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Using open role-play in group oral assessment: Topic management skills elicitation and display

Assessing interactional competence is a challenging endeavor. Current conceptualization of IC poses a dilemma for testing in whether it is possible to tease out individual contributions from what is essentially co-constructed as social interaction (Fulcher, 2010; Mcnamara, 1997). Given this challenge; however, such assessment is increasingly relevant to the field with the growing favorability of peer and group tasks for assessing 'real-life' interactional skills due to the fact that the format allows for equal rights among the student peers to interact (Gan, Davison, & Hamp-Lyons, 2008; Sandlund & Sundqvist, 2011). The focus of this study is to investigate student performances in an open role-play activity, which is one of the staple tools for peer and group assessment in language classrooms. The participants of this study were undergraduate engineering students at a university in Thailand who were taking an EFL course with the focus on communication skills. The objectives of this course were that students learn to communicate socially in professional meetings. As part of class activities, students participated in a small group of 4-6 people role-play task in which they were to introduce themselves and make professional connections for their companies. The data for this study are 34 video-recorded group performances with a total of 179 students. Adopting conversation analysis (Clift, 2016; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013) lens, this study explores aspects of interactional competence students displayed in this group role-play activity in order to ascertain the parameters in which the task afforded and elicited such performances. Given the requirement set out by the task, the findings from conversation analysis discuss five stable actions emerged from the data which this group of students have to manage as they participated in the role-play, plus two more actions in which they display their recipientship while others are taking the turns. Because these five actions are topical in nature, the analysis suggests that this role- play activity allows plenty opportunities for students to display their skills in doing topic initiation, topic development, topic shift, and topic termination. These are essential actions under topic management which is crucial for interlocutors to participate competently in 'real-life' social interaction, and has been well documented in conversation analysis literature (Button & Casey, 1984, 1988; Jefferson, 1984; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007). This CA literature serves very neatly as a set of guiding normative standards needed for assessing interactional competence for this task. By applying such standards, the analysis also reveals how lower ability students show tendency to abandon topic abruptly, fail to initiate repairs when a repair is due, and rely on resources external to the ongoing role-play talk to manage their understanding. Based on the findings, it is recommended that language teachers and testers consider conversation analysis as a framework for assessing interactional competence as it can provide a viable structure to identify individual accomplishments in co-constructed interaction that is the target of the assessment.

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