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The Impact of Oral Examiners' Conduct on Candidates' Performance: The Case of the KPG Exam in English

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ABSTRACT

The present thesis is concerned with oral examiners' differential enactment of the role they have been assigned in the context of language proficiency testing, because variation in examiner conduct ultimately results in unfair assessment, unfair testing. Specifically, this study investigates *if, when* and *how* oral examiners, taking part in the KPG exams in English, operate according to training instructions and guidelines, acting out the role assigned to them as 'silent interlocutors' or if they interfere/involve themselves in what the candidate says, in his/her oral performance. Moreover, it explores the consequences of such involvement in assessment; that is, what sort of impact different degrees and types of involvement have on how the candidate's oral performance is evaluated and marked.

In order to examine the KPG English examiner conduct, different types of data from a variety of resources were accumulated, and I used three distinct methods with which to examine these different types of data, collected over a period of three years:

- a) The first set of data was collected by experts observing oral examiners at work during the actual examination procedure and completing especially prepared forms. The analysis of the data revealed different types, degrees and frequency

of involvement. It also shed light into why examiners felt the need to intervene and what sort of effects the different types of involvement had on the candidate performance.

- b) The second set of data was drawn from simulated speaking tests. Examiners' and candidates' talk was recorded and later transcribed. A combined method of discourse and conversation analysis was used to examine instances of examiner involvement so as to identify causes or reasons for examiner involvement, as well as to understand how such involvement affected the candidate's linguistic output. Systematicity of co-occurrence of specific types of cause-involvement-effect was also sought and recorded.
- c) The third set of data consisted of written protocols produced by trained raters who assessed and marked the simulated speaking tests. These protocols were analysed with a view to understanding the ways in which examiner involvement may influence assessment. Although raters were not asked to evaluate examiner conduct, they made evaluative observations about examiner involvement and the purposes it served, when commenting on how examiners acted out their role. On the basis of the findings, an 'oral examiner involvement model' was generated.

Responding to the demand for coherence and transparency in the KPG language proficiency testing, the present study presents findings with regard to oral examiner conduct. In discussing the results of the study, we see how these findings may influence speaking test task development, and how they can be useful for training oral examiners and oral performance assessors.

Finally, considering that testers and researchers are still seeking the most appropriate way of testing oral proficiency –with some supporting the more

conversational type of interview and others advocating a more controlled type of test—this study provides evidence that controlled speaking tests, which circumvent examiner conduct variation, are associated with fairer oral performance testing.