Defining and operationalising task interactional difficulty

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The presentation proposes a theoretical and operational definition of a new construct, task interactional difficulty, which adds a further dimension to the current debate about what features make a task difficult for L2 learners. After arguing for the use of "task difficulty" instead of "task complexity", the notion of task interactional difficulty is thoroughly discussed. The construct is analysed from a conceptual point of view, first by briefly reviewing how difficulty and interaction have been characterized in previous SLA research, then by elaborating an explicit theoretical definition. This is subsequently operationalised in terms of three empirically observable dimensions: number of turn exchanges, number of initiating moves and visual access among participants. In order to control for the L2-competence variable, the first two parameters can be assessed on native speakers’ task performance, while the third can be represented by two fixed values, to arrive at a global interactional difficulty index ranging on an ordinal scale from 2 to 10. The proposed measures will be applied to a corpus of ten native speakers of Italian performing six different oral tasks, which will then be ranked according to their interactional difficulty. Implications for second language acquisition research will be discussed, reflecting in particular on the use of native speakers’ data as a means to assess task difficulty independently of L2 learners’ performance, as recently advocated by Long (2015). The proposed procedure can also be applied to other types of tasks and to other facets of difficulty, and can complement other ways of measuring task difficulty.


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