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Beyond Speaking Competence: A Multimodal Framework for Assessment

The purpose of this study is to propose, describe and justify a new framework to assess English learners' speaking competence using Multimodal Pragmatics tools. Pragmatics, as a field, is concerned with context-based interactions of language in use. However, the linguistic choices that are being made do not rely exclusively on the system of language itself, but also on other different contextual factors, such as the situational or cultural one (see Austin 1975, Goffman 1967, Leech 1983, among others). We find this approach to speaking competence assessment to be particularly relevant in the case of international students who come to study in the U.S. In order to support them, universities implement pathway programs that provide linguistic, cultural and academic training to all students seeking full enrollment. Pathway programs include academic courses in Writing, Reading, Speaking and Listening, but also content-based course, such as U.S. Academic Culture. Although primarily focused on acquiring knowledge related to the American academic values, goals, and expectations, such courses will be inherently assessing students' linguistic competence. All assignments in content-based ESOL classes are practicing common assignment types for undergraduate students. For example, one of the most popular ones is the academic presentation. Assessing such a complex assignment goes beyond speaking competence evaluation since it includes both content and delivery components. More importantly, since students are required to use technology to assist them in delivering content, academic presentations become multimodal environments where semiotic resources – language – image – sound- action interact through audio-visual mode "to contribute to holistic meaning- making for the accomplishment of formalized learning tasks" (O'Halloran et al., 2014). In other words, we argue that in academic presentations, meaning is derived through the interaction of language with other multimodal resources (e.g. images, academic symbolism, and embodied action). In this case, the focus is not merely on language or speaking as an isolated competence, but rather on language in operation with visual, actional and other multimodal resources. In our endeavor to develop a more elaborate view on the multimodal speaking competence assessment, we rely on an array of empirical materials, such as observation and practice analysis. Last but not least, through this study, we hope to raise awareness on the need to move beyond a tri- dimensional approach to speaking competence (speaker-language-context), to a multidimensional approach that captures the interconnected network (speaker-language-medium- context).

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