

The interaction immediately following the above sequence illustrates the teacher's alternative question (line #153) which inadvertently forced the student to choose between lines #138-154):

155. teacher: You don't eat anything or you just eat vegetables?
156. student: No, don't eat vegetables.
157. teacher: You don't eat...anything, you eat nothing?
158. student: No, only eat rice and meats and like that all the vegetables and they don't eat.
159. teacher: O.K. You eat rice and meat.
160. student: Yeah
161. teacher: but you don't eat vegetables.
162. student: Yeah
163. teacher: for three days
164. student: Yeah and
165. teacher: O.K.

Pa had trouble making clear to the teacher the specific Hmong eating rituals. It may have been the case that Pa was saying that the Hmong abstain from eating the food that they prepare for the feast or that they don't eat green vegetables during the celebration. There could also be other alternatives that are not immediately apparent. Pa told the teacher that the Hmong don't eat green vegetables (line #124). The teacher asked him "You don't eat anything or you just eat vegetables?" which showed that she had not understood his statement "Don't eat green vegetables." (line #124)

The teacher interrupted the student by saying "O.K.," which possibly signaled that she had thought that she had understood the student (line #163). The teacher showed a number of different understandings of the student's narrative in lines #138-163.

1. The Hmong stop eating for three days.
2. The Hmong do not eat green vegetables for three days.
3. The Hmong eat rice and meat for three days.

However, as Weinstein-Shr pointed out, (and as her Hmong informant confirmed), the Hmong do not fast during their celebration, rather they feast. The student explained that the Hmong "Stop eating <das> <das> (that) (that) food. So, after three days then we can eat."

(line *148) in response to the teacher's question "For three days?" (line *153). Miscommunication may have been due to phonological reasons. It is probable that the student pronounced the word "that" as "das" (line *148). Thus, the voiced interdental fricative /θ/ was voiced as the alveolar stop /d/.

In reviewing the transcript, the teacher noted the point in the conversation where she feels she began to misunderstand Pa. This occurred when she reformulated his utterances in line (*127):

127. teacher: People stop doing¹⁸

from Pa's most immediate preceding statements "They don't have even whose uh do like this on the already the old men." (line *126) and in line *124 "So we...don't touch anything. don't eat green vegetables, don't my English I no xxx...". The teacher interrupted the student's explanation of what the Hmong "stop" doing or don't do during the three days before the Hmong New Year. The student had begun to say what was possibly the word "work" (wo), in "Yeah, the people stop wo-" (line *131) but was interrupted by the teacher's alternative question:

They stop working or they stop making things?
(line *131-133)

This question is an attempt at reformulating what the student had been in the process of saying.

The teacher posed the idea that the Hmong stop eating (line *147) and then quickly added a "No," as if saying that she did not believe it. Pa's use of a transitive form of the verb "to eat" ("So after three days then we can eat." line *150) without specifying an object apparently confirmed for the teacher that the Hmong do not eat for three days. This is why she said to the researcher in the following line that it reminded her of Lent (when some people fast).¹⁹

After the teacher mentioned to the researcher the similarity that she saw between Lent and the Hmong New Year celebration preparations, the researcher asked "For three days they fast?" (line *152) to which the teacher questioned the student "For three days?"

(line #153). He might have understood the question to mean whether the preparations take three days and responded affirmatively in response.

Instead of asking Pa "Where do the people at this party drink?" the teacher supplied the answers for him in the form of a yes/no question. She thus established a series of "check-points" (comprehension checks) by restating Pa's answers to determine if her comprehension of the student's speech was accurate. By "checkpoint" I mean the use of short answers said with an slow intonation which indicated the speaker's willingness to be contradicted. For example:

166. student: The um eat rice with um water unriver and some some things. That's it we don't eat with the water and with the like a 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 <hoz> host 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 <ju> go to drink.

173. teacher: Oh, you go somewhere else and drink.

174. student: yeah, after finish then um after you drink <Eas> sens come back xxx (obscure) and have party.

175. teacher: Now now the people who are in this party

176. student: Yeah

177. teacher: I'm a little lost here I got to tell you. The people in this party are eating rice.

178. student: Yeah

179. teacher: and meat

180. student: Yeah

181. teacher: but if they want something to drink...they go somewhere different?

182. student: Yeah

183. teacher: take a drink

184. student: yeah

185. teacher: and then come back?

186. student: Yeah

In the exchange displayed above (lines 166- 186), Pa states that the people who are attending the celebration leave the party to drink. The teacher reaffirms this with a declarative statement to which Pa responds affirmatively. Yet, in lines 175 through

186 the teacher double-checked once again by asking comprehension checks ascertain her understanding of what the student had said.

FINDINGS

Six findings are suggested by this study:

- 1) Teachers who administer oral evaluations are placed into the dual role of interlocutor/facilitator.
- 2) The teacher's use of the interactional modifications-clarification checks, confirmation checks and comprehension checks may have promoted communication.
- 3) The teacher's use of a topic which was not familiar to her and her use of confusing backchanneling promoted fluency (continuous speech production) but not a successful exchange of information.
- 4) Communication may have been impeded by lack of shared knowledge among the interlocutors due to the nature of the task, several of the teacher's discourse strategies and the student's nonnative use of phonology and lexis.
- 5) This study confirms the apparent lack of clarity and consistency in teacher-feedback noted by Long in 1977 with regard to the use of backchanneling.
- 6) A dynamic exists between the interlocutors' desire to maintain fluency of speech and the nonnative speaker's ability to produce grammatically correct sentences with appropriate lexical choices.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Language learning is believed by many second language acquisition researchers to be a process of hypothesis-testing, hypothesis confirmation and rule-modification. With regard to these processes, second language learners depend on learning the communicative success of their interaction with interlocutors. This is in accordance with the important role that knowledge of results plays in language learning.

Pa's teacher often asked for clarification and expressed a lack of understanding of what Pa had said. Her double role of interlocutor/facilitator required her to participate fully in the conversation and also to encourage Pa in his attempts to converse. Yet if she had terminated the conversation at the points where she did not understand she might not have been considered a good interlocutor.

Although conversation teachers do not want to break the flow of conversation, students need to know when there is a communication breakdown. If the teacher were to evaluate fully the student's speech for factual accuracy she would be required to "stall" the evaluation at points in which she was dubious of comprehension. Then she would have to verify meaning through either an interpreter or through time taking measurements such as enactment etc. During an oral evaluation this is difficult to accomplish when there occur many communication breakdowns, detected and undetected.

The teacher's assessment of the student's proficiency was limited due to the topic of the evaluation which was too advanced and thus emphasized fluency rather than accurate exchange of content. Oral evaluations of advanced second language learners' speech might profitably include topics which require shared cultural schemata between teacher and student. This strategy would challenge the student's knowledge of the pragmatic rules of second language use. The results might prove valuable as information regarding techniques of assessing pragmatic rules of language use without shared cultural schemata.

The teacher's use of back-channeling and the student's and teacher's efforts to maintain a coherent conversation, often gave the impression that communication had taken place when in fact it had not. Although the teacher was consistent in her attempts to encourage the student's efforts to converse in English, the student would no doubt be discouraged if he were to know the full extent of his failure to communicate.²⁰

CONCLUSION

The oral assessment of students' proficiency in a second language is multifaceted. Several challenges exist for TESOL conversation teachers in assessing the proficiency of second language learners during oral evaluations: 1) promoting accurate exchange of information 2) encouraging ongoing fluent conversation, 3) informing students of the communicative success of the interaction to further their progress in the second language learning process.

The examination of the role that the teacher's discourse strategies played in promoting communication between teacher and student revealed that the interactional modifications- clarification checks, confirmation checks and comprehension checks- may have promoted communication. The use of confusing back-channeling, alternative questions and an interruption may have promoted miscommunication. TESOL teachers might investigate for themselves whether indeed the above discourse strategies promote or impede communication.

The analysis of detected and undetected misunderstandings and instances of noncommunication can serve a multitude of purposes with regard to the assessment of second language proficiency and the role discourse strategies play in communication between student and teacher. The identification and quantification of misunderstandings will prove helpful in determining the extent to which speakers miscommunicate.

Suggestions for further research in assessing student-teacher interaction include the following questions regarding discourse strategies: How does the student interpret the teacher's response of "Mmm", "Mum huh" and "Uh huh", e.g. involvement, encouragement or comprehension? How do the student and teacher determine if each other understands his or her speech? Which discourse strategies minimize misunderstandings? What is the ideal ratio in the classroom for openended vs. alternative questions?

It is not yet clear how extensively each discourse strategy should be used to promote interaction and hopefully, communication. What is the role of visual cues with regard to discourse strategies? Videotaped oral evaluations might provide valuable information regarding the paralinguistic variable that accompanies miscommunication. How would the findings of this study compare with those found in a large scale quantitative examination of the discourse strategies of interlocutors during an oral evaluation?

1. This paper was originally written for Dr. Teresa Pica's classes in classroom discourse and interaction and second language acquisition. The author wishes to thank Myong Ok Hwang Kramer, Teresa Labor, Jane Labotta, Teresa Pica and Gail Weinstein-Shr for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 Pica (1986) notes: "Theoretical claims have [also] been made (cf. Corder 1973; Higgs and Clifford 1982; Swain 1985) that learners gain opportunities to develop their productive capacity in the second language if demands are placed on them to manipulate their current interlanguage system so that they can make their initially unclear messages become meaningful to their interlocutors."

3 Canale (1983) notes that "as pointed out by Haley (1963) and others, such information [which is transmitted in interaction] is never permanently worked out nor fixed but is constantly changing and qualified by such factors as further information, context of communication, choice of language forms, and non-verbal behavior. In this sense communication involves the continuous evaluation and negotiation of meaning on the part of the participants, as described by Candlin (1980), Wells (1981) and others.

4 It may be difficult if not impossible to uncover speaker's actual intended message even when two native speakers are involved.

5 Hawkins (1982) recommends future research to "determine if there is a pattern which exists which would sift out appropriate responses that do not signal comprehension from those that do."

6 At the end of the evaluation, the student commented that he had wanted to write a composition about the Hmong New Year but could not find the words in English in his dictionary.

7 I would like to thank the teacher for her kindness in permitting me to observe, study her classroom and for sharing her reflections on the communicative success of the interactions.

8 The teacher remarked to the researcher that it appeared to her as if the student had not planned his discourse prior to the evaluation. Thus, his speech may be considered "unplanned discourse." (Ochs, 1979).

9 Weinstein-Shr completed an ethnographic study of the Hmong community for her dissertation entitled "From Mountaintops to City Streets: An Ethnographic Investigation of Literacy and Social Process Among the Hmong of Philadelphia" and is director of Project LEIF - Learning English Through Intergenerational Friendship which in Philadelphia serves 125 refugee adults, 25 of whom are Hmong. "Survival School for Refugees - In South Phila., Asians Conquer English - and their fears" Philadelphia Inquirer Sunday April 26, 1987.

Weinstein-Shr provided background information that was needed for a more informed guess to interpret the miscommunications that occurred and the possible reasons for them.

After Weinstein-Shr discussed her insights and hypotheses regarding the data, she later questioned a Hmong speaker regarding the Hmong New Year ceremony to verify the factual accuracy of the student's description.

10 The teacher used this gloss to refer to the student's speech styles and those of her own.

11 Tannen (1986) extrapolates on the relationship between Lakoff's Rules of Politeness and conversational style: "In choosing the form of an utterance, speakers observe one or another of these rules [1. Don't impose (Distance), 2. Give options (Deference) and 3. Be friendly (Camaraderie)]. Furthermore, each of these rules, when applied in interaction, creates a particular stylistic effect, as indicated by the terms in parentheses. That is, according to Tannen, preference for honoring one or another of these politeness

principles results in a communicative strategy which makes up style. Conversely, conversational style results from habitual use of linguistic devices motivated by these overall strategies.

12 It is widely acknowledged that interlocutors may share similar but limited goals. Some of the general goals of conversation include: (1) an exchange of information, (2) the maintenance of social bonds of friendship, kinship, (3) the negotiation of statuses and roles (4) decisions and joint action. Most of these are not the goals of "conversation teachers" in evaluating student: (2) and (4) are barely present and (1) can be quite limited as well.

13 Higgs and Clifford (1982) note "The question of how well one must perform in order to communicate successfully continues to be a matter of serious debate, but it appears that no one has asked why there should be such vigorous differences of opinion in this area. One reason may be that the discussants are working with restricted ranges of language proficiency and often base their opinions on totally different communicative tasks."

14 An important variable in the miscommunications that occurred may have been whether the student was aware of how little the teacher knew about his culture. At the end of the evaluation (line 372-375) after the misunderstanding regarding the food, the teacher said that "all this was new to me." An important question to be asked would be whether the student was aware of this before the start of the evaluation.

15 The method of retrospective analysis is useful but at times is insufficient because of the unreliability of recalled data.

16 The utterances "Uh huh" and "Mmmm" have been labeled as "assent terms" (Schegloff, 1968 p. 109), "feedback items" (Dittman and Llewellyn, 1968, p. 80), "backchannel cues" (Yngve, 1970, p. 568), "verbal reinforcers" and "recognition responses" (Rosenfeld, 1973, p. 67), "short utterances" (Kendon, 1967), "tying terms" (Sacks, lecture 22, p. 111, 10/10/67?) and "underlining others" (T. Labov, 1980, p. 1973).

These discourse strategies will continue to be referred to as "backchanneling devices".

17 A further disadvantage of alternative questions is that the student may choose a one word answer which may lead to a termination of the subject under discussion.

18 Weinstein-Shr posits that it is likely that Pa used the word "Stop" to mean "don't" ("We don't eat that food") in response to the teacher's question "Now in these three days, you stop eating?, No." (line 147). This would mean that the student meant to say that the Hmong do not eat the food that they are preparing for the three day celebration and not that they fast for three days.

Weinstein-Shr further hypothesizes that the teacher's repeated use of the verb "stop" in lines 127, 131 and 133 influenced the student to use the word "stop" in the sentences "So we stop ooh uh eat the gree, like uh the green vegetable (line 140) and in the sentence "Stop eating <das> <das> (that) food." (line 140).

19 What is not known is the effect of the teacher's comment to the researcher on the student's understanding of English. It is possible that the student may have become more sensitive to the presence of the researcher than he would have been before the teacher's remark to the researcher. Pa might have become hesitant to clarify any misunderstandings (and thus suffer even greater loss of "face") in front of a third party.

20 The student does not know the results of this research. However, the teacher's familiarity with the study is evident throughout the paper. Due to the study's findings, the teacher altered her speech in the classroom by using less alternative questions, more wh-questions and less interruptions.

APPENDIX A

The student was not able to explain why the Hmong do not eat green vegetables during the New Year celebration.

285. teacher: Do you know why ...the-they don't eat vegetables at this time? Is it because the meat and the rice ars so good? Or? Do you know the reason?
286. student: Yes, um at ...I don't know where but my mother and father they told me so um eat um green vegetable.
287. teacher: Um hum
288. student: So, in my country they were farmer.
289. teacher: Um hum
290. student: So, if you eat em green vegetable. So when you...grow the rice, right?
291. teacher: Um hum
292. student: You grow the rice and um grow the corn and everything.
293. teacher: Uh hum
294. student: you grow on the farm.
295. teacher: Um hum
296. student: They say something. Eat if ya in the new year and in the holiday xxx on the three day.
297. teacher: Uh hum
298. student: in the new year. So you eat um green vegeta- vegetable. So you have ummaybe in your farms you have um a large glass re then.
299. teacher: grass?
300. student: Yeah
301. teacher: Um hum
302. student: a large grass and some... um a grass grass shopper, right? They cut it.
303. teacher: They cut the grass uh huh.
304. student: They cut it and rice and um everything. Oh we grow in the farm.
305. teacher: Um hum
306. student: So they um they don't have to eat.
307. teacher: Uh hum
308. student: Some if you if you eat that in your farm some, maybe do like that then lady um old men so they say is true. So because I seen before.
309. teacher: Uh hum
310. student: If you don't believe so you eat right? Then when you grow the rice eh the farm
311. teacher: Uh hum
312. student: So you have a a lot mouth. So then mouth
313. teacher: Mmm?
314. student: like a dead in this muth mouth the um in the houth (house) in
315. teacher: mice?
316. student: Yeah
317. teacher: li-little animals?
318. student: Yeah, the animals. And they cut the rice and everything so...in the farm.
319. teacher: Um hum
320. student: They have
321. teacher: Mmm
322. student: many many thing.
323. teacher: Thi-this kind of a thing? Um (draws picture of a mouse)
324. student: Yeah? Heh

325. teacher: a mouse?
326. student: yeah
327. teacher: O.K.
328. student: and and the grey supper. A lot of they cut it rice and the corn um something else um young (?) grow in the farm.
329. teacher: Um hum
330. student: They say that sort of uh old lady and old young old men say that they don't give enough people to eat the green vegetable.
331. teacher: Um hum
332. student: so that was...maybe um they make up from the China because um they
333. teacher: You think it might of come this idea
334. student: yeah
335. teacher: came from China?
336. student: yeah. Maybe um three...in the order (older?) or uh (laugh)
337. teacher: Um hum
338. student: or the lie or the month before.
339. teacher: Um hum
340. student: they do from

The Teacher's Use of Comprehension Checks

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.
 405. teacher: alright, take care.
 406. student: Bye-Bye, Thank you
 407. JL : take care. Good luck.
 408. student: O.K. Bye
 409. teacher: Your number ---, Remember that.
 410. student: O.K.
 411. teacher: Alright (laugh)

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