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Teaching and Assessing Interactional Competence in the Classroom Context: from Theory to Practice

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I. Introduction

The new Course of Study for English in Japan began in elementary schools in 2020, junior high schools in 2021, and will go into effect in high schools in 2022. One of the biggest changes in English Instruction is the description (objectives and practical activities) of the four skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking) and the five domains (reading, listening, writing, speaking-interaction, and speaking-presentation). Among these, it should be noted that the skill of speaking is divided into two domains or areas (interaction and presentation), in which students are requested to speak with improvisation / impromptu, in other words, without preparation (cf. MEXT, 2017a; 2017b; 2018). The salient feature of this change is the word impromptu in improvisational speaking.

Communicative competence – one's ability to use language appropriately in social situations – was originally proposed by Hymes (1972) and has had a tremendous influence on language teaching and assessment. The target is not just remembering conversational phrases and performing/conducting conversations or simply organizing, memorizing, and giving prepared speeches, but aiming at something beyond that. How can we deal with the aspect of speaking ability in terms of spontaneous interactional competence, which is part of a larger framework for communicative competence? (Celce-Murcia, 2007). This paper discusses the theory of interactional competence and speaking-interaction in the classroom context with a focus on teaching and assessing.

Ever since MEXT (The Ministry of Education Sports, Science, Culture, and Technology) introduced the concept of two aspects of speaking (presentation and interaction) in the new Course of Study for English in Japan which went into effect in 2021 in junior high school, English language teachers have been attempting to understand the foundations of

interaction and how to teach it. In addition, they are also struggling with how to effectively design assessments that gauge the students' proficiency in interactional competence.

The idea of the five domains is taken from the CEFR framework (Listening, Reading, Spoken Productive, Spoken Interactive and Writing) (See CEFR, 2001). What is stressed in this framework is that we should consider not only teaching, but also assessing these skills. When we focus on teaching the Spoken Productive and Spoken Interactive domains, we need to have students integrate those skills or areas continually and dynamically so they have richer interactional activities. Also, when it comes to assessing their ability to interact, we should start with the theoretical construct of interactional ability, which is followed by the evaluation items in the rubric, such as correctness, appropriateness, or outspokenness. Since teaching and assessing are two sides of the same coin, we always consider both teaching objectives and assessing progress simultaneously.

II. Theoretical Background and Discussion of Interactional Competence

Kley (2019) maintains that teachers are faced with the challenge of assessing students' interactional competence in their conversations by creating tasks and rubrics in classroom contexts. Concerning topic management in conversations, Kley (2019) describes the four most salient actions that students should aim to accomplish: 1) initiating new topics, 2) reciprocating the interlocutor's topic-initiating questions, 3) expanding on topics, and 4) shifting between topics. One big issue in these actions is how it can be graded. In other words, is the score reflecting the competency of the individual student, or for a pair of students? /all participants in one interactional exercise (Kley, 2019).

Huth and Betz (2019) claim that testing formats for specific learning targets in interactional competence are consistent with the pedagogy and teaching materials that are currently available. They also maintain that just as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, or transcultural awareness can be taught and tested in instructed language learning settings, interactional competence can also provide learnable and testable instructional targets (Huth & Betz, 2019).

They further state that interactional competence does not focus primarily on the social context in the sociolinguistic sense (who says what to whom in demographic or institutional terms), but rather on the interactional context in the sense that utterances form turns, that some turns are typed and that some turns occur in predictable sequences forming pairs) (cf. Huth & Betz, 2019).

Testing is a central consideration in instructed language-learning settings. In the context of language education, testing provides the procedural backbone of the curriculum and satisfies a central institutional requirement: ascertaining an individual's L2 proficiency against normative-prescriptive assessment frameworks (Huth & Betz, 2019).

At the levels of pronunciation such as vocabulary, grammar, and relevance can be clearly assessed as being correct or incorrect. However, when teaching and testing L2 interactional learning targets, a number of important elements emerge. Human interaction entails normative elements but is also subject to negotiations, ambiguity, and choice (Huth & Betz, 2019).

Huth & Betz (2019) indicate that a basic principle in language testing has only limited utility when we consider the teaching and testing of L2 interaction patterns. When we teach principles, special consideration must be paid to the inherent context dependence of social action as well as the importance of individual choice and its consequences.

It is difficult to generalize a speaker's participation in special contexts because language performance in interaction varies across tasks and interlocutor in instructed settings (Huth & Betz, 2019).

As Huth & Betz suggest (2019), speakers' efforts in interactions to achieve intersubjectivity include basic procedures for structuring social interaction, such as turn-taking and repair, but they also include crucial practices such as alternative formats for accomplishing a specific action which are designed for specific recipients, situations and contexts, and encompass all available multimodal resources (Huth & Betz, 2019).

Sadlund and Sundqvist (2019) claim that while L2 scholars struggle with the specification and operationalization of interactional competence, language practitioners (teachers and raters) struggle with the assessment of L2 interaction. As Sandlund and Sundqvist (2019) mention, language practitioners wonder what counts/constitutes as competent participation in interaction in second language assessment. L2 speaking is often referred to as a complex language ability because of the uniqueness and complexity inherent in each individual's language skill (Sandlund & Sundqvist, 2019).

In the context of formal educational assessment of oral proficiency, interactional abilities usually constitute part of the assessment construct (Sandlund & Sundqvist, 2019). As all L2 oral test formats commonly include oral proficiency interviews, paired tests, and small-group tests, they also involve at least two interlocutors. The issues presented by co-constructed interaction and individual assessment have long been concerns for research on

L2 interactional competence testing (Sandlund & Sundqvist, 2019).

As Sandlund and Sundqvist (2019) suggest, it is worth noting that while constructs and rubrics may be based on specific definitions of L2 interactional competence, participants in a situated test interaction deal with contingencies arising within particular moments. In addition, the real-life consequences for test-takers and their scores are highly dependent on raters or raters' use of scoring rubrics.

Nguyen (2019) raises two debatable issues concerning interactional assessment; 1) how to assess individual abilities in co-constructed, jointly achieved interaction, and 2) how to maintain an emic stance. Since some learners produce more collaborative turn completions than others in the same-group conversations, it is not easy to find the solution for assessment of individual abilities in actual interaction. Also, interactional competence is inherently messy in the sense that participants achieve social actions in the midst of things, so maintaining an emic stance is challenging (Nguyen, 2019). The success of interactional competence teaching is largely due to the teacher's clear understanding of interactional competence. It is also important to train testers/students about interactional competence not only in teaching courses, but also through workshops, conferences, and seminars.

Hauser (2019) states that interactional language tests – that is, tests that involving interaction between the test-taker and tester or between test-takers – indicate the interactional competence of the test-taker is co-constructed by the participants. As a result, interaction is inherently contingent upon the proficiency factors of the interlocutors. According to Hauser (2019), one way of looking at interactional competence is that interactional competence should be used to refer to competence that participants co-construct within their interactions and that the knowledge or ability that they bring to those interactions. One major aspect of interactional competence involves being able to handle the contingencies that inevitably arise during interaction (Hauser, 2019).

III. Case Study of an ELF Class focusing on speaking (presentation and interaction)

For this study, the researcher examined a college ELF course titled *English and English education in the age of globalization: East Asia Perspectives* based on three linguistic assessment components: end-of-term paper (writing), presentation (speaking), and the teacher's observation of students' group interaction (overall ability). Focusing on speaking ability, the oral presentation (giving a speech) and the following question-answer session as well as group interaction activities were rated. The scoring criteria for speaking ability

is as follows:

Oral Presentation (evaluation of speaking ability, presentation ability)

1. Speech Organization (1-5 points)				
Excellent (5)	Good (4)	Moderate (3)	Fair (2)	Unsatisfactory (1)
2. Flow of Speech (1-5 points)				
Excellent (5)	Good (4)	Moderate (3)	Fair (2)	Unsatisfactory (1)

For the Question-and-Answer Session following the oral presentation (interaction ability)

3. Comprehension and Production / Interaction and Preparation (1-5 points)				
Excellent (5)	Good (4)	Moderate (3)	Fair (2)	Unsatisfactory (1)

For the Intra-Group Interactions

4. Intra-group interactions (1-5 points)				
Excellent (5)	Good (4)	Moderate (3)	Fair (2)	Unsatisfactory (1)

IV. Conclusion

As Butler and Iino (2021) claim in assessment theory, communicative competence has largely been conceived of as an individual's capability inferred from their independent performance on tasks that are representative of language use in a target domain.

In assessment practice, “the ability to use” component in the original Hymes model has not been deeply discussed. In many standardized proficiency tests, the knowledge components in communicative competence are organized into four skill domains and assessed separately. Some components, such as the “appropriateness” aspect of communicative competence, has been criticized as being largely judged based on the performance of native speakers (Cazden, 2011).

There has been growing interest in socio-interactional approaches to conceptualizing language abilities. In those approaches, language abilities are considered to be embedded in social contexts and constructed in fluid and dynamic interaction. English as a lingua franca (ELF) challenges the native-speaker norms and questions the static view of language ability (Jenkins, 2006).

ELF's emphasis on communicative effectiveness, rather than correctness and appropriateness, highlights the role of “the ability for use” in language abilities, which varies substantially throughout communication in one's first language as well as second language. This conceptualization of language abilities better fits the realistic needs of Japanese

students who largely interact in ELF contexts in the globalizing world.

The case study above tells us at least two things to consider within the rating system.

First, the rating of detailed items such as communicativeness in order for task completion to be measured in the assigned context.

Second, the issue of rating not only the test-taker, but also the interlocutor. Given that the question-answer session involves both the test-taker and the interlocutor, do we measure the interactional competence of both of them? For group discussions as well, do we rate only one person's speaking ability, or the group's contextual interaction? These components require thoughtful consideration in order to achieve progress.

Additionally, level ranges must also be accounted for due to their considerable influence in the overall process. For example, unlike novice level group discussions or question-answer sessions, intermediate/advanced-level interactions are highly complicated to measure in terms of interactional competence.

The language abilities necessary to compete in a globalizing world are highly context-dependent and cannot be made uniform or standardized across the globe (cf. Butler & Iino, 2021). Consequently, we need to consider the communicative effectiveness dynamically in assessing interactional competence.

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