

# The Use of Assigned Roles for Developing Students Interactional Competence

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## 概要

インタラクショナル・コンピタンス（相互作用能力）は、会話の流れをコントロールするために必要な技術です。外国語として英語を学習する者にとっては、複雑でむずかしい技術にもなります。この分野で問題となる点は、社会心理学的側面、社会文化学的理解の不足、または当該言語を使用する能力自体に問題があるといった3つの要素があります。会話の流れをコントロールするために必要な言語能力を教えるための試みとして学生に会話演習を実施した結果の考察研究です。英語中級レベルの学生が3週間の会話演習クラスを受講する前と受講した後を観察しました。結果として、会話演習クラス受講後の生徒には、会話の流れをコントロールする能力の向上はみられませんでした。このことは、当該言語の使用能力不足がインタラクショナル・コンピタンス（相互作用能力）不足の唯一の、または主な原因になるものではないことを示しています。

## Abstract

Interactional competence is a set of skills needed to manage the flow of a conversation. Managing the flow of a conversation can be a complicated and daunting task for EFL learners. Their deficiencies in this area may come about as a result of sociopsychological factors, deficits in sociocultural understanding or from a lack of appropriate linguistic resources. This study looks at the results of assigning conversation roles to students in an attempt to equip them with the linguistic skills necessary to manage conversation flow. A group of intermediate level students were observed before and after a 3-week treatment with assigned roles in class. The results do not show improvement in the students' ability to manage a conversation following the treatment, suggesting that specific linguistic deficits are not the sole or primary cause of the lack of interactional competence.

## What is interactional competence?

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has identified communicative competence as a key goal in their strategic plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities (MEXT, 2002). Communicative competence is defined by MEXT as being the ability to hold normal conversations. However, this leaves out the key element of defining what it means to *hold* a conversation.

In language acquisition research, communicative competence has been defined and redefined in many different ways. The term has been in use since the 1960s but the seminal definition was put forth by Canale and Swain (1980) in their work on the basis of the communicative approach to language teaching. They defined communicative competence as a set of four inter-reliant competences dealing with grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic aspects of language use. More recent definitions (see for example Bachman, 1990) add elements of illocutionary and operational competence. However the definition of communicative competence has evolved, two elements remain consistent. Communicative competence is based on two broad elements of language use: grammar and pragmatics (Byram, 1997).

Interactional competence, defined as the ability to manage a conversation, is a major part of pragmatics. It is the subset of communicative competence to which MEXT seems to be referring when they say that their goal is to develop Japanese learners' ability to *hold* a conversation in English. Thus, understanding and developing

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learners' interactional competence would seem to be an appropriate goal for ESL programs in Japan.

Young (2000) identified six key sets of knowledge which he refers to as the resources needed for interactional competence. The L2 speaker needs to understand rhetorical patterns, registers, turn taking patterns, organization of topics, appropriate participation roles and transition and boundary signals in L2 in order to interact and manage the interaction successfully.

Of these six key resources, an understanding of appropriate participation roles, and an ability to take on these roles, seems to be particularly lacking in intermediate EFL learners in Japan. Intermediate learners tend to have reasonably developed language skills for self expression. But, they generally lack the proficiency needed to initiate, maintain and bring conversations to a close. They cannot take on the traditional roles needed to make a conversation flow smoothly: leader, questioner, gatekeeper, etc. Without such proficiency, pragmatic failure awaits.

### What is pragmatic failure?

Pragmatic failure occurs when either of two things happens. There can be a miscommunication of pragmatic intent, as when a speaker uses an inappropriate tone or register. This can lead to the speaker being perceived as cold and rude on one end of the scale or overly friendly on the other. Or there is the case where the speaker fails to take on an expected role, failing to hold up their end of the communication as it were. This can lead to a breakdown in the communication when the speaker is perceived as being uninterested or incapable of participating in the conversation.

Kawate-Mierzejewska (2003), in discussing politeness levels, notes that pragmatic failure is rarely traceable to a single factor. She identifies three groups of factors that may be involved in pragmatic failure: deficits in linguistic proficiency (the learners have limited language skills), deficits in sociocultural proficiency (the learners misunderstand the role they are expected to play) and sociopsychological factors (the learners' beliefs or attitudes interfere). Identifying the potential sources of pragmatic failures is a key element in preparing learners to avoid them.

### Teaching Interactional Competence

Interactional competence, like all language and social skills, develops naturally in L1 through observation of and interaction with caregivers and others. This naturally developed competence has the potential for transfer from a learner's first language (L1) to the second language (L2). And, in fact, some aspects of pragmatic competence have been shown to transfer (eg modifying requests to suit different registers). But most aspects of pragmatic competence, including interactional competence, are not transferred from L1 to L2 (Kasper, 1997). This may be especially true with non-cognate languages like Japanese and English. And if learners do transfer aspects of interactional competence from L1, without understanding Young's (2000) six key resources discussed above, it may well be that they are transferring inappropriate aspects of L1 pragmatics and end up with a socio-pragmatic failure instead of successful interaction (Krause-Ono, 2004).

So, if appropriate interactional competence is not transferred naturally from L1 to L2, how then do learners acquire such competence? They may simply acquire it through interaction with teachers, classmates and other interlocutors, picking it up the way they did as children in L1. However, in an EFL context such as is prevalent in Japanese universities, language class work tends to put students in the role of either speaker or listener and

doesn't give the students a chance to do conversation management or large scale interactions (Kasper, 1997). Thus, teachers need to consciously establish the role of conversation manager for students. In short, we need to teach interactional competence.

This is not to say that EFL teachers in Japan should force students to accept the discourse patterns of English as the *correct* way of communicating. Teachers are simply opening their learners' horizons so that they have the tools to work with if they choose to (Gieve, 1999). This is a fine a line and must be walked with care.

Several studies have shown that various aspects of pragmatic competence can be taught through different methods. For example, Kasper (1997) cites numerous examples of pragmatic competence being taught through text analysis, direct instruction on speech acts, and role-plays. However, according to Gieve (1999), consciousness raising and role-play activities in class tend to produce L1 patterns so some kind of direct input seems to be called for.

### This study

This study hypothesises that the primary cause of pragmatic failure in the breakdown of conversation management by intermediate level EFL learners in Japan is linguistic. That is, the learners cannot manage the flow of a conversation because they lack the linguistic resources (i.e. language skills) to do so. Thus, the study seeks to show that the necessary skills can be directly taught.

This study is based on the use of assigned roles to develop interactional competence. The students were given an initial lesson on conversation roles and some aspects of conversation management. They were also given a questionnaire designed to help them think about which conversation roles and functions they were most comfortable with in L1. (See Appendix 1)

The lesson and questionnaire acted as consciousness raising, which, as seen above, tends to produce inappropriate transfer L1 pragmatic patterns if used alone. Thus an element of instruction and directed practice was added. Students were randomly assigned one of eight conversation roles reflecting key elements of conversation management. Managing a conversation includes, but is not limited to, initiating conversations, eliciting participation from others, guiding topic shifts, and maintaining the flow of input (see appendix B for samples of the role cards).

For three weeks following the initial lesson, the students were assigned a different role in each class session (a total of 12, 90-minute sessions). The assignments were semi-random, the teacher ensuring that students were not assigned the same role on successive days and that all students had the opportunity to take on all roles. The students were expected to carry out their role through the course of the class while working with regular class materials. Following the initial lesson, no explicit instructions on roles or conversation management was given but the students were given feedback on their performance in class.

### Participants

The study group consisted of a group of university students in Japan. The group was judged to be at a low intermediate level of English. It consisted of 12 students (7 male, 5 female). All of the study participants were enrolled in the Communicative English Program as described by Hadley, Jeffrey and Warwick (2002) and Hadley (2006), though none were English majors.

The participants were not volunteers. All data collection and instruction was integrated into class activities. This reduced the possibility that any positive results might come about as a result of the self-selection bias possible with volunteer groups.

## Results

Data was collected in pre- and post-treatment video samples of unplanned, small group speech on an assigned topic. The video samples were 5 minutes in length and were taken from randomly assigned groups. The tapes were transcribed and students' participation in the conversation was individually analyzed to find uses of the assigned roles. The number of instances of each strategy use was counted. The instances were further subdivided to show when the students used an appropriate lexical chunk to employ a given strategy ("What do you think about ...?", "Let's move on to the next point.") and when they employed the strategy using a single word or phrase ("You?", "Next").

Pre-treatment observations are characterized by a series of statements made in turn, each student following another around the circle until all have had a chance to speak. This is followed by comments or additional statements. This conversation style can be referred to colloquially as the *happyo* method, from the Japanese word for "announcement" or "statement". There is with very little interaction beyond active listening tokens. We see non-verbal continuers (gestures, eye contact, nodding etc.), non-lexical continuers (mmm, unhun, etc) and a few verbal assessments (really, wow, etc). But there are few, if any, instances of probing, questioning or eliciting.

The post treatment observations are also dominated by the *happyo* conversation style with considerable use of active listening tokens.

Table 1 shows the number of instances of conversation management strategy usage and the total number of turns taken by each group member in the pre-test and post-test results, as well as the differences between the two data sets.

Average number of instances per group member in 5 minutes of unplanned speech of conversation management strategies.						
	Pre-test		Post-test		Change	
Eliciting Participation (1 word)	0.4	1.3	0.7	1.5	0.3	0.2
Eliciting Participation (chunk)	0.9		0.8		-0.1	
Guiding Topic Shifts (1 word)	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.7	0.2	0.4
Guiding Topic Shifts (chunk)	0.1		0.3		0.2	
Controlling Input Flow (1 word)	0	0.3	0	0.2	0	-0.1
Controlling Input Flow (chunk)	0.3		0.2		-0.1	
Probing / Clarifying (1 word)	1.1	1.8	1.1	1.9	0	0.1
Probing / Clarifying (chunk)	0.7		0.8		0.1	
Average number of turns per group member	7.7		11.6		3.9	

**Table 1: Instances of conversation management strategy usage**

This data appears to show some improvements in the use of conversation management strategies. Most notably,

the number of instances of topic shifts more than doubled. On the other hand, the number of instances of controlling input flow actually decreased in the post-test data set. Slight improvements in the number of instances of eliciting participation and probing questions are likely a result of the overall increase in the number of turns taken by each student. In fact, taken overall, the number of instances of strategy usage as compared to the number of turns actually decreased (see table 2).

Percentage of turns used for conversation management.	Pre-test	Post-test
	48%	37%

Table 2 : Total number of turns used for conversation management.

Interestingly, the researcher's anecdotal observations of the pre and post-test results do not bear out the numerical data. Conversations in the post-test data set are seen to have a better sense of flow and, on an overall analysis, seem to be better managed.

## Discussion

A statistical analysis of the results using a t-test has shown that the pre and post-test data sets are not significantly different ( $t=0.27$ ). Therefore, it is difficult to assign a great deal of validity to the results. However, the results do seem to indicate that it is likely that the treatment (using assigned roles in class activities) was not successful in improving the students' ability to manage a conversation.

This could be due to two factors. Firstly, it could be that the treatment, through poor instructional design, did not actually improve the students' linguistic resources for conversation management. That is, it may be that assigning conversation management roles in class work may be an ineffective method of improving interactional competence.

The other, and more likely possibility, is that the problem is with the underlying assumptions of the study and instructional design. The three week treatment was based on the hypothesis that the primary cause of the students' lack of interactional competence was linguistic deficits. The results of this study would seem to indicate that this is not the case. As discussed above, pragmatic failure, in this case a breakdown in communication through lack of interactional competence, can be due to linguistic, sociocultural or sociopsychological issues, or a combination of the three. It may well be that researchers and teachers should look to non-linguistic causes to track down their students' deficits in interactional competence.

## Conclusion

This study has indicated that the perceived lack of interactional competence among intermediate EFL learners in Japan may not be due to a lack of linguistic resources. Rather, there may be a deeper sociocultural and/or sociopsychological cause for the problem. Further study will be necessary to narrow down the cause of the problem in order to design effective methods of helping learners develop their interactional competence in English.

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## Appendix A: Samples of class materials

## Conversation Roles

### What kind of conversationalist are you?

In everyday conversation, we all have certain roles we like to play. Some people tend to be active and others are passive. Some people talk *to* you and others talk *at* you. Some people love being the centre of attention and others hate it. What kind of conversationalist are you?



### Different Conversation Roles

Here are 9 names for different conversation roles. What do you think each means? With a partner, make some notes for each.

<u>The thinker</u>	<u>The leader</u>	<u>The clown</u>
<u>The wanderer</u>	<u>The questioner</u>	<u>The follower</u>  (a)
<u>The challenger</u>	<u>The wall flower</u>	<u>The dominator</u>

Read the descriptions of each conversation role and match them to the names.

- a) This person usually agrees with everything others say and doesn't add their own thoughts or opinions. The follower
- b) This person likes to joke. They don't usually add very much new information to the conversation but they keep everyone laughing. \_\_\_\_\_
- c) This person doesn't agree with anything. They always find a reason to disagree or take the opposite opinion. \_\_\_\_\_
- d) Other people in the group often don't know what this person is talking about. They change topics quickly and often. \_\_\_\_\_
- e) This person always wants to know more and asks for details. They often follow up on what others in the group say. \_\_\_\_\_
- f) This person listens to what the others are saying. They don't say much themselves but they are considering the topic very carefully. \_\_\_\_\_
- g) This person takes charge of the conversation and helps others participate. They guide the topic and bring in all of the group members. \_\_\_\_\_
- h) This person talks so much that the others in the group find it hard to participate. They don't listen to others. \_\_\_\_\_
- i) This person doesn't speak much at all. They may answer if someone speaks to them directly but they don't speak out on their own. \_\_\_\_\_

## Your Conversation Roles

- Which of these conversation roles is most like you when you speak Japanese?
- How about in English class? Does it depend on the topic? The other group members? The situation?
- Do you want to change your communication style? (For example, "I wish I was more like the clown. I want people to think I am funny".)





## Learning a New Role

In English class, it is important for all group members to be active participants who can play many different roles in a conversation. We call this kind of person a good conversationalist. Being a good conversationalist is not a mysterious talent. It is a set of skills that you can learn. Here is a list of SOME of the things a good conversationalist does. Can you think of an English sentence or phrase to help with each job?

A good conversationalist ...	English sentence or phrase
... starts a topic by volunteering their own ideas or experiences.	<i>I think...</i> <i>When I was in high school I ...</i>
...moves the conversation along so that you don't spend too much time on one topic.	
... makes sure the group stays on topic and doesn't wander off on a tangent.	
...makes sure that everyone in the group has a chance to participate.	
...stops dominators from talking so much that no one else has a chance to speak.	
... asks follow up questions to get more details from group members.	
... makes sure the group doesn't miss any important topics or ideas.	
... ends the conversation when the group runs out of things to say.	

**Appendix B: Samples of role cards given to students during the treatment.**

Your job is to make sure the group finishes every topic. For example : "What about X ?", "Have we talked about X yet?" or "Name, what do you think about X ?" Try to involve everyone in the conversation.

Your job is to end the conversation. When the group sounds like it doesn't have anything left to say, wrap up the conversation. For example : "OK. So is that everything?", "So it sounds like we have talked about everything." or "OK. I think we are done."

Your job is to ask people follow up questions. For example : "That's interesting. Why do you think so?", "Do you mean \_\_\_\_\_ ?" or "Could you explain that a little more?"

Your job is to volunteer to answer questions. For example : "I think \_\_\_\_\_", "My answer is \_\_\_\_\_." or "How about \_\_\_\_\_."

Your job is to move the group along. If the group spends too much time on one topic, bring up the next point. For example: "Can we move along?" , "We haven't talked about X yet. What do you think?" or " What do you think about the next question?"

Your job is to make sure the group stays on topic. If someone changes to topic, bring the discussion back. For example : " That's interesting. Let's get back to our topic." , "Yes. So anyway, like we were saying before...." or "Yeah, but our topic is X"

Your job is to make sure that everyone has a chance to speak. If someone is being quiet, ask for their opinion. For example: "What do you think Name?", "How about you Name?" or "Name, what's your idea?"

Your job is to stop only one or two people from talking too much. For example : "That's interesting. What do other people think?" , "That's a good answer. Let's find out what other people think." or "Yes. Do you agree Name?"