The Interactional Dimension of LOA:
Within and Beyond the Classroom

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Learners, teachers and peers constantly interact in classroom settings. Indeed, within the framework of learning-oriented assessment (LOA), the interactional dimension plays a critical role in bridging learning gaps (Purpura & Turner, 2014). For this reason, this dimension resounded throughout the talks at the 2014 Roundtable in Second Language Studies on Learning-Oriented Assessment. Although certain speakers discussed it as a component of classroom-based assessment (CBA), others proved that interaction applies not only to unplanned, oral exchanges in the classroom, but also to elicitations not involving the traditional agents of LOA. Technology can facilitate continued exchange beyond the classroom, and it can even provide a substitute for human interaction. Furthermore, as large-scale testing companies shift their focus to LOA, they recognize the importance of creating authentic scenarios which emulate real interactions. This paper surveys the different modes of interaction discussed by the speakers as facilitated in the classroom but also in these other interactional contexts.

According to Purpura and Turner (2014), the interactional dimension concerns the way in which spontaneous conversation and exchange in the classroom contributes to or detracts from successful learning. Indeed, the structure of communication, repair, and feedback greatly influences students' processing and integration of the targeted content. In their analysis of discourse between teachers and learners, Purpura and Turner located several different interactional structures, such as indirect questions, direct questions, recasts, and explanations. In their data, they observed that instructors' spontaneous or planned questions and feedback do not necessarily elicit appropriate responses from students; if instructors are not aware of such a phenomenon, learning can be hindered. The teacher must take into careful consideration of learner responses when framing the interaction.

Tsagari's (2014) data further supported this claim by illustrating instances of failed interaction. Her examples of teacher-student exchanges in Cypriot after-school language programs, or Frontistiria, emphasized her concern for teachers' approach to unplanned interventions. In particular, Tsagari observed that teachers' tendency to employ repetition and translation as scaffolding hinders learning rather than facilitates it.

In his theoretical talk, Poehner (2014) acknowledged the interactional dimension, highlighting both the quality and the extent of mediator intervention within the framework of dynamic assessment (DA) and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. DA aims to bridge what Vygotsky terms the zone of proximal development (ZPD), or the gap between what learners can achieve through mediation and what they can achieve independently. Ultimately, the necessity of mediator intervention should decrease as students progress towards self-regulation. With this goal in mind, Poehner recognized that the student-mediator dialectic presupposes joint engagement and cautioned that, in the interest of promoting learner agency, the mediator's involvement should not exceed its purpose, but rather push the student to take charge of her own achievement. The mediator must ensure a delicate balance of explicitness and scaffolding in the interaction, which will entail the instructional outcome of the exchange.

Leung (2014) also touched upon the interactional dimension in his theoretical talk, in which he explained the dialogic versus conversational nature of interaction and feedback in

classrooms. As termed by Alexander (2008), "dialogic teaching" encompasses not just any conversation, but an interaction that necessitates attention, engagement, and meaningful communication over time. While a conversation is unchained, a dialogue incorporates specific contextual values, long-term learning goals, targeted pedagogical questioning, critical thinking, argumentation, and an ongoing relationship between students and teachers. To promote successful classroom learning, teachers must recognize the need to embed interaction in a continuing dialogue.

While these talks highlighted the importance of teacher-student interaction, others dealt with the role of peer feedback in promoting learning. In particular, Abraham, Stengel, and Welsh (2014) discussed their use of a Web forum as a tool for facilitating peer feedback. In the context of a Spanish culture class, students provided ongoing feedback to their peers as they developed their final project. The online comment system facilitated an extended discourse outside of the classroom, allowing students to approach issues from multiple perspectives and promoting cultural understanding. Thus, this technology-based, planned interaction promoted the goal of the class and proved just as valuable as unplanned, in-class interactions.

In fact, several other presenters demonstrated that the interactional dimension extends beyond the classroom. In addition to promoting further interpersonal interaction, technology can sometimes substitute for a human interlocutor. For instance, O'Reilly and Sabatini (2014) from Educational Testing Service (ETS) regard the social purpose of written language as central to the design of reading comprehension tasks. They developed scenario-based standardized assessments intended to replicate real-life scenarios, and through simulated peer discussion around a theme, these elicitations provide an unconventional form of scaffolding and thus promote learning through virtual interaction. Also from ETS, Wolf and Lopez (2014) demonstrated a technology-based proficiency assessment which integrates simulated peer and teacher interactions. Administered to assess language proficiency in English learners entering K-12, the elicitations feature animated characters and provide scaffolding based on the needs of the individual learners. This way, the tasks mirror what might happen in a classroom interaction and ensure the engagement of the learners as in a face-to-face interaction.

Through the incorporation of simulated exchanges, these two talks substantiate the claim that LOA pertains also to large-scale assessment. Likewise, Saville and Salamoura's (2014) work extols the importance of interaction in standardized tests. While discussing a systemic approach to LOA, Saville emphasized the use of language for social purposes and for communication in a globalized world. Large-scale tests must align with classroom practices and promote learning through interactional authenticity. Hamp-Lyons (2014) further discussed a potential application of this approach through the redesign of the speaking portion of one of the Cambridge English exams. A study of the exam's current format revealed that the interlocutor's role does not elicit language naturally or supply sufficient scaffolding to promote maximal performance and learning (Hamp-Lyons & Green, 2014). However, Hamp-Lyons observed that several opportunities could arise for more authentic interaction if the role of the interlocutor were to be reconfigured. In other words, if the interactional dimension of the assessment imitated real conversation scenarios, the task would stimulate engagement, improve performance, and promote learning.

As seen in these selected talks, the interactional dimension carries significant weight in LOA, but it takes many different forms depending on the assessment contexts. In a regular classroom, the teacher can frame the interaction through careful consideration of which types of questions to ask and how to incorporate feedback or scaffolding. The interactional dimension, however, can

continue even outside of face-to-face interaction with the integration of technological platforms. These platforms and other aspects of the elicitation allow for interactional concerns to be carried over into large-scale assessment, thus broadening the field of LOA beyond the classroom itself.

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