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Developing interactional competence with limited linguistic resources

Interactional competence does not presuppose linguistic complexity. Based on Wong and Waring's (2010) model of interactional practices, I identify specific areas of turn-taking, sequencing, overall structuring, and repair that may be amenable to instruction geared towards lower-level learners of ESL.

Turn-taking refers to practices of constructing and allocating turns. Exposing lower-level learners to transcripts of actual conversations can assure the latter that many real-life conversational turns are comprised of single words, phrases or clauses. Lower-level learners can also be taught to use a set of response tokens such as continuers, news-receipts, change-of-state tokens, and simple assessments to keep a conversation going. They can, if possible, be further taught to place these tokens at specific junctures—neither too late nor too early to avoid inviting negative attributions.

Sequencing involves practices for building courses of action such as requests, invitations, and responses to compliments. Lower-level learners can be taught simple strategies such as *reference shift* and *praise downgrade* in response to compliments rather than the one-size-fits-all *thank you* that could sometimes make one sound unwittingly presumptuous. Lower-level learners can also be taught to both decipher and deliver *dispreferred* responses such as rejections, which are typically produced with delay, mitigation and accounts. Understanding and producing such actions properly is tantamount to learning how to be gracious, how to say *no*, and how to read an incipient *no*—despite one's limited linguistic proficiency.

Integral to one's interactional competence is also the ability to open and close a conversation. Lower-level learners can be taught to read and deliver the *plus*, *minus*, and *neutral* responses to *how are you's* or the like that signal different degrees of potential for elaboration. They can, in particular, benefit from the knowledge that it is perfectly acceptable to produce a simple, neutral response such as *Great, thanks*. In addition, subtle signals of pre-closing are clear learnables for lower-level learners since they are typically implemented with simple lexical or clausal items such as *Well, Okay*, or *I'll give you a call*. More importantly, learning to understand such indirect indicators to close a conversation can spare the NNS the *faux pas* of overstaying the welcome, so to speak.

Given lower-level learners' limited linguistic proficiency, repair—practices of addressing troubles in speaking, hearing, or understanding—is a particularly useful and important interactional resource. Exposure to transcripts of actual conversations is a good way of assuring lower-level learners that NSs self-repair (or “stutter”) as a normal part of their speaking and that talking involves building and fixing an ongoing conversational turn bit by bit rather than delivering complete, ready-made sentences. Lower-level learners can also reasonably develop the ability to efficiently deploy a range of simple lexical and phrasal units to initiate repair on another's talk when experiencing trouble hearing or understanding that talk.

In sum, it is indeed possible to have dignity and manner despite the size of one's linguistic repertoire. Limited linguistic proficiency does not preclude the development of interactional competence—at least not to a certain extent.