



## CONCEPTUALISING CLASSROOM INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE

Steve Walsh\*

**Abstract:** This article offers a preliminary conceptualisation of classroom interactional competence (CIC). Placing interaction at the centre of language learning, the paper considers the various practices available to both teachers and learners to enhance CIC and to produce classrooms which are more dialogic, more engaged and more focused on participation. Using a conversation analytic informed methodology, data extracts are presented to highlight specific features of CIC, relating to the ways in which space for learning is created and learner contributions ‘shaped’. I suggest that better understandings of these practices offer an alternative approach to enhancing learning and learning opportunity and highlight the need for a movement away from classroom decisions which are essentially materials -and methodology- based towards ones which are centred on spoken interaction.

**Keywords:** Classroom Interactional Competence, Classroom Discourse, Conversation Analysis, L2 Interaction, Participation and learning

**Özet:** Bu makale, Sınıf içi Etkileşimsel Yeti'nin (SEY) bir ön kavramlaştırmasını sunmaktadır. Çalışma, etkileşimi öğrenmenin merkezine koyarak, öğretmen ve öğrencilerin sınıfıçi etkileşimsel yetisini arttıracak ve daha fazla diyalog odaklı, katılımcı sınıflar yaratacak uygulamaları irdelemektedir. Yazıda konuşma çözümlemesi çıkışlı bir yöntem kullanılarak, öğrenme alanı yaratıp öğrenci katılımını şekillendirme ile ilintilendirilerek SEY'nin belli özelliklerine işaret eden sözlü örnekler sunulmuştur. Bu uygulamaların daha iyi kavranmasının öğrenmeyi iyileştirmeye ve öğrenme fırsatlarına alternatif bir yaklaşım getireceği iddia edilebilir. Ayrıca, bu uygulamalar materyal ve yöntem bazlı kararlardan sözlü iletişim odaklı sınıf kararlarına yönelme ihtiyacı doğuracaktır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Sınıf içi Etkileşimsel Yeti, Sınıf Söylemi, Konuşma Çözümlemesi, İkinci dilde etkileşim, katılım ve öğrenme

### Introduction

In this paper, I present a preliminary description and discussion of classroom interactional competence and consider how it can be characterized in different contexts. Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC) is defined as, ‘Teachers’ and learners’ ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning’ (Walsh 2011, p: 158). It puts interaction firmly at the centre of teaching and learning and argues that by improving their CIC, both teachers and learners will immediately improve learning and opportunities for learning. I aim to show how a better understanding of classroom discourse will have a positive impact on learning, especially where learning is regarded as a social activity which is strongly influenced by involvement, engagement and participation; where learning is regarded as *doing* rather than *having* (c.f. Larsen-Freeman 2010).

The paper falls into two sections. In the first, I review some of the work on Interactional Competence, a construct which has existed for more than twenty years and yet which continues to attract a great deal of attention. In the second section, I characterize Classroom Interactional Competence (CIC), using data extracts to examine the strategies open to both teachers and learners to enhance interaction and improve opportunities for learning. Implications for teaching and teacher education are then discussed.

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\* Newcastle University, UK, [steve.walsh@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:steve.walsh@newcastle.ac.uk)

### **Interactional competence**

It is apparent when studying spoken interaction that different speakers have different levels of competence and varying abilities to express their ideas and achieve understanding. This is true both in and outside classrooms, of native and non-native speakers, regardless of their language proficiency. Put simply, some people seem to be better able to communicate than others, while some people seem to have difficulty in conveying the simplest meanings. If we put this in the context of the second language classroom, the situation becomes both more complex and less understood.

Much of what happens in language classrooms, I suggest, is concerned with individual performance rather than collective competence. In other words, we, as teachers are constantly evaluating and assessing our learners' ability to produce accurate, fluent and appropriate linguistic forms. This is true in both a teaching and testing context where there is tendency to emphasize an individual's ability to produce correct utterances, rather than to negotiate meanings or clarify a point of view or idea. Speaking tests focus heavily on accuracy, fluency, grammatical structures, range of vocabulary and so on. They rarely consider how effectively a candidate interacts or how well a candidate co-constructs meanings with another interlocutor. In short, the focus of attention is on individual performance rather than joint competence.

There may be many reasons for this position, not least of which is the fact that a solo performance is easier to teach and test than a joint, collective one. To produce materials and devise tasks which focus on interaction is far more difficult than to devise materials and activities which train individual performance. Although contemporary materials claim to adopt a task-based approach to teaching and learning, they do not, I suggest, train learners to become better interactants. All attention is directed towards the individual's ability to produce accurate, appropriate and fluent utterances.

Outside the classroom, of course, effective communication rests on an ability to interact with others and to collectively reach understandings. Interactional competence, then, is what is needed in order to 'survive' most communicative encounters. Being accurate or fluent, in themselves, are, I suggest, insufficient. Speakers of an L2 must be able to do far more than produce correct strings of utterances. They need to be able to pay attention to the local context, to listen and show that they have understood, to clarify meanings, to repair breakdowns and so on. All of this requires extreme mental and interactional ability, the kind of ability which will not, arguably, be trained by taking part in pair-work tasks or group discussions.

The notion of interactional competence was first coined by Kramsch (1986, p: 370):

I propose (...) a push for interactional competence to give our students a truly emancipating, rather than compensating foreign language education.

What Kramsch seems to be saying here is that much foreign language teaching adopts what Cook (2003) terms a 'deficit' model, where second language speakers are perceived as being in some way inferior to first language speakers, and where the performance of second language speakers is somehow measured against that of first language speakers. Indeed, in language testing contexts, we frequently find descriptors or assessment criteria which use a wording like 'shows native like fluency of the language' in speaking tests and so on. Kramsch, by contrast, argues that a focus on interactional competence allows us to concentrate more on the ability of learners to *communicate* intended meaning and to establish

joint understandings. Essentially, interactional competence is concerned with what goes on *between* interactants and how that communication is managed. Rather than fluency, we are concerned with what McCarthy (2005) terms *confluence*: the act of making spoken language fluent together with another speaker. Spoken confluence is highly relevant to the present discussion since it highlights the ways in which speakers attend to each other's contributions and focus on collective meaning-making. It is also a concept which lies at the heart of most classroom communication, where interactants are engaged in a constant process of trying to make sense of each other, negotiate meanings, assist and query, support, clarify and so on. We might say that, both inside and outside the classroom, being confluent is more fundamental to effective communication than being fluent.

Since Kramsch's 1986 paper, many researchers have struggled with the notion of interactional competence without really coming to a convincing and workable definition. More recent references emphasize the fact that interactional competence is context specific and concerned with the ways in which interactants construct meanings *together*, as opposed to looking at features of *individual* performance which lie at the heart of communicative competence. For example, consider the differences between the interactional resources needed in a context where the emphasis is on a transaction, such as ordering a coffee, to the interactional resources needed to take part in a conversation. Clearly, in the first context, a basic knowledge of English will allow you to order a coffee with minimal interactional competence. In the second, however, and in most classroom contexts, much more sophisticated interactional resources will be required in order to successfully compete for the floor, gain and pass turns, attend to what the speaker has said, interrupt, clarify and so on. We can see, from these two examples, that interactional competence is highly context specific and related very closely to speaker intent and to audience.

In an attempt to identify specific features of interactional competence, Young (2003) points to a number of 'interactional resources' including specific interactional strategies like turn-taking, topic management, signalling boundaries and so on. Markee (2008) proposes three components, each with its own set of features:

- language as a formal system (including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation).
- semiotic systems, including turn-taking, repair, sequence organisation.
- gaze and paralinguistic features.

As Markee says (2008, p: 3), developing interactional competence in a second language involves learners 'co-construct[ing] with their interlocutors locally enacted, progressively more accurate, fluent, and complex interactional repertoires in the L2'.

Young (2008, p: 100) offers this definition of interactional competence:

Interactional competence is a relationship between participants' employment of linguistic and interactional resources and the contexts in which they are employed...

Here then, Young focuses on the relationship between 'the linguistic and interactional resources' used by interactants in specific contexts. At this stage, it might be helpful to look at some data in order to clarify some of the ideas we have discussed so far on interactional competence.

In extract 1 below, a group of adult international students following an in-session English language course at a UK university is working on a fluency-focused speaking activity. There

is no teacher present and the students are interacting according to the materials being used. Their task is to roll a dice and discuss a topic corresponding to the number shown on the dice. If they have already discussed that topic, they simply select another one.

### Extract 1

- L1 do you bring his photo with you  
 L3 eh...yeah but we have only a few photos because we get together (.)only one year or so=  
 L2 = and your work was very busy so you have no time to [play with him  
 L3 [Yeah  
 L1 but I suppose that you must (.)leave some enough money to(.)live with your boyfriend and in this way you can (.)improve the (.)eh (3 sec unintelligible) how do you say=  
 L4 =relationship=  
 L1 =relationship [yes  
 L4 [and know each other=  
 L3 =yeah I think I know him very well now (laughs)  
 (4)  
 L3 well lets talk another topic=  
 L2 =I remember one thing when they choose register in Coleraine and they organiser know you [reg...register...register  
 L [are single girl and they don't know you have a boyfriend  
 LL ((laugh))  
 L3 I think eh that is is humorous ok he is not very handsome and not very but I think he is very clever [ehm and he  
 L1 [a lot like you  
 L3 no (laughs) I think he is clever than me and (laughs)  
 (3)  
 L3 he do everything very (.)[seriously  
 L1 [seriously  
 L3 yeah (3 sec unintelligible) eh and eh in some eh...in some degree...eh I...admire him (laughs)=  
 L1 = thats a good [thing  
 L [Yeah (.) lets change another topic (10)

What is immediately obvious from the extract is the amount of interactional work that students engage in to keep the discussion moving and on track. Students have been asked to talk about pictures of people that they are close to and in line 1 the topic is launched with a question by L1 and an extended response plus justification by L3 in lines 2-3. In line 3, L2 shows empathy towards L3, making the point that L3 is very busy and has little time to 'play' with her boyfriend, a point taken up by L1, who says that they can at least live together as a means of improving their relationship. Note how the request for help in lines 6-7, a kind of word search, is dealt with very quickly by L4 in line 8, allowing the discussion to continue and avoiding a potential breakdown. In line 9, this is receipted by L1 and further reinforced in the overlapped confirmation by L4 in line 10 (and know each other=). L4's contribution is taken up by L3 in line 11. Following an extended pause of 4 seconds, L3 attempts to change topic in line 13. However, the change of topic does not occur immediately as L2 interrupts in line 14 with the telling of an anecdotal story about registration and the fact that the students doing the registration are able to know who is single.

L2's interruption prompts L3 to conclude her discussion about her boyfriend in lines 18-26 (*he's not very handsome, he's clever and serious about his work*). L1's overlaps are in support of what L3 is saying and offer some kind of affirmation or approval of the comments made by L3. Note too how laughter is used as a way of offering approval and affirmation throughout this extract. Finally, in line 28, L1 brings the discussion back to the original topic switch proposed by L3 in line 14, where there was no switch. Note the extended 10-second pause at the end of the extract, suggesting that the students are considering another topic and that there is now going to be a switch.

In terms of the interactional competence demonstrated in this extract, we can make a number of observations about the interactional resources employed and their impact on the overall flow and coherence of the discussion:

- Turn-taking. It is apparent that all four students manage the turn-taking very well and are able to interrupt, hold and pass turns. Interruptions occur, but naturally and in a supportive way. There are no major breakdowns and the discussion flows well.
- Repair. It is interesting to note that even though errors do occur, they are largely ignored. This is what Firth (1996) refers to as the 'let it pass' principle; in many business contexts where English is used as a lingua franca, interactants largely ignore errors unless an error causes a problem for understanding. In extract 1, the main repair comes in lines 7-10, where the word 'relationship' is needed in order to clarify meaning.
- Overlaps and interruptions. Note how overlaps and interruptions occur frequently, but they are supportive and designed to ensure that the interaction flows smoothly. These overlaps and interruptions are examples of what McCarthy (2003) refers to as good 'listenership': they signal to a speaker that she has been understood, that the channels are open and that the communication is working well. Essentially, they 'oil the wheels' of the interaction and help to prevent trouble and breakdowns from occurring. As a deliberate strategy, overlaps give vital clues to speakers that they are being understood and that something is being communicated.
- Topic management. One of the key indicators of the coherence of a piece of spoken interaction is topic management and development. In extract 1, we can see how the main topic of 'relationships' is introduced, developed and discussed at length despite one attempt to switch topic in line 14 – which is ignored until much later in line 28. Participants are genuinely engaged with the topic and succeed in maintaining it for some time and from a range of perspectives. In short, we can say that this is a good example of coherent discourse in which all participants are concerned to engage with and develop a topic to the full.

### **Classroom interactional competence**

Turning now to a conceptualisation of classroom interactional competence (CIC), defined here as 'teachers' and learners' ability to use interaction as a tool for mediating and assisting learning' (Walsh, 2011, p158), the starting point is to acknowledge the centrality of interaction to teaching and learning. In the same way we have seen that interactants display and orient to learning through interactions which are co-constructed, they also demonstrate differing abilities to jointly create discourse which is conducive to learning. CIC focuses on the ways in which teachers' and learners' interactional decisions and subsequent actions enhance learning and learning opportunities. From the extracts of data below, we will consider how teachers and learners display CIC and discuss the implications of this for gaining closer understandings of the relationship between L2 learning and interaction. The

assumption is that by first understanding and then extending CIC, there will be greater opportunities for learning: enhanced CIC results in more learning-oriented interactions.

Given the context dependency of interactional competence, we are attempting here to identify some of the features of *classroom* interactional competence (CIC). How are meanings co-constructed in the unfolding interaction? What do participants do to ensure that understandings are reached? How do they deal with repair and breakdown? More importantly, how does CIC influence learning? In what ways are participants able to create, maintain and sustain ‘space for learning’? Space for learning (Walsh, 2011) refers to the extent to which teachers and learners provide interactional space which is appropriate for the specific pedagogical goal of the moment. It does not simply mean ‘handing over’ to learners to maximise opportunities for interaction. Rather, creating space for learning acknowledges the need to adjust linguistic and interactional patterns to the particular goal of the moment. Again, the emphasis is on promoting interactions which are both appropriate to a particular micro-context and to specific pedagogic goals.

In language assessment circles, it is now widely predicted that interactional competence will become the ‘fifth skill’. Given that interlocutors display varying degrees of competence in their joint construction of meanings, I am suggesting here that teachers and learners also need to acquire a fine-grained understanding of what constitutes classroom interactional competence and how it might be achieved. Not only will such an understanding result in more engaged and dynamic interactions in classrooms, it will also enhance learning.

In the data, there are a number of ways in which CIC manifests itself. Firstly, and from a teacher’s perspective, a teacher who demonstrates CIC uses language which is both convergent to the pedagogic goal of the moment and which is appropriate to the learners. Essentially, this entails an understanding of the interactional strategies which are appropriate to teaching goals and which are adjusted in relation to the co-construction of meaning and the unfolding agenda of a lesson. This position assumes that pedagogic goals and the language used to achieve them are inextricably intertwined and constantly being re-adjusted (Seedhouse 2004, Walsh 2006). Any evidence of CIC must therefore demonstrate that interlocutors are using discourse which is both appropriate to specific pedagogic goals and to the agenda of the moment.

A second feature of CIC is that it facilitates interactional space: learners need space for learning to participate in the discourse, to contribute to class conversations and to receive feedback on their contributions. Interactional space is maximized through increased wait-time, by resisting the temptation to ‘fill silence’ (by reducing teacher echo), by promoting extended learner turns and by allowing planning time. By affording learners space, they are better able to contribute to the process of co-constructing meanings – something which lies at the very heart of learning through interaction. Note that this does not necessarily mean simply ‘handing over’ to learners and getting them to complete pair and group work tasks. While this may facilitate practice opportunities and give learners a chance to work independently, it will not, in itself, necessarily result in enhanced learning. The same point has been made by others (c.f. Rampton, 1999).

What is needed, I would suggest, is a re-thinking of the role of the teacher so that interaction is more carefully understood, and so that the teacher plays a more central role in *shaping* learner contributions. Shaping involves taking a learner response and doing something with it rather than simply accepting it. For example, a response may be paraphrased, using slightly

different vocabulary or grammatical structures; it may be summarised or extended in some way; a response may require scaffolding so that learners are assisted in saying what they really mean; it may be recast (c.f. Lyster 1999): ‘handed back’ to the learner but with some small changes included. By shaping learner contributions and by helping learners to really articulate what they mean, teachers are performing a more central role in the interaction, while, at the same time, maintaining a student-centred, decentralised approach to teaching.

Extract 2 is taken from a secondary class in China, where students are talking about visits to museums. This is an intermediate level class of students, aged 15-16, seated in rows in what might be described as a ‘traditional’ classroom layout. The teacher is eliciting reasons from the class which might explain why young people no longer visit museums.

### Extract 2

- 1 T: class begins (3) good afternoon everyone  
2 SS: good afternoon teacher  
3 T: sit down please (3) so our topic today is museums(.)  
4 talking about museums (.) have you ever been to museums  
5 (1)? Have you ever been to museums (2)? Yes of course.  
6 And what ↑kind of museums have you been to (4) NAME?  
7 S: (unclear)  
8 T: The national museum ↑yes thank you very much and how  
9 about you NAME?  
10 S: (unclear)  
11 T: History museum (.) thank you very much (.) so as you  
12 mentioned just now (1) you have been to ((puts powerpoint  
13 slides of museums up))many kinds of museums (.) but (.)do  
14 you still remember ↑when did you go to those museums for  
15 the last time (2)? When did you go there for the last  
16 time? For example when did you go to the national museum  
17 (.) the last time (4)? ((gets microphone from another  
18 student)). Thank you  
19 S: er maybe several month ago  
20 T: several month ago thank you ok how about you?  
21 S: I think several years ago  
22 T: several years ago. Ok ((laughs)). Thank you very much (3)  
23 ok actually can you tell me together do you often go to  
24 museums?  
25 Ss: no  
26 T: No so what you said is just the same as what I read in  
27 the newspaper the other day(.) would you please read the  
28 title of this piece of news together ((points to  
29 powerpoint slide))  
30 Ss: ((reading aloud)) why are young people absent from  
31 museums?  
32 T: thank you (.) what does it mean? (.) NAME what does the  
33 title mean?  
34 S: (.) why young people don’t go to museums  
35 T: they don’t go to museums very?  
36 S: often  
37 T: very often thank you very much (.) and (.)so actually

- 38           you are young people ↑why don't you go to museums very  
 39           often(3)? NAME
- 40    S:       (2) er because erm there's nothing in the museums that  
 41           er attracts us and er even the mus- things in museums are  
 42           usually very (.) old
- 43    T:       old thank you very much ok so nothing can attract you  
 44           ((writes on blackboard)) (3) what else? What else?  
 45           why don't you go to museums very often? NAME
- 46    S:       (3) I think going to museums is a wasting of time because  
 47           because I'm not interested in those old-fashioned things
- 48    T:       ok thank you very much so you're not in↑terested in it  
 49           it's not interesting right? ((writes on bb)) not  
 50           interesting (5) ok.

This teacher successfully creates space for learning by using a number of key interactional strategies:

1. Extensive use of pausing throughout, some of these pauses are quite extensive (c.f. lines 1, 3, 6 and 17, for example). The reader is reminded that teachers wait for less than one second after asking a question or eliciting a response. Pausing serves a range of functions:
  - It creates 'space' in the interaction to allow learners to take a turn-at-talk.
  - It allows thinking or rehearsal time (c.f. Schmidt YEAR ) enabling learners to formulate a response (see lines 44 and 46 where a teacher pause is followed by a learner pause).
  - It enables turn-taking to be slowed down, helping to make learners feel more comfortable and less stressed.
  - Increased wait time often results in fuller, more elaborated responses, as in lines 40ff and 46ff.
2. A lack of repair. Students make some mistakes in this extract (line 34, word order; line 46, verb form 'wasting of time'). These are ignored since they do not impede communication and do not fulfil the teacher's pedagogic goal here: elicitation and sharing of personal experiences. In this type of micro-context, error correction is not seen as being necessary and the teacher disregards errors since they are not of central concern.
3. Signposting in instructions. This teacher twice calls for a choral response (in lines 23 and 28). She marks her instruction and signposts that she wants the whole class to respond ('together'). This is a useful strategy in a multi-party conversation like a classroom where calling out and 'ragged' choral repetitions are very common.
4. Extended learner turns (in lines 46-47, for example). The teacher allows learners to complete a turn and make a full and elaborated response. Often teachers interrupt and close down space when learners are attempting to articulate something quite complicated. Here, she does the opposite and allows the student space in the interaction to make a full and useful contribution.
5. Seeking clarification (lines 34-37). The teacher is not entirely satisfied with the first response and insists on the insertion of 'often' to make sure that this contribution is as accurate as possible. This is a good example of a recast (see above).

In addition to creating space, in the same extract we can see how space can be ‘closed down’. One of the main causes of this is where teachers make excessive use of echo, repeating their own or students’ contributions, sometimes with no apparent reason or need. Note that there are 2 types of echo:

- Teacher-learner echo. Where a teacher repeats a learner’s utterance for the benefit of the class (lines 8, 11, 20 and 22 for example). This is helpful and ensures that a class progresses together and that everyone is ‘in the loop’. It is an inclusive strategy which ensures that the whole class comes along together and that there is commonality of understanding (see extract 8.2 where the teacher comments on the need to ensure that the whole class is ‘coming with me at the same time’).
- Teacher-teacher echo: where a teacher simply repeats her own utterance almost like a kind of habit (lines 4-5, 14-15, 32-33, 44). This serves no real function, arguably, and may impede opportunities for learning since the teacher is taking up learners’ space in the dialogue. It may be used as a kind of defence mechanism since silence can be quite threatening.

So far, we have seen that two important features of CIC are the convergence of language use and pedagogic goals, and the need for interactional space. A third feature or strategy entails teachers being able to *shape* learner contributions by scaffolding, paraphrasing, re-iterating and so on, a point which has already been mentioned. Essentially, through shaping the discourse, a teacher is helping learners to say what they mean by using the most appropriate language to do so. The process of ‘shaping’ contributions occurs by seeking clarification, scaffolding, modelling, or repairing learner input. In a decentralized classroom in which learner-centredness is a priority, these interactional strategies may be the only opportunities for teaching and occur frequently during the feedback move (c.f. Cullen 1998). Elsewhere (see, for example, Jarvis & Robinson 1997), the process of taking a learner’s contribution and shaping it into something more meaningful has been termed *appropriation*; a kind of paraphrasing which serves the dual function of checking meaning and moving the discourse forward.

We turn now to a further consideration of how these features of CIC manifest themselves in classroom data. Extract 3 below is taken from an adult EFL class in the UK, where the teacher is working with an upper-intermediate group of learners who are preparing to do a listening comprehension about places of interest. The teacher is, again, eliciting responses from the class about places they have visited during their time in the UK.

### Extract 3

- 1 T: okay, have you have you ever visited any places ↑outside  
London?=  
2 L1: =me I stay in (.) Portsmouth and er:: in Bournemouth  
3 T: [where’ve you been?  
4 L1: [in the south  
5 T: down (.) here? (pointing to map)  
6 L1: yeah yeah  
7 T: ↑why?

- 8 L1: er my girlfriend live here and (.) I like this student  
 9 place and all the people's young and a lot (.) er go out  
 10 in the (.) evening its very [good  
 11 T: [right  
 12 → T: anybody else? (4) Have you been anywhere Tury?  
 13 L2: Yes I have been in er (.) Edinbourg ((mispronounced)),  
 14 (.)=  
 15 T: =so here here ((pointing to map))=  
 16 L2: =yes er Oxford (.) Brighton (.) many places (.)=  
 17 T: =and which was your favourite?=  
 18 L2: =my favourite is London  
 19 → T: (.) ↑why?  
 20 L2: because it's a big city you can find what what you [want  
 21 T: [mmhh  
 22 L2: and do you can go to the theatres (1) it's a very (.)  
 23 cosmopolitan [city  
 24 L: [yes  
 25 L2: I like it very much=  
 26 T: =do you all (.) agree=  
 27 LL: =yes (laughter)  
 28 T: ((3)) laughter  
 29 T: has anybody else been to another place outside London?  
 30 L: no not outside inside  
 31 T: (.)mm? Martin? Anywhere?  
 32 L3: =no nowhere=  
 33 T: =would you like to go (.) [anywhere?  
 34 L3: [yes yes  
 35 T: where?  
 36 L3: well Portsmouth I think it's very (.) great=  
 37 T: =((laughter)) cos of the students [yes (.) yes  
 38 LL: [yes yes  
 39 L3: and there are sea too  
 40 T: Pedro?  
 41 L4: it's a (.) young (.) place  
 42 → T: mm anywhere else? (3) no well I'm going to talk to  
 43 you and give you some recommendations about where you  
 44 can go in (.) England (.) yeah

(Carr, 2006, DVD 12 task-based learning)

We can ascertain from this context (and from the lesson plan accompanying these published materials) that the teacher's main concern is to elicit ideas and personal experiences from the learners. The corresponding talk confirms this in a number of ways. First, there is no repair, despite the large number of errors throughout the extract (see, for example, lines 2, 8, 13, 36, 39), the teacher chooses to ignore them because error correction is not conducive to allowing learners to have space to express themselves. Second, the questions she asks are often followed with expansions such as 'why'? (see for example, 7, 19) which result in correspondingly longer turns by learners (in 8, and 20). Again, I suggest that both the teacher's questioning strategy and the longer learner turns are evidence of CIC since they facilitate opportunities for both engaged interaction and learning opportunity. Third, we note

that there are several attempts to ‘open the space’ and allow for wider participation of other learners. This occurs, for example, in 12 (*anybody else* plus a 4-second pause), in 26 (*do you all agree?*), in 42 (*anywhere else* plus a 3-second pause). On each of these occasions, the teacher is attempting to include other students in the interaction in a bid to elicit additional contributions. Again, her use of language and pedagogic goals are convergent, ensuring that learning opportunities are maximised.

Other features which show evidence of CIC include:

- the use of extended wait time, pauses of several seconds (in 12 and 42) which allow learners time to think, formulate and give a response. Typically, teachers wait less than one second after asking a question (see, for example, Budd Rowe, 1986), leaving learners insufficient time to respond.
- the use of requests for clarification (in 3, 5, 15) which serve to ensure that understandings have been reached. Not only do such requests give important feedback to the students, they allow the teacher to ensure that the other students are included by clarifying for the whole class.
- Minimal response tokens which tell the other speaker that understandings have been reached without interrupting the ‘flow’ of the interaction (see, for example, 11 (*right*), 21(*mmhh*)). Again, the use of such feedback is further evidence of convergence of pedagogic goals and language use.
- Evidence of content feedback by the teacher who responds to the message and not the linguistic forms used to articulate a particular message. In extract 3 above, for example, the teacher responds in an almost conversational way to almost all of the learners’ turns. She offers no evaluation or repair of learner contributions, as would be the ‘norm’ in many classroom contexts. Instead, she assumes an almost symmetrical role in the discourse, evidenced by the rapid pace of the interaction (note the overlapping speech in 3-5, 33-35, and latched turns in 14-18 and 25-27).

In the same extract, there are a number of features of CIC which we can highlight from a learner’s perspective. First, there is recognition on the part of L1 that the appropriate reaction to a question is a response, the second part of that adjacency pair, as evidenced in lines 2, 4, 6, 8. Not only does L1 answer the questions posed by the teacher, he is able to recognise the precise type and amount of response needed, ensuring that his contributions are both relevant and timely. He is also sufficiently competent to appreciate that a question like ‘why’ in line 7 almost always requires an extended response, which he provides in 8. His CIC is sufficiently advanced to appreciate that the teacher’s focus here is on eliciting personal experiences – while his responses are adequate and appropriate, they are certainly not accurate; yet this is of little or no concern given the pedagogic focus of the moment. This learner has correctly interpreted the teacher’s question as a request for further information where accuracy is less important than the provision of that information.

L1 also displays CIC in terms of his ability to manage turns, hold the floor and hand over his turn at a particular point in the interaction. He responds quickly to the teacher’s opening question, as indicated by the latched turn in 2 and turn continuation in 4, indicated by the overlapping speech. As well as being able to take a turn and hold the floor, this learner (L1) also recognises key signals which mark a transition relevance place – the teacher’s ‘right’ and accompanying overlap in lines 9 and 10 signal to this learner that it is time to relinquish his turn at talk and hand over to another learner. While it is the teacher who ‘orchestrates the interaction’ (Breen 1999), nonetheless, L1 has to be able to take cues, observe key signals and manage his own turn-taking in line with what is required by the teacher. He must also

recognize that his own contributions are largely determined by the teacher's and by the specific pedagogic goals of the moment.

In this section, we have seen how CIC is portrayed in a number of contexts. By 'context', I mean the physical, geographical and temporal setting of the interaction in addition to the specific micro-context, or mode, of the moment. As we have seen the interactional and linguistic resources used by both teachers and learners will vary considerably according to specific teaching and learning goals at a particular point in time. One aspect of CIC is the extent to which teachers match their use of language to their intended goals. The point being made here is that CIC is one aspect of learning in formal contexts: teachers and learners, by making appropriate interactional choices through their online decision-making, both facilitate the co-construction of meaning and display to each other their understandings. CIC manifests itself through the ways in which interactants create space for learning, make appropriate responses 'in the moment', seek and offer clarification, demonstrate understandings, afford opportunities for participation, negotiate meanings, and so on. These interactional strategies help to maintain the flow of the discourse and are central to effective classroom communication. They offer a different but complementary view of learning through interaction to that provided by a conversational analytic perspective which focuses mainly on turn design, sequential organisation and repair.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have presented and offered an initial characterization of classroom interactional competence. Placing interaction at the centre of learning, I have argued that in order to enhance learning and learning opportunity, teachers should begin by developing their own interactional competence. While I suggest that classroom interactional competence is highly context specific (both in the general social / geographic sense and in the more specific sense of 'context of the moment'), there are certain features of CIC which can be encouraged and promoted in any setting. By adopting specific interactional strategies, CIC can be greatly enhanced. These strategies include the need for teachers to create space for learning, the importance of jointly created understandings, the value of shaping learner contributions, the need to engage and involve learners in dialogue, and so on.

The idea of CIC has already started to be influential in different teaching contexts. Coyle et al. (2010), for instance, used insights from the concept of CIC by employing Self Evaluation of Teacher Talk (Walsh, 2006) to investigate the influence of interactive whiteboards on teachers' language use. More recently, in his study on Claims of Insufficient Knowledge (CIK) and their management by a language teacher, Sert (2011) introduced 'successful management of CIK' as a teacher skill that is closely related to CIC. His findings showed that using resources like Designedly Incomplete Utterances (Koshik, 2002) and embodied vocabulary explanations subsequent to a CIK are interactional resources that contribute to our understanding of CIC. It is obvious that more research in different settings with different participants is required to fully understand still uncovered features of CIC, which will then lead to a more in-depth understanding of teaching and learning practices in language classrooms.

Clearly, it is important for teachers to decide for themselves how to improve their CIC. What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to offer some thoughts on the various elements which make up CIC and suggested how teachers might enhance their own understandings. Like all professional development, there is no one 'right way' to improve. However, understanding a

specific context and developing skills appropriate to that context are central to any endeavour towards becoming a better teacher. Developing an understanding of classroom interaction and improving the way that interaction is managed are, I suggest, central to improving teaching.

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