

**ANNALI DELLA FACOLTA'
DI SCIENZE DELLA FORMAZIONE
DELL'UNIVERSITA' DI CAGLIARI
NUOVA SERIE VOL. XXVI – 2003 – PARTE II**

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CONFLICT AND COOPERATION

ESTRATTO

**UNIVERSITA' DI CAGLIARI
ANNO 2003**

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The dynamics of spoken discourse and its implications for the exploitation of the seminar format for ESL improvement in an academic context.

He will thus feel a constant sense of security amid all possible fluctuations that occur, and he will also abstain from pressing an ignorant or an intellectually weak opponent, beyond what may be necessary either for the purpose of playing the game correctly, or of punishing presumption.
(W. Somerset Maugham, 1976: 380-381)

Introduction

The above quotation refers to the game of poker, and the fact that the proficient player approaches his or her task by means of the application of logic through a trained intellect, employing specific skills in order to play the game effectively and observing a series of clearly defined rules. The proficient player of the game feels self-confident in dealing with an unpredictable and fluid situation.

The principles outlined in this brief extract might also hold true in the context of a discussion or debate in an academic setting. This is because a discussion has a structure and follows a series of rules in order to make it workable, since without those rules it could either degenerate into an argument, which nonetheless applies its own different set of rules allowing communication to take place, otherwise the communication process could break down altogether.

This paper sets out to define some of the rules which may be applied in general discourse, before turning to the specifics of the academic setting in seminars. For the purposes of this paper, a seminar is held to be "a class meeting for systematic study under the direction of a specific person" (*The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*), ideally a small group of ten to fifteen students and a tutor who guides the discussion. Within this context discourse itself allows both conflict and cooperation, since a seminar is taken as a forum for the exchange of differing opinions, possible only through the cooperation of participants in 'creating' communication itself. Not only this, but a further undercurrent of the conflict/cooperation contrast is found in social-affective factors occurring in the seminar context.

Finally, the implications of the rules of spoken discourse in a seminar context are discussed with a view to how they may provide insights into improving language performance in a specific academic context, and how they may be integrated in degree courses.

1. The dynamics of spoken discourse

All successful spoken interaction is based on a participant mutual understanding of a set of rules which dictate the form of the exchange. Conversation itself is complex, in that its form is dictated firstly by where it occurs. Thus, the formal discursal exchange of a parliamentary debate, for example, will tend to be highly structured, following a relatively set pattern dictated by very clear rules of linguistic and social behaviour. At the other extreme, an informal conversation will also have its own restrictions, albeit of a different kind. Secondly, the form of an exchange is dictated by who the participants are and what their relationship may be. Social peers interact differently to employer and employee, for example. Social factors have a bearing not only on the type of language employed, but also on the stratagems employed to maintain or terminate the interaction, and failure to comply to these rules, unconsciously in the case of the native speaker for the most part, may result in confusion or even offence.

It is exceedingly difficult to construct a satisfactory rule system for informal conversation, as it is infinitely variable, but on closer study certain patterns do emerge. Studies carried out in the 1960s and 1970s would appear to indicate that conversation is based on a form of cooperation between two (or more) parties who interact in sequences. Schegloff (1968: 1076) claims that "conversational sequence can be described by the formula ababab", which means that the participants take turns to speak, each one acting on cues from the other. The participants create the environment for the conversation since, as Sacks *et al.* (1978: 10) observe, "conversation is always 'situated', always comes out of, and is part of some real set of circumstances of its participants" and each turn is dictated by the context of the previous turn. In essence the participants mould their interaction as it progresses. The length of a conversation is not pre-defined but certain markers or cues will allow the continuance of the conversation through:

A machinery which includes the transition relevance of possible utterance completion recurrently for any utterance in the conversation generates an indefinitely extendable string of turns to talk.

(Schegloff and Sacks, 1973: 273)

Thus conversation can be seen as in a state of constant flux. The cues necessary to bring about the high degree of coordination necessary between the participants occur in what Schegloff and Sacks (*ibid.*: 238) term "adjacency pairs". They occur specifically in such acts as 'question-answer', 'greeting-

greeting', 'offer-acceptance/refusal' and 'summons-answer'. As such, one speaker responds to another's cue, the two parts of the adjacency pair occurring in juxtaposition. This "adjacent positioning provides a framework for the continuous updating of public, intersubjective understandings" (Heritage, 1982: 6).

These combinations have been closely studied in the opening or closing of a conversation. Schegloff (1968: 1077) gives the example of the opening of a telephone conversation, where the answerer consistently speaks first. This runs contrary to the generally accepted norm consisting of question/opening-answer sequence, since the answerer does not know who is calling. This initial greeting could be taken as a message for the caller to begin his/her turn, this being a signal of readiness to communicate. Closing a conversation also follows a complex procedure or sequence. The speaker who wishes to close requires confirmation that it is acceptable to do so. He/she will therefore use an open-ended stratagem, leaving his/her interlocutor the option of continuing or closing. These Schegloff and Sacks (1973: 246) refer to as "pre-closings", or setting the scene for a possible conclusion to the conversation.

Within the conversation itself there are a number of possibilities as to what topics may be approached, or what may be talked about in that specific context, the participants who are present and at that particular time. Schegloff and Sacks (*ibid.*: 245) refer to these possibilities as "mentionables", and these may be employed to prolong the interaction.

Discoursal collaboration, therefore, takes the form of rules which allow interaction to continue, and without which all communication would be chaotic, if not impossible. These rules allow for the inherent flexibility of discourse, and the unpredictable outcome of any exchange by a system of ongoing and continuous shifts which display systematic relationships or, according to Coulthard and Brazil (1981: 86) this "structural framework operates by classifying each successive discourse event in the light of the preceding one".

The complexity of turn-taking systems is discussed in Sacks *et al.* (1978), and variations due to different forms of interaction are noted, as interaction itself serves a multiplicity of purposes within different systems, from flexible in general conversation to highly structured in ceremonies, where the language serves little more than a symbolic purpose. Sacks *et al.* (*ibid.*: 47) suggest that "conversation should be considered the basic form of speech exchange system, with other systems on the array representing a variety of transformations on conversation's turn-taking system to achieve other types of turn taking system". As we shall see below, this view is possibly debatable, since for a number of reasons 'conversation' tends to be more complex than formalised speech settings.

In every day conversation, Coulthard and Brazil (1981: 84) observe that surface incoherence in a conversational exchange is often supplemented with shared, implicit knowledge which gives the exchange meaning for the participants. This is illustrated in example (1):

- (1) "If you don't mind, ma'am, I've a few questions to ask you."
Miss Marple said, "In connection with the murder of Mrs. Spenlow?"
Palk was startled.
"I may ask, madam, how you got to know of it?"
"The fish," said Miss Marple.

The comprehension of such an exchange would depend upon "the shared background of understanding of the participants" (*ibid.*: 84) in this one situation and at this specific time.

Certainly, to an external listener this exchange, taken from Agatha Christie's short story *Tape-Measure Murder* (1996: 258-259) would appear to be illogical. However, the narrator goes on to explain that Constable Palk had in fact no difficulty in understanding what Miss Marple meant, because he correctly assumed that the news of the murder had arrived with the delivery boy who always brought some fish to Miss Marple for her evening meal on the same day.

Thus, many of the tricks of humour through sarcasm or irony, for example, are rendered not only by "lexicogrammatical resources" (Halliday, 1994: 312) available to the interactants, but also by a mutual understanding of the context, e.g.

- (2) A: I'm leaving Tom, you know.
B: Oh! How sad!

In this particular example, the immediately apparent message conveyed by the lexicogrammatical content of the utterances, is that of speaker B's compassion towards speaker A, who has decided to end a sentimental relationship. However, the underlying message of the exchange, in particular speaker B's reaction could be interpreted as either positive or negative, depending upon the specific context in which it takes place. That is to say, an expression of genuine sympathy for someone experiencing a traumatic experience, as seen above, or even a humorous play on a situation, the background of which only the speakers, or those who know Tom, for instance, as a particularly unpleasant character, are party to. While example (2) may be amply comprehensible at face value to most proficient English language users, even though, as we

have seen example (3) presents further problems, since there appears to be a contradiction, if we consider the end of a relationship in a negative light:

- (3) A: I'm leaving Tom, you know.
B: Oh! Wonderful!

Speaker B would appear to show a cold lack of understanding, but two further factors may be considered in this case. Firstly, the intonation, pitch and tone of B's answer. These elements may communicate emotion (surprise, relief, boredom), although as McCarthy (1991: 107) claims, without knowing the context it is impossible to attach particular intonation patterns to particular emotions. This leads to the second factor, which is those extralinguistic features which accompany speech, including facial expressions, hand gestures and other forms of body language.

These considerations may have some implications for the learning environment in what could be defined as institutional or formalised settings in which context specific constraints are placed upon all the participants:

Here the incumbents of particular roles (e.g. teacher, counsel, interviewer etc.) ask questions and (where relevant) select next speakers, while others (e.g. pupils, witnesses, interviewees) are largely confined to responding to them.

(Heritage, 1985: 19)

Consequently, the question which may be raised is to what extent genuine communication or interaction takes place in the ESL classroom. Certainly, asking students to act out scenes from daily life (e.g. going shopping, checking in at the airport and so on) decontextualises, or more precisely 'recontextualises' the communicative interaction, since the classroom cannot genuinely represent the target situation in all its complexity. However, the seminar takes a specific place on the flexible-structured continuum proposed by Sacks *et al.* (1978) above, as general conversational flexibility is not present in such a situation, where academic conventions require the clear and logical expounding of ideas, with a relatively restricted or topic specific lexical range of the discipline concerned along with conventions of status among the interactants. The interaction which takes place in a seminar, where non-native speakers use English as a means of communication, is genuine, since the language is used with the specific purpose of discussing issues relevant, for example, to the degree course being studied.

2. Participant interaction in a seminar context.

Academic discussion as a communicative activity may be considered on two levels. Beneath the overtly conflictual situation created by the exchange of differing viewpoints or the critical analysis of ideas, there is an undercurrent of discursual cooperation, without which communicative interaction would not be possible.

In a seminar discussion the participants employ a narrow base of common knowledge, i.e. the university environment and their specific academic discipline. Humorous comments and puns will be largely excluded from exchanges taking place during a seminar, since the participants attempt to communicate ideas and opinions as clearly, succinctly and convincingly as possible. Failure to do so could lead to misunderstandings, as surface incoherence may be acceptable in general conversation, but read as "rude, evasive or eccentric" (Coulthard and Brazil, 1984: 85) in academic discussions.

Nevertheless, the seminar creates its own context specific environment in which the rules of interaction are different from those of less highly structured situations. These very rules may serve to create a type of interaction based on a different kind of 'conflict' to that which we consider as the exchange of differing opinions. While, from a purely lexicogrammatical point of view, face value interpretations of seminar discourse may be accurate, a significant factor which distinguishes academic discussion from every day conversation, the roles which the participants play tend to be very clearly defined on a social-hierarchical basis, thereby dictating clear expectations on the part of both the tutor and the students.

The tutor acts principally to delineate the topic area to be viewed in the scope of the seminar and manage the turn-taking procedure in order to ensure that there is no straying from the specific topic of the discussion and to ensure the maximum participation of all members of the seminar group. As such, his/her role is perceived as dominant. This may have negative effects on the learning process, if the seminar format is seen as providing learners with the opportunity to consolidate passive learning from lectures and reading, by actively employing information acquired in discussion and, thereby, being able to appreciate the relevance of such information, in a wider context, to their studies and their own academic development. This implies that care needs to be taken in the setting up and running seminars, if we consider the seminar as serving as a base for the analysis of facts, opinions and information pertaining to the discipline being studied, and through this analysis to build "coherent

frameworks and interrelationships" and relate these to "real-life experiences" (Cheung Gaik-Hoon and Wright, date unknown: 2), in a similar way to Kolb's (1984: 52) concept of how learning comes about:

Learning, the creation of knowledge, occurs through the active extension and grounding of ideas and experiences in the external world and through internal reflection about the attributes of these experiences and ideas.

In the seminar context this is brought about through the manipulation of ideas and concepts through discussion, that is to say not only internal reflection but also an exchange, a form of discourse which serves the purpose of intellectual stimulus and growth.

Tutor control of the seminar is effected largely by the use of various question types, to elicit specific, topic related information, not only as a test of student comprehension, but also to guide the discussion in the right direction. Questions will tend to be open ended, theoretically giving a high degree of freedom to the students to pursue their own ideas and, thus, encourage discussion.

There are, furthermore, purely managerial questions or cues, as observed by Cheung Gaik-Hoon and Wright (date unknown: 8) in their study of seminar students at the University of Hong Kong in examples (4) and (5):

(4) Can anyone think of an example?

(5) Any comments?

These serve either to keep a discussion moving or to give more students the opportunity to contribute. However, this type of tutor questioning, aimed at encouraging active participation, also displays underlying traits which may contribute to a conflict rather than a cooperative environment in the seminar. Coulthard and Brazil (1981: 89) point out that the majority of tutor/learner exchanges are tutor-initiated, leading to a learner response, followed by a further tutor comment, which usually takes the form of an evaluation and subsequently lead into the next point of the discussion. Such a sequence seems to accentuate the dominant role of the tutor, in that students will be perfectly aware that the tutor will often already know the answer to a topic-specific information-eliciting question which he poses, and the answerer will automatically try to answer according to what he/she thinks the tutor requires, and will necessarily require confirmation that the answer is satisfactory in the tutor's view. This leaves the learner with an over-reliance on the opinion of the tutor and an inability to make his/her own judgements on the validity of

his/her own ideas.

Such a view may lead to the conclusion that very nature of the communicative process within a seminar is threatening (Riley, 1985: 99), since the participants all have their own perceived role in the interaction, and the other participants are perceived in terms of the role they assume. This in turn may threaten the participants own positive self-perception. A discussion, for example, guided by the tutor in order to arrive at a particular conclusion, could be seen as threatening to the learner's free development of thought, and criticism of learner viewpoints as damaging to their positive self-image.

A possible solution may be found in Johns and Johns (1977: 102) attempt to differentiate between two distinct types of tutor control. "Low-level control" comprises the effective management of the turn-taking procedure, in which all participants in a discussion have equal opportunities to contribute and space to develop ideas, while "high-level control" guides the discussion and evaluates contributions made by the participants.

An attempt to limit the degree of tutor control would appear to be desirable, if the aim of a seminar is that of allowing space to the learner, in this case both for second language improvement and intellectual/academic development in a specific area of study. However, even if the tutor attempts to change his/her role in order to allow the freer development of discussion, reducing intervention to a minimum and changing the form of the questioning, this may not lead to a new participant perception of the roles assumed in a seminar, and, indeed, may be misunderstood by the students. As Shor (1993: 29) claims:

if a liberating teacher asks students to co-develop the class with her or him, the students often doubt that this is 'real' education. ('Real education' is something done to the students, not something they do, 'real education' means the teacher telling students what to think and what to do instead of dialoguing and negotiating with them).

The strategies employed in discussion are all important if the learner is to experience success. As mentioned above, the conflict nature of the seminar is, in part, due to the roles assumed by the participants and also the nature of the discussion, as a debate involves not merely an exchange of information in the form of ideas, but the formulation, examination in depth and criticism of such ideas. If a participant contributes to the seminar he/she risks face-damaging criticism, and the ability to deal with probing questions, particularly on the part of non-native speakers is generally learned by experience, rather than explicit teaching. This may be one of the reasons (excluding lack of prepara-

tion, of course) why it can be difficult to stimulate spontaneous discussion in the tutorial or seminar situation, as it may be viewed as a face-threatening exercise by the learners (Scollon and Scollon, 1983).

The ability of non-native speaker students to deal with the factors mentioned above is to a large extent handicapped by a lack of specific training received in the kinds of strategies useful in seminar discussions, and where training is received emphasis tends to be placed largely on lexicogrammatical content. In personal research carried out at the *Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo* of the University of Cagliari, a group of upper-intermediate English language learners themselves expressed the opinion that their second language problems were due to specific linguistic deficiencies such as lack of vocabulary and a poor knowledge of grammar. However, that lexicogrammatical knowledge alone does not necessarily lead to proficient language use (Hymes, 1979), and where a second or foreign language is the medium through which the student is learning in the seminar perhaps a different approach is necessary. This learning process, as discussed above, at university level in particular, runs a lot deeper than the mere assimilation of facts, and the student must learn to manipulate these facts, relating them to his/her own personal experiences. Consequently, the ability to manipulate the language medium as part of the learning experience in the seminar is of vital importance for the non-native speaker. This ability cannot be developed by training the student to follow set schemes, as characterised by the practice of stereotype acts which are not compatible with the highly dynamic nature of communication (Carton, 1983: 56). Training should be designed to aid the learner in developing his/her own 'linguistic individuality' along with his/her 'academic individuality'. This implies that a bridge needs to be built between the two, and a closer examination of both linguistic and academic needs exploited in the development of language improvement programmes within higher education where, in this case, ESL study is compulsory.

A final problem which may be encountered is when there are cultural differences within the seminar group, especially when it is of mixed nationality, a question of some significance considering the increasingly international nature of university study. For instance, to French speakers English speakers seem extremely abrupt when answering questions, while Arab speakers seem long-winded (Carton, 1983: 58). Conventions in turn-taking sequences may also differ according to cultural background, and without the explicit guidance of the tutor in "low level control" (Johns and Johns, 1977: 103) again the non-native speaker may have difficulties, either in asserting his/her presence, or by doing so in the wrong way and giving the impression to other participants in

the discussion of acting in an unacceptably aggressive manner.

3. Implications for ESL improvement programmes in an academic context

The overtly conflictual nature of the seminar requires specific skills on the part of the participants. A language improvement programme would focus particular attention on those basing them on the concepts of 'attack' and 'defence'. Strategy development would be closely linked to specific lexicogrammatical input and would focus on critical thinking, leading to constructive criticism in discussion (attack), and clarity of thought and logical construction of argument (defence). Language skills lessons would run parallel to seminars where what is learned in the former is put into practice while dealing with arguments or topics relevant to the degree course being followed by the students.

3.1 Attack skills.

It is always easier to find fault than it is to find the reason for that fault, and the ability to criticise encompasses an implicit need to justify that criticism in an academic type discussion. A degree of diplomacy is necessary along with an awareness of the rules of the game:

Speakers have to strike a balance between the need to attack, that is to question the value of other speakers' contributions, and the need to soften or mitigate such criticism in order to gain support from the other participants.

(Johns and Johns, 1977: 104)

The devices that can be used to mitigate serve almost as apologies for the criticism being levelled. This is important, because this compensates to a certain degree for the loss of face suffered by the participant being criticised, as in normal circumstances an apology results in a loss of face on the part of the person apologising. Thus,

(6) I'm sorry, but I don't agree because ...

contributes to pre-empting the addressee's loss of face.

A further skill would be the ability to intervene in the discussion, reading the appropriate moment for attracting attention. Again the concept of 'sof-

tening the blow' is a useful one to adopt (*ibid.*: 105), partial agreement being subsequently qualified, e.g.

(7) That's true, but ...

Similarly, criticism is often introduced by a request for permission to interject, e.g.

(8) Could I just make a point here?

Technique could be developed in the strategies of criticism at the simplest level in a two-stage system of criticism and justification. Specific language focus sessions outside the seminar itself with groupwork activities would help to bring about a conscious awareness of the mechanics of the process, in a situation where the potentially face-damaging pressures of open discussion have no bearing.

3.2 Defence skills

One aid to developing defence skills is an awareness of how critical questions function, and by taking measures to develop strategies to deal with them. Evasion is one of the most common strategies employed, as Bennett (1982: 102) demonstrates in his examination of a political debate in which one speaker attempts to trap another into making an error. The strategies used by the second speaker include an apparent failure to answer the question directly. This evasion, however, seems to be accepted by the first speaker, which leads Bennett to the conclusion that all conversation is held at two levels, verbal and non-verbal, and that these "two means of accomplishing ends function reflexively in the sense that communicative devices make possible the use of conversational stratagems, and conversational stratagems constrain the interpretation or decisions speakers and hearers make about what communicational devices are in effect" (*ibid.*: 107). These strategies very rarely do more than 'postpone the inevitable', and are, in any case, not acceptable in the context of a tutorial or seminar discussion, and concentration should be placed on being able to answer to criticism in a coherent and logical manner.

As such exercises could be devised similar to those described above under 'attack skills'. Practice, where specific focus is placed on logical argument construction in a more realistic situation could be provided with role-plays,

where the participants are given time to prepare in groups and then argue from a point of view with which they do not necessarily agree. A gradual progression from groupwork to a final feedback session would help to ease learners into using the skills necessary for seminar discussions with greater effectiveness and confidence.

Conclusion

The usefulness of exploiting the seminar format in an academic context can be considered on two levels. Firstly, it could provide a valid basis for developing ESL skills in a genuinely communicative context which provides a specific purpose for the use of English, and secondly the opportunity to discuss topics relevant to degree study. In the Italian university system, for example, the integration of these two aspects has the benefit of making the study of English a relevant part of the degree course, rather than a mere appendage to that course, where the 'general' language taught may not be relevant to an academic setting.

Furthermore, specific language work could be carried out in sessions organised for that purpose, with a particular focus on those techniques which may be applied in a discussion. In this regard, work would need to be carried out into what kind of language is used (Bardovi-Hardeg *et al.*, 1996: 325) in that specialised academic area and in that specific context in order to produce materials which are appropriate, both from a lexicogrammatical and also pragmatic point of view.

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