

Communication Breakdown between Native Speakers and EFL Users: An Attempt to Fill the Gaps

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ABSTRACT

This study is generally intended to give a comprehensive account of the communication breakdown between native speakers and EFL users. As international communication increases in the trend towards globalization, the demand for communicative competence in English is increasing more and more in the countries where English is a second/foreign language. Teaching English in these countries, however, fails to develop English proficiency for communication. The deficiency of communicative competence in English appears to result from the lack of interpersonal interaction in English. Therefore, one may suggest that improving interpersonal interaction is one main factor that possibly narrows the gap in the communication between native speakers of English and those who use English as a second/foreign language. It presents some brief views of some researchers who consider interpersonal interaction a fundamental requirement in the acquisition of second/foreign language. Accordingly, it is regarded as a fundamental requirement for Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA). The interactive perspectives in FLA have placed considerable attention on the role of interaction in general. On the one hand, "international" communication seems to require multiple competences. Studies of pragmatic and discourse competences, that focus on the process of achieving mutual intelligibility in spoken or written texts, gain increasing significance.

Introduction: A Preamble .1

Language is a human vocal noise or the graphic representation of the noise fused systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for communicative functions. As such, language is the most influential human means of communication. The so-called 'expanding circle' of foreign language speakers was said to include more than 750 million EFL speakers during the second millennium, compared to 375 million first-language speakers and 375 million second language speakers. Members of the English language speech

community spread all over the world; they can be found in Europe, North and
.South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia

Three primary utilitarian categories of the English language exist in many countries within the continents listed above. English is used as a native language or a mother tongue or a first language (L1) in the United States, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New-Zealand, most of Canada, the Caribbean, and South Africa. English is used as a second language (L2) in countries like Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, and many other Commonwealth countries. English is also used or learnt as a foreign language (FL) in countries like France, Belgium, Germany, Benin,
.Cameroon, and Arab Homeland

Osisanwo, W. (1989: 35) suggests that since all the users of English in the three utilitarian categories belong to the English speech community, it is reasonable to expect that one of the major goals of acquiring it should be the attainment of international intelligibility in expressive and receptive skills at the oral and written levels of communication. The question then arises whether such a laudable goal is ever achieved in many cases. Research findings abound on problems militating against the achievement of international intelligibility, especially in the area of mother-tongue interference on English as a second language (Lado 1957; Banathy et al.
. (1966; Duscova 1969; LoCoco 1975; Selinker et al. 1975

As international communication increases in the trend towards globalization, the demand for communicative competence in English is increasing more and more in the countries where English is taught as second/foreign language. Teaching English in our schools, however, fails to develop English proficiency for communication. The deficiency in communicative competence in English appears to result from the lack of
.interpersonal interaction in English as a foreign language

In this paper, I will try to shed some light on the communication breakdown as a problem EFL users are usually faced with whenever they are exposed to conversational situations with native speakers. The primary

goals of this paper are to present this problem, study its causes, and find
 .the most remedial solutions to solve it

Communicative Competence .2

Osisanwo, W. (1989: 36) states that communicative competence in a language entails the acquisition of receptive and expressive skills in the language. The poor acquisition of these skills often leads to a breakdown in communication between some native speakers and some ESL/EFL users of English. In some undergraduate courses —such as varieties of English, the English Novel, and Shakespearean Drama, offered in the present writer's institution for ESL teachers in training—records, tape recordings, videotapes, and films are often used as instructional materials.

They always ask for a replay of such discs or tapes, even after they are played several times. The demand does not arise as a result of interest or enjoyment but because they just can not understand substantial parts of the conversation. Their low-level performance in the assignments based on
 .such materials is a confirmation of the problem

Communication strategies form part of strategic competence which comprises verbal and non-verbal strategies that language learners utilize in order to compensate for lexical problems (Canale & Swain, 1980), to enhance the effectiveness of communication (Canale, 1983:11) and to sustain the continuity of a conversation in the face of communication difficulties, for example, by playing for time to think while searching for
 .(the intended meaning (Celce-Murcia, Dornyei & Thurrell 1995

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Canale's (1983: 11) four-part framework includes linguistic, socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic competences. Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) include grammatical competence, which encompasses vocabulary, syntax morphology and phonemes/graphemes.

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Teaching English in our schools, however, fails to develop English proficiency for communication. The deficiency in communicative competence in English appears to result from the lack of interpersonal interaction in English as a foreign language

Recently, 'genuine' or 'natural' discourse has become a goal of communicative approaches in the second or foreign language classroom.

Kramsch (1986) suggests that communicative competence must include the ability to express, interpret and negotiate meanings. She advocates that, for as natural a communicative situation as possible, students must be given opportunities in the classroom to interact with both the teacher and fellow students through turn-taking, giving feedback to speakers, asking for clarification, and starting and ending conversations. Nunan (1987:137) also suggests that "genuine communication is characterized by the uneven distribution of information, the negotiation of meaning through clarification requests and confirmation checks, topic nomination and negotiation by more than one speaker, and the right of interlocutors to decide whether to contribute to an interaction or not

On the whole, in traditional EFL classrooms, individual language learners receive limited number of speaking turns, partly because in most classrooms a large number of language learners have to share speaking turns. Especially in classrooms where the teacher monopolizes the discourse and in which the information predominantly flows in one direction (from teacher to student learners), the less assertive and less proficient learners receive minimal output opportunities (Ellis, 1990; Johnson, 1995). In particular, language learners are rarely pushed through negotiation of meaning (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Van den Branden, 1997).

In this regard, Mackey (1999) highlights the importance of active participation in the interaction, suggesting that one of the features that best interacts with the learner-internal actors to facilitate language development, is learner participation in the interaction. The teacher's role in the foreign language classroom, therefore, is to construct an interactive

learning environment in which learners can associate with each other and
 .generate meaning in the target language

Interpersonal Interaction .3

Interpersonal interaction is regarded as a fundamental requirement of Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA). Many researchers, such as Kramsch (1986), Rivers (1987), and Ellis (1988), have claimed that language instruction requires the development of interactional competence and interaction is the key to language teaching for communication. The interactionist perspectives in FLA have placed considerable attention on the role of interaction in general. Many researchers consider interpersonal interaction a fundamental requirement in second and/or foreign language acquisition. Kramsch (1986) claims that language instruction requires the development of interactional competence, and suggests a three-step approach to improve natural discourse and to build interactional competence in the classroom. The first step is to work on teacher/student oriented interaction, during which the students practise the target language with their teacher as a conversational partner. The second step is partner centered interaction, during which students learn to negotiate meaning with partners in the classroom and to generate meaning as well. In the third step of the interactional approach, students practise the ways of interacting without violating social and cultural constraints that learners meet in natural conversations.

Rivers (1987) treats interaction as the key to language teaching for communication. She defines interaction as the facility in using a language when their attention is focused on conveying and receiving authentic messages. She suggests some illuminating ways to promote interaction in the language classroom such as, avoiding teacher-dominated classrooms, being cooperative and considering affective variables, among others. In similar vein, Ellis (1988) states that classroom-based second/foreign language development can be successful when a teacher not only provides an input with x features of a target language, but when the reciprocal .interaction occurs as well

Discourse .4

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?What Does Interactive Competence Include .5

Interactive competence includes the ability to perform different speech acts and to negotiate meaning. Kramsch (1986) suggests that communicative competence must include the ability to express, interpret and negotiate meanings. She calls for a communication situation as natural as possible, where students are given opportunities in classrooms to interact with both the teacher and fellow students through turn taking, giving feedbacks to speakers, and starting and ending conversations.

Byrnes (1987) also calls for a greater emphasis on the learner, on speech as a process, and on the interactive process of speaking. Relatedly, Swann (1994) points out that the qualitative quantitative distinction is not always clear cut in practice, as applied to education research; the distinction is more on the continuum than on the dichotomy. It is often useful to draw on a combination of methods that may complement one another and provide a
.more complete picture of language

Remarkably, Blake (2000: 6) pinpoints that their utterances are "neither all wrong nor all right, but somewhere in between". The frequent errors in their language involved misuses of singular/plural, omissions of verb (be) and articles (a, an, the), and the reverse order of words. These language errors were sometimes connected through their explicit or implicit feedback, namely negotiations, and self-corrections. Contrary to Blake's comments (2000), these incorrect forms were sometimes explicitly passed from one to the other in their negotiations in the present study. Students copied incorrect forms from another student's message. From the researcher's observations made during the student's CMC sessions, one noticeable characteristic of the student's engagement in CMC chats was the increased motivation and active participation. Students were so

enthusiastic about their chat performance that they were absorbed in communicating in English to solve their tasks, and it was surprising, given the classroom context, for the students to be engaged to such an extent in the use of the target language. Their attempts to resolve their communication problems were so active that they always activated the dictionary function via Internet on the computer screen before logging onto their chats. On occasions, other chatters unexpectedly interrupted them. Nevertheless, they coped with the interruption successfully, persuading the intruder to leave the chat room (see Example 6). Thus their attention to their conversation never waned, but lasted throughout the session.

These results are in accordance with the previous findings (Pelletieri, 1999; Blake, 2000), which indicate that task based CMC does foster the negotiation of meaning, and that this negotiation appears to facilitate comprehension and successful communication among learners. Therefore, the present study does indicate that foreign learners do engage in such meaning negotiations through task based synchronous CMC which researchers claim to be beneficial for foreign language development. Considering that English language has a quite different phonological system, foreign students still need oral practice in English for their own oral communication competence.

Grammatical Competence .6

One of the positive aspects of CMC is the increased use of interlanguage. Moreover, Pelletieri (1999) suggests that synchronous CMC can play a great role in the development of grammatical competence. Conversely, Blake (2000) raises a question on the Focus of Form approach, in particular, the issue of grammatical development, indicating that lexical negotiations pre-dominate these networked exchanges.

Increased Motivation and Participation .7

From a pedagogical standpoint, one of the greatest advantages of CMC is the student's increased motivation and active participation. As previous research on CMC demonstrated, the students in this study report reduced anxiety about making errors and increased motivation for using the target language, both of which result in greater opportunities of embittering target language production. The increased motivation leads the students to participate in the CMC actively. However, the distance of the first language from the target language in the phonological system still requires oral practice in the target language.

Communicative competence in a language entails the acquisition of receptive and expressive skills in the language. The poor acquisition of these skills often leads to a breakdown in communication between some native speakers and some ESL/EFL users of English. In some undergraduate courses —such as varieties of English, the English Novel, and Shakespearean Drama, offered in the present writer's institution for

ESL teachers in training—records, tape recordings, videotapes, and films are often used as instructional materials. They always ask for a replay of such discs or tapes, even after they are played several times. The demand does not arise as a result of interest or enjoyment but because they just cannot understand substantial parts of the conversation. Their low-level performance in the assignments based on such materials is a confirmation of the problem

Communication Tasks .8

Eight communication tasks are selected and developed for the purpose of this study. The selection of these tasks is motivated in the first place by previous studies, e.g. Pellettieri, (1999); Blake, (2000), and in particular by two collections of articles edited by Crookes & Glass (1999a, 1999b). An effective way to assist language learning in the classroom or to study the processes of second language acquisition (SLA) is revealed and validated through the use of communication tasks (Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993; Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993). The theoretical perspective which supports the use of communication tasks is one which holds that language is best learned and taught through interaction. In interaction-based pedagogy, classroom opportunities to receive, comprehend, and ultimately internalize L2 words, forms and structures are believed to be most abundant during activities in which learners and their interlocutors can exchange information and communicate ideas. Such activities are structured so that all learners will talk as a means of sharing ideas and opinions collaborating toward a single goal, or competing to achieve individual goals. (Nunan, 1987; Rivers, 1987) It's therefore maintained that "classroom and research activities must be structured to provide a context whereby learners not only talk to their interlocutors, but negotiate meaning with them as well", and consequently to engage learners in these kinds of interactions (Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 19993: .(11

According to Pica, Kanagy & Falodun's typology (1994), a task that promotes the greatest opportunities for learners to experience comprehension of input, feedback on production and interlanguage modification is one that meets these four conditions

Each interactant holds a different portion of information, which must be (1 exchanged and manipulated in order to reach the outcome

Both interactants are required to request and supply this information to (2 each other

Interactants have the same or convergent goals. (3

4) Only one acceptable outcome is possible from their attempts to meet this goal

The eight communication tasks employed in this study are not open, but they are closed tasks, such as jigsaw and information gap activities, in which the interactants possess different pieces of information needed for a

solution and, therefore must work collaboratively to converge (Noun) = use spread over or cover on a single outcome. Each task was photocopied .and distributed among participants

In foreign language situations, it is very difficult to have exposure to the target language outside the classroom. With this limitation, task based 'activities are provided for learners to generate 'modified interaction Currently computer networks are being used in language teaching and learning. The use of global communication networks such as e-mail is .increasingly significant

The literature and previous research in this area suggests that Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) can provide many advantages over face-to-face oral exchanges, such as strong motivation, equal participation and the increase of target language production (Kelm, 1992; Beauvois, 1992; Kern, 1995; Chun, 1998). In addition, it is suggested that synchronous CMC can facilitate the development of .(socio-linguistic and interactive competence (Kern, 1995; Chun, 1998

Causes of the Breakdown in Communication .9

A comprehensive investigation that is carried out to confirm or reject the existence of the problem and to discover the sources of the breakdown in :communication revealed the following insights

1. A breakdown in verbal communication usually occurs when a foreign learner feels unable to catch the words of native speakers at any opportunity of communication due to different reasons such as the way native speakers talk or converse, or the native speakers' speech rhythm.
2. The deficiency of communicative competence in English as a result of the lack of interpersonal interaction results in failure communication.
3. There is a strong link between the breakdown and the native speakers' speech rhythm. (Osisanwo, 1989)

The last finding deserves to be described briefly so that the suggestions .are made later and appreciated

English Speech Rhythm .10

As mentioned by Osisanwo (1989), the fact that English is a stress-rhymed language was discovered to be the strongest source of the breakdown in

verbal communication. English language has word stress as well as sentence stress. In any poly-syllable word, one syllable is usually stressed while other(s) have a weaker degree of stress or are unstressed. Here are

:some examples

electrifi' cation un'fortunate .1

'bachelorre'markable .2

industrialization uni'lateralism .3

In connected speech, the native speaker gives prominence to the stressed syllables. The resultant production is such that the ESL listener, who is less skillfull maladroit at hearing and connecting the unstressed syllables with the stressed ones, often fails to ~~catch~~ recognize such words or .understand them

At the sentence level, certain words have syllables that are stressed while some words are completely unstressed. In connected speech, stressed syllables tend to occur at fairly regular intervals in time. This stress-timing gives the language its speech rhythm. A breakdown in communication occurs in connected speech when the native speaker achieves this speech rhythm by almost glossing over all of the unstressed syllables. This .phenomenon can be briefly illustrated by the following sentences

.I 'thought you'd/'gone a/'broad .5

.The po'lice had a/'rrested the/'thieves .6

Each of the underlined syllables is stressed and therefore the native speaker gives it prominence. The other syllables, which are unstressed, are said so quickly and lightly that they are not received by the ESL listener.

The situation is even worse when the native speaker is a naturally fast .speaker

Three Remedial Steps .11

Osisanwo (ibid) suggests three remedial steps to deal with this problem.

These are briefly discussed under "model selection," "contrastive ".analysis," and "course modification

Model Selection 11.1

The first step taken was to determine what model of English language should be taught. There is the unresolved controversy as to whether to use the native-speaker model or the educated West African (or even Nigerian) model for teaching Oral English. Unfortunately, a detailed description of the phonology of educated militating: having weight or effect glossing over: dealing with a subject too lightly or not at all tackling: dealing with cross the hurdle: overcome the difficulty suprasegmentals: units which extend over more than one sound in an utterance boost: an act that brings .help or encouragement

This issue of model selection is crucial to succeed wherever this problem exists. It should be recalled that our investigation showed that a breakdown in communication occurred frequently in the area of the suprasegmentals. We consider it essential to use that very model that .constitutes (poses) a problem as the teaching model

Contrastive Analysis 11.2

After selecting a model, the next major step taken was to carry out a contrastive analysis of the suprasegmental phonemes of the English language and the students' first language. This step enabled them to identify the major phonological differences between the two languages. At every practical session in the language laboratory, each student was requested first of all to produce the text of the day and record it. They were then supplied with the standard version of the text to listen to. Each student was asked then to mark on the script all the areas where his production differed from the standard version supplied. This was usually followed by an intensive listening session during which the standard version was repeated several times for the students to internalise. This step is consonant with Ladefoged's (1967:167) assertion that "in general people cannot hear differences between foreign language sounds until they have learned to make these differences." This approach was very effective because, while the students improved their production skills, their .receptive skill also received the required boost

The final step was relevant to the content of the phonetics and phonology of the English course. The emphasis on segmental phonemes was reduced.

The suprasegmental phonemes of English were given more attention because this aspect constituted a greater problem. This was done within the context of meaningful utterances. Practice materials were extracted from recorded dialogues, plays, and films with educated native speakers
.dominating

Conclusions .12

Internationally intelligible oral communication has two sides. While the person acquiring the language has to be able to speak to members of that speech community within and outside his country, he should be able to understand their speech, too. Emphasis has been laid on the ability of ESL

learners to achieve a level of spoken English at which they can be understood by other foreign speakers of the language. Ironically, the ability of the ESL learners to understand other international members of the English speech community, especially educated native speakers, has
.not been given sufficient attention

An effective way to assist language learning in the classroom or to study the processes of foreign language acquisition is revealed and validated through the use of communication tasks. Preparing for communication between people from a broad range of backgrounds implies the need to
.have a highly developed repertory of communication strategies

On the one hand, "international" communication seems to require multiple competences. Studies of pragmatic and discourse competences, that focus on the process of achieving mutual intelligibility in whole spoken or written texts, gain increasing significance. (See, for example McKay, 2002, pp. 49-76) In addition, developing the kind of strategic competence that has already been highlighted as an important aspect of "communicative competence" (e.g., Kasper and Kellerman, 1997, Bachman, 1990), is also inevitably worthy of renewed attention, as

international communication seems to require the ability to adjust to almost infinitely diverse intercultural communication situations.

Traditionally, however, "communicative competence" has been used to refer to the adaptation to single and well-established speech communities (Cf Hymes, 1972). Preparing for communication between people from a broad range of backgrounds, who will often communicate beyond their own or their interlocutors' speech communities in some kind of ill-defined third zone, implies the need to have a highly developed repertoire of communication strategies.

There is a consensus on the fact that language is best learned and taught through interaction. In foreign language situations, it is very difficult to have exposure to the target language outside of the classroom. With this limitation, task-based activities should be provided to generate 'modified interaction. Improving interpersonal interaction is one main factor that helps to narrow the gap of communication between native speakers of English and others who use it as a second/foreign language.

Tracing the problem of a constant breakdown in oral communication to phonological differences between English and the ESL learners' mother tongue, we have been able to solve the serious problem of hearing difficulty, by doing three things: appropriate model selection, perform a contrastive analysis with gradual sequential presentation of materials, and perform course content modification.

One should add that what has been achieved can be comprehensively assimilated only if there are follow-up or reinforcement drills and the constant provision of natural settings where the newly acquired skill of thoroughly understanding educated native speakers of the English language are used.

From a pedagogical standpoint, one of the greatest advantages of CMC is the student's increased motivation and active participation which result in greater opportunities of target language production. Chun (1994: 28) reports that "computer assisted class discussion (CACD) provides

excellent opportunities for foreign language learners to develop the discourse skills and interactive competence." The transcripts of discourse produced by Korean learners in task based CMC also support this finding by showing that learners do perform several interactive speech acts: they

ask and answer questions; they give feedback to others; request clarification when they have not understood their interlocutor; they check

comprehension, and they start and end conversations with appropriate greetings and leave takings. This study has come to suggest that task

based CMC can be an effective method for increasing interactive competence because it provides students with the opportunity to generate

.different kinds and modes of discourse

Research studies in more than two decades have not neglected the kind of competences needed for international communication. Canale and Swain's

(1980) and Canale's (1983) four-part framework included linguistic,

socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic competences. Bachman (1990)

and Bachman and Palmer (1996) include grammatical competence, which

encompasses vocabulary, syntax morphology and phonemes/ graphemes

(See Skehan 1998, pp. 157-164 for a full discussion). In this discussion we

can identify an important distinction between what we could term

linguistic knowledge and abilities which enable us to better apply or

compensate for lacunae in linguistic abilities. (See Kasper and Kellerman,

1997). Crystal (1997, p.22) points out that "the speed with which a global

.language scenario has arisen is truly remarkable

The final conclusion of this work is concerned with the so-called 'expanding circle' of foreign language speakers. If we succeed in breaking

down the actual communication breakdown, the number of such speakers

.will be billions

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