Activity 21.1 - Contemporary spoken English

Non-fluency features in italics:

A well what do they put in a computing programme? - -
B well you'll hear a lot about it in due course. It's what they call tests.
B which stands for investigating language acceptability.
A mm
B and they've done those on groups of undergraduates. We don't know what
A battery things. erm yes. erm sort of science graduates.
B German graduates. English graduates and so on. and asked them -
B there are various types of test they give them. they give them a sentence and there are four a.
there are three answers they can give. either it's acceptable. it's not acceptable.
A mm - -
B it's marginal. or you know it's somewhere between and then we they when they mark up
the results have a fourth category which is their answer was incoherent.
A yes.
B if it was heard and they couldn't hear it. if it was written they couldn't read it.
A mm.
B that's one type. then there's an operation test. they're interested say in well particularly
seeing various adverbs and they write something like I entirely. dot dot dot and the student
has to complete the sentence -
A mm.
B well with entirely they'll nearly all write agree with you.
A yes.
B and entirely and agree go together.
A mm.
B collate or something it's called.
A yeah.
B [laughs - -] and then they in fact try another adverb and then there'll be an absolute range of
verbs that go with it. you know it's quite interesting the way in the thesis they had a
sentence with entirely. and got people to er transform it into the negative.
A mm.
B this is very tricky. I should have thought there were.
B yes| well quite| they do that sort of thing you see| and then they see what they've produced| and then they score them up| in a certain way and they'll say have they | erm - have they done| what they were told to| and if not why not| and then there are various reasons why not| and they were scored| and given a mark| and it's quite in credible| that's one of the most valuable things| that I've thought was being done| in | in the battery test| because it should relate| quite directly| to| the meaning of the word| - B yes|

The following tidied-up version retains all the lexical and grammatical features of the spoken conversation, and only omits those features of speech production and interaction which we normally ignore when listening, like hesitations, repetitions and fillers. There are in fact comparatively few.

Setting out the text in "sentences" makes the grammatical structure of the conversation clearer.

A MCl or well what do they put in a computing programme?

B MCl well you'll hear a lot about it in due course

MCl it's what they call IL tests

Rel Cl (non-restr) which stands for investigating language acceptability

B MCl and they've done those on groups of undergraduates

MCl we don't know what unfinished

A MCl battery things

B MCl yes science graduates German graduates English graduates and so on

MCl and asked them

MCl there are various types of test [RelCl they give them]

MCl they give them a sentence

MCl and there are three answers [RelCl they can give]

MCl either it's acceptable it's not acceptable it's marginal

MCl or it's somewhere between

MCl and then we ..... AdvCl [when they mark up the results]

..... have a fourth category

RelCl (non-restr) which is their answer was incoherent

A yes

B AdvCl [if it was heard]

MCl and they couldn't hear it

AdvCl [if it was written]

MCl they couldn't read it

A mm

B MCl that's one type

MCl then there's an operation test
they're interested say [PrepCl in particularly seeing various adverbs]
and they write something like [Quoted Cl I entirely dot dot dot]
and the student has to complete the sentence

well with entirely they'll nearly all write [Quoted Cl agree with you]

entirely and agree go together
collate or something it's called

[laughs - -]
then they in fact try another adverb
and then there'll be an absolute range of verbs [RelCl that go with it]
you know
it's quite interesting the way in the thesis
[AppCl they had a sentence with entirely]
and got people to transform it into the negative

this is very tricky
I should have thought [NCi there were ... unfinished]

yes well quite
they do that sort of thing

you see
then they see [NCi what they've produced]
and then they score them up in a certain way
they'll say [NCi have they done [NCi what they were told to]]
[if not]
why not
and then there are various reasons why not
and they were scored
and given a mark
and it's quite incredible

I think [NCi that's one of the most valuable things [RelCi that I've thought was being done in the battery test]
[because it should relate quite directly to the meaning of the word]

yes
Points to note:

1. B does most of the talking, and her narrative consists principally of a series of main clauses [MCl] or simple sentences. The subordinate clauses are few and uncomplicated.
2. The main clauses tend to be linked by and, which functions rather like punctuation in writing, to separate off the clauses, rather than as a formal conjunction. This is especially noticeable in the sequence:

   \[
   \text{MCl} \quad \text{they do that sort of thing} \\
   \text{Comment Cl} \quad \text{you see} \\
   \text{and MCl} \quad \text{then they see [NCl what they've produced]} \\
   \text{and MCl} \quad \text{then they score them up in a certain way} \\
   \text{and MCl} \quad \text{they'll say [NCl have they done [NCl what they were told to]} \\
   \text{and AdvCl} \quad \text{[if not]} \\
   \text{MCl} \quad \text{why not} \\
   \text{and MCl} \quad \text{then there are various reasons why not} \\
   \text{and MCl} \quad \text{they were scored} \\
   \text{and MCl} \quad \text{given a mark} \\
   \text{and MCl} \quad \text{it's quite incredible}
   \]

which would not normally be acceptable in written English.

If we set out the text in the form of a dramatic dialogue - that is, a written form intended to be spoken but using normal written punctuation- we find that although it is a completely authentic example of spoken English conversation, it would not prove acceptable if acted on a stage:

A Well, what do they put in a computing programme?
B Well, you'll hear a lot about it in due course. It's what they call IL tests, which stands for "Investigating Language Acceptability", and they've done those on groups of undergraduates. We don't know what ..... A Battery things?
B Yes. Science graduates, German graduates, English graduates and so on, and asked them. There are various types of test they give them. They give them a sentence, and there are three answers they can give: either it's acceptable, it's not acceptable, it's marginal, or it's somewhere between, and then we, when they mark up the results, have a fourth category, which is their answer was incoherent.
A Yes.
B If it was heard and they couldn't hear it, if it was written they couldn't read it.
A Mm.
B That's one type. Then there's an operation test. They're interested, say, in particularly seeing various adverbs and they write something like "I entirely dot dot dot", and the student has to complete the sentence.
A Mm.
B Well, with "entirely" they'll nearly all write "agree with you".
A Yes.
B And "entirely" and "agree" go together - "collate "or something it's called.
A Yeah.
B [laughs - -] And then they in fact try another adverb, and then there'll be an absolute range of verbs that go with it.
A Mm. You know, it's quite interesting the way in the thesis they had a sentence with "entirely" and got people to transform it into the negative.
B Mm.
A This is very tricky. I should have thought there were ...
B Yes, well, quite. They do that sort of thing, you see, and then they see what they've produced and then they score them up in a certain way and they'll say have they done what they were told to and if not why not and then there are various reasons why not and they were scored and given a mark and it's quite incredible!
A I think that's one of the most valuable things that I've thought was being done in the battery test, because it should relate quite directly to the meaning of the word.
B Yes.

What makes this conversation unacceptable as dramatic dialogue? The answer lies partly in the requirements of dramatic dialogue, which is not simply overheard ordinary conversation, though it may give this impression in the theatre.

The sequence previously referred to,

They do that sort of thing, you see, and then they see what they've produced and then they score them up in a certain way and they'll say have they done what they were told to and if not why not and then there are various reasons why not and they were scored and given a mark and it's quite incredible!

could be written as,

They do that sort of thing, you see. Then they see what they've produced. They score them up in a certain way, and say, have they done what they were told to, and if not, why not. Then there are various reasons why not, and they were scored and given a mark. It's quite incredible!