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Demystifying the Role of Paired Task and Test-Taker Speaking Ability in Assessing Co-Constructed Discourse in Paired Oral Assessment

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to demystify the role of paired task and test-taker speaking ability in assessing co-constructed discourse in paired oral assessment across Iranian EFL paired examinees with different ability combinations. To accomplish this aim, non-experimental qualitative research was devised in which 36 participants were purposely recruited from three distinct speaking competence levels; namely, upper-intermediate (High-Level), lower intermediate (Mid-Level), and elementary (Low-Level), with 12 learners in each. Participants with similar and different proficiency levels were randomly assigned to six different paired group combinations and were given a discussion task as a paired-test speaking task in which they were asked to discuss the topic of the conversation and attempt to develop the co-constructed discourse. The voices of each couple discussing the assigned topic were then recorded. Following the transcription of the examinees' performances, the researcher analyzed the learners' conversations using Young's model of interactional competence, which deals with the speakers' ability to organize interactions in terms of turn-taking, break-down repair, and mutual understanding using verbal communication in relation to the situational context. The findings demonstrated that low-ability partners employed gestures and postures in turn-taking, as well as a lot of breakdown repairs while failing in mutual comprehension, particularly in talks with more skilled interlocutors. Mid-ability pairs struggled to provide an adequate response in the second position to demonstrate understanding of an interlocutor's comment or statement but could advance the communication in terms of mutual understanding and moderate success in proper breakdown repairs in their own similar and balanced pairs. However, they lost confidence in taking turns and relied heavily on fixes when conversing with more experienced interlocutors. Similarly, low-ability paired persons seldom tropicalized portions of other speakers' contributions in their own talk. High-ability speakers were more likely to demonstrate prior talk knowledge through contingent answers. These findings revealed that task direction and progress might have an impact on interactional behavior and how understanding is expressed. Additionally, the findings have some implications for teaching, learning, and testing L2 speaking through paired-test tasks for the purpose of improving EFL learners' speaking skills sub-skills.

Keywords: Co-Constructed Discourse, Paired Oral Assessment, Paired Task, Test-Taker Speaking Ability

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental goal of language for people is to meaningfully interact with one another; humans should first grasp the language utilized among them in order to express their thoughts and intention (Hassan, 2014). This

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shows that speaking is the most significant skill in language learning; speech is the primary means of transmitting sentiments, information, beliefs, ideas, and emotions. This also implies that speaking, rather than writing or reading, is the first phase in acquiring a language, even when acquiring a foreign or second language. According to Abdallah and Mansour (2015), learning a language involves a concentration on speaking skills, real usage, and contextual-pragmatic practices.

The nature of speaking entails the development of interactional competence (Dings, 2014; Galaczi, 2013; Lam, 2018; Roever & Kasper, 2018; Youn, 2020) and the development of co-constructed discourse (Çiftçi & Vásquez, 2020; Kreuz & Luginbühl, 2020; Kim & Crepaldi, 2021; Lialikhova, 2019). The interactional competence that is put to use in ELF interactions is substantiated through the interplay of the use of the linguistic code and basic interactional competence as prompted by the immediate communicative needs of the interlocutors. The development of interactional competence and co-constructed discourse is of prime significance with respect to testing the communicative domain of L2 speaking (Antón & Pendexter, 2021; Kecskes, 2019). Interactional competence refers to the speakers' ability to "deploy interactional resources (turn-taking, repair, boundaries, speech acts, etc.) through available linguistic resources as needed by the speaker/hearer to express their communicative intentions in actual situational contexts" (Young, 2000, p.2), seeks to explain the variation in an individual speaker's performance from one discursive practice to another. Likewise, as Young (2011) argues, interactional competence comprises a descriptive framework of the socio-cultural characteristics of discursive practices and the interactional processes by which discursive practices are co-constructed by participants.

Both communicative and interactional aspects of inter-language competence gave way to the development of paired and group work activities in L2 classrooms (Artunç & Hart, 2020; Burch & Kley, 2020; Govindasamy & Shah, 2020; Kley, 2015; van Moere, 2012). Accordingly, in paired test tasks, the test taker is usually matched with the peer or interlocutor who is also taking the test. A thorough review of the related literature revealed that just a few studies have examined the developing nature of students' speaking skills under the effect of co-constructed discourse with respect to paired and group speaking tasks and tests (Artunç & Hart, 2020; Burch & Kley, 2020; Jaiyote, 2015; Kley, 2015; May 2009; Nakatsuhara, 2010).

In ESL/EFL classroom interaction, and more specifically, in the Iranian educational context, teachers and students are often on opposing sides with one; teachers speak all the time, whereas students mumble and swallow their words, or say nothing (Rahimi & Sobhani, 2015; Zakian, 2021). Almost all such teachers and lecturers, therefore, complain about the unwillingness of their students to talk and communicate effectively (Ebadijalal & Yousofi, 2021; Hodge Baxter Magolda & Haynes, 2009; Ockey, Koyama, Setoguchi & Sun, 2015) and this is reflected in their test-taking ability and deficiency in their interactional competence (Kley, 2021). This may be particularly frustrating to some of the learners, especially when they receive no feedback for their speaking performance or response to their questions. This is a common phenomenon in all ESL or EFL contexts, especially the latter, no matter whether the teacher is local or foreign (Ounis, 2017).

Consequently, this research was fixed on the role of paired task and test-taker speaking ability in generating speaking strategies and improving speaking abilities in the Iranian EFL learners and thus finding its possible effects on assessing co-constructed discourse. It has been agreed that second language speaking proficiency is not only associated with language learners' accuracy and fluency but also their interactional competence in the L2, which is understood as learners' collaboration with one another by negotiating meanings, providing and requesting clarifications, and anticipating their interlocutor's response to reach a common meaning and understanding (Kramsch,1986; Roever & Kasper, 2018). Besides the social dimension to speaking proficiency and face-to-face interaction (cf.

Mcnamara & Rover, 2006) and interactional competence perspectives have been incorporated into the language testing and assessment domain.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In foreign language learning, speaking is considered a vital skill. This is due to the fact that most students learn a foreign language in order to be able to understand and establish oral communication with native speakers. Speaking is a complex process in which many linguistic elements are involved including phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic as well as discourse levels (Albino, 2017). Comprehending and producing appropriate language is important for EFL learners because failure to do so may cause frustration for both the speaker and the listener or have their messages misunderstood (Rabab'ah & Rumman, 2015). In a foreign language situation where students lack the need and opportunity for genuine communication in the target language, it would be difficult for students to develop their speaking ability (Toro, Camacho-Minuche, Pinza-Tapia & Paredes, 2019).

The concept of interactional competence was put forward for the first time by Kramsch (1986), stating that interactional competence means learners' ability to communicate and construct meaning jointly with a focus on what goes on between the interlocutors and how meaning is regulated by them. She maintains that interactional competence is more than proficiency and requires knowledge of culture and social factors as well. Koike (1989) as one of the well-known figures in interactional competence research argued that pragmatic competence is in close contact with the development of interactional competence and adult L2 acquisition, especially in developing a knowledge of speech acts in interlanguage is bound to this development. As McCarthy (2005) asserts, in interactional competence instead of fluency, learners deal with confluency; that is, making the language fluent together through meaning-making and contribution. Interactional competence revolves around how meaning is made in interaction together rather than individually. Likewise, Young (2000) believes that while models of communicative competence view context to have a static nature, interactional competence is dynamically context-dependent.

Interactional competence, as Young (2000) defined it, refers to the speakers' ability to organize interactions in terms of turn-taking, break down repair, and keeping mutual understanding relying on verbal communication with respect to the situational context. In fact, resources through available linguistic resources as needed by the speaker/hearer to express their communicative intentions in actual situational contexts" (p. 2), seeks to explain the variation in an individual speaker's performance from one discursive practice to another. Likewise, as Young (2011) argues, interactional competence comprises a descriptive framework of the socio-cultural characteristics of discursive practices and the interactional processes by which discursive practices are co-constructed by participants.

Young (2014) proposes that interactional competence is ‘‘an individual's knowledge and employment of these resources that is contingent on what other participants do; that is, interactional competence is distributed across participants and varies across different interactional practices"(p. 2). Kley (2021), however, argues that, from this perspective, there is a difference between the knowledge needed to perform interactions competently and what interlocutors agree with. Meanwhile, Young (2019) argues that such knowledge does vary, and is distributed when people interact and the knowledge needed to interact at all, coherently, which does not and could not vary in those ways. Kecskes, Sanders, and Pomerantz (2018) distinguish between interactional competence and basic interactional competence (BIC) which is developed during infancy when the first stages of interaction are embarked upon.

Therefore, some researchers such as He and Young (1998), and Young (2000) propose an alternative theoretical framework to communicative competence-interactional competence theory as a replacement for communicative competence, because they believe that individuals do not acquire a general, practice-

independent competence; rather they acquire a practice-specific interactional competence by participating with more experienced others in specific interactive practices. (He & Young, 1998, p.7). In addition, Kramsch (1986, p.367) in her article" From Language Proficiency to Interactional Competence" defines the term interaction "as interaction entails negotiating intended meanings, i.e., adjusting one's speech to the effect one intends to have on the listener. It entails anticipating the listeners' response and possible misunderstandings, clarifying one's own and the other intentions and arriving at the closed possible watch between intended, perceived, and anticipated meanings" (Young, 2011, p. 428). Therefore, interactional competence is considered a theory of the knowledge that participants bring to and realize in interaction and includes an account of how this knowledge is acquired (Kley, 2021).

Ahmadi and Montasseri (2019) studied interactional competence in paired vs. group oral tests in the Iranian context. They investigated the highlighted features of interactional competence from the raters' point of view. For this purpose, 16 male and female proficient English language and literature students of Shiraz university participated in the study; also, 10 experienced raters were chosen to rate the performances. The participants were given a set of controversial questions, once to argue their viewpoints in four-member groups, and once more in paired interaction. The detailed analysis of the transcription of interviews revealed at least three aspects of interactional competence, each with some subcategories: management, engagement and attention, and paralinguistic aspects. Moreover, peer-to-peer interactions were filled with turn-taking, other-initiated self-repair, use of pauses and wait times, back channeling, and facial features such as eye contact. Group performances were prominent with self-initiated self-repair, open-ended clarification requests, and employment of vocal features.

Lialikhova (2019) investigated the Norwegian EFL learners' processes in co-constructed content and language knowledge through peer interaction in CLIL. This study looked into how three groups of different proficiency ninth graders (high-, mid-, and low-achievers in English as the L2) co-constructed content and language knowledge through homogeneous peer interaction during a short-term CLIL intervention in the Norwegian context. The main findings demonstrated that the high- and mid-achieving groups succeeded in building mainly content rather than language knowledge through collaborative dialogue and promoting cognitive development, presumably due to relatively well-developed L2 skills. In contrast, the low-achieving group struggled to collaborate and avoided performing cognitively demanding tasks, unless scaffolded by the teacher, indicating that these learners were in special need of scaffolding by an expert. Although limited in its scale, the research contributes to some understanding of how learners of different levels of L2 proficiency construct knowledge through CLIL and offers implications for teaching and further research.

Kley (2015) investigated interactional competence in paired speaking tests with regard to the role of paired task and test-taker speaking ability in co-constructed discourse. He employed conversation analytic conventions to investigate the interactional resources that test-takers deployed to maintain mutual understanding. The procedures of repair (self-repair in response to other-initiated repair, inter-turn delays, and misunderstandings as well as other-repair in conjunction with word search activities) that emerged from the inductive analysis of the test discourse, in his view, broadened the conceptualization of interactional competence in the context of paired speaking assessments. Kley (2021) paid close attention to the role of L2 speaking ability and the notion of inter-subjectivity in co-constructed test discourse. He reported an analysis of how learners of German in the second year of college, who participated in a paired speaking assessment, achieved inter-subjectivity, which is one key component of interactional competence (Kley, 2015). Inter-subjectivity became visible in the practices that the participants used to display an understanding of prior talk. The focus of the study was on the interrelation between speaking ability (low vs. high) and displays of under-

standing. From a corpus of 34 peer-to-peer test discussions, three low-ability and four high-ability test-taker pairs were included in the analysis. The analysis demonstrated that low-ability pairs struggled to perform an adequate response in the second position to display an understanding of a comment or statement made by the interlocutor. Likewise, Low-ability paired individuals rarely tropicalized elements of the other speakers' contributions in their own talk, whereas high-ability speakers were more likely to display an understanding of prior talk by means of contingent responses. However, the analysis also showed that task orientation could influence interactional conduct and how understanding was displayed.

Research Questions

Based on what was stated above, this study attempted to find answers to the following research questions:

> ***QR1***. *To what extent do pair test-take speaking ability combinations (high-high, mid-mid, low-low, high-mid, mid-low, high-low) impact the turn-taking procedure in developing co-constructed discourse?*
>
> ***QR2***. *To what extent do pair test-taker speaking ability combinations (high-high, mid-mid, low-low, high-mid, mid-low, high-low) impact mutual understanding through the interactive listening procedure in developing co-constructed discourse?*
>
> ***QR3***. *To what extent do pair test-taker ability combinations (high-high, mid-mid, low-low, high-mid, mid-low, high-low) impact breakdown repair procedure in developing co-constructed discourse?*

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 36 EFL learners with three different speaking skill levels: upper-intermediate (High-Level), lower intermediate (Mid-Level), and elementary (Low-Level), each having 12 members. They were male and female students from Jahad Daneshgahi Institute in Arak, Iran, ranging in age from 18 to 25. They were selected through the IELTS Speaking test, from a population of 40 students studying English at the same institute at various levels. Following the administration of the test, students with scores between 1 and 3 were classified as elementary learners with low spoken proficiency, those with scores between 4 and 6 as intermediate level learners with mid-proficiency levels in speaking, and those with scores of 7 and above were classified as upper-intermediate learners.

Instrumentation

The following instruments were used in the current study:

IELTS Speaking Task

An old version of IELTS speaking task was used to assess the participants' spoken proficiency. This instrument was a standard IELTS speaking task that was chosen from the standard series. This examination is often created in an interview format, with examinees speaking with a professional examiner. This test is divided into three sections and takes 11-14 minutes to complete. In the first section, the examinees are asked questions about themselves and their families. Section 2 requires the participants to speak about a topic. Section 3 requires the examinees to have a longer discussion about the topic mentioned in section 2. The inter-rater reliability index recorded for the IELTS speaking exam is (r (3000) =.87, P.05. (O'Sullivan, p.1) The band descriptors, which encompassed the speaking sub-skills of fluency and coherence, lexical resource, grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation of the participants, were used to grade their performance in the IELTS Speaking.

Speaking Paired-test Task

The second instrument utilized in the study was a previously-used discussion task about reading traditional newspapers and their status in the virtual world, which was introduced by Kley (2015). All participants from various combinational groups were invited to this oral performance test and answered the discussion task. Similarly, the concepts of turn-taking, mutual comprehension, and breakdown repair

were considered while evaluating the co-constructed discourse. Following the language proficiency exam, the participants were given a speaking test. The results revealed how effectively they could produce co-constructed discourse and communicate in English.

Procedure

The participants in this study were chosen in the first step. First, a standard retired IELTS speaking exam was given to 40 intermediate students in order to homogenize their spoken language proficiency levels into three groups: upper-intermediate (n=12), lower intermediate (n=12), and elementary (n=12). Out of 40 pupils, 36 were assigned to one of the three skill levels listed above. The chosen participants were randomly assigned to combinational groups, which shaped paired groups in each level and combinational level in the same way that learners with similar proficiency levels shaped three groups encompassing three pairs. Learners with dissimilar and unbalanced proficiency levels shaped three other groups encompassing three pairs each. Then, the six groups of paired learners participated in a paired test task of speaking in which they were instructed to debate the conversation's theme and attempt to establish a co-constructed discourse.

The voices of each pair discussing the assigned topic were then recorded. The subject was the same for all of the pairs, even if they were unaware of it, and a particular time was set with both interlocutors in each paired group to reduce the influence of topic release and score pollution. As a result, three pairs in each group completed the paired-test task, and the researcher then transcribed the conversation between the interlocutors in each group (a total of six people) discussing a single topic.

Following the transcription of the examinees' performances, the researcher analyzed the learners' conversations using Young's (2000) model of interactional competence, as approved by Ma (2021), which refers to the speakers' ability to manage interactions in terms of turn-taking, breakdown repair, and maintaining mutual understanding using verbal communication in the context of the situation. Similarly, Ma (2021) sees turn-taking, mutual understanding, and breakdown repair as the three most important ideas determining interactional competence and co-constructed discourse.

RESULTS

Research Question One

To answer the first research question, the paired speaking discourse of participants in each group was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through content and thematic analysis. In this respect, the frequency of the cases of turn-taking in the three groups of each pair was specified and then its percentage was calculated representing the extent to which paired test-taker speaking ability combinations (high-high, mid-mid, low-low, high-mid, mid-low, high-low) impacted turn-taking procedure in developing co-constructed discourse. The results, as Table 1 below shows, revealed that test-takers' speaking ability impacts the turn-taking procedure in developing co-constructed discourse. Also, it was found that participants systematically organize their turns to speak and based on their own language proficiency level and that of their interlocutor, follow different types of turn-taking organization such as 1) speaking and then asking questions, 2) using conjunctions, 3) agreeing/disagreeing phrases, 4) asking for /giving opinions, 5) fillers for pauses, 6) avoiding interruptions, and 7) gestures and facial expressions which are identified in this study. In total, 629 turn-taking strategies were counted for all the participants in developing the discourse in their interaction with respect to the task given which was an oral discussion task about the use, advantages, and disadvantages of newspapers.

As shown by the frequencies in Table 1 below, most of the interactions take place when the pairs developing a discourse through a conversation are at the same level. However, the more proficient the learners, the more prolonged conversation will be witnessed. The amount of turn-taking strategies represents the extent to which the discourse had advanced (Levinson, 2016), i.e. when the conversation developed for a discussion task

takes place between two interlocutors with high degrees of speaking proficiency (High-High), the number of turn-taking strategies in total reaches 175 cases (f=175, 27.82%), while in the High-Low case, the number of turn-taking strategies in total reaches 101 (f=101, 16.05%) of the total turn-taking strategies used, though 35 cases (f=35, 5.56 %) are gestures and facial expressions (see Table 2). For the High-Mid interlocutors the number of turn-taking strategies reaches 82 cases (f=82, 13.03%), while for the Mid-Low interlocutors, the number of turn-taking strategies reaches 107 cases (f=107, 17.01%). This figure is 85 for the Mid-Mid interlocutors (f=85, 13.51%). The same topic and the same task reach 79 cases (f=79, 12.55%) for the Low-Low pairs.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics; Turn-Taking Strategies in Combinational Groups (Total Counts)

Paired Groups	Turn-Taking Strategies	Frequency	Percent
High-High	Speaking and then asking questions, Using Conjunctions, Agreeing/Disagreeing Phrases, Asking for /Giving Opinions, Fillers for Pauses, Avoiding Interruptions, Gestures and Facial Expressions	175	27.82%
Mid-Low		107	17.01%
High-Low		101	16.05%
Mid-Mid		85	13.51%
High-Mid		82	13.03%
Low-Low		79	12.55%
Total		629	100%

In terms of the specific turn-taking strategies displayed in Table 2, the following results were obtained:

A. For the High-High pairs, speaking and then asking questions (f=32, 5.08%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by agreeing/disagreeing phrases (f=30, 4.76%), while the least turn-taking strategy used for the pairs enjoying high L2 speaking proficiency is gestures and facial expressions (f=12, 1.90%).

B. For the High-Low pairs, gestures and facial expressions (f=35, 5.56%) are the most frequently used strategy followed by avoiding interruptions (f=15, 2.38%) which is mostly presented in Persian, not English. The third place is given to agreeing/disagreeing phrases (f=13, 2.06%), while the least turn-taking strategies used for the pairs enjoying High-Low L2 speaking proficiencies are using conjunctions (f=8, 1.27%) and asking for /giving opinions (f=8, 1.27%). In the same vein, speaking and then asking questions (f=12, 1.90%) is a relatively low frequently used strategy for the High-Low pairs.

C. For the High-Mid pairs, using conjunctions (f=18, 2.86%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by speaking and then asking questions (f=14, 2.22%) and asking for /giving opinions (f=14, 2.22%), while the least turn-taking strategies used for the pairs enjoying High-Mid L2 speaking proficiencies are fillers for pauses (f=8, 1.27%) and gestures and facial expressions (f=8, 127%). In the same vein, avoiding interruptions (f=11, 1.57%) is a relatively low frequently used strategy for the High-Mid pairs.

D. For the Mid-Low pairs, asking for /giving opinions (f=23, 3.65%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by fillers for pauses (f=19, 2.60%) and using conjunctions (f=19, 3.02%). The third place is given to avoiding interruptions (f=15, 2.38%), while the least turn-taking strategies used for the pairs enjoying Mid-Low L2 speaking proficiencies is speaking and then asking questions (f=8, 127%).

E. For the Mid-Mid pairs, using conjunctions (f=19, 3.02%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by gestures and facial expressions (f=15, 2.06%) speaking, and then asking questions (f=15, 2.38%). Then, the third position is given to fillers for pauses

(f=14, 2.22%), while the least turn-taking strategies used for the pairs enjoying Mid-Mid L2 speaking proficiency are avoiding interruptions (f=5, 0.79%) and speaking and then asking questions (f=7, 1.11%).

F. For the Low-Low pairs gestures and facial expressions (f=26, 4.13%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by fillers for pauses (f=12, 1.90%) speaking, and then asking questions (f=15, 2.38%), while the least turn-taking strategy used for the pairs enjoying Low-Low L2 speaking proficiency is speaking and then asking questions (f=7, 1.11%).

Research Question Two

The paired speaking discourse of participants in each group was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through content and thematic analysis. The frequency of the cases of mutual understanding through the interactive listening procedure in developing co-constructed discourse in the three groups of each pair was specified and then its percentage was calculated representing the extent to which paired test-taker speaking ability combinations (high-high, mid-mid, low-low, high-mid, mid-low, high-low) impacted mutual understanding through the interactive listening procedure in developing co-constructed discourse.

The results, as shown in Table 2 below, revealed that test-taker speaking ability impacts mutual understanding through the interactive listening procedure in developing co-constructed discourse. Also, it was found that participants make use of fixed expressions showing their mutual understanding in terms of a) mutual affection, b) sympathizing (supporting emotionally), c) celebrating (when a mutual understanding has been reached), and d) non-verbal emotions released (i.e., facial expressions and body language). These four types are interpersonal in terms of communication.

In total, 177 mutual understanding strategies were counted for all the participants developing the discourse in their interaction with respect to the task given which was an oral discussion task about the use, advantages, and disadvantages of newspapers. As shown by the frequencies in Table 3, most of the interactions take place when the pairs developing a discourse through a conversation are at the same level. However, the more proficient the learners, the more prolonged conversation will be witnessed. The frequency of mutual understanding strategies represents the extent to which the discourse had advanced (Ma, 2021), i.e. when the conversation developed for a discussion task takes place between two interlocutors with high degrees of speaking proficiency (High-High), the number of mutual understanding strategies in total is 46 cases (f=46, 25.99%), while in the High-Low case, the number of such strategies in total reaches 27 (f=27, 15.25%) of the total mutual understanding strategies used. For the High-Mid interlocutors the number of mutual understanding strategies reaches 32 cases (f=32, 18.07%), while for the Mid-Low interlocutors, the number of mutual understanding strategies is 27 cases (f=27, 15.25%). This figure is 30 for the Mid-Mid interlocutors (f=30, 16.94%). The same topic and the same task reach 17 cases (f=79, 9.60%) for the Low-Low pairs.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics; Mutual Understanding Strategies in Combinational Groups (Total Counts)

Paired Groups	Mutual Understanding Strategies	Type	Frequency	Percent
High-High	a) Mutual affection, b) sympathizing (supporting emotionally), c) celebrating (when a mutual understanding has been reached), and d) non-verbal emotions released (i.e., facial expressions and body language).	Interpersonal	46	25.99%
High-Mid			32	18.07%
Mid-Mid			30	16.94%
Mid-Low			27	15.25%
High-Low			25	14.12%
Low-Low			17	9.60%
Total			177	100%

In terms of the specific mutual understanding strategies used, as displayed in Table 2 above, the following results were obtained:

A. For the High-High pairs, Mutual Affection (f=15, 8.47%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by Celebrating (f=12, 6.77%), while the least mutual understanding strategy used for the pairs enjoying high L2 speaking proficiency is Non-Verbal Emotions (f=9, 5.08%). Sympathizing, meanwhile reaches 10 cases (f=10, 5.64%).

B. For the High-Low pairs, Non-Verbal Emotion (f=10, 5. 46%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by Mutual Affection (f=6, 3.38%). The third place is given to Celebrating (f=5, 2.82%), while the least mutual understanding strategies used for the pairs enjoying High-Low L2 speaking proficiencies is Sympathizing (f=4, 2.25%).

C. For the High-Mid pairs, Mutual Affection (f=11, 6.21%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by Sympathizing (f=9, 5.08%). The third place is given to Celebrating (f=8, 4.51%), while the least mutual understanding strategies used for the pairs enjoying High-Mid L2 speaking proficiencies is Non-Verbal Emotions (f=4, 2.25%).

D. For the Mid-Low pairs, Mutual Affection (f=8, 4.51%) and Non-Verbal Emotions (f=8, 4.51%) are the most frequently used strategies followed by Sympathizing (f=6, 3.38%), while the least mutual understanding strategy used for the pairs enjoying Mid-Low L2 speaking proficiencies is Celebrating (f=5, 2.82%).

E. For the Mid-Mid pairs, Mutual Affection (f=10, 5.64%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by Sympathizing (f=8, 4.51%), while the least mutual understanding strategies used for the pairs enjoying Mid-Mid L2 speaking proficiencies are Celebrating (f=6, 3.38%), Non-Verbal Emotions (f=6, 3.38%).

F. For the Low-Low pairs, Mutual Affection (f=6, 3.38%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by Sympathizing (f=5, 2.82%), while the least mutual understanding strategy used for the pairs enjoying Mid-Mid L2 speaking proficiencies is Non-Verbal Emotions (f=2, 1.12%), and Celebrating (f=4, 2.25%) stands in a low position.

Research Question Three

The paired speaking discourse of participants in each group was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through content and thematic analysis. The frequency of the cases of breakdown repair procedure in developing co-constructed discourse in the three groups of each pair was specified and then its percentage was calculated representing the extent to which paired test-taker speaking ability combinations (high-high, mid-mid, low-low, high-mid, mid-low, high-low) impacted breakdown repair procedure in developing co-constructed discourse.

The results, as shown in Table 3 below, revealed that test-taker speaking ability impacts breakdown repair procedure in developing co-constructed discourse. Also, it was found that in order to repair the broken-down discourse or interactional communication, participants make use of systematic strategies such as a) requesting for clarification, b) not acknowledging, c) topic shifting, d) not responding, e) repeating, f) recasting, and g) adding. In fact, corrective repair (corrective feedback), recast (repeating the correct form and the reformulation of all or part of an utterance help maintain the meaning of the primary utterance despite the significant modification of the structure of the utterance (Ellis & Sheen, 2006) were frequently used by the EFL learners taking part in the study. Also, in some cases, in line with Dingemanse and Enfield (2015), reactive repair (both indirect and direct forms) was witnessed which employed addition (adding some information to the mentioned utterance of the interlocutor) and repetition (repeating all or parts of the utterance without adding or changing the structure of it).

In total, 87 breakdown repair strategies were counted for all the participants developing the discourse in their interaction with respect to the task given which was an oral discussion task.

As shown by the frequencies in Table 3 below, most of the interactions take place when the pairs developing a discourse through a conversation are at the same level. However, the more proficient the learners, the more prolonged conversations will be witnessed. The less use of breakdown repair strategies repre-

sents the extent to which a successful discourse has been co-constructed (Dingemanse & Enfield, 2015; Ma, 2021), i.e. when the conversation developed for a discussion task takes place between two interlocutors with high degrees of speaking proficiency (High-High), the number of breakdown repair strategies in total is 2 cases (f=2, 2.29%), while in the High-Low case, the number of such strategies in total reaches 28 (f=28, 32.18%) of the total breakdown repair strategies used. For the High-Mid interlocutors the number of breakdown repair strategies reaches 8 cases (f=8, 9.15%), while for the Mid-Low interlocutors, the number of breakdown repair strategies is 22 cases (f=22, 25.28%). This figure is 15 for the Mid-Mid interlocutors (f=15, 17.23%). The same topic and the same task reach 12 cases (f=12, 1379%) for the Low-Low pairs.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics; Breakdown Repair Strategies in Combinational Groups (Total Counts)

Paired Groups	Breakdown Repair Strategies	Frequency	Percent
High-High	a) requesting for clarification, b) not acknowledging, c) topic shifting, d) not responding, e) repeating, f) recasting, and g) adding	2	2.29%
High-Mid		8	9.15%
Mid-Mid		15	17.23%
Mid-Low		22	25.28%
High-Low		28	32.18%
Low-Low		12	13.79%
Total		87	100%

In terms of the specific breakdown repair strategies used, as displayed in Table 3 above, the following results were obtained:

A. For the High-High pairs only two cases of repair have been reported; Topic shifting (f=1, 1.14%) and Repeating (f=1, 1.14%), showing that when both interlocutors are enjoying high speaking proficiency, they can understand each other, make fewer mistakes, and speak clearly and understandable.

B. For the High-Low pairs Requesting for Clarification (f=8, 9.19%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by Not Responding (f=6, 89%), while the least mutual understanding strategies used for the pairs enjoying High-Low L2 speaking proficiencies is Topic Shifting (f=0, 00%).

C. For the High-Mid pairs Requesting for Clarification, Repeating, Recasting, and Adding as breakdown repair strategies were all used very rarely (f=2, 2.29%) for all cases. Other strategies have not been used at all.

D. For the Mid-Low pairs Repeating (f=8, 6.89%) and Recasting (f=8, 6.89%) are the most frequently used strategies followed by Requesting for Clarification (f=5, 5.74%), and Not Responding (f=4, 4.59%), while the least breakdown repair strategies used for the pairs enjoying Mid-Low L2 speaking proficiencies are Not Acknowledging (f=2, 2.29%), Topic Shifting (f=2, 2.29%), and Adding (f=2, 2.29%).

E. For the Mid-Mid pairs Topic Shifting (f=5, 5.47%) and Repeating (f=5, 5.47) are the most frequently used strategies followed by Recasting (f=3, 3.44%), while the least breakdown repair strategies used for the pairs enjoying Mid-Mid L2 speaking proficiencies is Adding (f=2, 2.29%). There is no account of other strategies (see Table 4.6).

F. For the Low-Low pairs Not Responding (f=5, 5.74%) is the most frequently used strategy followed by Repeating (f=4, 4.59%) and Requesting for Clarification (f=2, 2.29%), while the least breakdown repair strategies used for the pairs enjoying Low-Low L2 speaking proficiencies is Topic Shifting (f= 1, 1.4%).

DISCUSSION

With respect to the first research question, the present study findings revealed that test-taker speaking ability impacts the turn-taking procedure in developing co-constructed discourse. Also, it was found that participants systematically organize their turns to speak, and based

on their own language proficiency level and that of their interlocutor, follow different types of turn-taking organization such as 1) speaking and then asking questions, 2) using conjunctions, 3) agreeing/disagreeing phrases, 4) asking for /giving opinions, 5) fillers for pauses, 6) avoiding interruptions, and 7) gestures and facial expressions which are identified in this study. Moreover, it was revealed that most of the interactions take place when the pairs developing a discourse through a conversation were at the same level of spoken language proficiency. This finding can take support from Young's (2000) notion of L2 speakers' ability in deploying interactional resources such as turn-taking and speech acts. In fact, a good number of run-taking strategies in a discourse represent development in the interlocutors' interactional competence (Ma, 2021), referring to the speakers' ability to organize interactions in terms of turn-taking. In addition, interactional competence then involves learners' orientation to such semiotic systems as turn-taking and sequence organization as well as to gaze and embodied actions which are in line with the findings of some of the previous studies (Kley, 2021; Young, 2019).

The reason might be sought in the fact that, unlike the ordinary speaking tests in which turn-taking unit types are fixed, the interviewer asks questions and the interviewee responds (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Johnson, 2000, 2001; Young, 2013; Young & Milanovic, 1992), the paired speaking tests provide room for more equally distributed language features (Brooks, 2009; Lindahl, 2018; Taylor, 2001). In addition, in line with some previous studies (Csépes, 2009; Roever & Kasper, 2018), the paired test format has longer and more balanced turns across the interlocutors. This can reduce the interlocuters' stress and anxiety and increase their motivation to speak and co-construct the discourse.

All in all, the significance of turn-taking strategies in developing co-constructed discourse by interlocutors in a discussion task takes support from a good number of studies investigating how participants develop their competencies through the turn-by-turn unfolding of talk within short time spans (Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, & Okada, 2007; Blackwell, 2021; Firth, 2009; Firth & Wagner, 2007; Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Hall & Pekarek Doehler, 2011; Kecskes, 2019; Koike & Pearson, 2005; Mori & Hasegawa, 2009; Salman, & Betti, 2020) or a longitudinal view (Antón & Pendexter, 2021; Brouwer & Wagner, 2004; Cekaite, 2007; Desta, 2019; Hellermann, 2008, 2011; Ishida, 2009; Kecskes, Sanders, & Pomerantz, 2018; Kley, 2015; Kreuz & Luginbühl, 2020; Young & Miller, 2004).

With respect to the second research question, the results revealed that the test-taker speaking ability impacts mutual understanding through the interactive listening procedure in developing co-constructed discourse. In addition, it was found that participants make use of fixed expressions showing their mutual understanding in terms of a) mutual affection, b) sympathizing (supporting emotionally), c) celebrating (when a mutual understanding has been reached), and d) non-verbal emotions released (i.e., facial expressions and body language). These findings are in line with McNamara and Roever's (2006) findings confirming that successful communication is bound to the production of a comprehensible discourse.

As the present study findings showed, most of the interactions take place when the pairs developing a discourse through a conversation are at the same level. The frequency of mutual understanding strategies represents the extent to which the discourse had advanced (Ma, 2021), i.e. when the conversation developed for a discussion task takes place between two interlocutors with high degrees of speaking proficiency (High-High), the number of mutual understanding strategies increases, while in the High-Low case, the number of such strategies decreases a lot. These findings are in line with Ma (2021) who argues that mutual understating creates a feeling of success in developing conversation and paves the way for the development of a co-constructed discourse. As mutual understanding relies on both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors in advancing communication (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018; Kley, 2015; Lam, 2018), it plays a significant role in co-constructing a discourse.

As for the third research question, the study findings revealed that test-taker speaking ability impacts breakdown repair procedure in developing co-constructed discourse. In addition, it was found that in order to repair the broken-down discourse or interactional communication, participants make use of systematic strategies such as a) requesting clarification, b) not acknowledging, c) topic shifting, d) not responding, e) repeating, f) recasting, and g) adding. These findings are in line with some of the previous study findings considering some of the aforementioned strategies as the sources of development of interactional competence and co-constructed discourse with respect to testing the communicative domain of L2 speaking (Antón & Pendexter, 2021; Kecskes, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrated that providing EFL test-takers enjoying different speaking proficiency levels with paired-test tasks creates an atmosphere of success in which test-takers co-construct the discourse, promote interactions, and convey the meaning. Hence, they rely on turn-taking strategies, make use of mutual understanding strategies, and use repairs to compensate for the communication breakdowns.

EFL learners need to know native-like vocabularies, grammatical points, preferences, dictions, and the like for a native-like performance. However, this is not enough as they need to improve their interactional competence as well (Young, 2019). Therefore, according to the results of the present study, some implications for teaching, learning, and testing L2 speaking through paired-test tasks can be suggested for the purpose of improving EFL learners' speaking skills and their sub-skills.

A. Different techniques of co-constructed discourse interaction manifested in the three strategies derived in the present study could be highlighted and taught to the learners by second language teachers to make the learners more aware of what they are dealing with. The assumption is that participation in co-constructed discourse practices facilitates learning as it creates a facilitated, friendly, and empowering integrated learning atmosphere (Arundale, 2021), and learners must pay attention to the features of input they are exposed to and notice the gap between the target like forms in it and the current state of their linguistic, pragmatic, and co-constructed discourse knowledge (Kley, 2021).

B. English teachers could employ a co-constructed discourse interaction model in an attempt to solve their learners' linguistic and meta-linguistic problems meaningfully, reduce classroom anxiety, and increase their motivation to speak and interact more successfully. This can be focused on more specifically in the conversation classes where EFL listening comprehension and speaking take more significance than other language skills (Asaei & Rahimi, 2021; Bashir et al., 2011; Bin-Hady, 2021). Likewise, EFL learners would notice the gaps and get aware of a mismatch between the input they receive and their current learning. This way the classroom interactions could be enriched and would help subsequent L2 development of the EFL learner.

C. Materials developers in the ELT domain also could employ the findings of the present study and those of similar ones to present tasks in which learners' awareness of EFL speaking is enhanced. Such tasks may help learners move towards self-correction, autonomy, and meaningful learning which are in line with supportive techniques in the co-constructed discourse interaction presented by paired-test tasks (Young, 2011; Kley, 2015).

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