

ASSESSING WHAT A SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER KNOWS THROUGH STUDENT-TEACHER INTERACTION ¹

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In the TESOL classroom, interaction between teacher and student may determine the success of an exchange (Long and Sato, 1983), (Brock, 1986) (Pica, Young, Doughty, 1986). However, the communicative success of an exchange is difficult to measure due to the multidimensional factors involved in communication and the presence of misunderstandings.

The extent of detected and undetected miscommunication between second language learners and native speakers of a language has not been studied extensively, nor is its effect in the language learning process currently known. What has been shown is that knowledge of results plays an important role in language learning (Long, 1977). Long (1977) has pointed to an apparent lack of clarity and consistency in teacher-feedback directed at learners in the TESOL classroom.² It has not been determined yet which discourse strategies best promote clarity and consistency in teachers' feedback nor promote or impede communication.

This paper presents episodes of detected misunderstandings and instances of noncommunication between Pa, a Laotian Hmong student, and his TESOL teacher during an oral evaluation. It is a case study which investigates the role of the following variables in assessing the student's proficiency of English and in assessing communication between teacher and student: the discourse strategies adapted, the lack of shared background among the interlocutors, the student's nonnative use of phonology and his choice of lexis.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF COMMUNICATION AND MISCOMMUNICATION

For this study, the term "communication" refers to any exchange between a speaker and a listener in which the listener receives an interpretation seemingly identical to that of the speaker's intended message.³ Hymes (1974:15) observes:

To define communication as the triggering of a response [as Hockett [1958:573] has done, and Kluckhohn [1961:895] has accepted], is to make the term so nearly equivalent to behavior and interaction in general as to lose its specific value as a scientific and moral conception.

In addition, the concept put forth by Hawkins of "assumed communication" (Hawkins, 1982) refers to the belief by at least one of the interlocutors that successful communication has taken place between both parties.⁴ In this paper, I use the term "miscommunication" to refer to a difference between propositional meaning (Austin, 1965) and listener perception and the term "noncommunication" to mean a listener's global lack of comprehension.

Most conversation analysts agree that communication occurs through the negotiation of meaning in interaction between speakers who have shared knowledge and backgrounds (Labov and Fanshel, 1977) (Gumperz and Tannen, 1979). Furthermore, Gumperz (1972:4) notes that the process of communication requires "both shared grammar and rules of language use" [pragmatic rules of language use]. Savignon (1983:4) observes "...meaning is never one sided. Rather, it is negotiated between the persons involved."

Varonis and Gass (1985) have noted the role that the lack of shared linguistic, social and cultural factors play in observed misunderstandings between native and nonnative interlocutors. Thus, miscommunication may occur even though the interlocutors' speech is free of lexical, grammatical and phonological errors that occur among nonnative and native speakers of English. It may be wholly or in part due to speakers' differing schemata or interpretations.

It is the mark of polite conversation for interlocutors to pay attention, to ask relevant questions, and to respond accordingly. However, Hawkins (1982) has shown that there is a danger in using the concept of "appropriate response" as a measure of communication. Responses that are appropriate when comprehension exists can be misleading if there is no comprehension between the interlocutors. Hawkins (1982) found that native-nonnative miscomprehension was difficult to measure since the nonnative speakers responded appropriately to the native speakers but their responses did not always signal comprehension.⁵

Gumperz (1982:1) warns that conversational responses may not signal the presence of understanding:

Only when a move has elicited a response can we say that communication is taking place. However, there are other types of situations in which interlocutors' responses do not necessarily indicate that they have understood their partner's intended message.

Even between native speakers, there may be conversation without communication of information in the strict sense. Malinowski's concept of phatic communion does not necessitate understand- Malinowski (1953:315) explains its function as "a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words." According to the definition of communication that I introduced above, "an exchange between a speaker and a listener in which the listener receives an interpretation which is seemingly identical to that of the speaker's intended message", communication does not exist without some comprehension.

THE STUDY

During the Fall of 1986 I observed classroom discourse and interaction at the Community College of Philadelphia to study the question "What role do discourse strategies play in promoting or impeding communication between student and teacher?" This paper provides a detailed examination of a short segment of interaction between a student and a teacher during an oral evaluation. The analysis examines some of the constraints that are inherent

in a situation which demands that a beginning second language learner's speech be fluent and comprehensible.

Participants in the Study

The Student: At the time of the study, Pa, 24 years old, had been in the United States for several years and was repeating the class for the second time. He may have attended three years of college in Laos. He had worked as a cook at a Thai restaurant in Philadelphia before he had attended the Community College of Philadelphia. Pa is a speaker of Hmong, Laotian and some Thai ("50% know" in his words, or 50% proficiency).

As will be seen, Pa shows tremendous difficulty in communicating in English⁶. His speech style which relies heavily on the use of content words, can be characterized as "telegraphic speech." At times he does not use; verbs, pronouns, prepositions, articles and cohesive and coherent ties.

The Teacher: The teacher, who is a skilled instructor, provides an invaluable source for this discourse analysis. She strove to promote an environment in which a student who is barely proficient in English can maximize his performance. Although an experienced TESOL teacher, this was her first time teaching a Speaking and Listening class. She is not a speaker of either Hmong, Laotian or Thai.

Data Collection

The data collection consisted of tape recording the final oral evaluation of a lower-intermediate Speaking and Listening class.⁷ The teacher had announced to the class previous to the day of the evaluation the topic of the evaluation. She asked the students to describe a holiday of their native country.⁸ The holiday that the Hmong student chose to describe was the Laotian Hmong New Year.

Present at Pa's evaluation were Pa, the teacher and the researcher. The student was aware that he was being recorded, for the teacher's and the researcher's tape recorders were placed on the table in full view throughout the evaluation.

In order to pass the evaluation, Pa was required to display a level of fluency (in terms of continuous speech production) which was more advanced than his proficiency in English. After collecting and analyzing the data, it became apparent to the researcher that the teacher and the student did not share the same linguistic systems, pragmatic rules of language use or cultural awareness regarding the New Year holiday. Thus, in order to clarify my understanding of Pa's culture, I consulted with Gail Weinstein-Shr, who has worked extensively as teacher and researcher with the Hmong community.⁹

The Student's and Teacher's Use of Interactional Modifications

Due to the nature of an oral evaluation, it may be presumed that if the student did not fully understand the teacher's questions or comments, the evaluation would not be the appropriate time to express his lack of comprehension or press for clarification. The rules for interaction during the evaluation emphasized fluent conversation (i.e. "public-language", Goffman (1963), used to perform and display ability to speak fluently), between the participants.

Table 1 displays the student's use of the interactional modifications: confirmation checks and comprehension checks. (See Pica, Young, Doughty, 1986, Long, 1980 for definitions). Note the student's use of zero clarification checks.

Table 1

The Student's Use of Interactional Modifications

Comprehension Checks	Confirmation Checks	Clarification Checks
17	1	0

The student used the comprehension checks "right?" and "you know?" throughout the evaluation and one confirmation check at the end of the evaluation when he was confirming the day of the written examination. Examples of these interactional modifications are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Examples of the Student's Interactional Modifications

Comprehension Checks:

302. student: a large grass and some...um a grass grass shopper, right?

310. student: If you don't believe so you eat right?

344. student: Uh Thats um if um if um whose um have good idea and whose um have um learn a lots from like uh learn English all right?

Confirmation Check:

392. student: Friday morning?

The teacher used a great amount of confirmation checks (27 tokens-63%) which appears to create a non-threatening atmosphere conducive to conversation. Table 3 displays the amount and type of interactional modifications used by the teacher.

Table 3

Quantification of Interactional Modifications Used by the Teacher

Confirmation Checks	27
Clarification Checks	
Yes/No questions	3
Wh questions	4
Declarative statement	3
Comprehension Checks	2
Total	45

The teacher tried forty five times to understand the student by asking for confirmation, clarification and verification of comprehension. The following four

examples are interactional modifications used by the teacher (see Pica, Young, Doughty, 1988 for definitions, Long 1980).

Table 4

Examples of the Teacher's Interactional Modifications

Requests for Clarification

129. teacher: I'm a little confused here.

177. teacher: I'm a little lost here. I got to tell you.

Request for Confirmation

317 teacher: little animals?

Comprehension Check

401. I'll see you Friday morning O.K.?

According to the teacher and affirmed by the researcher, both the teacher's and the student's speech styles can be classified informally as "information fillers."¹⁰ This means that their speech styles are interactive due to the interlocutors' quest for supplying and receiving information to each other. It can be assumed that the constant interaction between Pa and the teacher indicates a high degree of cooperative involvement. This conversational style follows one of Lakoff's Rule of Politeness (1973) (later called Rules of Rapport): Be friendly (Camaraderie).¹¹

The Speaking and Listening Evaluation

The teacher began the evaluation by asking the student, Pa, to talk about a Hmong holiday. The student discussed the Hmong New Year and their preparations for the New Year celebration. According to Pa, on December 27th, the Hmong begin three days of preparation. From January first through the third the Hmong abide by the traditional Hmong regulations of what tasks they are allowed or are not allowed to perform (for example, not touching knives, not blowing on a fire and not eating green vegetables).

Although the teacher was interested in learning the details of the Hmong New Year celebration and the student was motivated to perform well during the evaluation, neither of the inter-locutors needed to obtain absolute factual accuracy.¹² The teacher's rationale for asking about the holiday was to provide a basis with which to evaluate Pa's fluency in English. By choosing this topic the teacher ensured that the students' familiarity with the discourse domain would promote fluency (Selinker and Douglas, 1985). However, in assessing language competence, Higgs's and Clifford's suggestion (1982) is relevant to the assessment of second language learners' speech in oral evaluations:

The question that needs to be asked is not merely "Was the student able to communicate?" but "What was he able to communicate and how?"¹³

Furthermore, many other aspects of a language also need to be assessed: skill in verbal interaction, grammatical complexity, register, style and appropriateness of "discourse" as a whole.

The teacher could not have tested Pa on the factual accuracy of his description because she is not familiar with Hmong holidays.¹⁴ If she had been planning to attend a Hmong New Year celebration in Laos, communication would have been more likely secured through the teacher's need to fill an "information gap" (Johnson and Morrow, 1981).

In administering oral evaluations which evaluate a student's proficiency in a language, teachers have the difficult job of encouraging the student's speech and at the same time participating in a conversation in which they may not be aware of how much information they may be miscomprehending. By responding cooperatively (Grice, 1975), Pa's teacher encouraged Pa by providing positive feedback during times when Pa found it difficult to articulate his thoughts in English.

At no time that the teacher did not understand the student's speech did she damage his "public face" (Goffman, 1963) or "positive face" (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

Communication may have been sacrificed between teacher and student for the sake of face-saving, an essential prerequisite for the student's persistence in language learning.

Based on the student's performance during the oral evaluation and on a written examination on an unrelated topic several days later, the teacher determined that the student should retake the class once again. The student was given a grade of "Making Progress."

After the student had left the Learning Lab, (the site where the evaluation had taken place), the teacher mentioned to the researcher that she had not understood the student's explanations regarding the Hmong's rituals. Of significance is the teacher's formulation of her involvement as a determinant in the outcome of the misunderstanding:

412. teacher: O.K. that's very complicated-xxx But why would you not eat vegetables and why would you not drink except if you had to leave?

413. JL: Maybe cause you're farmers and vegetables are your livelihood.

414. teacher: That's what your everyday thing -

415. JL: So

416. teacher: That was what I was thinking but I couldn't quite get that idea from him. I mean that I felt that idea was coming from my head

The teacher noted that she did not know why the Hmong do not drink at the Hmong New Year ceremony. She commented at another time that perhaps the reason she had not asked was because she feared she would not understand the response. What is missing in the data is an evaluation by the student of how well he thought he understood the teacher's questions and comments (Hawkins, 1982). 15

Another instance of "non-communication" is the student's explanation of why the Hmong do not drink at their ceremony (See Appendix B). It can be hypothesized that either 1) the student did not understand the teacher's questions, 2) did not know the answer or 3) knew the answer but did not know how to express it so that the teacher would understand.

The teacher and student used clarification checks and confirmation checks to resolve misunderstandings over whether the Hmong fast or feast during the New Year ceremony

and what was the sequence of events concerning the Hmong's ritual of leaving their ceremony to drink. These misunderstandings will be treated in detail after the relevant discourse strategies are shown.

ANALYSIS OF DISCOURSE STRATEGIES USED IN THE EVALUATION

Interlocutors use a variety of conversational strategies depending on whether they believe that they have understood each other. The discourse strategies used by the student and the teacher during the evaluation can be categorized into two groups: those that may have promoted communication and those that may have impeded communication.

I use the term "promoted" to refer to the speakers' creation of opportunities for negotiation of meaning to clarify information not understood previously. In addition, I use the concept of discourse strategies promoting communication (and not "resulting" in communication), because I do not claim a direct causal relationship between discourse strategy and the communicative success of an interaction. Due to the nature of the situation researched, in which all contributing factors could not be controlled, there was no way to verify that communication resulted.

Discourse Strategies Which May Have Promoted Communication

In the first set of discourse strategies examined, the teacher reminded the student several times the location and place of the written examination. Subsequently the student appeared at the designated time and place to take the examination. A direct correlation is not being claimed regarding the student's comprehension of the teacher's speech. It seems likely that there was a causal relation, but it is also possible that the student understood the teacher's reminders by asking a fellow student at a later date.

Confirmation Check and Comprehension Checks: At the end of the evaluation, the teacher needed to confirm that the student understood when and where the written examination would take place (See Appendix B).

391. teacher: O.K. I will see you on Friday morning.
 392. student: Friday morning?
 393. teacher: Yes, we have a test in B.
 394. student: So
 395. teacher: Same room
 396. student: O.K.
 397. teacher: same time. Nine o'clock.
 398. student: O.K.
 399. teacher: On Friday morning
 400. student: O.K.
 401. teacher: I'll see you Friday morning. O.K.?
 402. student: O.K.
 403. teacher: Just be about an hour. O.K?
 404. student: O.K.

After the student had confirmed that the examination would take place on Friday morning (line *392), the teacher again reminded him of its date (line *401). At the same time, she confirmed his understanding with the comprehension marker "O.K." In this manner, the teacher used a series of "checkpoints" to remind the student the time and the location of the examination and to ensure his comprehension.

Confirmation Check: In the following example, the conversation teacher used a discourse style which consists of reformulating their comments in the form of a question in order to confirm her understanding (*172). In this sequence the student explains the Hmong's ritual which forbids drinking at their ceremony.

166. student: the um eat rice with um water un river and some
 some things. That's it we don't eat with the water
 and with the type of soda we don't eat only three
 days. If you want to drink or for um parties um in
 the party we have
 167. teacher: Um hum
 168. student: but after party on January first
 169. teacher: Mum hum
 170. student: so we don't have to eat for the party if whose have
 the party in the so they don't drink for the party.
 171. teacher: Mum hum
 172. student: If you want to drink, so you want to um...you get up from the
 party and you go to drink.
 173. teacher: Oh, you go somewhere else and drink?
 174. student: Yeah, after finish then um after you drink sens come back xxx
 (obscure) and have party.

In line *173 it appears as if the teacher understood the sequence of the events but not the rationale. Here, the student is able to communicate information regarding the "here and now" but not to convey abstract concepts. His assertion that the Hmong leave the party to drink conflicts with the teacher's assumption and past life experiences in which people drink at parties.

Clarification Check, Open-Ended Questions and Confirmation Check: The teacher used a clarification check in line *129, an open ended question (Wh-question) in line *135 and a confirmation check in line *137.

120. student: Foe, so on the, no eh January first
121. teacher: Mum Hum
122. student: until January thirch, three day
123. teacher: Mum hum
124. student: so we don't touch anything, don't eat green vegetable, dum my English no (obscure) bro so that you know um bro the fire? bro like (pantomimes blowing motion).
125. teacher: Oh, blow on the fire. Yeah
126. student: They don't have even whose uh do like this on the already the old men
127. teacher: People stop doing
128. student: Yeah, yeah
129. teacher: I'm con I'm a little con I'm a little confused here.
130. student: Yeah, the people stop wo--
131. teacher: They stop working? or they?
132. student: Yeah
133. teacher: or they stop making things?
134. student: Yeah
135. teacher: For how long?
136. student: For uh three day.
137. teacher: For three days?
138. student: Yeah. Stop working and something.

Pa answered the teacher's questions affirmatively in lines *132 and *134. One result was to prolong the conversation, which in itself may be a means of promoting communication. However, prolonging the conversation may result in miscommunication if the student is unwilling to question the teacher's reformulations. The student may not have

thought it was important to correct the teacher, or may have considered it impolite to correct her or may actually have misunderstood her.

Discourse Strategies Which May Have Promoted Miscommunication

The teacher used four discourse strategies that may have inadvertently led to miscommunication: 1) backchanneling designed to indicate her comprehension in instances where the teacher actually did not understand the student, but thought that she had; 2) backchanneling to continue the conversation when the teacher did not understand the student; 3) alternative questions; 4) an interruption.

Confusing Backchanneling: Backchanneling devices used in teacher-student interaction do not always indicate comprehension.¹⁶ Backchanneling can be used in three different situations: 1) when a teacher has understood the student and is signaling comprehension; 2) when a teacher thinks he or she has understood the student but has not, ("assumed communication") and signals comprehension; 3) when a teacher signals for the student to continue whether or not he or she has understood. They may be designed to serve as encouragement to the student to continue.

The teacher's frequent use of backchannel signals like "Mmmm", "Mum hum" and "Uh huh" may have led the student to think that she had understood him. However, the Hmong speaker's telegraphic speech which often resulted in incoherence intra and intersententially meant that during the evaluation his descriptions were not always comprehensible: i.e., there was insufficient discourse competence (Savignon, 1984). (see Appendix A)

Alternative Questions: The conversation teacher asked the student six alternative questions ("or-questions"), which according to Hatch (1983) are a characteristic of foreigner talk.

Like backchanneling, alternative questions may serve an interactive function and thus promote conversation if they succeed in eliciting speech. However, it is possible for the student to understand only one alternative or possibly neither alternative.¹⁷

The following quotation functioned by "forcing" the students to choose an answer even when neither of the alternatives posed were correct.

155. teacher: You don't eat anything or you just eat vegetables?

As seen from the data, alternative questions continue miscomprehension if the choices themselves are incorrect. The teacher asked the student to answer alternative questions and then repeated his utterances when she did not understand.

Perhaps if the teacher had asked more "wh-questions" the possibility for communication would have increased. For example, if the teacher had asked the student in line 167 "What do you do?" or "What do you eat?" (during the three days of the holiday) instead of "You stop eating?" more details might have been obtained and perhaps communication would have resulted. The student might have replied "We prepare food for the holiday. We don't eat it until then." Instead Pa used the referent "that" which the teacher did not understand due to phonological reasons.

The Teacher's Interruption: The teacher interrupted the student once, as seen in the following example:

- 130. student: Yeah, the people stop wo-
- 131. teacher: They stop working? or they
- 132. student: Yeah
- 133. teacher: or they stop making things?
- 134. student: Yeah

There is no guarantee that the student understood the teacher or that if the teacher had not interrupted him in line *130 that his speech would have been comprehensible.

The teacher is a highly proficient and experienced TESOL professional. Yet, as can be seen, the comprehension of a second language learner's speech is a difficult task. The above discourse strategies may have been designed to provide direction and support to the student and the teacher's desire to understand the student's speech.

A DETAILED ANALYSIS OF A MISCOMMUNICATION-- "FAST" OR "FEAST" AT THE HMONG NEW YEAR?

The following example illustrates many of the discourse strategies given above. At this point, Pa is trying to explain a Hmong eating custom of the New Year's celebration. But he has trouble conveying the information. Note the clarification check in line *129.

120. student: For, so on the, eh January first
 122. student: Until January thirch, three day
 123. teacher: Mum hum
 124. student: so we...don't touch anything, don't eat green vegetable, don't my English I no xxx [bro] (blow) so that you know um [bro] the fire?, [bro] like (pantomimes blowing motion).
 125. teacher: Oh, blow on the fire. Yeah
 126. student: They don't have even whose uh do like this on the already the old men.
 127. teacher: People stop doing
 128. student: Yeah, yeah
 129. teacher: I'm con-I'm a little con-I'm a little confused here.
 130. student: Yeah, the people stop wo-
 131. teacher: They stop working? or they
 132. student: Yeah
 133. teacher: or they stop making things?
 134. student: Yeah
 135. teacher: For how long?
 136. student: For uh three day
 137. teacher: For three days?
 138. student: yeah, stop working and something. Eating eat for for the wood [wu?] for the food [futs]. (i.e. gather firewood to prepare food).
 139. teacher: Uh huh
 140. student: So we, stop ooh uh eat the green, like uh the green vegetable
 141. teacher: Uh huh
 142. student: (which are all) green...(year?) take 'em from-from the farmer, from the garden (so).
 143. teacher: Uh huh. So they-
 144. student: So they do (?) eat
 145. teacher: So they prepare ahead of time. They didn't they get ready before.
 146. student: Yeah.
 147. teacher: Now, in these three days, you stop eating? No.
 148. student: Stop eating das das food (-We don't eat that food)
 149. teacher: Oh, O.K.
 150. student: After three days we can eat. So, after three days then we can eat (-We can eat that food).
 151. teacher: Oh, then you can eat. It sounds like Lent, sort of (to the researcher).
 152. JL: For three days they fast? (to the teacher)
 153. teacher: For three days?
 154. student: Yeah.