

Promoting pragmatic awareness and spoken discourse skills with EAP classes

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The development of speaking skills in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) courses is a relatively neglected and under-researched area of ESL teaching which relates to a problem facing overseas students preparing for courses in Australian universities. It has become increasingly clear that many of them have difficulty interacting professionally and socially with their native-speaking (NS) peers and teachers in academic contexts. This article draws on recorded data from a recently completed classroom research project, carried out by an EAP class in South Australia, to describe a process which allows non-native speaking (NNS) learners to experience authentic oral interaction with NSs, as well as providing opportunities for them to reflect on the linguistic and socio-pragmatic features of spoken discourse as they arise. This heightened awareness of language in context can build confidence in the learners' oral skills, and may enhance academic performance.

Introduction Recently I took part in a collaborative research project which required a group of EAP students to carry out interviews with native speakers on campus, to record those interviews, and then present their transcriptions to the class in the form of an oral presentation. During the project the class were actively engaged in the following activities:

- preparing for the interviews
- evaluating them after they had been completed
- transcribing the spoken language of the interviews with the help of the teacher/researcher
- presenting their finished products to the class in the form of a discourse analysis of an actual speech event in which they had been co-participants.

Since I had been present as co-teacher throughout the ten week programme I was able to observe the event from both a research and teaching perspective. What was of special interest to me was the evident pedagogic value of these different stages of the cycle (interview, transcription, and class presentation) in developing the oral/aural skills of the students. In this paper I will argue that EAP courses need to focus more specifically on the interactive nature of spoken discourse in their classroom work, and suggest that the cycle outlined above may have

pedagogic potential for enhancing effective cross-cultural communication in spoken academic contexts.

**Need for training
in interactive oral
skills for EAP
programmes**

Like most ESP (English for Specific Purposes) programmes, training in academic listening and speaking skills tends to focus on the transactional rather than the interactional (Brown and Yule 1983) needs of the learner. Traditional methods of developing aural/oral competence in academically-based courses have relied on simulation activities which replicate the study skills situations learners are likely to encounter (see for example Lynch and Anderson 1992). While activities such as note-taking from recorded lectures or from formal seminar presentations provide useful practice in transferring information from the spoken to the written medium, they cannot give learners practice in interactive oral communication, since the interlocutor's response 'in real life' will be unpredictable, and often difficult to process by the NNS, for a variety of reasons which will become apparent. Nor can simulated exercises provide the range of socio-pragmatic information that is readily available in authentic exchanges (Thomas 1983, 1995). The sort of mis-communication that can and does occur between NS/NNS in academic contexts is frequently the result of mutual failure to identify the pragmatic content of the message. For example, towards the end of a recent tutorial, an overseas student (Eva) failed to correctly identify her NS colleague's intention (pragmatic meaning) when he addressed the following remark to her:

'Eva, YOU haven't said much'

(NB: Tonic stress on YOU. A low key falling tone over the remainder of the utterance gives it the illocutionary force of gentle invitation. A high key and/or rising tone would be more likely to imply criticism.)

Eva smiled to indicate that she had understood what the speaker had just said, but she remained silent, believing this was not an appropriate time to justify her reticence. When questioned afterwards in private by the tutor, she admitted that she had taken the remark as an adverse comment on her lack of participation, and had not realized that the speaker was simply inviting her to join the discussion, without any intended criticism. I did not check to see the reaction of her NS colleague, but I suspect he was quite unaware that a relatively serious misunderstanding had occurred at this pragmatic level. I would imagine that EAP teachers can find plenty of examples of this kind of socio-pragmatic failure.

**Need for training
in cross-cultural
communication at
different levels of
language use**

From a pedagogic point of view, strategies are needed for coping with such cross-cultural misconceptions at a range of levels, from the socio-cultural and pragmatic to the purely linguistic. In the example cited above, the cause of mis-communication appeared to be pragmatic failure. At a surface level Eva clearly understood every word that was addressed to her, yet she incorrectly identified the speaker's meaning as a criticism of her behaviour. But problems of understanding are just as

likely to occur at a surface (phonological/lexical) level. In the next examples, two overseas students who want to make a polite request to interview a stranger, hear (and write down) the reply they received, as follows:

'OK. Not long and be quick!'

when the man actually said

'OK as long as you're quick'

The students' incorrect perception of rudeness ('I'm doing this under sufferance and at great personal inconvenience') led the interviewers to feel that the reply they received could have been racially motivated. The misunderstanding was only uncovered in the course of playing back their recording in class, when the discrepancy between their transcript and the actual wording was made clear by the teacher and several other peers. A later analysis of the intonation over the corrected wording was carried out by the teacher, and it showed that the speaker had intended to sound friendly but humorous. This prosodic point had in fact been appreciated by a number of learners.

These two examples indicate a more general problem of miscommunication in spoken interaction between NS and NNS in academic environments. This was the focus of the collaborative research model mentioned earlier. After providing details of this research I will suggest a model for raising awareness of potential communication difficulty at three distinct levels: socio-pragmatic, pragmalinguistic, and linguistic.

***Investigating oral
communication
breakdown: an
action research
programme***

The subjects were a class of 15 students enrolled in an EAP programme at the University of South Australia in Adelaide prior to taking up tertiary studies in Australian institutions. They were mainly postgraduate learners from Pacific Rim countries aged between 24 and 40, with an equal gender balance, and with language proficiency scores between IELTS 4 and 5.

Interview process

In response to an initial needs analysis questionnaire, the class had identified 'conversing with native speakers of English in academic contexts' as a major concern. In order to formulate an hypothesis about the nature of this spoken communication difficulty, the class were required to gather their own data. This meant going out and recording themselves talking with native speakers on the university campus. The interview format was chosen because it allowed for topic initiation by the learners, and provided them with some degree of control over the responses. The students were able to choose whether they wished to proceed with the interviews alone or in pairs. They were free to decide on the topic they wished to cover, and the sort of questions they wished to ask (see Appendix 1) and the wide-ranging nature of the responses they received was unexpected and interesting for all involved.

*Transcription and
class presentation
of the texts*

Having obtained a recording of reasonable quality, the students returned to their class and carried out a preliminary transcription of the interview, adopting a procedure and transcription technique that had been previously modelled to them (see Clennell 1994). In the classroom they were able to compare notes with their peers about the recordings, and to receive advice from their teacher and their fellow students about interpreting the text exactly as it was played back to them. This work on the transcript was continued at home or in the library, with the assistance of a class partner who acted as a moderator as well as technical assistant—operating a tape recorder and transcribing at the same time can otherwise be a frustrating experience for anyone working on their own. Once they had completed an acceptable version of all or part of their conversation, they could offer their transcript to the whole class as a formal ‘seminar’ style presentation. During this session various linguistic features of the texts, such as a variety of lexical, grammatical, or phonological items, would be highlighted by the participants and teacher. In the rest of the paper I shall discuss the pedagogic implications of the three stages I have outlined above.

**Stage 1: The
interview itself**
*Pre-interview
preparation and
post-interview
analysis as
opportunities to
develop
sociopragmatic
awareness*

The interview stage offered a broad focus on the social and cultural context of the situation where the learners were able to experience at first hand what was termed the ‘sociopragmatic’ level of language, i.e. ‘the social conditions of language use, what can be talked about, when and where’ (O’Grady and Millen 1994: 2). Since the learners initiate the interview, they have a vested interest in establishing and maintaining the discourse. The teacher can best assist preparations for the interview by drawing attention to occasions where students may face unexpected topic switches, or fail to understand the interlocutor’s meaning. This provides an opportunity to discuss discourse strategies—sometimes described as ‘communication strategies’—such as the following:

- what to say and do when someone is talking too quickly
- how to avoid unnecessarily complex grammatical structures in the middle of a conversation
- what to say when you can’t recall a vocabulary item

These items can be prepared for in advance, or simply noted down for use later. Equally important, at a cultural level, is the fact that learners are able to work out in advance what is more or less appropriate to say or do in a given situation, by discussing interviewing techniques with their peers and with the teacher. At this point, the teacher may wish to adopt a ‘cultural awareness-raising’ role, in order to encourage discussion on topics such as:

- appropriate ways of approaching and addressing a stranger (e.g. NOT addressing a NS student of the same age as ‘Mister’ or ‘Miss’)
- different ways of politely requesting an interview
- different ways of initiating the interview

- ways of discretely withdrawing if the invitation has been declined

The class as a group will then be able to attend to the cultural expectations that underpin such a routine. For example, how do you imagine an average Australian might feel when asked for an interview in this way? What strategies would be appropriate in your culture for accepting or declining such a request?

The interviews placed the teacher in a better position to evaluate the effectiveness of this initial preparation, and the degree to which the expectations of the students matched their actual experience. In this particular project a summary of answers to the original questionnaire (see Appendix 2) provided some useful feedback on the interview process, and prompted a lively discussion about the degree of co-operation students had received from their selected interviewees. On all such occasions, valuable insights may be gained into cross-cultural language issues, such as:

- what is considered a tolerable pause length? (Our Japanese informants felt that a pause of 5–10 seconds was acceptable, but this figure varied among the different Asian groups represented.)
- issues of politeness (Do we need to say sorry when we have finished?)
- modes of address (How do you address a woman when you don't know if she is married or single?)

Apart from giving the students useful insights into a range of obvious differences between Anglo-Australian and Pacific Rim cultures, the questionnaire may also highlight inter-cultural differences between Asian students, and on occasion may also lead to further discussion out of class, as well as informal contributions to the topic in the students' journals.

Stage 2:
Transcription of
interviews
Practice in
perceptual listening
skills as a way of
developing
pragmalinguistic
awareness

Back in the classroom, the students re-engage with the text, this time as outsiders able to look with detachment at what actually took place, while still maintaining the insider's knowledge of the context and content of the discourse. The teacher is present to share their experiences and offer advice and suggestions when required. At this point I noted that it sometimes helped the learner to be allowed time and space for further reflection once a new item had been identified. For example, when a point about intonation acting as a marker of speaker intention was being highlighted, learner awareness of the item had now been raised, and this could be enough for a learner to digest. In my experience, learners need to feel that they have arrived at their discoveries through their own efforts, and a session on discourse prosody at a later stage may be the best way to bring the latent discovery to fruition as an acquired skill.

Stage 2 enables the learners to re-experience the speech event as it occurred, but with three important added advantages:

- knowing the precise context of the situation

- recalling as it unfolds the specific verbal manifestation of the interaction and
- having the technical equipment necessary to stop and restart the speech flow as necessary.

The focus of this stage could be on the 'pragmalinguistic' level of language use, that is to say, 'an understanding of what the speaker is trying to do with the language, and what is significant about the language choices that are made' (Thomas 1983). The pedagogic purpose is to raise learner awareness of the implications of such choices in pragmatic terms. At this level, the learner is guided and encouraged by the teacher to look for and then identify the speaker's intended (pragmatic) meaning, and to appreciate the reasons for its choice. In the following example—a case where they would certainly need the teacher's help—they are invited to examine the intonation patterns in a NS utterance more precisely, to see how prosodic information is used to mark its illocutionary force (McCarthy 1991, Clennell 1997). Here a NS tutor is responding to an overseas student's question about how best to frame the opening section of an essay:

'You COULD write it that way, but there may be . . .'

First of all, students would be invited to suggest different possible meanings contained in such an utterance. From such a discussion, the multiple discourse functions of pitch and tone, as well as lexical and syntactic configuration would emerge. Eventually the teacher would be able to guide them to the most likely interpretation dictated by the context with which they are already familiar. Thus, the response above can be appreciated as a veiled criticism, and not as the positive suggestion initially suspected by some participants. To return to our earlier example, the students' attention could be drawn in a similar fashion to Eva's failure to appreciate the intended meaning of

'Eva, YOU haven't said much'

as a turn-taking invitation rather than a comment on her reluctance to speak. This apparent communication failure, like all good 'errors', can provide the teacher with a valuable opportunity to highlight important prosodic issues relating to discourse strategies (Gumperz 1992). It can also offer learners a chance to improve their understanding of the socio-cultural conditions that influence effective language choices.

Stage 3: Class presentation of the transcribed text

An exercise in linguistic analysis as well as a speech production activity

Once the transcription is complete, the students can then present their texts to the class for review in the style of an academic seminar presentation (itself a useful practice in EAP spoken skills). One way they can do this is by offering the transcript on an overhead transparency while they play the recorded data to the class. During this stage the listeners are offered help and additional suggestions from both the class and the teacher in deciphering or reappraising the significance of specific elements in the text which may have eluded or confused them. With the focus on specific linguistic items, they are now

able to operate at a textual level and deal with specific lexical, grammatical, or phonological realizations of the text as devices which maintain cohesion and coherence, such as the discourse markers 'well, then', or 'thus', or 'whereas'.

This can be especially insightful when an ongoing problem of perception or grammatical over-simplification is finally recognized and acknowledged. A good example of this occurred in this first draft of an interview about the Port Arthur Massacre, where the interviewer revealed a voiced-consonant perceptual difficulty in mis-hearing both the voiced dental fricative [ð] and the alveolar [d], when he transcribed

'It is pretty shocking what happen er I mean . . .'

whereas the NS's actual words picked up by several class members during the replay, had been

'It is pretty shocking what happened there, I mean . . .'

Another example is that cited earlier, in which students misheard the crucial connector 'as long as', so that when 'OK. Not long and BE quick' was heard in place of the actual wording 'OK. As long as its quick.' An error of this type would have been picked up in this session, and if it had been allowed to pass by the rest of the class would have been dealt with 'in situ' by the teacher. However, remedial work on voicing difficulty, as shown above, would be noted by the teacher for a later one-to-one session dealing with specific L1 phonological interference.

Implications for the ELT classroom

In summary, I would draw attention to four salient pedagogic conditions which characterize this particular teaching experiment, and which may account for its rich potential as a teaching model. Firstly, the fact is that students 'own' their texts, and therefore have a personal affective involvement in the subsequent analysis and related learning outcomes. The second important consequence of this textual ownership is that it focuses attention. Learners are able to attend to the mechanism of language choice by selective focusing on specific aspects of the text at different levels of cultural and linguistic complexity. This sharpened attention may play a key role in Second Language Acquisition (see Schmidt 1990). Thirdly, there is the role of collaboration, both in the creation of the text itself, and in the subsequent reevaluation by peers and teacher of that product. Since all the texts are the result of joint production (see Clark 1996) this collaboration highlights the fact that cooperation is essential if meanings are to be negotiated successfully. Finally, there is the role of the researcher. In this class, every individual took responsibility for investigating their own communication difficulties, and shared this responsibility with their teacher and their peers.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested a process whereby EAP students gather spoken data, transcribe it, and present the text to the class. I have suggested that it has pedagogic potential because, by providing samples of contextualized spoken interaction, it raises learner awareness of the

different levels of meaning and language usage—from the broadly socio-cultural through to the specific and linguistic at the level of phonology and syntax. Giving the students the opportunity to own their texts and look at them as joint constructions, enables them to see how sociopragmatic meanings are embedded in the discourse, and how effective communication is dependent on interaction and mutual negotiation. Finally, the experience of co-researching their own language learning process, provides teachers and learners with deeper insights into the process of becoming communicatively competent in a second language.

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Appendix 1

Sample of topics
selected by students
and used during the
project for
interviewing native
speakers

What is your opinion of the recent budget cuts in education?

What are your opinions about the proposed gun law changes?

Do you think the use of walkman-style radio cassettes is a good thing for young people?

What are your views about diet programmes?

Are you in favour of gambling? Do you think the Casino is a good idea for Adelaide?

Appendix 2

Some areas of difficulty experienced when interviewing native speakers on campus

Answer True/False (Not true at all = 1; completely true = 5)

A The interview procedure

	Total	Rank
1 Embarrassment at stopping a person and asking them for an interview.	35	(4=)
2 Difficulties explaining why I wanted to interview them.	19	(11)
3 Not easy to find the polite forms necessary to set up the interview in a friendly manner.	32	(8)
4 Sometimes difficult to read and ask a question at the same time.	35	(4=)
5 Sometimes difficult to know when the person had finished answering the question.	25	(10)

B The actual communication

1 I found it hard to understand native speakers at times because they spoke much faster than I expected.	53	(1)
2 I found it hard to follow the answers they gave because they often used unfamiliar idioms and expressions.	42	(2)
3 I found that I frequently lost the meaning of what they were saying because I was thinking about the next question I wanted to ask.	26	(9)
4 I found that I lacked confidence in listening skills, especially in hearing the important information words.	35	(4=)
5 I often wanted to interrupt the speaker and ask him to repeat, but I didn't want to do this because I felt embarrassed at my lack of understanding.	34	(7)
6 I felt it would help me to have ways of giving myself time to think before I speak such as erm ... perhaps so ... etc.	40	(3)