Editorial: Interactional competence in the online space: Affordances, challenges, and opportunities for TESOL practitioners

David Wei Dai
Averil Grieve
Sharon Yahalom
Editors

Interactional competence, Conversation Analysis, and the online space

Interactional competence (IC) is a concept gaining growing currency in language learning (Hall et al., 2011), teaching (Wong & Waring, 2020), and assessment (Dai, 2022; Plough et al., 2018; Roever & Dai, 2021). First proposed by Kramsch (1986), IC focuses on developing second language (L2) speakers' abilities to use language for functional purposes, ranging from "survival as a tourist or a student to negotiating treaties" (p. 366). The conceptualization of language competence as an ability for use differentiates IC from traditional understanding of proficiency, which consists of componential, de-contextualized ability indicators such as lexical range, grammatical soundness, and pronunciation. The ethos of IC emphasizes that language teaching needs to focus on cultivating L2 speakers' abilities to use their linguistic resources (e.g., vocabulary and grammar) to achieve meaningful social actions in real-world interactional contexts.

Although the interactional turn in language teaching can be seen as a reflection of the general communicative movement in language education since the 1970s (cf. communicative competence in Hymes, 1972), one unique feature of IC is that it uses Conversation Analysis (CA) as its methodological apparatus to understand how interaction unfolds. Originally developed for sociological research (Sacks et al., 1974), CA locates interaction in audio or video data and approaches it from the interactants'

perspectives. A conventional CA process (ten Have, 2007) to analyze speakers' IC is to first build a collection of speakers' performances. The analysts then transcribe speakers' performance data using a CA system (Hepburn & Bolden, 2017) to observe specific interactional practices such as:

- building one's turn following the previous speakers' turn (Sacks et al., 1974)
- demonstrating empathy using specific prosodic features (Couper-Kuhlen, 2012)
- managing moments of conflict that threaten social harmony and interpersonal relations (Dai, 2021; Tai & Dai, 2022)
- assuming specific social roles (e.g., a student or an employee) and talking in a role-congruent manner (Dai & Davey, 2022; Roever & Dai, 2021)

These interactional practices, made observable and analyzable by CA, are what speakers employ to achieve functional language use. CA therefore allows researchers to empirically investigate how language learners develop the ability to interact, the findings of which can feed into effective pedagogy and assessment that promote learners' communicative competence. All the contributions in this special issue use CA as their analytic method to ground interaction in actual speaker performance data, which makes their findings of IC empirically verifiable.

Apart from addressing a topic that is gaining ascendancy in language education research, this special issue is the first of its kind to position the discussion of IC in the online space. From texting, to voice-messaging and to video-conferencing, computer-mediated communication has proliferated and permeated every form of interpersonal interaction. The COVID-19 global pandemic has further accelerated this trend as social isolation policies have made much of interpersonal interaction only feasible in the online space. This has similarly impacted on language teaching and assessment, with language teachers scurrying to transplant their teaching and testing practice online (Moorhouse et al., 2021; Isbell & Kremmel, 2020). Even though the world is slowly experimenting with how to live with COVID-19, we can expect that online language learning, teaching, and testing practices, already prevalent pre-COVID-19, will continue to exist in different forms now that both students and educators have gained a

renewed appreciation of the affordances of the online space. As online language education becomes increasingly normalized, we are seeing research catching up with practice; a growing number of studies have now looked at how to develop, teach and test language learners' IC in the online space (see Dai, 2021 for an example of a standardized online IC test). This special issue therefore represents a step in furthering this important discussion.

Overview of this issue
This special issue comprises three research articles and three book reviews, each of which exemplifies the ways in which IC can be applied to face-to-face and online learning opportunities for L2 speakers.

Tracing the development of a single learner's chat-based requests over nine months, Taiane Malabarba clearly highlights the validity of applying microanalytic CA analysis to authentic textual data. She analyzes one learner's use of semiotic and interactional resources to make requests, and negotiate deontic stance. The learner's choice of resources changes over time and is reliant on past discourses and development of interpersonal dynamics. Overall, Malabarba highlights the intrinsic learning value of extra-curricular text chat groups for student-teacher interactions, which provide authentic opportunities for meaningful language use and relationship development.

Similar to Malabarba, Ann Tai Choe, Hanh thi Nguyen and Cristiane Vicentinic provide an IC microanalysis of dispreferred actions in interactions between one learner and their educator in a naturally-occurring unstructured online interaction. They examine how the two participants manage and negotiate epistemic and affective stances in online search sequences during a Skype-based interaction. Highlighting the value of unstructured non-task-based interactions for learning, the learners in Malabarba's and Choe et al.'s studies leverage a range of resources to negotiate their positions in relation to their interlocutors and to past, present and future interactions. Malabarba's chat rooms and Choe et al.'s web searches are authentic activities that trigger social actions and foster L2 users' IC in the online space.

In his microanalysis of online specific strategies to gain common ground, Nils Drixler analyzes learners' turn-taking and use of epistemic and multilingual resources in a virtual exchange between German and Israeli English-language student teachers. Similar to Malabarba and Choe et al., Drixler focuses on the use

of English as a lingua franca in an authentic context. However, Drixler is able to include use of multimodal resources in his analysis (e.g. gestures, mimicry, gaze) and move beyond analysis of less complex multimodal resources. Drixler concludes that the strategies and resources used by learners to gain common ground are unique to the virtual conferencing context. For example, learners reinforced and negotiated epistemic claims by resorting to multi-modal (e.g. gaze) and multilingual actions (e.g. code switching).

The special issue concludes with three highly insightful book reviews. In her extensive overview of Roever (2022), Ann Tai Choe concludes the book is a perfect introductory guide for the teaching and assessment of pragmatics and IC, especially in terms of the way it weaves theory with ready-to-use materials for practice. Michael Davey also highly recommends Wong & Waring (2021) for educators seeking understanding of historical and current theoretical concepts of CA and how these can be woven into classroom teaching practices. With only minor reservations, Leila Zohali recommends Salaberry & Burch (2021) for its critical overview of current approaches to the design of interactive speaking assessments and its plethora of ideas for reconceptualizing test design. These include adding a sociolinguistic-interactional perspective and integrating the building blocks of IC such as sequential devices, non-verbal semiotic resources, and social members' categorical knowledge.

Contributions to TESOL

After the flurry of shifting pedagogical practices online at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic – ofttimes with limited resources and experience on the part of both educators and students – the sector is now in a position to take a metaphorical breath and consider how to move forward with pedagogical practices in the online space. While the shift to online learning and teaching was swift, it is undoubtedly here to stay, and IC research is key to understanding which aspects of education work effectively online, including how tasks, activities and interactions could be best modified to facilitate learning and most benefit students.

The three articles presented in this special issue provide insight into how IC can inform and contribute to the field of TESOL. Malabarba's study highlights the importance of

encouraging technologically-based student-teacher interactions, while Choe et al. demonstrate that less structured, non-task-based interactions require a sophisticated use of language and negotiation skills and can contribute significantly to the ways students learn. Additionally, Drixler shows that the virtual conferencing context provides unique opportunities for online interaction, regardless of where students are geographically situated. Through the use of CA, these three studies shed light on the subtleties and intricacies of digital interaction between teachers and students, and between the students themselves, as well as types of formal and informal activities which may contribute to students' engagement and learning experiences.

As TESOL teachers and students become more comfortable with interacting online and using different forms of technology, there are opportunities for continued experimentation and exploration of second language acquisition and IC in the online space. We believe that this special issue, which presents novel ways of examining online communication and interaction through the lens of IC, makes a significant contribution to TESOL educators' understanding of teaching and learning in the online space.

References

Couper-Kuhlen, E. (2012). Exploring affiliation in the reception of conversational complaint stories. In A. Peräkylä & M. L. Sorjonen (Eds.), *Emotion in Interaction* (pp. 113-146). Oxford University Press.

Dai, D. W. (2021). *Design and validation of an L2-Chinese interactional competence test.* [Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Melbourne].

Dai, D. W. (2022). *Assessing interactional competence: Principles, test development and validation through an L2 Chinese IC test* [monograph under contract]. Peter Lang.

Dai, D.W., & Davey, M. (2022). *On the promise of using membership categorization analysis to investigate interactional competence.* [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University.

Hall, J. K., Hellermann, J., & Pekarek Doehler, S. (Eds.). (2011). *L2 interactional competence and development.* Multilingual Matters.

Hepburn, A., & Bolden, G.B. (2017). *Transcribing for social research.* Sage.

Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 269–293). Penguin.

Isbell, D. R., & Kremmel, B. (2020). Test review: Current options in at-home language proficiency tests for making high-stakes decisions. *Language Testing, 37*(4), 600-619. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0265532220943483

Kramsch, C. (1986). From language proficiency to interactional competence. *The Modern Language Journal, 70*, 366–372. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05291.x

Moorhouse, B. L., Li, Y., & Walsh, S. (2021). E-Classroom interactional competencies: Mediating and assisting language learning during synchronous online lessons. *RELC Journal,* 1-15.https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0033688220985274

Plough, I., Banerjee, J., & Iwashita, N. (Eds.) (2018). Special issue on interactional competence [Special issue]. *Language testing, 35*(3).

Roever, C., & Dai, D. W. (2021). Reconceptualizing interactional competence for language testing. In M. R. Salaberry & A. R. Burch (Eds.) *Assessing speaking in context: Expanding the construct and its applications* (pp. 23-49). Multilingual Matters.

Sacks, H., Schegloff, E. A., & Jefferson, G. (1974). A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking for conversation. *Language, 50*(4), 696–735.

Tai, K. W. H., & Dai, D. W. (2022). *Observing teachers' interactional competence in an ESOL classroom: A translanguaging perspective* [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University.

ten Have, P. (2007). *Doing conversation analysis.* Sage.

Wong, J., & Waring, H. (2020). *Conversation analysis and second language pedagogy: A guide for ESL/EFL teachers.* Routledge.

Dr David Wei Dai is Lecturer in the MNHS Student Academic Support Unit at Monash University, where he teaches clinical communication to nursing, midwifery and physiotherapy students. His research program centers on the teaching, learning and testing of interactional competence, drawing on both quantitative (Many-Facet Rasch Measurement and Classical Test Theory) and qualitative (Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis) research methods. David is currently working on a

monograph on assessing interactional competence of interactional competence to be published by Peter Lang.

david.dai@monash.edu

Dr Averil Grieve is Senior Lecturer in the MNHS Student Academic Support Unit at Monash University, where she teaches professional communication to EAL social work students. Averil has taught a range of TESOL subjects and co-founded a bilingual primary school, for which she provides consultation. Her research interests include the teaching and learning of pragmatics in health communication, transcultural teaching practices and the ethical use of online writing assistance tools.

averil.grieve@monash.edu

Dr Sharon Yahalom is Lecturer in the MNHS Student Academic Support Unit at Monash University. She teaches clinical communication to EAL nursing students, assisting in the development of professional interaction, language and clinical communication skills. Sharon has a PhD in Applied Linguistics and over 20 years' experience as a TESOL teacher. Her research interests include health professional students' experiences at placement, language and communication in nursing, English for Specific Purposes and language assessment.

sharon.yahalom@monash.edu