AN ORAL DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE ON SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Teaching and learning to speak English using oral language data drawn from real life communication can be unique experiences for English teachers and students who usually rely on unauthentic written texts of a textbook. This small study focuses on a conversation involving the author and his native speaker counterpart. Entities of the conversation put under analysis and discussion include its register and generic structure, exchanges, prosodic features and communication strategies. The dialogic features of the text are presented in the data collection procedure and description section. The article is expected to provide a perspective for doing similar analysis with other oral data by teachers and advanced learners of English as a second or foreign language.

Key Words : actual oral language; exchanges; prosody; communication strategies

ABSTRAK

Mengajar dan belajar berbicara bahasa Inggris menggunakan data bahasa lisan dari komunikasi kehidupan nyata dapat menjadi pengalaman unik bagi guru dan pembelajar yang biasanya bergantung pada teks-teks buku pelajaran yang bersifat tertulis dan tidak otentik. Studi kecil ini difokuskan pada percakapan yang melibatkan penulis dan mitranya seorang pembicara asli bahasa Inggris. Bagian-bagian percakapan yang dianalisis dan dibahas termasuk register dan struktur umum, pertukaran, ciri-ciri prosodik, dan strategi komunikasi. Ciri-ciri dialogis teks disajikan dalam bagian prosedur pengumpulan dan gambaran data. Artikel ini diharapkan memberikan cara pandang untuk melakukan telaah serupa dengan data lisan yang lain oleh guru dan pembelajar tingkat tinggi untuk bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa kedua atau bahasa asing.

Kata Kunci: bahasa lisan kehidupan nyata; pertukaran; prosodi; strategi komunikasi

INTRODUCTION

The use of interaction, actual verbal communication, authentic oral texts or spoken language corpora has been identified as a determinant source of learning English as a second or foreign language (Hatch, 1992; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Stenstrom, 1994; Clennell, 1997; Aijmer & Stenstrom, 2005; Stephens, 2011; Dose, 2013). Such a use can also serve as an approach for reflective practice that is both 'evidence-based and data-led' (Walsh & Mann, 2015).

Spoken language corpora are used to analyze phenomena characteristic of natural spoken language, including discourse markers, hedges, tags, backchannels and ellipsis (Aijmer & Stenstrom, 2005). By studying spoken language at discourse level students can gain more appropriate knowledge of the purposes and motives that lie behind language options (Hatch, 1992; McCarthy & Carter, 1994). Clennell (1997) and Stephens (2011) found that the use of authentic oral texts as source for ESL teaching and learning raises overseas students' awareness of appropriate pragmatic discourse features of English intonation, which is a key to reducing communication breakdown between native and non-native speakers of English. In addition, actual oral language data exposes learners with ample strategies of communication so as to allow the flow and maintenance of an oral interaction (Clennell, 1994a, b; Hie & Yin, 2008; Lam, 2010; Ugla & Adnan, 2013). Thus, using actual or appropriate oral English texts increases the potential of foreign language learners to produce spoken expressions that sound natural or appropriate to their native speaker counterparts (Dose, 2013). As a matter of fact, despite the claim of continuously using communicative approach in which oral interaction is generally a main feature, the majority of English teachers have not exploited the use of spoken language corpora in teaching; this has led to the lack of success of non-native students especially at the advanced level to achieve native like competence (Clennell, 1997; Stephens, 2011; Dose, 2013). On the other hand, there have been some practical books that provide a good perspective for analyzing spoken language data in ways that facilitate learner understanding and acquisition (e.g., McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Stenstrom, 1994). For this reason a minor research project of a conversation has been conducted, focusing on the following questions:

1. What are the register and generic structure of the conversation under study?

2. What are the characteristics of the exchanges or conversational movement and prosody of the conversation?

3. What communication strategies are used by the participants in the conversation?

The main purpose of this project is to share with EFL teachers and advanced learners the researcher's genuine experience of studying (i.e., transcribing, interpreting and identifying key features using a set of standard conventions and terminologies) his own orally produced text. It is argued that using self-produced oral discourse for analysis and learning can result in everlasting impressions and hence strongly facilitates language acquisition at the advanced level (Clennell, 1997). The next section serves to explain the data collection procedure and description, which aims to illustrate both the contextual choice and the text of the conversation. The contextual choice refers to initial steps which were gone through to produce the dialogue, in relation to ethical issues and data credibility. By the text it means the overall textual structure of the recorded interaction. The data presentation and analysis section focuses on some key elements of the data, i.e., the register and generic structure of the conversation, explanation of exchanges, prosodic features and communication strategies. The key concepts (drawn mainly from Stenstrom, 1994; McCarthy, 1991; Brown & Yule, 1983) are introduced, given examples and explained through the recorded oral data.

METHOD

To have actual spoken language data for analysis, a small recording project has been carried out. The recording was transcribed using standard orthographic forms using the International Phonetic Association (IPA) conventions adopted by Brown and Yule (1983) as follows:

short pauses	:	+
longer pauses	:	++
overlappings	:	| |
unintelligible parts	:	(?)
backchannelling	:	{ }
rising tone one tone group	:	/
falling tone on tone group	:	\
rise/fall	:	/\
fall/rise	:	\/
turns	:	(number)

The sample of transcribed data for analysis is provided in the appendix. The interaction is between B, a native English teacher in a language center of an Australian university and A, the

researcher, a non-native English speaker. Some procedure has been followed to produce the interaction. B was met and informed that the researcher would like to have an informal conversation with her and would record it for the purpose of a small research project in teaching English as a second language. She agreed and the room was prepared; it was one of the center quiet study rooms and equipped with a recorder. The sitting position of the researcher and the resource person was opposite to each other and mediated by a small table. Until the time the recorded talk was about to start, the sorts of topics to talk about had not been determined. The researcher explained that the topics to talk about could be just anything as long as a conversation was produced, but of course the one which would be familiar to both of them. In such a case, the researcher could initiate by asking questions and the interlocutor would respond, or vice versa. The description as above is important mainly because it was not an accidental speech event, yet the nature of the speech production is guaranteed as a natural one, or it can be seen as a particular 'genre' (Eggins, 1994). What is important for both participants to establish at stages as above is an initial 'intersubjectivity'; that is the sharing of awareness, which aims to establish a triangular relationship between the speaker, the listener, and the context of situation (Wells, 1981, p. 47). This inter-subjectivity is prerequisite for communication to be successful. That the participants had not decided what to talk about in the dialogue indicates that the expressions or speech which would be produced were natural, unplanned, and therefore could represent an actual spoken language that can be analyzed for learning purposes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The register and generic structure

The conversation can be analyzed in terms of its 'register' and 'generic structure' (Eggins, 1994). A text register covers its 'field', 'mode' and 'tenor'. The 'field' deals with what the text is about: teaching English as a second or foreign language. The field can usually be identified from the lexical items in the conversation, such as 'international students' (turn 1), 'multicultural group' (turn 9), 'language background' (turn 12), 'communicative approach' (turn 13), and 'non-native speakers of English' (turn 22).

The 'mode' has to do with what role language is playing in the interaction. As many turn-takings occur

and as the terms 'dialogue' or 'conversation' have been used so far, the interaction is evidently communication between two persons. However, it is quite difficult to identify from the text whether the participants are face-to-face or not, particularly by observing its deictic words. It is because they were talking about abstract things, not concrete things which can be observed in a view of whether they are near or distant from the participants and therefore can inform the distance of the participants. Last, the 'tenor' is to do with the interpersonal relationships between the participants and the social role they are playing. From the text, we can easily observe that B is an experienced native English speaking teacher while A is one who shares many similarities in profession with her, an English teacher but a non-native English speaker, who seeks information around B's professional teaching experiences.

In terms of 'generic structure', the interaction can be more suitably labeled as an informal interview because A has always taken the turns of asking questions while B of responding. The interaction is developed by such things as B's confirming the questions, A's asking for confirmation of B's explanation. And, it is terminated by A's explicitly intending to end to conversation by thanking B.

The purpose of the interview seems to be more 'transactional' as there is a transaction of B's knowledge and experience in which A prompted B to produce such. This cannot be considered as an 'interpersonal' one because the interview was apparently so packaged that it served a tangible goal (Eggins, 1994, p. 47).

Explanation of the exchanges

What makes an interaction a typical spoken interaction is that it contains the atmosphere of cooperativeness and harmony. Spoken interaction is a collaborative, spontaneous social activity governed by the principles of turn-taking and cooperation between/among the participants. Because spoken interaction is spontaneous, proper turn-taking is not necessarily what happens; there are some other forms of conversational entities which signify attention or provide positive impact to the flow of the interaction (i.e. backchannels, overlappings) and the ones which may indicate various types of hesitation phenomena, such as: verbal fillers, silence, repetitions and incomplete utterances (Stenstrom, 1994, p. 1). Each of entities in the recorded interaction is analyzed below.

Turn-takings

'A turn is everything the current speaker says before the next speaker takes over' (Stenstrom, 1994, p. 4). The turns of the recorded interaction are indicated by the specific numbering in the transcription, for example:

1 A: I'd like to ask you + first of all + about what is your impression particularly on having + uum + a lot of + um + international students or something ++ coming |from|

2 B: |what's| my /impression

The numbering 1 and 2 above counts for the turns which A and B used to produce their speech. Thus, as shown in the appendix, the sample of the transcribed data for this analysis consists of 49 turns.

Backchannels

Backchannels are reduced turns of a speaker to give a sign of attention to the other party who is currently dominating the flow of the interaction, which do not involve a speaker shift and even motivate the other to continue (Stenstrom, 1994, p. 1 & 5).

Backchannelling can be found in many turns of the recording, mediated by the symbols { }, as the following:

7 A: {oo + so + um}

17A: {oo + yes}

19A: {uhm}

Such backchannels also appear in turns 23, 27, 33, 35, 37, 43 and 51.

Overlappings

There is also a time when a participant interrupts a speaker's turn while s/he has not terminated her/his speech and overlapping of speech production occurs. In the transcription, overlapping is signed by the symbols ||. These overlappings can be observed in turns 1 and 2:

1 A: I'd like to ask you + first of all + about what is your impression particularly on having + uum + a lot of + um + international students of something ++ coming |from|

2 B: |what's| my/ impression

Also in turns 37 and 38:

37A: |{oo + so}|

38B: |for beginners|

In turn 37, however, the speech is not only overlapping, but also backchannelling because it functions to show attention to B's speech.

Verbal fillers

Verbal fillers are sorts of lexical expressions which are used to fill

pauses, instead of silence, which do not necessarily convey certain messages. They may indicate some kind of hesitation; they also can produce a positive effect to the flow of conversation which helps the speaker to take, prepare and yield the turn and to anticipate feedback (Stenstrom, 1994, p. 1). There are several verbal fillers which are used in the recorded interaction, in turns 1, 14, 16, 22, 42, 50 and 52; some are presented below (in the bold type):

1 A: I'd like to ask you   + first of all   +   about what is your impression particularly on having   + uum + a lot of + um + international students **or something** ++ coming |from|

14B: **well** + let me see

42B: yea + should be normal + but + **you know** + that is + that students have said to me

Incomplete utterances

Another characteristic which is often discovered in spoken interaction is 'incomplete utterances' which occur when a participant takes over before the other indicates to finish, more probably because he/she can predict what her/his interlocutor is going to say, or the interlocutor is still planning to say in her/his mind while the one overtaking feels that he/she is able to help for the idea or to confirm what the interlocutor is going to say. To a high extent, this construes the 'quality principle' of Grice (as cited in Cutting, 2002) which highlights the significance of efficiency of speech. We can observe these incomplete utterances in the transcription, for example in turn 1 in which B in turn 2 takes over and also in turns 15, 20, 29, etc. One example can be seen below:

29A: \/do you ever have some complaints + for example + from your learners + about that kind of thing + in which your methods +

30B: /\oo + it's different teaching /methods

In turn 29, A has not finished his speech, rather he is still planning what to say (indicated by the pause (+)) when B takes over. In such a case, B predicts what A is going to say by specifying the 'method' with 'teaching method'. However, she is not completely sure about the prediction yet and so at the end of her expression she applies a rising intonation ('/method') which serves as her device to ask for confirmation from A. More on the intonational discourse is discussed below.

Prosodic features

Another area of analysis which plays a quite determinant role for

successful communication is prosody, which includes, tone group boundaries, tonic syllables and pitch movement.

Tone groups

Tone groups constitute informational units segmented by the speaker to convey a particular pragmatic message and form 'phonological boundaries'; such a message is projected in at least one nuclear prominence or tonic syllable in a tone group (from now on, the tonic syllables are shown in capital letters). A nuclear prominence usually indicates what the speaker assumes to be new in the sense of 'newsworthy', in contrast to being given information (McCarthy 1991, p. 99; Clennell, 1997, p. 3). Tone groups may also be segmented by certain pause lengths (Brown & Yule, as cited in McCarthy, 1991). As shown in some examples from the recording:

3 A: UM + about how you approach your /teaCHING + because u + will be + um a lot of um u + intercultural + crosscultural /\probLEMS

4 B: /\YEAA + but I don't usually find MUCH problem + AND + it's because I've alWAYS taught in + a multicultural \group

5 A: /SINCE

6 B: since ALL of my teaching + I've been teaching for + TWELve years.

In turn 3, there are evidently three tone groups. The first one 'UM' indicates A's impression on B's question in the previous turn. In next tone groups in turn 3 and the other turns, all the tonic syllables bring new newsworthy.

Pitch movement

The main concern here is tonicity which refers to the location of tone in a tone unit. 'The same item in the same position but in different turns may or may not carry a nuclear tone'; therefore, analyzing the tonicity is necessarily significant (Stenstorm, 1994, p. 24). The tonicity is indicated by the flow of intonation which consists of three types: rising (/), falling (\ ) and leveling (no symbol) (Brown & Yule, 1983). Let us see the examples below:

10 B: \YEAA + from different /CULture

11 A: from different \culture

Though similar in form, both turns above bring about different pragmatic meanings because each has different intonation. The rising tone in turn 10 shows asking for confirmation, while the falling one in turn 11 indicates giving confirmation.

Communication strategies

'Communication strategies' (CSs) is the other very important area to investigate for the purpose of second language learning. Such strategies may not necessarily be derived from learning the second language. Many second language learners have acquired these in their first language acquisition. Fortunately, many of the strategies may be available universally because they are not necessarily linguistic-dependent, but rather have to do with how participants manage to survive, to make others understand and to build a smooth flow of communication.

In other words, as Clennell, (1994a, p. 2) propounds, CSs, both verbal and non-verbal, are significant for two main reasons: to cope with communication breakdowns and to enhance the effectiveness of communication. In short, CSs deal with interactants' efforts to make their input, linguistic and functional, comprehensible to others (Tsui, 1991, 1995).

Observing the transcribed recording, several key CSs which both A and B have employed to produce such a successful conversation were found. The main CS which A used is questioning, which is spread out in almost all of A's turns (turns 1, 5, 9, 13, etc.). Indeed, this is really true, as Stenstrom (1994, p. 2) remarks: 'Question can be used to start a conversation and they can be used over and over again to keep it going when it is on the point of fading out.' Even, A uses questions to shift from topic to another and to develop the topic.

A's further CS is doing any sort of question modification which is comprehension-oriented, that is doing any circumlocution to enable B to grasp his intended messages. This is done so because A feels that B has not understood him (as indicated by her facial expression or another non-linguistic factor), or B herself employs a 'confirmation checking' device, namely asking A to confirm what she said. The way to carry out a confirmation check can be by repeating or paraphrasing what the previous speaker said with a rising tone. As in the examples below:

1 A: I'd like to ask you + first of all + about what is your impression particularly on having + uum + a lot of + um + international students or something ++ coming |from|

2 B: |what's| my /impreSION

3 A: UM + about how you approach your /teaCHING + because u + will be + um a lot of um u + intercultural + crosscultural /\probLEMS

In turn 1, A poses a question. Yet, it is not fully comprehensible to B since she asks for confirmation by paraphrasing A's question in a rising tone. What A does further is semantically modifying the question by referring to any concrete referent, in this case teaching practice and this makes B understand what A's question actually is. In fact, confirmation check is the device which B often uses in the interaction; we can see other examples in turn 10, 22, 30. However, as the confirmation check in turn 22 is observed more closely, it is a bit different from the others:

22B: how they /LEARNT + \YEA + that's a good argument for NON native of English + being good teachers + do you /that + because + because if you + if you add to learn English yourself

The first tone unit ('how they /LEARNT'), which is terminated in a rising tone and so connotes a question, is a confirmation check; but she does not wait until A provides confirmation as in other turns, rather she is confirmed herself. The other CS which was found interesting is what A expresses in turn 41: he paraphrases B's previous explanation, but not applying rising intonation to ask for confirmation, rather he uses a sort of 'opinionating', and successfully B

decodes it as asking further clarification (in the next turn). As in the following turns:

41A: it should be normal I THINK +

42B: /\YEA + should be normal + but you know + that is that students have said to me

A's preference of 'opinionating', instead of tangible questioning, is perhaps because the degree of his certainty supersedes his curiosity. What he needs, however, is support, not objection, from his interlocutor B.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The data presentation and analysis can be summarized as follows. First, the contextual procedure in spoken text production should be considered to ensure its naturalness and spontaneity so that it can be used as a model source of learning. Second, the register and generic structure of the text provides the intrinsic nature of the text. Third, the analysis of exchanges or conversational movement and the prosodic features which are characteristic to spoken language interaction shows that spoken text is just substantially different from a written one. Such discussion leads to a conclusion that considering actual data of oral discourse can provide empirical

evidence on how linguistic elements are realized in actual communication and what sort of role they play. Last, to make the conversation flow, the participants have applied some communication strategies. In the data analysis it is shown that the communication strategies such as questioning, responding, modifying, clarifying are developed and constitute various nuances in the communication, and play a role of determining to which direction an interaction aims and is further developed.

There are some implications from the findings. First, an English teacher or student can create a natural spoken text provided that the requirement of spontaneity in producing the utterances is fulfilled. For many advanced level students, involving themselves in natural conversations in English either with native English speakers or with their non-native peers or teachers is an opportunity to improve their oral mastery in the second or foreign language. Moreover, by recording, transcribing and analyzing their own conversations, the students can develop their meta-cognition through which they can reflect and critique their own oral production. The data presentation and analysis can serve a practical model for EFL/ESL students and teachers in creating and analyzing their own oral

texts. It is envisaged that being able to analyze oral texts produced by native English speakers and likewise non-native speakers, advanced level students would see the subtle differences in the varied aspects of the spoken texts. This skill may inform the students regarding how they manage to achieve a near-native level of oral competence or a level where they can communicate orally effectively with their native speaking counterparts.

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