current speaker's turn, overlapping the last word  
(or part of it)*

Research results (Zimmerman and West, 1975; Coates, 1993, 1996) showed that overlaps are likely to be equally distributed between participants in same-sex conversations, but that in mixed-sex conversations they are much more likely to be made by male speakers. In sum, in same-sex conversations, women overlap each other more than men. And this overlapping speech is different from interruptions in that two or more speakers can continue talking on the same topic at the same time and nobody regards this as a violation of their right to speak (Wareing, 1999). This is a very clear indication of the fact that women value cooperation, collaboration, and intimacy.

'Minimal responses' are words like 'yeah', 'mmm', 'uh-huh', 'that's right', and the like used to show positive attention to and supporting the speaker in the choice of the topic. Coates (1993, p.109) defined minimal responses as "a way of indicating listener's positive attention to the speaker, and thus a way of supporting the speaker in the choice of topic". Coates (1993) further explained that in a conversation the listener like the speaker has an active role and minimal responses are indicative of listener's active attention and active participation. Review of the related literature (Coates, 1993, 1996) on minimal responses show that women use them more than men and in more appropriate times. To sum up, researches on the use of minimal responses unanimously show that women use them more and at appropriate moments than men do. Coates (1993) concluded that when men use minimal responses they often use delayed ones which cause to establish male dominance in conversation and diminish female speakers.

'Talk time' refers to the length of time a person spends to speak with the interlocutor. There is an age-old belief that women talk too much. Other than the common belief and folklinguistic data even linguistics have attributed talkativeness to women without any empirical study. In a section on the verbosity of women, in his book 'Language: Its nature, Development,

and Origin', Jespersen (1922) claimed that women talk more than men and he quoted examples from literature to prove his point. However, empirical research findings consistently contradict this (Swan, 1989). And, in fact, nearly every empirical study of this feature showed men to be more verbose than women. Wareing (1999) summarized different research findings that in mixed-sex conversations the average amount of time for which a man talks is approximately twice as long as the average amount for which a woman talks. In sum, in mixed-sex conversations it is men who dominate the floor not women.

And, finally, 'topic selection' refers to the kind of topic each speaker selects to talk about. Women are said to select more personal topics such as: family, friendships, and emotions. On the other hand, men are said to choose more impersonal topics like those based on factual or technical knowledge such as: football, cars, or home improvements ((Hudson, 1980; Coates, 1986; and Wareing, 1999). To sum it up, Coates (1993) concluded that women mostly talk about people and feelings while men talk about things and actions. All these variables vary in discourse depending on the gender of the interlocutor.

The present study gains significance especially in a country like Iran where single-sex educational system has made a barrier between speakers of opposite gender assigning them into separate speech communities each with its own norms of appropriateness and rules of interaction. It is apparent that in such an educational context language learners and OPI candidates are more gender conscious than in other areas of the world where coeducational system is prevalent. Therefore, the unaccounted gender consciousness and consequently gender-driven psychological barriers among language-users in general, and OPI candidates in particular may have significant impacts on discourse produced from an oral interview.

Basically the question is whether gender actually affects the discourse produced from an OPI. If the findings do reach a sound statistical basis they can be further applied to testing speaking skill; therefore, yielding in

implications in oral proficiency interviews, teaching speaking skill, and materials development and syllabus design.

This study narrowly focuses on five highly-gendered discourse variables which are 'interruptions', 'overlaps', 'minimal responses', 'talk time', and 'topic selection'.

Given the purpose of the study, together with participants sitting for an IELTS interview, this study aimed at answering the following questions:

Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on interruptions made in IELTS OPI?

Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on overlaps produced in IELTS OPI?

Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on minimal responses given in IELTS OPI?

Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on the topics selected in IELTS OPI?

Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on the time each person spends talking in IELTS OPI?

## **Methodology**

### **Participants**

The overall number of the participants of this study was 83 FCE students of Simin Educational Association (SEA) of Ardabil who had attended IELTS preparatory classes at the same institute. They were students of 5 FCE classes ie, 1 FCE1 class, 2 FCE3 classes, and 2 FCE4 classes. The



participants were rank-ordered according to their performances on the TOEFL (Sharpe, 1996) and they were assigned to 3 groups: high (HG), intermediate (IG), and low (LG) proficiency groups. Fifteen male and 15 female participants were selected from the top of the list as HG. They were assigned as the main group of the study. Following HG in the list 15 male and 15 female participants were also selected as IG. They were assigned as the pilot group of the study. And the rest of the participants who formed the LG were eliminated from the study. As a result, 60 subjects were excluded from the data of the first experiment. Thirty participants who formed the pilot group took part in the process of concurrent validation and reliability of the IELTS test. And 30 others, who formed the main group, participated in the main study.

### **Instrumentation**

In order to sample the subjects, validate the IELTS speaking test, and to gather data to test the hypotheses of this research two tests were used: For the purposes of the present study use was made of the IELTS speaking test (See Appendix One). The TOFEL test (Sharpe, 1996) was also used for subject selection and standardization of the IELTS OPI.

Basically the IELTS speaking test is a 10 – 15 minute interview or conversation between a candidate and an examiner. The speaking test is the final section of the IELTS test. Success in IELTS speaking test depends on the applicants' ability to converse in English with the examiner. The assessment takes into account fluency, coherence, lexical resources, grammatical range, accuracy, and pronunciation (Jakeman and McDowell, 1999). It consists of three main phases:

Phase 1: The candidate and the examiner introduce themselves and then the candidate answers general questions about themselves, such as their home, family, job, hobbies, interests, and so on. This phase lasts about 4 – 5 minutes.

Phase 2: The candidate is given a task card and is asked to talk on a particular topic. This phase lasts about 4 – 5 minutes.

Phase 3: The examiner and the candidate engage in a discussion of more abstract issues and concepts. The discussion lasts between 4 and 5 minutes (Irvani, 2003).

### **Procedure**

In order to address the research questions the data obtained were statistically analyzed and interpreted. First, the statistical analyses were done on the IELTS speaking test in order to determine its validity and inter-rater reliability. The concurrent validation of the test was estimated through computing the correlation between the mean scores yielded from the interviews based on IELTS speaking test and the TOFEL test through running the SPSS software programme (version 9). The correlation coefficient confirmed a high degree of empirical validity of .88 at.01 level of significance. The inter-rater reliability of the test was estimated through computing the correlations between the scores produced in the pilot study. Each candidate was interviewed by one and was scored by all 8 raters. Therefore, 8 sets of scores were produced and they resulted in 28 sets of correlations. All correlation coefficients were meaningful at.01 level of significance. Appendix 2 depicts a summary of the results.

Next, the audio-taped oral discourses produced from the IELTS speaking test in all 60 interviews were transcribed and then analyzed according to the previously-mentioned research variables. The study focused on 2 independent variables, namely male and female, and five dependent variables, namely interruptions, overlaps, minimal responses, talk time and topic selection. Next, the frequencies of the use of each dependent discourse variable (interruptions, overlaps, minimal responses, and topic selection) produced by either gender in all 60 interviews were calculated. Talk time was separately calculated by determining the length of the time each gender (interviewer and candidate) spent speaking through the use of a stopwatch. And, finally use was made of Chi-square test in order to determine whether

the differences were statistically significant. The Chi-square calculations were pre-determined to be meaningful at .01 level of significance and 3 degrees of freedom.

These features were chosen on the basis that they seem to be highly gendered in spoken interaction according to research reviewed by Coates (1993). Although it could be argued that pre-selecting these features meant that the research ignored other gender-based variables which could affect the oral interview, this strategy was taken in order to allow direct comparisons with Coates (1993) specific claims about the use of these conversational features and O'Loughlin's (2002) work on realization of interruptions, overlaps, and minimal responses on the oral discourse of the IELTS speaking test.

### **Results and discussion**

The necessary transcriptions were carried out, the frequencies were calculated and the chi-square computations were run to attain the results. These results were concerned with the impact of gender on interruptions, overlaps, minimal responses, talk time, and topic selection of the discourses produced from the interviews. In the following section, the research questions of the study are discussed one after another.

#### **Interruptions**

***Question 1: Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on interruptions made in IELTS OPI?*** Based on the previous research, Coates (1993) suggested that same-sex interlocutors are unlikely to interrupt each other. On the other hand, in mixed-sex conversations men frequently interrupt women while women rarely interrupt men.

There were very few instances of interviewer interruptions in the data. In the following example the interviewer interrupts the candidate by intervening to take up and develop the first response given by the candidate.

The asterisk sign \* in the extracted conversations pinpoints the focus of analysis.

FC: Well, about my plans in future (.) I'm going to finish my studies and go \* to a foreign country (Mhm)[ and I'm also going]

MI: Why are you going to go abroad?

The overall number of interviewer interruptions was 46. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the results for each gender pairing. Each cell shows, first, the range of interruptions and, secondly, in parentheses the total number of interruptions for that gender pairing.

**Table 1**  
**Interviewer interruptions: range of interruption (total number in parentheses)**

Candidates	Interviewers	
	Male	Female
Male	0 – 4 (14)	0 – 2 (6)
Female	0 – 2 (10)	0 - 5 (16)

The statistical Chi – squared test was calculated for interviewer interruptions to see if the difference is significant. The results of Chi – square calculation (5.24) proved insignificant at.01 level of significance and 3 degree of freedom (5.24<11.34).

There were almost rare instances of candidate interruptions in the data. In the example below the candidate continues the topic of 'cars causing pollution' after the interviewer changes the topic.

FI: How does air pollution start?

FC: There are a lot of cars in the streets (mmm) and the smoke of the cars make air pollution.

FI: How can we prevent air pollution?

\* FC: And it starts by the smoke produced from the factories.

FI: Well, but...

On the whole, there were 11 instances of candidate interruption across all 60 interviews.

Table 2 shows their distribution.

**Table 2**

**Candidate interruptions: range of interruption (total number in parentheses)**

Interviewers	Candidates	
	Male	Female
Male	0 - 1 (6)	0 - 1 (1)
Female	0 - 1 (2)	0 - 1 (2)

The statistical Chi - squared test was calculated for candidate interruptions to see if the difference is significant. The results of Chi - square calculation (3.99) proved insignificant at .01 level of significance and 3 degree of freedom ( $3.99 < 11.34$ ).

Regarding interruptions, the frequency distribution roughly shows that in same-sex pairings OPI candidates interrupt interviewers more than in cross-sex pairings. It may be justified through the fact that same-sex interlocutors feel closer to each other than cross-sex ones. Therefore, they interrupt each other more freely to drive their own points of view than in cross-sex pairings. This is in sharp contrast to what was claimed by Zimmerman and West (1975) and Coates (1993) that there are more interruptions in cross-sex pairings. It also revealed that female interviewers interrupt male candidates less than other gender pairings. This may also derive from the fact that females are, by nature, more cooperative and less

assertive than males are. This is in line with Zimmerman and West (1975) and Coates' (1993) contentions about female speakers and interruptions. Although the data gathered in this study show slight variation in the number of interruptions made in all 60 interviews Chi-square calculations did not prove the differences to be significant.

### **Overlaps**

***Question 2: Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on overlaps produced in IELTS OPI?*** Research results (Zimmerman and West, 1975; Coates, 1993, 1996) showed that overlaps are likely to be equally distributed between participants in same-sex conversations, but that in mixed-sex conversations they are much more likely to be made by male speakers.

There were ample instances of overlaps by interviewers (interviewer overlap). Most of the overlaps used by interviewers seemed to be offering support for the candidates both by confirming information and continuing the topic. The following example shows the interviewer confirming the candidate's idea that "we can prevent air pollution by replacing gas instead of petrol". As the candidate reformulated this utterance, the interviewer perhaps recognized the candidate's need for support in this idea and thus joined in to confirm it.

MC: We can prevent air pollution by replacing gas instead of petrol.

FI: Sure.

\* MC: You know, many taxi drivers these days use [gas instead of petrol.]

FI: [gas instead of petrol in their taxis.]

There were just two instances of overlaps by interviewers which seemed to involve an attempt to close down the topic of discussion.

The total number of interviewer overlaps across all 60 interviews was 112. The following table (3) shows a breakdown of the results.

**Table 3**  
**Interviewer overlaps: range of overlaps (total number in parentheses)**

Candidates	Interviewers	
	Male	Female
Male	0 – 9 (30)	0 – 4 (16)
Female	0 – 13 (37)	0 - 5 (29)

The statistical Chi – squared test was calculated for interviewer overlaps. The results of Chi – square calculation (8.56) proved insignificant at .01 level of significance and 3 degree of freedom ( $8.56 < 11.34$ ).

Almost all the observed candidate overlaps appeared to play a facilitative role in the interviews. In the following example the candidate seems to be supporting the interviewer's idea of the existence of jeopardizing types of pollution in Iran and continues this by offering more types of it.

MI: And, there are different types of uumm [pollution that endanger our country]

\* MC: [yeah, put it in danger]

MI: So what are different types?

MC: Air pollution (yeah) mmm sound pollution...

The total number of candidate overlaps was 31. Table 4 depicts a breakdown of the candidate overlaps.

**Table 4**  
**Candidate overlaps: range of overlaps (total number in parentheses)**

Interviewers	Candidates	
	Male	Female
Male	0 – 3 (10)	0 – 4 (9)

Female	0 - 1 (6)	0 - 3 (6)
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The statistical Chi – squared test was calculated for candidate overlaps to see if the difference is significant. The results of Chi – square calculation (1.63) proved insignificant at .01 level of significance and 3 degree of freedom ( $1.63 < 11.34$ ).

Regarding overlaps, the results of both interviewer and candidate overlaps proved that there is no significant gender impact on the use of this discourse feature on the IELTS OPI.

#### **Minimal responses**

Question 3: Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on minimal responses given in IELTS OPI?

Coates (1993, p.109) defined minimal responses as “a way of indicating listener’s positive attention to the speaker, and thus a way of supporting the speaker in the choice of topic”. ‘Yeah’, ‘huh’, ‘u-huh’, ‘mhm’, ‘that’s right’ are some examples of minimal responses. Coates (1993) further explained that in a conversation the listener like the speaker has an active role and minimal responses are indicative of listener’s active attention and active participation. Review of the related literature (Coates, 1993, 1996) on minimal responses show that women use them more than men and in more appropriate times.

In the IELTS interview data, minimal responses appeared to serve a supportive function in keeping with Coates’ definition. In other words, they encouraged the interlocutor to continue speaking by providing a signal to show active listening. Minimal responses abounded in the data. The total number of interviewer minimal response was 824. Table 5 illustrates a breakdown of the results.



**Table 5**  
**Interviewer MRs: range of MRS (total number in parentheses)**

Candidates	Interviewers	
	Male	Female
Male	8 – 24 (222)	8 – 29 (226)
Female	6 – 32 (195)	5 - 24 (181)

The statistical Chi – squared test was calculated for interviewer minimal responses. The results of Chi – square calculation (6.79) proved insignificant at.01 level of significance and 3 degree of freedom ( $6.79 < 11.34$ ).

Candidate minimal responses totaled 85. The fact that this figure is much lower than the equivalent number (824) for the interviewer minimal responses is not surprising given the roles of the two groups of interlocutors: the interviewers' role is to facilitate the candidates' test performance. Table 6 illustrates the breakdown of the results.

**Table 6**  
**Candidate MRs: range of MRs (total number in parentheses)**

Interviewers	Candidates	
	Male	Female
Male	0 – 7 (26)	0 – 5 (17)
Female	0 – 5 (24)	0 - 5 (18)

The statistical Chi – squared test was calculated for candidate minimal responses. The results of Chi – square calculation (2.74) proved insignificant at.01 level of significance and 3 degree of freedom ( $2.74 < 11.34$ ).

Regarding minimal responses, the frequency distribution shows that male candidates used slightly more minimal responses than their female counterparts. It seems that males and females use minimal responses for different purposes. Females seem to use minimal responses to mean that

they support the other speakers' opinion. While males seem to use minimal responses to mean that they accept what they are told. However, Chi-square calculations did not prove to be significant. Therefore, in the context of speaking tests it should be borne in mind that the way candidates or interviewers give minimal responses in same-sex or cross-sex pairings should not concern the administrators.

### **Talk time**

Question 4: Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on the topics selected in IELTS OPI? There is an age-old belief that women talk too much. People in Western societies believe that women talk more than men. Based on previous research Coates (1993) claimed that men speak more than women do in cross-sex conversations. Wareing (1999) summarized different research findings that in mixed-sex conversations the average amount of time for which a man talks is approximately twice as long as the average amount for which a woman talks. In sum, in mixed-sex conversations it is men who dominate the floor not women.

On the whole, male candidate talking time was 379 minutes while female candidate talking time was 367 minutes. Table 7 illustrates the breakdown of the results.

**Table 7**  
**Candidate talking time: range of talk time (total number in parentheses)**

Interviewers	Candidates	
	Male	Female
Male	09:51 – 15:54 (196)	08:55 – 16:49 (176)
Female	10:00 – 14:49 (182)	09:04 – 15:39 (181)

Regarding candidate talk time a comparison of the total frequencies (male: 379; female: 367) of talking time for each gender revealed no discernable pattern. This is in sharp contrast to what has been put forth in the literature. According to folklinguistics women talk much more than men. However, the data in this study proved that gender does not have a

significant impact on the amount of time male and female interlocutors choose to speak. In order to justify this, it may be argued that the time a candidate is allocated to speak is almost limited and rather fixed, because all candidates are asked the same questions and the same number of questions. By the way, in an oral interview the interviewer is not only responsible for controlling the interview. Therefore, all candidates are put under almost the same conditions in oral interviews therefore the amount of time they are allowed to speak is almost fixed.

#### **Topic selection**

Question 5: Does gender of interviewers and interviewees have an impact on the time each person spends talking in IELTS OPI?

Another way women and men's conversation appear to vary is in the topics they choose to discuss (Hudson, 1980; Coates, 1986; and Wareing, 1999). Women are said to talk about people and emotions such as family, friendship, social life, books, foods, drinks, and life style. On the other hand, men are said to talk about things and actions such as football, cars, home improvement, business, politics, and taxes.

In the second phase of the interview each candidate was asked to choose a topic from among 6 topics to talk about. According to literature 3 of the topics were associated with males and 3 of them were associated with females.

In the IELTS data, on the whole, among male candidates 16 of them chose topics associated with male speakers but 14 chose the ones associated with speakers of the opposite gender. Also among female candidates 20 of them chose topics associated with female speakers and 10 chose the ones associated with speakers of the opposite gender. Table 8 illustrates a breakdown of the results.

**Table 8**  
**Candidate topic selection**

Topics	Candidates	
	Male	Female
Male	16	18
Female	14	12

The statistical Chi – squared test was calculated for candidate topic selection. The results of Chi – square calculation (1.32) proved insignificant at .01 level of significance and 3 degree of freedom ( $1.32 < 11.34$ ).

One reason for this, may be, the topics were not in extremes, ie they were not so masculine or so feminine for the speakers of the opposite sexes to find them impossible to speak about. For example, there can be some cases where one sex can not speak very well: Women about cars and engines and men about cosmetics and fashion.

By and large, the findings are in contradiction with Coates’s (1993) claims about the use of each of these discourse features in conversation. It may originate from the fact that oral proficiency interview may differ from casual conversations where participants tend to have more equal rights and responsibilities. Another reason which may justify this is that gender is a social and cultural phenomenon (Wareing, 1999) and it may differ from the Western to the Eastern context, therefore, modifying the results.

It is noteworthy that the findings of this research are consistent with the findings of O’Loughlin (2002).

### **Conclusions**

In sum, the statistical results yielded from Chi–square calculations and the results of discourse analysis in this study show that gender does not have a significant impact on the discourse produced from the IELTS OPI. The discourse analysis indicated several points worth mentioning. First of all, in relative terms, that there was limited use of overlaps, negligible use of

interruptions, and widespread use of minimal responses in the discourses produced from the interviews. Second, the variables under investigation did not appear to follow any unified gendered pattern in the data of this study. And finally, different gender pairings seemed to use minimal responses and especially overlaps with a high degree of variability. The most important point revealed through discourse analysis is that female and male interlocutors made use of positive overlaps and minimal responses which is revealing of the fact that a collaborative, cooperative, supportive, and friendly speech style is not exclusive to just female participants in the context of OPI.

Concerning testing speaking skill, it should be borne in mind that the gender of interviewers and candidates does not require any particular precautions to be taken or any particular preparations to be made prior to making and administration of tests of speaking ability with regard to the discourse variables scrutinized in this research study.

According to Henning (1987) bias in testing which is a major source of unreliability refers to “the nonrandom distribution of measurement error which usually results in unfair advantage for one or more groups or categories of individuals over other groups taking the same test” (p.189). In keeping with Henning’s definition, there could be a variety of gender pairings (M for male, and F for female), in an OPI, between interviewers and candidates (I for interviewer, and C for candidate), namely MI/MC, MI/FC, FI/MC, and FI/FC the gender effects of each of which could potentially be a major source of difference between interviews, however, the results of the present study yielded from Chi-square calculations offers no implications for the way interviewers and candidates should be paired for interview purposes.

Concerning language teaching one of the prominent language skills is the speaking skill. Based on the results of the present study, it should be borne in mind that the gender of interviewers and candidates does not imply the observation of any particular teaching standards and procedures in

teaching speaking ability. In other words, the results of this study does not imply any superiority over either coeducational or single-sex educational system where students are seated either in mixed-sex or all-male and all-female classrooms.

Concerning curriculum development, it should also borne in mind that the results of this study does not imply the observation of any particular standards and measures in the selection of the topics for speaking test course books regarding gender of interviewers and candidates who will study and possibly take such a test.

Palmer (1972) asserted “we can not design a language course until we know something about the students for whom the course is intended” (p.129). To abide by Palmer’s assertion the present study made an attempt in order to uncover facts about interviewers and candidates’ gender and to seek guidance in the way the content of speaking course books should be prepared with regard to gender. The results do not convey any particular implications for materials preparation.

Therefore, it can be concluded that although in the Iranian educational context learners are educated in single-sex classrooms; this separation does not have a significant impact on the discourse produced from the oral proficiency interview such as the case of the IELTS OPI.

The finding of this study which is conducted in the language testing context differs from those conducted in the social context of linguistic use. Of course, there can be a number reason behind. One can be due to the characteristics of the testing context which may be a serious one compared to the daily social context. Another may originate from that fact that the characteristics which interviewers and candidates bring into the testing situation may differ from those they bring into the social context of language use. It is, therefore, highly probable that the aspects of the testing context itself, such as the purpose of the test, the language which is the medium of the test, the cultural aspects of the country where the IELTS test is being administered, and the social identities and status of the interviewers

and candidates which take part in the IELTS OPI may determine whether significant gender differences in the discourse produced from the interview will emerge or not. Anyway, in humanities, we are dealing with human variables which might minutely alter depending on a plethora of personal, social, cultural, attitudinal, psychological, and even physiological factors.

*Received 28 August, 2005*

*Accepted 17 January, 2006*

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Appendix 1 IELTS Speaking Test

(Phase one)

---

Interviewer: Good morning. My name is....Could you tell me your name please?

Candidate: .....

Int: And your candidate number?

Can: .....

Int: Thank you. Now could you tell me a little about yourself?

Can: .....

Int: What do you usually do in your free time?

Can: .....

Int: What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of living here?

Can: .....

Int: I'm new here. Are there any places of special interest I could visit in your city?

Can: .....

Int: Could you describe one of them for me?

Can: .....

Int: What would be the best way for me to go there?

Can: .....

Int: I want to have a meal in your town. Could you recommend a good restaurant?

Can: .....

Int: Where is it?

Can: .....

Int: Why do you like it?

Can: .....

Int: What do you suggest I order?

Can: .....

Int: Is it expensive?

Can: .....

Int: Why did you learn English?

Can: .....

Int: What are your plans for future?

Can: .....

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\_\_\_\_\_Phase two\_\_\_\_\_

Int: Now I want to give you a card. There are different topics on it and you should choose one to talk about (interviewer gives the card. There are six topics and one card with almost four questions for each topic. The topics are: your favourite writer, a party, a vacation, a typical workday, saving money, and childhood memory).

Card number one ⇨

Describe a recent party that you liked very much.

You should mention:

- Where and when it was
- Who were the participants
- What was special about it
- And explain why it was so attractive to you

Card number two ⇨

Are you saving money to buy something?

You should talk about:

- What you are planning to buy
- How much it will cost
- How much longer you will need to save before you can buy it

Card number three ⇨

Describe a memory of your childhood.

You should say:

- What it was
- When it happened
- How it affected your later life

- Whether you remember it as a pleasant or disgusting memory

Card number four ⇨

Describe a typical workday of your life

Talk about:

- When you start it
- How you get to work
- What you specially do
- Whether you like to have a different job or not

Card number five ⇨

Talk about your favourite writer (author)

Talk about:

- Who he/she is
- Who introduced him/her to you
- What his/her best work is
- What he/she usually writes about

Card number six ⇨

<p>Describe your favourite vacation.</p> <p><u>You should talk about:</u></p> <p>When you take it</p> <p>What ceremonies it has</p> <p>How old it is</p> <p>Why it is very interesting to you</p>
---

Int: Now tell me which topic you chose.

Can: .....

Int: Now take this card (the card which has information about the topic) study it quickly and tell me as much as you can about it.

Can: .....

Phase three

Int: OK, good. Now let's go back to real life and you. Tell me, what do you think are the greatest problems facing your country at present?

Can: .....

Int: And, what has been done so far to solve these problems?

Can: .....

Int: How much successful do you think these measures have been?

Can: .....

Int: Do you think things are likely to get better or worse in the future?

Can: .....



Int: As a citizen of your country how do you think you can help solve these problems?

Can: .....

Int: Now let's talk about environment. What is pollution?

Can: .....

Int: What are different types of it?

Can: .....

Int: Does any of the types of pollution jeopardize your country?

Can: .....

Int: How does air-pollution start?

Can: .....

Int: How can we prevent air pollution?

Can: .....

Int: Thank you. It's been pleasant talking to you. I wish you all the best in life. Goodbye.

**Appendix 2**

**Correlation coefficients for the inter-rater reliability of the test**

	MI1	MI2	MI3	MI4	FI1	FI2	FI3	FI4
MI1		.83	.84	.88	.82	.83	.79	.78
MI2			.83	.88	.75	.80	.87	.78
MI3				.85	.79	.79	.76	.81

<b>MI4</b>					<b>.82</b>	<b>.84</b>	<b>.85</b>	<b>.90</b>
<b>FI1</b>						<b>.76</b>	<b>.77</b>	<b>.80</b>
<b>FI2</b>							<b>.74</b>	<b>.76</b>
<b>FI3</b>								<b>.83</b>
<b>FI4</b>								

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