

Developing Rating Scales to Assess Interactional Competence in L2 Speaking Tasks

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Abstract

This study aims to account for the nature of peer-peer interaction in paired speaking tasks. This will be realized by addressing three issues: refining the construct of interactional competence at both macro- (overall interaction quality determined by interaction patterns and task completion status) and micro-levels (particular features in interactions); examining the extent to which the distribution of interaction features varies with task types; developing task-sensitive rating scales for interactional competence. A total of 35 pairs of language learners in an intensive English program participated in the study. Each pair responded to four 2.5-minute interaction tasks. All interactions are being scored on overall interaction quality by four raters. Then each individual interlocutor's performance in all interactions will be coded for interaction features ranging from interactive listening, topic management, turn-taking management, to using questions. The data obtained will be analyzed to answer the following questions: Results will help form a better understanding of interactional competence at both macro- and micro-levels. This study will cast light on what counts for interactional competence and how to develop a valid scale to assess it in L2 peer-peer interaction.

Keywords: interactional competence, rating scales, L2 speaking tasks, interaction features

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Background

The past two decades have witnessed a growing interest in paired speaking assessment (e.g., McNamara, 1997; Taylor, 1999; Dimitrova-Galaczi, 2010; Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009). There are, nevertheless, three concerns in using paired speaking tasks in language testing: First of all, researchers call for more understanding on the construct itself and explore more on what counts for interactional competence; Secondly, it is necessary to investigate whether different task types could elicit different patterns of interaction features (Taylor, 2001); Lastly, appropriate rating scales are needed: to be able to measure interaction performance while taking task type effect into considerations (Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009; North, 2000). In order to better understand each of these issues, the study aims to address the following research questions.

Research Questions

Question 1: Are hypothesized relations among interaction features supported empirically?

Question 2: Is the Interactional Competence Quality scale a reliable and valid measure?

Question 3: Do the interaction features account for variance in interactional competence?

Methods

Level 4 and 5 PIE students (35 pairs in total) who have signed the consent form participated in the study. Each pair's oral interactions on four paired speaking tasks were audio-recorded. All recorded interactions are being transcribed by the researcher and then coded for a range of interaction features. Meanwhile, all interactions will be scored by four raters using three different scales. Data analyses will then be conducted to answer the research questions.

Results

Currently all interactions are being transcribed and scored. The researcher expects to receive results by early August, 2014.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

The participants had a chance to practice conversation skills when working with a partner to complete the four speaking tasks. This oral skill is important for second language learners to communicate effectively with others both in class and in daily life (Norton, 2005). Some students explicitly expressed their likeness of the activities.

Using the results of coded interaction features and scores of interactional competence, the researcher will develop a valid and reliable scale for assessing PIE students' L2 oral interaction skills. This is important for second language learning practitioners since the scale will reveal key information on learners' interaction skills and inform them of what should be done to improve students' interactional competence. Overall, the scale will be an asset for both in-class speaking instruction and assessment purpose.

References

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