What Speaking Skills do Students Need?

— An Analysis of an Attempt at Interpersonal and Intercultural Communication —

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This action research was designed to determine whether the teaching materials being used in a basic English Speaking Skills class are really giving the students the pragmatic knowledge they need to take part in a genuine communicative situation. Students were asked to write a role-play for a first time meeting with a native speaker in a designated situation and the way they managed the opening and closing and the development of their dialogues was analyzed. The results showed that few students could manage the pragmatic aspects of a conversation where skills in interpersonal and intercultural communication were required. This indicates that there is a need to redesign our teaching materials and reconsider our teaching approach in order to help students overcome these pragmatic difficulties.

1. Introduction

1. 1 Where we started from

The idea for this, as yet only exploratory, action research, arose from the desire to develop a short course for first year students in a required Speaking Skills class in a four year university. The students in the course are not English majors and there is a manifest need to revise the English they have studied in school at a quite basic level. At the same time it was considered equally important, in order to increase motivation, to make students feel they were not merely recovering ground which they had covered in school, but were being offered a chance to activate their knowledge of English and prepare for participation in genuine communication in English by developing their interpersonal and intercultural communication skills.

We accepted, for the purposes of reconsidering the effectiveness of our teaching materials and the skills the students already possessed, Klopf and Ishii's (1989 : 72) claim that genuine communication in the form of interpersonal talk has as its goals the developing of interpersonal relationships, gaining compliance, and gaining understanding. When a new relationship is developing it can be seen to go through three steps. These are (1) coming together and building the relationship, (2) staying together and maintaining the relationship, and (3) (often, but not always) moving apart and terminating the relationship. Klopf and Ishii (1989) envisage these steps as being worked

through over a quite long period of time and during a series of meetings, but we believe that the same steps need to be worked through even in a short, perhaps one-off meeting. In order to be successful in starting and carrying on a conversation with a stranger, students need to be aware of these steps and be provided with the necessary language and functions to move through them if their attempts at communication are to become more than just practice exercises.

1. 2 Establishing the needs of the students

The need to write our own teaching materials in order to meet students needs more exactly became clear when students were asked to write a role play in which they were to take the part of a Japanese student in America attempting to engage an American they had met by chance in conversation in a jazz cafe. This exercise was designed to allow students to use the basic geetings, introductions and grammar usages they had been studying in a communicative situation. An analysis of the role plays the students produced provided some unexpected information. It was apparent that, even after studying the basic grammar usages, some students were still having difficulties with them. More signifcantly for this research, it was also evident that even the students who could manipulate the grammar usages had had other problems of a more pragmatic nature. Few students, for example, managed to correctly negotiate entry into conversation with a stranger successfully or develop the conversation in a mutually interesting and informative way, and even fewer found a good way to close the conversation in an acceptable way. The way the conversation developed was also often inappropriate to the situation. In other words, students were unable to reach the goals of interpersonal talk aimed at developing a relationship outlined above in spite of the fact that this will probably be one of the most important skills they will carry with them into a situation where they have to communicate with English speakers whom they have not met before. It was obvious that there were gaps in the teaching materials we were using as they were not preparing students to interact in a pragmatically appropriate way in the target language (Bardovi-Harlig, 1991).

The difficulties students had writing what we thought was a straightforward role play made it clear that there was a need to find out through some kind of action research what the learning needs of students really were at the beginning of the course, that is, before any teaching had taken place, and think again about whether the teaching materials we were currently using really met students' needs.

A search of the literature produced a number of papers dealing with concerns about the difficulties learners have with communication related to ours (Izumi, 1996 ; Ellis, 1996 ; Shibata, 1998 ; White, 1993). For the most part, however, these articles addressed interpersonal and intercultural communication problems at a higher level of difficulty and complexity than was appropriate for our students. For this reason we felt a need to investigate problems that can occur even at a very basic level, and which are not usually addressed until students reach a more advanced level, if at all.

In order to prepare students for participation in real communicative events, we considered it important to try to find out what pragmatic skills and what functions needed to be included in teaching materials to enable them to do this in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner.

2 . Research Method

2. 1 The data collection task

The task is attached as Appendix A. This is the same task as the one mentioned above, originally devised and used as a final task to be done by students after a series of lessons which taught very basic language incorprated into a limited number of topics, but which could, nevertheless, be of considerable use in a first meeting with a stranger. The language functions covered were greetings, introductions, and the topics were families, occupations and interests. The grammar incorporated into these lessons were yes/no questions and *wh* questions with *to be* and with *do/does* and the simple present tense with *like*. The task was designed to give students an opportunity to write a conversation using these functions and grammatical structures in a situation which they might meet up with if they traveled to an English speaking country and interacted with native speakers. For the purposes of this research, a data collection sheet was designed to provide spaces numbered to correspond with the turns of the two speakers in the dialogue created. Subjects were then asked to use these spaces to write comments about problems they had with particular parts of the dialogue.

The task was pre-tested with two classes in the first semester before the data analyzed here was collected from two different classes in the second semester. As a result of this pre-test the layout was changed to make the data easier to analyze and the instructions were rewritten in Japanese instead of English.

2. 2 Subjects and collection of the data

The subjects were the students in two first year Speaking Skills classes. Twenty-four students completed the task. The subjects completed the task in class time during the first lesson of the course. Sixty minutes was allowed.

3 . Data Analysis

We confined our analysis of the dialogues our subjects wrote, in which they took the part of "you" (Y) and talked with John (J) (see the profile in Appendix A), to three aspects : the opening of the conversation (greetings and asking for permission to share the table), the development of the conversation, and the closing of the conversation.

3. 1 The Opening (greetings and asking for permission to share the table)

Seven students successfully started the conversation with pragmatically acceptable expressions, whereas 17 subjects were unable to ask for John's permission to share the table.

The following are the pragmatically acceptable openings. Note that we did not

discount items on account of unacceptable grammar alone.

S 9 : Hello. May I sit here?
S11 : Excuse me. Do I sit down this chair?
S12 : Excuse me. May I sit down here?
S13 : Excuse me. Can I your next seat sit down OK?
S18 : Can I sit next you?
S19 : Excuse me. Can I sit your next chair?
S24 : Hi! Shall I sit down this table?

It is noted that four (S11, S12, S13, S19) out of the successful seven openings start with "Excuse me." This expression is not unacceptable here, but it is more likely to be used in a situation in which information, for example directions or the time, or an answer to a question is being sought, such as in:

A : Excuse me, do you know if flight BH106 is on time?
B : No, I'm afraid it's going to be ten minutes late.

(Blundell et al., 1982 : 1)

Since in Japanese *"Sumimasen"* would be used when speaking to a stranger in the same context as the task, we assume that the subjects transferred the Japanese expression to the situation and translated it literally. Five more subjects (S 3, S 4, S 6, S20, S22) started their dialogues with "Excuse me", but did not go on to ask for permission to share the table.

Six subjects started the conversation by exchanging their names, as in the examples below, which is not appropriate in this context:

S 7 Y : Hello. My name is T.
J : Hello. my name is John.
S 8 Y : Hello. My name is M. A. What's your name?
J : Hello. My name is John Smith.
S21 Y : Hi! My name is Y. K. I'm from Japan. Who are you?
J : I'm a John Smith. From in L.A.

All these students seem to be recalling dialogues in their junior and senior high school textbooks that taught them to give a greeting and then exchange names. These students must now learn that this pattern is not ubiquitous; that at brief chance meetings names may not be exchanged until the end of the conversation, if at all.

Two subjects used the expression "Nice to meet you" without having first exchanged names as in:

S15 : Y : Hello! Nice to meet you.
J : Hello! Nice to meet you too.

In Japanese when you meet someone for the first time you say *"Hajime mashite"*, the equivalent of "Nice to meet you" in English, but at most casual settings you do not mention your name nor ask the other's name. Students may have transferred this way of greeting to English.

Two subjects abruptly started asking questions.

S 5 : Y : Hello, May I ask your question? What' your name?
J : Yes. Sure. My name is John Smith.
S 16 : Y : What's your name?
J : My name is John Smith.

This is, of course, not appropriate in English or Japanese.

3. 2 Development of the dialogue

One of the most frequent patterns seen in the dialogues written by our subjects was a very one-sided question and answer session in which the subject asked questions and John answered them :

S 2 : Y : How are you?
J : Nice to meet you.
Y : How old are you?
J : twenty four.
Y : Where are you hometown?
J : New York.
Y : what do you job?
J : journalist.
Y : Do you married?
J : Yes, I do.

The above conversation is like a police questioning. This is not a dialogue which has interpersonal communication as its goal because it is decidedly one way, which is inappropriate in this situation.

Another example of the same kind of conversation occurs when J asks Y questions as in this conversation (S 16) :

J 2 : Are you an college student?
Y 3 : Yes, I am. I am a Japanese student.
J 3 : Do you like jazz music?
Y 4 : Yes, I do.
J 4 : Do you know Helen?
Y 5 : Yes, of course. She is a good singer.

There is an important difference, however, between S 2 and S 16. In S 2 *wh* questions were used repeatedly, but in S 16 yes/no questions were used, and this makes the conversation sound more comfortable. As Tsuruta et al. (1988 : 19) point out, using a series of *wh* questions makes a hearer feel they are being cross-examined, while using yes/no questions is much more effective at the "experimenting step" in developing a conversation with a stranger (Klopf and Ishi, 1989 : 73).

Nine subjects (S 9, S 10, S 11, S 13, S 17, S 18, S 19, S 23, S 24) succeeded in developing their conversation well, or reasonably well, although there were many grammatically incorrect expressions and miss-spelled words. We will take a close look

at the development in S 17 and examine how it was structured.

Y 3 : Do you like jazz music?
J 3 : Yes, I do. I write about jazz for a magazine.
Y 4 : Is that magazine's name "New Music"?
J 4 : Yes. Do you read this?
Y 5 : Sure. I read this magazine every week.
J 5 : Oh, I am very surpprised!
Y 6 : Me, too. What have you written in New Music?
J 6 : I have written top page.
Y 7 : Oh. The picture.
J 7 : Yes. I was take a picture which is top page.
Y 8 : Wow. Please Look me your taking a picture.
J 8 : Sure. Please go to my house last week.

Notice that Y and J take turns asking and answering questions and this moves the dialogue forward and gives the conversation a natural flow. Neither Y nor J leads the conversation ; they share it equally. Both find some shared similarities or interests and this leads to talk of the possibility of enjoying more time together in the near future, so the experimenting step is successful. Feedback such as *Oh, Wow, Sure* and *Me, too* is also effectively used.

3. 3 Closing the dialogue

"Closings are culture-specific, both in their obligatoriness and structure" (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991 : 6) and are therefore difficult for low level learners to handle well. For this reason we did not expect that all of our subjects would close the dialogue and we had not specifically ask them to do so. We found in fact, that none of the 6 subjects (S 5 , S 10, S 12, S 13, S 19, S 20) who made the attempt managed a pragmatically satisfactory closing, for example, as in S 10 :

Y 10 : Tom? Good name.
J 10 : Thank you.
Y 11 : I'm glad to see you. Bye.
J 11 : Bye.

In this closing, Y 11 should have said something like "It was nice meeting you", instead of "I'm glad to see you". Before this terminal exchange there should have been a preclosing statement like "I have to go" (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991 : 6-7). A more natural closing would be :

Y 11 : Well, I have to go. It was nice meeting you.
J 11 : Nice meeting *you*, bye
Y 12 : Goodbye, John.

In S 19 there is no preclosing, either :

J 7 : Today is happy day.
Y 8 : Me, too.

J 8 : See you. good bye.
Y 9 : See you.

Also, in S 12 :

Y 7 : That's great. Thank you, Mr. Smith. I have a good time.
J 7 : Thank you, Mr. A. I have a good time, too. Please listen to good music.
Y 8 : Good-bye, Mr. Smith.
J 8 : Good-bye.

Here in the ending of S 12, Y 7 and J 7 "shut down the topic" (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991 : 7), but before the terminal exchange a preclosing should have been included. The ending of S 20 is different from the above three, because J invites Y to a concert :

J 7 : Do you go to jazz concert with my family next time?
Y 8 : Yes, please.
J 8 : See you, again.
Y 9 : See you.

The form of the invitation in J 7 and Y 8's acceptance of it are grammatically incorrect as well as being awkward and pragmatically unacceptable because J 8 didn't go on to make arrangements for going to the concert or even to get in touch again. A more acceptable ending might be :

J 7 : Why don't you come to a jazz concert with my family next time?
Y 8 : I'd love to.
J 8 : Maybe I'll see you here again.
Y 9 : Yes. See you.

In S 5 and S 13 the dialogues are closed as follows :

S 5 : Y 8 : Do you know Japanese jazz singer?
J 8 : Yes, I do.
Y 9 : Thank you very much.
J 9 : You're welcome.

S 13 : Y 8 : Yes, I do. Sometimes I reading it.
J 8 : Do you think wont to my job?
Y 9 : Yes, I wont. Thank you very much. Good bye.
J 9 : Good bye.

These endings sound like those that might come at the end of an interview and are not appropriate in this situation.

3. 4 Analysis of comments Closing

Five out of our 24 subjects did not write any comments on their task-sheets. The number of comments written by the other subjects varied from a total of one, to one for every Y-J exchange ; the latter comments took the form of a Japanese translation for the English dialogue. Most of the comments show us the subjects' concern about how they should render a particular Japanese phrase into English, and about whether

the grammar and/or spelling of what they wrote was correct.
We found some comments showed that the subjects were aware that what they wrote in English might not be pragmatically correct in that particular context:

1) I wondered how to start the conversation. (S 4, S 24)
2) I wondered whether it was right or not to ask about John's private matters such as where he lived. (S 9)
3) It was difficult to construct a dialogue. (S 9)
4) My dialogue did not sound natural. (S 9)
5) I could plan a good dialogue, but did not know the right English. (S 11)
6) I was wondering if it was all right to say "How do you do?" just after "Excuse me." (S 22)
7) It was really hard for me to be polite in asking a *wh* question and in closing the conversation. (S 12)

These subjects were, however, not able to solve the difficulties they knew they were having.

4. Discussion and Suggestions for Future Studies

Our analysis of the data confirmed the impression we already had that our incoming students were far from prepared to take part in a natural communication situation where interpersonal and intercultural communication skills are required.

There appear to be a number of different causes for the errors made in the dialogues. White (1993 : 193) points out that "learners of a foreign language already know how to be polite within their own language and culture". They are taught from infancy. The necessary routines can thus usually be gone through without serious thought. Such routines are often a matter of mastering a series of set formulae, but it is just because these exchanges are set formulae that they are often included in dialogues and taught without any explanation of when they should and shouldn't be used and, more importantly, the way in which they may differ from the routines used in the learners native language. The dialogues that our subjects wrote show that some of the errors that occurred may have arisen from the misapplication of ill-digested conventions in the target language or attempts to transfer better understood ones from the native language which resulted in problems which are not simply linguistic ones; they instead involved the use of a form which did not match the speaker's intentions and so created a risk of confusing or, more seriously, aggravating the listener.

It is not intended that the data collection task should end its useful life as just such a data collection exercise. The fact that one of the researchers was a Japanese speaker and one an English speaker enabled us to make a number of interesting discoveries. For instance, in the course of our discussions we realized that while Japanese do not automatically make introductions, not to do so in English is very impolite. Yet teachers teach English introductions assuming their students are already aware of the impor-

tance of making them. Our duty now as teachers is to incorporate the insights we have gained into difficulties students have with interpersonal and intercultural communication in English, and try to establish more exactly what the causes are. We propose to use the knowledge gained to make changes in our teaching materials so that students are provided with both the language and the understanding of interpersonal and intercultural communication issues which they lacked when they attempted the task for the first time. When the relevent part of the course has been taught we will ask the students to attempt the task again and then hold a careful feedback session to confirm that students have understood what is required to make such a meeting work well. We will also ask students to evaluate the usefulness of the task so that we can make changes to the design if they should seem to be required.

5 . Conclusion

The action research reported on in this article proved to be an extremely useful way of determining whether the content of our teaching materials and courses was meeting students' needs. It became apparent to us that the teaching materials and communicative exercises we have been using have not provided our students with all the skills and understanding necessary to participate successfully in even a simple first time conversation with a native speaker. The data collected has shown us how to improve our teaching materials in a way that will overcome these deficiencies and as well as help to increase student motivation by placing the grammar usages they learn in genuine communicative situations.

Appendix A

Data Collection Task

状況設定：

あなたは日本人の大学生です。ロスアンジェルスで英語短期集中プログラムに参加してます。滞在中のある日、生のジャズ演奏を聞こうと喫茶店に入って行くと、大きなテーブルに１人で座っている男の人がいました。彼はジャズ演奏家達の写真を撮ったり、ノートにしきりにメモを書いてます。あなたはこの男の人に関心を持ちます。あなたは彼と話をしたく思い、同じテーブルに座ることにしました。

課題：

1）Johnとあなたとの対話を英語で書きなさい。対話は、Johnとあなたとの人間関係を作り上げるようになるよう、考えて書きなさい。必要ならば、次のプロフィールの中の情報を使ってもかまいません。

2）対話を構築中につまずいた箇所があれば、どういうところで、どうしてつまずいたかを「コメント欄」に具体的に書きなさい。

＊　課題をやる時間は60分です。

Profile

Name : John Smith

Age : 24

Hometown : New York — but lives in an old house by the sea near Los Angeles.

Occupation : journalist — writes about jazz for a magazine called *New Music*

Family : married — wifes's name is Helen — she is a jazz singer — they have one son who is one year old — son's name is Tom.

Data Collection Worksheet

学籍番号：　　氏名：　　作成日：　　年　　月　　日

		コメント欄
You 1 ：	Y 1 ：	
John 1 ：	J 1 ：	
You 2 ：	Y 2 ：	
John 2 ：	J 2 ：	
.	.	
.	.	
.	.	

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