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Exploring the construct of interactional oral fluency: Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing approaches

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study pursues the construct of interactional oral fluency during peer interaction by (a) investigating raters' perceptions (verbal protocol) and comparing them with those of individual performance, (b) examining the rated scores (Likert-scale) in two performance conditions using empirically-based scales that were newly developed based on the verbal protocol data, and (c) conducting correlation and regression analyses with the rated scores and the temporal aspects of speeches (pruned and unpruned speech rates). By employing competence-based and performance-based measurements, the study also explores conceptual gaps regarding oral fluency between Second Language Acquisition and Language Testing research. The participants were 56 Japanese university-level learners of English and four native English speakers who rated the learners' oral fluency. The verbal protocol data showed that temporal aspects (e.g., pauses) and interaction-specific features (e.g., turn-taking) were interwoven, indicating that joint performance between the interactants is a constituent of the construct of interactional oral fluency. The statistical analyses revealed that learners' individual performance does not necessarily predict how they will perform in an interactional context, challenging the assumption that L2 specific processing is stably manifested in performance regardless of context.

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1. Introduction

Oral fluency has been investigated in the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Language Testing (LT) in theoretically and methodologically distinct manners. The bulk of SLA research on oral fluency has employed individualized tasks such as picture-description, in order to obtain second language (L2) speech data with the assumption that (a) individualized elicitation tasks tap into learners' underlying competence, and (b) scores obtained on those tasks reflect an L2 ability that learners can use in real-world contexts. Meanwhile, LT research prioritizes the establishment of reliable and valid ways to measure L2 performance, and LT researchers believe that L2 performance is a reflection not only of a learner's L2 knowledge (or 'trait', cf. the trait theory) but also of the context in which the learner performs. In this field, it is believed that a learner's final performance is a reflection of the interaction between trait and performance context (the interactionalist approach: see, for different ways of understanding L2 performance, Chapelle, 1998; Douglas, 2001; Messick, 1989). As a result of their distinct beliefs regarding performance, LT researchers have primarily used interactional tasks such as oral interviews to evaluate learners' L2 knowledge and ability.

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In this respect, Chalhoub-Deville (2001, p. 224) argued that SLA researchers "need to reconsider the notion of elicitation instruments as a monolith" as the instruments used in individualized tasks may interfere with the L2 knowledge which underlies a learners' performance. This is an important claim precisely due to the fact that if a measurement in an L2 study lacks validity and/or reliability, the subsequent interpretations of the obtained scores and, thus, our understanding of L2 performance or development could result in a "valid test fallacy" (Norris & Ortega, 2003, p. 739). Therefore, it is crucial to examine the systematic effects of the elicitation tasks themselves (cf. task characteristics: Bachman & Palmer, 2010) when assessing L2 performance. Furthermore, neither SLA nor LT research has extensively examined the effects of elicitation tasks used to measure oral fluency during interaction despite the fact that the improvement of fluency during oral interaction is a major goal for L2 learners. Hence, the current study aims to examine the effect of interaction-between-people as a possible variable affecting how fluent L2 speeches are perceived (henceforth, *interactional oral fluency*) and to explore the construct of interactional oral proficiency through theoretical and methodological frameworks borrowed from SLA and LT research.

2. Literature review

2.1. L2 performance and interaction

From the time that a model for communicative competence was proposed (Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), research has attempted to conceptualize L2 competence during interaction. In this framework, inter-personal factors such as communication strategies are included under strategic competence; being one of the four types of competencies which make up communicative competence. Strategic competence distinguishes itself in that, while the other three competencies (grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse) can be owned individually by learners, it can only be observed as a set of skills to better use the other competencies (see Hulstijn, 2011). In this line, Young and He (1998) proposed the interactional competence—reflected by skills such as turn and topic management—as an additional component of communicative competence, arguing that Canale and Swain's model focuses solely on intrapersonal skills (see also Barkaoui, Brooks, Swain, & Lapkin, 2013). That being said, a problem arises when one wishes to measure these features. Due to the fact that the said features are specific to interaction, how can they be measured as part of an individually-owned L2 competence? Partly due to this methodological difficulty and partly due to their theoretical orientation (i.e., competence is owned individually), many researchers have employed individualized tasks (e.g., picture description tasks) especially in SLA research.

Alternatively, L2 performance during interaction can be conceptualized more broadly: In LT research, where oral interviews are the primary elicitation methods not only for research but also for high-stake exams, researchers have taken into consideration the role that interlocutors (or interviewers) play in L2 learners' performance and the effect that this has on the scores assigned to individual learners (see, for a historical review, Fulcher, 2003). In fact, there is a growing body of research on testing L2 performance during interaction between learners (peer interaction) as this type of interaction is representative of both classroom and real-world discourse (see Turner, 2012). Ducasse and Brown (2009), for instance, investigated how raters perceived interaction between beginner learners of Spanish. Twelve raters listened to the interactional performance of 17 pairs and a content analysis was conducted on the raters' verbal reports (i.e., think-aloud protocols). In the data, some interaction-specific themes were identified (e.g., non-verbal interpersonal communication, interactive listening, and interactional management), confirming that assigning scores to individual learners is challenging both theoretically and methodologically.

Due to the complex nature of interaction (see McNamara, 1997), such investigation into peer interaction has largely been qualitative and has sought to identify certain interactional patterns that influence raters' perceptions, often drawing on the idea of co-construction of knowledge. That is, L2 performance during interaction can be better understood when it is considered as a joint performance by the interactants (see Együd & Glover, 2001; Jacoby & Ochs, 1995; May, 2011; see also Young, 2011 for the conversion-analytic approach). Despite the in-depth understanding of interactional performance we can achieve within this framework, this approach still suffers from a lack of systematic measurement. One way to arrive at a better understanding of how interaction affects L2 performance and, subsequently, at a systematic way of measuring interactional performance is to experimentally compare performances during individual and interactional tasks. Hence, the current study compares performance in the two conditions using both performance-based (i.e., raters' perceptions) and competence-based (i.e., speech rates) measurements.

2.2. Oral fluency and interaction

The impossibility of isolating "a single unitary concept" (Koponen & Riggenbach, 2000, p. 17) in regards to oral fluency has been agreed upon by many researchers (Chambers, 1997; Fillmore, 2000; Freed, 1995; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Lennon, 1990). In SLA research, studies have found that fluency, measured by differing yet individualized tasks, is related to other competencies such as accuracy. For instance, Hilton (2007) examined the relationship between morphosyntactic errors and oral fluency and found that grammatical knowledge was highly correlated with various temporal measures (e.g., words per minute and rate of hesitation). Having found significant correlations between accuracy scores (error-free clauses) and temporal measures (e.g., speech rate and mean length of runs), Kormos and Dénes (2004) claimed that accuracy could "overrides the effect of temporal factors on listeners" (p. 160). That is, if a learner is accurate, he or she may be perceived as more fluent than another learner whose speech rate is higher but with lower accuracy.

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