Describing Students` Spoken Interaction: A Profile Approach

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Summary

This article introduces a model for describing the spoken English of students interacting in small groups as a first stage in a research project aimed at assessing the needs of Kochi University students in spoken interaction. It focuses on three related areas of interaction: patterns of participation, control of topic and features of conversational cooperation.

Key Words: spoken interaction, topic, participation, cooperation, support, challenge, initiation, response.

Applied linguistic research differs from pure linguistic research in that it attempts to use linguistic theory to suggest solutions to practical problems that occur in disciplines closely related to linguistics such as language teaching. This paper introduces the rationale for a research project that addresses the issue of skills' imbalance in the English of Japanese students by focusing on spoken interaction. As a non-Japanese speaking native speaker of English, it has not been difficult to identify spoken interaction as a focus for improvement. Three stages in this research project have been identified. The initial aim is to describe the spoken interaction in English of Kochi University students. The main focus in this introductory paper is to suggest criteria for providing a description by using insights from spoken discourse analysis. The description lends itself to two possible uses. The first is feedback into teaching, the second is assessment. Nevertheless, the initial aim is to provide a non-judgemental description in the form of a profile of communication both for individual students and, more ambitiously, for a representative sample of students.

Once the instrument of description has been developed, it will be used at a second research stage to provide a synchronic description of the spoken interaction of a sample of students. The third stage will be to apply the instrument to a diachronic description that will assess the effect of teaching on the spoken interaction of students by describing their interaction before and after the teaching of the interactive skills referred to in this introductory paper.

The piloting of the project has been carried out during the assessment of students at the end of the first semester of this academic year. Students were observed communicating in English in seven small groups of four. They were presented with a list of sub-topics related to one major topic and asked to start a conversation and to keep it going without assistance from the teacher. Each group was observed for about 30 minutes. Only two instructions were given: firstly, students could choose

any topic they liked and change it whenever they liked. Secondly, they should converse exclusively in English. During this thirty-minute conversation, the teacher used the chart provided in appendix one to record the communication of each student. Although this pilot stage has been useful for assessing the conversation component of the first semester's teaching programme, few descriptive conclusions have been drawn at this point. The main research focus at this stage is to develop and test the instrument and practise operating it.

What does Spoken Interaction Involve?

The theoretical rationale for this project is based on two sources. The first is the American conversational analysis of Sacks et al. (1974). It is particularly the applications of ethnomethodology to turn-taking that have been exploited. In their review of ethnomethodology, Sharrock and Anderson (1986:72) refer to the way participants organize the transfer of turns as the "local problem of turn distribution". The approach of conversational analysts places great emphasis on the fact that conversation is a participant-managed system. Sack and Schegloff (1974:234) outline this position in their article on conversational closings, stating that "we are not interested in it as a problem for analysts except in so far, and in the ways, it is a problem for participants". To participate in conversations, conversationalists need to be familiar with the techniques in operation for the distribution of turns. Sacks et al. demonstrate that, to participate in interaction, active attention to the obtention of turns to speak is required. By focusing on this aspect of interaction, analysts are then focusing on what participants need to do to take part in interaction. Of particular relevance is the notion of self-selection. Self-selection is a term used in the analysis of turn-taking to indicate that a speaker was not nominated to speak by another participant, but selected him or herself. Sacks et al. (1978:12/13) outline the recursive rules underlying techniques the participants use in structuring turn transition, such as "a, current speaker select next, technique". They go on to define the obligations and rights of speakers when this technique is observed to be in use.

> [...] then the party so-selected has rights, and is obliged, to take next turn to speak [...]

They then state that "if the turn-so-far is so constructed as not to involve the use of a, current speaker select next, technique, then current speaker may, but need not, continue, unless another self-selects".

The second theoretical focus is structural discourse analysis. (See Sinclair and Coulthard 1975; Coulthard 1977; Burton 1980; Berry 1980; Coulthard & Montgomery (eds.) 1981; Sinclair & Brazil 1982; Stubbs 1983; Coulthard (ed.) 1987 & 1992; McCarthy 1991; Willis, D 1992, Hoey 1991 & 1993; Tsui 1994.) A full account of this approach has already been provided in a previous Kochi research report (Nunn 1995). This project uses the notion of response and non-response elements of discourse derived from this approach.

The aim of this paper is not to provide a detailed rationale of background theory, but rather to present a derivative practical model. In the field of EFL, "discourse analysis" is used to refer to one approach to data analysis subordinated to applied purposes. Richards et al. (1985:84) use discourse analysis in this applied sense, stating that "such analyses can be useful in finding out the

effectiveness of teaching methods and the types of teacher-student relationships". For this research project, discourse analysis will be used in this subordinate, applied sense.

The initial aim is to provide both individual and group profiles of students` spoken interaction. In order to produce such a profile, it is necessary to determine the boundaries of spoken interaction for this project. Interactive features have been selected that are frequently identified as problem areas by teachers of Japanese students. Naturally, it is hoped that the usefulness of this specification is not limited to this research context. The components identified for analysis come under four main headings: features of participation, topic control, supporting other participants and challenging other participants (Burton 1980).

Participation

Features of participation inevitably influence every other aspect of interaction because it is impossible to describe the ability of a non-participating student with any degree of certainty. The possibility that problems related to participation are a result of social factors related only to the roles of teachers and students in whole class interaction also needs to be considered. Assuming the students interacting together in small groups are all of equal status, it is important to describe how turns of talk are distributed. The readiness and ability to obtain turns are part of a participant's conversational profile. In figure one below, six features have been identified. In a profile, the features are not mutually exclusive and relative frequency rather than frequency per se will be described. Nomination may refer to a participant waiting to be nominated or to a participant nominating others. Nomination may occur directly with the use of a name, or with a question clearly directed at one participant, but can also be realised by gesture or even eye-contact. A participant may also select himself at a point of transition relevance. (Sacks et al. 1974) Once a turn has been obtained, the extent to which a participant maintains the turn can then also be assessed. Interruption, which is a special form of self-selection, is identified simply as one participant starting a turn before the current speaker has closed his or her turn. The coding of these features is numerical, each instance of a particular feature being marked in the appropriate box.

Producing and maintaining a long contribution has only been subjectively assessed to mean that more than one clause was produced by a speaker. A large tick is recorded for each long contribution and a small tick is added next to the large tick to indicate each subsequent clause within the contribution. In this way both the number of long contributions and their approximate length is recorded. Long contributions are vulnerable to interruption when hesitation or long pauses occur. A description of participation should therefore also include an estimation of the rate of hesitation and the way co-participants react to it. Finally, the proportion of non-response contributions is contrasted with responses in order to determine a speaker's tendency to adopt a leading participatory role in the conversation.

Fig 1   Features of Participation

Self-selection
Nomination
Interruption
Making and maintaining (long) contributions (narrative, etc.)
Hesitation/Long pausing
Non-response contributions
Response contributions

Topic control

Even when "topic" is defined simply as "what is being talked about", the topic of conversation is not a simple issue. In discourse analysis, it is normally assumed that it is people who have topics and not the discourse itself. The initiation, negotiation and change of what is being talked about is significant in terms of discourse control. It is therefore important to describe the role of participants in relation to topic control and the extent to which they participate in the development or change of topic as the interaction progresses. While topic control is often the domain of the teacher in classroom interaction, in small group interaction the students are in control of the choice and development of the topic within the broad area suggested. Students are also advised that they can select a totally different topic if they wish. Figure 2 below indicates the features relating to topic control. Along with control of participation, control of topic is a central feature of conversational style. A participant who selects the topic or changes it is influencing both the direction and the structure of the discourse.

Fig 2 Topic Control

Choosing the topic
Developing the topic
Changing the topic

Cooperating with Other Participants

The last two areas are specifically related to cooperative features of conversation. Participants may vary in the extent to which they support or challenge other participants. (See Burton 1980.) The cooperative nature of interaction makes this kind of description of great interest to the cultural outsider as it may be assumed that both the degree and style of cooperation between participants will vary from one culture to another. Features that have been identified as supporting contributions

are shown in figure 3 below. These have been divided into verbalized contributions which do not in themselves develop the topic but encourage the speaker to go on, with expressions like "ah ha" or "really", etc. Non-verbal encouragement has also been recorded. This could include nodding or shaking the head or use of eye-contact. Contributions which ask for clarification on preceding discourse are also considered to be supporting contributions, provided that they are in no way identifiable as challenging.

Fig 3 Supporting Other Participants

Verbalized encouragement (backchaining, remarks like "how interesting", etc.)
Non-verbal encouragement (gesture, eye-contact, etc.)
Asking for clarification

Contributions which in some way challenge the current speaker are listed in figure 4 below. These could be statements that disagree or which even contradict what the current speaker is saying. Hostile questions are classified under the heading "interrogation". Comments which have the effect of mocking or scorning the contribution of another speaker are also challenges, as are statements that seem to judge the contributions of other participants. An initial conclusion from the piloting stage is that Kochi students rarely challenge others, or if they do, they use such subtle techniques that this non-Japanese observer fails to notice it.

Fig 4 Challenging

Disagreeing
Contradicting
Interrogating
Scorning Sarcasm, etc.
Judging

Features of Assessment

Features typically associated with subjective testing of student performance in standard tests of spoken English such as accuracy, fluency and clarity are not the main focus of this project. Clarity is intended to include both delivery, diction and pronunciation. Accuracy refers to "correct" use of syntax and appropriate use of lexis. Fluency refers to both speed and smoothness of delivery. Figure 5 is an optional section as far as the research project is concerned. It is considered that these features can be best assessed in individual presentations by each participant rather than in group interaction, which is the focus of this research. These features are also clearly judgemental

and are more appropriate to models designed for assessment than for models of description. In spoken language courses, parallel assessment of the features in figure five can be provided alongside the descriptive categories presented in figures one to four.

In a description of interactional style, fluency can partly be assessed in terms of smoothness of speaker change, which is related to hesitations and pauses. Hesitation makes a speaker vulnerable to interruption and creates a transition relevance point, so fluency is not only a feature of individual competence, but also of interactional competence. Practical considerations during analysis will determine its importance for this study.

Fig 5   Assessment

| Clarity |
| Accuracy |
| Fluency |

Conclusions

The development of an instrument for describing features of students` interactive style is an important preliminary stage in both planning for improvement and in providing reliable assessment of students` ability to interact successfully. This first paper has presented a descriptive instrument and described the rationale behind it. Issues related to the application of the instrument during this long term project aimed at discovering the best approach to improving our students` skills in spoken interaction will be the subject of a future paper.

Appendix
Coding Spoken Interaction

Self-selection	
Nomination	
Interruption	
Making and maintaining (long) contributions (narrative, etc.)	
Hesitation, long pauses.	
Non-response contributions	
Response contributions	

Choosing the topic	
Developing the topic	
Changing the topic	

Supporting

Verbalized encouragement (backchaining, remarks like "how interesting", etc.)	
Non-verbal encouragement (gesture, eye-contact, etc.)	
Asking for clarification	

Challenging

Disagreeing	
Contradicting	
Interrogating	
Scorning Sarcasm, etc.	
Judging	

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