INVESTIGATING SECOND LANGUAGE INTERACTIONAL COMPETENCE USING VIDEO RECORDINGS TO ENHANCE ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION

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Malaysia is a growing economy and undergraduates will have to acquire appropriate communication skills. In this study, two aspects of the interactional communicative competence were investigated, that is the linguistic and paralinguistic behaviors in small group communication as well as conflict management in small group communication. Two groups of student participants were given a problem-solving task based on a letter of complaint. The two groups of students were video recorded during class hours for 40 minutes. The videos and transcription of the group discussions were analyzed to examine the use of language and interaction in small groups. The analysis, findings and interpretations were verified with three lecturers in the field of communication. The results showed that students were able to accomplish the given task using verbal and nonverbal communication. However, participation was unevenly distributed with two students talking for less than a minute. Negotiation was based more on alternative views and consensus was easily achieved. In concluding, suggestions are given on ways to improve English language communication.

Keywords: communication, interactional competence, video, English language

I. INTRODUCTION

English is a global language and many developing countries are trying to be competitive in the globalized economy. Several issues have been raised regarding the level of proficiency and fluency of Malaysian undergraduates, including those who have graduated from universities. The problems include various aspects of communication skills and soft skills such as interactional skills (Hassan & Selamat, 2002). This research places interaction in a pivotal position in language learning and communication. Thus, the study focuses on a Business and Professional Communication course offered in a local tertiary level institution in Malaysia. Upon completion of the course, students are expected to understand the underlying theories and concepts of communication in business and professional contexts; develop awareness of the importance of non-verbal skills, listening skills and interpersonal communication skills in establishing effective communication; acquire knowledge and skills necessary to communicate and work effectively with people within an organization as well as outside the organization; and acquire knowledge and skills in using proper grammatical structure in speaking and writing for business communication. It is important that students achieve interactional skills so that they are better able to work in groups and engage in group discussion (Walsh,

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2011). It has been stated that language, semiotic systems and paralinguistic features are important in the process of acquiring interactional competence (Markee, 2008). These means of nonverbal communication are culture specific and need to be decoded within the specific contexts so that meanings conveyed are interpreted accurately.

Various scholars have begun to investigate interactional competence, as compared to communicative competence (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980). Many have voiced out their dissatisfaction in the model of Communicative Competence, and suggested that ESL practitioners look at interactional competence (Johnson, 2004) and how it is employed in naturalistic interaction such as the classroom. It is argued that interactional competence is different from communicative competence and it is important for L2 educators to recognize the elements of interactional competence that ESL learners bring to their interaction, and whether they are internationally competent when discussing in small groups. Without mutual intelligibility between the interacting parties, it would be difficult to communicate effectively or work in teams. In order to achieve a better understanding of interactional competence in the educational context, we need to investigate what happens when learners get together to discuss tasks in small groups.

Young (2008) refers to interactional competence as the link that connects whatever linguistic or interactional resources a person has to communicate in a given context. Here, the resources are categorized into two aspects – those of language (register and modes of meaning) and interaction (sequential organization, turn taking and repair). The fundamental principle in interactional competence is that general language competence does not exist, and that competence exists in local and context specific situations (Young, 2009). This is different from communicative competence models whereby universal competence is thought to exist and should be mastered by second language learners in order for them to interact successfully in the course of daily interaction. Interactional competence is also linked to a discursive practice Hall (1999) whereby it views social realities as 'interactionally constructed rather than existing independently of interaction, of meanings are negotiated through interaction, of the context-bound nature of discourse and of discourse as social action'. Unlike communicative competence, which is about the ability of an individual to employ those resources to communicate, interactional competence lays emphasis on how these resources are used. The crux of the argument is that participants have to co-construct interactional competence in discursive practices and this practice goes beyond the knowledge residing in the individual. In other words, interactional competence is intersubjective and the participants have a shared understanding of the meanings and the messages being conveyed. Shared meanings facilitate understanding and reduce misinterpretation.

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The functional approach underpins the theory to this study on investigating interactional competence. It involves small group communication and focuses on results and outcomes accruing from group behavior (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996). This perspective sees communication as an important tool group members use to solve problems and make decisions. Communication helps group members or participants in the small group discussion by facilitating logical reasoning, rational evaluation and critical thinking, as well as preventing group members from faulty decision-making and flawed problem solving. Thus, communication is instrumental because it helps group members achieve their desired goals and meet specific objectives. Communication paves the way for making informed decisions based on analysis, synthesis, discussions to generate solutions and making a choice from competing alternative arguments.

From a functional perspective, researchers are concerned with identifying the specific aspects of group communication and structure that produce the group's desired outcomes. This could be identifying problems, problem-solving, brain storming for different perspectives, or making informed decisions. Research conducted from this perspective suggests that group members have a better possibility of making the most appropriate decisions and solve the problems that need to be addressed if several conditions are fulfilled. For example, group members must commit to making the best decision, adhere to the procedures that serve as guidelines based on the module, and follow interaction practices which are considered the norm. Soft skills are emphasized, especially verbal and nonverbal communication. The final decision is open to review, though the time factor could act as a constraint. According to the functional perspective, groups follow systematic procedures to accomplish their tasks. The expectation of group members is that they are able to understand the problem, work on solutions based on some clearly established criteria, discuss possible solutions, make evaluations based on the possible solutions and choose the best possible alternative. The systematic procedure to identify the problem normally moves from lower order thinking skills to higher order thinking skills. The cognitive processes involve comprehension at the early stage, discussion, comparison of ideas, an evaluation of possible competing ideas and synthesizing all the information into a cohesive piece of writing.

III. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES/QUESTIONS

The research has two major objectives. It investigates the linguistic and paralinguistic elements that reflect the ability to work in small groups and how students manage conflict in small group interactions should conflicts arise.

In the context of the Business and Professional Communication course offered at the tertiary level institution, the following research questions were posed.

a) What are the linguistic and paralinguistic elements that reflect the ability to work in small groups?

b) How do students manage conflict, if any, in small group interactions?

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study was conducted in tertiary level institution in Malaysia. The research participants were undergraduates who were enrolled in a Business and Professional Communication course. It comes under the broad realm of the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. This course is a one-semester course of 42 contact hours during a 14 week period. Classes were conducted twice a week for a duration of 1 ½ hours each. The students were majors in the field of business and management. Two groups of students comprising 5 members each were selected for the study. Both groups had completed the first three courses on proficiency. This included English for Communication 1, English for Communication 2 and Process Writing. Both groups had an average age of 20 and had male as well as female students. As a preliminary step, students were informed that they would be video recorded during the whole session. Students were advised not to be concerned with the video recording activity but to remain focused on their task, that is, to respond to a letter of complaint about an air conditioning unit which had been delivered to the customer and how to address the customer's complaints. Students focused on identifying the problem and then coming up with a solution. The video recordings were viewed several times and the information was transcribed. The researcher and the three experts worked together adhering to agreed-upon conventions. The transcriptions were studied for elements of verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and conflict management. Based on the video recordings, the three experts and the researcher gave their input on ways to improve the communication skills of students.

V. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section deals with the core findings on verbal and nonverbal communication of the students. This is followed by elements that are important in developing a Malaysian interactional competence model.

Table 1 below describes the major aspects of verbal communication and student engagement with communication activities during the task.

It can be seen form Table 1 that student communication was driven by the need to complete the task, identification of the specific problems and finally discussion to arrive at an acceptable solution. It focuses on results and outcomes [10]. The verbal communication and exchanges showed that the choice of words was very important to this particular task as students had not only to identify the problem but to offer a solution that would be viewed as favorably as possible by the customer. Based on the recordings, students showed awareness in their

TABLE 1: MAJOR ASPECTS OF VERBAL COMMUNICATION EVIDENT
DURING GROUP DISCUSSION

Aspects of verbal communication		Student Activities
A	Task based	Students focus on task completion; adhere to problem-solution order.
B	Read the letter carefully to identify the problem	Negotiation to finalise the problem that was perceived in the letter; students identified specific problems; consensus was easily achieved.
C	Discussion and negotiation	Major part of the task. Students focused on and deliberated on possible misconceptions that could arise with the product. Participants offered alternative solutions and this were seen for their merits. Students tried to work out the best solution based on set criteria. Upon deciding on the solution, remaining time was used to complete the task. Repair and adjacent pairs were observed.

discussions that whatever reason they gave for the source of the problem had to be done tactfully with clear evidence. It was also noticeable in both the groups that each group had two students who were relatively more active than the others. These students tended to speak more and respond more during the session. These active students contributed to the discussions and used a larger vocabulary compared to the others. Adjacent pairs were evident and some specific vocabulary was used to address the problem related to the air-conditioner. Many of the words in the module as well as the complaint letter from the customer were used by the students. These included words such as *inconvenience, apologize* and *requested*. The discussion also showed that students asked for clarification on important points regarding possible solutions to the problem. There was some brain storming, though limited to only some of the students, to provide alternative explanations for the customer complaints and the parties that could be responsible for the mistake. Important points and words were emphasized together with nonverbal communication.

Sometimes, code-mixing took place when there was no immediate word that the speaker could draw upon. This was normally precede by the words *apa itu* which literally translates into "What is that?", which is often used as a prelude to indicate that the person is attempting to find the appropriate word to describe a situation. Code-mixing was also used when the students used their mother tongue to prompt other participants to contribute ideas. When the most suitable word in English was not found, students made an attempt to make use of other words that would be more appropriate. Sometimes, pronoun references created confusion. However, students were able to resolve any ambiguities when they communicated. For example, a group member would intervene with "You mean…?" It was evident that students made use of the linguistic resources available to them to communicate their message. Many words were drawn from the module as the module was

accessible to all of them. As noted by Young [7] [8], the focus in interactional competence is on the reciprocal use of these resources.

The study also showed how nonverbal communication was used by students to communicate their messages. The nonverbal cues conveyed many messages and provided evidence that it was impossible not to communicate within this small group communication setting. It conveyed a range of meanings or messages from deep engagement to non-involvement or indifference. Table 2 shows a classification of the types of nonverbal communication that participants were engaged in during the video recording.

TABLE 2: NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND DESCRIPTION

Nonverbal communication	Description
a. Eye contact	This was most evident among those who were actively involved in the discourse. There was more eye contact from those who were active in the group. Less active participants were inclined to have less eye contact. Eye contact was used to search for cues related to comprehensibility, consent or disagreement. There was no aggressive eye contact or prolonged staring throughout the discursive activity
b. Para language	Important points were marked by emphasis and changes of tone in voice. Rate of speech too was used to emphasise key points.
c. Proxemics	Active participants tended to sit more closely or incline towards other.
d. Kinesics	Hand gestures were used actively by students while expressing themselves and this was especially so among the students who led in the group discussions. It was often used to emphasize a point.
e. Facial expressions	A very commonly used means of expression. Predominantly used to convey agreement, clarification or nothing more to add. Students also smiled naturally conveying cordiality and a harmonious relationship.

The importance of nonverbal communication can be seen by the fact that it is used to convey messages in themselves or reinforce the spoken message in an effective manner that is easily understood by the others in the group. It was also used to convey emotional states or how the participants were feeling during the session. For example, narrowing the eyes and tilting the head meant that one of the listeners was not able to understand what was said. The active participants, especially, combined verbal and nonverbal communication skills effectively to communicate important points or points that needed to be deliberated. They had a wider range of Smiles could signify a positive engagement and respectful communication. Sometimes, smiles indicated that the student had nothing to contribute on the point being discussed, was being courteous or did not challenge

the point put forward. There were also some actions that denoted intensity such as gripping the pen when deeply engaged. Nodding of the head was used quite regularly to indicate assent. So, nonverbal cues are very important to give feedback to the others in the group or the speaker. Verbal and nonverbal communication is important in the process of acquiring interactional competence [3].

There was very little conflict management evident from the group discussion. Most differences in opinion came in the form of alternative explanations rather than outright disagreement or negating the other person's point of view. The nonverbal communication showed that there were no gestures, eye contact or other mannerisms that conveyed a need for strong assertions to express a particular viewpoint. Alternative views were given in a very respectable tone and not to position one view above the other. Students were also able to negotiate where necessary on any issues that were raised by group members.

Besides the major observations made above, there were other details that could be seen from the recorded videos. Let us take the example of one of the groups, which will be referred to as Group 1. Firstly, the seating arrangements and positions seem to show who leads the group, who acts like the assistant and the others who seem to be contributing little to the conversation. For example, in group 1, every group member was comfortable with the proxemics or the personal space. Nevertheless, the group leader sits closer to those who are more active with a good posture while the less active participants are seated slightly further away. The student who assumes the leadership role engages actively in face-to-face interaction with the student who acts like an assistant to her. They follow the adjacent pattern. Most of the conversation is almost top-down with the leader playing a dominant role. All the participants accepted the status quo. The male student in Group 1 hardly says anything and declines the offer to contribute when the leader asks him for his opinion. Secondly, the male student seems to belong to the out group as towards the end of the session, he yawns, which the leader hardly takes note of and he is often seen looking at the watch. He is easily distracted by what happens around him. Turn-taking doesn't matter to him as he is generally an observer rather than a participant. Thirdly there is code switching at some points where the leader finds it hard to find the words, or tries to think of a way to express her ideas. She takes the initiative when there is a lack of response from group members. Fourthly, under time pressure, the leader goes into code-switching mode, especially when the instructor announces that there were 10 minutes remaining. Fifthly, the group members tend to speak in a low volume when they are faced with time constraints. Sixthly, the way of working seems to indicate that two of the group members spend more time writing and contribute very little to the exchange of ideas or discussion. There were times when there was hardly audible communication between the members. Seventhly, towards the end, that is after the announcement that there are 10 more minutes left to complete the assignment, the leader begins to

speak more softly and focuses on writing the answer. Eighthly, there is very little eye contact for some of the group members. Most of it is confined to the two or at times three active discussion group members.

Group Two (the other group) also showed some similarities with group 1 in terms of one student taking the lead and the more active students seated closer to the leader. There was also little eye contact among two of the members while others engaged more actively and tended to look more at their friends. However, there were also certain points which were more characteristic of Group 2. Group 2 had some instances where group members laughed or shared some lighter moments. They could laugh at mistakes or when their friend made efforts to repair. This was done in good humour and helped to ease communication. Adjacent pair exchanges were also more evident among all the members with the exception of one student. This student was totally unresponsive to whatever was being discussed and seemed contented to allow others to contribute to the discussion. It gave the impression that group members accepted his passivity.

Additionally, there were some points that were noted and interpreted by the three communication experts. It was noted that both the groups had one student who was silent almost all the time. They spoke for less than 30 seconds. There was consensus that this silence could be interpreted in several ways. It could mean that the student did not share the views of the other group members, chose to play a passive role by just listening, observe or listen to the others but not participating directly or preferred writing to reading. Nevertheless, it was inferred that there was minimal reaction from these two students and this was more pronounced in Group 2. The student in Group 2 did not produce sounds to indicate that he was following the discussion and had very limited eye contact with all the other group members. His facial expression was frozen almost all the time during the session and did not laugh when the others responded to humour

It was also evident that there was very little overlapping or simultaneous talk. They maintained a pleasant and friendly tone all the time, even when they were prompting at times for other group members to participate. Turn-taking was very good and no one raised their voices to be heard or dominate the discussion. In fact, the group members were happy to have someone lead the group and seemed to accept that someone must act like a de facto leader. In Group 1, for example, the leader was very patient with the almost silent member of the group even though she tried to prompt him to give some ideas.

As stated earlier, interactional competence is focused on competence in local and context specific situations [6]. Based on the data and information gathered from this research, Diagram 1 shows some elements that could be considered in improving interactional competence among students in the Malaysian context.

Based on this study, it has shown that verbal and nonverbal communication combined with sociocultural competence is important for small group

communication. The first box, that is, verbal communication includes semantics/pragmatics and form, both of which were evident in the video recordings. The understanding of words need not be the same for the interlocutors and those involved in the group discussion. They are subjected to different interpretations. For example, the word *problem* seems to have other possible meanings as used by the students. Pronoun references too, are understood differently. The word *them* is dependent on the context of the sentence and pronoun references can create ambiguity in meaning and understanding of the issue being discussed. Thus, it is important for students to have the ability to understand as accurately as possible the meaning of the word based on the contextual clues and the situation in which the word is used. This is important as different interpretations of a word can lead to misunderstanding or even legal action in real life situations.

The second box relates to nonverbal communication. This is critical in a multi-ethnic and multilingual country such as Malaysia, as different forms of nonverbal communication are acceptable in some communities and not so acceptable in other communicates. For example, prolonged eye contact with an intense gaze could be unsettling to the other person as it could be interpreted negatively or as inappropriate to somehow elicit a response. Pointing with the forefinger could bring negative consequences because it could be interpreted as an uncouth gesture or associated with aggressive tendencies.

The third box on the left hand side denotes socio-cultural competence which includes sociolinguistic grammar such as register and politeness strategies that are critical to improve communication among the interlocutors. Words have denotative meanings and connotative meanings which could widely vary in different contexts, situations and cultures. Hence, discretion has to be used in the process of interaction so as to enhance communication with the appropriate choice of words and the avoidance of words that could potentially create misunderstanding. Pragma linguistic grammar would be important to ensure that the discussion is facilitated and there is a need to make a decision whether a strong word would be acceptable or there is a necessity to use softeners. For example, even in English, some students tended to use the *–lah* (illocutionary particle in the Malay language) as a suffix which served to soften the stance or show politeness. In the Malaysian context, softeners and politeness are generally valued speech acts that show a good upbringing besides sensitivity towards others self-esteem and opinions. Knowledge of politeness strategies helps the group to interact harmoniously in spite of differences in opinions. This is especially important in the field of business and professional communication which involves negotiation, stating opposing views in an acceptable manner and reviewing positions in a way that is acceptable and conforms to the sociocultural norms of the community. A *no* might be acceptable in some cultures but the majority group in Malaysia perceive the outright *no* in communication as rather rude and the person who has been denied his request

might lose face. It also gives rise to issues of decorum and respecting the other, even in the adversarial circumstances. Closely related to these two aspects are the cultural grammar that evaluates values and behaviours based on commonly accepted parameters.

VI. CONCLUSION

This research focused on the use of video recordings to analyse communication skills in the context of verbal and non-verbal communication, students' negotiating skills and aspects that influence the interaction process. For instance, Malaysian English, be it standard or otherwise, and the mother tongue was used as a linguistic resource when ideas could not be easily expressed in the English language.

Research in the future can look beyond the local context and see how international students communicate and achieve interactive competence, as more international students enrol in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Video viewing and its attendant tasks can be integrated into the business and professional communication course as this has the potential to give wide exposure to viewers on different types of communication strategies, gender differences in interaction and preferred interactional styles of people form different cultures. The role of interactional competence, too, can be seen in other contexts such as during an interactive business presentation, interview, business negotiation or settlement. Studies can also be conducted on issues that affect interactional competence and active relational interaction.

Acknowledgment

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