Interactional competence with and without extended planning time in a group oral assessment

Linking one's contribution to those of others' is a salient feature demonstrating interactional competence in paired/group speaking assessments. While such responses are to be constructed spontaneously while engaging in real-time interaction, the amount and nature of pre-task preparation in paired/group speaking assessments may have an influence on how such an ability (or lack thereof) could manifest in learners' interactional performance. Little previous research has examined the effect of planning time on interactional aspects of paired/group speaking task performance. Within the context of school-based assessment in Hong Kong, this paper analyzes the discourse of two group interactions performed by the same four student-candidates under two conditions: (a) with extended planning time (4-5 hours), and (b) without extended planning time (10 minutes), with the aim of exploring any differences in student-candidates' performance of interactional competence in this assessment task. The analysis provides qualitative discourse evidence that extended planning time may impede the assessment task's capacity to discriminate between stronger and weaker candidates' ability to spontaneously produce responses contingent on previous speaker contribution. Implications for the implementation of preparation time for the group interaction task are discussed.

INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE IN L2 SPEAKING ASSESSMENTS

Interactional competence (IC) is now assessed in many high- and low- stakes L2 speaking assessments (e.g. Cambridge English exams, public exams in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and university in-house speaking tests in Australia). This is reflected in the growing use of the paired/group format and the inclusion of interactional criteria in rating scales. In a recently published state-of-the-art paper, Galaczi and Taylor (2018) define interactional competence as 'the ability to co-construct interaction in a purposeful and meaningful way, taking into account sociocultural and pragmatic dimensions of the speech situation and event' (p.226). Concerted efforts in speaking assessment research in the past two decades have worked to define the construct of IC through identifying features salient to raters (e.g. Ducasse & Brown, 2009; May, 2011; Orr, 2002) and features distinguishing different proficiency levels (e.g. Galaczi, 2014; Roever & Kasper, 2018). Building on theoretical and empirical IC research in L2 learning, assessment, and related disciplines, Galaczi and Taylor (2018) delineate five broad domains of interactional skills, namely, '*topic management, turn management, interactive listening, breakdown repair and non-verbal or visual behaviours*' (p.226).

Apart from these various domains of interactional features, *spontaneous* production of responses in real-time interaction is conceivably an integral element of interactional

competence. Hall and Pekarek Doehler (2011) argue that IC concerns the ways in which learners monitor each other's actions 'moment-to-moment' and formulate their own responses accordingly (p.2). Such a conceptualization of interactional competence also aligns with a psycholinguistic perspective of speaking performance that '[it] requires the extemporaneous integration of procedural memory into a real-time performance' (Ross, 2012, p.225), as well as with seminal applied linguistic and language testing theories of language ability, which accord much importance to demonstrating ability for actual use:

> Communicative testing must be devoted not only to what the learner knows about the second language and about how to use it (competence) but also to what extent the learner is able to actually demonstrate this knowledge in a meaningful communicative situation (performance).
>
> (Canale & Swain, 1980, p.34)

> *Communicative language ability* (CLA) can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence, and the capacity for implementing it, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use.
>
> (Bachman, 1990, p.84)

Closely related to spontaneous production of responses in real time is the ability to produce responses *contingent* on previous speaker contribution, which I have argued to be an important construct feature of IC within L2 paired/group speaking assessment (AUTHOR, 2018). By referring back to or topicalizing elements in a previous speaker's talk, the current speaker displays evidence of his/her comprehension of the co-participants' talk (*ibid*.). This IC feature has been similarly described in other speaking assessment studies as 'say[ing] something that relates to what has been said before' (Galaczi, 2008, p.98), or 'incorporating their partner's ideas into their own speech' (Nitta & Nakatsuhara, 2014, p.167), and in the Common European Framework as 'relat[ing] own contribution skilfully to those of other speakers' – the C1 level descriptor for 'Cooperating' (one of the Interaction Strategies) (Council of Europe, 2017, p.97).

Within the context of school-based speaking assessment in Hong Kong where the present study is situated, Gan (2010) found that in the group discussion task carried out by a higher-scoring group, students provided contingent responses to each other and demonstrated understanding of the prior talk. In contrast, the lower-scoring group of students often responded minimally (e.g. 'yeah', 'okay') without linking their own contributions to those of the previous speakers'. Gan (2010) argued that the (in)ability to

engage in real-time interaction and produce contingent responses seemed connected to different levels of speaking proficiency as reflected in the scores. However, another study by Luk (2010) painted a considerably different picture. Among her data set of 11 group interactions conducted by 43 students in a girls' school, the prevalent patterns of the students' discourse were mechanical turn-taking, perfunctory formulaic responses and pre-planned speech, with little evidence of spontaneous interaction. These findings were corroborated by the student and teacher interviews, where some students admitted pre-planning and pre-scripting the assessed interaction, and the teacher-rater lamented how the students focused on reading their note cards and made little effort to genuinely listen and respond.

An interesting question emerges from the conflicting findings above: Could the differences in students' demonstrated ability in real-time interaction and producing contingent responses observed in the two studies be related to how much preparation time was given? Students received the discussion questions 10 minutes before the assessment in Gan (2010), but one day ahead in Luk (2010). What possible effects do different lengths of preparation time[1] have on students' speaking performance?

EFFECTS OF PLANNING TIME ON SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

On the question of whether pre-task planning time benefits subsequent speaking task performance in general, previous research on task-based language teaching (TBLT) has identified benefits of planning time from a cognitive perspective. A comprehensive overview of these studies in Ellis (2009) suggests that the most notable positive effect on task performance is in fluency, and to a lesser extent, there are also benefits in terms of accuracy and complexity. However, studies in language testing contexts exploring the potential benefits of planning time on subsequent speaking performance have generated mixed results (Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010). While some studies provided evidence of a positive impact on accuracy (Wiggleworth, 1997), complexity (Xi, 2005), or both, along

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[1] The term *preparation time* is used in official documents published by HKEAA, whereas *pre-task planning time* is used extensively in the SLA and language testing literature. The two terms are used synonymously in this paper.

with 'breakdown' fluency (Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005), others found little or no benefits for test scores or the discourse output (Iwashita, McNamara, & Elder, 2001; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010). Notably, in both the strands of second language learning and testing research, the majority of studies focused on proficiency measures (accuracy, fluency, and complexity) of the speaking output, and had an exclusive focus on monologic rather than interactive tasks (Nitta & Nakatsuhara, 2014). Little research has been done to examine the effect of planning time on interactional aspects of the task performance (*ibid.*).

Nitta and Nakatsuhara (2014) wrote a pioneering study, which investigated the impact of planning time on the quality of interaction in a paired speaking test task. The qualitative component of their study examined candidates' interactional discourse under the three-minute planning time condition and the no planning time condition. The analysis showed that the unplanned interactions were characterized by collaborative dialogues, in which candidates engaged with each other's ideas and incorporated their partners' ideas into their own utterances (echoing the findings of Gan, 2010). In contrast, candidate interactions with three minutes planning time were characterized by more extended monologic turns, with candidates only superficially responding to their partner's talk while focusing on delivering prepared ideas and talk (echoing the findings of Luk, 2010). As such, despite slight benefits on the scores, the qualitative analysis of interactional patterns identified a more fundamental validity issue – that planning time might inhibit the paired task from tapping into what it aims to measure, i.e. the ability to interact collaboratively.

The discussion above points to the need for more research on the effect of pre-task planning time in *paired/group* speaking assessments, and for such research to go beyond examining the effect in terms of proficiency measures, but also aspects of interactional performance. Relatedly, research needs to investigate what candidates actually do during the pre-task planning time (Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010), and to examine any links between the planning activities and students' interactional conduct in the subsequent assessed interaction.

PLANNING TIME AND ASSESSMENT OF INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE

As mentioned, the lack of spontaneous real-time interaction and contingent responses to previous speakers' talk was reported in both Gan's (2010) and Luk's (2010) studies. An important question arises, therefore, as to whether the lack of spontaneous contingent responses to co-participants constitutes discourse evidence for lower levels of interactional competence (Gan's argument), a consequence of extensive pre-task planning (as suggested by Luk's data), or both. A further, more important question would be whether extended preparation time (and the planning activities students engage in) may contribute to 'bleaching' of the differences between students with higher and lower levels of interactional competence – more specifically, students who can produce contingent responses in real time and those who cannot. However, apart from some students' interview reports in Luk (2010), none of the studies reviewed so far investigated in detail what students actually did during the preparation time, or established links between the observed interactional patterns and the pre-task planning activities. More recently, AUTHOR (2015a, 2015b) began to examine students' pre-task planning activities through gathering evidence from stimulated recall interviews and video-recordings of students' preparation time in a mock assessment (see 'Discussion' section).

The ongoing challenges that the issue of preparation time poses to the school-based assessment initiative (see Hamp-Lyons, 2015), together with the two research gaps identified above: (1) a lack of research investigating the effect of pre-task planning time on assessing interactional competence, (2) a lack of studies directly comparing students' performance in the school-based assessment Group Interaction task under different task implementation conditions, formed the impetus of the present investigation. This paper addresses the following research question:

Are there differences in students' performance of interactional competence in a group oral assessment under two planning time conditions: (a) extended planning time (4-5 hours), and (b) without extended planning time (10 minutes)[2]?

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[2] The amount of preparation time given in the HKDSE speaking exam

In this paper, the analysis of students' performance of interactional competence will primarily focus on their ability/inability to spontaneously produce contingent responses to previous speakers' talk, examined in relation to the preparation time given and students' planning activities. Other aspects of the students' IC performance (e.g. turn-taking, non-verbal behavior), where relevant, will also be reported.

ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

The assessment context for the group interactions examined in this paper is the school-based assessment component of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) English Language examination. The school-based assessment component accounts for 15% of the total subject mark, made up of two assessments. Students engage in one *Individual Presentation* and one *Group Interaction*[3], one of which is based on an extensive reading/viewing program (Part A), and the other based on the Elective Modules (e.g. workplace communication, popular culture) in the upper secondary English curriculum (Part B). For further details of the school-based assessment, refer to the Teachers' Handbook (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2014) available online.

This paper focuses on the *Group Interaction* task: students in groups of three to five (mostly four) carry out a discussion of around eight minutes, which is assessed by the students' own English teacher. Performance in the Group Interaction task is assessed against four criteria, namely *I. Pronunciation and Delivery*, *II. Communication Strategies*, *III. Vocabulary and Language Patterns*, and *IV. Ideas and Organization*. The score descriptors for two of the four assessment criteria include features of interactional competence, for example, 'can use appropriate body language to display and encourage interest' and 'can use a full range of turn-taking strategies to initiate and maintain appropriate interaction' under *II. Communication Strategies*; and 'can consistently respond effectively to others, sustaining and extending a conversational exchange' within *IV. Ideas and Organization* (HKEAA, 2014, p.12).

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[3] This is commonly known as the 'group discussion' task. The term 'group interaction', however, is used in official documents of school-based assessment published by the HKEAA. The two terms are used synonymously in this paper.

An interesting aspect of the assessment context, which is also the focus of this paper, is the amount of preparation time students are given prior to the assessed group interaction. The assessment policy for school-based assessment places considerable emphasis on flexibility and sensitivity to students' needs in the design and implementation of the assessment tasks, as the Teachers' Handbook states:

> [T]he SBA component is *not* and cannot be treated as identical to an external exam in which texts, tasks and task conditions are totally standardised and all contextual variables controlled; to attempt to do so would be to negate the very rationale for SBA...

(HKEAA, 2014, p.4)

Although the recommendation to release the 'exact assessment task' shortly before the assessment to avoid students memorizing and rehearsing the interaction (*ibid*., p.43) is included in the Teachers' Handbook and in teacher training seminars, the emphasis on flexibility in the assessment policy has translated into diverse assessment practices. There is considerable variation across schools as to when the discussion task with question prompts is released to students, hence the length of preparation time during which students can talk to group members about the upcoming assessed interaction. This is evident in the preparation time reported in various studies (Fok, 2012; Gan, 2010; Luk, 2010), ranging from 10 minutes to one day or more – see AUTHOR (2015a) for a more detailed account. For the two schools in the present study, School L released the discussion prompt to students 10 minutes before the assessment, and group members were not allowed to talk to each other during preparation time. School P released the discussion prompt to students a few hours before the assessment, and students who had formed their own group could plan their interaction together.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection

The analysis in this paper draws on data collected in a larger research project which explored different aspects in the assessment of interactional competence (IC) within the English Language School-based Assessment in Hong Kong. The data collected consisted of (1) video-recordings of 42 assessed group interactions from 2 schools (School P and

School L), (2) interviews with 14 groups of student-candidates and 3 teacher-raters incorporating stimulated recall, and (3) mock assessments performed by 2 groups with preparation time video-recorded (for details, see AUTHOR, 2015a).

This paper presents micro-analysis of two group interactions performed by the *same group* of four female students, one in the real assessment, and one in the mock assessment, with different planning time conditions (see Table 1 below). For the discussion task in the real assessment (PB14), students took the roles of marketing team members of a company having a discussion about the promotion of a product. The discussion task in the mock assessment (PB14Mock) was adapted from and comparable to the discussion task in the real assessment. It was modified in a way such that it was adequately similar to the real assessment, but with the type of the product and the company changed (a skincare product vs. a slimming product), and one sub-topic on the discussion prompt replaced with another ('target group' changed to 'competitors or similar products on the market'), so that the students could not simply replicate all the ideas or the same dialogues from the real assessment. See Appendix A for the discussion tasks in the real assessment and the mock assessment.

PB14	PB14Mock
Real assessment	Mock assessment
With extended preparation time	*Without* extended preparation time
4-5 hours preparation time (as reported in the interview with the student group)	10 minutes preparation time
---	Took place approx. 2 months after the real assessment

Table 1: Task implementation conditions for the two group interactions analyzed

The motivation for carrying out a mock assessment with a radically reduced length of preparation time came from preliminary findings from phase 1 of the data collection, where students were found to contrive 'authentic' interaction (AUTHOR, 2015b) while their talk exhibited several features of pre-scripted interaction. To investigate whether and how the length of preparation time impacts on the quality and authenticity of students' interaction in the subsequent task performance, this group of students (Group PB14) was

selected to take part in this mock assessment based on initial viewing of the video-recording, in which episodes of ostensibly authentic exchange were found.

In the mock assessment, the students were given approximately 10 minutes of preparation time. While some previous studies had a no-planning-time condition in their design, the present study did not include such a condition, as it might intensify students' anxiety (see Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010). A 10-minute preparation time was already a drastic reduction from what these students had in the real school-based assessment, and is also the operational condition for the external speaking exam component of HKDSE. This amount of preparation time was also hypothesized to allow students to brainstorm ideas for discussion but not pre-plan the unfolding of the interaction (e.g. who to take a next turn and how to respond), which would otherwise compromise the spontaneity of the interaction. To enhance the simulation of the real assessment, a teacher-rater, Miss Tsui, was there to assess the two group interactions and give the students feedback on their performance. The entire process of the mock assessment, from preparation time to the assessed interaction, was video-recorded. Students' note cards were also collected as supplementary data.

It is noteworthy that the mock assessment took place approximately 2 months after the real assessment, due to practical constraints on aligning the participants' and the researcher's availability. However, this perhaps worked to the study's advantage: the time delay made it less possible for the students in the mock assessment to 'regurgitate' what they had said and how they had interacted in the real assessment.

This paper also draws on students' and teacher-raters' comments on the interactions from stimulated recall interviews. During the interviews, the group interaction video-recordings were played and paused at intervals for the students or teacher-raters to volunteer their comments. The teacher-raters were also encouraged to pause the video playback whenever they wished to and comment on any features salient to them. Additional questions about particular episodes in the interaction or aspects of individual students' performance based on the researcher's initial viewing of the video-recordings were also asked.

Methods of analysis

The discourse of the two group interactions PB14 and PB14Mock was transcribed and analyzed using a conversation analytic approach (see Jefferson, 2004; and Appendix B for additional transcription symbols), supplemented by stimulated recall data and students' note cards where relevant.

Following the analytic procedure recommended in Conversation Analysis (CA) texts (Liddicoat, 2011; Psathas, 1995; ten Have, 2007), the analysis began with repeated listening/viewing of the recordings alongside reading the transcripts to identify phenomena of potential analytic interest. This process, although sometimes termed 'unmotivated looking' in CA, does not mean literally purposeless reviewing of the data (Psathas, 1995). Instead, it encourages an openness to emerging patterns and interesting phenomena, while refraining from imposing pre-existing theories, categories or hypotheses on the data (see also discussion in Galaczi, 2014). Following this principle, this initial stage of analysis involved taking note of the conversational actions being performed and the way they are performed, or conversely, attending to particular features of talk and the actions accomplished by them (Schegloff, 1996). Observation notes were made first in the transcript margins, and subsequently in a separate document, along with some tentative analytic accounts for the observations (ten Have, 2007).

Following the above procedure, an overall analytic focus was identified: the extent to which the student-candidates were able to participate in real-time interaction and to produce responses contingent on previous speaker contribution. This was then analyzed through noticing how each of the students responded to the previous speaker(s) in their own current turns in the two assessed interactions under different task conditions. Three other interactional features in the students' discourse also emerged to be relevant: their overall participation in the interaction (number of substantial turns taken); (un)readiness to take up speakership at transition relevance places; and the non-verbal feature of gaze – making eye contact with co-participants or browsing one's note card (see Appendix C for a summary of these features in each student's performance under the two planning time conditions). Taking these various aspects into consideration, the analysis provided an overall picture evaluating the students' performance of interactional competence.

As mentioned, the conversation analysis was supplemented by students' note cards and the relevant stimulated recall data. What was written on the note card provided an

indication of whether an idea was pre-planned or contingent on previous speaker contribution. Stimulated recall with the students yielded corroborating evidence confirming the (pre-planned or pre-scripted) nature of the whole interaction or a particular episode of exchange within it. Stimulated recall with the teacher-rater showed how students' performance was perceived by the teacher-rater, and provided data about salient features recognized by the teacher-rater as relevant to her evaluation of the students' interactional competence (cf. May, 2011).

DATA ANALYSIS

We begin by looking at the students' group interaction in the real assessment (PB14), before which they had a few hours to prepare.

Extract 1 – PB14: 10-25

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1.   L:   Mm. Yes, our company has just released (.) our beauty products
2.        in- eh- uhm the teenagers. Mm:: (.) mm:: (1.9) uhm: so: are
3.        you guys clear about the special features of the product?
4.   K:   °Mm.° I've heard that the new products .h are composed of a
5.        traditional Chinese medicine. That is quite special.
6.        (..)
7.   T:   Uhm:: but, do you think that the traditional Chinese
8.        medicine .h have strong and strange smell?
9.        Many people may refuse to use our ↑pro↓duct.
10.  S:   Hey. You've missed out a ↑po↓int. That is our product also
11.       includes (.) natural ingredients (.) li:ke lavender (.) which
12.       'll successfully cover (.) the:: ↑smell brought by the
13.       traditional Chinese medicine.
14.  L:   Mm::. (.) It's one of the fo- ma- m- main focus, that uh to
15.       promote our product. .h Uhm, it is not smelly even if we have
16.       added the traditional Chinese medicine into it. ......
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In this interaction, the group simulates a marketing team meeting for the promotion of a new skincare product. This extract begins with L initiating the first topic by announcing the release of the new product and asking if group members 'are clear about

the special features of the product' (lines 1-3). K then introduces the first feature of traditional Chinese medicine as an ingredient, along with a positive assessment of the feature (lines 4-5). This is, however, disagreed by T. T's disagreeing response begins with the hesitation 'uhm', followed by her negative assessment of the Chinese medicine ingredient, which she framed as a question (lines 7-8). Here, neither participant orients to the question as one projecting an answer, as T carries on to present a further account for disagreeing based on potential negative consumer reactions (line 9).

It is worth noticing that T's disagreeing response here assumes a turn shape that is markedly different from the kind of disagreeing responses typically found among other group interactions in the larger project's dataset – formulaic disagreeing responses with an explicit disagreeing component (e.g. I'm sorry I can't agree with you'). Also of significance is that, through her negative evaluative comment and the further account for disagreement, T topicalizes the previous speaker's contribution (Chinese medicine as a special feature) in her talk rather than deliver a new idea of her own.

Interestingly, T's talk is also followed by a disagreeing response (lines 10-13). S counter-challenges T that she has 'missed out a point', which she then immediately reveals to be a compensatory feature of their product (line 11). Notably, such a sequential development, where a further disagreeing response counters the first, is rare in the dataset. More importantly, S is then able to deploy the neglected feature of 'other natural ingredients like lavender' conveniently as both a counter argument and as her own 'new' contribution to the topic (lines 11-13). Such a turn design allows S to seamlessly shift to a new idea (other ingredients), while still highlighting her talk as being contingent on both previous speakers' contributions by further developing the topic of Chinese medicine as a special feature of the product.

In lines 14-16, L responds first by a prolonged 'mm' with a downward, 'approving', intonation. She then 'wraps up' the discussion of this feature by furnishing the gist – it is one of the main focuses of the promotion – and a formulation/paraphrase of S's argument about how the lavender would cover the smell of the Chinese medicine.

Thus, all three students (T, S, and L) responding to K's idea demonstrated their ability to sustain and develop other-initiated topics by producing responses contingent on previous speakers' contributions. Such an interactional achievement by this group of

students was recognized by the teacher-rater, Miss Cheung, who, during stimulated recall, paused the video and commended the students in this exchange:

Extract 2 – PB14 Teacher Interview

((TR pauses the video after line 9))
TR: I like it how she responded to something that K said. So rather than say something else...... she asked about it.

Miss Cheung positively remarked that T raised a question about K's idea in her response, topicalizing the previous speaker's contribution rather than focusing on delivering her own idea. Subsequently, Miss Cheung also gave a favorable evaluation of S's response on how she further developed the topic of Chinese medicine as the product's special feature and elaborated on how the problem with its smell can be solved. Throughout the stimulated recall, Miss Cheung remarked several times that this group's interaction was 'authentic', although some features of the assessed discourse and the students' stimulated recall revealed that the interaction was pre-scripted (see AUTHOR, 2015b).

We now turn to the group interaction among the same four students in the mock assessment (PB14Mock) with only 10 minutes of preparation time. In Extracts 3 and 4 below, we will see evidence of different levels of interactional competence among the group of students being manifested in their discourse.

Extract 3 – PB14Mock: 91-112

```
1.   S:   \\You guy got a- (you) got a good poi:nt.
2.        \\((glances across the group))
3.        And I think uh:: we can- or- \\>just similar to< what
4.                                  \\((gestures to T))
5.        XX((name of T)) has said, uhm we can: give some fr- free goods
6.        to schools and cooperate with them, and promote our product
7.        to- the student who:: got an: who have obesity p- the problem
8.        of (.) obesity. So uh we can take reference for their BMI to
9.        promote our products and, .h (on one side) we can help (.) uh
10.       better (health){help}, on their health.
11.  All: °Mm.° ((L and T nod; L and K exchange looks))
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12.  L:    °Uhm:° uhm \\I agree that we should \\(.) uh we should
13.                   \\((looks at S))              \\((browses her note card
14.        promote our product like (.) uh by giving free gift// to
15.        +++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++//
16.        \\different schools, .h uhm as being a:
17.        \\((looks at different group members from this point on))
18.        respode{responsible} social (.) cores- co-operatio- co-
19.        operations{corporation} uh (.) I think our companies should
20.        bear the: (.) social responsibility, which is like
21.        arisings{raising} the awareness of the .h teenagers uh: to
22.        deal with the obesity problems.
23.        Uh\\m by differ-distributing free gifts// to schools, .h
24.          \\((   browses      note       card  ))//
25.        uhm:: (.) we ca:n (.) apart from promoting our products, we
26.        can also (.) help the students to know more: (.) the
27.        importance (.) to uhm: to have a: (.) good BM<(h)I(h)> level
28.        and index.=[Uh (.)
```

Here, two participants, S and L, demonstrate their ability to link their contributions to those of others' through developing the idea of distributing free product samples in schools proposed by T, the previous speaker (see Extract 4 below). Consider first the response by S. The contingency of her talk on T's contribution in the preceding turn is discursively foregrounded by making explicit reference to T's talk with the preface 'just similar to what XX((name of T)) has said' (lines 3-5), thereby attributing the source of the idea to T and framing her forthcoming talk as developing on the same idea. Topicalization of T's 'free gifts' idea is seen in the ensuing talk, where S elaborates on how to operationalize the promotion through measuring students' BMI (Body Mass Index) (line 8), and outlines another advantage of this promotional strategy – to enhance students' health (lines 9-10).

As L takes on speakership at line 12, she engages in further topical talk about the 'free gifts' idea. In providing an extended account for agreeing with T's proposal, L refers to the company's social responsibility to raise awareness about obesity among teenagers (lines 16-22). She also incorporates in her talk the idea of BMI (lines 26-28)

mentioned by S in the preceding turn. Thus, we see how both S and L build their own contributions on those of the previous speakers' by picking out and topicalizing elements of talk in the prior turns ('distributing free gifts', 'BMI'). In so doing, they manage to sustain and develop a topic (cf. assessment criterion *IV. Ideas and organisation*) and display understanding of previous speakers' talk, while also adding their own contributions to the talk exchange.

Of significance is how the two participants have demonstrably managed such interactional achievements quite spontaneously rather than relying on prepared material. L only browses her note card on two occasions as she mentions the idea of giving away 'free gifts' in schools (lines 12-15; 23-24). In the rest of the turn, she makes no reference to her note card and maintains eye contact with other group members at all times. Similarly, S looks at co-participants rather than browse her note card during her turn (lines 1-10). Although there are quite a few language errors within L's turn (lines 18-21), this precisely demonstrates her attempt (and her ability) to spontaneously construct a response in real-time interaction that links to and builds upon previous speakers' contribution. The students' note cards (Figures 1 and 2) collected at the end of the assessed interaction provide corroborating evidence.
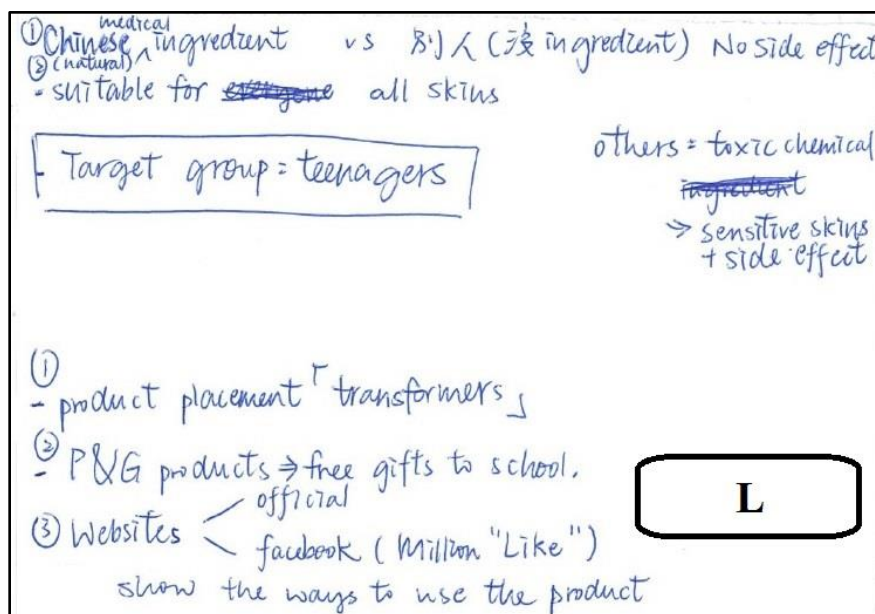

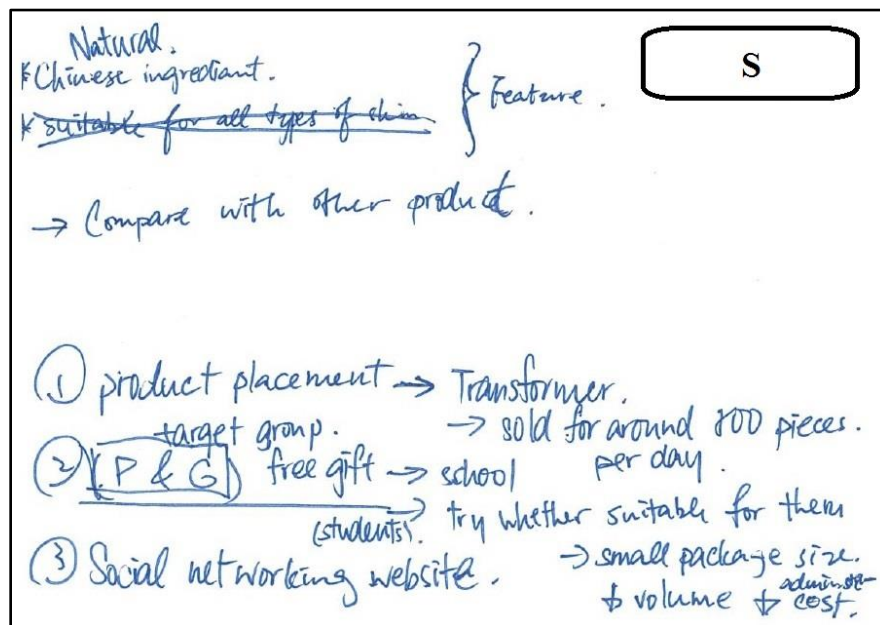**Figure 1 Student L's note card for PB14Mock**

Figure 2 Student S's note card for PB14Mock

None of the ideas about being a socially responsible corporation (lines 16-19), raising teenagers' awareness of obesity problem (lines 20-22), and BMI levels (lines 22-25) in L's response in Extract 3 was pre-written on L's note card. In other words, these were genuinely ideas that L came up with as the interaction unfolded, which were contingent upon the previous contributions by T and S, topicalizing their ideas about giving free samples and BMI respectively. Similarly, the ideas of measuring students' BMI and enhancing their health did not appear on S's note card.

In contrast with L and S, T is observably weaker in relating her contributions to previous speakers in this group interaction. Extract 4 shows the two turns by K and T prior to S and L's turns (in Extract 3).

Extract 4 – PB14Mock: 76-90

```
1.   K:   \\Yeah[r], besides websites, we might also think some other
2.        \\((T looks at K))++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
3.        ways to promote our products, like uhm we may set up some big
4.        ++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
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5.        banners (.) everywhere \\like uhm the buses, the MTR stations,
6.        +++++++++++++++++++++++++ \\((T nods; starts browsing note card))
7.        both uhm places are: uh the teenagers always will uhm go to,
8.        ++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
9.        or: uhm >they may notice it<, so, they will (.) realize that
10.       ++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
11.       our \\products' uhm benefits, and then (.) uhm they may have
12.       ++++ \\((T looks up at K again))++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
13.       uh interest on them. °What do you think?°
14.       +++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
15.       (...)  ((T turns to L and the two exchange looks))
16.  T:   \\°Uhm:::° (.)
17.       \\((turns away from L and looks down at note card))++++++
18.       I think sell:: our product to school by free gift is (a great)
19.          +++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++ +++++
20.       is a good idea also. .hh Because can let students to try our
21.                   +++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
22.       products, and:: (.) and:: understand more: (.) our:: (.) our:
23.       ++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
24.       fo- our features of our products.//
25.       +++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++//
26.       \\°What do you think?°
27.       \\((turns from note card to K))
```

Notice how T's talk (lines 16-27) exhibits little contingency on K's contribution in the preceding turn (lines 1-14): Even though T's response stays on the prescribed topic of 'promotional strategies' ('free gift… is a good idea also'), she does not make reference to or topicalize any elements in K's prior talk about print advertisements in public areas (lines 3-13). Rather, she goes straight into proffering her own suggestion of distributing 'free gifts' in schools (cf. how S and L develop T's 'free gifts' idea in the following turns, as shown in Extract 3). T's response, therefore, can be considered a *relevant* but not a *contingent* response to the previous speaker's talk.

The non-verbal actions in this exchange are also worth noticing. When K is speaking in the preceding turn, T displays listenership by making eye contact with K in lines 2-6 and 12-14, while she browses her note card in lines 6-12. This suggests that T has been listening at least during part of K's talk. Nevertheless, in the subsequent turn, T's gaze stays on her own note card most of the time (marked by the '+' sign in lines 17-25) until she bids for speaker change (lines 19-20), corroborating the above analysis that T's talk relies on her pre-planned idea and does not develop the previous speaker's idea(s).

T's lack of readiness to spontaneously produce a contingent response, or indeed simply to take a turn to speak, is also evidenced by the pause at line 15, where she exchanges looks with L before taking up speakership, together with the delay and hesitation in starting her turn (line 16). Similarly, two turns earlier (Extract 5 below), in another 3.4-second inter-turn silence (line 6), T exchanges looks with L, but then withdraws eye contact and directs her gaze back to the note card. On registering T's lack of readiness in taking up speakership, L self-selects to take the following turn (lines 8-9).

Extract 5 – PB14Mock: 64-72

```
1. K:   Maybe we should also put some videos, of some uhm special
2.      features that our product have, to uhm in a:: very (.) uh funny
3.      way to show uh the public.
4.      ((L nods))
5. T:   °Mm:.°
6.      (3.4)  ((T and L look at each other; T then looks down at note card and smiles;
7.             L's eye gaze stays on T))
8. L:   Uhm yeah as we all know that because (.) there're million of
9.      teenagers are using Internet ......
```

The pause at line 15 (Extract 4) is therefore a second chance/prompt for T to take a turn to speak. In the only other substantial turn that T has taken[4], the fact that her gaze mostly stays on the note card, together with the match between her talk and the points written on the note card, again suggests that T's talk is reliant on prepared ideas. Thus, in neither of

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[4] Extract available in AUTHOR (2015b), not shown here due to space limitation

T's substantial turns in this interaction has T managed to spontaneously construct a response based mainly on previous speakers' contributions. In other words, T's discourse offers little evidence of understanding co-participants' contributions produced in real time (vs. pre-negotiated and pre-planned ideas); and correspondingly, the ability to formulate responses that are contingent on previous speakers' locally produced talk.

Remarkably, then, T's performance in the mock assessment presents a stark contrast with her performance in the real assessment. Table 2 summarizes the IC performance features displayed by T that emerged in the analysis of the two group interactions. In the real assessment (PB14) with extended preparation time, T has taken five substantial, multi-TCU[5] turns, but only two in the mock assessment (PB14Mock) without extended preparation time. She seemingly has no issues with turn-taking in the real assessment, while the two inter-turn silences in the mock assessment reveal her lack of readiness to take up speakership. As for producing contingent responses, one of her response turns in PB14, where she contests the previous speaker's idea of Chinese medicine being a desirable product feature, has ostensibly suggested her ability to produce contingent responses to co-participants' talk (see Extract 1). However, T's performance in the mock assessment (Extract 4), together with her reliance on the note card, implicates the contrary.

Feature	PB14 (4-5 hours preparation time)	PB14Mock (10 minutes preparation time)
Contingent response	• Has produced a contingent response developing on a previous speaker's idea by challenging it (positively remarked by teacher-rater)	• Produces responses based on pre-planned ideas but *not contingent* on previous speaker contribution
Readiness for speakership	• Displays readiness to take up speakership • Coordinates turn-taking with others non-verbally by exchanging eye contact around transition relevance places	• Displays a general shyness and unreadiness to take up speakership (teacher-rater's comment) • Takes a turn only when prompted twice through gaze by a co-participant
Number of turns taken	• Takes 5 multi-unit turns (out of 25)	• Takes 2 multi-unit turns (out of 19)
	• Maintains eye contact with co-	• Makes occasional but short-lived

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[5] Turn Construction Unit

Eye contact vs. note card	participants throughout • No browsing note card as pre-scripted and rehearsed the interaction during preparation time (reported in stimulated recall)	eye contact with co-participants • Browses note card during most of her turn

Table 2. Profile of IC performance features of the lowest-scoring student (T)

Table 3 below shows the scores obtained by the four student-candidates in the assessed interactions under the two planning time conditions, including the rating (Bands 0-6) for each assessment criterion (I-IV), and the total score (out of 24) for each student-candidate. Table 4 shows each student-candidate's combined score (out of 12) for the interaction-related criteria *II. Communication Strategies* and *IV. Ideas & Organization* under each planning time condition.

Students		K				L				S				T			
Assessment Criteria		I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV	I	II	III	IV
PB14 (4-5 hours preparation)	*Sub-score*	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5
	Total score		20				20				20				18		
PB14Mock (10 minutes preparation)	*Sub-score*	5	5	6	6	5	4	5	5	4	4	5	5	4	4	4	4
	Total score		22				19				18				16		

I. *Pronunciation & Delivery*
II. *Communication Strategies*
III. *Vocabulary & Language Patterns*
IV. *Ideas & Organization*

Table 3. Performance scores of the four student-candidates in PB14 and PB14Mock

Students	K	L	S	T
	Combined score for interaction-related criteria II & IV			
PB14 (4-5 hours preparation)	10	10	10	10
PB14Mock (10 minutes preparation)	11	9	9	8

Table 4. Combined scores for interaction-related criteria II. Communication Strategies and IV. Ideas & Organisation

The scores seem broadly congruent with the analysis above, with T receiving the lowest overall score and the combined score for interaction-related criteria II & IV in PB14Mock. Note, also, that the four student-candidates' scores for criteria II & IV were identical in PB14 (extended preparation time), but slightly more differentiated in PB14Mock (10-minute preparation time). It goes without saying that these scores need to be interpreted with great caution, as they were particular to these two group interactions only and were awarded by two different teacher-raters. However, it is noteworthy that the teacher-rater for the mock assessment reported finding it easier to differentiate performance levels in PB14Mock (10 minutes preparation time) than in another group, PB11Mock (1-hour preparation time), explaining that the extended preparation time resulted in a highly 'well-organized' interaction. A larger-scale empirical study is needed to verify if the different planning time conditions indeed result in more/less differentiated scores.

DISCUSSION

AUTHOR (2018) has argued that contingent responses to co-participants' talk is an important feature that demonstrates interactional competence (IC) within group oral assessments. In this paper, it was noted how the lack of contingent responses was found in both Gan's (2010) and Luk's (2010) studies of school-based assessment group interactions in Hong Kong, but the students in the two studies had highly discrepant durations of preparation time. Is the lack of contingent responses evidence of lower levels of IC, a consequence of extensive pre-task planning, or both then? Crucially, therefore, we need to ask whether extensive planning time might obscure the differences between students who can spontaneously produce contingent responses and those who cannot. Where evidence suggests that extended preparation time bleaches such differences in IC performance among students, the group interaction task as an instrument of assessing IC becomes problematic. The discourse evidence from the two group interactions performed

by the same students (PB14 and PB14Mock) analyzed in this paper preliminarily suggests that this might indeed be the case.

In AUTHOR (2015a, 2015b), it was found that student groups with extended preparation time tended to engage in certain planning activities that made the assessed interaction highly structured and contrived. These included:

a) pre-determining consensus and final decisions,
b) pre-planning interactive sequences (e.g. A asks a question, which B answers; C states his view, and D agrees/disagrees),
c) pre-ordering turns and pre-allocating them to particular group members, and,
d) occasionally, pre-scripting the discussion verbatim

– see AUTHOR (2015a, p.52) for a diagram detailing these activities. Such task engagement presents two kinds of threats to the validity of the assessment task. First, the task risks construct under-representation, as what the assessed interactions show is merely interactional competence 'in a can' – a staged performance of a composed dialogue based on students' knowledge and perceptions of what IC is, rather than a manifestation of students' execution of IC in real time. Second, the nature of the elicited interaction is altered, as the abovementioned pre-task planning activities remove or reduce the information and opinion gaps and obviate the necessity for genuine communication of ideas, as well as eliminate the spontaneity and contingencies otherwise inherent in interaction (Kramsch, 1986).

In the video-recording of the 10-minute preparation time for PB14Mock, while students also talked to each other, their pre-task planning did *not* include any of those activities mentioned above, but consisted of

1) analyzing the topic and task demands,
2) brainstorming content ideas for each sub-topic on the task prompt,
3) considering how to open the discussion (but not who to start talking), and
4) negotiating the flow of discussion (but not pre-ordering or pre-allocating turns).

The pre-task planning can thus be characterized as more content-based, rather than pre-determining the unfolding of the assessed interaction.

In the analysis of PB14Mock (Extracts 3 and 4), we have seen that, subsequent to such form of more content-based pre-task planning, two stronger students (S and L) were able to *spontaneously* produce contingent responses which developed on co-participants'

immediately prior talk, with minimal reference to their own note cards. The weaker student (T) not only participated peripherally and took fewer turns than in the pre-scripted interaction (see Table 2), but also produced talk largely dependent on her own pre-planned ideas. In contrast, in the assessed interaction PB14 with extended preparation time, T's more natural, non-formulaic disagreeing response (Extract 1) yielded ostensible evidence of her ability to produce responses contingent on previous speaker contribution, and was commended by the teacher-rater in the stimulated recall. However, this seemingly contingent response by T, as with all those produced by other group members in PB14, was collusively pre-scripted rather than spontaneously produced.

As such, where students in a group under the extended preparation time condition collectively decide to pre-plan or pre-script the entire assessed interaction, the discrimination between those who can spontaneously produce contingent responses in real-time interaction and those whose ability is limited to preparing and animating scripted responses becomes obscured, as the discourse data (and, to some extent, the score data) above suggested.

Therefore, in addition to the threats to validity identified in AUTHOR (2015a, 2015b), the current analysis preliminarily suggests that extended preparation time may impede a group interaction assessment task's capacity to discriminate between stronger and weaker performances of IC, in terms of the ability to spontaneously produce contingent responses to co-participants' prior talk in real time. One, of course, needs to acknowledge that a number of factors either related or unrelated to the amount of preparation time might also contribute to the observed performance. These include, for example, students' levels of anxiety and confidence in engaging in spontaneous L2 interaction, their own preferences towards having preparation time (Nitta & Nakatsuhara, 2014), and their strategy use during preparation time (Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010). In future research, these and other factors related to psycholinguistic processing and individual differences could be examined in conjunction with the effect of planning time.

Towards innovative and contextually-appropriate task implementation

The other student group in the mock assessment (PB11Mock) was given approximately one hour of preparation time. The video-recording of their preparation

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time showed that this gave the students enough time to pre-plan interactional sequences and pre-allocate speaking turns, but *not* pre-script the interaction verbatim (AUTHOR, 2015a). Based on observations of the students' pre-tasking planning activities in PB11Mock (1 hour) and PB14Mock (10 minutes), one could postulate 30 minutes to be a potentially appropriate preparation time in the school-based assessment context. Such a time allowance might be constraining enough to discourage students from pre-planning or pre-scripting the interaction, while adequately substantial (cf. 10 minutes) for students to brainstorm content ideas and research language items (e.g. looking up vocabulary items or brand names in English). This awaits empirical verification in future studies.

However, perhaps the key is not *how much* preparation time is given, but *what* student-candidates do during pre-task planning (Wigglesworth, 1997; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010), in particular, whether collusion is involved (Luk, 2010; Spence-Brown, 2001). Another possible measure, therefore, is to have students do their pre-task planning individually (as in School L), whatever the length of the preparation time is. This helps preserve an information or opinion gap among the students and prevent students from pre-planning contrived interactions. However, this would also deprive students of the opportunity to provide or receive scaffolding help to/from each other. Yet another 'middle-ground' alternative would be for students in groups of four to do the pre-task planning work in pairs: this enables students to receive/provide scaffolding help where necessary, while preventing excessive pre-planning and pre-scripting of the entire assessed interaction. Such a configuration of pre-task planning in pairs also bears some authenticity simulating real-life workplace or study situations where individuals work in pairs or small groups before engaging in discussions or meetings among larger groups. Further, this affords students learning opportunities – opportunities for 'metatalk' or 'Language-Related Episodes', where learners 'talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, self and other correct' (Storch, 2008, p.97; see also Swain & Lapkin, 1995) – during preparation time as part of the assessment event. As recommended by the Examination Authority in the Teachers' Handbook for the school-based assessment (HKEAA, 2009), teacher-raters will need to exercise principled judgment in setting the exact task implementation conditions that are contextually

appropriate, tailored to students' needs, while (I would add) preserving the integrity of the task as an assessment of interactional competence.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Due to constraints on participants' availability, it was only possible to carry out the mock assessment with two student groups. As such, the investigations on students' pre-task planning activities and their impact on the subsequent assessed interaction were essentially exploratory in nature. The findings would benefit from empirical verification with a larger sample, along with an independent criterion measure for the candidates' interactional competence or speaking proficiency. This limitation notwithstanding, the present analysis has yielded discourse evidence of qualitative differences in students' performance of interactional competence in a group speaking assessment task with and without extended preparation time, and has provided a preliminary answer to the research question.

To what extent would such differences in task implementation condition influence students' patterns of interaction in the subsequent assessed performance, and have a compromising effect on the task's ability to discriminate between students with higher and lower levels of interactional competence? These questions are perhaps worth conducting further quantitative investigations to answer. The statistical evidence thus generated can also strengthen the preliminary findings of the present study in terms of empirical generalization. Some avenues worth exploring include:

(1) If/how extended preparation time (negatively) correlates with features of spontaneous real-time interaction (e.g. overlaps, collaborative turn construction)

(2) Whether extended preparation time yields a statistically significant narrower score range for the criteria related to interaction (Communication Strategies; Ideas and Organization), indicating a compromised capacity for the task to discriminate between students with different levels of interactional competence

(3) How much preparation time would be optimal for adequate preparation without encouraging students to pre-plan or even pre-script the assessed interaction

The caveat for engaging in investigations such as (1) is the possibility of premature categorization when coding large quantities of interactional data. One way to mitigate this problem is to conduct detailed conversation analysis of singular instances and ensure a good understanding of the phenomena before coding the data for statistical treatment (see Galaczi, 2014). However, the inevitable trade-off between empirical generalization and the depth of analysis should be duly acknowledged.

It is hoped that continuous efforts in language assessment research will contribute to better understanding of the relationship between the conditions under which an interactive speaking task is implemented and the nature of IC performance elicited.

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APPENDIX A

Group Interaction task for the real assessment (PB14)

Group Interaction (Elective module: Workplace Communication)

You are a member of the marketing team of Fabulous International Company. Your company is going to promote an existing / a new food item or drink. Discuss with your team ways to promote this product.

You should include the following:
- the target group(s)
- special features of the product
- strategies to promote the product
- anything else you think is important

Group Interaction task for the mock assessment (PB14Mock)

Group Interaction (Elective module: Workplace Communication)

You are a member of the marketing team of Slim Easy Ltd. Your company is going to promote a new slimming product / treatment package. Discuss with your team ways to promote this product / treatment package.

You may consider the following aspects:
- special features of the product / treatment package
- competitors and similar products in the market
- strategies to promote the product / treatment package
- anything else you think is important

APPENDIX B

Additional transcription symbols

`\\word     //` `\\((action))//`	Overlap of non-verbal action simultaneous with speech
`\\words words  //` `\\((action))+++//`	Continuation of the non-verbal action described in double parentheses simultaneous with speech
`wurd{word}`	Spelling indicative of the way the word is pronounced. The word within the curly brackets is transcriber's guess of the word uttered.
`word[s]` `word[t]`	Extraneous sound segment at the end of a word or unconventional realization of the final sound segment
`......`	The rest of the turn omitted