

A Review of Research on L2 Interactional Competence

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Abstract

According to the theory of interactional competence, discursive practices are co-constructed by participants, each of whom contributes linguistic and pragmatic resources to the practice. Interactional competence is the ability that people need in daily communication and language learning. This study introduces the basic concepts and theoretical framework of interactional competence, reviews the relevant literature and achievements of the research on interactional competence in second language (L2) testing and teaching at home and abroad, points out the limitations of the current research, and puts forward suggestions for further studies.

Keywords

Interactional Competence; L2 Testing and Teaching; Discursive Practice; Conversation Analysis.

1. Introduction

The theory of interactional competence originated in the 1980s and has gradually attracted the attention of second language acquisition scholars since then. The term of interactional competence was first proposed by Kramsch (1986), who argued that language proficiency is not equal to interactional competence, and there is an essential difference between the two terms. Interactional competence refers to the knowledge and skills that participants employ to achieve successful interaction in discursive practices, and is one of the most important abilities that language users need in daily communication and language learning.

Later, Young (2008) put forward the theoretical framework of interactional competence on the basis of Hall, He & Young (1998) and other studies. The theory holds that language knowledge and ability are embodied in the discursive practices co-constructed by communication participants in a specific context, and emphasizes the situational and interactive nature of language use. In the following three decades, the study of interactional competence has had a profound impact on the field of second language acquisition, resulting in the emergence of a large number of research theories, methodology and conclusions. In recent years, researchers have incorporated interactional competence into L2 testing and teaching, and carried out a series of studies in these two fields.

The research on L2 interactional competence in foreign countries has achieved great development, the analysis framework of interactional competence has gradually taken shape, and the number of empirical studies has steadily increased. In contrast, few studies in China have systematically introduced the theory of interactional competence, and the related research on L2 teaching and testing is also lagging behind. Therefore, this study intends to sort out the research background of L2 interactional competence, introduce the concept and theoretical framework of interactional competence, review relevant studies at home and abroad, and analyze the limitations, so as to promote further development of L2 interactional competence research.

2. Overview of the Theory of L2 Interactional Competence

2.1. Definition of Interactional Competence

The concept of interactional competence evolves from the concept of communicative competence. The difference between the two terms might be somewhat confusing.

In 1966, the concept of communicative competence was first proposed by the American sociologist Dwell Hymes. He believed that communicative competence includes not only the understanding and mastery of the language, but also of the knowledge of when, where and in what way to communicate with whom appropriately. Communicative competence is a complex concept, involving language, rhetoric, society, culture, psychology and other factors. It is a person's ability to use linguistic means (oral or written) and paralinguistic means (body language) to achieve a specific communicative purpose.

Hyme's "communicative competence" can be summarized as a person's use of language knowledge and ability. Canale & Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) extended Hymes' theory of communicative competence and proposed a theoretical framework of "communicative competence" for foreign language learning and testing, which mainly includes four aspects: (1) grammatical competence (2) sociolinguistic competence (3) discourse competence (4) strategic competence. This framework had a great impact on second language acquisition and language testing in the 1980s.

However, in the field of second language acquisition, with the increasing attention paid to the influence of social interaction and context in language use, some scholars pointed out that communicative competence theory tends to overemphasize the learner's internal language competence and regard linguistic competence (including pragmatic competence) as a learner's individual attribute, which is separated from linguistic behavior. Admittedly, communicative competence attaches some importance to the psychological attribute of pragmatic competence, but ignores the social attribute to a certain extent. In defining linguistic competence, more attention should be paid to the influence of social interaction and context.

Therefore, some scholars attempt to study language communication from the perspective of sociology. Kramsch (1986) first raised the issue of interactional competence in second language acquisition, emphasizing that language communication is a dynamic process, which occurs in specific social context and is co-constructed by both sides of communication through cooperation, negotiation and accommodation. Interactional competence is the ability of participants to act as both speakers and listeners in an interactive social context.

The biggest difference between the concept of interactional competence and communicative competence lies in that communicative competence emphasizes individual competence, while interactional competence is shared by all participants and will change with different discursive practices. Interactional competence "is not what a person knows, it is what a person does together with others" (Young, 2011). In a word, interactional competence goes beyond the scope of communicative competence. Communicative competence is an individual attribute and consists of several components that can distinguish people from each other. In contrast, interactional competence is shared by participants and is different in different communication activities. How individuals use their knowledge will depend on the behavior of other participants (Young 2011).

2.2. Theoretical Framework of Interactional Competence

After Kramsh put forward the concept of interactional competence, Young (2008) proposed the "theory of interactional competence" on the basis of the research of Kramsch (1986), Hall (1995, 1999), He & Young (1998) and other scholars. Interactional competence theory is formed on the basis of communicative competence theory and conversation analysis theory combined with socio-cultural theory. This theory explains how L2 learners use and integrate their own

language resources in conversation to achieve the purpose of successful communication. It aims to reflect the characteristics of people's participation in discursive practices in the real context, so as to provide a theoretical basis for the acquisition and development of L2 conversational competence.

In the framework of interactional competence, context includes time, space, institution, society, politics, history and other dimensions. Language communication is a cooperative social activity, and the speaker, the listener and the situational context interact with each other. Successful communication depends not only on the background knowledge shared by both parties and the external context of communication, but also on the internal context that participants strive to cooperate and build. Young (2008) states that interactional competence consists of three general resources, which can be subdivided into seven specific resources. 1) Identity resources, 2) Linguistic resources, 3) Interactional resources: (1) speech act (2) turn taking (3) repair (4) boundaries.

Dings (2014) proposed to add another category on the basis of the above classification of interactional resources, which is called adaptive behavior. Dings argued that adaptive behavior is one of the important characteristics of interaction, which marks the mutual understanding of both sides of communication, the ability to adopt other people's views and the ability to consider from the perspective of others.

Galaczi & Taylor (2018) summarized the previous theoretical and empirical research results of L2 interactional competence from the perspective of interaction skills, and proposed an interactional competence analysis framework. Rooted in the social context, the framework takes into account the context, social culture, pragmatics and other dimensions of speech acts, and tries to analyze the specific skills of the speaker and the listener from five aspects: topic management, turn management, interactive listening, obstacle repair and nonverbal behavior. The skills listed in this framework, however, do not cover all the interaction features, which need to be further verified, enriched and expanded.

3. Research on the Testing of L2 Interactional Competence

As the theory of interactional competence was put forward, it was accepted by more and more scholars and soon became one of the research focuses in the field of language testing. A large number of studies on the testing of L2 interactional competence sprang up. However, the co-construction and dynamic characteristics of interactional competence have brought considerable challenges. L2 speaking testing is a kind of social behavior. Various social and cultural factors will affect the performance of the subjects, and then affect the judgment of the interactional competence of the subjects. In recent years, researchers have focused on the performance of L2 interactional competence in the study of concept construct, task design and rating scales, etc.

First of all, many scholars have discussed how to define the concept of interactional competence from the perspective of testing. Galaczi (2008) used conversation analysis to study candidates' speaking texts, and found that interaction features such as topic organization, listener support and turn taking can effectively distinguish candidates' interactional competence, so she proposed to describe interactional speaking competence from these three dimensions. Galaczi found in her research that there are three main modes of interaction between candidates: cooperative, parallel and asymmetric. At the same time, she also found that the scores of candidates in interactive communication were related to the interaction mode. Most of the subjects with high scores used collaborative interaction, while most of the subjects with low scores used parallel interaction.

In addition to the research on the candidate's interactional competence, many researchers have found the influence of examiner factors on the candidate's second language testing. Ducasse

and Brown (2009) employed the examiner's verbal protocol to study the rating process of examiners, and found that examiners focused on nonverbal communication means, interactive listening, turn taking and topic management when evaluating interactional competence. May (2011) also explored the definition of interactional competence by studying the psychological process of examiners' rating. The research results show that the main interactive characteristics that examiners focus on include the degree of understanding the content of the other party's speech, the ability to respond to the other party's speech, the use of communication strategies, non-verbal means, and the ability of interaction management and cooperation.

Research in this field has also attracted the attention of domestic academic circles. For example, He & Dai (2006) adopted corpus method to analyze the interactive text of China's College English oral test from the perspective of interactive language functions of consent / disagreement, asking opinions / information, challenge, support, repair, persuasion, development, etc. Gan (2010) used conversation analysis and interactive sociolinguistic methods to study the difference between high scorers and low scorers in interactive characteristics. Li Qinghua (2019) and Zhang Lin and Jin Yan (2016) pointed out that pragmatic assessment constructs have been expanded from speech act capabilities based on speech act theory and politeness theory to the interactional competence of language communication, and proposed a preliminary idea of the descriptive framework of interactional speaking competence. In fact, domestic research is basically at the stage of theoretical construction while empirical research is still far from enough.

In short, in recent years, the theory of interactional competence has attracted much attention in the field of language testing, but there are still many problems to be studied urgently. Since interactional competence is embodied in specific communication activities (Young 2000), its development and evaluation performance are affected by various internal and external factors, which do not play an independent role, and their role might not be direct or explicit. So, what factors are included in the construct of the second language interaction assessment? What is the relationship between these factors? How should we design testing tasks? How should we design rating scales? What is the way to verify the validity? These problems need to be explored by scholars in the future research.

4. Research on the Teaching of L2 Interactional Competence

The research on interactional competence in the field of second language teaching is much later than that in the field of second language testing, and there are very few relevant empirical studies. Whether interactional competence can be taught and how to teach it are two main problems that need to be solved by researchers in this field.

Researchers found that the traditional syllabus which is language level oriented tend to regard language learning as a straight-line cumulative process. This kind of teaching mode fails to make language learners develop a comprehensive ability to adapt to new conversation partners, new cultural environments and various new situations. To achieve this comprehensive ability, the key is to put more emphasis on the dynamic process of interaction and the cultivation of interactional competence.

Hall (1999) and Young (2009) suggested that concept teaching method should be used to help learners perceive the real context of second language communication, understand the characteristics of community discursive practice, and acquire systematic knowledge of interactive resources. Young (2019) called for the use of systematic theoretical instruction to carry out the teaching of L2 interactional competence, and put forward suggestions for the specific operation process. Barraja Rohan (2011) tested the effectiveness of using conversation analysis to help students improve their second language interactional competence, and found

that interactional competence teaching based on conversation analysis can improve students' awareness of language conventions and help them actively participate in discursive practices. Matsumoto & Dobs (2017) discovered that teachers and students frequently use indicative or metaphorical gestures in second language classes, affirming the value of gestures as interactive resources in second language classes.

Balman & Sert (2017) argued that learners can develop their interactional speaking competence by collaborating to complete oral tasks with information gap. Van batenburg et al. (2019) also reached a similar conclusion, suggesting that information gap should be taken into account when designing classroom tasks, and explicit interaction strategies should be used in teaching to improve interactional competence, so as to increase learners' confidence.

In domestic research, Yang Mei and Dong Peiyun (2019) pointed out that second language learners can use various interactive resources in the classroom, create opportunities for second language practice and improve their second language interactional competence in conversation. Kou Jinnan (2016) investigated the specific characteristics of group interaction modes in class and analyzed the characteristics of different interaction modes in terms of completion time, dialogue content and initiation mode. Xu Jinfen and Cao Zhongkai (2010) analyzed the quantity and quality of language output in the three pair interaction modes, and found that the fixed pair interaction mode was more conducive to improving language output.

The above related research has promoted the teaching of second language interactional competence, and provided a reliable theoretical exploration for studies on the teachability and specific practice of L2 interactional competence. Nevertheless, much more work needs to be done in this field. Interactional competence is not an ability that students can acquire through books, it must be mastered through long-term discursive practices. How to build a complete system of interactional competence teaching, design specific teaching programs, and guide students to master the skills of interactional competence would require a lot of theoretical and empirical research for a long time, as well as continuous exploration by researchers and teachers in the practice of second language teaching.

5. Conclusion

The theory of interactional competence has developed for more than 30 years, yet the scope of research content is not comprehensive, and the research methods and means are relatively limited. Still, it provides a research direction with broad application prospects and development potential. It is also an inevitable research trend to incorporate interactional competence into the field of second language testing and teaching. It is hoped that in the future, more researchers will pay attention to the research of L2 interactional competence, jointly promote the reform of interactional competence assessment and strengthen interactional competence teaching.

Acknowledgments

The study is part of the research findings of the research projects (ACKYC21091, acszjyyb2021123), sponsored by Anhui University of Finance & Economics.

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