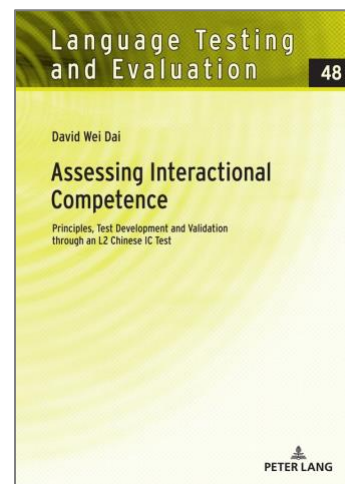# Review of *Assessing Interactional Competence: Principles, Test Development and Validation through an L2 Chinese IC Test*

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The book *Assessing Interactional Competence: Principles, Test Development and Validation through an L2 Chinese IC Test*[2] (Dai, 2024) is grounded on the author's experience of teaching English to medical graduate students. Dai observed that while in school, students were taught and assessed based on linguistic criteria; in intercultural professional settings, they were evaluated by entirely different standards. This discrepancy led him to explore whether interactional competence (IC) constitutes a distinct test construct.

With the increasing adoption of the communicative approach in language learning and teaching, there has been growing interest in assessing IC as it pertains to situationally-appropriate language use in speaking (Galaczi & Taylor, 2018). Even before Kramsch (1986) introduced the term *interactional competence*, the interactive nature of spoken language ability had been recognized through earlier concepts such as the interactional features of speaking in context (Hymes, 1974) and communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). He and Young (1998) further expanded the IC construct beyond individual ability, framing it as a co-constructed process that involves language processing within interaction.

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[1] This book review is the result of a collective effort by the Proficiency Standards Division Book Reading Group at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center.
[2] Assessing Interactional Competence (2024) is available as an open-access publication, making it freely accessible to researchers and educators. All research materials are also available in the appendix (https://www.peterlang.com/document/1306687).

In light of the IC context, this book seeks to address three key questions across eight chapters: First, can critical IC activities be identified for the development of an IC test? Second, can IC abilities be effectively rated using the test? Third, can the measurement process yield reliable results? These overarching questions were further refined based on different validation inferences for the IC test developed by the author. Each research question was examined separately across three studies, with a summary provided in the final chapter. Additionally, the author shares the training materials, surveys, and rating scales used in the studies in both English and Chinese in the appendix section, making them valuable resources for those interested in conducting similar studies.

Chapter 1 proposes IC assessment as an alternative to traditional linguistic assessments, focusing on the ability to engage in real-life communication. It identifies research gaps, including the limited exploration of non-English languages and computer-mediated communication (CMC). The chapter highlights the need for further research on the real-world applicability of IC assessment and its relationship with linguistic competence (LC). Lastly, it outlines the book's structure with research questions and assumptions for inferences of the validity framework.

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive literature review on the assessment of IC. The chapter not only delves into the philosophical foundations of IC assessment in exploring various perspectives on interaction and pragmatics but also examines the role of CMC in language learning and its implications for IC assessment. This chapter also introduces the two main principles Dai adopted for the development of IC assessment: Conversation Analysis (CA) for analyzing the sequential aspect of the interaction and Membership Categorization Analysis (MCA) to investigate the categorical side of interaction. A significant portion of this chapter is dedicated to defining the IC construct, both theoretically and operationally, discussing its differentiation from LC and the importance of assessing IC in both first (L1) and second language (L2) speakers. The chapter concludes by addressing challenges in test design and rating materials development for IC assessment.

Chapter 3 highlights the significance of the interpretive argument within Kane's validity framework (2012), which necessitates supporting evidence for inferences such as domain description, evaluation, generalization, explanation, and extrapolation. The research design is structured into three studies: task-based needs analysis and test design, test construct and rating scale development, and the principal testing study. By following this staged approach, comprehensive evidence is gathered for the interpretive argument, which is later evaluated in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 4, Dai details the design of an interpersonal communication test, starting with a task-based needs analysis (TBNA) to identify challenges L2-Chinese speakers face in interpersonal interactions. The test development involved drafting items based on TBNA findings and refining them through feedback from various informants. The final IC test includes nine items covering three interactive modes, three power variables from politeness theory, and three sub-target language use domains, designed for CMC. The methodology section explains the TBNA and test

development process, using triangulation methods for comprehensive data collection. The study involved 18 participants from diverse backgrounds, using hermeneutic-Socratic interviews and longitudinal reflective diaries. To ensure quality and reliability, norming questionnaires were used to validate the items in two rounds. Data analysis for the TBNA used thematic analysis, while the test design involved qualitative and quantitative data analysis to refine and validate the test items effectively.

In Chapter 5, Dai presents his second study, in which he develops and validates an indigenous criteria-based rating scale for IC. This rating scale prioritizes real-world communicative demands over primarily academic standards. By incorporating the perspectives of domain experts, the author improves on the ecological validity of the scale. As a result, the rating instrument better captures how speakers handle the challenges of interpersonal discourse, such as managing disagreements or cultivating cooperative relationships. Building on these expert insights, the author structures the scale around six performance categories: Conflict Management, Solidarity Promotion, Reasoning Skills, Personal Qualities, Social Relations, and Linguistic/Prosodic Choices. Initial pilot testing results demonstrated the scale's effectiveness in capturing the intended elements of IC and prompted minor adjustments based on empirical data. By grounding the rating scale in the lived communicative experiences of everyday users, the author demonstrates how an indigenous, criteria-based rating scale can reliably measure authentic interaction.

Chapter 6 presents the main findings of the study, including IC test results, questionnaire responses, and the relationship with the traditional language proficiency scores from the Chinese Standard Exam, Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK). A large-scale IC test involving 106 Chinese speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds (26 countries) and different age groups (from the teens to the forties) provided insights into IC assessment and offered detailed guidelines for those interested in replicating similar studies, particularly in material development and rater training. The study emphasized the necessity of LC for IC, as speakers require sufficient linguistic resources to manage social interactions effectively. However, LC alone does not guarantee strong IC, as evidenced by the wide dispersion of IC scores among L1 speakers, supporting the distinction between the two constructs at higher proficiency levels. While CA-informed examples and training materials improved rater consistency, test takers expressed less confidence in their suprasegmental abilities such as pronunciation and prosody, suggesting a need for targeted feedback for those features, specifically in teaching and assessment. Additionally, although the self-assessment questionnaire was found to be reliable, its correlation with IC test scores was lower than expected, indicating a gap between perceived and actual IC performance.

Chapter 7 returns to the validity argument, evaluating evidence and inferences from prior chapters to assess the IC test's overall validity. It expands beyond Kane's framework by including test practicality and its impact on teaching and learning (Chapelle, 2021). The chapter highlights the contribution of this study to advancing assessment methodologies and addressing gaps, such as the need for more studies on CMC platforms and IC assessment in diverse settings. It also emphasizes the importance of further investigation into practical applications and theoretical developments.

In Chapter 8, Dai summarizes the entire research project, highlighting its significance, innovation, and limitations, as well as discussing future research directions. It begins with a philosophical discussion on pragmatics theories and proposes a unified model of interaction to reconcile epistemological conflicts. Focusing on Chinese and using CMC as a testing platform, the book adopts a methodical approach using the Kanean argument-based validation framework, rigorously designing and validating test tasks through TBNA and feedback from various informants. The book also democratizes applied linguistics by involving everyday-life domain experts in the test construct development, as well as ensuring that the IC rating scale is more reflective of real-life language use. It emphasizes cross-disciplinary enrichment, explores the relationship between interpersonal communication and LC, and argues for teaching and assessing IC independently from LC. The author also addresses outstanding issues, limitations, and future research directions, including incorporating L2 perspectives and exploring decision and consequence inferences. Additionally, the chapter notes that the use of raters for IC assessment also requires further investigation.

In the conclusion of this book, the author recognizes the importance of linguistic abilities traditionally emphasized in standardized speaking proficiency tests, such as vocabulary, grammar, and cohesive discourse, while contextualizing them within meaningful, real-world language use rather than treating them in isolation. This study extends the construct by integrating sociocultural and identity-related dimensions of communication, reinforcing that IC is fundamentally about responding to others, accomplishing social actions, and maintaining coherence in interaction.

Methodologically, Dai adopts an innovative approach by incorporating laypeople's perceptions of effective interaction rather than relying solely on theory-driven linguistic criteria. This bottom-up perspective offers a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of what constitutes successful interaction. By drawing on CA and MCA, the study presents a comprehensive model that accounts for both the sequential organization of interaction and the ways speakers convey identities, social roles, and community memberships.

To conclude, the studies in this book demonstrate that interactional competence is not entirely dependent on linguistic proficiency, as even lower-proficiency L2 speakers can outperform L1 speakers in interactive effectiveness. The findings challenge traditional assessment paradigms that favor native speakers, and Dai alerted readers to the need for a more equitable framework for evaluating communication skills. This reconceptualization of IC aligns with broader shifts in language assessment as IC concepts such as turn-taking and joint development of discourse are incorporated in the revised Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Speaking skill level descriptions (2021) on the social interaction aspect of language function. By offering an empirically supported and theoretically robust model, this book paves the way for assessing and teaching IC in diverse language use contexts, highlighting the importance of adaptability, collaboration, and real-world communicative effectiveness.

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