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Iranian EFL Learners' Interactional Competence in Paired Speaking Tasks: An Account of Task Type Variability

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Abstract

The use of paired speaking tasks for the assessment of interactional competence has recently attracted the attention of many scholars in language learning research. The present study aimed at investigating whether task type has any effect on promoting language learners' interactional competence measured by means of multi-factor qualitative coding of paired speaking tasks. The performances of 92 dyads of conveniently-selected intermediate Iranian EFL learners on four paired speaking tasks were assessed using a rubric developed based on recent models for the scoring of interactional competence. To reveal the factors contributing to interactional competence, confirmatory factor analysis was run rendering the four-factor rubric developed in the present study as a valid measure of interactional competence through paired speaking tasks. In addition, to check the effect of different task types on interactional competence, the researchers calculated ANOVA estimates. Mean difference statistics computed indicated that some significant effect with large effect size existed for task type. Post-hoc comparisons carried out made it clear that from among the four tasks (i.e., Spot-the-difference, Story-completion, Decision-making, and Free-discussion) only the Story-completion task was the source of variability in the scores of interactional competence. The findings are of significance in that they point to the centrality of task type in assessing speaking through paired tasks. The study has certain theoretical and practical implications for foreign language teaching/testing researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: Interactional Competence, Paired Speaking Tasks, Task Type

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1. Introduction

Research on language learning and assessment has shown a growing interest in the dynamic and discursive aspects involved in language use. Many of these aspects have been described in accordance with Kramsch's (1986) concept of *interactional competence* (Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Cekaite, 2007; Galaczi, 2014; Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Gan, 2010; Kasper, 2006; Masuda, 2011; Walsh, 2012). Previous research, however, has failed to provide a *clear* definition for IC and its components (Young, 2019). On the one hand, *Interaction* has sometimes been described based on conversation analysis (CA) while in other cases the intersubjective nature of interaction has been the focus of attention. On the other hand, to use linguistic terms, *competence* has been referred to as one's underlying knowledge to produce and interpret well-formed sentences in a language. Nevertheless, although IC is built upon its preceding theories of competence, it differs from Bachman's (1997) communicative language ability or Canale and Swain's (1980) communicative competence significantly. According to Kramsch (1986), successful interaction requires both a knowledge of the universe shared by the participants as the reference to a common external context of communication, and the construction of "a shared internal context or sphere of intersubjectivity" (p. 367) that is built through the participants' collaboration within an interaction. And this is the conceptual definition of IC adopted as the base for the present research.

In addition, there has been a growing interest in the use of paired speaking tasks (i.e., speaking practices in which pairs are asked to converse naturally about a topic) in second language (L2) learning and assessment because of the important characteristics associated with such tasks. First, paired tasks require interlocutors to use a variety of interactional skills to fulfill a communicative goal (Brooks, 2009; Davis, 2009). Second, they can successfully bring about the elicitation of linguistic and paralinguistic features. Third, paired tasks have the potentiality to soothe the tension that may be invoked due to the asymmetrical power of the examiner over the examinee in interviews (Taylor, 2001). Fourth, paired speaking tasks are considered as central in communicative classrooms for their reliance on paired activities (Galaczi, 2014). Finally, they can promote authenticity in language assessment (by presenting real life situations) and provide positive washback in L2 learning contexts (Ducasse & Brown, 2009; May, 2011; Taylor, 2001).

Despite the importance attached to the use of paired speaking tasks in L2 assessment, the administration of such tasks to assess IC can give rise to certain problems worthy of consideration. First, assessing L2 oral interaction has proven to be a complicated undertaking (Chalhoub-Deville, 2003; May, 2010; Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009) because of the complexity inherent in

interaction itself. Next, due to the situatedness of IC, different task types turn out to pose even more challenges in L2 assessment through paired speaking practice. Consequently, the impact of different task types on interaction performance (that has been insufficiently probed in previous studies of IC) needs to be investigated to see whether different paired speaking tasks are likely to elicit different interaction patterns in the assessment of oral language.

The present study, therefore, was designed to shed more light on the complex nature of peer to peer interaction by conducting a confirmatory analysis of a rubric developed based on prevalent models for the scoring of IC through paired speaking tasks. A second goal was to take the situatedness of IC into account by considering the effect of task type on IC. Two research questions were thus addressed.

1. Does empirical evidence support the proposed model of factors contributing to interactional competence in paired speaking tasks in EFL learners?

2. Does task type variability have any significant effect on interaction performance in paired speaking tasks in EFL learners?

2. Literature Review

2.1. An Overview of Interactional Competence

In an attempt to capture the nature of language knowledge/ability, the concept of IC was introduced by Kramsch (1986) as a "dynamic process of communication built through the collaborative effort of the interactional partners" (p. 368). In his endeavor to picture the role of interaction in L2 verbal communication, Hall (1995) conceptualized the notion of IC in second language acquisition (SLA) research. According to Hall, IC can be seen as one's ability and knowledge of using linguistic and paralinguistic properties of language in oral communicative events.

Based on the existing literature on the studies of IC (e.g., Barraja-Rohan, 2011; Kasper, 2006, Walsh, 2012), conversation analysis appears to have had a paramount influence on the description of the features of IC such as sequential and preference organization, knowledge of and ability in turn-taking, turn design, action formation, and repair. The ability in topic initiation and development has attracted more attention in the testing context (see Cekaite, 2007; Galaczi, 2014; Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Gan, 2010; Masuda, 2011). According to May (2011), the concept of IC has been mainly investigated in the studies of speaking assessment as they address different aspects of conversational organization such as topic initiation and development, clarification requests, and other features (Brooks, 2009; Taylor, 2001). These studies have investigated participants' IC with a focus on their

performance in managing the conversation rather than on their mastery over formal aspects of language.

Furthermore, Young (2008, 2011) and He and Young (1998) studied interaction by describing resources interactants feed into discursive practices. As He and Young pointed out, such pragmatic linguistic resources entail the knowledge of syntactic patterns, rhetorical organization, and lexical features that characterize a specific practice as well as the awareness of managing turns, organizing topics, and marking boundaries between practices and transitions during an interaction.

The first thing participants need to do in oral interactions is to create "a shared internal context or sphere of intersubjectivity" (Kramsch, 1986, p. 367). Explicit in this view of intersubjectivity is the conscious allocation of interactional acts requiring one's ability to put themselves in the shoes of other interlocutors. Stated differently, intersubjectivity is realized as the knowledge shared between participants. Young (2008) takes intersubjectivity as the basic component of IC which is associated with adjacency pairs (i.e., units of conversation containing an exchange of functionally related turns by two speakers where the first turn requires a certain type of the second turn) as means of achieving intersubjectivity. Therefore, it is fair to note that adjacency pairs are fundamental to intersubjectivity because they are used by the interactants to show their understanding of turn sequences, and allow analysts to observe the progress of constructing intersubjectivity (Seedhouse, 2004).

Intersubjectivity emerges, as Young (2008, 2019) has proposed, through interactional resources including speech acts, turn-taking, repair, and boundaries deployed by interlocutors in discursive practices. Based on Wang's (2015) study, the first category comprises four communicative functions, namely *argumentation*, *discussion*, *support*, and *connection* that serve the purpose of act selection and its sequential organization in discursive practice. The turn-taking system, however, is used to clarify how participants in a conversation know when to select the next speaker, when to end the turn, and when to initiate a new one. In Schegloff's (2007) view, speakers may give the floor to their interlocutor, maintain it when they are speaking, take it when their interlocutor is speaking, and accept it from their interlocutor. As Tecedor Cabrero (2013) asserts, repair can be self-initiated (i.e., initiated by the speaker) or other-initiated (i.e., initiated by the interlocutor). It can also be self-repair (i.e., terminated by the current speaker) or other-repair (i.e., completed by the interlocutor). If merged, four possible repair categories will result: (1) Self-initiated self-repair, (2) Self-initiated other-repair, (3) Other-initiated self-repair, and (4) Other-initiated other-repair. As Young (2008) suggests, the boundaries of an interaction include the opening and closing acts serving to draw a line between a given practice and an adjacent talk.

Based on the discussion put forward by Tarplee (2010), collaboration functions as a key element in achieving an intersubjective understanding that can surface in participants' performance; particularly an understanding of who is in the next turn position, and of how the previous turn has been received and how the next one is expected to be regulated. Likewise, Young (2011) highlighted the mutuality and reciprocity of interactional resources that participants draw on to recognize and respond to each other. We may consider such mutuality and equality as an appropriate means of illustrating various levels of collaboration.

In sum, IC can be seen as the ability to undertake a dynamic process of co-constructing interaction (Lam, 2018; Plough et al., 2018; Roever & Kasper, 2018) in a purposeful and meaningful way to achieve a communicative goal (Gan, 2010) between two interlocutors as they come to engage in an active conversation. So, the dynamic process of interactional competence development can be elucidated by exploring the overall profile of interaction inclusive of the patterns of co-construction and task completion, on the one hand, and by analyzing the use of various interactional resources and also the active role of interlocutors in a conversation, on the other.

2.2. Tasks in L2 Interaction

Compared to the study of interlocutor's effect, the investigation of tasks as a source of variability that can add up to the complexity of interaction seems to have been scarce in interaction-based studies (Nakatsuhara, 2011). Even though IC has sometimes been assessed through the administration of paired speaking tasks, such assessments involve certain problems worthy of consideration. Assessing L2 oral interaction is judged to be a complex undertaking (Chalhoub-Deville, 2003; May, 2010; Taylor & Wigglesworth, 2009) because of the complicated nature of interaction itself. Moreover, there is no consensus on what constitutes co-construction and successful task completion in these tasks (Gan, 2010). Since IC is taken to be unique to each context, certain factors like task types and individuals' characteristics may make paired speaking tasks even more complicated in L2 assessment. The research on the diversity of interlocutors in terms of personality, awareness, gender, and language proficiency has shown variability in performing paired speaking tasks (e.g., Berry, 2007; Brown & McNamara, 2004; O' Sullivan, 2002). The effects of different task types, however, remain underexplored in few studies as described below.

While some researchers have used a variety of task topics to prompt participants to interact in paired or group tasks with parallel structures (e.g., Lumley & O'Sullivan, 2005; Nakatsuhara, 2006; Sun, 2011), very few have tested the possible effects of task type on interaction performance. Among this research is the study conducted by Hall and Hope (2015), who identified

three levels of micro aspects of interactants' performance that evidence use of IC resources at the level of adjacency, macro aspects of their performance serving larger goals of the interaction, and global traits of the interaction itself. In particular, they found out that role play differs from semi-scripted interview in the opportunities given to interactants to use their interactional resource, that the opportunity to draw upon a range of IC resources may be related to the power relationships built into the task, that both semi-scripted interview and role play seem to require candidates to employ more interactional resources than would computer-delivered or fully scripted tests, and that test tasks do tap interactional competence.

Balaman and Sert (2017) used conversation analysis to show how task openings by a focal L2 learner differs from a face-to-face discussion task to an online emergent information gap task. Differences in turn taking, allocation, design, and action formation were observed as their findings revealed. Although their study did add to literature on L2 interactional competence, their comparative analyses were based merely on two single cases.

To continue the line of research, Ahmadi and Montasseri's (2019) investigation of features of interactional competence from raters' perspective revealed at least three underlying aspects: management (entailing turn-taking, repair, and sequencing), engagement and attention (including seeking clarification, word-search strategies, and backchanneling), and paralinguistic features (involving vocal features, facial features, and gesture). Moreover, in line with a second concern of their study, the researchers made a comparison between peer-to-peer and group interaction performance. The former proved to be filled with turn-taking, other-initiated self-repair, use of pauses and wait times, backchanneling, and facial features such as eye contact. However, self-initiated self-repair, open-ended clarification requests, and employment of vocal features were prominent in the latter.

In another recent study, Vo (2019) identified four factors underlying interactional competence, namely body language, topic management, interactional management, and interactive listening, through an exploratory factor analysis. Their analyses further demonstrated that while topic management features were dominant in the individual task, interactional management features were at their highest in the paired discussion task. Furthermore, body language and topic management features were found to be predictors of interactional competence scores in the individual task, whereas body language, topic management, interactional management, and interactive listening features proved to anticipate scores in the paired discussion task.

Overall, the research outlined above does not put forward conclusive unifying results regarding the presumed effect of task type on IC. This study,

therefore, was designed to delve into the complicated nature of peer-to-peer interaction in paired speaking tasks by adopting a confirmatory approach toward a proposed rubric for the scoring of IC through paired speaking tasks developed based on prevalent models. Moreover, the present study aimed at enriching previous research by addressing the variable of task type to see whether it has any significant effect on interaction performance.

3. Method

The present study relied on the statistical analysis of the participants' IC scores on four different peer-peer speaking tasks to investigate a hypothesized model of assessing IC and examine the effect of task types on interactional performance.

3.1. Participants

A number of 95 dyads (i.e., 190 students conveniently sampled from various language institutes) initially took part in this study. They were both male and female, nearly one-third and two-thirds respectively, and their age ranged between 18 and 37. They were university students or graduates in non-English majors and had been studying English in institute(s) for at least two years. The reason for having a population of this size was to meet the criteria for conducting a confirmatory factor analysis on the proposed model of interaction features. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2006), the sample size should meet a threshold of five times the number of variables; the proposed model comprised 14 items that necessitated the participation of a minimal number of 70 pairs involving 140 participants. Oxford Quick Placement Test was conducted to indicate the possible variations as a result of differences in proficiency levels. Six participants failed to meet the score range (30 to 40) for an intermediate learner and were excluded from the study. The remaining participants (N = 184) were randomly paired up with their fellow classmates (92 dyads) to complete the four tasks. Two experienced English teachers, including one of the researchers, with over 17 years of teaching background cooperated as raters.

3.2. Materials and Instruments

3.2.1. The Rubric of Interactional Competence

The four categories of interactional resources proposed by Young (2008, 2019) were adopted as the measure of IC. Based on the previous studies (Schegloff, 2007; Tecedor Cabrero, 2013; Wang, 2015), the four interactional resources could be manifested in 14 interaction features. Each of these features was operationally defined and exemplified. However, an important concern to be addressed prior to the main study was to ensure the validity and reliability of the developed scoring rubric as an assessment instrument of IC. In terms of construct validity, each of the interaction

features was operationally defined based on the previous literature as illustrated in the Appendix.

Based on the patterns of interaction proposed by Galaczi (2008) and Storch (2002) and the importance of task completion (Hall & Pekarek, 2011; Jin et al., 2012), a five-level rating scale was developed as the criteria for evaluating the participants' performance with regard to the presence or absence of the 14 interaction features characterizing interactional resources in achieving intersubjectivity. A score of 5 was allocated to an interaction where both participants had an equal and mutual engagement in the interaction while the task was successfully completed. A score of 4 was given to an interaction that was collaborative with a low level of mutuality and equality where the task completion was broadly successful. A score of 3 indicated that the interaction was dominated by one of the participants with low levels of mutuality and equality while the task was partially completed. A score of 2 was given to an interaction where both participants tried to equally dominate the conversation and were least likely to collaborate with each other while having equal access to the conversational floor; additionally, some aspects of the task were not addressed and the task was minimally completed. The lowest score was given to an interaction where the interaction feature in focus was not opted for by any of the participants, and despite an equal chance of access to the conversational floor, the interaction was not collaborative and the task was then inadequately completed.

A pilot study was conducted using convenient sampling with 24 pairs of EFL students who were studying *American English File 2 (2nd ed.)* which is one of the English coursebooks designed for learners at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The participants studied at two different language institutes in Isfahan and took part in the study voluntarily. Task 1 was deployed in order to evaluate the participants' IC based on the scoring rubric. Each pair's performance on the task was video-recorded for further evaluation. Relying on the developed rubric, the two raters (i.e., one of the researchers and an experienced teacher who got familiarized with the scoring procedure) scored the participants' performance.

The Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) was selected as a method of inter-rater reliability measurement (Koo & Li, 2016). ICC estimates and their 95% confidence intervals were computed using SPSS (version 25) based on a mean-rating ($k = 3$), absolute-agreement, 2-way mixed-effects model. According to Koo and Li, values below 0.5 show poor reliability, values between 0.5 and 0.75 indicate moderate reliability, values between 0.75 and 0.9 signal good reliability, and values above 0.90 point to excellent reliability. Table 1 shows the results of reliability analysis for each of the interaction features in particular and overall.

Table 1

The Results of the Inter-Rater Reliability for the Pilot Study

Feature		Intraclass Correlation	CI	Sig
Act Selection	Argumentation	.80	.54-.91	.00
	Discussion	.83	.62-.93	.00
	Support	.77	.47-.90	.00
	Connection	.72	.37-.88	.00
Repair	Self-self repair	.86	.69-.94	.00
	Self-other repair	.84	.65-.93	.00
	Other-self repair	.86	.67-.93	.00
	Other-other repair	.93	.85-.97	.00
Turn Taking	Yielding the floor	.86	.68-.94	.00
	Keeping the floor	.85	.67-.93	.00
	Taking the floor	.89	.74-.95	.00
	Accepting the floor	.86	.69-.94	.00
Boundaries	Opening	.85	.65-.93	.00
	Closing	.83	.61-.92	.00
Overall		.93	.85-.97	.00

As shown in Table 1, there was a high agreement between the two raters in giving scores to the interactional performance of the participants ensuring the inter-rater reliability of the developed scoring rubric of IC.

3.2.2. Paired Speaking Tasks

Four different paired speaking tasks (i.e., practices that involve getting pairs to converse naturally about a topic) were also used to elicit participants' interactional performance and to investigate possible differences in their scores across the tasks. Two factors were taken into consideration in the development of the tasks: a) the distinctive features of a task based on SLA research and b) the matter of authenticity in target language use as advised by the literature. As some SLA researchers (e.g., Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008) point out, the presence of three features including information access, task outcome, and negotiation results can contribute to the development of distinctive tasks.

Table 2 shows the distinctive features of the four tasks developed for the purposes of the present study. For example, in the case of Task 1, the definition of a split task encompasses a presentation of different pieces of information to participants (i.e., giving different pictures prompts to participants in a pair). A closed task requires interlocutors to arrive at a

certain outcome (i.e., finding the existing difference between the two pictures).

Table 2

Features of the Four Tasks

Task	No.	Features
Spot-the-difference	1	split (information access) + closed (task outcome)
Story-completion	2	shared (information access) + closed (task outcome)
Decision-making	3	open (task outcome) + convergent (negotiation results)
Free discussion	4	open (task outcome) + divergent (negotiation results)

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Task Administration

The first step was to set up the pairs in accordance with the placement test results. Both raters worked together to assign the participants in pairs. Next, packages containing copies of task prompts were distributed amongst the participants (each package included two copies of the four tasks for each participant (in terms of Task 1, the participants were given different pictures). Then, one of the researchers provided guidance to the participants on how to use their smartphones to record their interaction on each task and how to name the audio files based on their pair ID and task number. The participants were also advised against using Persian, their first language, in carrying out the tasks. For each task, the treatment started by reading the prompt to the participants and answering their questions to make sure everyone knew what to do. Next, the co-teacher allotted one minute to the participants for preparation and 2.5 minutes for finishing each task. Meanwhile, both administrators walked around the classroom to prevent any first language (L1) use during task preparation and completion. When time was up, they asked the participants to stop their conversation and save the audio recordings. Finally, the two raters collected the prompts of the completed task and made sure that every pair had properly recorded their interaction. Similar procedures were undertaken for the three remaining tasks and a ten-minute break was offered to the participants after completing Task 2 to refresh themselves before moving to tasks 3 and 4. At the end of each data collection day, the third researcher collected all the audio files from each pair and transferred them into a computer for further transcription, analysis, and scoring.

3.3.2. Coding and Scoring Interactions

The two coders (i.e., one of the researchers and the co-teacher) started coding five random interactions together to make themselves familiar with the coding performance. Throughout the coding procedure, they reviewed

both the transcription and the audio record of each pair's utterances to mark all occurring features based on the assigned coding symbols following the operational definition of each interaction feature. Next, any inconsistencies encountered between the coders were appropriately fixed through negotiation. Once the coders had achieved a 100% agreement in coding performance, twenty of the remaining interactions were coded by each of them. The results were used to measure inter-coder reliability – *Cohen's kappa* = .87, 95% *CI*: 0.83 to 0.91, $p < .05$ (Plonsky & Gass, 2011). After ensuring inter-coder agreement, the remaining interactions were coded by one of the researchers.

In terms of the coding procedure, each interaction was reviewed four times using both transcription and audio records. Firstly, the raters followed the operational definitions and used the assigned symbols (see the Appendix) to identify and mark the features of act selection. Secondly, they reviewed the transcripts to score the indicators of turn-taking. Thirdly, the transcripts were reviewed once more to analyze and score the indicators of repair mechanisms. Finally, each of the transcripts was reviewed for the last time to identify, classify, and mark the exemplars of initiating and closing acts used by the interlocutors. All of the interactions were coded using the same four-step coding procedure.

As in the coding procedure, it was imperative to establish a consensus between the coders in using the developed rating rubric to attribute scores to the overall quality of interactions. Therefore, one of the researchers trained the other rater in scoring before the rating process actually began so as to bring about an understanding and an accurate, consistent use of the rubric. Both reviewers allocated scores to five randomly coded interactions based on the developed rubric. Then, they compared and discussed their decisions with regard to each sample based on each level of the rubric. This continued until both raters reached an agreement on the samples. Once a consensus was built, the two raters scored the remaining interactions.

3.4. Data Analysis

In his discussions of how to create intersubjectivity, Young (2008, 2011) has proposed a classification of interactional resources used by participants in order to achieve intersubjectivity in interaction:

- *Speech acts:* the choice of acts in a discursive practice and their sequential development (Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010)
- *Turn-taking:* how participants in a discursive practice choose the following speaker and how they adjust the timing of turn termination and turn initiation (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974)

- *Repair:* the ways in which participants react to interactional troubles in a discursive practice (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977)
- *Boundaries:* how participants deploy and identify the opening and closing acts of a discursive practice serving to draw a borderline between a given practice and adjacent talk and/or as transitions within a single practice (Geluykens & Swerts, 1994; Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff & Sacks, 1973) (Young, 2019, p. 97)

Since the first research question in this study addressed what features contribute to IC, in line with Young's classification of interactional resources, it was hypothesized that interaction features fall into four categories of act selection, turn-taking, repair, and boundaries. In other words, it was assumed that four factors can be distinguished within the set of variables (N = 14). Consequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which applies to a single set of variables to see which ones form coherent subsets relatively independent of one another, was conducted. In doing so, an initial model of hypothesized relationships among interaction features was formed using Maximum Likelihood (ML) extraction and Varimax rotation methods with a fixed number of factor loadings (N = 4). Next, CFA was applied in order to check the fitness of the proposed model.

As with the second research question, which was concerned with the effect of task type on the participants' interactional performance scores, the overall IC scores on each of the four tasks were analyzed and compared using one-way repeated-measure ANOVA.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

The performance of each pair across the four tasks was scored. In order to interpret the overall scores based on the rubric levels, the average scores of participants on each interaction feature were calculated. The total score was also calculated by adding up participants' overall scores on each interaction feature divided by the number of features (N = 14). Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of interaction features in all four tasks combined. Since the scores were given on a scale of 1 to 5 describing a very low level of interaction competence to a very high level of IC, five intervals were calculated between 1 and 5 in order to interpret the scores. A score ranging from 1 to 1.8 was considered as a very low level of IC; the range of 1.8 to 2.6 showed a low level of IC; a score falling between 2.6 and 3.4 was an indication of an average level of IC; a high level of IC required a score between 3.4 and 4.2; and a score ranging from 4.2 to 5 was attributed to a very high level of IC.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Overall Scores in all Four Tasks

	Feature	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Act Selection	Argumentation	92	2.75	4.50	**3.60**	.36
	Discussion	92	2.50	4.25	3.44	.36
	Support	92	2.75	4.50	**3.61**	.34
	Connection	92	2.50	4.75	3.47	.37
Repair	Self-initiated self-repair	92	1.75	4.00	2.69	.50
	Self-initiated other-repair	92	1.75	4.25	3.24	.49
	Other-initiated self-repair	92	1.50	3.75	2.55	.51
	Other-initiated other-repair	92	1.50	4.00	2.68	.59
Turn-taking	Yielding the floor	92	2.00	3.75	2.72	.40
	Keeping the floor	92	1.75	4.00	2.84	.40
	Taking the floor	92	1.75	4.00	2.71	.39
	Accepting the floor	92	1.75	4.00	3.08	.42
Boundaries	Opening	92	2.25	4.25	3.37	.43
	Closing	92	2.75	4.50	**3.79**	.36
	Total	368	2.68	3.66	3.13	.19

As presented in Table 3, a total mean of 3.1 indicated that, in general, participants showed an average level of IC. Moreover, they showed a high level of IC with regard to the features of act selection. In terms of repair mechanisms and turn-taking, participants had an average level of IC except for the other-initiated self-repair feature that was slightly below the threshold of an average IC (M = 2.55) and fell into the low level. Regarding the boundaries, the participants showed an approximately high level of IC (M = 3.37) in opening and a high level of IC (M = 3.79) in closing an interaction. Variations in scores were also observed across tasks as discussed below.

4.1.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Prior to CFA, the missing data, multivariate outliers, multicollinearity, and normality were examined (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006) which indicated no violation of CFA assumptions. The obtained scores on 14 interaction features of IC were then subjected to ML using SPSS version 25. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy turned out to equal .76 going beyond the recommended value of .6 which meant that, overall, the variables warranted a factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974). Moreover, the value for Bartlett's Test of Sphericity's Chi-Square was 556.18 (df = 91, p = .000). The significant outcome of this test rejected the null hypothesis supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix.

A clear break after the fifth component was observed through the examination of the screen plot. Further analysis continued by retaining four components, supported by the results of Parallel Analysis, showing solely four factors with eigenvalues outreaching the corresponding criterion values for a randomly generated data matrix having the same size (14 variables, 92 respondents). Accordingly, having four factors in this set of data was a more precise account of the analysis since there were four factors with an initial eigenvalue greater than 1 which, hence, deserved further investigation.

The four-factor solution explained 61.42% of variances in the data set with factors 1 to 4 contributing 10.42%, 25.5%, 16.43%, and 9.06%, respectively. The variance explained was the one in the observed features in terms of underlying latent factors of IC. According to Habing (2003), at least 50% of the variance should be accounted for by the common factors in a proper model. This confirmed that the four-factor solution was an appropriate model. The results of the four-factor solution are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

The Factor Analysis for the Interaction Features (Four-Factor Solution)

	Factor Loadings			
	1	2	3	4
Argumentation	**.73**	-.03	-.20	.04
Discussion	**.78**	.04	-.14	.00
Support	**.81**	-.00	.02	.04
Connection	**.80**	-.04	-.17	.03
Self-initiated self-repair	.01	**.88**	.01	.18
Self-initiated other-repair	.04	**.76**	.15	.06
Other-initiated self-repair	-.09	**.68**	.26	.03
Other-initiated other-repair	-.00	**.66**	.21	.04
Yielding the floor	-.12	.20	**.63**	.02
Keeping the floor	-.09	.18	**.79**	-.06
Taking the floor	-.06	.13	**.78**	-.19
Accepting the floor	-.19	.10	**.62**	.04
Opening	.03	.10	.02	**.99**
Closing	.04	.10	-.09	**.53**

Based on the results of the factor analysis, an initial model with four factors was prepared for further data analysis to check the fitness of the proposed model. The results for the initial model reached the minimum for model fit (X^2 = 76.05, *df* = 71, p = .31). Overall, the empirical evidence supported a good fit of the hypothesized four-factor model of IC; *CFI* = .99, *GFI* = .9, and *RMSEA* = 0.02.

4.1.2. The Effect of Task Type on IC Scores

Descriptive statistics for interaction features across the four tasks are presented in Table 5. As shown in Table 5, the mean scores for the features of act selection slightly differed across three of the tasks (i.e., spot-the-difference, decision-making, and free-discussion tasks). In these three tasks, the participants showed a high level of IC ranging from a mean score of 3.76 to 4.18. In contrast, in the story-completion task, the mean scores were significantly lower (M = 2.07 to 2.4) indicating a low level of IC. In general, the highest mean scores on features of argumentation (M = 4.04), discussion (M = 3.91), support (M = 4.18), and connection (M = 4.01) were obtained in the free-discussion task while the lowest mean scores were obtained in the story-completion task, (M = 2.4, 2.19, 2.08, and 2.07, respectively).

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Interaction Features across the Four Tasks

Feature		Task Type							
		Spot-the-difference		Story-completion		Decision-making		Free-discussion	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Act Selection	Argumentation	4	.67	2.40	.86	3.96	.56	4.04	.62
	Discussion	3.89	.65	2.19	.9	3.76	.68	3.91	.64
	Support	4.14	.65	2.08	.9	4.06	.6	4.18	.51
	Connection	3.89	.76	2.07	.92	3.92	.69	4.01	.56
Repair	Self-initiated self-repair	2.80	1	2.71	1.01	2.78	1.02	2.45	1.02
	Self-initiated other-repair	3.44	.89	3.15	.99	3.40	.96	2.97	1.06
	Other-initiated self-repair	2.69	1.07	2.58	1.02	2.66	1.07	2.26	.91
	Other-initiated other-repair	2.76	1.09	2.68	.98	2.76	1.09	2.52	1.08
Turn-taking	Yielding the floor	2.68	.76	2.67	.85	2.77	.85	2.76	.83
	Keeping the floor	2.80	.86	2.79	.9	2.95	.92	2.83	.88
	Taking the floor	2.59	.87	2.71	.9	2.79	.93	2.75	.83
	Accepting the floor	3.15	.90	2.96	.93	3.13	.94	3.08	.90
Boundaries	Opening	3.56	.90	3.66	.82	2.46	1.02	3.81	.79
	Closing	3.98	.71	4.10	.43	3	1.06	4.09	.64
Total		3.31	.4	2.77	.41	3.17	.4	3.26	.42

Concerning turn-taking features, the participants performed on an average level of IC ranging from a mean score of 2.59 to 3.14. The highest score in turn taking belonged to accepting the floor feature in spot-the-difference and decision-making tasks. However, regarding interactional

boundaries, the participants showed a high level of IC across all four tasks, except for the opening feature in the decision-making task where the mean score (M = 2.46) indicated an average level of IC.

Overall, the highest mean score was obtained in the spot-the-difference task (M = 3.31, SD = .40) whereas the lowest mean score was obtained in the story-completion task (M = 2.77, SD = .41).

A one-way repeated measures ANOVA was run to compare scores of IC across the Spot-the-difference task, the Story-completion task, the Decision-making task, and the Free-discussion task. Prior to ANOVA, assumption testing was conducted (the homogeneity of the sample, normal distribution of scores, and other conditions for the test were checked). The results indicated that there was a significant effect for task type (Wilks' Lambda = .45, F (3, 89) = 35.20, p < .001, effect size = .54). However, as displayed in Table 6, post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni test revealed that the mean score for Task 2 (M = 2.77, SD = .41) was significantly different from that of Task 1 (M = 3.31, SD = .40), Task 3 (M = 3.17, SD = .40), and Task 4 (M = 3.26, SD = .42). That is, only the Story-completion task caused variability in IC scores across the four tasks and there was no statistically significant mean difference among the other three tasks.

Table 6

The Post-Hoc Comparisons of Interactional Competence Scores across the Four Tasks

		Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Task 1	Task 2	.54	.05	.00	.38	.70
	Task 3	.14	.06	.12	-.02	.30
	Task 4	.05	.06	1.00	-.13	.23
Task 2	Task 1	-.54	.05	.00	-.70	-.38
	Task 3	-.40	.06	.00	-.57	-.22
	Task 4	-.49	.06	.00	-.66	-.32
Task 3	Task 1	-.14	.06	.12	-.30	.02
	Task 2	.40	.06	.00	.22	.57
	Task 4	-.09	.05	.61	-.23	.05
Task 4	Task 1	-.05	.06	1.00	-.23	.13
	Task 2	.49	.06	.00	.32	.66
	Task 3	.09	.05	.61	-.05	.23

4.2. Discussion

In order to tackle the first research question of what factors contribute to IC, the complex nature of IC was investigated by expanding Young's (2008, 2019) classification of interactional resources; the endeavor resulted in a model with further subcategories (features) that could characterize interlocutors' interactional competency. The proposed four-factor model

supported the idea that IC is co-constructed by all the participants within a specific contextual practice (Taguchi, 2017; Young, 2019). The four factors building up the developed rubric are discussed below.

Act Selection: The first category, act selection, includes features of argumentation, discussion, support, and connection. The findings supported the idea brought up by Taguchi (2017) that there is a divergence between pragmatic and interactional competence in that the latter is co-constructed by all the participants within a specific contextual practice, including discursive consecutive interactional acts of argumentation, discussion, support, and connection. In line with Wang's (2015) research, the findings suggested that the interlocutors in this study used the features of act selection to arrive at a minimal level of mutual understanding to complete the tasks. Therefore, expressing opinions, discussing different point of views, showing engagement by supporting a partner, and making connections between ideas can be considered as interactional properties of the same factor that helps participants work collaboratively to achieve intersubjectivity and fulfill communicative goals.

Repair: According to Kaur (2011), repair is used by interactants as a means of compensating for conversational troubles and preventing possible misunderstandings to make their message more comprehensible to their interlocutors. The present study employed the four types of repair proposed by Tecedor Cabrero (2013) including the features of self-initiated self-repair, self-initiated other-repair, other-initiated self-repair, and other-initiated other-repair. In self-initiated self-repair cases, the analysis of repair indicators showed that, in line with Schwartz's (1980) description, the participants were more likely to signal the initiation of the repair process by non-vocalic tokens of a question and use of wh-words. Self-initiated other-repair instances had the highest mean scores across the four tasks showing that intermediate learners in this study were more successful in employing this interaction feature in a collaborative manner and with a broad completion of task requirements, yet with low levels of mutuality and equality. This could be explained by the fact that conversational troubles are mostly recognized and signaled by the speaker him/herself while being corrected and compensated for by the non-speaking interlocutor, possibly due to the processing load on the speaker and his/her non-verbal help-seeking behavior realized by the other interlocutor. In this regard, a mutual state of understanding is achieved through collaboration rather than the equal participation of interlocutors. These results, in light of the analysis of repair indicators, showed that participants deployed different repair strategies to deal with conversational problems so as to maintain a mutual understanding of context-specific interaction, a finding supported by Hall and Pekarek Doehler's (2011) study.

Turn-taking: Schegloff's (2007) model of turn-taking included the sub-features of yielding the floor, keeping the floor, taking the floor, and accepting the floor. The results of the confirmatory factor analysis on the hypothesized model showed strong loadings of these features on the same latent factor. However, the mean scores on the features of turn-taking indicated that the participants were rather more confident in the use of accepting the floor feature at an average level of interactional competence. That is, the non-speaking participants were more likely to wait for an invitation to take part in the conversation. This could be an underlying reason why the overall performance of participants was described at an average level of interactional competence since it could affect the proportion of participants' engagement throughout the interactions. In other words, the non-speaking participants tended to remain silent yet collaborative while the speaker was contributing to the completion of the task. The sense of collaboration was evident in that there were no rejections of a turn when the speaking participants offered the conversational floor to the non-speaking ones. However, it should be noted that the accepting feature had a slightly higher overall mean score in comparison to the offering feature because, in most cases, the participants showed a sense of more collaboration and mutuality when accepting the floor. Cekaite's (2007) work, in which the participant of interest flourished in the use of *taking* the floor feature over time, can lend support to the findings of the present study by virtue of the fact that the very use of this feature depends "in part on IC co-constructed by" the participants (Young, 2019, p. 99).

Boundaries: the last IC resource, addressed participants' use of sequence organizers to signal the initiation and termination of an interaction. Overall, the features of opening and closing had the highest mean scores in all tasks combined and across the four tasks suggesting that the learners used the boundary features at a high level of IC. High factor loading coefficients and mean scores are hints that the participants could employ these features collaboratively to achieve intersubjectivity throughout the tasks. This observation, therefore, can contribute to Young's (2019) assertion that "IC goes beyond the pragmatic competence of a single participant to recognize that IC is co-constructed by all participants in a discursive practice" (p. 93).

In a nutshell, the investigation into the four-factor model proposed in this study corroborated the need for a refinement of the definition of IC put forward by Hall (1999). With regard to the use of the four features by the participants, the findings pointed towards the idea of interactional contingency meaning that the features used by the participants in discursive practices depend on, to use Young's (2019) terms, "what they perceive other participants doing and thinking"; hence the importance of intersubjectivity as a fundamental aspect of IC. In addition, since "IC is not the permanent

possession of a specific participant" it seems safe to say that "perhaps the term *competence* does not adequately describe IC" (p. 97). Therefore, the dynamic process of IC can be depicted by accounting for the overall profile of interaction inclusive of the patterns of co-construction and task completion, on the on hand, and by analyzing the use of various interactional resources and also the active role of interlocutors in a conversation, on the other.

The four-factor model confirmed in the present study roughly corresponds to the model proposed by Ahmadi and Motasseri (2019), whose detailed analysis of the transcription of interviews with a group of raters revealed three aspects of interactional competence: management, engagement and attention, and paralinguistic aspects, each with its own subcategories. The management feature included turn-taking, repair, and sequencing (resembling the act selection feature here), with boundaries as the only missing feature in their model. This absence may be justified when one considers the point that, in their research, raters' views constituted the data. Chances are high that raters underestimate, or even ignore, boundary as a considerable feature in rating interactional performance since the ability to signal the initiation and termination of an interaction is taken for granted by many of them.

The second research question concerned whether the variability observed in IC scores stems from the use of different task types. With the scores obtained in all four tasks combined, the intermediate language learners in this study showed an average level of IC. The highest mean scores on interaction features belonged to those of act selection and boundary resources. This may suggest that the participants could use signposting language to express their opinions, discuss different ideas, show engagement in the conversation, and build connections between ideas. The mean scores on participants' interactional performance obtained in each of the four tasks indicated that the intermediate interactants in this study employed interaction features differently across the four tasks. For example, the highest mean scores on the features of act selection were obtained in the free-discussion task while the mean scores on the use of repair features were at their lowest values in the very same task. This finding may suggest that task type can cause variability in an interaction (Nakatsuhara, 2011) by necessitating the use of certain interactional resources in a particular task type. Results also suggest that task type could possibly turn out to have a certain impact on the distribution pattern of interaction features and can count in interaction performance.

The descriptive statistics showed that the lowest mean scores regarding the features of act selection were obtained from story-completion task. Concerning the effect of act selection features in predicting the overall

interactional competence scores, it seems that the participants could not perform well in deploying argumentation, discussion, support, and connection features in accordance to the dimensions of mutuality and equality (Dimitrova-Galaczi, 2008), showing a low level of interactional competence. This could be explained by two main reasons. First, the story-completion task is characterized by shared given information and closed outcome. Second, the scenario for the story-completion task might have been familiar to most of the students, i.e. the story of accidentally sitting on wet paint. As a result, the participants might have already known how they should have completed the task and, hence, showed less collaboration in fulfilling the task. This was also observed by the raters in the evaluation process.

Nevertheless, since the study of tasks as a source of variability in discursive interaction seems to have been scarce in interaction-based studies, further research is needed to confirm or repudiate the findings of the present investigation in this regard.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The present research helped strengthen the theoretical foundation of the concept of IC by empirically investigating the construct with regard to the use of interactional resources. The results yielded evidence to revise the construct as the ability to effectively collaborate with others in order to achieve various communication goals through the use of the features of act selection, repair, turn-taking, and boundaries (Gan, 2010; Kramsch, 1986; Lam, 2018; Plough et al., 2018; Roever & Kasper, 2018; Tarplee, 2010; Young, 2008, 2019). Moreover, task type effects, which were mostly overlooked in previous interaction studies, were taken under scrutiny in this study. The statistical analysis showed that task type can influence participants' IC scores and is, thus, viewed as a source of variability in discursive interaction.

The findings of the study provide certain implications for pedagogical practice. First, successful communication requires mutual collaboration. Learners should be aware that an efficient interactant often uses interactional resources of act selection, repair, turn-raking, and boundaries to maintain the conversation within a sphere of mutual understanding. Second, various distribution patterns of interaction features can be elicited through certain tasks. The findings of the present study suggest that teachers should opt different paired speaking tasks based on their instructional objectives and in accordance with the underlying features of interaction.

It should be also pointed out that the present study only focused on intermediate EFL learners while learners with higher or lower levels of proficiency may perform differently from what was observed in this study in

terms of interaction quality. In order to tackle this issue, participants with different proficiency levels can be examined in future studies. Additionally, the current study used four types of paired speaking tasks that were different in terms of information access, task outcome, and negotiation result (Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Alternative approaches to classify paired speaking tasks could be envisaged. For instance, future studies may categorize tasks based on their complexity and examine the relationship between such tasks and communicative performance in terms of the underlying features of interaction.

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Appendix: Features of Interactional Competence

Category	Feature	Operational Definition	Symbol	Example
		The occurrence of utterances …		
Act Selection	Argumentation	showing one's opinion (rebuttal or acceptance) about an idea	AR	A: *I think it's the best piece of technology …* B: *I don't think so, …*
	Discussion	making a statement about what a partner just said or comparing ideas	DS	B: *… we should paint the room green.* A: *Yeah, green make it much more cheerful.*
	Support	showing engagement in the conversation (by backchanneling or helping partner out)	SP	A: ah … *I mean those small motorbikes … ah …* B: *You mean a moped?*
	Connection	referring to a previous idea	CN	A: *It's the same about cars. They also produce a lot of pollution.*
Turn-Taking	Yielding the Floor	Offering the floor to the other interlocutor	YF	A: *What do you think?* B: *I don't know, it …*
	Keeping the Floor	Showing one's intention to maintain the conversational ground	KF	B: *It's really difficult, … ah, you know, it's a complex process …* A: *Yeah, green make it much more cheerful.*
	Taking the Floor	interrupting the speaker	TF	A: *It actually comes in different colors and …* B: *No, you're mistaken, it only comes in white …*
	Accepting the Floor	showing one's grasp of the talk	AF	A: *Well, I think …*
Repair	Self-initiated self-repair	showing the speaker's recognition of mistake and its correction by rephrasing	SS	A: *It's on the bad, Oh sorry, I meant the bed*
	Self-initiated other-repair	showing the speaker's recognition of a mistake and its correction by the non-speaker interlocutor	SO	B: *What was his name? James, Jamey?* A: *James.*
	Other-initiated self-repair	indicating the non-speaker's recognition of a mistake and its correction by the speaker	OS	A: *I really like the silk leaning of the coat* B: *leaning?* A: *Oh, sorry. Lining.*
	Other-initiated other-repair	showing the non-speaker's recognition of a mistake and its correction by the non-speaker interlocutor	OO	A: *I think it's unconny.* B: *Pardon?* A: *It's very strange.* B: *You mean uncanny?* *A; Yeah.*
Boundaries	Opening	signaling the initiation of a talk or showing the introduction of a new idea	IN	A: *OK, let's start by discussing the advantages first.*
	Closing	concluding the talk or signaling the termination of the interaction	CL	B: *I think that's all.* A: *Yeah, that's all we need for the project.*

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