The basic interactional competence of language learners

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Abstract

This study has a theoretical and an empirical part. In the theoretical part, we focus on an issue underlying studies of what language learners must learn to interact competently in L2. These studies do not consider what learners already know that we refer to as *basic interactional competence* (BIC), a putative universal that begins developing in pre-linguistic infancy as part of human rationality. BIC is knowledge of the way successive utterances/actions can be substantively interconnected that forms them into an interaction and not a random collection. We regard BIC as the basis on which learners infer and adopt the practices and norms of native speakers in a host culture, as well as interact competently with other learners in L2 as a lingua franca. In the empirical part of this study, we examine naturally occurring interactions between learners of English and native speakers to identify some aspects of learners' participation that rest directly on BIC. We assigned participants a topic they could discuss without asymmetries of knowledge of the topic, or of culture- and institution-specific norms, techniques, practices, and roles. We found that learners took an active part in making their interactions succeed in ways that have gone unnoticed and unheralded. Their responses to questions, self-editing of word choices, and detecting and remedying understanding troubles, are attributable to their having tacitly analyzed the substantive interactions among utterance/actions.
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1. Introduction

The interest that has arisen in the interactional competence of non-native speakers[1] is an outgrowth of the general shift that has taken place in studies of NNS–NS interactions away from an early focus on difference and difficulty to a focus on success. That early focus on difference and difficulty presupposes that language learners are helpless to overcome whatever deficits they have in specific L2 interactions. But this tacit presumption of helplessness overlooks that language learners, no less than anyone else, have agency, and have been active participants in L1 interactions. Crediting NNSs with agency is congruent with Kidwell's (2000) proposal that we use a "success approach" in the study of intercultural communication that has as its aim explicating the resources that enable participants (especially NNSs) to accomplish their communicative tasks. On that basis, we should expect NNSs to actively work to make L2 interactions succeed, drawing on whatever resources they can draw on to make that happen. It is with the expectation of NNS agency, through that lens,

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[1] We are aware of the debate about who a "native speaker" is. However, for this study we will be using the term in its traditional sense without taking a stand in the debate.

that we examined the talk of NNSs in interactions they had with native speakers (NSs) of English, as detailed in the second, empirical part of this report.

NNSs' participation in L2 interactions has garnered considerable attention in recent years. Some of this has involved an interest in L2 (often English) as a lingua franca in interactions between NNSs and other NNSs (House, 2014; Mauranen, 2006, 2009, 2012; Seidlhofer, 2001, 2011; see also Gardner and Wagner, 2004; Swan, 2012). But our interest here is NNSs' interactions with NSs in L2, which has also been of interest in the context of studies of second language acquisition (e.g., Cadierno and Eskildsen, 2015; Hall, 1999; Hall et al., 2011; Hall and Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Kramsch, 1986; Pallotti and Wagner, 2011; Pekarek Doehler and Pochon-Berger, 2015; Walsh, 2012; Young, 2011; Young and Miller, 2004).

The focus in much of the work on NNS–NS interactions associated with the study of second language acquisition is on interactional abilities that NNSs *acquire* to interact in a new language in a new (host) culture with NSs—generally referred to as ''L2 interactional competence.'' However, our focus is on interactional capabilities that NNSs *already have* as they enter into L2 learning, which we refer to as *basic interactional competence* (BIC).[2] BIC comprises knowledge of the principled ways in which utterances/actions can be discursively linked, or fitted to each other, to achieve *inter*action. We consider that the empirical reality of BIC has been demonstrated by Bruner's (1975, 1983) findings that in pre-linguistic infancy and early childhood, children quickly develop a recognition of linkages between their own actions and the (re) actions of others. Through BIC, speakers—both NSs and NNSs—can (tacitly) analyze ways in which successive utterances/actions are linked, whether linkages of prior utterances/actions to each other, of present utterances/actions to prior ones, or present utterances/actions to wanted or unwanted future ones. These linkages are constraining of what is said next, and of the situated meaning of specific utterances/actions based on how they are fitted to what has been said, is now being said, or may yet be said.

We posit that as people interact in their native language and native culture, they rely on this basic knowledge of the way interactional components can be sequentially linked, and also on knowledge of routinized procedures and practices built on that basic knowledge. When learners acquire a new language and interact in L2 in a new culture, they have to learn how to adapt the routinized procedures and practices of their native culture to their counterparts in the host culture. To do this, they must detect, analyze, and adjust to whatever the differences are, and for this they have—and must have—BIC to draw on.

In the theoretical part of our study we contrast BIC that learners already have with the culture-specific knowledge learners acquire to interact effectively in a host culture, which we refer to as *applied interactional competence* (AIC). We do not claim that BIC supplants the various ways in which the interconnectedness of a succession of utterances has been analyzed, but rather that BIC is a foundational competence that underlies those. For example, Grice's (1975) concept of particularized conversational implicatures presupposes the ability of speakers and hearers to tacitly analyze the connections between utterances, but Grice (1975) does not specify the basis for making such analyses. For that, we turn to BIC.

We consider that BIC is also the foundation for the formation of the culture-specific procedures and practices of interaction in one's native culture and those of other cultures one may move into. BIC differs from what Hymes (1974) called ''communicative competence''. Hymes defined communicative competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus overlaying a sociolinguistic perspective on Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence. There have been several attempts to clarify what Hymes' concept includes (e.g. Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Cazden, 2011). But none of them attend to the underlying knowledge of principled ways that utterance/ actions can be linked to form an interaction (BIC), from which come the concrete and observable ways utterances/actions are linked in culture-specific, routinized, procedures and practices.

In the empirical part of our study we report specific instances we found in NNS–NS interactions in which NNS took an active part in making the interaction work that depended on their (tacit) analysis of linkages between utterances/actions, not knowledge of specific procedures and practices, roles, status relations, norms and the like in the host culture. In some instances, NNS answered a question on the basis of an inference based on those linkages of the question's purpose, not what was directly asked (Examples 1–2). In some instances, having detected that a question incorrectly presumed they had certain knowledge or experience, NNS answered in a way that was responsive to the question, based on those linkages, without endorsing the incorrect presumption (Examples 3–4). In some instances, NNS self-edited or checked on a word choice that, based on a tacit analysis of those linkages, was consequential for what could or did come next (Examples 4–7). In other instances, based on a tacit analysis that revealed anomalies in the way specific utterances/ actions were linked, NNS detected an understanding trouble and created remedies (Examples 8–10).

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[2] The acronym BIC should not be confused with the acronym BICS, Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, in Cummins (1979), a construct he introduced to distinguish his primary focus on Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).