Interactional Competence and SLA: A Systems-Thinking Perspective

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Abstract

The present study theoretically examined the concept of interactional competence. It, in the main, took account of the definition and features of the interactional competence to clarify its relationship with the communicative competence models. In brief, interactional competence involves the ongoing process of face-to-face interaction emerged out of language practices that follow the sociocultural rules of use defined within a given discourse community. More to the point, interactional competence is characterized with respect to interactive practices, discursive practices, interactional resources, and the contingency of language competence that were concisely explored in the paper. What is more, interactional competence was described with respect to the chaos and complexity theory. Another issue worth considering deals with the impact of interactional competence on the field of SLA and L2 classroom interaction, which was also taken into consideration.

Keywords: chaos/complexity theory; communicative competence; interactional competence; SLA

INTRODUCTION

Hymes' (1972) framework for explaining communicative competence accounts for the potential of the language system for grammaticality and the degree of its generalizability to the cultural milieu, the feasibility or the extent to which a given performance is acceptable within both the grammaticality constraints and culture bounds, the appropriateness or relevance of what gets done with respect to the facets of the context of situation, and the real performance together with its implications. As also acknowledged by Young (2011), building upon Hymes' framework, Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) also provided further developed models for representing communicative competence. For example, Bachman's (1990) communicative language ability model apart from knowledge of structures or world knowledge consists of the three components of language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms. Language competence as the first component comprises organizational and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence

includes grammatical competence, namely, knowledge of vocabulary, morphology, syntax, and phonology/graphology. Textual competence consists of competence of cohesion and the rhetorical organization. Pragmatic competence takes account of illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Illocutionary competence encompasses the ideational, manipulative, heuristic, and imaginative functions of language. Sociolinguistic competence embraces sensitivity to dialect or variety, sensitivity to register, sensitivity to naturalness, and the ability of interpreting cultural references and figures of speech. The second component, namely, the strategic competence, from Bachman's perspective, describes the language users' mental capability of executing language competence for communication. The third component of Bachman's model, that is, psychophysiological mechanisms incorporate the neural, bio-cognitive, and physiological processes required for using language as an anatomical occurrence. However, Young (2011) criticized these models due to their reductionist account of communicative competence considering it in terms of an individual language user's competence and thus neglecting the contributions of other participants involved in interactions.

ON DEFINING INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE

Johnson (2004) argued that the concept of interactional competence takes account of the social essence of interaction by going beyond the abstract conceptualization of communication that regards interaction in terms of the process of the combination of different competencies transpiring inside the individual's mind. Interaction is, thus, identified in terms of real-life language practices that take place in sociocultural milieus. Likewise, Erton (2007) asserted that interactional competence accounts for the individuals' knowledge and use of the various interactional resources and rules for communication in different contexts of situations within a discourse community. Erton asserted that interactional competence involves knowledge of grammatical rules and syntactic structures as well as the psycho- and sociolinguistic functions. Thus, interactional competence affords the accuracy of language usage along with the reciprocal conception of speech act sequences in conversational exchanges. This ability identified as functional competence implicates the language users' capacity of making sense of the talker's intended meaning through the assessment of his/her body language; responsiveness to the semiotic signs; different varieties of interaction in the social milieu, namely, welcoming, leave-taking, and the like; the language functions; and the like. In the same vein of argument, Young (2000) acknowledged that interactional competence is identified in terms of four characteristics as it is embodied in performing co-constructed discursive practices via the language users' deployment of resources for interaction and recognizing and comparing the ways through which language practices are configured. Each of the features captured in this definition is clarified subsequently.

Interactive practices

Interactional competence is not on a par with the language competence independent of the context of situation and, instead, emerges out of interactive practices (Hall, 1993; Hall & Brooks, 1995, cited in Hall, 1995). Hall (1995) asserted that interactive practices

consist of strategic and goal-oriented acts of communication that deploy linguistic resources and are culture-bound. Interactive practices are executed via speech act trajectories; the assumptions behind using sequences of speech acts; mechanisms for turn-taking; and the choice of lexis, syntactic structures, and rhetorical devices characteristic of the sequential and topical development.

Co-construction of discursive practices

Interactional competence, as Young (2000) asserted, takes place in the course of language users' joint discursive practices. Communicative competence, however, emphasizes a single participant's knowledge of how to communicate in a social setting. In the same vein, Chalhoub-Deville (2003) argued that the interactional competence considers the language use as an event occurring in the social milieu wherein the ability, language users, and the context of situation are mutually connected, a point that can be put as ability– in language user– in context. Based on this representation, the language user's activated ability works together with the addressed facet aspects of the context of situation to alter the features of the context and to be altered by them. Accordingly, Young (2011) referred to the contingency of the interactional competence as the participants' knowledge and deployment of context facets is allocated to language users and fluctuates with respect to the various interactive practices. Thus, interactional competence is defined not as a single person's knowledge of what to do to interact in a social context but as the language users' shared discourse activities.

Interactional recourses

As discussed by Young (2000), another feature of interactional competence pertains to the language users' utilization of general resources for interaction to jointly construct discourse activities, a feature that is not referred to in communicative competence models. These resources as specified by Young (2008, cited in Young, 2011) include identity resources, linguistic resources, and interactional resources. Identity resources refer to the participation framework that accounts for the status of identities that all language users bring to an interaction. The two linguistic resources for interaction contain register and modes of meaning. Register comprises the characteristics of pronunciation, lexis, and grammar that exemplify a discursive activity. Modes of meaning explain the means of generating interpersonal, experiential, and textual meanings in the course of a discursive practice. Interactional resources encompass speech acts, turn-taking mechanisms, repair strategies, and boundaries that are briefly explained. Speech acts refer to the choice and trajectories of speech acts in a language practice. Turn-taking mechanisms make reference to how language users choose the next participant as well as in what way they recognize when to terminate a conversational turn or to initiate the adjacent one. Repair strategies cover the ways participants react to and compensate for communication breakdowns during discursive practices. Boundaries demarcate the acts of initiating and ending a practice that function to differentiate a given speech from the next stretch of discourse.

Contingency of language competence

According to Young (2000), the analysis of a discursive practice is, first and foremost, founded on the identification of resources brought to the interaction. Also, the patterns of interactional resources are compared with the configurations of resources for other language practices to determine the contingent resources distinctive to that practice as well as the extent to which the patterning of resources for different discourse activities is generalizable. Similarly, Johnson (2004) argued that interactional competence is not equivalent to the global language competence. It is rather contingent on the local context of situation.

A SYSTEMS-THINKING PERSPECTIVE ON INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE

The chaos/complexity theory (C/CT) as a new paradigm for the scientific speculation has already exerted its influence on different fields of study. Levy (2000) debated that complexity theory is concerned with the analysis of systems, which are complex, dynamic, and nonlinear and covers both chaos theory and network theory. According to Levy, there is a distinction between chaos theory and network theory. Chaos theory analyzes systems wherein the deterministic nonlinearity recursively amounts to both ostensible randomness in behavior and certain patterns. Network theory examines the interconnectedness of nodes in networks. Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2000) encapsulated the major properties of the complex nonlinear systems. According to Larsen-Freeman (1997), these systems enjoy dynamicity, complexity, nonlinearity, chaos, unpredictability, sensitivity to initial conditions, openness, self-organization, feedback-sensitivity, adaptiveness, strange attractors, and fractality. Larsen-Freeman (2002) asserted that the C/CT examines the transactions of elements within a system out of which the wholes emerge instead of examining each part individually. The interactions between components that take place at the local level amount to globally emergent patterns. As said by Larsen-Freeman, complex systems that are considered to be open violate the second Law of Thermodynamics in that they take the energy from the environs to self-organize themselves and thus reach the higher complexity levels. Through their self-organizing behavior, entropy is avertable as new echelons of order arise. Moreover, the dynamicity of complex systems entails that they pursue a route in the course of temporal/special junctures known as the strange attractor because albeit the cycle happens again, the paths followed by the systems are by no means exactly identical. In parenthesis, Larsen-Freeman also referred to the fractality of the scale levels that display self-similarity. As said by Larsen-Freeman, complex systems enjoy nonlinearity due to their intrinsic sensitivity to initial conditions as the outcomes of the systems are not proportionate to the causes and thus are predictably unpredictable. Finch (2001) also avowed that complexity signifies the linkage of the elements that act together in the system. This self-organization amounts to the emergence of global constructions, which are not predictable.

Larsen-Freeman (1997) debated that SLA can be considered as a complex system. SLA processes are, first and foremost, dynamic as the L2 learners' interlanguages are in constant evolution over time. Second, SLA processes are complex due to their

interdependence on a variety of elements. Third, U-shaped learning signifies that L2 systems enjoy nonlinearity. Also, the restructuring of L2 learners' interlanguages highlights that SLA processes exhibit self-organizing behaviors and thus can renovate order due to their sensitivity to the feedbacks. Moreover, the distinctiveness of the L2 leaners' interlanguages is due to the constraints of their various L1 strange attractors.

In the same vein, De Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2007) stated that dynamic systems theory (DST) studies complex systems comprising numerous interacting elements with varying freedom degrees. De Bot et al. asserted that complex systems constantly evolve in the course of time. Also, they regarded "complete interconnectedness" as a significant property of a complex system that entails the interconnectivity of elements within the system. Moreover, they debated that each complex system consists of sub-systems that enjoy the preferred "attractor states," which are transitory and not essentially anticipated. The attractor state is equivalent to chaos in certain complex systems. "Replete states" are those circumstances that are evidently not desired. Another characteristic of complex systems mentioned by De Bot at el. is referred to as the "butterfly effect" that brings to mind the nonlinearity of these systems due to their sensitivity to initial conditions (p. 8). According to De Bot et al., the behavior of languages bears resemblance to complex systems and thus DST can be applied to the SLA inquiries to give explanations for various phenomena in this domain such as the intrinsic complexity and nonlinearity of the process of L2 acquisition, individual differences, the continuous change in SLA processes in the course of time, which is the primary property of complex systems, and the like. Likewise, Paiva (2005) confirmed that DST views the L2 as a complex system that comprises mutually associated biological, cognitive, sociopolitical, cultural, and historical elements that guide our thought patterns and actions in the social world and enjoys dynamicity and nonlinearity. The L2 system also comprises interacting subsystems subject to the constant instability, movement, and transformation that influence the web of elements in the system. The edge of chaos is said to be the ideal state of L2 acquisition.

Accordingly, Seedhouse (2010) argued that the L2 interaction represents a form of oral discourse that possesses the features of a complex adaptive system for certain good reasons. In the first place, L2 interaction comprises different varieties; nevertheless, each variety signifies distinctive characteristics local to the context of situation. Also, the language system serves both as the outcome and means of the process of L2 teaching and learning. What is more, L2 language users function as the agents of establishing the interactive practices in the classroom environment. That is to say, the L2 classroom interaction provides an unstable system.

In light of foregoing debates over C/CT and DST, the interactional competence seems to have the characteristics of a complex adaptive system. It is, first and foremost, complex due to its dependence on the existence of several variables including the language users' knowledge and actions, the language system itself, discursive practices, and the context of interaction. Second, these elements continually act together during the establishment of the nonlinear process of communication and thus the system ceaselessly evolves and

changes and enjoys dynamicity. Interactions are nonlinear as the outcomes of communicative acts are not equivalent to the causes. Moreover, the language users' joint participation in interactive practices, the contingency of the immediate context of interaction on the language users' knowledge and performances brought to the social setting, and the situative character of interactive practices emphasize the interconnectivity, unpredictability, and the emergent facet of interactional competence. Furthermore, the participants' utilization of interactional resources, say, turn-taking and repair mechanisms signify that elements comprising interactional competence possess adaptiveness, feedback-sensitivity, and self-organization. More to the point, the routes of communicative acts fluctuate with respect to different interactive practices and thus are constricted by various strange attractors.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE FOR SLA

Lee (2006) referred to dualistic perspectives on interactional competence in the milieu of applied linguistics. One view considers interaction resources as fixed constructs that can be set as goals in L2 education. However, another position foregrounds the context-sensitivity and dynamicity of L2 interaction. Kasper (2006) discussed that the contingency of interactional competence perceives the L2 learners as co-constructors of meaning in discursive practices rather than as incompetent speakers. Thus, it is recommended not to look upon the L2 learners as unskillful communicators, and, instead, to think of them as co-participants. Accordingly, Walsh (2012) considers interactional competence as a tool for the effective establishment of real-life interactions. Successful communication in an L2 involves the capacity of conversing with other participants to collaboratively negotiate for meanings. Therefore, L2 language users must be capable of attending to the local situation, attaining shared understanding, making meaning clarifications, mending communication failures, and the like. That is to say, the possession of fluency and accuracy and the ability of generating correct statements do not suffice for the survival of communicative interfaces. This demands the implementation of great mental capabilities and interactive efforts that are less likely to lend themselves to teaching and learning through L2 classroom activities such as collaborative tasks, oral discussions between group members, and the like.

CONCLUSION

All in all, interactional competence is contingent on other participants' interactional practices and performances. That is to say, it is distributed across all language users' language competence and discursive practices. It does not merely comprise a single person' knowledge of what and how to act to communicate in a social setting. Rather, it takes into consideration the individuals' joint performances in the social world (Young, 2000, 2011). Drawing on the chaos and complexity theory, the present study proposes that interactional competence represents a complex adaptive system that enjoys the predictable unpredictability, collaborative discursive actions, and circularity.

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