L2 interactional competence and assessment
Insights and challenges – a discussion paper

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1. Introduction

The incommensurably refined ability to interact with others is foundational to what makes humans distinct from other species and represents the bedrock of humans’ language development, both phylogenetically and ontogenetically (Levinson, 2006; Tomasello, 2003). Accordingly, understanding interactional competence is crucial not only for comprehending the intricacy of language learning, but also for adequately assessing people’s ability to perform social actions linguistically and to communicatively interact with others.

The papers in this Special Issue (SI) have been brought together to discuss current developments and challenges in research on assessing interactional competence in a second language (L2). The importance of such an endeavor cannot be underestimated in times of increased globalization and migration, involving heightened demands on multilingual abilities for social and professional integration. Foregrounding the immense complexity of testing interactional competence and the related conceptual and practical challenges, the papers unanimously highlight the importance of bridging the gap between empirical and conceptual advances in second language acquisition (SLA) research on the one hand, and conceptual, empirical, and practical developments within the field of L2 assessment on the other. Through critical discussions of variable aspects of assessment (ratability, descriptors, constructs, etc.) entailed by micro-analyses of empirical data, the studies assembled here provide powerful demonstrations of the fact that we have come a long way since Kramsch’s critique of the “oversimplified view of human interactions” (Kramsch, 1986, p. 367) inherent in the communicative competence model – a critique that had been addressed specifically to the accuracy-focused proficiency movement (in the U.S.) of the time. The path, however, has been a stony one, and much still lies ahead.
In this discussion paper, I first briefly outline some parallels in the historical developments of assessment and SLA research. I then focus on the convergences among the papers in regard to their conceptualization of interaction competence and the related challenges and recommendations for language assessment. I conclude with some personal remarks on the need for the field to be exigent when it comes to (rethinking divergent) ontologies of language learning, and to be pragmatic when it comes to refining testing criteria and practices.

2. A bit of historical background

Research on interactional competence emerged relatively late in the history of both assessment and SLA research and was basically driven by a move away from the long-dominant focus on individuals’ cognition in order to account for people’s socially – and hence jointly – acting in the world. In the field of assessment, McNamara (1997) stressed early on the need for research to better conceptualize the construct of interaction so as to render justice to its co-constructed nature, and thereby to move away from the (then) dominant focus on individual cognitive processing. A number of researchers followed his call by advocating the necessity to develop assessment models and practices that recognize the social, i.e., mutually adaptive, nature of language use in interaction. This line of research has been exponentially growing, as shown by the rich bibliographical references presented in this SI.

Simultaneously with the above, parallel calls for more interaction-oriented research were issued within the field of SLA. Firth and Wagner (1997) prominently argued for an alternative to the fundamentally monologic and individualistic language ontology characterizing the prominent lines of SLA investigations at the time, which were primarily concerned with linguistic form, form-function mappings, and individual cognitive (input) processing. In response to monologically oriented conceptualizations of the notion of communicative competence subsequent to Hymes (1972), socially-oriented SLA researchers started to advocated a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of such competence. Yet, systematic empirical investigations into the notion of interactional competence (henceforth IC) have emerged only in the 21st century, and they have intensified in the past decade.

By taking social interaction as the bedrock of human linguistic and, more generally, mental functioning, and therefore as the starting point of the study of L2 learning and assessment, the above developments lead to a radical reversal of the traditional monologic and individual-centered logic that had for long domi-
nated the respective fields. This very enterprise is pursued by the papers brought together in this SI.

3. Conceptualizing interactional competence and challenging existing descriptors

The papers draw on what has today become arguably the dominant understanding of IC (for discussions, see Pekarek Doehler, 2019; Skogmyr-Marian & Balaman, 2018). Succinctly put, they conceptualize IC in terms of speakers’ systematic procedures (or methods; Garfinkel, 1967) for accomplishing actions in interaction and coordinating these with co-participants: procedures for turn-taking, opening or closing a conversation, repairing, disagreeing, requesting, managing topics, etc. They stress the fact that these procedures, although also relevant in the first language (L1), are not simply transferred from the L1 to the L2, but are “recalibrated” in the process of L2 learning. It is important to note that such an understanding has roots in ethnomethodology – a branch of micro-sociology that is concerned with how members of a given group organize their social interactions in order to make these mutually understandable and accountable – from which Conversation Analysis (CA) emerged in the 1970s. The papers brought together here draw on CA as applied to SLA for their empirical analyses.

Given that the papers aspire to an encompassing and empirically grounded conceptual understanding of IC, it comes as no surprise that they converge on a challenging diagnostic: To date, we lack operational tools for implementing practicable language assessment of IC without compromising validity – and this is true both for classroom testing and for standardized assessment procedures. One richness of the SI lies in its addressing practical issues pertaining both to language teaching (e.g., Barth-Weingarten & Freitag-Hild, this issue) and to standardized testing (e.g., Lam, Galaczi, Nakatsuhsara, & May, this issue; Youn, this issue); accordingly it offers suggestions concerning the training of both teachers and testers, as well as for refining descriptors in standardized testing (e.g., Schirm, Uskokovic, & Taleghani-Nikazm, this issue). Drawing on the above notion of IC, and thoroughly informed by CA research on IC development, the papers also have in common a distancing from a speech-act centered L2 pragmatics, which, as Roever (2011) argued, under-theorizes the way in which actions are accomplished in social interaction (Youn, this issue).
3.1 Epistemologies of language learning, descriptors, and reference frameworks

A recurrent concern through the SI is the need for a refinement of descriptors relative to IC, such as those found in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) or the performance descriptors for language learners of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which leave imprints both in teaching practices and in standardized assessment models. As I argued elsewhere (Pekarek Doehler, 2019, 2021), this underspecification of IC is tightly related to the ontologies of language learning underlying such frameworks and their epistemological grounding, which stand in stark contrast to the interaction-based non-individualistic view of competence advocated in current socially oriented SLA research as well as in this SI. While the later CEFR Companion, dating from 2018, displays more attention to interaction than the 2012 version, referring notably to the “co-construction of meaning through interaction” (p. 27), it still generally proposes a narrow, if not lacunary, understanding of IC (Schirm et al., this volume). This is reflected, for instance, in the fact that it operates a binary division between listening and speaking while simply adjuncting interaction as a third component (Barth-Weingarten & Freitag-Hild, this issue). On epistemological grounds, the notion of IC challenges the compatibility between assessment’s aim to measure individual learners’ abilities objectively, i.e., against pre-determined standards (operationalized in testing as an individually ratable trait), and CA’s emic view and focus on collaboration/co-construction (see Lam et al., this volume; Youn, this issue).

The studies presented here basically converge on the relevancy of using generic organizational principles of social interaction, as detailed in CA research (Schegloff 2007, p.xiv) to capture the complexity of IC (Pekarek Doehler, 2019, p.49). While there are advantages as well as caveats attached to such an endeavor (Barth-Weingarten & Freitag-Hild, this issue), all authors stress the need to base descriptors on empirical evidence from the micro-analysis of social interaction, and they present powerful demonstrations of how to do that.

3.2 Refinement of descriptors, operationalization and practicality

The need to refine IC descriptors as well as challenges in operationalizing interaction-relevant assessment parameters are at the core of the discussions in the papers, and they are broached through a variety of empirical data and analytic foci.

Schirm et al. (this issue) address the challenge of assessing understanding in interaction. They offer a fine-grained analysis of response tokens produced in
question-answer sequences by German L2 speakers in naturally occurring conversations with L1 speakers, demonstrating how such an analysis can inform us about the issue of understanding in interaction. Based on their findings, they recommend rubrics for the assessment of understanding to include features such as presence or absence of third-position responses (including tokens), the range of response formats (e.g., variety of tokens) or the fittedness of a response format to its interactional context (recognizability by co-participant). The authors empirically demonstrate how the tricky issue of understanding can be relevantly addressed in a way that goes beyond the binary division between listening/understanding and speaking, and situates it in the interactional dynamics of co-participants’ mutually oriented activities.

Focusing on L2 grammar-for-interaction, Youn (this issue) draws on the insight that linguistic resources are used for action accomplishment in social interaction, and discusses the role of such resources in defining and assessing IC. She identifies differences in how learners of different proficiency levels accomplish requests within role plays: higher-level learners use diverse grammatical formats according to sequential position and contingencies related to request. This provides empirical evidence for the role of grammar as a validity criterion for assessing IC. Accordingly, Youn calls for the descriptions of grammar in rating criteria to take into account local interactional contingencies, such as the sequential placement of a given grammatical pattern. As Greer (this issue) points out, these suggestions resonate with the fact that grammatical patterns emerge through iterative use as practical solutions to recurrent social-interactional exigencies. Youn’s findings are hence perfectly in line with recent advancements within CA-SLA, while opening promising avenues for future developments in L2 assessment.

Lam et al. (this issue) address challenges of ratability. Focusing on two IC features – topic management and interactive listening – in paired test-taker interactions, the authors first demonstrate how actions tend to be accomplished conjointly and through the coordination of a number of multimodal resources. They then critically discuss the operationalization of IC features in 23 rating scales currently used in a range of assessment contexts, and analyze how IC is operationalized in a standardized test and a classroom-based test. On these grounds, they identify three key ratability challenges: (i) shared vs. individual aspects of IC, (ii) multimodality, (iii) the high-inference nature of IC observations. They conclude by recommending that CA-based activities be integrated into rater training. In addition to offering a much-needed clarification of terminological divergences between CA-SLA and assessment research, this paper provides a powerful demonstration of how research at the interface of L2 assessment and CA-SLA can advance not only our understanding of the challenges of ratability, but also relevantly inform rating scales and practices.
Barth-Weingarten & Freitag-Hild’s (this issue) paper targets assessment of IC in secondary schools. The authors propose an analysis of action ascription within a role-play situation and show that a wide range of skills can be detected through such a focus. Thereby, they also illustrate how the concept of action ascription can be operationalized for assessment purposes in public-school classrooms based on CA findings. In particular, they propose to tackle practicality challenges related to time-pressure and limited resources in school testing by focusing on specific key points relevant for scrutinizing action ascription, such as turn design or sequence organization. The paper offers a fine-grained understanding of the challenges of assessing IC in a public-school setting, urging school testing to overcome the shortcomings of the CEFR descriptors, which, as the authors relevantly note, “are not intended to be used as assessment instruments, though they can be a source for the development of such instruments” (CEFR Companion, p. 41).

Taken together, the papers in this SI provide an exemplary illustration of how research at the interface of CA-SLA and L2 assessment can fruitfully be brought to bear on identifying the precise challenges of assessing IC and suggesting avenues for refining descriptors, operationalizing interaction-relevant assessment parameters, and implementing related assessment practices. They concur on stressing the need to develop more specific descriptive criteria to allow more accurate assessments of test-takers’ IC. Thereby, they offer precious advancements toward a more adequate construct of IC. Their findings and suggestions can be taken as a strong incitation for further empirically anchored micro-analytic research on IC, IC assessment criteria, and practices.

4. Some personal thoughts in conclusion

Allow me to conclude with just a bit of a personal thought, and a disclaimer. First, the disclaimer: as the alert reader specialized in assessment research inevitably noticed: I am writing from the standpoint of where (I hope) lies my expertise: in the micro-analysis of social interaction and of how such interaction, over time, becomes the very fabric of L2 learning, that is, the grounds from which developmental trajectories of IC emerge. Given the importance of the issue at hand, I am delighted to have had the opportunity to read the papers (and the related commentaries) and to offer a short discussion. L2 assessment is (often) part of gatekeeping processes, not only within schools, but also in our professional and social lives; it is instrumental in warranting (or not) access to the workplace, to institutions of higher education, to citizenship, etc. The importance of recognizing people’s true abilities – the validity criterion in assessing IC – in view of their social, educational, and professional integration can therefore not be underesti-
mated. Given the importance of the issue at hand, I venture to share two concluding thoughts.

First of all, I have personally much appreciated the pragmatic solutions proposed in the papers, such as raising awareness of IC in teacher training by selectively focusing on ‘key points for analysis’ for the actual rating (Barth-Weingarten & Freitag-Hild, this issue; see also Waring, 2019; Youn, 2020), training test-raters based on CA-related rubrics (Schirm et al., this issue), completing existing ratings for actions (such as requests) by integrating new dimensions, such as grammar-for-interaction (Youn, this issue), and last but not least, advocating a “middle-ground position” (Lam et al., this issue) that reconciles the individual and the collaborative view of IC, and implies that individual IC features can be oriented to and scored, but that shared IC scores could be envisaged in certain situations for certain IC features: “what participants do in social interaction… how they negotiate the employment of interactional resources, is co-constructed, but the abilities to recognize and mobilize interactional resources must also be individual” (Nguyen 2019, p.401, as cited in Lam et al., this issue).

Second, a substantial challenge lies in the very epistemological foundations of reference frameworks such as the CEFR. While these are highly influential in regard to both school testing and standardized assessment, they remain indebted to a monologic and individualistic view of L2 learning and use; it is exactly this view that lies the grounds for an only additive (and arguably marginal) inclusion of IC, for instance as one of the sub-components of speaking. Given the CEFR’s paramount impact on L2 teaching and testing within Europe and beyond, it is time to rethink these foundations in view of current developments in SLA that highlight language, learning, and competence as fundamentally situated, mutually oriented, and emerging in and through social interaction (Pekarek Doehler, 2021; Wagner, 2019). While such a conceptual reframing certainly entails a re-specification of the descriptors for interaction, ultimately the CEFR and its underlying conceptualization of L2 learning will need to be aligned with the shift, in the field of SLA research, toward a usage-based and interaction-oriented understanding of learning. Simply put: It cannot overlook current empirical evidence showing that linguistic constructions evolve through language use situated in social practice, and that becoming a competent interactant in an L2 means being able to engage in joint action with others in locally adaptive ways.
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References


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