Towards Respecification of Communicative Competence: Condition of L2 Instruction or its Objective?

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The concept of *communicative competence* is one of the most influential theoretical developments in language education as it helped redefine the objectives of L2 instruction and the target language proficiency. While acknowledging these contributions, this paper asks if the conceptual formulation of *communicative competence* has other relevancies for our understanding of the realities of language use in L2 instructional settings. Classroom interaction itself is an occasion of language use that relies on the competence of the parties to the interaction; the competence that is already in the room is then a constitutive feature of the work-practices of teaching and learning. Informed by Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis, this paper proposes that communicative competence may be as much the condition of L2 instruction, one that makes L2 instruction possible in the first place, as its target outcome. Brief analyses of transcripts from ESL classrooms are offered to demonstrate how the communicative competence found in L2 classrooms is a contingent resource for language teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Hymes’ formulation (1971) of *communicative competence* has been one of the most influential theoretical developments in natural language studies and in applied linguistics (Ellis 1994; Firth and Wagner 1997; Stern 1983). The language education literature has seen an array of proposals to formalize communicative competence into theoretical constructs that can offer common frames of references for establishing L2 (Second Language) instructional objectives and measuring the language proficiency of nonnative students (e.g. Bachman 1990; Canale and Swain 1980; Celce-Murcia et al. 1995; Cummins 1983; Harley et al. 1990; Widdowson 1978).

While recognizing continued efforts to generate more refined theoretical models, this paper asks if the formulation of *communicative competence* has other relevancies for the study of language education. Theoretical models of communicative competence may help to formulate target objectives for language teaching and learning and thus help to determine what L2 instruction needs to do to achieve them. Yet, we have rarely considered that L2 classroom interaction itself relies on competent language use for its accomplishment; the competence that is already in the room is a constitutive feature of the work-practices of teaching and learning.
This question traces back to Hymes’ call (1971) for language studies that take the organization of living speech as a viable object of study and thus, recognizes the language classroom as a natural social setting in which members carry out various interactional tasks through competent language use. If so, what we need is a more closely considered account of language use in L2 classrooms and examine how that figures into the realities—and resources—of what goes on in the practical course of L2 instruction. This paper begins by questioning what language behavior could count as evidence of competence and what the parties to the interaction accomplish with it. L2 classroom interaction is then not just an instrument to accomplish communicative competence as an instructional objective, but is also a practical occasion that exhibits competent language use.

This alternative undertaking of competence examines the interactional detail in an L2 classroom in order to describe how the actual interactional contexts and contingencies are managed by and made intelligible to the teacher and students as practical matters of their competent hearing and productions. Brief analyses of transcripts from undergraduate ESL (English as a second language) classrooms are offered to demonstrate how communicative competence sustains the very thing that goes on there, namely, the work of teaching and learning.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE ACTUAL CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE USE

Communicative competence for L2 instruction

This alternative interest in communicative competence in L2 instruction begins with the question that prompted Chomsky and later Hymes, ‘What is so competent and remarkable about language behavior?’ While Chomsky (1965) found competence in the generative possibilities of language systems, Hymes (1974) expanded the scope of competence to include knowledge of social and cultural norms and rules of speaking that underlie language use and an individual’s ability to realize it in actual speech. Competent speakers are capable of producing adequate ways of speaking that each situation demands and of making use of the rules for their own ends (Hymes 1973, cf. Widdowson 1983). As a rejoinder to Chomsky’s cognitive essentialism, Hymes reinstated the social realities of communications in language studies that Chomsky had suppressed for analytic reliability (Taylor 1988).\(^1\)

Hymes’ call to take interest in the sociability of language has been a catalyst for the field of language education as it expanded the scope and epistemic content of target competence that concerns L2 curriculum. Furthermore, it offered a much needed theoretical rationale for L2 research, which was leaning toward a more functional approach (Richards and Rogers 1986). This resulted in the development of various theoretical constructs for L2 instruction (e.g. Canale and Swain 1980; Celce-Murcia, et al. 1995;
Munby 1978; Savignon 1983, 1997) and language assessment (e.g. Bachman 1990; Canale 1983; Canale and Swain 1980).

Behind this development was a common disciplinary interest, namely, to generate broadly acceptable frames of reference that identify the essential components of target competence. The adequacy of the given theories is then to be assessed by the degree to which they offer systematic ways of characterizing language phenomena in terms that can effectively identify and organize the objects and objectives of L2 instruction. This would allow language professionals to design their instructional programs and evaluate the language proficiency of their L2 students from within a common or unified perspective. This point is put forth in the seminal paper by Canale and Swain (1980).

These (theoretical) principles serve as a set of guidelines in terms of which communicative approaches to second language teaching methodologies and assessment instruments may be organized and developed. Such a theoretical analysis is crucial if we are to establish a clear statement of the content and boundaries of communicative competence—one that will lead to more useful and effective second language teaching and allow more valid and reliable measurement of second language communication skills (Canale and Swain 1980: 1).

This has been an enormous theoretical undertaking that has shaped the direction of L2 instruction significantly. However, it also entails a precarious task, namely, representing in a few abstract constructs the complex realities of language use across an unforeseeable range of variation and situational contingency. The success of this enterprise depends largely on the capacity of the theories to abstract the realities of language use into stable and recognizable constructs.

Although this practice of abstracting is at the heart of any disciplinary undertaking of formal analysis (Cazden 1996), it is still an open question as to whether and how these analytic undertakings have been successful (see Chalhoub-Deville 1997; Davis 1989; Fulcher 1998; Harley et al. 1990; Hoekje and Linnell 1994; McNamara 1996, 1997; Schachter 1990; Skehan 1995; Spolsky 1989). Nonetheless, there is a disciplinary consensus that communicative competence points to an underlying cognitive knowledge system, and therefore, specifying distinctive properties of the system is an important goal of language acquisition research. Doughty and Long illustrate the case in point:

The focus is firmly on identifying the nature and sources of the underlying L2 knowledge system, and on explaining developmental success and failure. Performance data are inevitably the researchers’ mainstay, but understanding underlying competence, not the external verbal behavior that depends on that competence, is the ultimate goal. Researchers…recognize
that language learning, like any other learning, is ultimately a matter of change in an individual’s internal mental state. As such, research on SLA (Second Language Acquisition) is increasingly viewed as a branch of cognitive science (Doughty and Long 2003: 4).

Hence, there remains a classic distinction between competence and performance in which actual language use is regarded as a surface manifestation of much larger and stable cognitive learning mechanisms.

However, the centrality of cognition in prior research has been challenged recently by several researchers (e.g. Block 1996; Lantolf 1996; van Lier 1994). This controversy was brought out acutely in the exchange that was featured in the special issue of Modern Language Journal that carried Firth and Wagner’s (1997) critique of the SLA research. This debate furnished us with a rare occasion to reflect on the nature of the enterprise of L2 studies by tapping into the epistemological foundations that underlie it.

**Interaction and interactional competence**

One issue that figures centrally in this debate is the role of interaction and what it shows about competence. Firth and Wagner (1997) argued for the importance of contextual and interactional dimensions of language use and the need to treat them analytically on their own terms. To this charge, there was a firm stance on the generality and stability of cognitive organization as a primary objective of L2 research (see Gass 1997: 83, 1998; Kasper 1997; Long 1997); competence displayed in social interaction is considered to represent the cognitive outcome of learning. That is to say, the contextual and interactional dimensions of language use are recognized only insofar as they contribute to building global language acquisition systems (see Liddicoat 1997). Not all that can be found in interaction counts because the aim of acquisition research is to distill a language structure that could be mapped on an underlying knowledge system. The formulation by Gass is illustrative:

> The goal of my work has never been to understand language use per se, but rather to understand what types of interaction might bring about what types of changes in linguistic knowledge… the emphasis in input and interaction studies is on the language used and not on the act of communication. (Gass 1998: 84)

In this regard, for both sides of the debate, what can be seen in interaction and how to characterize it is a central issue for understanding competence.

There have been several analytic programs in language studies that center on interaction. Hymes’ own *ethnography of speaking* is one such undertaking that aims at ‘discovering and formulating rules for appropriate language use’ (Saville-Troike 1996: 353) in specific contexts that are culturally defined
and socially determined. This focus is also echoed in the undertaking of interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 2001) that provides ‘a framework within which to analyze social context and to incorporate participants’ own understanding of context into the inferencing of meaning’ (Schiffrin 1996: 316).3

These analytic programs tend to find competence in the social/cultural systems that underlie communicative conventions and in the speakers’ abilities to make use of them in interactional contexts. A great deal of research has ensued by examining how social and cultural contexts become embedded in language use and how they interact with language teaching and learning (e.g. Allen 1992; Brooks 1992; Bryant 2001; Cheng and Warren 1999; Foster-Cohen 1990; Riggenbach 1991; Sato and Kleinsasser 1999; Shehadeh 1999; Tyler 1995; Wilkins 1982). These analytic programs offered a completely different epistemic stance toward interaction from the prior emphasis on language cognition as they attempted to substantiate what interaction reveals, for example, how actual interaction displays different social and cultural conventions among the participants and how those differences can render particular forms of language use relevant or problematic.

Accordingly, the term ‘interactional competence’ has been used increasingly in applied linguistics as several L2 researchers find it important to examine what can be seen in actual interaction (e.g. Hall 1995a; Kramsch 1986; Young 2000). For example, interactional details are important in socio-cultural theories because ‘the language that we learn to use in these practices comes to us packaged with particular histories, already dialogized, spoken about, and evaluated and we encounter it already “used”’ (Hall 1995b: 218). Interaction brings into view how individual competence is connected to, and partially constructed by both those with whom she is interacting and the larger sociohistorical forces (Hall 1995b; Vygotsky 1978). It is then through the regularities of communicative practices that L2 learners gain access to conventionalized means and activities; in a way this becomes another dimension of target competence.

The analytic focus on interactional competence in applied linguistics carries on its back a certain degree of tension between two conflicting interests: on the one hand, there is a disciplinary interest to formulate interaction as stable and recognizable constructs that can be transformed into target objectives for language teaching while, on the other hand, analysts have to preserve in some way the detail of interactional organizations that are complete with contingency and variation. This tension can be found in the papers by He and Young (1998) and Young (2000) that attempted to define speaking abilities in a way to represent normal conversation in the target language authentically. In their account, interactional competence is co-constructed by all participants via discursive practices that are specific to practice because ‘individuals do not acquire a general, practice-independent competence; rather they acquire a practice-specific interactional competence.
by participating with more experienced others in specific interactive practices’ (He and Young 1998: 7).

While recognizing the specificity of interactional details within each situational context, there is still the need for the common categories through which an analytic program can ‘make principled comparisons between one context of interaction and another’ (Young 2000: 2). Accordingly, Young (2000) offers five regular and formal interactional resources that participants bring to the interaction as a basis for comparative analysis.4

This is, however, a precarious task; it points to the discursive practice of interaction that is locally contingent and situationally specific while at the same time, it attempts to create stable and unifying categories with which to compare language practices across contexts and even to document change. This undertaking extends the scope of acquisition research into the detailed interactional realm of language use, meanwhile maintaining what are essentially ‘abstracting’ procedures with formal criteria; in a way, it continues the program of specifying ‘competence’ as the target objective for both L2 analysts and classroom professionals. Recognizing this dualism, Kasper and Rose (2002) proposed that interactional competence could be treated both as a curricular objective and also as an interactional process that enables L2 learning:

They (L2 learners) perform their current interactional competence in collaboration with peers or participation in IRF-structured classroom discourse and at the same time develop their pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and interactional ability. In the notion of interactional competence, goals and processes of L2 learning are dialectically related (Kasper and Rose 2002: 57–8).

The tension is thus clarified as the dialectic of goals and process. Yet the question remains: what does this ‘process’ look like in actual language use in L2 classroom interaction and how do we understand it analytically in relation to the activities of the members who carry it out?

**Analytic resources of conversation analysis**

A central resource for addressing this question may be found in the literature of conversation analysis (CA). Conversation analysts are concerned with the competences that underlie ordinary social activities and interactional routines. They focus on describing a common set of methods and procedures that ordinary speakers use when they engage in intelligible conversational interaction (Heritage 1984a). The emphasis on the procedural aspects means that CA researchers consider language interaction ‘an achievement out of structured sets of alternative courses or directions which the talk and the interaction can take’ (Schegloff 1986: 114). CA’s analytic task is to explicate how language interaction is posed as a problem to members and how they (members of interaction) resolve it by constructing their talk methodically
in the moment-by-moment contingencies of interaction (Schegloff 1991). Particularly notable is their finding that interaction exhibits identifiable, stable, and thus recurrent structural regularities such as turn-taking, repair, preference, and IRE structure (Mehan 1979; Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff et al. 1977; Schegloff et al. 2002). Ordinary speakers bring their knowledge of these organizations as it influences their conduct and interpretation of the conducts of others (Heritage 1984a).

Over the years, CA’s detailed findings about the sequential production of talk-in-interaction have been appreciated and set to work across various settings of social studies. As Wagner and Gardner noted, one of the real strengths of CA that makes it attractive is that it is ‘based on the regularity of behavior as documented in the collection of cases’ (Wagner and Gardner 2004: 7), which makes CA findings robust and cumulative.5

In the Modern Language Journal debate, Kasper expressed optimism that CA’s analytic program may enable us to ‘reconstruct links between L2 discourse and the acquisition of different aspects of communicative competence’ (Kasper 1997: 311). Since then, there have been some recognizable efforts to examine SLA using CA’s methodological resource. Broadly identified as CA for SLA (Markee 2000), these researchers endeavored to give analytic accounts of the relation between pedagogy and interaction by explicating how learning behaviors could be understood as ‘a conversational process’ (Markee and Kasper 2004: 496; Seedhouse 2004). A recent volume of Modern Language Journal published several exemplary studies to that end (He 2004; Kasper 2004; Markee and Kasper 2004; Mondada and Doehler 2004; Mori 2004; Young and Miller 2004). Mondada and Doehler (2004) identified the contribution of interaction to learning by examining how grammar exercises in second language classrooms in Switzerland are being accomplished in and through the interaction. Kasper (2004) showed how the definition of character of the task by a native and nonnative speaker, whether it is conversation among friends or meta-lingual focus for learning, is procedurally consequential in their deployment of repairs and topic initiation of talk. In their examination of one-on-one interactions between an adult ESL learner and his writing tutor over a period of time, Young and Miller’s research (2004) identified change in the ESL learner’s ability to engage in pedagogical interaction. In his book on conversation analysis, Markee (2000) explored the possibility that CA’s regularities would ‘enable SLA researchers interested in understanding the effects of conversational repairs on language learning to investigate whether the moment-by-moment sequential organization of such talk has any direct and observable acquisitional consequences’ (Markee 2000: 42).

More recent reactions to the growing number of CA for SLA studies in L2 literature are still mixed. One of the criticisms is that CA remains descriptive in delineating learners’ competence without manifesting explanatory adequacy (see Ellis 1994: 38, 429–430; Gregg 1993; Long 1993 for earlier
formulation of explanatory adequacy). Several critics in the *Modern Language Journal* (2004) collection argued that CA oriented studies fail to go beyond descriptive analysis in order to tackle the issue of learning and acquisition (Gass 2004; Hall 2004; Larsen-Freeman 2004). Their critiques seem to acknowledge the universal and generative possibilities of structural regularities in CA’s findings and therefore, they urge CA researchers to take up and solve the puzzle of acquisition. That is to say, there seems to be confidence that CA’s structural regularities offer an important resource in going beyond mere descriptive analyses of what happens in the classroom in order to examine what kinds of change are possible and how.

**Communicative competence in L2 instruction**

The recognition of CA’s structural resources has energized various language researchers to examine acquisition issue (e.g. Hall 1998; Young and Miller 2004). It is not entirely clear, however, to what directions CA for SLA will take in coming years. As for my interest in an alternative undertaking of communicative competence, I want to stay a little longer with what CA’s sequential analysis can offer.

The sequential analysis of talk-in-interaction can show us how the parties undertake their own discourse and assemble courses of action that we commonly speak of as teaching and learning. While the promise of explanatory adequacy implicates going beyond what the interactional details reveal, the sequential analysis treats the descriptive analysis as a production account. That is to say, interactional details are examined because they show the competent and orderly production of the discourse as the members produce and experience it. Interactional details exhibit structural regularities but they also pull into view how members accomplish social action and activities by managing and acting on those organizational regularities.

The characterization that interaction is itself a competent production contrasts sharply with the prior research that treats communicative competence as a criterion reference to determine the qualities of classroom interaction. The proposed criteria are used to reconstruct language use in the classroom and therefore, interactional details recede into the background in deference to the theories of target competence. Communicative competence then becomes an analytic resource for L2 research, rather than an analytic topic that shows how language use organizes the interactional realities of L2 instruction or how the parties to L2 instruction make their way through their interaction (see Lynch 1993: 147–52; Zimmerman and Pollner 1970 for the distinction of topic and resource in the study of practical actions).

This leads us to the useful distinction between communicative competence as an outcome of L2 instruction and communicative competence as a condition of L2 instruction. If we follow Hymes’ initial call for the study of actual
language use, we recognize L2 instruction as an actual occasion of language use (Cazden 1988; Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz 1982; Erickson 1986; Heap 1982; Mehan 1980). Accordingly, we treat language use as an analytic topic and investigate what may be already competent about it before subjecting it to pre-formulated criteria of competence or incompetence. The idea is to find a collection of competency’s evidences in the practical interactional details of L2 instruction as the students and their teachers experience them; this can be accomplished by describing the interactional choices made by the parties and analyzing what consequences their choices have for how the instruction takes the shape that it does.

One of the primary tasks in this regard is to preserve and retrieve the ways in which the parties understand what goes on across the emergence of their contingent interactions. Prior literature has tended to treat understanding as a matter of the propositional contents of the speakers’ intentions by invoking inferences based on ‘mutually shared background information’ (Searle 1975: 60–1). Analysts make out the substantive contents by referring to speakers’ intentions, social and situational contexts and the relevant communicative conventions. They then determine whether and how the contents are recognized or problematized by the parties to the talk as a case of competence or incompetence.

The alternative rendering of communicative competence, in contrast, considers understanding to be a local-interactional matter (Garfinkel 1967; Macbeth 2003; Schegloff 1988). Interaction itself brings out a contingent task of common understanding: in the projectable course of interaction, the parties attend to what has been said, what it entails, what it calls for next, and figure out when and how to say it. Meaning making is a members’ task, first, and their work is made available to each other and to us in the production of appropriate next turns on time (Moerman and Sacks 1971/1988). Understanding in this regard is a procedural operation (Garfinkel 1967; Schegloff 1992) rather than the matching of corresponding sets of shared content knowledge.

This does not mean that we disregard the substantive contents of language interaction. Rather, we insist on finding those contents in the ways the members locate, characterize, and act on them in their talk-in-interaction. CA’s analytic strength is in helping us access and describe the ways in which competence is made available and used in interaction. Mehan’s comment is illustrative:

Interactional competence is not purely a cognitive or subjectivistic consideration. It is not to be confused with underlying abilities. The conception of competence being developed here is interactional in the sense that it is a competence that is available in the interaction (Mehan 1979: 129).

Note in the following exchange how this difference becomes visible in the analysis of its sequential production. This brief exchange was used to
illustrate the role of a native speaker’s feedback on nonnative speech (Day et al. 1984: 25).

NNS: How do you do on- o weekends? Usually, I mean usually.
NS: What do I do on the weekends?
NNS: Yeah.

The native speaker’s comment ‘What do I do on the weekends?’ is a part of what is called negative input (Schachter 1982), informing the nonnative speaker of what was problematic in his/her talk and supplying corrective feedback.

However, if we consider this exchange purely to be a matter of linguistic error and correction, we would miss and thus take for granted the competent practices of language use that make this exchange intelligible in the first place. Note, first, that the nonnative speech contains repair initiations especially in the second utterance ‘Usually, I mean usually.’ This repair indicates that this nonnative speaker is competent enough to see how his/her earlier question may be problematic and therefore repairs it to tell the native speaker how to hear the question: s/he is interested in knowing what the native speaker does on weekends in general, not on one particular weekend.

The native speaker’s subsequent response then becomes the second repair initiation that is oriented to the task of common understanding: it recognizes what the nonnative speaker was doing and thus asks ‘Is this what you mean?’ The native speaker’s question can be considered a language correction and yet, identifying it only as a ‘correction’ does not adequately recognize the interpretive works embedded in the exchange. That is to say, this excerpt shows each member’s orientation to the intelligibility of their talk and its contingent accomplishment as a course of action. We may not know if this nonnative speaker finally learned how to ask a question about what people do on the weekends. However, the issue of learning the correct ways of speaking is preceded by the competent language use to make his/her own talk intelligible.

The focus on structural and functional regularities of given language production might be important in identifying language errors and generating instructional remedies to address target competence. A close analysis of sequential organizations shows, however, that it is the members’ interactive production of their discourse that makes the interactional sequence what it is, even when there appear to be communicative problems and incorrect language use.

L2 classroom interaction is built on similar types of competent language use and it is in this sense that we see communicative competence as the condition to L2 instruction. This competence is to be found in the members’ operational methods by which they construct the orderly, evident, and practical understandings of classroom interaction. CA’s resources are informative, not just because they bring out recognizable regularities, but also because they pull into view the members’ reflexive undertaking of
their discourse; this essentially constitutes their work-practices of classroom interactions. That is to say, our understanding of L2 classroom interaction, its pedagogy and accomplishment, and even problems, relies on the participants’ undertaking, their activities, and therefore, their communicative competence that carries them.

**EVIDENCE OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN L2 INSTRUCTION**

The present section offers a sequential analysis of two excerpts that are lifted from a data corpus that includes three ESL undergraduate composition courses and one speaking class across 46 class sessions that were audio/video taped. These excerpts are selected because they are particularly telling cases (Mitchell 1984) in demonstrating the communicative competence embedded in the details of classroom interaction.

The students in these classes are either immigrant or international students who are learning English to pursue their academic degrees at North American universities. The speaking class is part of an ESL program that offers comprehensive and intensive language courses in the area of speaking, writing, reading, listening, grammar, and pronunciation. The students in these classes are largely from Arabic or East-Asian countries. The composition program has three levels; two composition classes in the data corpus are from an intermediate level and the third one is from an advanced level. The students are generally active in both teacher-led discussions and in other small group activities. The teachers in these data sets are female native speakers of English who have taught nonnative students for several years in each program.

The collected materials were transcribed following the convention developed in conversation analysis. Transcriptions provide a practical means of describing actual social events in the details of their interactional production (Drew and Heritage 1992; Jefferson 1985; Sacks 1984). This does not mean, however, that the transcripts provide unmediated access to interactional activities. Rather, they serve as detailed reminders of how the parties to the interaction competently locate, analyze, and coordinate activities in the course of interaction (Atkinson and Delamont 1990; Lynch 2002). In this sense, I take transcripts as useful records of the participants’ sequential production of their own discourse.

**The communicative competence of repair**

In the first excerpt, the teacher and her students are brainstorming ideas about various types of inventions. This is a preliminary to a group activity in which the students are to devise inventions that would be useful in their everyday lives. The exercise is supposed to be fun and imaginative and the students understand it as such.
Note that this excerpt is full of incomplete utterances, uncertain hearings, and subsequent repairs that may be indicative of nonnative discourse. The study of errors in L2 discourse is an important area of L2 research that identifies types of errors and proposes ways to correct them (Corder 1981; James 1998). However, the sequential analysis shows that repairs bring into view the members’ competence to monitor their talk, recognize potential difficulties, and adjust in the course of interaction.

Excerpt 1–110

912. T: Think of something else that would be useful in your
913. everyday life, what’s something that would be useful in your
914. everyday life?
915. (5.0)
916. E: A machine to wake me.
917. T: A ma(h)chine to what?
918. E: OK(h), awake me.=
919. T: =Wake you up, and I hope the machine would then actually
920. get you to class (.) on time, hahaha, all right, is this possible,
921. all right†, this might be something similar to: this
922. invention, it might be a little crazy and goofy (.) all right,

The teacher begins this exchange by characterizing the type of inventions she is looking for, ‘something that would be useful in your everyday life?’ (913–914). After some considerable silence by the cohort (915), one student (E) ventured an answer ‘A machine to wake me’ (916).

The teacher’s next turn to E’s answer is a repair initiation (917) pointing to her problem in hearing E’s response: ‘A machine to what?’ (On reparative organizations, see Schegloff 1989; Schegloff et al. 1977). This is followed by E’s follow-up in line 918, ‘OK(h) awake me.’ As a repair, this turn displays her (E) analysis of what may be problematic for the teacher’s hearing; her analysis is both competent and correct as she transforms ‘wake me’ to ‘awake me.’ The laughter token embedded here also displays her self-assessment of what her previous answer should have been in offering the alternative.11 The next turn by the teacher then shows her recognition of the interpretive work by E.

Many L2 researchers have considered these kinds of sequences—repairs producing reformulations—the key to successful language development (Gass and Selinker 2001; Pica 1987). Teachers offer feedback that informs L2 speakers of problems in their language production (Day et al. 1984, Schachter 1982) and how to correct them in the form of a recast (Long and Robinson 1998; Lyster 1998; Nicholas et al. 2001). However, the above repair sequence also displays both participants’ orientations to the intelligibility of the student’s reply to the teacher’s first question. Whatever instructional objective was intended in this question, its success relies on the communicative competence of all parties, particularly the students’ analytic
competence to recognize problems, locate, and analyze their object, and repair them in the course of interaction. Their competence is then to be found not just in the presence of structural features such as ‘recast’ or ‘correction’ but in how these repairs carry the course of interaction in producing the relevant next turns. The repair brings into view the members’ orientation to the tasks of common understanding and my data corpus is full of such sequences, contrary to Pica’s observation that this type of interactional modification is not common in classroom settings (Pica 1987).

The next exchange in this same sequence offers a similar display of competent language use. The teacher solicits more answers from the students by offering formulation of what kinds of invention the students could suggest, ‘it might be a little crazy and goofy’ (922). J’s answer in the next turn (924) comes in this sequential context.

Excerpt 1–2

919. T: Wake you up, and I hope the machine would then actually
920. get you to class (.) on time, hahaha, all right, is this possible,
921. all right↑, this might be something similar to: this
922. invention, it might be a little crazy and goofy (.) all right,
923. what else, what’s another (.) possible invention?
924. J: A robot can (cook).
925. T: I’m sorry?
926. J: A robot can (cook) for me.
927. (0.5)
928. J: (Cook).
929. T: Oh, a robot to bring a can of coke to you?
931. T: Excellent, I wouldn’t mind having one of those myself Juma,
932. a(h)ll righ(h)t↑ all right, what else?

This answer is met by the teacher’s request for clarification in her repair initiation ‘I’m sorry?’ (925). Drew (1997) calls this type of remark an open class repair initiator because it does not specify the source of the difficulty. With no further direction, J’s next turn repair makes his answer more complete, ‘A robot can (cook) for me’ (926). His articulation is, however, phonetically ambiguous as it can be heard as ‘coke’ or ‘cook’; this ambiguity is played out in the subsequent turns.12

J’s repair is followed by another repair after a short pause (927) which he apparently hears as a continuing problem for the teacher, and thus he repeats the word, ‘(cook)’ (928). Note that the teacher’s initiation has been open and non-specific, but J produces consecutive repairs in 926 and 928 that locate what the teacher’s problem of understanding is. In other words, J’s repair in line 926 demonstrates his competence in analyzing what the
teacher did and did not hear in his previous answer and his repair in 928 demonstrates his assessment of how effective his first repair was.

The analyses shown by J in his repairs yield an interesting result. The teacher begins her next turn (929) with ‘Oh,’ signifying a change-of-state in her understanding (Heritage 1984b), followed by her formulation of his reply: ‘a robot can bring a can of coke to you?’ (929). This response can be categorized as a ‘recast’ that shows how the teacher recognizes what J meant and transforms his answer into a linguistically adequate utterance by changing ‘coke’ into ‘a can of coke’ with her emphasis on the word ‘bring.’

To my hearing, however, ‘coke’ is not what J said or meant. In this light, his subsequent agreement in line 930 to the teacher’s hearing in 929 displays his decision to let it pass: perhaps, he sees that the repair so far has taken the interaction in a different direction and decides that there is no time to work out what a certain word was, especially when the larger task of talking about a useful invention has already been accomplished. This in itself is quite a sophisticated display of communicative competence, one that recognizes the ambiguity of the discourse enacted in the sequence so far and what can become of it. Similarly, the subsequent turn shows how the teacher brings this exchange to a close by offering her acknowledgment of J’s invention and its relevance to the task at hand. J’s comments might seem less than fluent and even unsuccessful in getting his message across, and yet they show a competent assessment of what is at stake in the interaction and how to proceed.

It is commonplace to find problems of understanding in natural conversation; ambiguity and/or misunderstanding are routine occurrences in talk-in-interaction. But as analysts of L2 instruction, we tend to look beyond them to get at the source of the problems in things like mispronunciation, a lack of grammatical competence or even an inadequate understanding of social norms and rules of speaking. That would, however, miss the competence of the participants who constantly monitor the intelligibilities of their own discourses and act on them accordingly. Rather than proceeding with the errors, J instead produced a next turn that is appropriate for the construction of the lesson sequence. His competent language use then becomes a condition for instruction to proceed.

As the discussion continues, we find another case of competent language embedded in repair sequences. The teacher wants another example of an invention.

Excerpt 1–3

931. T: Excellent, I wouldn’t mind having one of those myself Juma,
932. all right, what else?
933. (2.0)
934. T: Give me one more.
935. (6.0)
936. T: In a perfect world, use your imagination (. ) what else?
937. (5.0)
938. H: Uh like when you are drive- aha:: driving on the highway↑
939. T: Uh [hmm.
940. H: [aha (.) boring (.) for long time [to make aha:: long
distance trip, so something like aha::: aha:: moving:
941. T: [Uh hmm
942. H: moving:: aha::
943. T: Uh hum
944. S: Pillow?
945. H: Uh[: yeah, so car rise on the::: [(.) like an:: escalator↑
946. S: [(hh)
947. R: [( ) [( )
948. T: Oh::, [excellent, OK((h).
949. H: [I, I don’t have to drive [( ] just sit.
950. T: [Yes, you can just sit back <and watch movies [or read a book.>
951. H: [Yeah.
952. H: Yeah.
953. T: A(h)ll righ(h)t, OK, very good, now, with all this in
consideration, what do you think I am going to ask you to do right now?

H begins his comment in line 938 by setting up the situation before explaining what his invention is. This turns out to take up multiple turns as he begins with a dependent clause ‘when . . .’ with an upward intonation at ‘highway↑,’ which indicates that more is forthcoming (Lerner 1996). The teacher recognizes it and offers her go-ahead with ‘Uh hum’ (939) (See Jefferson 1984; Schegloff 1981 on continuers). In this response, the teacher not only registers what H is saying but joins him in securing the resources to complete his answer.

In his next turn, H continues to build his scenario of how ‘it’s boring for long time to make aha:: long distance trip’ (940 and 942). This is a continuation of his work by establishing a domain of everyday life in which his invention could be useful, for which the teacher offers another continuer (941). In line 942, H turns to the substance of his invention, something that goes along with long distance driving. However, he struggles across a string of self-repair initiations to say it (‘aha:: aha:: mo-, aha moving aha::’), not being able to offer a sufficient description for others to recognize what his invention is and what it does.

Seeing H’s struggles, another student (S) ventures a candidate suggestion ‘Pillow?’ (944). Completing an interlocutor’s incomplete utterance is a display of communicative competence as well (Sacks 1992), it shows that S was following what H was trying to say closely enough to anticipate what might make his repair-initiations complete.

H acknowledges S’s candidate repair in his next turn (‘Uh:: yeah’: 945) but does not use it to develop his account further. Instead, he marks and acknowledges S’s candidate repair and continues his account differently to
offer an alternative version of what he means: ‘so car rise on the::: (.) like an:: escalator?’ (945). In this sense, H’s difficulties in saying what he means are complemented by his competence in producing his continuing efforts to say it. And his continued effort gets some recognition from his fellow students (946–947).

The teacher finally recognizes H’s invention in ‘escalator’ in her next turn (‘Oh excellent’: 948). With this recognition, H goes ahead to say what the consequence of his invention would be (949): that one only sits and does not have to drive.16 In her overlapped next turn (950–951), the teacher not only claims her understanding, but also offers evidence of it by describing what one could do with the machine that H has been trying to describe: ‘Yes, you can just sit back and watch movies or read a book.’ H recognizes and affirms the teacher’s formulation in line 952–953.

In this excerpt, H’s inability to articulate what his invention is drives the sequence and may be the most prominent feature of the sequence. This exchange shows, however, that H accomplishes the task of describing his invention without being able to directly name it through collaborative interaction; his next turn relies entirely on the recognition of the teacher and his classmates. That is to say, this exchange shows how the teacher and students rely upon their competent language use to accomplish the task of understanding of those matters being talked about; H builds the preface to his telling by managing his turns and recognizing how his last remarks are interpreted by the teacher and his classmates, offering repairs and reformulations as needed. The exchange also shows the teacher’s competent hearing of non-native discourse and her ways of acknowledging the range of interpretive work her students’ discourse manifests. It is these competent practices of language use by the parties that construct the discourse and accomplish the task at hand.

The most visible relevance of communicative competence to those who are engaged in natural interaction is that they constantly refer to, invoke and rely on each other’s competence to accomplish their interactional tasks of understanding. Any next utterance may yield misunderstanding, ambiguity or confusion. Those problems, however, are found and addressed within the sequences of actions as each next utterance displays its speaker’s analysis of what has gone before, whether it is recognizing problems, acknowledging responses, trying alternative hearings or even finding humor. There is no question that the above excerpts reveal areas of English proficiency that these students need to develop. Nonetheless, sequential analysis gives us a view of the members’ competent undertaking of their discourse and this competence is something that sustains and organizes the practical life of the L2 classroom.

Communicative competence in questioning sequences

The second excerpt shows a questioning sequence in another ESL classroom. Questioning is one of the most familiar forms of teacher talk in language
classrooms that offers important language input for second language development (Long 1996; Nunn 1999). Notice, however, that questioning is also a central resource for classroom teachers in carrying out various pedagogical and social actions, such as introducing topics, demonstrating concepts, eliciting forms of reasoning, correcting grammar, and even maintaining order. While many studies have classified questions according to various functional characteristics (Carlsen 1991; Cullen 1998; Long and Sato 1983), the intelligibility of a question often becomes a matter of negotiation and interpretive adjustment by the parties involved in the interaction. This following excerpt shows how one of the teacher’s questions becomes an object of close analysis by her students, as they try to establish a sense of what the question is asking.

The teacher is going over the directions for an oral presentation—the final assignment for the course—that her students are required to do in a couple of weeks. The direction under consideration reads ‘analyze your audience.’

Excerpt 2–1

597. T: OK, so, that’s the first thing, decide on the task, so make sure you are doing this (...) second thing, analyze your audience, what do I mean by this, analyze your audience, what does this mean?
598. (4.0)
599. T: Who is your audience gonna be for this presentation?
600. S: ( )
601. K: [Classmate]
602. S?: [Classmate]
603. T: Good, OK, [so not just me (.) but all your classmates, now, pointing to her and then, the cohort])
604. T: what would you need to analyze?
605. (4.0)

Each question the teacher asked in this excerpt is a display question for which she knows the answer (Mehan 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Wells 1993). What becomes notable in this questioning sequence is not that it shows a process of unpacking the pre-figured propositional content of the phrase ‘analyze your audience.’ Rather, the sense of ‘analyze your audience’ becomes subject to a series of interactional exchanges in which the teacher explores what students know and organizes her next question accordingly. That is to say, the question’s sense remains indexical and thus open for ongoing interpretation and negotiation.

The teacher’s initial question gets no response from the students (601) and she then reformulates the question (602). Rather than a simple repetition of the previous question, this reformulation shows the teacher’s analysis
of what problems of understanding her students may have had with her initial question. Accordingly, she narrows it into a question of ‘audience.’ In addition, the teacher ties the question to the actual context of the students’ upcoming presentation by asking ‘who is your audience gonna be for this presentation’ (602). The students’ silence in line 601 is, therefore, a constitutive feature of her next question as the teacher determines what the silence means and how it should be addressed.

Several students reply in line 603–605, and the teacher accepts them with a positive evaluation in line 606. Now that they have practically settled the issue of ‘audience,’ the teacher moves on to the first term of her initial question, the ‘analyze’ part (606 and 608). This question, however, receives another silence from the students and the teacher, once again, reformulates and repairs the question in line 610–611.

Excerpt 2–2

610. T: What-, what would you need- what does the word ‘analyze’
611. mean?
612. (4.0)
613. T: <Do you know what this word means?>
614. (3.0)
615. S?: ( )-
616. W: [Consider?°
617. T: Yeah
618. [(Nodding)]
619. K: [We know what it means.
620. T: What does it mean?
621. K: The:: make order, [and::
622. T: [(Nodding)]
623. O: To tell [to::
624. T: [(Turn to O and nodding)]
625. (2.0)
627. T: OK, what would it mean to analyze your audience?

Repairs routinely identify the source of the trouble—the thing to be repaired—in the alternative they offer. In the above sequence, the repair is produced as the teacher begins to repeat the previous question, but cuts it off twice (610). The repaired question ‘what does the word analyze mean?’ becomes a vocabulary question about the meaning of the word ‘analyze.’ We can say then that the silence led the teacher to question her assumption as to what students know and to rework her question: What was problematic for the students is the semantic meaning of the word ‘analyze,’ not the pragmatic sense of the question as her previous question has projected. The student’s
silence becomes a resource for the teacher in which the identity of L2 students as second language learners becomes situationally invoked in her repair.

This repaired question, however, again receives no answer in the next turn position (612), and the teacher pursues the question by making it into a yes/no question (613). The answer by K (619) is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, he speaks for the cohort by using ‘we’ rather than ‘I.’ Second, he addresses the pragmatic sense of the question not the semantics of the vocabulary item. In K’s reply, then, we can see how he understands the question’s implications; he recognizes the teacher’s question as a prefacing yes/no question and replies to it, rather than answering the question it prefaces. Just as each next question by the teacher shows how she understands the students’ response and its projectable horizons, K’s response, too, shows his understanding of the teacher’s last turn, the sense it carried. In this way, K’s reply displays a keenly competent analysis of the teacher’s question, as he speaks up on behalf of the competence of the cohort. Every next turn at talk then becomes a mark of competent analysis of the previous turn and it is this competence that sustains and makes the interaction move forward. The participants’ next course of action then is the competence’s evidence.

Note that the claim by K that they know what it means is not enough for the teacher as she pursues the question in line 620 (see Pomerantz 1984 for how speakers pursue a response in ordinary conversation). A few students including K offer answers in lines 621 and 623 even though they are incomplete and fragmented.

Excerpt 2–3

627. T: OK, what would it mean to analyze your audience?
628. (5.0)
629. T: Before you give a speech to someone, what would you mi-
630. what might you want to know?
631. (0.5)
632. T: Why would this be important?
633. K: Consider of: our audience.
634. T: Yeah, consider about- OK? take some consideration (. ) Gima
635. (. ) would not want to give this presentation to me if I was
636. Pele, OK, (. ) or if I was this great soccer player, all right, he
637. would not want to give a presentation about learning about
638. how to play soccer to a roomful of soccer players (. ) right?
639. So you need to take into consideration what does your
640. audience already know, what don’t they know (. ) all right, so
641. think about this, next one, analyze the task.

In line 627, the teacher returns to her initial question posed in line 598–600. Between these two iterations of the same question (line 598–600 and 627), however, much has changed. One evidence is that the teacher takes the
cohort’s silence in line 628 differently as she invites the students to contemplate a particular situation (‘before you give a speech to someone’) that calls for a particular course of action (‘what might you want to know and why is it important?’). Although it is syntactically fragmented, K’s comment in the next turn (633) is a direct reply to the question in line 627: ‘what does it mean to analyze your audience?’ The teacher immediately accepts it, elaborates upon it, and provides a summary formulation: ‘So you need to take into consideration...’ (639–641).

To point out how the teacher reformulates her question this way is not meant to criticize her on grounds that her initial question was ambiguous or incomplete. Rather, it exemplifies the indexical nature of questions whose sense is contingent on and made available by the parties’ interpretive work. The sense of the questions, therefore, is managed and made sensible through the on-going exercise of communicative competence in which what students know and understand is made public and addressed in the course of questioning and answering.

From a close analysis of the unfolding interactional sequences, one can try to bring out categorical features of interactions to abstract teachable and learnable constructs. Yet even that undertaking relies on the parties’ competence because their logic and knowledge are built into the sequential organization of the discourse, which is made available and managed in the course of interaction. Interaction when seen in its produced detail displays these sequential contingencies and CA’s structural resources point to how members accomplish their practical tasks of understanding across them.

The immediate purpose of the transcript and its analyses is to demonstrate how a descriptive analytic program can show the essential sociability of language behavior for which Hymes’ proposal of communicative competence is instrumental. Instead of proposing to amend or refine it as a theoretical construct, this treatment of communicative competence seeks ways to describe the competent achievements of common understanding in the interactional details of L2 instruction. This competence is displayed not in post hoc accounts or in the observers’ categorical constructs, but in the ways in which the members act on their discourse within the sequential order of their interaction. Through this competent work, instruction falls into place, curricula are brought into view, speakers are nominated and activities develop. This is where we can recover the evidence of their communicative competence as the very thing that organizes the possibilities of L2 instruction.

CONCLUSION

The primary goal of the present paper is to propose a respecification of communication competence through a descriptive analysis of L2 classroom interaction. Rather than treating communicative competence as just an outcome of L2 instruction, we see it as an enabling condition. The task of respecification begins by asking what occurrences of language behavior
could count as a competent case of language use. This question points to a distinctively different analytic direction for understanding what communicative competence is and how to locate it both analytically and naturalistically. There is no question that previous theories of communicative competence have offered L2 literature conceptually useful and analytically powerful resources for understanding L2 instruction and L2 language phenomena. The familiar analytic task has been to locate the systematic theoretical bases for characterizing competence and then fitting the instruction to the characterization in order to facilitate learning.

The alternative analysis of L2 instruction, however, demonstrates that learning begins in the practical fields of understanding and that understanding is the practical undertaking of the parties engaged and embedded in their analysis of their discourse, which is visible in the detail of its production. Communicative competence becomes available in action, rather than something contained in an utterance whose presence or absence is indicative of theoretical objects or constructs such as discourse competence or grammatical competence. The alternative view, therefore, does not separate the practical actions the members accomplish from the communicative means for accomplishing it. The sequential organization of classroom interaction shows this procedural course of action in which L2 instruction is organized in and as the members’ competent language use in the room.

Accordingly, taking communicative competence as a condition of L2 instruction brings us closer to an understanding of L2 instruction because it helps us to examine and take interest in the most mundane organizations of classroom teaching and learning. This might coincide with what Allwright and Bailey (1991) had in mind when they argued that ‘in order to help our learners learn it is not “the latest method” that we need but rather a fuller understanding of the language classroom and what goes on there’ (Allwright and Bailey 1991: xviii). The task of respecification points to the teaching and learning as activities and actions in the making as we attend to ‘those matters which are visible in the midst of the activity which manifests them’ (Sharrock and Anderson 1982: 173) rather than focusing on patterns or regularities that could be indicative of target competence. This alternative analysis can then tell us something about the organization of classroom interaction and instruction that we hope to control and improve (Lynch and Macbeth 1998).

This paper takes an elaborate trajectory to untangle the complex and variant history of communicative competence and proposes an alternative way to specify it. While there have been various attempts to re-think and re-characterize communicative competence, the present paper finds the usefulness of communicative competence not in its adequacy as a conceptual tool but in its relevance to the action and activities as the members experience them. We want to keep the analytic interest in language use for the ways in which the parties demonstrably do, and find an understanding of their communicative competence in the actual affairs they competently assemble in concert. This suggests a new possibility of how we might begin
a production account of classroom interaction, exploring its contingencies, achievements, and collaborations, which might lead us to reconsider the practical life of teaching and learning.

Final version received October 2005

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my thanks to the editor and three anonymous reviewers for their informative comments that helped me clarify and refine the primary argument of the paper. A special thank goes to D. Macbeth for his advice and support. This paper is the result of countless discussions with him over several years and his influence is evident throughout.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPT NOTATIONS

[ ] Overlapping utterances
(2.0) Timed silence within or between adjacent utterances
( ) An uncertain hearing of what the speaker said
(( )) Scenic description and accounts
(.) A short untimed pause
= Latching that indicates no interval between adjacent utterances
- A halting, abrupt cutoff
. Falling intonation, e.g. sentence final
° Quieter than surrounding talk
: A prolonged stretch
_ Stressed syllable
↑↓ Marked change in pitch: upward or downward
(h) Aspirations
< > Utterance is delivered at quicker pace than surrounding talk


NOTES

1 See Hymes (1992) and/or Cazden (1996) for the historical development of the concept of communicative competence.

2 This challenge was noted by Stern a couple of decades ago: The dilemma for the linguistics systems builder is that he either attempts to take in everything that plays a part in language and risks making his system unwieldy and too complex to handle or he makes a deliberate choice and abstracts from the complex reality and is thus in
danger of distorting it by restricting the field of observation too severely. (Stern 1983: 146)

3 See Singh et al. (1988) for a critique of interactional sociolinguistics on the ground that it is excessively focusing on cultural and ethnic differences in language use and thus misses out on more universal principles of discourse such as cooperation.

4 Participants bring (1) knowledge of rhetorical scripts; (2) knowledge of certain lexis and syntactic patterns specific to that practice; (3) strategies for managing turns; (4) management of topics; and (5) knowledge of the means for signaling boundaries between practices and transitions within the practice itself (Young 2000: 6–7).

5 This comment is taken from their introduction of an edited book that carries various CA works that involve second language speakers.

6 Harvey Sacks clarifies this analytic rationale in the following remark: We can then say that a warrant for the study of the phenomenon of ‘understanding’ is that it’s specifically a thing that is achieved, and it can proceed employing conversation, and have places where it gets exhibited, etc. We need not say we’re interested in ‘understanding’ by virtue of, e.g. some humanistic bias about the nature of conversation or by reference to some theoretical supposition that people understood each other, but by virtue of the fact that one of the things people do in conversation, as they do ‘questioning’ and ‘answering’, etc., is specifically, ‘showing understanding.’ (Sacks 1992: 141)

7 See Jacoby and Ochs (1995) and Young and Miller (2004).

8 In their analysis, Day et al. (1984: 25) noted that the native speaker’s utterance could be also viewed as a continuation of the topic.

9 There are a variety of theoretical positions and practical recommendations as to how to interpret and report transcribed discourse (Green et al. 1997; Kasper 1997; Lapadat and Lindsay 1999; Mishler 1991; Ochs 1979; West 1996). See Green and Dixon (2002) for a comparison of various approaches to classroom discourse.

10 See appendix for transcript notations.

11 I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.

12 Note the (cook) in the transcript—it is also uncertain for the transcriber.

13 To hear ‘a robot can coke for me’ is to treat an internationally familiar noun-object as a verb. While there is no certainty, we can further observe that ‘can (cook)’ may, in just pronunciation, have been the resource for the teacher’s ‘can of coke.’

14 One of the reviewers offered this point.


16 I take it that the image of the escalator is one of an ‘intelligent roadway’ that rises above the traffic.

17 French and Maclure (1981) found similar work in questions in infant classrooms.

18 Note that the first response by W (616) answers the definition question: ‘Consider?’ K, in overlapping the teacher’s continuer, is changing the terms of the reply: he is affirming the competence to the pragmatic sense of what ‘analyze audience’ means.

19 I owe this point to D. Macbeth (personal communication).
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