Strategic Competence and L2 Speaking Assessment

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ABSTRACT

Assessing second language speaking has long been an important part of language testing in both large-scale assessment settings and in smaller scale classroom-based assessments. Accordingly, researchers in the second language (L2) assessment field have made efforts to establish a better understanding of the nature of speaking ability and its underlying competences. With speaking tests increasingly involving test takers' performances on certain tasks, test takers are required to utilize their language knowledge by means of their *strategic competence* (*i.e*., skills necessary to put language knowledge into use), which has been considered an integral component of communicative language ability (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and L2 speaking ability (e.g., Bygate, 1987; Fulcher, 2003). However, what strategic competence in speaking entails remains unclear, as its definition has varied greatly across different theoretical models and empirical studies. This paper provides a brief overview of the varying approaches to defining *strategic competence*, and reports on major empirical findings related to the conceptualization of this important facet of speaking ability, surveying the extensive literature in the broader fields of applied linguistics and L2 assessment in particular. The paper starts with (1) a review of the applied linguistics literature on the major influential approaches to understanding oral strategic competence, followed by (2) an in-depth review of how the L2 assessment literature has conceptualized *strategic competence* in relation to different theoretical models, and lastly, (3) a discussion of empirical studies examining strategic competence in the context of speaking test performance. The paper concludes with directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Assessing L2 speaking has been an important part of language testing in both large-scale assessment settings and in smaller-scale, classroom-based assessments. In order to make accurate inferences about the test taker's speaking ability, it is crucial to establish a solid understanding of the construct. Historically, because of the different approaches to viewing language ability and L2 use, *speaking ability* has been conceptualized and defined in various ways. Lado (1960) and Carroll (1961) defined it from a skills-and-elements approach, in which discrete language elements were the focus of measurement. Since then, the definition of *speaking ability* and the methodology by which it is measured has changed considerably (Kim, 2011) as the role of performance in oral proficiency testing was introduced and advocated by earlier testers such as Clark (1975) and Jones (1985). The majority of current speaking tests include tasks that either

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have examinees engage in a spoken interaction with one or more interlocutors (i.e., direct speaking test) or provide monologic responses to prompts or questions delivered through computers or audio recordings (i.e., semi-direct speaking test).

Speaking test performance is complex, due to the numerous variables that affect performance and score variability (e.g. test taker characteristics, rater judgment, task features and rubric descriptors). In relation to these different facets that make up the test setting, a test taker is asked to use his or her language knowledge by performing a particular task. Given the complex relationship among the facets, it is difficult to understand the nature of the underlying test construct of *L2 speaking ability* in relation to the different test performance variables, and thus it becomes challenging to make accurate inferences about the test takers' abilities. Therefore, in addition to language knowledge, the test taker's skill to use his or her knowledge effectively is also being intentionally or unintentionally measured. Some of the seminal communicative language ability (CLA) models that will be later reviewed in this paper note the distinction between the static view of language knowledge (or competence) and the skills needed for language use, which is often referred to as *strategic competence* in L2 testing literature. Although its definition has changed overtime and varies between different theoretical models, *strategic competence* has been irrefutably considered an integral component of CLA (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996) and L2 speaking ability (e.g., Bygate, 1987; Fulcher, 2003).

Despite its evident importance in understanding the nature of speaking ability and its role in test performance, there does not seem to be a consensus and agreed-upon definition of what strategic competence is and what it entails with respect to L2 speaking. Therefore, in this paper, I attempt to discuss this topic in depth and review the literature that contributes to our understanding of the nature of *strategic competence* in relation to L2 speaking ability and assessment. Given that investigations of *strategic competence* and speaking in the L2 assessment literature have often been drawn from theories and empirical findings from the applied linguistics literature, this paper will take into account the literature from both applied linguistics and L2 assessment in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the different approaches that have been taken to conceptualize and understand the nature of *strategic competence* in L2 speaking and assessment.

This paper will start with the review of the influential approaches to conceptualizing and defining *strategic competence* in oral communication in the broader applied linguistics literature. Following this section, I delve into the L2 assessment literature to examine the ways in which strategic competence has been defined in different theoretical models of language in general and speaking ability in particular. Finally, I review in detail a few empirical studies that have attempted to investigate the nature of *strategic competence* specifically in the context of speaking test performance. Based on the summary of the findings, I conclude by addressing gaps in the literature and providing suggestions for future research.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF STRATEGIC COMPETENCE AND SPEAKING IN THE APPLIED LINGUISTICS LITERATURE

In the field of applied linguistics, strategic competence has been mostly equated to the use of different types of strategies involved in oral communication, but several different approaches have been taken in identifying and classifying these strategies. The following section

will summarize these different views from the early taxonomies to the more recent psycholinguistic and interactional approaches.

Early approaches to defining strategic competence in oral communication were largely influenced by Canale and Swain's (1980) model of communicative competence. According to their definition, *strategic competence* in oral communication was defined as the use of communication strategies "to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient linguistic competence" (p. 30). Aligned with this idea, strategic competence in oral communication was largely understood as problem-solving mechanisms.

The most well-known and widely-cited taxonomies of communication strategies are those of Tarone (1977) and Færch and Kasper (1983). In Tarone's (1977) study, ESL learners' performances on a picture description task were recorded and transcribed, and follow-up questions and analyses of the qualitative data led to the identification of five types of communication strategies: paraphrase, transfer, appeal for assistance, mime, and avoidance. Using spoken language corpus data from Danish learners, Færch and Kasper (1983) identified a similar set of strategies, which they grouped into two broad categories, *achievement* and *reduction* strategies. *Achievement strategies* refer to compensatory strategies used for successfully achieving communicative goals by means of available resources (e.g., L1, L2, gesture) or by asking for help (i.e., appeal). *Reduction strategies* are those used to modify or abandon the initial communicative goal or resort to more internalized rules to avoid communication problems.

Although the earlier taxonomies received considerable attention, a different approach to defining *communication strategies* emerged after researchers such as Poulisse (1987; 1993) and Bialystok (1990) challenged the previous classifications that were largely based on the resources (L1, L2, or gesture) used to encode the strategies. They questioned the generalizability of the taxonomies to different contexts as they were mostly empirically derived from specific types of tasks and were based on surface descriptions of strategy use and not explained in respect to underlying cognitive thinking processes. Accordingly, Poulisse (1987) proposed an alternative classification of communication strategies taking a process-oriented approach. Her taxonomy focused more narrowly on the types of *compensatory strategies* the speaker would employ when dealing with lexical difficulty. The first type, *conceptual strategies*, is used when the speaker attempts to explain the lexical item by tapping into knowledge of its semantic meaning and features. *Linguistic strategies*, on the other hand, refer to those used when the speaker utilizes knowledge of L1 and L2 phonology, morphology, and/or syntax to communicate the unknown or irretrievable item.

Poulisse (1993) later suggested a new taxonomy in which strategies were placed in the broader psycholinguistic framework of Levelt's (1989) speaking model. Her new typology was suggested to explain the occurrence of strategies according to the model's different stages of speech production. According to Levelt (1989), the speaker first forms the content of the intended message (preverbal message) using knowledge of the world, ongoing discourse, and situation in the *conceptualization* stage. The preverbal message, yet to be encoded, then proceeds to the *formulation* stage where the lexical items needed to deliver the message are retrieved and the message is grammatically, phonologically, and phonetically encoded. Finally, the resulting phonetic plan is transformed into overt speech through the *articulator*. In accordance to the first two stages of conceptualization and formulation, Poulisse (1993) classified strategies into three types: *substitution* (replacing the intended lexical item with another before formulation),

reconceptualization (changing of the preverbal message itself), and *substitution plus* (using speaker's linguistic knowledge to encode the substituted items).

The psycholinguistic approach to categorizing communication strategies was more plausible in that it did not pertain to a list of strategies that are simply observed on the surface of a performance. Instead, communication strategies were conceptualized in terms of underlying cognitive processes. However, these taxonomies are not free from criticism, given that they focus narrowly on strategy use related to lexical shortage or retrieval problems. The strategies identified are also limited to those that are used in the stages of planning and encoding the message. Another concern arises from the fact that there is no mention of strategies employed to confront other problems unique to speaking, such as time-pressure or meaning negotiation. Although Tarone (1977) did note that the speaker can appeal for help when needed, this was only in relation to strategic decisions made by the speaker in response to a lack of linguistic knowledge; she failed to address how the decisions are made in response to another interlocutor, which was a major limitation found in other taxonomies (Færch & Kasper, 1983, 1984; Poulisse, 1987, 1993).

However, in a subsequent publication, Tarone (1981) took an interactional approach, broadening her definition of *communication strategies* so that it "relates to a *mutual attempt of two interlocutors* to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (p. 288, my emphasis). This idea was supported by Wagner's (1983) study, in which he found that the speaker's assessment of the communicative situation greatly impacted the speaker's strategy selection. He explains the use of *interactional strategies*-- when the speaker relinquishes verbalization to another, in recognition of the other party's superior linguistically competence.

Dörnyei (1995), critiquing the prior narrow definitions of *communication strategies*, greatly expanded the notion to include *interactional strategies* that promote mutual understanding in meaning between participants, such as checking comprehension or asking for clarification. He also identified the category of *indirect strategies*; such strategies do not necessarily pertain to problem-solving devices, but rather are employed to create a better condition for communication by, for instance, maintaining the conversation flow or feigning understanding. This category also included strategies speakers would purposefully use to gain time by means of fillers and hesitation. Dörnyei's (1995) later classification of communication strategies was rearranged by Dörnyei and Kormos (1998), so that this different group of strategies could be explained in relation to the phases of Levelt's speech model, making the taxonomy more theoretically grounded.

Using information from an open-ended survey, Nakatani (2006) derived a set of oral communication strategies with a stronger emphasis on interaction. Therefore, her list of communication strategies encompassed strategies needed for both production and reception-- eight related to speaking and seven to listening. Unlike previous definitions viewing communication strategies as problem-solving mechanisms, hers was broad enough to include strategic behaviors used for non-compensatory situations for enhancing or facilitating communication. Listening strategies included negotiating meaning (e.g., request clarification), enhancing comprehension (e.g., scanning, getting the gist), and focusing on the interlocutors' non-verbal conduct and speech flow. For strategies related to production, unprecedented fluency-oriented strategies (e.g., paying attention to flow) were included, and strategies that reflect more regulatory thinking that govern the selection and employment of other strategies were also addressed (e.g., controlling anxiety and attempting to think in English).

In sum, the ways in which strategic competence regarding L2 speaking has been conceptualized in the applied linguistics literature has evolved over the past few decades. The inconsistent and varied approaches to deriving and categorizing strategy use have led to results that are difficult to compare and synthesize. Moreover, although some theorists have managed to plausibly explain the use of strategies in reference to a model that depicts the underlying processes involved in speech, most of the approaches viewed communication strategies as only problem-solving mechanisms. Unfortunately, such a depiction was not broad enough to discuss in depth the interactional strategies used to engage in reciprocal communication, nor did it highlight the important roles of the higher-order thinking processes (*i.e.,* metacognition) that govern and regulate the employment of strategies.

We now turn to the review of L2 assessment literature to examine the L2 testers' conceptualization and understanding of strategic competence in relation to different theoretical models of language and speaking.

L2 TESTERS' CONCEPTUALIZATION OF STRATEGIC COMPETENCE AND SPEAKING ABILITY

Language testers have proposed models of CLA in an attempt to explain and account for the multi-componential nature of language and speaking ability. In these models, *strategic competence* has received attention as an integral component of language ability. One of the very first renowned models of communicative competence dates back to Canale and Swain (1980). Their model not only suggests the conceptualization of language ability in terms of knowledge of lexical items, morphosyntax, and semantic rules (*grammatical competence*), but it also includes knowledge of discourse and sociocultural rules (*sociolinguistic competence*) and communication strategies (*strategic competence*). In this model, *strategic competence* refers to the coping mechanisms the speaker uses to handle communication breakdowns. This view has led to the previously discussed taxonomies of communication strategies (Færch & Kasper, 1983; Tarone, 1981). Fulcher's (2003) fairly recent framework of speaking ability, which will be discussed shortly, echoed that of Canale and Swain, equating strategic competence with the use of compensatory achievement and avoidance strategies. On the other hand, the definition of *strategic competence* in Canale's (1983) framework was broadened to include any attempt that is made by the speaker to enhance the effectiveness of communication. Moreover, Canale (1983) further expanded on Canale and Swain's model, separating *discourse competence* (i.e., knowledge of organizing and putting texts together) from *sociolinguistic competence*. Hence, he proposed four components of communicative competence instead of three.

The understanding of strategic competence being essential in all communicative language use was also sustained by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996), whose CLA models are considered the most comprehensive to date. Bachman and Palmer's model, essentially adapted from Bachman (1990), is one of the most well acknowledged and widely referenced in L2 assessment research. In both models, CLA consists of mainly two parts: *language competence* and *strategic competence*. Language competence is broken down into *organizational competence* (i.e., knowledge of rules and structure including *grammatical* and *textual* competence) and *pragmatic competence* (i.e., knowledge of contextually-appropriate language consisting of *illocutionary* and *sociolinguistic* competence). Bachman (1990) depicted strategic competence with respect to different stages of planning, execution, and assessment drawing on

Færch and Kasper's (1983) approach to describing oral communication strategies in terms of a speech production model. Subsequently, Bachman and Palmer (1996) specifically described strategic competence as a set of *metacognitive strategies* used in the stages of goal-setting, assessment, and planning.

Applying Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of communicative language ability, Fulcher (2003) proposed a model that specifically accounts for speaking. However, his definition of strategic competence, which he terms *strategic capacity*, reverts back to the narrower definition of strategies used for overcoming or avoiding communication problems. In addition to strategic capacity, his framework includes the other four components of speaking ability: *language competence* (phonology, accuracy of syntax, vocabulary and cohesion, and fluency), *textual knowledge* or the understanding of discourse structures such as turn taking, adjacency pairs, and openings and closings, *pragmatic knowledge* of appropriacy, implicature, and expressing being (defining status and roles through speech), and *sociolinguistic knowledge* that is situational, topical, and cultural.

Influenced by learner strategy research in pedagogy (e.g., O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990), Purpura (1997; 1998; 1999) critically reviewed Bachman and Palmer's (1996) definition of *strategic competence*. He postulated the importance of cognitive strategies in addition to metacognitive strategies as part of strategic competence. His taxonomy of metacognitive and cognitive strategy use is grounded in an information processing model, and the strategies are aligned with the different stages within the model. *Metacognitive strategy* use is conceptualized as the thinking strategies utilized in assessing, monitoring, evaluating, and testing oneself mentally after performance. *Cognitive strategy* use is described as the *doing* strategies that occur in the different stages of information processing: comprehending input (e.g., clarifying), storing/memory (e.g., repeating/rehearsing), and retrieval/using (e.g., linking with prior knowledge). Recently, taking into account Oxford's (2011) comprehensive model of strategy use, Purpura (2013) proposed that *strategic competence* further includes meta-level thinking processes that also relate to affect and interpersonal relationships (i.e., meta-affective and meta-sociocultural-interaction strategies).

As reviewed, strategic competence has been understood differently with the L2 testing body of work. Earlier conceptualization of strategic competence in models of CLA were narrower in the sense that strategies were explained in terms of compensatory strategies utilized to cope with communication problems. The latter definitions exhibit a broader approach to understanding strategic competence as a skill needed and existent in *all* communication situations. In addition, the more recent descriptions of strategic competence informed by learner strategy research make note of the importance of including both metacognitive thinking and cognitive strategies. Given the varying viewpoints and definitions of strategic competence and speaking ability, it is also important to see how strategic competence in speaking assessment has been empirically examined. The next section considers the empirical studies that have investigated strategic competence in the context of speaking test performance.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES OF STRATEGIC COMPETENCE AND SPEAKING TEST PERFORMANCE

Even though strategic competence has been proposed in a number of models of CLA, it has not received as much attention in the L2 assessment literature with regards to speaking

assessment (Huang, 2013). Only a handful of studies have empirically examined strategic competence in the context of speaking test performance. The following studies were conducted to examine the nature of strategic competence and its relation to proficiency and different test variables, such as task and context.

Shohamy (1994) examined communicative strategies used in semi-direct and direct oral proficiency interviews (SOPI and OPI, respectively). Recordings of examinees' performances were studied to find differences in observed communicative strategies as well as linguistic and discourse features. Results showed that certain types of strategies (i.e., paraphrasing and self-correction) occurred more in the semi-direct test whereas test takers made more use of their L1 in the direct format. However, the selection of strategies investigated was very small in number and was only from observation of surface-level data, and not based on any taxonomy or model.

Cohen & Olshtain (1998) explored the processes involved when speakers assess, plan, and execute speech acts in a role-play with a native speaker. Strategies were elicited through observation and self-report, and it was found that the examinees usually thought of a general plan of how to address the task. However, they neither attended to nor planned for the specific language resources to use. Also, the results showed that the examinees often thought in more than one language. This study went beyond surface features and looked into the test takers' use of strategies and thinking processes involved. Nevertheless, it was only exploratory in nature, and the strategies were not reflective of the interactional nature of the task, since they pertained mostly to the individual's thinking processes and strategy choice regarding production before the execution, rather than during the performance.

Yoshida-Morise (1998) examined strategies in interactional test performance using students' performance data on the OPI. In addition to reduction and achievement type communication strategies, she identified four others. Among them, *telegraphic* and *change-of-role* strategies were specific to the interactional facet of performance. Telegraphic strategies concerned instances where the speaker made the listener guess the intention. Change-of-role strategies, borrowed from Wagner (1983), referred to when the speaker turned the floor to the interlocutor. Results showed that higher and lower proficiency students used different types of strategies, but in terms of overall number of strategy use, the lower group tended to use more. Although this study put more attention to strategies occurring in interaction, it was limited in that it relied on strategies that were only observed on the surface.

As part of a larger validation project, Barkaoui, Brooks, Swain, and Lapkin (2013) investigated the nature of strategic competence involved in TOEFL iBT speaking test performances on semi-direct tasks. Examinees performed two independent (responding to a prompt orally) and four integrated tasks (responding to reading and/or listening orally) and then reported their strategy use. Strategic behaviors were coded in terms of a pre-established taxonomy. The taxonomy included a very broad range of strategies informed by communication strategies (e.g., Paribakht, 1985), learner strategies (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), and the L2 assessment literature (e.g., Fulcher, 2003; Purpura, 1999; Yoshida-Morise, 1995), which were grouped into five categories: *approach, cognitive, metacognitive, communication*, and *affective*. Among them, the results showed that metacognitive (*i.e.*, conscious examination of context for organizing, planning and evaluating), communication (*i.e.*, conscious plans for solving communication problems), and cognitive strategies (*i.e.,* manipulating of the target language to understand and produce) were the most frequently reported. More frequent strategy use was found in the integrated than in the independent tasks. However, the total number of strategies showed no relationship with the total score of the speaking test. When the relationship between

strategy use and task scores was examined, it showed very mixed and unsystematic results that were hard to interpret. Barkaoui et al. (2013) attributed the result to the complex nature of strategic competence; nevertheless, they conclude that strategy use is integral to understanding speaking test performance, and therefore, call for more investigation. This study was the first to examine strategic competence in a large-scale speaking assessment incorporating strategies from a widely-defined taxonomy. Yet, the analysis did not go beyond mere frequency counts and failed to explore more in-depth questions such as "who uses each strategy, why, where, when, and how" (Swain, Huang, Barkaoui, Brooks & Lapkin, 2009, p. 56).

Taking a similar focus, Huang (2013) looked at strategic competence in the IELTS exam. The IELTS speaking section involves two reciprocal and one non-reciprocal tasks. In the former, the examinee must interact with the interviewer face-to-face. In addition to examining reported and observed strategic behaviors, Huang (2013) examined whether strategy use differed across testing and non-testing contexts, the three tasks, and the intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. Her taxonomy was based on that of Barkaoui et al. (2013), but because of the interactive nature of the tasks, the category of *social strategies* (e.g., asking questions and attending to examiner's interest to heighten engagement) was also included. Metacognitive and communication tasks were found to be used most frequently, but surprisingly, social strategies were the least used. To examine task, context, and proficiency effect, a more systematic investigation was used with multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). Although there was no proficiency effect found, examinees were found to use more strategies in the testing situation than the non-testing, and overall, strategy use differed by task. However, the context and task interaction effect also suggested that the context effect varied by task or vice versa. Thus, Huang's (2013) study again proved the difficulty of understanding the complex interrelationships among variables. One major drawback from this study was that it did not include *social strategies* in the analyses because of its violation of assumptions for MANOVA. This is unfortunate, as this group of strategies could have brought interesting insights into the strategic competence invoked in reciprocal speaking assessment tasks.

While the above-mentioned studies were mostly devoted to describing the nature of strategic competence in respect to different types of strategy use, a different approach to depicting strategic competence can be found. Some L2 testers (e.g., De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012; Hulstijn, 2011; Van Moere, 2012) have conceptualized strategic competence as having facility in language processing (e.g., *processing skills* or *processing competence*) bringing attention to the importance of measuring processing speed.

De Jong et al. (2012) examined the extent to which strategic competence defined as processing skill (i.e., ability to rapidly and correctly process linguistic information) is related to oral proficiency. Their study looked at the ways in which linguistic knowledge, processing skills, and pronunciation predicted oral proficiency. In addition to tasks measuring pronunciation, linguistic knowledge was measured by vocabulary and grammar tests. Linguistic processing skill was operationalized as *processing speed*, which was measured by picture naming and sentence completion tasks. The three linguistic skills (knowledge, processing, and pronunciation) and their relationships to oral proficiency, measured by monologic speaking tasks, were studied. The results showed that all of the linguistic skills were associated with speaking proficiency together explaining 76% of the variance. Therefore, the researchers claim that processing skill is a valid facet of speaking proficiency.

Similarly, Van Moere (2012) advocated for the assessment of a psycholinguistic construct (i.e., *processing competence*) for speaking assessments. He proposed the use of

specially designed elicited-imitation tasks to measure the test taker's automaticity in producing accurate and fluent language. Scores from the tasks were analyzed using multi-faceted Rasch measurement, and the results indicated that (1) the tasks were successful in reliably separating the test takers into different levels of ability, and (2) performances between native speakers and L2 learners were found to be significantly different. Although the author admitted that the task is not for measuring a communicative construct, this study demonstrates that processing speed/automaticity could be also viewed as a an important component of speaking ability.

In sum, strategic competence has been acknowledged as a component of speaking ability in CLA models, and empirically it was mostly described as strategy use that encompasses both meta-level thinking and doing strategies. The strategies studied vary across the very small number of studies and are not necessarily rooted in any cognitive or psycholinguistic model, resulting in inconclusive findings. In contrast to the approach to describing strategic competence as strategy use, a different approach to conceptualizing strategic competence as facility in processing knowledge and producing speech exists. In conclusion, although strategic competence is being discussed theoretically and empirically in L2 assessment, there is not enough empirical evidence to form a good understanding of its nature, let alone how or if it should be measured.

DISCUSSION

Based on this review, it is fair to say that there is still a great need for further research in the area of strategic competence in relation to speaking ability. Due to its evident importance in understanding oral communication and speaking test performance, many L2 researchers and testers have tried to define and conceptualize it in many ways. Those who associated strategic competence with strategy use suggested theoretically or empirically different definitions and taxonomies. Despite the continuous inquiry in this area, empirical investigations are yet exploratory in nature and there does not seem to be an agreed understanding as to what exactly strategic competence in speaking entails. Overall, further reflection and examination are particularly considered necessary with respect to three aspects.

First, the results from empirical studies thus far are difficult to compare and synthesize because of the varied approaches to defining and identifying the construct. In order to come to a more generalizable definition of oral strategic competence, we must be able to explain the underlying mental/cognitive processes involved in speaking test performance and view strategy use in reference to them. Purpura (1999), for example, studied strategic competence in reading and grammar test performance systematically in reference to a model of information processing, and his most recent L2-processing-in-assessment model depicts the different stages from test input to response generation (Purpura, 2013). Strategy use here is associated with thoughts and behaviors invoked by the different processing components. Such a socio-cognitive processes approach to examining speaking strategic competence is needed in order to achieve a systematic and theoretically grounded explanation of strategy use and thinking processes involved in speaking test performance.

Second, another interesting and relevant area of research would be speed of processing (*cf.* Van Moere, 2012) and its relation to strategic competence and speaking ability. It is very often the case that L2 speaker's speaking is evaluated based on his/her 'fluency' because the less hesitation and fewer pauses we hear, the more proficient we consider the L2 speaker. Even in the case of speaking test rubrics, fluency is often a criterion for judgment. Although fluency is only a

surface feature of performance, if researched and understood in relation to speech production (*i.e.,* automatic encoding of a message) and L2 processing theory (i.e., easier retrieval of knowledge), it may potentially be an indicator of the L2 learner's strategic competence, from a cognitive/psycholinguistic processing point of view (Kormos, 2006).

Finally, oral strategic competence cannot be thought of as separate from interaction. A feature unique to speaking ability is its reciprocity. Moreover, as speaking tests aim to be more representative of real-life target language use, many large-scale and smaller-scale classroom-based speaking exams engage examinee's face-to-face interaction with one or more interlocutors. In rating the performances on these types of tasks, a number of rating scales include interactional competence as a scoring criterion that looks at, for instance, the test taker's ability to initiate, respond to, and take turns effectively in interaction. Yet to be explored in both applied linguistics and L2 assessment is how strategic competence may be understood in an interactional speaking context. When interaction is involved in speaking assessment, conceptualizing speaking ability and strategic competence solely in relation to an individual's attribute (i.e., cognitive approach to viewing language assessment) would be problematic, because the thinking, employment of strategies, and use of language knowledge can all be affected by the presence of another person in the interaction. There is ongoing debate among testers concerning whether interactional competence should be viewed as a shared ability construct (McNamara, 1997). Yet, considering that the main interest in testing is in regard to making inferences about an individual's ability, taking such a social approach to language testing is not ideal. Therefore, with further examination of an individual's cognitive thinking processes and strategy use involved in reciprocal L2 speaking test performance, the nature of speaking ability and strategic competence should be understood taking a socio-cognitive approach (Purpura, 2013), putting both individual and interactional parameters into consideration.

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