

## **Interactional Competence in Paired vs. Group Oral Tests**

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### **Abstract**

Previously, competence was conceptualized as a static individual construct that could be measured with regard to grammatical, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and discursive dimensions of second language (L2) knowledge. This perspective was criticized with the emergence of constructivist views in second language acquisition (SLA), and interaction was assumed to be coconstructed in specific contexts by all the members of the group, and was referred to as interactional competence. This study aimed at investigating the highlighted features of interactional competence from raters' point of view. The raters were also required to compare and contrast the differences between the performance of paired vs. group interactions. For this purpose, 16 male and female proficient English language and literature students of Shiraz university participated in the study; also, 10 experienced raters were chosen to rate the performances. The participants were given a set of controversial questions, once to argue their viewpoints in four-member groups, and once more in paired interaction. Having videotaped the discussions, the raters were asked to watch the clips and were interviewed to comment their perspective. The detailed analysis of the transcription of interviews revealed at least three aspects of interactional competence, each with some subcategories: management, engagement and attention, and paralinguistic aspects. Moreover, peer-to-peer interactions were filled with turn-taking, other-initiated self-repair, use of pauses and wait times, backchanneling, and facial features such as eye contact. Group performances were prominent with self-initiated self-repair, open-ended clarification requests, and employment of vocal features.

**Keywords:** Interactional Competence, Peer-to-Peer Interaction, Group Interaction, Rater Perspective

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### **1. Introduction**

Previously, the social aspect of language teaching and learning has been the focal point for some researchers in a number of fields such as linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Depending upon the discipline, various aspects of social interaction have been investigated, namely, face-to-face interaction (Goffman, 1967), dealing with face saving and threatening acts (Goffman, 1967), politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987), and conversational turn-taking (Schegloff, 1968). Within the field of linguistics, especially, some prominent scholars, namely, Dell Hymes, Gumperz, and William Labov concentrated on use of language in actual contexts instead of focusing on language as a system. The linguists' center of attention was particularly on language learning and acquisition, competence, and interactional skills. Such being the case, different models of communicative competence emerged and were reviewed within the last few decades.

Communicative competence, as one of the pivotal concepts of language acquisition was primarily proposed by Hymes (1971). Contrary to Chomsky's notion of competence that refers only to knowledge of grammatical structures, communicative competence, to Hymes, encompassed sociolinguistic and contextual knowledge rather than knowledge of syntax alone, highlighting his maxim "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (Hymes, 1972, p. 278). Shortly put, communicative competence includes language knowledge and usage in appropriate communicative situation (i.e., different social situations require different language use). Therefore, one has to know the language itself besides knowing how to use it, as Hymes put "competence is dependent upon both (tacit) knowledge and (ability for) use" (Hymes, 1972, p. 64). He maintained that communicative competence is a matter of following social

norms of a specific speech community and a competent speaker knows the knowledge of language and its well-suited use.

Following Hymes, Canale and Swain (1980) revised the notion of communicative competence by dividing it into three subcomponents: 1) grammatical competence (knowledge of lexis, syntax, morphology, semantics, & phonology); 2) sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of formality, politeness, and sociocultural rules); and 3) strategic competence (strategies for compensating conversational breakdowns). Later, Canale (1983) added another competence to this category, namely, discourse competence, which refers to knowledge of mixing linguistic elements to attain a unified text. This competence, however, was criticized to function on a different level, encompassing the other three competencies. Having considered this discourse competence to be central, Celce-Murcia (2007) introduced a more complicated, yet more integrated model of communicative competence. In this model, discourse competence is central, controlling the arrangement and ordering of words, sentences, and structures to create a unified speech. Sociocultural competence includes pragmatic knowledge of interaction; that is to say, social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness, and cultural factors. Linguistic competence refers to knowledge of grammar, semantics, and morphology; interactional competence includes actional and conversational competence; formulaic competence consists of prefabricated chunks of language; and strategic competence refers to strategies of preserving the flow of interaction.

Another theoretical framework proposed for communicative competence was put forward by Bachman and Palmer (1996). Their model breaks language competence into two subcategories: 1) organizational competence, consisting of grammatical and textual knowledge; and 2) pragmatic competence, including sociocultural and functional facets of language.

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Strategic competence, which has three areas of goal setting, planning, and assessment, is an independent component for itself, defined as "a set of metacognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function for language use, as well as in other cognitive activities" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 70).

McNamara (2001) asserted that all models of communicative ability have three features in common: language knowledge, nonlinguistic factors related to language use, and actual language use. Some scholars (e.g., He & Young, 1998; Wang, 2014; Yu & Li, 2002) introduced a number of criticisms toward the overall notion of communicative competence by pointing out the central attention of communicative competence on verbal language. Thus, they ignored other facets of interaction like body language and gaze, leading models of communicative competence sociologically inadequate, because this discipline concentrated on both verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. Johnson (2004) also argues that in the aforementioned models, context sensitivity and the dynamic nature of context is to some degree neglected. Some disapproval regarding the cognitive nature of these models were also presented, which finally led to emergence of approaching interaction from another perspective.

Because models of communicative competence circle around an individual language user and attempt to elucidate an individual's knowledge of language and its suitable use (Sun, 2014), some scholars have approached communication from a more social point of view, as interaction is constructed jointly by all the members together rather than individually. The concepts of interactional competence (Kramsch, 1986; Young, 2008, 2011) and coconstruction (Jacoby & Ochs, 1985), therefore, have been proposed to claim that interaction is above individual language users. The theory of

interactional competence may be introduced with nuances by some scholars, but they are all in agreement that it is "a theory of the knowledge that participants bring to and realize in interaction and includes an account of how such knowledge is acquired" (Young, 1999, p. 118).

The concept of interactional competence was put forward for the first time by Kramersch (1986), acclaiming that interactional competence means learners' ability to communicate and construct meaning jointly with a focus on what goes on between the interlocuters and how meaning is regulated by them. As McCarthy (2005) asserts, in interactional competence instead of fluency, learners deal with confluency; that is, making the language fluent together through meaning-making and contribution. During interactions, learners are engaged in meaning making, clarification, and negotiating; hence, not only inside EFL classroom, but also in real-life situations, confluency is privileged to fluency. Moreover, Kecskes, Sanders, and Pomerantz (2018) distinguish between interactional competence and basic interactional competence (BIC) which is developed during infancy when the first stages of interaction are embarked upon.

Interactional competence revolves around how meaning is made in an interaction together rather than individually. Kramersch provides the definition of this notion as "the ability to organize one's thoughts and one's speech in human interactions" (Kramersch 1986, p. 367). She maintains that interactional competence is more than proficiency and requires knowledge of culture and social factors as well. According to Galaczi and Taylor (2018), IC also involves cognitive and social factors working together. Young (2000) also believes that while models of communicative competence view context to have a static nature, interactional competence is dynamically context-dependent. Interactional competence from his viewpoint is defined as "a relationship between participants' employment of linguistic and interactional

resources and the contexts in which they are employed" (Young, 2008, p. 100). He points out that interactional competence enjoys six resources, namely, 1) knowledge of rhetorical scripts, 2) knowledge of the particular relevant register, 3) knowledge of turn-taking rules, 4) knowledge of topical organization, 5) knowledge of an appropriate participation in interaction, and 6) knowledge of the means for signaling boundaries (Young, 2000). Moreover, Markee (2008) distinguishes the features of interactional competence as follows:

- 1) formal and rule-based aspects of language (syntax, semantics, & pronunciation);
- 2) semiotic aspects of language (turn-taking, repair, sequence and ordering);
- 3) gaze, body language, and paralinguistic factors.

Interactional competence is also highlighted in language teaching and learning classrooms, which is simply put as classroom interactional competence (henceforth CIC). It is described as "teachers' and learners' ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning" (Walsh, 2011, p. 158), focusing on the fundamental role of interaction in classrooms. CIC deals with how the interaction between teacher and learners for a specific pedagogical goal promote the learning opportunities by creating chances to adjust linguistic and interactional patterns to enhance context-specific interaction (Walsh, 2012).

Given its complexity and multifacet construct, one issue pertaining interactional competence is that for the purpose of its assessment, incorporating scoring criteria is vague (Ducasse, 2009), and as Waring (2018) put it, specifying and standardizing interactional competence is an unraveled issue. Approaches to developing rating scales, as Fulcher (2003) put it, are of two sorts (i.e., intuitive and evidence-based). The intuitive approach is more

frequent, created based on judgements and experiences of the experts (North & Schneider, 1998), but the problem is that it lacks empirical evidence and leads to obscurity of scale descriptions. Evidence-based scoring criteria are derived from observed quantified data gathered from assessments. The data-based scales are created based on analysis of learners' performance or by investigating the raters' perspective on scoring those performances. There are some studies carried out on creating data-based scales (e.g., Brown, Iwashita, & McNamara, 2005; Fulcher, 1996; Norris, 2001; Pollitt & Murray, 1996; Turner & Upshur, 1996). However, few of them were carried out on the analysis of raters' judgments on learners' performance. This study, hence, attempts to study raters' orientations to interactional competence assessment.

### **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

This study tries to speculate how raters assign scores to interactional competence of the learners engaged in an interactive communication in a group vs. paired performance. Also, it attempts to shed light on the criteria that raters have in mind, based on which they score the learners' performances. In other words, what is interactional competence from the raters' point of view, and how it differs in group vs. paired performance.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

To fulfill the stated objectives, a number of research questions were addressed.

1. What features do raters consider in rating interactional competence in paired performance?
2. What features do raters consider in rating interactional competence in group performance?
3. How are the features different or similar in paired vs. group interaction?

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

As mentioned before, the fact that available interactional competence scoring scales are inadequate and vague on one hand, and that a few studies have

investigated data-driven scale development from raters' perspective on the other hand, the present study enjoys significance in that it attempts to analyze raters' orientation toward interactive competence of paired vs. group performance. Moreover, it may be beneficial for classroom teachers to have a clearer picture of how to rate interactional competence, or what criteria to consider while assessing it. The results of this study might also function as evidence in order to develop a more integrated and less obscure scoring scale or rubric to assess interactional competence.

## **2. Literature Review**

A number of researchers have empirically analyzed the learners' interactional competence in language classrooms to reach a deeper and more complete outlook on interactional competence. In most of these studies raters were asked to express their own perspective of interactional competence features.

In one study, Ducasse and Brown (2009) in a university achievement test for Spanish students, asked 12 raters to verbalize their rating process to investigate the criteria they had in mind based on which they judged the learners. To this end, the raters watched 17 videos of paired interactions among learners doing a task. The raters' responses indicated that they considered three features as successful interaction: nonverbal interpersonal communication, interactional management, and interactive listening. The raters included body language, gaze, gestures, eye contact, compensatory strategies, supportive listening, giving verbal support, clarification request, questions, comments, and backchannelling (e.g., uh-huh, mm, yeah, right, okay, and really?) to be part of fulfilled interactional competence. The researchers asserted that meaning is coconstructed if both listener and speaker be successful in in their roles.

In a similar vein, May (2006) explored the main features of an interaction raters pinpoint while rating a discussion task of English for Academic

Purposes course. Two raters and 12 Chinese students of English language with similar proficiency levels participated in fulfillment of two parallel tasks. The performances were videotaped and the raters assigned scores based on a scale as well as producing a verbal report. The results revealed that raters considered many issues missing in the scale such as paraphrasing ideas, managing the flow of interaction, and giving assistance to the interlocuter. The mentioned features were later added to the scoring scale. May (2011) extended her study by identifying salient features of interactional competence in paired test-taker performance. The reports gathered from raters showed that three features were indicative of successful interaction, (i.e., the interlocuters' mutual comprehension), their responses, and appropriate use of strategies. These aspects of interaction were added in details to the scale.

He and Di (2006) created a checklist of language functions to examine interactional competence in an oral assessment in form of group discussion section. The purpose was to investigate whether or not interactional functions were accomplished completely. The interactional competence was defined in terms of eight criteria, such as, giving agreement, clarification request, challenging opinions, supporting ideas, persuading the interlocuter, developing ideas, and negotiating meaning. Forty-eight group discussions were examined based on the criteria and the findings indicated that agreement and challenging opinions were the most frequent features while the six other criteria had fewer occurrence.

Brooks (2009) conducted another study to peruse interactional competence in paired test performance in an academic English language class consisting of 16 participants. The features that emerged from the analysis of peer-to-peer performances included elaboration, finishing the partner's sentence, referring to partner's opinions, and paraphrasing.

The above studies show the significance of assessing interactional competence in the last decade; as shown above, a number of studies have been carried out in this regard, particularly with an approach to raters' perspective. However, whether or not raters' perspective differs in rating group and paired interactional competence has not been addressed before. To fill the gap, this study was an attempt to examine how raters define interactional competence and how they set criteria while scoring the learners' performances in group vs. paired oral tests.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Context of the Study**

The participants were 16 (both male & female) proficient English language and literature students in Shiraz university, chosen as participants based on their availability and willingness to communicate. They were suggested by their professors to be intermediate and above in terms of their speaking ability based on their interactions and performance in class throughout the semesters. All of them had already taken mandatory courses of language laboratory and oral reproduction of stories, which targeted at their oral skills. They engaged once in group and another time in paired ten-minute discussions to be videotaped. Also, ten experienced raters examined the video clips, considering the participants' interactional competence, and will be interviewed later.

#### **3.2 Data Collection and Analysis**

The participants were divided into four groups consisting of four individuals in each. They were given a controversial topic (e.g., marriage or gender issues), and were requested to discuss and argue for or against the topic for about ten minutes while their discussion was being videotaped. Once again, the same participants were paired together so that group members would not encounter each other to discuss a related topic, building up to eight pairs;

their discussion lasted for ten minutes and were permissibly videotaped. In the next step, ten experienced raters watched the video clips and investigate the learners' interaction. To avoid confusion, five raters watched group performances first and then paired discussions, and five other raters watched the videos in a reverse manner. Later on, the raters were interviewed to talk about the criteria they had in mind while assigning scores to learners in terms of their interactional competence. After analyzing the raters' verbalization, the researchers transcribed the interviews and extracted and grouped the features to observe which criteria were highlighted in raters' perspective and how these features differed in paired and group performances.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Interactional competence, as mentioned before, is an amalgamation of linguistic and interactional resources as well as the context of the interaction. To examine the construct of interactional competence, the raters were asked to watch the videoclips and consider their perception of what nonlinguistic aspects of the participants' management of interaction make it accomplished, as it is essential to investigate the criteria by which the interactants are assessed. Also, the raters were required to investigate which features of performance differed in group vs. peer-to-peer interaction. Subsequently, they were interviewed to describe their comments on the performances and the observed differences among them. The transcription and final coding of the extracted features mentioned by the raters revealed a set of criteria which are categorized under three main classes, namely, management, engagement and attention, and paralinguistic aspects. These criteria are discussed in the following paragraphs and some excerpts extracted from the videoclips and raters' interviews are rendered.

#### **4.1 Management**

The first general feature the raters pointed to be observable in participants' performance is the way they attempt to manage the interaction to make the conversation flow. Successful interaction consists partly of how the interlocuters initiate the topic, mind their turns in an acceptable sequence, maintain and extend the conversation, connect the topic with similar subjects, and finally end the flow of conversation effectively. The aspects to be considered under management are turn-taking, repair, and sequencing.

##### **4.1.1 Turn-taking**

Talking in turns indicates that both the listener and the speaker are able to alternate between their utterances, yet conventions of speech rules are taken care of by both parties. The speakers must be able to manage their rights when they are involved in speech exchange. The current speaker may select one specific listener, may select self to continue after a pause or hesitation to add more information or to repair the former utterance or even to introduce a new topic or asking questions, another listener may select the current speaker to continue, or another listener may choose another member of the group to take turn.

The raters mentioned that in paired interaction videoclips, the turn-taking was easier for both parties to manage, as the number of the interlocuters were only two, making it easy for them to grasp where to start and end their turns by employing eye contact, timing, vocal patterns, high-pitched volume, and auditory cues. In group interactions, however, the opening and closing sequences (various strategies that speakers use to initiate and terminate a conversation) were to some extent problematic, as the speakers wanted to add new information or argue against or for one point of view to negotiate their perspectives. Consequently, use of overlapping and interruptions were outstanding in group discussions. Two brief excerpts are presented below to

contrast the turn-taking strategies in paired vs. group interactions. The first one is extracted from a paired conversation.

*Participant 1: from the very early ages we tell our boys not to crime, but that's like a crime to tell kids not to express their feelings, because society expects you to behave in a certain way.*

*Participant 2: That's exactly the words I meant to tell. I've seen a lot of men who were more sensitive than women. It's just a matter of heart not gender. There should be a balance.*

*Participant 1: Yes, exactly. I think it's very cruel to ask our children to be approved and limit themselves just because the society expects them to do so.*

As the raters put forward, the turns are not intruded in paired interactions, but in group discussions there are some instances of invading one's utterance, as presented below:

*Participant 1: I think in our country it is accepted that women should work in the house and men work outside. It's not in a small range, but many people....*

*Participant 2: Actually... It has become a culture, a policy in our country and that's how people expect you to be...*

*Participant 3: Do you think it's gonna change?*

*Participant 2: Hopefully! I think there must be new policies by the government or authorities...*

*Participant 4: We should start from ourselves!*

As indicated in the above excerpt, in some cases, the interlocuters cut each other's speech to add their own comment. Although this conversation was argumentative, turn-taking was trespassed in group discussions.

#### **4.1.2. Repair**

When speakers in a conversation interact with each other, they sometimes may face troubles of speaking, comprehending, and hearing. The speakers, then, should make use of available strategies to compensate for these conversational shortcomings. In other words, speakers should employ repair mechanisms to resolve these troubles. Both the speaker and the hearer are able to sense the need for repair and initiate it; that is to say, repair is either

initiated by 'self' or the speaker or by 'other' or the hearer of the speech, namely, self-initiated and other-initiated repair respectively.

Raters claimed that participants' use of other-initiation mechanisms were dominant in peer-to-peer conversations, particularly open-class initiations such as the listener asking: 'huh?', 'hm?', and 'what?'. These repair strategies might have occurred due to the inattention of the listener to what is going on in the conversation, or by checking on the direction or rereading the question once again. The following excerpt is an example of other-initiated request for repair in a peer-to-peer interaction:

*Participant 1: A boy should be treated in a way that makes him ready for future responsibilities to protect his family. This case is more severe for boys.*

*Participant 2: What? You think they should be treated differently?*

*Participant 1: They must be aware of their gender roles, but it also depends on their age.*

The listener in line (2) asked for repetition, for she might have not understood the speaker. However, asking for repair is not always due to inattention to the speaker, and may be because of the low volume of the speaker's soft voice, making the speech inaudible. Another other-initiated repair mechanism is repetition, which was also deployed in peer-to-peer conversations. The repetition is usually fulfilled through high intonation interrogative voice of the listener. By reproducing the word or phrase the listener assumed he/she has heard, the speaker notices that there is a trouble in his/her production which must be repaired. The source of repetitions may also be problems of reference or impairment in hearing or understanding a lexical item to elicit the blurred information. The raters asserted that such repair mechanisms are more frequent in peer-to-peer dialogues, likely because no other interlocuter is involved to share answers; thus, all the attention of the listener is needed to comprehend the speaker.

Contrary to other-initiated self-repair mechanisms, in group conversations, self-initiated self-repair strategies seemed to be more prominent. This type of repair occurs when the speaker encounters a moment of silence or pause on the side of the interlocutors, noticing that what has been uttered is most probably misunderstood by other members in the group and as a result, repairs the utterance. In other words, the behavior of the partner in delaying to respond reveals that there is a misapprehension which needs to be repaired. The raters believed that the reason why self-initiated repair occurred more often in group interaction is that all the members of the group indicated their confusion at once, letting the speaker know there was something wrong with his/her own speech.

#### **4.1.3 Sequencing**

As commented by the raters, one aspect closely related to turn taking is to consider the sequence of the discussion, the turns, and the management of the conversation. That is to say, participants are supposed to handle the flow of their speech, particularly by managing the course of the topic, trying to stick to the related issues being discussed, avoiding introduction of any intruding subject, and proceed the discussion in an arrangement of sequences. In the videotapes, *"neither in group discussions nor in paired performances, no sign of departure from sequence of turns and topics was discovered"* (rater 3).

#### **4.2 Engagement and Attention**

The second feature commented by the raters is referred to as *engagement and attention*, which deals with the extent to which a listener is actively involved in the conversation flow attentively. The listener is expected to ensure the speaker that he/she is following and understanding what goes on between the interactants. A number of features related to this criterion were investigated

by the raters and will be discussed below, namely: seeking clarification, word-search strategies, and backchanneling.

#### **4.2.1 Seeking clarification**

In any communicative interaction, sometimes the listener might request the speaker to clarify some ambiguous information to make sure that comprehension has been attained and confusions and misunderstandings are resolved. Clarification requests not only provides the speaker with appropriate feedback, but also convinces the speaker that the listener is totally involved in the interaction. The common markers used for clarification request could be as such: *I'm not much certain whether or not I can understand you, the main issue is not clear to me, what did you mean by saying that?* In the following excerpt from a group conversation, two participants ask the speaker to clarify his point further:

*Participant 1: Boys and girls are different, they should be treated differently.*

*Participant 2: Would you please elaborate on that?*

*Participant 1: Ah... in some circumstances... based on their capacities... they are not the same...*

*Participant 3: What do you mean by different capacities?*

*Participant 1: I mean... children have to be treated based on their intelligence, not their gender... their talents might be different, girls may be talented in some areas and boys have some other gifts.*

The raters claimed that since the topic of interaction was argumentative, clarification requests were used in both paired and group conversations; however, due to the multiple number of the participants engaged in group interactions, more misunderstandings may take place, which lead to more open-ended clarification requests. The paired performances, though consisting of closed questions for clarification, are deficient in such features in comparison to group performances.

#### **4.2.2 Word-Search Strategies**

In some cases throughout a conversation, a speaker may show hesitancy in speech which is indicative that he/she is not able to remember or find a lexical item to make the utterance comprehensible for the listener. The speaker may directly ask for the word from the partner by saying "what is it called?" or "what's her name again?" and providing enough information about the search item. Word-search activities, hence, might be self-directed (the speaker tries hard to remember the word) or other-directed (the speaker asks if partner(s) can help them remember the word). If the partner(s) can provide the speaker with the target word, then it could be claimed that mutual understanding is jointly constructed. The raters reported no particular prominent instance of direct word-search in performances of both paired and group interactions.

Another class of word-search markers, as the raters pointed out, are referred to as wait time or pauses that the speakers make whenever they forget a word or by simply murmuring "mmm" or "uh". This pause lets the partner(s) know that the speaker is seeking help. Also, this silent pause gives time to the speaker to think about the missing word and give a suitable response. The number of pauses in paired performances seemed to be more than the group interactions; one rater claimed that this could be attributed to the single partner in paired interaction:

*we can see more pauses in paired dialogues, maybe because there is only one partner for the speaker, and this partner may not remember the word either, but in the case of group performances, at least one of the partners can remind the speaker of the forgotten word*

#### **4.2.3 Backchanneling**

Another feature of engagement and attention criteria is backchanneling, which occurs when the listener assures the speaker that the speech is understood. Usually backchanneling takes place in form of fillers and

vocalized sounds without referential meanings such as 'uhum', 'yes', 'hmmm', or in form of phrasal backchannels including 'really?' and 'wow!' if it is verbal, and giving nods to the speaker if it is non-verbal. By doing so, the partner is confirming the speaker that meaning is negotiated and encouraging him/her to continue the conversation.

According to the examination of the raters, backchanneling activities were more repetitious in peer-to-peer interactions. The reason behind this, as raters asserted, might be that only two interlocuters are engaged in paired interactions, and they inevitably have to pay close attention to each other and give compatible prompts of mutual understanding. In group conversations, on the other hand, at least four partners are involved in the interaction and there is no urgent need for any of them to backchannel or as one of the raters acclaimed, "the amount of attention could be in direct opposite relation to the number of the participants involved in a conversation, the more the participants, the less the attention". In group interactions, thus, backchanneling as an indicator of attention might be slightly less frequent.

#### **4.3 Paralinguistic Features**

The third criteria raters pointed out to be the most obvious interactive trait of the performances is paralinguistic features (to use Young's terminology), and refers to the nonverbal physical aspects of communication participants bring to send unconscious interpersonal messages in an interaction. The raters could distinguish some aspects of this feature in case the sound of the videoclips was mute, as it deals with body language of the candidates. Since paralinguistic features usually put emphasis and add shade on what occurs verbally, they may thoroughly change the meaning of the utterances. These features were identified and interrogated by the raters and were classified into three subcategories, that is, vocal features, facial features, and gesture. The aforementioned classification is discussed in the following section.

### **4.3.1 Vocal features**

One group of features effective on the non-linguistic aspects of a conversation is the vocal characteristics of the speech between the interactants. These vocal features include the volume of the utterance and participants' voice, which might be rising or falling based on the subject matter and topic of discussion, the tone of the speakers may also change in accord with participants' feelings and emotions towards the conversation, and pitch of the speech, which is concerned with highness and lowness of the utterances. The vocal features are indicative that the partner is involved in the conversation and is listening supportively.

As asserted by the raters, the tone, voice, and pitch of speech in group performances seemed to be more fluctuating than the paired interactions. This could be attributed to the quick belligerent argument among the participants and their controversial viewpoints on the issue which makes the conversation more disputatious, leading to sudden alternations of voice and pitch in the group. On the contrary, the paired performances did not follow such a considerable swing of vocal features between interlocuters. It must be noted that due to the argumentative nature of the videoclips, the overall vocal features of the performances were significantly changing; yet the group interactions benefited from more changes in vocalizations.

### **4.3.2 Facial features**

Another set of characteristics ascribed to the paralinguistic facets of conversation and body language described by the raters, is the facial expressions of the partners. These facial features, if used properly, can be as half informative and communicative as the verbal interaction, as the prominence of these traits is emphasized by one of the raters:

*Faces are significant means of communicating positive and negative feelings, thoughts, and feedbacks. They provide non-verbal information on how our partner is feeling at the moment; so, counting*

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*them as the most important construct of interactional competence, I think, wouldn't be surprising. If one is capable of analyzing them, he comes to know if his partner is surprised, angry, astonished, confused, consent, or displeased with what you're saying.*

Alongside the feelings and emotions sent by face, eye contact can serve as another feature of body language, the presence of which demonstrates that the listener is attentively engaged in the conversation and is paying attention to the speaker. Eye contact is direct visual gaze in the eyes of the partner, with the purpose of intent concentration on the interaction. While the raters approximately agreed on the same amount and type of emotions and feelings of faces in both group and paired interactions, some raters believed that participants tended to gaze at each other more often in peer-to-peer performances. One reason behind this difference could be that *"in paired discussions there is only one listener for the speaker to look at, but in group conversations, three partners are listening to the same speaker, and they might look at the speaker once in a while"*.

It is worth mentioning that gaze and eye contact, as asserted by one of the raters, is to some extent a matter of cultural and individual preferences. In these videoclips, *"all the participants were chosen from the same cultural background, yet individual behavior of at least one or two participants in not gazing directly at their partners can be thought of as a negative feedback."*

#### **4.3.3 Gesture**

The last trait related to paralinguistic features observed in the performances and reported by the raters is the body gestures of the participants, consisting of bodily postures, movements, motions, positions, and head and hand movements. Such gestures help build an authentic and cooperative communication and enhances communicative functions and may have direct influence on the partners' comprehension.

Raters mentioned that appropriate and authentic use of gestures could be observed in both group and peer-to-peer performances. One of the raters also commented that *"hand movement shows the speaker is confident and in control of the interaction, but too much use of hand movement gives me the feeling that the speaker can't express what he means and is using body language instead of the forgotten lexical item."* Emphasizing the beneficial role of gestures in comprehension, another rater pointed out that *"postures are useful if both parties employ them in their communication, that is, in case either of the listener or speaker in paired interactions avoids using body language, there is a negative effect on the other person in making a meaningful negotiation"*. Similar to the other aspects of paralinguistic features of interactional competence, gestures are highly derived from sociocultural backgrounds of the interactants and might differ from one specific community of speakers to another.

In this investigation into the main aspects of interactional competence and the differences between paired and group interaction from raters' perspective, there seems to be compelling evidence for the discrepancy between features of interaction in group and paired performances, namely management, engagement and attention, and paralinguistic aspects. In other words, interaction is coconstructed by all the members involved in the course of discussion and all its characteristics are created collectively in groups and mutually in pairs, as the members bring their individual knowledge of participation to the progression of interaction. Increasing the population of the interactants makes the interaction more complex and demanding, and as a result requires a more exhaustive acquaintance with features of interaction to make it more effective.

## 5. Conclusions

The theoretical groundings of SLA assume competence as an individual cognitive construct, mainly measured with regard to the grammatical, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and discursive aspects of the learner. Contrary to this cognitive static view of competence, the dynamic sociocultural perspective on the concept of competence asserts that language proficiency must take into accounts the interactional aspects of the language. Understanding interactional competence brings about a more embracing viewpoint of competence, for it underlines the alliance in making meaning in a specific context of interaction.

Given the significance of interactional competence in L2 development, this study attempted to shed light on the main dimensions of this construct from the raters' perspective and to investigate whether or not raters identified any differences in terms of the participants' performances in paired vs. group interaction. The raters distinguished three general features in participants' interactions: management, engagement and attention, and paralinguistic aspects, each with their subcategories. A number of differences in peer-to-peer vs. group interaction were also observed. The raters reported that as the number of the interactants grows from paired to group discussion, the nature of the interaction changes to a more complicated challenging level.

The paired interactions, raters put forward, seemed to be more prominent in terms of the participants' turn-taking, other-initiated self-repair, use of pauses and wait times, backchanneling, and facial features such as eye contact. Group performances were identified to be abundant with self-initiated self-repair, open-ended clarification requests, and employment of vocal features as in pitch, tone, and sound. Additionally, raters believed that both paired and group interactions were approximately equal in terms of their sequencing, word-search strategies, and gestures.

It must be mentioned that interactional competence is not an exclusive individual static construct to be measured easily, but is a dynamic local, context-dependent concept that members of an interactional course co-construct together, which is not independent of the course of practice in which it is taking place, namely, it is specific to a particular context and situation and introducing any changes in the context results in shift in this competence. How participants deploy the management, engagement and attention, and paralinguistic aspects in their interaction defines this competence.

The described characteristics of interactional competence calls for L2 learners awareness-raising of context and language use through reflective practice of interactional competence. To this aim, instructors are recommended to allocate considerable amount of their time practicing interaction, for instance, they can enhance partners' participation in the interaction, instructing learners how to deal with repair and pause, how to take turns and manage the sequence and topic, how to send paralinguistic communicative signs to facilitate meaning making, and similar activities for learners' professional development.

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