Multiple Questions in Different Sections of Oral Proficiency Interviews

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Abstract

It is known that productive skills, i.e. writing and speaking, are hard to evaluate in EFL classes, and they require special training in terms of assuring valid and reliable assessments. Recently oral proficiency interviews (OPIs) have gained popularity as one type of assessment and they seem to provide more valid results when administered appropriately. One of the main characteristics of OPIs are multiple questions (MQs) which are used to deal with the problems. Therefore, investigating the use of MQs in OPIs may enable researchers to reach a better understanding in terms of their role and contribute to the field. In this respect, conversation analysis which enables researchers to track learning and examine micro details makes it possible to see what is happening in conversations. In the scope of the current study, in which two-hour recording of OPIs administered in a Turkish University, the use of MQs in OPIs is examined by using conversation analysis and the findings are discussed. It is observed that interviewers use different kinds of questions to enable candidates to talk. By taking this into consideration, several suggestions are given in order to raise the validity and reliability of OPIs.

Keywords: Multiple Questions, Oral Proficiency Exams, Conversation Analysis, Problems in OPIs

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Introduction

One of the most complicated issues in language assessment is the assessment of students' speaking skills which is open to subjective evaluation and result in validity problems when conducted poorly. Thus, researchers in language assessment field have developed several procedures to assess how well students can use language in spoken interactions. According to Johnson (2001) and Lazaraton (2002), one of these assessment types whose construct validity has been investigated a lot and which is used in several forms is the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). According to Lowe (1983), "the OPI is a proficiency test, i.e., it tests a candidate's speaking ability as compared to language as it is spoken by well-educated native speakers" (p. 233). Kasper and Ross (2007) define OPI as "an institutional speech event designed for the purpose of spoken language assessment (p. 2046). In OPIs, a test taker whose spoken language in the object of the assessment and a language tester who is an expert of the target language and controls the interaction interact with each other.

It is possible to get students to use the target language in an OPI exam by using some tasks. As Okada and Greer (2013) argue a variety of tasks can be utilized in OPIs in order to get speech samples for evaluation purposes by using interviewer-led questions and answer tasks, news-telling tasks and role-play tasks. In addition, to increase the validity and the reliability of OPIs test administers try to apply standard protocols with detailed manuals and conduct training sessions. It is almost impossible to come up with intersubjectivity problems together with speaking problems, though (Okada & Greer, 2013). So, it may not be appropriate to assume that as Kasper and Ross (2003) point out these problems in OPI interaction are dealt with repair organizations. The problems causing repair organizations may be because of students' lack of language ability or interviewer-related issues such as clumsy question construction. That is, as Okada and Greer (2013) point out not only interviewees' language abilities but also interviewers' way of managing the talk in OPIs have important roles in OPIs.

There are some differences between OPIs and ordinary talk regarding the sequential structure, preference organization, repair, topic organization and question modification in daily conversations (Johnson, 2001; Lazaraton, 2002). As a kind of institutional talk which shares some properties with interviews, as Young and Milanovic (1992) argue, in OPIs interviewer and tester play asymmetrical roles. This means that interviewers' attitudes can influence the performance of candidates (Brown, 2003;Caroll, 2004).In that, the examination

of interviewers' questions can yield answers for troubles causing repairs in interactions (Egbert, 1998; Kasper & Ross, 2007).

Multiple Questions (MQs)

One of the characteristics of OPIs is their question-answer (Q-A) sequences. According to Sacks (1992) as cited in Kasper and Ross (2007) "questioning is the defining action bound to the social category of 'interviewer'" and they are a powerful interactional control device. In OPI context nonreciprocal Q-A sequence is seen frequently since it enables the interviewer to elicit ratable speech samples (Kasper & Ross, 2007). However, a projected answer may not be obtained all the time (Schegloff, 1980). In the case of non-relevant or unsatisfactory answers by the interviewee, as Davidson (1984) points out, the interviewer may reform the questions by using subsequent versions. In other words, the interviewer may utilize multiple questions (MQ) on the same topical point (Heritage & Roth, 1995). The current study investigates the use of such multiple questions used in OPIs.

According to Gardner (2004) two types of MQs, which are frequently used in that as in ordinary conversation, can be observed in turn structure as a form of "expanded question sequences". In this vein, the sequences can be vertically or horizontally organized. In vertical MQ sequences, the speaker asks a subsequent question following a gap whereas in horizontal MQs speaker forms subsequent question following initial question without giving the turn. It is possible to see both vertical and horizontal MQs in OPIs (Kasper & Ross, 2007).

MQs are vertically organized because of a problematic response to the initial or the prior version of the question. In OPIs, a candidate's response can be found to be problematic and require subsequent questions. In these cases, Kasper and Ross (2007) state that three kinds of sequential environment can be observed: other-initiated repair sequences, a response gap and a problematic answer.

When a candidate has problems with understanding the question, he/she can initiate a repair in the next turn. The second versions of the initial question can be an exact repetition can vary in terms of lexical and grammatical structure. On the other hand, a projected second pair part by a question can be a gap of silence. In such situations, the interviewer can re-phrase the initial question in a similar way with different words, make some additions such as adding an adverbial phrase, make some modifications by applying small changes to the original question (Gardner, 2004). Although Gardner (2004) examines these in ordinary conversations, Kasper and Ross (2007) argue that a gap can be treated in the same ways in

OPIs (p. 2053). In case of unsatisfactory answers, the interviewer can adjust the initial question to elicit more extended answers.

When MQs are organized as multiple turn-constructional units (TCU), there are two or more questions following each other without allowing the candidate to take the floor for an answer. According to Kasper and Ross (2007), these kinds of MQs are quite common in OPIs and generally interviewers form such kind of MQs when they feel the candidate may have difficulties in producing answers. In these cases, they may form MQs to repair completions, change the topic, request for extended action, ask about hypothetical events, and ask about delicate topics (Kasper & Ross, 2007, p. 2057).

In order to avoid understanding problems before giving the floor to the candidate, an interviewer can form another version of the initial question. In addition, in OPIs it is not rare that interviewers form MQs to change the topic. In this way, it becomes possible for interviewers to help candidates understand and generate acceptable answers. The most common forms of this kind of MQs include using two complete questions, using sub-sentential topic nominating question plus question, and topic nominating statement plus question series (Kasper & Ross, 2007).

MQs can be used to make requests for extended actions such as describing objects, living spaces or daily routines or narration of past events etc. In this case, the first TCU introduces the topic whereas the subsequent questions narrow down the topic to elicit an answer. In addition, OPIs can include MQs for hypothetical events. By using such kind of MQs, an interviewer can check candidate's listening comprehension and ability to use conditionals. Finally, an interviewer can utilize MQs to raise a sensitive matter.

Data

The data which is used in this study is derived from a two-hour length sample of a twelve-hour recording of OPIs administered in Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University School of Foreign Languages. The exam was administered at the end of 2015-2016 academic year as part of proficiency exam. All the candidates were taking language preparation classes compulsorily and were supposed to achieve B2 level proficiency on CEFR scale in order to go on their education in their faculties. Most of the candidates were Turkish students whereas there were some foreign students from Middle East or Arabic countries. The interviewers were all Turkish working in School of Foreign Languages as English lecturers. And they all had at least ten years of teaching experience at the time of the study. Before administering the

interviews, all the staff who were going to be interviewers had attended workshops to increase the interrater reliability of the exam.

The interviews were recorded as a part of the university's proficiency exam which is prepared by the test office staff. All the candidates were informed that their interviews would be recorded and they signed a consent paper. In addition, they are also informed that their names and identities will be used in an anonymized way and will not be revealed under no circumstances. The ones who had not consented were excluded from the study, and their interviews were carried out without video recordings. All the candidates were aware of the interview procedure since they had taken similar exam both at the beginning of and in the middle of the academic year.

The spoken part of the proficiency exam was conducted as OPIs and had three main parts. The first part that included the warm-up section was not graded. In the second part candidates were asked to choose a topic randomly and talk about the picture given. During this phase interviewers asked guided questions to continue the talk. Then in the final section students were asked to choose a topic and made a monologue on that topic. In case of failure to continue the monologue, interviewers were allowed to intervene the process in this section as well. Candidates were rated by the interviewer and an assessor according to the predetermined criteria. For each candidate, a ten-minute session was arranged. The data obtained from these interviews were transcribed through Jefferson's (1979) Transcription Conventions and analyzed via Conversation Analysis Research Methodology.

Findings& Discussion

When the data were analysed, it was found out that there were 38 instances of MQs in the two-hour recording. Accordingly, 21 of all the MQs were formed in the warm-up section of the interview which was not rated. In addition, 10 of them were formed in the second section which was the conversation part whereas four MQs were used in the last part which was the monologue part. Besides, MQs in the last part were in the form of vertical MQs whereas MQs in other parts included both vertical and horizontal types of MQs.

When the MQs in the first section are taken into consideration, it is seen that one of the environments in which MQs are formed by the interviewer to continue the talk is problematic answers. In this kind of MQs, although interviewer finds candidate's answer relevant to the topic, he/she finds it unsatisfactory. Thus, by forming subsequent questions, the interviewer tries to expand the talk.

Extract 1

```
1     T:     (0.5) >alright<↑do you play↑ (.) with computers,
2     S:     yes
3            (0.5)
4     T:     what do you do with them (0.4)play,
5            (0.3)
6     S:     er::i usually play  computer games (.) and
7            (4.0)
8     T:     can you rep↑air computers,
9     S:     er: (0.7) i am not good at (.2)
10    T:     okay. but you can play
11    S:     yes err i can play:↓
12    T:     can you↑ (0.2) ↑write application
13           (0.3)
14    S:     application
15    T:     or games.
16           (0.4)
17    S:     er::::i am not good at to. do. it. but=
18    T:     at the moment (inaudible voices)
```

All the OPIs investigated in this study take place in the School of Foreign Languages buildings and candidates are invited to take the interviews with pre-determined appointments. On the interview day, a candidate is supposed to be ready at the given time. When a candidate enters into the test room, first the interlocutor asks the candidate to fill out the form and sign the attendance list. Then having seen the candidate is relaxed and is ready for the interview, interviewer starts the interview with a warm-up section.Extract 1 will illustrate one of the MQ sequences in the warm-up section of the OPI. The interviewer projects an answer by asking a yes/no question (1) to enable the candidate talk. However, candidate's short answer in line two which is followed by 0.5 seconds of silence in line 3 is a dispreferred response in terms of the interlocutor. Therefore, in line 4 interviewer rephrases the initial question and tries to elicit a more elaborate answer (Kasper, 2004). In other words, interviewer redoes the question (Kasper, 2004) which is an other-initiated self-repaired-sequence (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977). However, again candidate gives an incomplete answer (line 6) followed by 4 seconds (line 7) of silence which is again a dispreferred action in an OPI. This long gap (7) in the next turn makes the interviewer see this as a repair and interviewer forms a subsequent version by making the modification (8). This time interviewer tries to expand the topic by focusing on the other opportunities to talk about computers.Again candidates' relatively short and insufficient answer (9) as second pair part forces interviewer treat the former question as pre-sequence (Schegloff, 1988) and reformulate the question by making another modification (12). In this way, interviewer modifies the preceding question by substituting "play" with "write an application" and looks for a preferred answer. In most of the MQs sequences in this

section has similar structures in which interviewer treats candidate's insufficient and inappropriate answers to the questions as problems. But it is possible to see more horizontal MQs in this section.

Extract 2

```
1    T:    ok [S] so(.) you r /studing/ (0.4) politics and international
2          rela:tions
3    S:    ° yes°
4    T:    do you like this (0.6) field, (.) do you like this department?
5    S:    yesi like this
```

In a similar context as in extract 1, extract 2 illustrates another example in from warm-up phase in another test room of the same OPI. In this conversation, interviewer tries to lessen the candidate's nervousness by starting to ask questions related to the candidate's department. In line one interviewer starts with an implied question as the first pair part and then leaves the floor to the candidate. However, candidate's short answer (2) leads the interviewer to reformulate the implied question as yes/no question by repairing the preceding one. But this time to ensure an elaborate answer from the candidate, interviewer forms horizontal MQs and reformulates the initial question by rephrasing with almost the same words (4) by substituting the lexical item "field" with "department" and raises intonation. As can be seen in line four, the two questions are complete TCUs and forms the first pair part of the adjacency pair. That is, a candidate can answer these questions as one question. However, candidate's answer as the second pair part of the question-answer sequence is found insufficient.

Extract 3

```
20   T:    whats your favourite game [name S]
21   S:    /li:/ of legends
22   T:    league of legends
23   S:    ° yes°
24   T:    okay
25   S:    i play (.) league of legends (.) in my computer
26   T:    do you win? or do you lose
27         (3.7)
28   S:    ° genellikle° (0.5) usually wins
           (usually)
29   T:    okay usually you win okay very good
30         (1.20)
31   T:    what ↑ else (0.5) you can do (0.6) on your computer
32   S:    ° ° yes° °  err:
33         (1.40)
34   S:    i- i (0.9) i find out
35         (1.5)
36   S:    err
37         (1.70)
38   S:    information
39         (0.6)
40   T:    okay (1.1) do you study english on your computer
41   S:    yes i: listen i listen
42         (1.30)
```

```
43    S:    enlish musics
44    T:    you listen to /enlish/music okay
```

Extract 3 illustrates a different use of MQs in the warm-up stage. Different from previous examples here both vertical and horizontal MQs are utilized by the interviewer. As the first pair part of the Q-A sequence, the question in line 20 projects an answer by the candidate. Although the answer as second pair part is syntactically correct and a relevant answer, interviewer initiates repair with a recast in line 22.However, candidate's dispreferred answer in line 23, leads interviewer form two complete questions in line 26 to narrow down the topic by offering two options and also elicit a more acceptable answer by the candidate. In the next turn which follows a 3.7 silence gap (27), with a self-initiated self-repair, the candidate starts the answer by code-switching (28) first but immediately self-repairs the answer and forms an acceptable answer (28). Having obtained another dispreferred answer, interviewer requests for an extension with the question in line 31 and asks the candidate talk about alternative ways of using the computer. This way interviewer looks for a relevant answer. All in all, it is seen that MQs used in the second phase were formed both vertically and horizontally

Extract 4

```
90    T:    alright
91          (3.0)
92    T:    do ↑ you have (.) a healthy diet
93          (0.8)
94    S:    °diet° (.) er no=
95    T:    =do you eat ↑ healthy food do you [eat ↑ fast food
96    S:                                      [nu ((inaudible voices)]
97          i don't eat fast food because i (0.6) err
98          (1.7)
99    S:    go to gym yani¤
100               (that is)
101   T:    okay
102         (3.3)
103   S:    i
104         (1.3)
105   S:    eat
106         (0.6)
107   T:    healthy food
108   S:    he- healt- healthy food=
109   T:    =what kind of food what do you eat¤
110         (1.1)
111   S:    ° eat° errrr
112   T:    do you eat fruit?=
113   S:    =chi- (0.3) chi-
114         (1.1)
115   T:    vegtab[les:]
116   S:          [chee]se egg
117   T:    ↑ cheese egg okay
```

Extract 4 will illustrate a conversation from the second section of the OPI. As a complete TCU interviewer introduces a new sequence in line 92. In the next turn following, 0.8 of silence (93) candidate provides a repair which points to an understanding of the problem (94). In line 95 interviewer does a third turn repair to the candidate's answer. This time after forming a subsequent version of the initial question, the interviewer does not let candidate take the turn in TCU and continues the turn by forming another complete question in line 95. In this way, interviewer narrows down the focus of the initial question and provides alternative options for the candidate and also tries to avoid more problematic understandings. Then, in lines 96 and 97 candidate provides an answer however the silence in line 98 indicates a problem. In line 99 the candidate provides a self-initiated self-repair sequence. Interviewer's confirmation in line 101 does not make the conversation continue. Long pauses in line 102 and 103 split by candidate's dispreferred utterance makes interviewer give a clue (107). Nevertheless, the dispreferred utterance by the candidate results in interviewer's formulation (109) of another question and request for an extension from the candidate. In the following turn, the silence (110) and hesitation (111) by the candidate indicate a problem of understanding. Again, as the third turn interviewer narrows down the topic by a subsequent question (112) as a repair completion.

Extract 5

```
64    T:    oka:y (0.4) [how] old is your father?
65    S:                [and]    errr              ° fif-fifty five°
66    T:    fifty five years old okay does he know english?
67    S:    yes errrrr (1.0) again when I was child errhe teaches (0.6)
68          errr
69          (8.1)
70    S:    he teacheng-english
```

Extract 5 shows the use of MQs vertically in section 2. Interviewer initiates the turn by formulating a question (64). The candidate, second pair part, provides an answer with hesitation. Interviewer accepts this by reformulating candidate's utterance but wants to elicit extended answer so by using another question he/she shifts the topic. Candidate understands the question and provides an answer. In terms of the use of horizontal MQs in the conversation part of the OPIs, no such instances emerged in the current data.

MQs in the last part of the OPIs showed a similar tendency with the ones in the second part. However, three of the four MQs used in this section belonged to one recording and the candidate provided dispreferred short answers throughout the OPI.

Extract 6

```
1     T:      hmm hmm
2             (10.6)
3     T:      an any plans for summer?
4             (1.3)
5     S:      yes.
6             (0.7)
7     T:      yeah what are you going to do in the summer
8             (14.7)
9     T:      are you going to visit your family?
10            (1.9)
11    S:      yes.
```

Extract 6 shows a part of the conversation in this part. Actually, in this part candidate is supposed to make a monologue. However, as can be understood from the long pauses candidate's unwillingness to communicate (Sert & Walsh, 2013) forces interviewer to try to elicit appropriate answers which will direct the candidate to a monologue. In the first line interviewer acknowledges candidate's previous utterance and waits 14.7 seconds. Then, tries to elicit an elaborate answer by forming an implied question and leaves the floor again to the candidate. Candidate gives a short answer as the second pair part which does not mean much. Upon getting this insufficient answer interviewer rephrase the initial question (7). Finally, as extremely long pause by the candidate indicates the problem is still going on and as the third turn, interviewer narrows down the topic by using another version of the initial question.

Conclusion

In scope of the current study a two-hour section of a twelve-hour OPI recording was investigated. The data were derived from the OPIs which were carried out in Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University School of Foreign Languages. Especially question types used by the interviewers were focused on to obtain a perspective in terms of OPIs implementation and use of multiple questions. When the above findings are taken into consideration, it is seen that the use of MQs in OPIs are used for several purposes by the interviewers. They may prefer to form MQs as a response to a problematic answer by the candidate (Kasper & Ross, 2007). In this way, they may obtain rateable speech samples. MQs can be used in vertical or horizontal ways. When they are used vertically, they may be used as responses to other-initiated repair in Q-A sequences or deal with gaps or problematic dispreferred by candidates. On the other hand, when they are utilized horizontally, they may function differently. An interviewer can form horizontal MQs to make the topic clearer by narrowing down the topic or provide more alternative options to the candidates to go on the conversation. In addition, these kinds of

MQs can be used to change the topic when a problem emerges because of candidate's lack of understanding or language knowledge. In case of relatively short and insufficient answers although they are syntactically and lexically accurate and relevant answers, this kind of MQs can be preferred to request extensions by the candidates and elicit more speech samples which are ratable.

When the position of MQs in OPIs is taken into consideration, it can be said that MQs are more probable in the first part of an OPI, which is not graded and are usually used to warm up and decrease the anxiety of the candidates such as in extracts 1 and 2. The structural patterns of the MQs can be formed both vertically and horizontally or in a mixed way. Since interviewers can interfere the conversation in this section, the use of various kinds of MQs can be seen plausible. However, in most cases, they are used to deal with the problematic second turns which can be gaps or dispreferred answer by providing a subsequent version of the initial question. Moreover, they can be used to help candidates by providing alternative subtopics. The other commonly used section of MQs is the second phase of OPIs which are topic-based conversations guided by the interviewers. MQs used in this section show a similar tendency with the ones used in the first section of the OPIs. On the other hand, when the third section which is supposed to be a monologue is examined the use of MQs is relatively few. According to the data investigated, it can be argued that if a candidate's lack of language knowledge is high, then the interviewer may have to form MQs to enable the continuation of the monologues. But since the aim of this section is to rate the candidate's ability to talk on a topic, the use of MQs to help the candidate to achieve this goal may be argued.

As can be observed in the above extracts multiple questions are employed by the interviewers in OPIs to elicit utterances which mean that the use of MQs has a significant role in OPIs. Thus,training interviewers about the use of MQs in different sections of OPIs and raising awareness may be important to enable more objective evaluation of candidates' speaking abilities.

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