

Article

An Analysis of Conversation Styles of English Learners ~ Backchannels as Effective Strategies in Communication ~

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Abstract This study investigates communication patterns of English learners in conversational interaction and explores what kinds of communication style¹⁾ they employ when they are communicating in English. By analyzing the conversation in the situation where speakers in conversation have to communicate only in English, this study will explain important elements and effective strategies for communication in second language.

Key Words : backchannels , conversation style, English learner, effective communication

1. INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to investigate the communication patterns of English learners in conversational interactions and explores the communication styles¹⁾ speakers employ when they communicate in English. What kinds of effective conversation strategies do English learners utilise for successful communication? What are the important elements in communication in their second language?

English learners often use ungrammatical elements and insufficient English grammar when they are speaking in English. This study analyses the strategies English learners use in interaction to compensate for their insufficiency in grammar and reveals the elements that play important roles in communicative success. The study also considers the difference in strategies learners use in accordance with their proficiency in English.

2. DATA

The data in this study consists of conversational interactions videotaped and transcribed in detail in which pairs talk about given topics. English daily conversation data are collected both in the United States and Japan from 2006 to 2008. English conversation data in which Japanese speakers have to manage to communicate only in

English are analysed.

Participants in conversation are divided into two levels, advanced and elementary, in accordance with the level of their English proficiency. These levels are judged by (1) the speaker's experience of studying abroad (in English speaking countries), and (2) the TOEIC score as an objective index of English proficiency.

Elementary speaker:

no experience of studying abroad and TOEIC score is under 500

Advanced speaker:

studying abroad for more than one year or lived for years in English speaking countries, or have high TOEIC score (over 800)

By analysing the conversation in the situation where speakers in conversation have to communicate only in English, this study will indicate important elements and effective strategies for communication in a second language.

3. ANALYSES

3.1 Analyses from a pragmatic perspective

This study considers speakers' conversation strategies from a pragmatic perspective and reveals how even elementary speakers achieve successful communication in spite of ungrammatical and incorrect elements in their conversational interactions.

3.1.1 Backchannel

Backchannel is generally defined as a strategy that facilitates the current speaker's utterance without turn-taking.

3.2 Backchannels as effective strategies for mutual understanding

English learners use a number of effective strategies for boosting mutual understanding in conversational interaction. Backchannels by other participant in interaction play important roles not only to show "listenership" but also to facilitate the current speaker's utterance utilising strategies with various kinds of functions indicated in the following subsections. They participate in the conversation by not "just listening" other participant's utterance.

The following backchannels as effective strategies for mutual understandings are observed in this study.

<Backchannels as effective Strategies for Mutual Understandings>

(1) Continuers

Elementary level speakers use more backchannels than advanced speakers and elementary / advanced speakers uses different types of backchannels

(2) Confirmation the contents of conversation by Participants

Speakers often repeat and paraphrase what other participant in conversation said to confirm what the speaker said

(3) Paraphrase / Repetitions

(4) Provision of searching words

3.2.1 The Use of Backchannels as Continuers

The first type is a "continuer", which is used to

express listenership and to facilitate the current speaker's utterance as seen in Example 1.

< Example 1 (Advanced learners) >

1T: I just moved to Boston, like a week ago, so I'm not really sure, like, what's out there, so I just sta--, pretty much stay or my home and clean up, set up all the furniture and all the stuffs.

→ 2M: Yeah.

3T: When I was in Virginia or Maryland area, I just pretty much, I spent my time with my friend.

They were, we go to fishing, we go, like, play soccer once, twice a week, and we like find good restaurant and good wine =

→4M: Hmm.

5T: = and we go clubbing all this stuff

As seen above with advanced learners of English, backchannels, such as yeah, hmm uh-hmm, true, and yeah I think so, are often observed also in elementary speakers' utterances. When one participant speaks, the other participant plays a part as a listener using such backchannels as above to express listenership and to facilitate the current speaker's utterance. These backchannels are utilised by not changing the current main speaker, and the participant continues as a listener while using these strategies.

In the following, we will specifically focus on the effective use of different types of backchannels by elementary speakers.

3.2.2 Backchannels by elementary speakers

Frequent use of backchannels and different types of backchannels are observed in both elementary and advanced speakers' utterances, however, more frequent backchannels are observed in the interaction by elementary speakers than the one by advanced speakers. Elementary level speakers use backchannels with several kinds of functions for indicating not only listenership but also "participation" in conversation, by clarifying using "repetitions", "paraphrasing" and "repairing", and "providing words". We will now examine each of them in a more detailed manner.

3.2.2.1 Confirmation and clarification by Repetition

This type of backchannel is used to confirm both the utterance and mutual understanding as seen in Example 2.

<Example 2>

Proficiency level: elementary (Traveling)

- 1T: Er When have you been? (Laugh)
- 2K: Oh, I - - I- - I have --- I - - (laugh) I have been ,
----- er country ? or er --- in Japan?
(laugh)
- 3T: Country.
- 4K: Country, oh. Only America.
- 5T: Oh.
- 6K: Oh.
- 7T: America and Canada.
- 8K: Ar --- yes, yeas, yes, yes.
- 9T: Well – I went Canada, America and Hawaii.

→10K: Hawaii

→11T: Hawaii.

12K: Oh, when – when did you er --- go ---
to Hawaii?

As seen in example 2 (Lines 3T and 4K, 10K, and 11T), speaker often repeats what the other participant in conversation said to confirm both the utterance and mutual understanding. We can also see the use of the same type of repetitions in Example 3.

Next, we will consider the utterance in example 3.

<Example 3>

- 1M: Oh --- How much?
- 2K: ah – five days and – five – fifty hundred (yen).
- 3K: { Fifty
Fifty hundred? (Laugh)
- 4T: (laughing) Change!
- 5K: (laughing) OK, change!
- 6T: Five, zero zero zero zero (5,0000).

- 7K: Ah, OK ah ----- Fifty thousand
- 8T: ah } thousand?
- 9K: Oh, { eh? } Thousand?
- 10T: { Thousand. } Thousand.
- { Fifty thousand. }

- 11K: Thousand.
- 12T: yes.
- 13K: Fifty thousand, Oh yeah.
Fifty thousand, oh, nice for you.

Speaker K thought speaker T mistakenly used an expression “five hundred” where the speaker should say “five thousand”. Speaker K clarifies what speaker T says using this repetition as backchannel several times as shown in line 7K, 9K and 11K until both speakers agree in 13K.

3.2.2.2 Paraphrase and Repair

Backchannels such as paraphrase and repairs are often observed by elementary English speakers. Next, we will consider Example 4 (in line J3).

<Example 4>

proficiency level: Elementary (Traveling)

- J1: Have you ever been abroad?
- S2: Yeah, yeah, --- I --- I --- I’ve been to France.
- J3: Oh French?
- S4: ar, yeah. E...e... because jyanaku tte nn...
because ka ----
My friend is e --- study at France.
- J5: hmm Oh, yes, yes.
- S6: So, I visited my friend
- J7: Oh, oh,
- S8: But I --- I went to French alone so --- e...
- J9: ↑ (nodding) nn
- S10: it my, it was my first ----- yeah so nn (laugh)

Speaker J confirms (in line J3) what speaker S says using paraphrasing, “Oh French?” This expression is incorrect, but he intended to increase mutual understanding with other participant in conversation. Speakers often use repair as confirmation of the contents of conversation.

<Example 5>

(Proficiency level: Elementary)

- J19: When --- when did you go?
- S20: e...Eiffel Tower ah---
- J21: Oh, no, no =

→ J22: = When }
 S23 Ah! }
J24 = when your school day, your high school days?
 S25 { Oh I see, I see. }

As seen in example 5, Lines 21-22J +24J, Speaker J corrects a misunderstanding in the other participant's reply in S20. This repair also works to confirm the conversation topic.

3.2.2.3 Backchannel as provision of words

The participant in a conversation often provides words or phrases for the speaker searching for them to promote other speaker's understanding and facilitate the conversation. Speaker J uses the strategy of providing words twice in J7.

<Example 6>

(proficiency level: Elementary)

S1: I'm live in eh --- Takadanobaba.

J2: Ah.

S3: Near.

J4: Wakejyuku?

S5: Ah, no, no --- ee----- (he is trying to explain
 by his gesture)=

S6: = near near, yeah.

→ J7: ↑ near. ↑ Near station?

S8: Yeah.

4. Cooperative Participation

As seen in examples of elementary speakers, they often use cooperative strategies and communication styles, such as repetition, paraphrase, repairs and provision of words and phrases, using them more than advanced speakers to confirm and increase mutual understanding. This results in communication without breakdowns.

By analysing the conversation in situations where speakers have to communicate in English, this study has revealed that elementary speakers in conversation often

use cooperative strategies to compensate for grammatical insufficiency more than advanced speakers. They tend to rely highly on these cooperative pragmatic strategies to compensate for insufficiency of their grammatical competence more than advanced speakers.

Speakers' cooperative participation and collaboration is an expression of "empathy", which is important in effective communication.

5. CONCLUSION

English learners use a variety of strategies for effective communication in English, using backchannels effectively. They often confirm and clarify the contents of their conversation by a variety of backchannels indicated above.

This study has revealed the use of the effective conversation strategies, indicating that cooperative participation compensate for grammatical insufficiency especially in elementary level speakers' interactions by comparing them with those by advanced level speakers.

As the study used only limited conversation data, therefore, more elaborate investigation in different conversational situations is needed for future research.

References

- 1) Tannen Deborah (1991) *You just don't understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. Oxford University Press.
- 2) Victor Yngve (1970) *On Getting a Word in Edgewise. Papers from the Sixth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, pp. 567-577.

Transcription notation

- = the equals sign indicates 'latching' between utterances.
 --- indicates pause (the number of hyphen shows pause length)
 { } overlapping
 (explanation)