

## The role of interactive communication in IELTS Speaking and its relationship to candidates' preparedness for study or training contexts

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Grant awarded Round 15, 2009

This study compares the demands made on candidates in the Speaking sub-test of the IELTS Test with speaking required in a university setting. It aims to provide evidence of the extent to which the IELTS Test is representative of the knowledge and skills required to demonstrate English proficiency in university programs.

[Click here to read the Introduction to this volume which includes an appraisal of this research, its context and impact.](#)

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to provide evidence of the validity of the IELTS Speaking Test based on test content, that is, the extent to which it is representative of the knowledge and skills required to demonstrate English proficiency in undergraduate and graduate programs. This is investigated by comparing the oral interactive communication demands of the IELTS Test, through an analysis of a set of recorded interviews, with the demands identified in a university setting, through analysis of institutional documentation, interviews with staff, and observations of classroom interaction.

In the first part, the literature relating to spoken interaction in a study context was reviewed to identify which features of interactive communication are described. The findings were then discussed in the light of research and developments in the testing of spoken language. This was followed by an analysis of institutional documents within an Australian university focusing on expected and explicit speaking outcomes in first year university study.

The second part went on to explore the impact of those features of interactive communication, found in part 1, on students' preparedness for speaking in study or training contexts. It consisted of observations of first year classes within an Australian university and interviews with the lecturers.

The third part consisted of the transcription and discourse analysis of taped IELTS interviews at Band 6 and above. The discourse analysis uncovered which interactional features, as identified in the literature, appeared in the candidate discourse. The findings highlighted the overlap and the gaps between features defined in the literature and their presence in the interview discourse. This enabled the researchers to report on the likely preparedness of the IELTS candidates for their study or training with regard to interactive communication.

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## IELTS RESEARCH REPORTS, VOLUME 12, 2011

**Published by:** IDP: IELTS Australia and British Council  
**Editor:** Jenny Osborne, IDP: IELTS Australia  
**Editorial consultant:** Petronella McGovern, IDP: IELTS Australia  
**Editorial assistance:** Judith Fairbairn, British Council  
**Acknowledgements:** Dr Lynda Taylor, University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations

**IDP: IELTS Australia Pty Limited**  
ABN 84 008 664 766  
Level 8, 535 Bourke St, Melbourne VIC 3000, Australia  
© IDP: IELTS Australia Pty Limited 2011

**British Council**  
Bridgewater House  
58 Whitworth St, Manchester, M1 6BB, UK  
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## 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Educational institutions in English-speaking countries typically use English language tests, such as IELTS, as measures of the preparedness of non-native speakers of English for university study. However, the connection between these measures and what is expected by way of proficiency in oral interaction during study or training remains essentially undefined. If candidates in test performance can be shown to exhibit features of interactive communication that are explicitly stated in course requirements, then claims can be made on the basis of test performance about candidate preparedness for when they commence study. A further issue that is increasingly seen as important is the impact of such tests on language programs, that is, their ‘washback’. A test is more likely to have beneficial washback when the content of that test is more closely related to the types of tasks that students will be required to engage in and the skills they will be need to draw on once they begin their study, and the more explicitly this relationship is described.

While the traditional view of the communication needs of international students in higher education has tended to privilege reading, writing and, to a lesser extent, listening skills, it is now generally accepted that oral communication skills are as important as literacy (eg, Carroll and Ryan, 2005). Since it has been demonstrated that long-term learning depends on the learner *actively* processing the material that they read, and that there are cognitive benefits to verbal participation (Gagne, Yekovich, and Yekovich, 1994; Gredler, 1992; McKeachie, 1970; Smith, 1980), recent years have seen a shift in teaching methodology within universities to a more participatory style of learning. So, given the increased value placed on interactive communication in the classroom, the question arises of whether the existing English tests for entrance to tertiary education are adequately targeting relevant interactional skills.

There are concerns about the ability of traditional single-candidate tests to provide candidates with the opportunity to show their ability to participate in interaction other than as an ‘interviewee’, responding to questions. These concerns have underpinned the increasing attention given in recent years to paired-candidate tests. The strongest argument for such tests lies in the claim that they allow for the assessment of a broader range of skills than do the more traditional interviewer tests, in particular that they are more ‘balanced (Egyud and Glover, 2001) and interactive (French, 1999), with candidates producing a greater range of functions (Kormos, 1999; Lazaraton, 2002) and interactional patterns being more varied (Saville and Hargreaves, 1999). A number of studies have reported a greater percentage of conversational management functions, such as topic building in the paired tasks (eg, Galaczi, 2004; Taylor, 2001). However, while language tests are increasingly incorporating paired candidate tasks in course-based (eg, Ducasse, 2010; May, 2009) and general proficiency contexts, such as the Cambridge Suite, tests of English for Academic Purposes remain focused on single-candidate assessment, whether face-to-face with an examiner or in a semi-direct format.

This study addresses the relationship between test and criterion as it pertains to the IELTS Speaking Test. It takes a broad view of the test as a measure of oral communicative effectiveness, and seeks to identify how it measures up in its scope against the communicative effectiveness skills required of students entering higher education in English-speaking contexts. In order to do this, we take a three-pronged approach. First, we will review the literature to learn how the oral communicative demands of university study have been described in earlier studies. Next, we will analyse one particular university context in depth, drawing on an analysis of institutional documents, observation of university classes taken during the first year, at undergraduate as well as masters level, and interviews with the lecturers. Finally, after identifying the salient skills and task characteristics, we will evaluate the extent to which the IELTS interview taps into these skills.

## 2 COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION DEMANDS IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING: THE LITERATURE

In reviewing the literature to ascertain how the oral communicative demands of university study have been described, we found a number of areas of research activity that touch on the communication needs of students entering higher education. One such area is concerned with the 'first year experience' (Krause et al, 2005; Tinto and Goodsell, 1994) and focuses on identifying the gap between preparedness and course demands, which can help universities determine which skills students are lacking. However, despite research indicating that students' communication effectiveness is positively associated with positive learning outcomes (Frymier, 2005), remarkably little detail emerges regarding oral communication skills specifically. Where it is mentioned, it is usually couched in terms of *contexts* where communication is required and *activities* students are expected to participate in, or the relative importance of speaking skills vis-à-vis other skills, with little or no detail about what specific linguistic skills are required of students – whether native-speaker or non-native-speaker background – to participate effectively (Carroll and Ryan, 2005; Kaur and Khan, 2010; Shen, 2008). Murray (2010) notes the need for “a clear understanding and articulation of the language and literacy skills NESB and ESB students respectively need to succeed in their studies” (pp 62-3).

Nevertheless, analyses of interaction in the university classroom are beginning to emerge. Some of these are concerned with interactions involving experienced academics, such as dissertation defence (Grimshaw, 1989), academic colloquia (Tracy, 1997; Tracy and Baratz, 1993; Tracy and Carjuzaa, 1993) and meetings of research teams (Jacoby, 1998; Ochs and Jacoby, 1997). These are perhaps of less relevance to a study such as this, which is concerned with assessment taken before the commencement of a university course. However, a number of studies are concerned with seminar interactions among undergraduate or postgraduate students and involve the sorts of interactions which even beginning students can be expected to participate in, with a central focus being the discussion of readings from books or journal articles. Benwell (1999), for example, determined that the skills which emerged as important in discussion contexts included the ability to produce, initiate and maintain interaction through the production of a range of moves including opinions, solutions, evaluations, evidence, refutation, and seeking confirmation. Similarly, Berrill (1991) identified the following moves within undergraduate small group discussion interaction: generating, challenging and evaluating viewpoints; testing generalisations or definitions by giving hypothetical situations or personal anecdotes; and moving towards consensus.

Other research, not on the seminar skill requirements listed above, is often designed to inform the design, development or validation of language tests. It has drawn on the views of university staff and/or students as to what tasks and skills are important (Brown, Iwashita and McNamara, 2005; Cumming, Grant, Mulcahy-Ernt and Powers, 2005; Kim, 2006; Rosenfeld, Leung and Oltman, 2001). These studies, however, tend to focus on identification of informational functions, rather than interactional ones. For example, Rosenfeld et al (2001) surveyed university staff and students to identify the linguistic tasks important for completing coursework. While explaining or informing, and developing or structuring hypotheses were identified as the most important oral communication tasks, others included summarising information, giving and supporting an opinion, describing objects, and making comparisons/contrasts.

While many of the studies of oral university communication, especially those in the field of language testing, have focused on defining its functional features, communication theory provides an alternative way of looking at what it takes to be communicatively effective which is concerned with its interactional aspects. McCrosky and Richmond (1996) argue that effective communication requires one to be appropriately assertive on the one hand, and appropriately responsive on the other. They define assertiveness as the “capacity to make requests, actively disagree, express positive or negative personal rights and feelings, initiate, maintain or disengage from conversations, and stand up for oneself” (McCrosky and Richmond, 1996, p 2). Responsiveness is the “capacity to be sensitive to communication of others, to be a good listener, to make others comfortable in communicating, and to recognise the needs and desires of others” (McCrosky and Richmond, 1996, p 93). In an instructional context, both responsiveness and assertiveness, which include maintaining and initiating interaction found in the studies on seminar discourse, have been found to contribute to both teacher and student effectiveness (Myers and Bryant, 2002; Frymier, 2005).

Returning to the features of seminar talk, a series of studies by Waring (2001, 2002a, b) examine the interactional characteristics of graduate seminars through the use of conversation analysis. All three studies focus on the same set of what she describes as “*competent native and normative speakers*”, that is, students late in their masters program or in a doctoral program. The 2001 study examines strategies employed by participants to collaboratively manage the task of disagreeing and critiquing: *peer referencing*, where “as/like you said” is used to collaboratively build critiques of the reading or to preserve the integrity of the speaker’s position while producing a potentially competing one, and *asserting vulnerability*, where speakers frame themselves as being uncertain or not knowing, or admit that their arguments have been inconsistent, inaccurate or implausible. The 2002a study examined how participants in a number of studies dealt with non-comprehension of the readings in graduate seminars. While admitting non-comprehension was a dispreferred, and hence delayed, action, another approach was to attempt to establish the legitimacy of the non-comprehension, for example, by describing the effort made to understand text, or offering a partial understanding. A third approach was to appeal to the group. The 2002b study examined the ways in which participants demonstrated understanding of co-participants, that is, minor contributions offered that did not change the direction of the talk, which Waring terms *substantive reciprocity*. The behaviours included extensions (eg, with an analogy or an illustrative example), reformulations, or ‘jargonising’ (offering a canonical expression to capture the gist of the prior explanation).

The collaborative nature of the interactional features studied, Waring argues, derives from the nature of the task, in which the participants are positioned as “co-constructors of knowledge”. Thus, offering attempted understandings is a strategic step taken by speakers toward managing the impression that they are intellectually able, despite non-comprehension, and substantive reciprocity is inherently collaborative because the recipients “are willing to dedicate their opportunities to talk to exposing, illuminating, and solidifying the meaning produced by another” (2002b, p 476). Conversation analysis has also been used to examine the ways speakers signal upcoming changes in footing, both verbally and non-verbally (Viechnicki, 1997), and the ways in which participants manage topicality (Stokoe, 2000), particularly the opening sequences in which they “get down to educational business” (2000, p 184) and subsequent “off-topic” sequences.

The studies of discourse in university settings reviewed above reveal its inherently interactive – and collaborative – nature, at least as far as one central seminar activity, the discussion of readings, is concerned. Yet, despite this, English for Academic Purpose (EAP) speaking tests are typically either interviewer-led (as is the case for IELTS) or semi-direct (as is the case for TOEFL). While semi-direct

tests have been criticised as not allowing reciprocal interaction, consisting essentially of monologic tasks, interviewer-led tests have also been criticised as not allowing students to demonstrate a broad range of interactional skills, due to the inherently hierarchical relationships of examiner and candidate. Recent studies have explored the value of peer-peer tasks in oral assessment and generally found that they are both more balanced and more likely to incorporate a broader range of interactional and conversational management functions (Taylor, 2001; Lazaraton, 2002; Brooks, 2009; Galaczi, 2004).

It is also the case that studies concerned with the predictive validity of IELTS have generally found little or no significant relationship between IELTS scores and subsequent academic performance, and this lack of relationship is even more marked for IELTS Speaking Tests (see, for example, Cotton and Conrow, 1998; Kerstjens and Nery, 2000). This begs the question of the extent to which the IELTS Speaking Test predicts the sorts of language behaviours required to succeed in university study. Studies which have examined the actual language performance of students have produced mixed results. While Ingram and Bayliss (2007) found that, overall, students' in-class oral language behaviour reflected the IELTS level they were assessed at in terms of features such as syntax, language functions and tasks, content and meaning, fluency and coherence, pronunciation, range of lexis, organisation of information, class involvement, pragmatic awareness and register, Paul (2007) found that students experienced difficulty in language and content in relation to the complexity of academic demands.

So on reviewing the literature, the oral communicative demands of university study indicate that students' communication effectiveness is positively associated with positive learning outcomes but that the specific oral communication skills required have not, as yet, been described in detail. The skills for seminar participation emerge as important in student discourse; these include producing, initiating and maintaining interaction through the production of a range of moves. In addition, generating, challenging and evaluating viewpoints were also identified, among other skills, as making up the skills required for interaction in undergraduate small group discussions. Finally, when asked, university staff maintain that the most important oral communication tasks include summarising information, giving and supporting opinions, describing objects, and making comparisons/contrasts. These skills, viewed as a whole, reflect the fact that the university environment is one that is interactive where, as was also found, responsiveness and assertiveness are indicative of effectiveness.

It is with this background that we examine, in the context of one university, the expected oral communication skills of students in the first year of their courses, as described in institutional literature and the communication requirements that face them, in terms of the types of classroom activities in which they will participate. We then examine whether the interactional skills required in this context are also required within the IELTS interview, in order to address the question of the match of test with target context.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The project aims to investigate the role of interactive communication in the IELTS Speaking subtest, and its impact on candidate preparedness for study or training contexts, in two parts. Our questions concern:

***Research Question 1***

Which features of oral interaction are expected of students entering university, as described in institutional documents and by teaching staff, and as observed in classes?

***Research Question 2***

Which of these features emerge from a discourse analysis of transcriptions?

***Research Question 3***

Do specific features of interactive communication emerge at specific band levels?

#### 3.1 Research Question 1 methodology

Research Question 1 is addressed through the following methods:

- an analysis of institutional documents within an Australian university, developed in response to a requirement to embed the teaching and learning of graduate capabilities into disciplinary areas; the documents focus specifically on the role of graduate capabilities, including speaking and teamwork, in first year subjects
- interviews with teachers of core (compulsory) first year subjects
- observations of core first year subject classes.

Appendix 1 lists the documents made available to the researchers for analysis. All were developed within the context of a move to integrate the development of graduate capabilities and content delivery, and focused specifically on the role of defined graduate capabilities in first year undergraduate courses. The documents include two reports which presented the results of surveys and focus group discussions carried out in two faculties, Law and Management (Spencer and Riddle, 2009) and Humanities and Social Sciences (Howell, 2010), and a set of additional documents, supplementary to the reports, which focused more closely on specific discipline areas or aspects of teaching and assessment.

Based on the information drawn from the document analysis, a semi-structured interview schedule was developed for the interviews, focusing on the role and nature of oral communication in first year subjects, and on the skills expected of students (Appendix 2). Interviews were carried out with eight lecturers responsible for core first year subjects across five faculties.

The interviewee lecturers were sampled on recommendation from the directors for Learning and Teaching from each faculty. They were known as lecturers willing and interested in discussing assessment and performance issues on such areas as the role of speaking in their courses. They were subsequently approached by email for an appointment to discuss taking part in an interview and having their classes observed.

The questions for the interview, in Appendix 2, were developed to encourage open responses that focused on speaking in academic contexts in the different faculties. Apart from asking lecturers to define speaking requirements in their subjects, they were also asked whether speaking was required or assumed and, in either case, if it was modelled, explicitly taught, or assessed. The interviews were run over the first few weeks of semester in the lecturers' offices and were digitally recorded for transcription.

An observation checklist was then developed with the aim of identifying and classifying interactional moves produced by students, that is, dialogic turns responding to, or intended to produce a response from, an interlocutor, as opposed to monologic talk. For classification we drew on a framework developed by Saville and O'Sullivan (2000) which built on the work of Weir (1993) in characterising three types of speaking functions – informational functions, interactional functions and interaction management functions, as these seemed to reflect the characteristics of oral interaction as described by the lecturers in their responses to the interview questions. We also referred to informational and interactional functions identified by van Moere (2010) and He and Dai (2006) in tests of English for Academic Purposes. Individual functions were selected for inclusion based on information supplied in the interviews and a pilot observation.

The pilot observation involved the observation of 12 small groups of four to seven students preparing an oral presentation task within the same subject. As a pilot, this repeat observation allowed all the groups making up a cohort to be observed, enabling observation of a whole range of discussion dynamics and different performances. Their discussion behaviour was recorded by a non-participant observer against a checklist of functions drawn up from a combination of the findings from the studies mentioned above. The finalised check list for the remainder of observations is found in Appendix 4,

### **3.2 Research Questions 2 and 3 methodology**

Research Questions 2 and 3 are addressed through an analysis of 24 IELTS interviews, supplied by IELTS Australia, six at each of the band levels 6, 7, 8 and 9. A special request was made to ensure the range of students in the sample matched the countries of origin found in courses at the university, including a representation for native speakers at Band 9. Lower levels were not included because the cut-off score for entry to tertiary courses falls with the range sampled. Candidates were identified as being from the Philippines (4), China and Taiwan (3), the Indian subcontinent (10), UAE (3), South Africa (1), UK (1) and Ireland (1).

Using the same checklist of functions as was used for the observations, the transcribed IELTS interviews were examined to find instances of the specified information, interactional and interaction management functions. A comparison was made of the emergence of these functions across the four proficiency levels.

## **4 ANALYSIS**

### **4.1 Document analysis**

As described above, the documents gathered were developed within the context of a university-wide move to integrate the development of graduate capabilities and content delivery; they focused specifically on the role of defined graduate capabilities in first year undergraduate courses. The core graduate capabilities across the entire university are: *Writing, Speaking, Inquiry/research, Critical thinking, Creative problem-solving and Teamwork*. In the two sets of faculty surveys, first year core subject coordinators were asked to determine whether each graduate capability listed above, was relevant, assumed, encouraged, modelled, explicitly taught, or assessed in that subject. These categories were taken from Sumsion and Goodfellow (2004, p 333). Definitions of these terms are provided in Appendix 3. Course specific descriptions of how these skills are demonstrated in the curriculum and, where relevant, how they are assessed, derived from the focus group discussions which were conducted by the faculty Teaching and Learning Team. The discussions involved reviewing the grid completed prior to the session and updating any changes that provided a more accurate description of manner in which graduate capabilities in that subject were assumed taught or assessed.

While there was a recognition among all staff that oral interaction was relevant to *all* graduate capabilities, as it was believed that these were largely developed through talk and discussion, for the purposes of this study we focused specifically on the two graduate capabilities most directly relevant to spoken interaction, namely *Speaking* and *Teamwork*. The two faculty-wide surveys (from the Faculty of Law and Management and Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) reported that both speaking and teamwork were considered relevant to almost all core subjects. In the Law and Management report, a third of 35 first year core subject coordinators across six disciplines (accounting, economics and finance, law, management, information systems and marketing) reported that the generic speaking skills were assumed at course entry level, and half of them reported that the generic teamwork skills were assumed at entry level. In the other survey from Humanities, a quarter of 62 first year core subject coordinators reported that the generic speaking skills were assumed at entry to a course, and a further quarter reported that the generic teamwork skills were also assumed at entry. One third reported that speaking was assessed in the core programs, and a further third reported that teamwork was assessed.

Further review of the documents, which listed the discipline-based graduate capabilities and descriptors by individual subject, sought to elaborate what spoken interaction was understood to involve, by identifying all references to speaking. These were then coded for context, interaction type, activity, function, and interactional skills. While there were a few references to oral interaction skills required in a lecture context (namely, asking and answering questions, and brief paired-student discussions), and reference was also made to office consultation hours, the majority of the references were to tutorial interaction. Within the tutorial context, activities were of two types: monologic and dialogic. Monologic activities included individual and group presentations, such as reporting the results of small group discussion back to the whole class or participating in a prepared individual or group presentation. The most commonly referred to dialogic activity was small group discussion or problem-solving, although whole class tutor-led discussion was also mentioned. Functional moves that were specifically referred to included presenting and eliciting information and opinions, presenting an analysis, an argument, or a critique, explaining issues and problems, supporting an argument with evidence, negotiating, and summarising the outcome of a discussion. Interactional skills included participating in and leading the discussion, demonstrating active listening skills, being responsive to what others are saying, asking and answering questions, and speaking concisely and clearly.

Assessment criteria for oral presentations were both content-focused (the quality and relevance of the information and examples, the level of evaluation, the structure of the talk, the logic of the argument), interactionally focused (the presentation methods, the engagement of the audience in discussion, eye contact, body language, and confidence), and linguistically focused (appropriateness and grammaticality of the language). No assessment criteria were available for group interaction.

## 4.2 Interviews

As described above, eight lecturers responsible for core first year subjects across five faculties participated in the interviews. All eight considered speaking to be critical to the process of learning, and referred explicitly to the ability to interact with others and participate in group work and engage with the tutor as a key characteristic of speaking in their courses. They referred to activities such as problem-solving and discussion. Four also referred to the need to participate in presentations, formal and informal, assessed and non-assessed. Specific speaking skills described by the lecturers included giving information, expressing and responding to opinions, articulating a position, formulating ideas, constructing an argument, summarising or explaining, challenging and critiquing, seeking and giving clarification, and asking and responding to questions. The content of the talk was said to be based largely on reading within the subject, although there were also role-play tasks and project presentations. While speaking was reported as being assessed directly only by three lecturers, it was noted that oral discussion activities fed into other assessed tasks, such as essays or group reports.

Involvement in discussion was viewed as integral to the learning process. While there was a general assumption that students did not enter with highly developed group work and presentation skills, they were nevertheless expected to have the linguistic skills necessary for participation, and a readiness to engage in discussion. Non-native-speakers were generally described as less participatory in a group, and less likely to take the lead. This was believed to be because they had some difficulty following native-speaker students, a lack of confidence, and also difficulty “finding a way in” to a conversation.

When asked to comment on the relevance of IELTS to first year entry, there was a general feeling that Sections 2 and 3 were relevant to the speaking skills required in coursework (namely, monologic and dialogic), but that the main thing missing in Section 3 was interaction where, as one lecturer put it:

*It's not just a case of we ask a question then we get one answer then move on. After the answer, we take the answer apart and go down some paths that may or may not be built into the question within, so I am not sure that responding to things encompasses a single track discussion which is just a basic level compared to a free-flowing discussion where you rebut and disagree and take something as far as you can, even though it is not necessarily part of the question. The discussion is unpredictable which is why they have trouble listening and also formulating a response...[Students] need skills like ask a question – clarifying or critical – taking discussion in different direction, as well as giving an opinion. So the third section does not go as far as we expect.*

## 5 OBSERVATIONS

Observations were carried out in seven classes across seven subjects: Biotechnology, History, European studies, Anatomy, Health sciences, Human biology, Law, and Management. As described earlier, an observation checklist was developed with the aim of identifying and classifying interactional moves produced by students, that is, moves produced in response to an interlocutor or designed to elicit a response from an interlocutor (Figure 1). After a pilot observation, it was decided not to count individual instances as this proved too difficult, especially with multiple groups working simultaneously, but to provide an impressionistic overview of frequency.

The researcher was present in an unobtrusive location where the function grid sheet could be completed without students feeling observed and uncomfortable. The resulting impressionistic overview involved the researcher dividing the time by the number of groups available on which to focus attention. During one hour sessions of observation, while being discreet and not being involved in the interaction taking place, the researcher was able to form an impression, as an experienced lecturer/tutor accustomed to witnessing the development of tertiary class discussions.

We start with a brief description of the seven observed classes. Each different number represents a sample class observed for interactional functions in different subjects. All participants completed the required ethics forms agreeing to take part before being observed in their interactions.

Classes 1a and 1b consisted of two different, but related activities in a Bio-business management course. The aim of the unit was to work in groups to establish a virtual biotechnology company to produce and market a virtual product. The first observation was a small group session with the tutor present but participating only when addressed by a group member. The activity was the preparation of an assessed task, a business meeting role-play. By the time of the observed session in that subject (class 1a), the roles in the company had already been decided and each person was presenting the material they had researched, such as the gap in the market, the costing, the timeline for production, the competitors, etc. The second observation (class 1b) was of a subsequent assessed task in the same course, a ‘product presentation’ to potential investors. One member of each group was selected to do the presentation.

In class 2, six groups took turns in the space of an hour to present the results of a group investigation into a preset Aboriginal history topic, in which the group had analysed a set of historical documents in order to interpret the history. Each group of four to five students took turns to speak for between 8 and 10 minutes. There was very little interaction, with no questioning following the presentations.

Function type	Function	Description
Information 1	Providing information, ideas or opinion	Provide information, ideas or opinion, with or without support or justification
Information 2	Supporting own ideas or opinions	Express further reasons or provide further evidence
Information 3	Elaborating own ideas or opinion	Elaborate on own ideas or opinion
Information 4	Suggesting	Suggest a particular idea
Interaction 1	Challenging ideas	Challenge assertions made by another speaker
Interaction 2	Justifying / providing support for other	Offer justification or support for a comment made by another speaker
Interaction 3	Agreeing / disagreeing	Indicate (dis)agreement with what another speaker says (apart from 'yeah'/'no' or simply nodding)
Interaction 4	Qualifying / modifying	Modify arguments or comments in response to comment by other
Interaction 5	Persuading	Attempt to persuade another person
Interaction 6	Asking for information, ideas or opinion	Asking for information, ideas or opinion
Interaction 7	Requesting elaboration / justification	Request elaboration or justification of previously stated information or opinion by other
Interaction 8	Elaborating / modifying ideas or opinion	Elaborate or modify others' ideas or opinion
Interaction 9	Negotiating meaning	Check understanding, indicate understanding / uncertainty, ask for or provide clarification
Management 1	Initiating	Start an interaction
Management 2	Changing topic	Change the topic
Management 3	Concluding an argument/decision	Sum up or conclude a discussion/decision

**Figure 1: Observation checklist**

Classes 3-7 all involved small group discussion of questions relating to class readings. In class 3, which was concerned with cultural identity, the discussion was small-group based, with the tutor taking part as invited. The groups discussed responses to questions written on the board, drawing on both academic input and personal experience, after which they reported back on their discussion, which was then followed by a tutor-led general discussion. The discussion topic changed three times over a total class of 50 minutes. In class 4, groups of five students worked together to answer a set of questions about human physiology based on the weekly readings and lectures. (The topic was mountain climbing and the body.) The tutor participated only when drawn in. Class 6 was a revision class for the semester exam in management communications. After nominating a set of revision topics, the class generated revision questions for each topic. This was followed by small-group discussion of the questions, each group focusing on a different topic and using the textbook index and lecture notes as a resource, and finally by the groups reporting their responses back to the whole class.

In class 6, the activity was to discuss in groups of four a set of questions based on readings and cases concerned with the human rights charter, and then to report back and discuss further with the lecturer. For two topics, each discussion lasted about 20 minutes. In class 7, the activity was also to answer questions in groups of five on a weekly topic, social problems that affect health. The tutor participated only if asked. After the class, the students were expected to write up their answers individually and hand them in for assessment.

To arrive at the impressionistic view of the frequency reported in Table 1, the observer marked each function per function type between 1 and 5 for frequency of occurrence while sitting among the students in the class. Table 1 shows the frequency of each of the observed interactional functions across the observed classes, from 5 (very frequent) to 1 (infrequent). All of the listed functions occurred in some or all interactional activities. Tallying number of frequency was not an option because in the classroom setting, where the observations took place, the class broke out into small group interaction and it was not possible to report on the interactional behaviour occurring simultaneously in all groups; the researcher focused on one group at a time while tallying. In classes that were more teacher directed, the recording of 'student/teacher' type speaking was easier to gather. That is not to say that in the multi-group situations the data was affected by where the observer was sitting. Fortunately there was ample space to move around and between tables in order to gauge the level of interaction and record it as faithfully as possible under the circumstances. Classes were very measured in the volume of the talking on the tasks enabling the observer to tune in to changes of speaker in a manner that does not compromise the recording of the impressionist data offered by Table 1.

Function type	Function	Frequency	In IELTS
Information 1	Providing information, ideas or opinion	5	x
Information 2	Supporting own ideas or opinions	5	x
Information 3	Elaborating own ideas or opinion	1	
Information 4	Suggesting	4	
Interaction 1	Challenging ideas	3	
Interaction 2	Justifying / providing support for other	2	
Interaction 3	Agreeing / disagreeing	4	x
Interaction 4	Qualifying / modifying	1	x
Interaction 5	Persuading	2	
Interaction 6	Asking for information, ideas or opinion	4	x
Interaction 7	Requesting elaboration / justification	1	x
Interaction 8	Elaborating / modifying others' ideas or opinion	3	
Interaction 9	Negotiating meaning	5	x
Management 1	Initiating	1	
Management 2	Changing topic	1	
Management 3	Concluding an argument/decision	2	

**Table 1: Frequency of observed functions**

Out of the three types of function – information, interaction and management – interaction was broken down into nine functions based on previous studies. Of those functions, asking for information, ideas and opinions, negotiating meaning and agreeing and disagreeing were most frequent and have been shown to appear in IELTS, (Lazaraton, 2002). Qualifying/modifying and requesting elaboration/justification were the least frequent. Management functions: initiating and changing topic, were not frequent in the observation data but, as can be expected from the teaching/learning context and from the class contexts detailed below, the information functions were most frequent apart from elaboration.

It has to be taken into account that the IELTS Speaking module has a short time span in which to elicit as much information as possible from which the rater interviewer draws inferences on the candidate's proficiency level. If a function was rarely observed over an hour of none test conditions, then it would be more difficult to observe under test conditions that run for shorter periods of time.

The typical class consisted of an introduction by the lecturer before students worked in groups, followed later on in the session by whole-class teacher led discussion. Depending on how a class was managed, the functions used by students and style of speaker selection varied. As the description above indicates, student-managed interactions were a frequent type of activity. In addition, teacher-led discussion was also quite frequent, either as whole-class discussion or with the lecturer participating in the small groups. Other classes required students to make presentations with little or no interaction. Typical interaction patterns are described below for student- and teacher-managed interactions.

## 5.1 Whole-class teacher-led discussion

Depending on the teaching style and the size of the group, speaker selection in the whole-class, teacher-led discussion worked in different ways, ranging from teacher-directed question and answer to free discussion. For example, in one very large class the lecturer invited students who had raised their hands to speak. Students did not only put their hand up in direct response to the lecturer, however, they also challenged ideas that other students had presented, provided their counter-opinion, and tried to persuade the lecturer and the class. There were also further student-student turns in response to the challenges. In another class, after the students had completed a small-group activity discussing a set of readings, questions from the lecturer prompted them to extend concepts from the readings by contributing personal examples to the class. There was a considerable amount of student-student interaction as students contributed to the discussion by supporting, agreeing, or disagreeing with what others had said. There was also negotiation of meaning and elaboration of others' ideas.

In another very small class, the interaction was not directed so markedly by the lecturer. The participants spoke to each other in a more relaxed and informal manner. The discussion also involved requests for elaboration, agreement and disagreement, and suggestions, by both students and the lecturer. Because of the informality, students initiated, shifted and concluded topics in a way that was otherwise observed only within student-only small groups.

In the revision class, students were asked which topics they would like to revise for the exam. The topics were negotiated and suggestions were made and supported as to how to divide the topics among the members of the class. After the groups had dealt with their allocated revision questions, they took turns presenting their information on the allocated revision questions. The students self-selected to answer individual questions by speaking up when it came to their group's turn. When a response appeared to be insufficient, other students extended and elaborated it with student-initiated turns, or the lecturer elicited more from the group or the class.

## 5.2 Small-group student-managed discussion

### 5.2.1 Small groups involving the lecturer

While the level of involvement in small-group interaction varied considerably across groups and classes, the full range of functions was found to occur in these interactions, albeit with some occurring more frequently than others.

The prototype group-work class consisted of a number of small groups working simultaneously, with the lecturer participating in selected groups. In the group work interactions, speaker selection was available to the students and did not lie solely with the lecturer. This meant that the interaction-management functions became relevant. Small-group activities were of two types – problem-solving (as part of the problem-based learning (PBL) curriculum) and discussion of readings. Even where the lecturer was involved in the group interaction, the interactions with the lecturer were specific to the groups' needs and not in response to interactional 'demands' made by the lecturer. Consequently, the interactions typically involved the students asking questions of the lecturer, for example, seeking explanation of aspects of the topic that were not clearly understood and, therefore, hampering their progress with the problem-solving task. Students would request elaboration on the scenario they were dealing with or suggest a possible response to the problem to the lecturer before writing it down.

### 5.2.2 Small student-only groups

Where the students were discussing a set of questions, the aim was generally to reach consensus. The talk about a particular question usually started once troubles talk about the course or activity had finished. Typically, one participant would self-select as the group leader or scribe. This person would manage the interaction, starting and concluding talk on each question. He/she would indicate that the group should start with the work by saying, for example, “Has anyone worked on the answer to number 3?” Students would offer information or opinion, and other students would agree, disagree, or challenge, depending on the perceived accuracy of the information. Students would also make suggestions about ways of rephrasing what had been said for the written answer. In order to wrap each question up, either the answer would be restated by the group leader to confirm that it represented what had been said, or the question would be abandoned as the leader or another member selected a new one. The group leader typically managed the topical focus of the interaction by determining when to move on to the next question. As the scribe, this person also asked for elaboration and clarification more frequently than the others. He/she also undertook speaker selection of students who appeared to have an answer that could be written down.

Other student-only interactions required students to share information that they had individually researched and which was, therefore, known only to them (eg, the role-play activity). Here, they provided information and made suggestions, and responded to requests for support and elaboration. In the role-play, speaker selection and topic change was instigated by the student who had the role of meeting chair.

In sum, the seven observed classes provided three types of classroom interactions to report: whole class teacher-led discussion, small group student-managed discussion and small group discussion with the lecturer involved.

## 6 IELTS INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

The next part of the analysis responds to Research Questions 2 and 3.

*RQ 2 Which of these features emerge from a discourse analysis of transcriptions?*

*RQ 3 Do specific features of interactive communication emerge at specific band levels?*

Using the same checklist as was used for the observations, the transcribed IELTS interviews were examined to find instances of the specified information, interactional and interaction management functions. In order to characterise the interviews in terms of criteria from the literature and the document review, and including the outcomes from the interviews with the lecturers, the functions listed in Table 2 below, were checked against the transcriptions. If the function was present at all in the 24-interview sample, then the column was marked as positive.

	Literature	Documents	Interviews	Observations
Ask question	+	+	+	+
Refute	+			
Seek confirmation	+			+
Opinion	+	+	+	+
Evidence	+	+		+
Evaluate	+			+
Attitudes, judgements beliefs			+	+
Explanation		+		+
Answering questions		+	+	+
Provide information		+	+	+

**Table 2: Characterisation of interviews**

Each transcription was combed for evidence of the functions required by students for participation in courses at university across the four categories. The features emerging from the discourse analysis of transcriptions, as per RQ2, were for the most part, asking questions and giving opinions. These two functions were found across all the sources used to determine criteria for the analysis of the interviews. This is not surprising as these functions are basic to classroom speaking required for students in educational settings.

Regarding the quantity of each function across the transcriptions, there are many instances where candidates give opinions, answer questions, provide evidence or give explanations during the IELTS Speaking subtest. Candidates also evaluate and express attitudes during their performance and they are provided with the opportunity to refute a position put to them by the examiner. Asking questions is mentioned as a relevant function in all four categories, but there are only two instances in the 24 interviews. Both questions are related to IELTS test procedure with candidates inquiring whether they have spoken for sufficient time during the Long turn in Part 2 of the interview. Seeking confirmation is also used with regards to test procedure, the location of the written exam for the following day, in a single instance.

Moving to a discussion on the specified information, interactional and interaction management functions, firstly, in terms of interaction management, it was overwhelmingly the case that the interviewer managed the introduction and closure of topics. This was achieved through the use of the interlocutor frames, which flagged the topic shift. There were no instances of candidates initiating, changing or closing topics. Furthermore, candidate turns were overwhelmingly informational, produced answers in response to a direct question, and almost always involved the provision of factual information (personal and world knowledge), or expressing and supporting an opinion. This was the case at all levels. So in response to RQ3 across band levels, the analysis did not return any differences in interactional management. As the interviewer controlled the topic, with a shift of focus with each new question, in this particular sample of high level bands (Bands 6 to 9), there were no instances of students elaborating their own or others' ideas, and no instances of them making suggestions.

In terms of the interactional functions produced by test candidates, the most frequent was negotiating meaning, either checking hearing or understanding, or indicating lack of understanding. There was one instance of repair by a candidate, produced in response to the interviewer indicating that the candidate had misheard the question but there was not concentration of repair that corresponded to a particular band. There were a few instances where the interviewer rephrased all or part of the candidate's response which elicited either minimal acceptance "yeah" from the candidate, or a repeat of part of the original or rephrased response.

While most of the candidates turns were straightforward responses to direct questions, there were one or two cases of the interviewer either challenging what the candidate had said, or producing a statement of his or her own opinion on a topic. In these cases (all with Band 8 or 9 candidates and produced in Part 3), the candidate responded by accepting or rejecting the assertion.

### Example 1

- C .....but these days children are more equipped with:uh (.) science fiction stories (.) and even ah (.) horror stories and all those things (.) even my cousin likes reading she's just six years old and she likes reading horror stories (.) and I was surpr↑ised
- I (xxxx) cartoon continues to be popular with the children (.) there are some exceptions no doubt
- C of course! cartoon is popular with children but children are- these days are turning to ah- (.) are being more intelligent than those days (.) they--they feel cartoon is more um (.) ah is more ATTRACTIVE but science fiction is more IQ stuff ...

### Example 2

- I [if] you go to a restaurant you can't see them cooking the food (.) so how would you know? (.)
- C [actually (when you go to a restaurant)] in our country (.) uh:: uh in front of restaurant there is a fire like you are more than welcome to visit our kitchen(ette)hh ((laughter)) =

One of the most marked features that distinguished the interviews from the classroom interactions was that there was no follow-up to candidate responses. Subsequent turns by the interviewer rarely built on the candidate's response, and when they did, it was either to link to another question or to request elaboration or justification of an opinion ("Why?"). As each candidate response was followed by a next question, there was no development of an argument over a number of turns. This is built into the rater 'script' to control for rater interview style and is repeated in each case. Other than the instances mentioned above of the interviewer challenging the candidate or providing a statement to be responded to, the interviewer did not participate in sharing his or her own ideas. This meant that there was no opportunity for candidates to challenge, support, evaluate or build on their interlocutor's ideas. There was also no opportunity for them to use persuasion, or to modify their own viewpoint in response to a counter-argument. Overall, in the time available for the interview, there was no opportunity for interactional development of an argument involving responding to, and building on, what another speaker has said.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

What emerged strongly from the documents and the interviews was the expectation that students would enter university able to participate in interactive communication within the classroom in the form of group discussion, largely centred on the content matter of the subject. This was supported by the observations of core first year subjects where five of the eight observed classes involved students working together to answer questions based on readings. Functionally, it was expected that students would be able to inform, explain, argue, analyse, question, negotiate, challenge and defend. Interactionally, it was expected that they would participate *actively* in group work, that is, be responsive to what others say and initiate exchanges. The classroom observations indicated that while active participation was by no means universal, with non-native-speakers in some cases being the least participatory, the full range of functions was found to occur.

Depending on the class size, the activity, and the teaching style, students' talk emerged differently. Where the lecturer was involved in teacher-directed discussion, the interaction was at times of the question-answer type, with students being required to respond with information or offer ideas or an opinion and, at times, a more open discussion, with students responding directly to other students.

Small group work involving problem-solving or consensus building was also frequent. In this, they not only shared information, ideas and opinions in response to fellow students' interactive moves, but also requested and provided elaboration or justification and supported, challenged or refuted other students' views, in addition to seeking clarification or confirmation of the information, ideas or opinions that were being presented to them. Where the teacher was not involved, the responsibility fell to the students to manage the interaction themselves, including the closure and initiation of topics.

Few of the features found in the classroom observations, and that were found important by the lecturers, emerged in our sample of high-level IELTS interviews, though the discourse analysis by Lazaraton (2002) shows with a larger sample that the most commonly observed functions do occur in the IELTS. The majority of those functions that did occur were of the informational type – providing information or opinion, and supporting or justifying opinions. However, while this reflected the question-answer exchanges noted in tutor-led interaction, in the IELTS Speaking Test, topical talk was usually abandoned as a further question was produced. This meant that, other than repair, few instances of interactional functions were found in the candidates' talk. The two that did occur were agreeing / disagreeing and qualifying / modifying, and produced in response to challenges by the interviewer. These were found only in Part 3, and at the higher levels.

In summary, the main similarities and differences between the classroom interaction and the interview interaction are as follows.

1. In both the university classroom interaction and the IELTS interview, students are required to produce information and opinion in response to questions.
2. In classroom interaction, students are also involved in the production of a range of interactional and interaction management functions, whereas they are not required, but may occur, in the IELTS interview.

In the development of generic skills at university, and as an approach to learning in the university, oral communication and teamwork are seen as important tools. This view appears to be strongly supported by teaching staff in the context studied, and there was ample evidence of activities requiring students to work collaboratively in small groups to share ideas and information, and work towards consensus building. However, little of this negotiation of ideas and consensus-building is in evidence in the IELTS interviews. As candidates are only required to respond to direct questions or propositions, no evidence of their ability to participate actively in oral discussion – to find a way in to share and discuss their own knowledge or ideas, express their opinions, and challenge, support, or evaluate others’ contributions – is gathered. The requirements of *assertiveness* and *responsiveness* identified in the literature are both lacking; candidates are not required to demonstrate their ability to hold their own in a discussion, nor to demonstrate their skills as a listener and interactional partner.

The emergence of the central role of interactional skills in the university classroom, and the disjunction between the characteristics of classroom interaction and IELTS interview interaction, lends weight to concerns amongst language testers that interview tests do not allow a full range of interactional behaviours on the part of the candidate (Brooks, 2009; May, 2000). This study indicates that the structured nature of the interviews appears to limit the ability of interviewers to elicit a broader range of interactional functions, even with more proficient speakers. It could be argued that for the skills required to complete the IELTS Speaking module to be deemed appropriate, they need to replicate those that test-takers will need to utilise in the future target language use situation.

However, the assumption that a test (IELTS in this case) should necessarily reflect all or most of the features of language that occur in the context for which the test is supposed to assess candidates’ preparedness (in this case, university classes) is questionable. On the one hand, any such attempt raises issues of practicality and comprehensiveness. It begs the question of which of the features identified here (or indeed, other ones which may be found in other academic contexts and classrooms not included in this study) should be incorporated into the test construct. Additionally, also, there are concerns with paired-candidate tests which are perhaps irresolvable, but which impact on the inferences that can be drawn from test performance: namely, the question of whether it is justifiable to generalise from a candidate’s interactional performance in a test to the target context, when there may be any number of factors impacting their performance, including involvement in the topic (having ‘something to say’) and the interactional performance of their interlocutors. The alternative is to take the current approach, where the speaking test acts as a measure of linguistic (syntax and lexis) and productive (pronunciation, intonation and fluency) mastery alone and, as such, does not require the simulation of the target context.

The study addressed the relationship between test and criterion as it pertains to the IELTS Speaking Test, with the intention of evaluating the extent to which the IELTS interview taps into speaking skills required during university study. The literature relating to spoken interaction in a study context was reviewed and features of interactive communication were identified. The informational, interactional and management functions were then discussed in the light of research and developments in the testing of spoken language. This was followed by an analysis of institutional documents within an Australian university, focusing on expected and explicit speaking outcomes in first year university study.

The observations of first year classes within an Australian university and interviews with their lecturers highlighted that providing information, supporting ideas and negotiating meaning had the highest occurrence and were valued by lecturers.

The transcription and discourse analysis of taped IELTS interviews at Band 6 and above uncovered which interactional features, as identified in the literature, appeared in the candidate discourse for this sample and range. The features found in common were 'producing information' and 'offering an opinion' in response to questions, which is to be expected in an interview and also in a classroom setting. The sample did not yield any differences in interactional management across band levels, but regardless of their IELTS score, lecturers found students were not ready for the many and varied interactional demands in the classroom, particularly in a second language.

While the predictive validity of the current IELTS Speaking Test is low, as the studies discussed earlier in this report found, it may nevertheless be the case that it cannot be enhanced through the incorporation of more interactional requirements. This is, of course, an empirical question. However, ultimately we return to the issue of washback, and pose the question as to whether learners intending to take tertiary studies would be better served by test preparation which focuses explicitly on group interaction and discussion skills rather than on interview skills.

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## APPENDIX 1: INSTITUTIONAL DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED FOR ANALYSIS

1. Final Report: Curriculum Review and Renewal Project in the Faculty of Law (Spencer and Riddle, 2009)
2. Final Report: C-MAP, 'Curriculum mapping in Humanities and Social Sciences' (Howell, 2010)
3. The survey results, an analysis of the role of defined graduate capabilities in fifteen core first year subjects across programs in the School of Communication, Arts and Critical Enquiry (SCACE) in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.
4. A report summarising data on the role of one of the graduate capabilities (speaking) within core first year subjects across all departments in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
5. A report illustrating ways that one of the graduate capabilities (speaking) is taught and assessed within three core first year subjects in SCACE
6. A report illustrating ways that one of the graduate capabilities (teamwork) is taught and/or assessed within three core first year subjects in SCACE
7. A first year core subject oral presentation task and assessment criteria in Biotechnology, involving both tutor and peer assessment
8. Statement of faculty graduate capabilities for the Faculty of Science Technology and Engineering

## APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CORE SUBJECT LECTURERS

1. What do you understand by "speaking"?
2. What speaking skills are required in this unit?
3. How do non-native speakers differ from native speakers, if at all?
4. Is speaking required and assumed, or required but not assumed?
5. How is "speaking" encouraged in this unit?
6. How is "speaking" modelled in this unit?
7. How is "speaking" explicitly taught in this unit?
8. How is "speaking" assessed in this unit? (tasks and criteria)  
For all other graduate capabilities except writing (ie inquiry and research, critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork)
9. Are oral communication skills part of this graduate capability?
10. If yes, can you elaborate on what sorts of oral communication skills are relevant?
11. If yes, is it required and assumed? Is it modelled, explicitly taught, or assessed?
12. How is IELTS relevant or not relevant to the speaking skills required in first year?

### APPENDIX 3: DEFINITIONS OF TERMINOLOGY

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Relevant</i>	The graduate capability in question is pertinent to the subject. The skill may be intertwined with a learning activity or piece of assessment in the subject; it may be related to assumed prior knowledge or to a prerequisite for enrolment; or it may be actively encouraged and modelled to students.
<i>Assumed</i>	Staff teaching into the subject expect that students enter the subject with a level of competence in the graduate capability concerned. Staff may also assume that there is no need to explicitly teach the graduate capability in the subject, because of that expectation of prior knowledge.
<i>Encouraged</i>	Students are actively encouraged to learn or practice a graduate capability through the learning or assessment activities conducted in the subject. For example, students may be encouraged to work in teams in tutorials (although students may not be explicitly taught how to work in groups).
<i>Modelled</i>	The behaviour / practices of teaching staff model the graduate capability to students; for example, proper referencing of material in lecture slides allows students to model referencing in written or presentation work.
<i>Explicitly Taught</i>	The graduate capability is explicitly taught to students; for example, academic writing skills are taught in a lecture or workshop.
<i>Assessed</i>	Students are required to submit one or more pieces of assessed work which measures their achievement of a level of competence in a particular graduate capability. Preferably, achievement is measured against specific marking criteria.

### APPENDIX 4: OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

Information 1	Providing information or opinion
Information 2	Supporting ideas / justifying opinions
Information 3	Elaborating / modifying (unprompted)
Information 4	Suggesting
Interaction 1	Challenging ideas
Interaction 2	Justifying / providing support
Interaction 3	Agreeing / disagreeing (refuting)
Interaction 4	Qualifying / modifying
Interaction 5	Persuading
Interaction 6	Asking for information or opinion
Interaction 7	Requesting elaboration / justification
Interaction 8	Conversational repair
Interaction 9	Negotiating meaning
Management 1	Initiating
Management 2	Changing topic
Management 3	Concluding an argument / decision